# *The Pursuit of Happiness:*

## *- Making Meaning of the Transition from University to Labour Market in Denmark*

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# Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomena of graduation from Aalborg University (AAU) from a critical vantage point. Through a combination of perspectives addressing both the individual experiencing graduation, as well as the sociocultural context in which he or she resides, the investigation sheds light on graduation without reducing it to either side of the structure-agent dichotomy. To address the social and cultural context, the notions of the competition state, recent reformations of the educational system, performance society as well as social acceleration are combined. In order to address the individual's capabilities for agency, positioning theory is combined with the theory of life-course, transitions and ruptures. This somewhat disparate theoretical framework is fused through the meta-theoretical vantage point of Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose, with key notions of power and discourse, as well as the notion of governmentality. In order to allow the illumination of the phenomena, the two distinct analytical approaches of critical discourse analysis (CDA), as Norman Fairclough lays it out, is combined with the thematic networks analysis (TNA) as laid out by Jennifer Attride-Stirling. An envelope of material mailed to all soon-to-be graduates by The Career Centre at AAU serves as the empirical data for the CDA; whereas three conducted, semi-structured interviews serve as data for the TNA. Overall, the investigation shows that graduation is a highly complex and multifaceted endeavor. It appears to be a forthcoming rupture for the individual, and the transition is influenced by both personal historicity as well as socio-structural forces, and this also also begs the question of identity. Here, the material from the Career Centre, with its discourses of individualization, competition, positivity and neoliberalism, comes to serve as a guide at a time where guidance is often needed. Even if discarded or laughed at, the material is nevertheless shown to have an impact, and it draws upon an order of discourse found in broad society about what it means to enter the labour market. It is discussed that rather than empowering the graduate and aiding them through graduation, the material draws upon the logic of never-ending growth and personal development, which instead suppresses and singles out graduates, and this in turn has a series of negative consequences for both the graduates and society as a whole. Finally, it is argued that changing the system is a collective matter, which requires rebuilding the communities and unions that neoliberalism, here seen manifested in the material from The Career Centre, has come to dissolve.

# Preface

This master's dissertation is the culmination of interests and ideas that I have, not only accumulated, but, in a sense allowed myself to become gradually shaped by over the course of my, soon, five years of studies in the field Psychology at the University in Aalborg. It is no secret that I have, as far as I can remember, been particularly interested in viewing the world rather critically (and often, I like to think, with good reason), and this has also permeated my studies throughout my time at the university. With the companionship of two like-minded partners and very close friends, we wrote a Bachelors thesis critically illuminating the major reforms happening in the Danish educational system in recent years (Ingvardsen, Lund & Møldrup, 2014), focusing on the three overall institutional structures of the primary school, the gymnasium (high school) and the university. And last year, my ninth semester project dealt with the relationship between living with a smartphone and the sociocultural tendency of social acceleration. Here, the focus was on understanding the meaning-making process of the individual residing in a world of fast-developing connectivity, how this world was seen as shaped and moulded through relations of power and discourse, and finally what the individual did to resist its impact. This master's dissertation, as mentioned, draws upon everything I have done up to this point. As such, I consider this dissertation to be a major, but definitely not final, piece of the puzzle I have been spending my studies putting together. One central lesson has been that criticism, if not to fall into the chasm of pessimism, has to be aimed at something, not so that it can be destroyed, but improved. Luckily, my interest for the historical, cultural and social aspects of what it means to be human has also taught me that our world largely consists of things we have invented. Laws of nature do not govern that world; hence we have the power to change it, once we become aware of its defects. Maybe that is too much to hope for this master's dissertation, but, personally, I know I have changed after having written it. So that has to count for something. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Sarah Hassan Awad for all the guidance and genuine interest showed for my projects over the last two semesters. Without, this would not have been possible.

Joachim Ingvardsen 30/05-2016

“If you aren’t rich you should always look useful”

- Louis-Ferdinand Céline

# Table of Contents

# 1. Introduction

Walking through the busy halls and cantinas of the university campus throughout the blooming spring of 2017, one is exposed to an immense variety of impressions, some of which, for a person about to graduate, stand out as being more interesting than others. "*Find your dream job!*" Reads a poster on a bulletin board. "*Sell yourself! Three tips for your sales pitch!*" Reads a sheet of paper taped to a concrete pillar. The chatter amongst the lunching students is equally interesting. One cannot help to rudely overhear bits here and there about worries and excitements, about being done with whatever people are doing, going on their summer holidays, or perhaps reaching the end of life at Aalborg University (AAU) altogether. The sense that there is something in the air around this time of year is arguably nothing new. Graduation, exams, bees and sunshine; all of this seems to fit. And yet something does feel different, partially a subjective sensation, no doubt, but it resonates with much of what has profused the various media in recent times. One such element that comes to mind is that of our own Svend Brinkmann (2014), who with his satirical and critical book "Stå Fast", in a sense, introduced 'mainstream' Denmark to a counter-discourse against the demands for constant self-improvement of our day and age; a stance that especially has its roots in a long line of critical psychological and sociological thinkers. With this introduction, things did not seem to become simpler. Rather, it seems that yet another nuance was added to the array of possible outlooks onto what awaits all of us, once we graduate and come out the other side of AAU. Was there going to be a dream job out there for me? Will I really have to 'sell myself' as the paper read, and if so, how am I supposed to do that? What should my price be? What about 'standing firm', as Brinkmann, roughly said, calls for, is that possible when I also want to find a good job, or will I have to compromise myself? Are other soon-to-be graduates experiencing this stage in life as I am, or do they have a completely different outlook on the matter?

Yet another element, which seems particularly important for why spring feels the way it does this year, has to do with how we were introduced to our final semester by the university itself. This introduction, in the form of a personally addressed envelope containing a range of materials from The Career Centre at AAU, including a catalogue known as 'The Graduation Guide', seemed to hold as its central aim and

argument that now, being our final semester at AAU, was not the time to write our master's dissertations. Or, rather, now was not the time to *just* do that. Instead, we should really start thinking about employment, about the labour market, and about doing everything we possibly can to ensure that we do not just graduate, but that we also graduate with a job. And If we are not that fortunate, the catalogue is, luckily enough, packed with ideas for what we can do to ensure that our time as unemployed will be as brief a setback on our careering adventure as possible. This envelope from The Career Centre, which will be presented in further detail later in the introduction, put together with all the influences of a seemingly accelerating and multi-nuanced context, inspired the interest in taking a closer look at the phenomena of graduation as well as the social and cultural forces involved in this endeavour.

## 1.1 Framing the empirical context: graduates from Aalborg University

It would be interesting to investigate the phenomena of graduation in many different contexts, such as universities in other cities as well as other institutions of higher learning. However, as was already hinted in the above, Aalborg University, aside from being a personally interesting context, has, through its mailed envelope to the author and all other soon-to-be graduates, offered a unique glimpse at some of the forces that come into play for the young individual about to graduate in our day and age. As such, it makes great sense to make this envelope, understood as a manifestation of discourses located both within the institutional sphere as well as in broad society, a cornerstone in the investigation, and thus also a natural frame for the empirical context. Another point for why this is an interesting focus has to do with graduation in general. It might have been interesting to look at facets of the labour market amongst earlier students who have already graduated. However, one preconception, which was also partially inspired by personal sensations and from the climate amongst close friends and classmates at the university, was that the time around graduation was a very unique place to be in life. It was understood as a time unlike anything we have experienced before, and it posed questions that we really did not know how to answer. Focusing on the outlook on the labour market as some unknown entity located in 'the future', and as partially shaped and constructed through all the social and structural forces involved in our lives at the moment, seemed far more interesting than the investigation into what that labour market may actually

look and be like. As such, it becomes a two-fold study of both the university as an institution, what they do to prepare the soon-to-be graduates for the labour market, and also of the individual and how he or she manoeuvres through this unique and schismatic time of their lives. In order to further introduce the reader; a brief introduction will be given of the material from The Career Centre at AAU in the following.

### 1.1.1 The material from The Career Centre

Upon receiving the personally addressed envelope, the first thing that struck me was the weight of it. It was clearly not just a couple of letters wishing me good luck with my final paper, nor was it a personal invitation to a graduation party at the principal's expense. In fact, it was nothing of that kind. The envelope, as already hinted, contained a thick and colourful 67-page catalogue known as 'The Graduation Guide', on which it read "*Become ready for a life after the studies*". Furthermore, there were three pieces of a4 paper, which were dedicated to invitations to a whole range of 'Career Events' spanning from February till June, 2017, all of which were dedicated to help me, the receiver of the material, prepare for my life after AAU. Another piece of paper represented an invitation to the clearly biggest and most important of all these events; known as 'Career Exhibition'. Here, on March the 7$^{th}$ in Gigantium, Aalborg, you could "*meet more than a hundred companies and organisations*" and thus "*kick-start your career*". For fear of going into a subjective rant, no more will be said about the material here, other than the fact that it was mailed to all soon-to-be graduates from the university, and that it will play a central role for the investigation and this paper in its entirety. As will also be of importance later on, a selection of the most interesting papers and pages from the catalogue will be found on Appendix 6, and all references to the material throughout this paper will be made to that appendix.

## 1.2 Problem formulation

Grounded in the understanding of the phenomena and the empirical context as it was briefly laid out in the above, and in order to secure directedness and a degree of structure throughout the investigation about to be initiated, a central problem formulation was articulated, which goes as follows:

**"How does the individual experience transitioning from the educational system to the labour market? And how does the sociocultural context of Aalborg University in Denmark anno 2017 affect this process?"**

Well aware of the somewhat broad nature of this problem formulation, three underlying problem statements have been formulated, which serve to further nuance the investigation:

- Is it possible to identify a network of discourses, which characterize the social and structural context of graduation from Aalborg University, 2017?
- What relations of power do these discourses lay bare?
- In what way is the individual capable of acting with- and through this network of discourses to make sense of graduation and the labour market?

## 1.3 The theoretical framework of the investigation

It now makes sense to direct the attention towards the introduction of theories and perspectives, which will serve to give some of the keywords in the problem formulation, such as *discourse, sociocultural context* and *individual*, their meaning throughout the investigation.

### 1.3.1 The sociocultural context of the investigation

In order to set the frame for the investigation in its entirety, light will be shed on the broader sociocultural context, initiated with the work of the Danish professor in comparative political economy at Copenhagen Business School, and author of the widely influential book "The Competition State", Ove Kaj Pedersen (2011). According to Pedersen, Denmark, like the rest of the developed and globalized world around us, has undergone a drastic makeover in the name of neoliberal political and economical ideals since the 1980's. As a result, it is no longer sufficient to call Denmark a *welfare state*. In fact, it might even be plain wrong to do so. Instead, says Pedersen, we have turned into a *competition state*. That is, Denmark is a state in fierce competition with other states, and due to neoliberal deregulations rooted in a capitalistic logic of 'the free market' along with increased globalization, its main focus is no longer the protection of its citizens from the forces of international economy, to reduce inequality or to provide people with a wholesome, democratic and morally anchored

education. Rather, and perhaps even oppositely, it is to do anything in its power to *mobilize* its citizens to take part in the battle of stately competition, and true to the logic these new "liberal" economic ideals, anything that does not improve competition (and thus results in economic payoff) can- and is interpreted as a burden (Pedersen, 2011).

In thread with this layout of Denmark as an increasingly neoliberalized state in competition with other states, we have seen a series of reformations of many aspects of public institutions over the past 20 years. Particularly the educational system, with complete reformations of the primary schools (L51, see Antorini, 2013), high schools (Johansen, 2014) and the universities (Regeringen, 2013), has undergone a drastic transformation in the name of the competition state. At the university, this has also meant a new set of regulations, which are particularly aimed at making sure that students complete at least 30 ECTS each semester, and that if they somehow fall behind, it may have economical repercussions. One central argument behind these reforms is that what students do and learn throughout the educational system, should be tied closer to what the labour market demands. As such, the logics of the competition state are not just to be found in the offices and closed halls of government, but also manifested in the very real institutions linked to everyday living of the individual.

Another perspective, which also draws upon the notion of the competition state in order to understand why and how Denmark as a context *social* and *cultural* context develops as it does, is drawn from Anders Petersen (2016), lector in sociology at Aalborg University. Petersen has come up with a notion in his book baring the very same title: "*The Performance Society*" (DK: Præstationssamfundet), which, roughly speaking, points at facets of society where *performance*, as a demand and a norm, has escalated and reached a point where it results in severe consequences for the individual. Petersen uses the psychopathology of depression to exemplify an area where the *incapability* to perform results in diagnosis located in the head of the person, followed by exclusion, treatment and finally rehabilitation, all in a culture where standing still is not an option.

Exactly this view on the impossibility of standing still serves as the central argument for introducing the final perspective used to frame out the socio-cultural context; namely that of the critical sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa (2005; 2010; 2013). With his theory of *social acceleration*, Rosa draws upon a long line of thinking spanning from the earliest dawn of modernisation up until today, to propose the first coherent theory addressing the seemingly shared experience of 'time speeding up'. Central to Rosas proposal, is that social acceleration is to be understood as both technological and thus materialistic; in the form of increased speeds of transportation of goods as well as information across distances, and also social; in the form of an increased speed of social life, oftentimes interrelated with the technological development. This was also the subject in a previous study by the author (Ingvardsen, 2016), where the increased speed of life was seen as closely related to living with a smartphone; a device which has, through its connective features, fundamentally redefined many aspects of social life. Returning to the theory, Rosa proposes one central consequence of social acceleration, what he calls *alienation*, which, as we will see later; will also be of high interest throughout this investigation.

Put together, these perspectives set the frame for the sociocultural context of *graduation* for the remainder of the investigation. Seeing that one of the central keywords in the problem formulation, and indeed one of the major interests underlying this paper in its entirety, is that of the experience of the *individual*, it now makes sense to take a closer look at the perspectives addressing the other side of the duality.

### 1.3.2 Addressing the individual in the investigation: perspectives on agency

In order to shed light on how the individual both experiences – but also *acts* – within and through the structural frame of Aalborg University, Denmark, 2017, the central notion of *agency* will be comprised and supplemented from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective comes from that of *positioning theory,* as it is laid out particularly by Rom Harré and Fatali Moghaddam (2008). With its roots in social constructionism, agency will here be understood in a particularly dynamic fashion, as the possibilities for acting as they emerge in particular contexts and through the various forms of communication. It is central to the theory that different positions afford different means of acting; of making certain actions meaningful and others invalid, through the bestowment of rights and duties. With this perspective, agency will also,

to an extent, be seen to precede the person; that is, exist as possibilities within a context before the person entering it. As will be made apparent later in the investigation, this perspective will be very useful for understanding how the soon-to-be graduates are positioned- and position themselves in relation to the event of graduation and the forthcoming transition to the labour market.

This leads to the next theoretical approach included to shed light on the individual as an agent – namely the theory of *life-courses,* as it is laid out by Tania Zittoun (2009; 2012). With this perspective, and particularly through the key notions of *transitions* and *ruptures*, it becomes possible to address agency as a less dynamic and more coherent entity; where the possibilities for acting in meaningful ways, for the individual, is very much a bound to his or her own historicity. Here, the individual is understood in a developmental light where meaningful acts of the past, as well as the close relations that were particularly influential at those points in life, serve as cornerstones for acting in the present towards the future. It is central to the theory that certain transitions, once they become too great or unfamiliar to the person, can result in a rupture – that is, a place in life where the road splits in front of you, and where continuous development necessitates adaptability. The theory of life-courses will be of great interest for understanding the phenomena of *graduation* as a forthcoming rupture, as a particular point in life where the past may or may not serve as a guide for the future, and where transitioning, in the light of the surrounding social and cultural environment, can be seen as either normal or idiosyncratic.

### 1.3.3 The meta-theoretical standpoint of the investigation

The theoretical framework, as it was presented above, and indeed the problem itself, can be said to contain an inherent structure-agent dualism. In order to overcome this dualism in a meaningful manner and thus allow the respective theoretical perspectives to complement each other, a set of meta-theoretical reflections leading up to a uniting vantage point will be presented. This will particularly be through the key notions of *power* and *discourse*, as well as a set of underlying notions connected to *governmentality*, as they are understood and theorized by Michel Foucault (ex 1974; 1976; 2007) and later by Nikolas Rose (1999). Seeing that these reflections also represent the very first section to come following this introduction, it does not make great sense to elaborate on them here. However, Foucault, and the follow-ups on

much of his theoretical work as it is laid out by Rose, represents the anchor point through which the all of the theoretical perspectives will be connected.

## 1.4 Conducting the investigation

This leads on to the more methodological aspects of the investigation, as well as how it will be carried out. As the problem formulation as well as the theoretical framework both seem to hint, the two-folded nature of this investigation also finds itself reflected in the methodological approach. In order to come as close as possible to answering the problem formulation, two distinct analytical strategies will be implemented. First, a *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), as it is laid out by Norman Fairclough (2003), will be conducted using the presented material from The Career Centre as data. Here, the focus will be on scrutinizing what Fairclough terms an *order of discourse*, consisting of several individual discourses, which are seen manifested in the material with ties to the broader institutional and sociocultural context in which it resides. The aim of this analysis is the lay bare some of the discursive logics and relations of power represented in the material, how they interact, which ones are dominating, and in the end how they come to impact the lives of the graduates. Faircloughs approach stands firmly on the shoulders on Foucault, and as such, the presentation of Foucaults understanding of power, knowledge and discourse will serve as a valuable foundation for the CDA. This analysis will draw particularly on the *sociocultural* theoretical perspectives.

The other analytical approach used in this investigation, then, directs the attention away from the more structural and institutional levels of analysis, to taking a closer look at the individual. The semi-structured interview, rooted particularly in a phenomenological interest for the *lifeworld* of the interviewee, will serve as the foundation for this particular collection of data. More precisely, three soon-to-be graduates have been interviewed, and their transcriptions, which are presented on appendices 1-3, will be analysed using the *Thematic Networks Analysis* (TNA) as it is laid out by Jennifer Attride-Stirling (2001). With this data-driven approach, the aim is first and foremost to allow the interviews to speak for themselves through the formation of themes grounded in selected bits of data. It goes without saying that the theoretical framework also comes into play during the course of this approach, which in turn feeds into the themes themselves. As such, the process is a circular one, and thus also

true to the interpretive principles of *hermeneutics* (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). This analysis will draw particularly on the theoretical perspectives addressing *agency*.

Put together, the purpose of these two analytical approaches is to allow for the analysis of both Aalborg University as an institutional context interlaced with discourses and relations of power, as well as of the individual graduate as an agent experiencing the event of graduation and reproducing or perhaps resisting the discourses that he or she encounters and engages with. Finally, the discussion will serve to combine the two approaches, to draw upon particularly interesting findings from each analysis and to propose the central arguments for this paper as a whole, and thus also to come closer to an answer for central questions posed in this introduction.

## 1.5 A brief layout of the master's dissertation

To round off the introduction, the remaining master's dissertation will be briefly laid out in the following:

- In section 2 the *meta-theoretical reflections*, which will function as the theoretical and philosophical vantage point connecting the remaining theories, will be presented.
- In section 3 the *theoretical perspectives* will be presented. First by addressing the *sociocultural context*, starting with the context of the state of Denmark, onto a look at the recent reformations of the educational system, onto an elaboration on a culture of performance, and finally by presenting the mechanism of social acceleration. Hereafter, the perspectives addressing *agency* will be presented. First by looking at agency as a dynamic entity, followed by a look at agency as a coherent entity.
- In section 4 the *methodological reflections* underlying the investigation in its entirety will be presented.
- In section 5 the two *analyses* will be conducted based on the empirical data and the theory. The first analysis will be the Critical Discursive Analysis, followed by the Thematic Networks Analysis.
- In section 6 an evaluative and critical *discussion* of some of the most important and interesting findings from the two analyses will be conducted. The discussion will also centre on methodological aspects of the investigation itself, the central arguments of the paper as well as the possible consequences of the findings.
- In section 7 the *conclusion* will serve to synthesize the results of this master's dissertation, as well as to answer the central problems posed in this introduction.

# 2. Meta-theoretical reflections

With this section, the meta-theoretical reflections leading up to the overarching philosophical and scientific standpoint guiding the investigation in its entirety will be presented. This standpoint serves the purpose of tying together an otherwise dispersed set of theories; allowing them to complement each other in investigating the specific problem of this paper. First, the notion of *power*, as it is understood through the writings of philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1966; 1974; 1975; 1976; 2007), will be presented as the cornerstone guiding these meta-theoretical reflections. Here, the key notions of *discourse, knowledge* and *governmentality* will also be presented in relation to power. In order to add nuances as well as to build on the ideas of Foucault, a more contemporary perspective with the writings of English social theorist Nikolas Rose will be included. Here, the focus will be turned particularly onto a more contemporary understanding of the mechanisms of governmentality as well as how it has been implemented throughout (western, capitalistic, neoliberal) societies since the late 90's.

## 2.1 Michel Foucault and the characteristics of power

For Foucault, the notion of *power* is not seen as something exercised, an essence that one subject or institution possesses while another does not. Rather, power is to be understood as a nominal and contextual entity inherent in the complex web of relations of multiple subjects. Power is omnipresent between subjects rather than *in* them, and as such; all relations involve the workings of power. In this sense, the subject always exists in multiple positions according to different relations of power wherein one can speak of balances rather than possessing or being the subject of power executions. It is through these relations that the subject, the person or 'individual' comes into being (Foucault, 1976). In this sense, power precedes the person and permeates every aspect of life, but it nevertheless remains quite simply: the way in which one individual manages to govern another in their mutual relation; that is, to determine his/her behaviour in a given situation (Foucault, 2007). This nominal understanding of power relates to the sociocultural context, and here the notions of *discourse* and *knowledge* come into play as central facets to the continuous reshaping of power relations. This will be elaborated on in the following.

### 2.1.1 Power and knowledge

For Foucault, power and knowledge go hand in hand reciprocally; power creates knowledge, which again creates power, and the subject always comes into contact with multiple networks of knowledge throughout various everyday-practices and discourses. A discourse, for Foucault, is roughly understood as a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation. As such, knowledge can be seen as carried through discourse, and once this knowledge has been adopted within a particular context or field of practice, it comes to serve as a form of implicit 'truth'. That is, it ties to a way of speaking and of 'doing things', which is logical and unconcerned. Truths, once they have been adopted, are also continuously defined by those with the power to do so, which then again will serve to maintain their position of power (Barker, 1998). Foucault (1974) gives an archetypical example of this in "The History of Madness", in which he shows how power and knowledge has created a circular and self-supporting system in a closed-off institution. Here Foucault excavates the ways in which the dissolving of absolutism in favour of democratic governments, along with the growth of positivistic science, gave rise to new methods of classification. A distinction was needed between the reasonable, normal individual and the 'mad', and thus madness was 'invented'. These categories served as truths adopted in broad society, and the two classes had to be separated in order to avoid the contaminating effects of madness on the newfound reason. In the madhouse, mental diseases were continuously *invented* by the very same institution inventing the cures for them. Thus, a closed context of power was firmly maintained in which the mad were almost completely subjectivated and installed with a certain truth under a realm of knowledge very difficult to penetrate and affect. Here the title of 'psychiatrist' represents the position of an expert weighing heavily in any power-balance. This position allows access to affecting certain networks of discourses as well as to sorting false knowledge from true; something out of grasp for anyone without that same expertise. Parallels can be drawn to other regimes of knowledge, such as the other various realms of science, as well as the economic system and the labour market with its logics of growth, personal development and competition, in which certain 'experts' safeguard the reproduction of certain truths and a network of knowledge, which for the individual becomes hard to resist (Foucault, 1974). This understanding of knowledge and power will be of great interest, particularly in the critical discourse analysis (section 5.1).

However, it is also important to return to the notion of power as omnipresent and reciprocal. Even the strongest and most firmly held notions of truth may eventually fall under scrutiny and become subject to re-evaluation. Through the sweeping movements of humanism through Europe, even the mad became humans again, and the expert psychiatrists were forced to treat the mentally diseased according to such principles (Foucault, 1966). Also, whenever a discourse is reproduced, it always carries small mutations; bits are changed, rejected or highlighted between subjects, and this also touches the balance of power (Nola, 1998). In this Foucaultian sense, a truth can never be a universal one. A truth remains true, in particular contexts, until its replacement by yet another truth. In the following, we will take a look at how this power-knowledge relation can be seen as manifested in how we have come to understand 'ourselves'.

### 2.1.2 Discipline and subjectivation of the individual

As mentioned, the major structural changes around the enlightenment in Europe gave birth to the new notion of 'the individual'. This notion required new ways of streamlining people to secure order and directedness in society. In "Crime and Punishment", Foucault (1975) describes the transition from public punishment, such as whipping or other physical methods, to more subtle and effective approaches relying instead on proactive surveillance and hidden forces. Relating to the notion of power, discipline has also become dispersed. It is part of every aspect of life; it comes from everywhere – including (and most importantly) from our selves. In order to discipline the mind and create self-governing subjects, it was understood that the body had to be controlled. The hospital beds were fitted with names and journals for every patient, and the schools were rebuilt with classrooms shaped like cells and long hallways allowing a single guard to overlook several hundred individuals. Students were classified according to each other; examinations, grades and diplomas became instrumental means securing the alignment of individuals (as well as the singling-out and re-disciplining of misfits) according to standardized goals. The results are twofold; on one hand the overarching goals became homogenized, while the person was individualized. The prison was also re-invented, and here the symbolic *Panopticon*, with its design allowing constant surveillance of all cellblocks, by a single guard, without the cellmate's knowing, sets the standard for effective imprisonment. The

possibility of being watched turned surveillance into the much more efficient self-surveillance. In sum, this abstract illustration of power, as Foucault portrays it, will serve as a meta-theoretical anchor point throughout the remainder of the investigation.

## 2.2 Nikolas Rose the new principles of governmentality

The British sociologist and social theorist Nikolas Rose has often been credited for not only drawing upon- but also resurrecting many of the central ideas and notions from the works of Michel Foucault and bringing them back to new life fitting the context around the new millennium. Rose proposes a re-understanding of the historical-political ideas presented in the above; what is often united under the term *governmentality,* from the underlying notions of subjectivation, surveillance and discipline. In order to further match and complement the previously presented theoretical works of Foucault with facets of our sociocultural context here and now, some of the key notions from the writings of Rose will be presented in the following.

### 2.2.1 From discipline- to a society of control

Furthering the ideas sparked by Foucault in "Discipline and Punish", in his book "Powers of Freedom", Rose (1999) describes a facet of society, which in many ways, one could argue, is even more prominent today than it was at the time of its publication 18 years ago – what he terms *control* society. Paralleling Foucault's notion of power, control is not to be understood as a centralized or inherited substance linked to certain people or institutions; rather, it is to be seen as a dispersed and flowing entity constantly modulating the forces and capacities between subjects and the practices in which they participate. In contrast to previous (western) societies largely based on institutional discipline, control is not about confining the person to physical spaces (the prison, the barracks, the assembly line etc.) in order to inscribe her or him with behavioral attributes, but rather one of *individualizing* the person, that is, creating a subject capable of reflecting and thus *correcting* itself without the costly need of actual disciplining nor punishment. In this sense, disciplining turns into a kind of inverted self-control guided by the societal tendency to weigh and measure and break the subject into smaller bits of information, which are then used as the basis for making alterations to oneself. Rose gives a precise example of this:

> "*One is always in continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to buy, to improve oneself, constant monitoring of health and never-ending risk management* (…) *Conduct is continually monitored and reshaped by logics immanent within all networks of practice*" (Rose, 1999, p. 234).

This point made by Rose will remain essential throughout the investigation, and the logics that he refers to will be dealt with throughout the analysis (section 5). In the following, it makes sense to take a closer look at some of the forces behind this shift towards further individualization and how this relates to control.

### 2.2.2 The power of inclusion and the opposite

Rose goes on to scrutinize two overarching circuits of power through which control can be seen as abstractly manifested in our society. First, *inclusion* involves a circuit of security, understood as the means through which subjects continuously are required to validate and proof their identity in order to be included in the practices in which they engage. Identification is part of almost every aspect of life for the modern-day citizen and runs along many different modes; all of which are required to maintain a state of security. Examples of this could be computer-readable passports, birth-certificates, drivers licenses, fingerprints, DNA-records, job-contracts, credit cards, bank accounts and so on (Rose 1999). The point is, that it is through these measures that the individual receives, not only actual citizenship, but also his or her authenticity as a *real* person and thus also the right to exercise personal 'freedom'. Some of these modes of identification are, of course, quite old and rigid. But, as is also the subject of this paper, yet another site of inclusions could be identified, which are more vague but nevertheless just as real; namely the requirements placed by the various institutions, companies, indeed the entire labor market upon the individual to *proof,* not that they are actual persons with a degree and thus the legitimate right to work in a given job, but also proof that they are more than that; to have an impressive CV, a LinkedIn profile, a list of competences, volunteer work, being self-motivated and capable of 'kicking down the door' and selling themselves in an interview etc. (appendix 6). The point is, that the drive to be included, here understood as part of the group of people with the right job and an expansive career, can be seen as linked to powerful ideals such as the pursuit of happiness, pleasure and meaning.

Being included is key to 'the good life' (Brinkmann, 2011; 2014). Because of this, the demand is, first and foremost, one that we place upon ourselves, and we volunteer to allow the monitoring of multiple aspects of our lives, to provide any form of information such as past experience, records, (online) profiles, data-charts etc. in order to be included. As such, we are governed to be mentally self-governed, which exemplifies quite simply the efficient governmentality strategies of (late) modernity. In order to understand why the security of inclusion is such a powerful standard, attention will also have to be shifted to its counterpart.

The other circuit of power involved in a society of control relates to the notion of *exclusion* – a place of insecurity. While in a more classical society of discipline, the institutions were designed to hierarchically monitor deviant behavior and continuously make corrections through the molding of standardized, normalized individuals. The prison, the asylum, the closed-off hospital and so on were all physical ways of removing the 'deviant' from 'normal' society and of reformation, which was realized in actual institutional spaces. Rose proposes that in a society of control, there is no longer just the gaze of 'the one eye' – the one institution or the law. Rather, the surveillance has dispersed, it is embedded in particular activities, and activity is logged in multiple databases scattered around all spheres of life. As such, the metaphor of the Panopticon is, in some ways, obsolete. Instead we are navigating through multiple fields of surveillance, and the refusal to do so, or simply the 'insufficient' results from these acts of monitoring, may result in exclusion rather than explicit punishment. Here, being excluded, as an abstract phenomenon, involves the *rejection* of the person from a common unity – be it actual citizenship, the job, or other more abstract seals of approval. An example could be that of the unemployed who has to be designated the title 'job-seeker' in order to avoid exclusion from welfare- as well as more symbolic benefits, which also places the problem solely in the life of the individual. You are unemployed because you are not good enough at finding a job. So, improve, otherwise we might have to cast you out. The other possibility is that you are unemployed because, for whatever reason, you are simply unwilling to work, in which case, insofar as you are part of the class supposed to work, you are completely delegitimized and stripped of all sense of belonging. As we shall take a closer look at later, certain economical and political tendencies unfolding in Denmark in recent times can be seen as actual manifestations of this power to include and exclude on a

societal level. To summarize, the two power circuits roughly outlined here constitute the mechanisms through which control is achieved, not through the whip or the ball and chain, but through the installment of powerful ideals and engraved logics throughout broad society about what it means to be a consuming, working individual with a socially verifiable *identity* here and now, and what might happen if you do not live up to those ideals.

### 2.2.3 The Psy-sciences and the subjectivation of the 'new' individual

One final point, which will be addressed as part of these meta-theoretical reflections surrounding power, stands in close relation to the notions of individual and personhood. As Svend Brinkmann (2011) points out in his book "Identitet", it was not until the latter half of the 20th century that people here in the west really began to think about the question of identity, as something that you had to *have,* or *contain*. Whereas the soul was more or less universal and complete – at most oscillating between the ultimatum of right and wrong, good and evil, – the individual, with the development of the Psy-sciences and particularly the Freudian and Eriksonian ideas of personhood here in the West, opened up a whole new inner world that could be explored and redefined. Psychotherapy became one such technology to help modify the person, and through the placement of a core, or a potential, that could be realised on the inside, the language of 'Psy' has since become the dominating means through which we understand 'ourselves'. The psychologized language is embedded in institutions, across contexts, and most important of all it is inherent in the everyday-ways we interact and engage with each other. As hinted in the earlier sections, this has also shifted the balances of power; partly in favour of certain institutions such as the modern-day workplace in a capitalistic society; mainly because it directs the attention (and foci of *change*) towards something inside the individual. In many ways, as will also be argued for throughout this paper, the 'psy' language has morphed through new waves of management and neoliberal discourse, and as such, Freudian terms have been replaced by more modern notions such as core competences, adaptability, sportive metaphors such as being a 'winner' or a 'team player', strengths and weaknesses, motivation, flexibility and so on (appendix 6) but the individualizing result remains more or less the same. It still delegitimizes other social, organisational or societal views as legit outlooks to understanding the status quo as well as the development in a given context. For the individual, the finger always points inwards,

and one could imagine that this is even more the case when you are about to transfer from a life of studying, where all your achievements have come to define you, to a life of work, where these achievements are what will land you the good job. The idea of personal development and consumption as the key to an identity, as a demand and a societal truth, in the light of Foucault and Rose, becomes a powerful way of subjectivating and thus also controlling. This point will also be of particular interest- and become more apparent later in the investigation.

# 3. Theoretical presentations

The presented meta-theoretical reflections provide the lenses applied throughout the remainder of the theoretical presentations. As mentioned, they make it possible to combine a set of theories that might otherwise seem far apart or even incompatible, and they provide the focus needed to illuminate a particular problem from a particular angle. With this section, the theoretical framework allowing the qualitative investigation of the phenomena and problem underlying this thesis in its entirety will be presented. This presentation will be two-fold; first, interesting facets of the sociocultural context in which the investigation is carried out will be elaborated on. Next, a series of perspectives addressing the individual as a meaning-making agent within this context will be presented.

## 3.1 Framing the sociocultural context

As mentioned, the sociocultural context will be the focus in the first set of theoretical presentations; first, by addressing some of the major societal tendencies taking place in the context of Denmark (and much of the so-called western world) in recent years, then by focussing on the development in the Danish educational system and their recent structural reformations, and finally by outlining the theory of social acceleration from the sociologist Hartmut Rosa as one anchor point unifying these sociocultural perspectives.

### 3.1.1 From the welfare- to the competition state

As already stated in the introduction, Denmark is no longer a welfare state *per se*. Instead, it makes more sense to talk of Denmark, like every other state in the increasingly globalized and homogenous world, as a *competition state*. This, in a sense, new form of state, also bears with it new requirements from- and convictions about the

people that inhabit and represent it. The ideal citizen, through the logical outlook of this new type of competitive state, is no longer a democratically involved, informed member of society, but first and foremost a consumer of public and private goods and a profitable investment. The ideal citizen is no longer a person, but a specific set of core competences, a flexible and self-motivated asset always striving to improve him- or herself, and one that can be instrumentalized and put to effective use in the globalized and ever-changing labour market (Pedersen, 2011; Brinkmann, 2011).

Here, the citizen who is opportunistic, creative, selfish and in every possible way at service for the competition state becomes the symbol of success. This citizen does not reflectively strive for success *for* the state in any patriotic way, but rather and exclusively as a personal matter, and exactly because of this level of subtlety it remains such a powerful mechanism of control. Public services such as free health care and education are, sometimes more explicitly laid out than others, ultimately instrumental means for this all-engulfing logic; they keep people healthy so they can work, they supply the labour market with a state-of-the-art workforce, and their institutional efficiency at doing so can and is increasingly evaluated and measured in value for money. This has permeated not only the internal political jargon in Denmark, but can be seen as widespread in public discourse (see ex Klausen, 2016, in Politiken on New Public Management, appendix 6).

One of the areas particularly relevant for this investigation is that of the educational system and its still closer ties to the labour market as the frontline in this battle of never-ending growth. Here, the main mission is the effective streamlining of people; getting them faster and faster through the system while providing them with the means to operate still narrower and more specific functions afterwards. But, most importantly, it is to motivate people to *perform* on their own, to strive to become a *winner* and to reach *the good live.* More on this in section 3.1.2 on *the performance society*, but first we will take a closer look at how the educational system has developed through some of the major institutional reformations that have happened alongside the wave of neoliberalism and state-driven competition over the past 25 years.

*3.1.1.1 The recent reformations of the Danish educational system*

With the bill passed under the previous government in 2013 on the latest reformation of the primary school in Denmark (Lovforslag L51, see Antorini, 2013), the kids in Denmark, from the age of 6 to around 15, since 01/08-2014, are part of an institution, which in effect has made their schooling a full-time occupation while added a variety of new methods for screening, evaluating and documenting their progress and achievements. One central aspect of this reformation was that a normal day at school had to involve a variety of extra activities, so-called 'leisure offers', which was to involve pedagogues and teachers, but were not supposed to be curriculum *per se*. However, they do involve ideals for developed competences, and it is not possible for the child to go home before the hourly requirements have been met, and as such, the role of the primary school has changed fundamentally in Danish society. As a result, it is now the main arena for the child's upbringing; one that centres more and more on the measureable, on making binding decisions about the future at a still earlier age, and its so-called offers are to a large extent *obligatory*. The curriculum was also to be more centralized and remote-controlled in accordance with overall societal and economical goals, and individual schools were stripped of much of their autonomy and possibilities for affirming their own values, schedules and activities. Not surprisingly, after the bill was passed in 2013, teachers went on a nationwide strike, with one argument being that the new quantitative demands would take a toll on the quality of their teaching, many quit their jobs, but in the end the strikes resulted in the biggest lockout in Danish political history, silencing the teachers and removing them and their unions from the political negotiations (Bonde & Jessen, 2013).

Another reformation happening 10 years earlier, which was also met with a lot of resistance but nevertheless carried through, was that of *Gymnasiereformen* (Eng: The High School Reformation, see Johansen, 2014), which was implemented in 2005. Similar to the later reformation of the primary school, this institutional makeover served the purpose of implementing new instruments for measurements and control, as well as a series of measures designed under the slogan "responsible for your own learning". As such, one of the main goals was to implement a system closer in resemblance to the universities and ultimately the labour market. Students had to be made self-reflexive, self-motivated and responsible; in this sense, exercising control over themselves (Becker-Christensen, 2002, p. 825). With the new tools for evalua-

tion as well as the new grading-system, which was more comparable both internally between students and externally across the state and even internationally, competition was to be one of the key drives behind the high school student's newfound *lust* for learning. This is to prepare them for what comes afterwards, and good grades obviously are the ticket to a good education at the university. Because of the limited spots available at the most sought after courses, the average grades have in effect inflated since the reformation. Recent studies have pointed out how this new trend, the "12-grade students" in high school, has been related to a concentration of some of the most stressed individuals across society. One study showed that as many as 55 per cent of the 2nd year students scored around the top of the stress-scale. Even if such an 'objective' scale is questionable, it is alarming, because as the study points out, this places these 16-18 year-olds in the top 20 per cent of the adult population suffering the most from stress – the ones that would normally be referred to professional treatment (Richter, 2017). As such, according to its own agenda of making the students responsible and self-driven, the reformation has been a great success.

One final reformation, which it also makes sense to include here as part of the layout of the competition state and its influence on the educational system, is, quite obviously, centred on the universities and other similar institutions of higher education. *Fremdriftsreformen* (Eng: The Progress Reformation, passed in April 2013) was implemented around the same time as the reform of the primary school, and its primary aim was to "get the university students to finish their studies faster" (Regeringen, 2013). The reform implemented a set of new regulations, particularly aimed at making sure that students do not fall behind more than six months of the normal time required to finish an education, and if they do, it will have economic repercussions in the form of lost SU (the state support of students). Another part of the reform was that the students now have to study full-time, that is, they have to complete at least 30 ECTS each semester, which roughly equates, the government says, to 37 hours of studying per week. In effect, this means that if you fall behind or find out that you want to change courses, you might risk losing your SU or not have enough to finish a different course and as a result will have to work extra hours in your 'spare time' while studying full-time. Also, as will be particularly relevant and interesting for the present investigation, the reformation served the purpose of tying the university still closer to demands posed by the labour market.

Put together, looking at these three structural reformations with the terminology of Foucault and Rose, it becomes easy to see how they serve the purpose of engraving a very particular set of discursive truths in the institutions for the students to engage within. This new form of governmentality, true to the logic in a competition state, is highly efficient in that control, through remote and standardized forms of surveillance that are nevertheless omnipresent, to a large degree has turned into self-control. The students do not need to be disciplined; the fear of 'not making it', translatable to being *excluded*, in that sense, is a form of control far more powerful than detention or the whip. The discourses surrounding these notions of success and failure are powerful, exactly because they emanate from logics deeply engraved in the rest of society and the economic system, and as we shall see in the analysis (section 5) they play a large role in how the master student comes to understand the transition between university and labour market.

### 3.1.2 The performance society

Another perspective addressing a contemporary societal tendency, which it makes sense to mention as part of framing the sociocultural context here, is what Anders Petersen (2016), lector in sociology at Aalborg University, has termed in his book baring the very same title: "Præstationssamfundet" (Eng: The Performance Society). In the book, Petersen looks at how depression, yet another of the major health-related issues of this day and age, can be seen as closely related to the development of a society, in which people have to *perform,* to such an extent, that it breaks them. The rise in cases of clinically diagnosed depressions as well as the large amount of anti-depressant medicine consumed in Denmark (around 450,000 prescriptions, equal to about 1 in 12 of the population being on some form anti-depressant medication), can be seen as a kind of seismograph indicating that something is happening in the bedrock of society, which is reflected in the people living in it. Using the competition state as the backdrop, Petersen lays out the performing citizen, first and foremost as an *individual*; that is, as an individualized person in fierce competition with other individuals, constantly doing what is required to win and develop, and always looking for answers on the 'inside', rather than in the external society or groups. To perform is inherently individualistic. The sphere of career and work represent the obvious arenas in which the individual is required to perform, but the tendency also finds itself manifested across and throughout all other spheres; such as love life, non-work

achievements and hobbies such as travels and being physically fit, behaviour on social media etc. This individual has himself as his own primary focus, he constantly strives to be flexible, to make himself appealing for the labour market, to feel 'at home' in the insecurity of a changing world and to cleanse his life of routine and habits like the diseases they are.

It is broadly understood, says Petersen, that you have to be robust to survive in this world, that resilience is a personal matter, a matter of mental attitude, and here depression is the diametrical opposite of the sought after winning individual. It is essential that you are capable of performing, and as Petersen argues, the depressed is not capable of dealing with that demand; he represents the immobile, non-development and lack of direction. The depressed, to continue along the metaphor of sports, is a loser, and losers rarely have a spot on the team for very long. As such, these people are 'dealt with' in the most efficient manner, the disease is diagnosed and placed within the head of the person, the symptoms are treated with pharmaceuticals or individual-centred therapy, and everything can continue as usual. The people supposedly suffering from depression are urged to deal with 'their' depression as best and quick as they can, so that they once again can take part in performing. Petersen describes the performance society as based in a culture of 'gentle barbarism' as he calls it; here understood as parallel to the notions from Foucault and Rose, that other measures of control have replaced the whip, but nevertheless result in the same barbaric (and chronicle) load placed on the individual by demands of constant performance. This culture gains its strength from this power to include and exclude, distinguishing winners from losers with nothing in between, and as the empirical data presented in Petersen's book clearly reveals, many of the depressed individuals describe a feeling of insufficiency, inadequacy and a sense that the train has now left without them.

This bleak and rather dystopian layout of our society is, of course, not the whole truth. To perform is obviously also a positive thing, and the welfare state – if one can call it that – relies on people showing up for work every day – and performing. If everyone stayed home and abused welfare benefits – as is arguably one of the most prominent points of critique and real vulnerabilities faced by the welfare state – there would not be any welfare for anyone. This is surely not Petersen's point. One could

argue, instead, that it is only once these demands to perform get out of hand, when they become so institutionalized, uncontested and part of every aspect of being, as engraved logics on how you are supposed to live, that they start to have dire consequences, as the ones presented by Petersen. In the following section, the focus will be on precisely how and why the demands can be seen as escalating to that point.

### 3.1.3 The logic of social acceleration

Thus far under this section, we have looked at a particular area of society from a particular angle, describing some of the major tendencies that have occurred in the context of Denmark since the 1980's up until now. However, a deeper look at some of the social and historical mechanisms behind these tendencies, what have arguably let them to appear as they have, could still be fruitful. With this section, the theory of social acceleration, by addressing how an increase in the *speed* with which our lives play out, as the inherent facet intertwined with the logic of capitalism, will provide such a perspective. Here, I will be drawing particularly on the critical sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa (2005; 2010; 2013).

#### *3.1.3.1 Social acceleration and modernity*

Rosa (2010) introduces his book "Alienation and Acceleration" by postulating, that the reason behind why we experience many of the difficulties we face today – be it the climate rapidly deteriorating, plastic in the oceans, the growing inequality between rich and poor or the examples of rapidly growing epidemics of mental disorders linked to stress and depression throughout the western world – could be found in the sociological observation that we live in a world, in which we have installed a particular system of temporality. It is an inherently accelerative system, and thus it creates a world bound to speed up exponentially. Rosa takes it further and asks the question: "*what is a good life, and why don't we have one?*" (Rosa, 2010, p. 7). His own thesis is that a speeding world breeds alienation, a strangeness to the world experienced by the people living in it, simply because things are changing so fast that it becomes hard to feel 'familiar' with anything. This is in itself not a new idea, or one that Rosa can claim credit for. Since the dawn of what is often termed *modernity,* critical thinkers such as Goethe, Marx and Adams have observed, although highly unsystematically and scattered, the accelerating effects on the social lives of people through phenomena such as capitalism, innovation and industrialisation, all of which

rely on this 'love of movement' central to the modern age (Hassan, 2010). But what is actually meant by the 'acceleration of time'? It is only recently, with the contributions from Rosa, that these observations have been formulated into a consensual theory within the social sciences.

*3.1.3.2 The subtypes of acceleration*

In order to understand why people's social lives can be seen as accelerating, Rosa proposes three subtypes of acceleration, which are systemically interrelated. The first type, A) *technical acceleration*, consists, as the name suggests, of the acceleration of goal-directed processes through technological innovation. Increasing *Speed* equals to a compression of space driven by ever-faster transportation of people, goods and information across distances. Especially with the invention of the major networks (telegraphs, phones, radios, TVs and the internet), time, the meter of capital and social life, has been continuously redefined. The logic of growth in a capitalistic system is based on this, and the current trajectory is one of continuing this trend of never-ending efficiency. The quicker and easier we can move around, travel to exotic places, send out information about ourselves and so on, the more we will also tend to do it. This exemplifies quite simply the self-propelling feedback system behind social acceleration driven by technologies. Things accelerate because we all accelerate (Rosa, 2005). However, looking at the technological innovations themselves as possibilities for 'speeding up' and thus living up to the law of capitalism is, in itself, insufficient. In order to understand why our lives seem to be moving faster and faster, we will also have to look at how our social worlds are involved with this tendency.

The next type of acceleration, B), *the acceleration of social change*, represents the perpendicular corner of the triangle and is closely correlated to the technical aspect. Social change is, however, distinguished as it relates to the tempo of – on one hand practices and action orientations – and on the other associational structures and patterns of relationship. Thus, technical advancements will next to always have an effect on social change on an individual and a structural level. However, it is also possible to have social acceleration without the technical aspect, as seen with organizational changes and institutional reformations such as those presented in the above. An example of the acceleration of social change *with* technical acceleration could be the invention and diffusion of major technological advancements. Since the invention of

the typewriter in 1714, it took around 174 years of marketization for it diffuse into society and become somewhat of a commodity, and much longer before it was finally replaced by a new technology. With inventions like the CD player or the computer it took less than a decade for them to diffuse. From the invention of the Internet to its 50-millionth connection it took 4 years, and with programs and apps on smartphones it rarely takes a year for them to diffuse (Rosa, 2013). For the individual, this means that present values and experienced possibilities within particular spheres of social life change much faster; how we engage and interact may, quite literally, not be the same tomorrow. As such, nothing is truly certain. This has created a demand for flexibility and adaptability in order to 'keep up' with a world constantly moving forward, and as we will go more in depth with later, the phenomena of graduation can be seen as one such place where the technological and social aspects of acceleration come together, placing very particular demands on the individual.

This leads on to the final aspect of social acceleration in Rosas theory. C) *The acceleration of the pace of life* is defined as the heightening of the tempo of life, understood as an increase in episodes of action or experience per unit of time and cannot simply be derived from the acceleration of social change, even if, of course, it represents an obvious reaction to that development. This implies that the 'lack of time' stands in paradoxical relation to the category of technical acceleration – advancements supposedly freeing time resulting in the opposite. On a more *objective* level, this trend, involving a condensation of episodes of time, can be seen in time budget studies as resulting in e.g. shortening of mealtimes, less time spent sleeping, conversing with your family and on other leisure activities, despite the fact that average hours of work time in the western world have been decreasing gradually since world war two (see e.g. Garhammer, 2002).

*Subjectively,* according to Rosa, this accelerating pace of life is often expressed as a growing sense that one lacks time, a stressful compulsion to accelerate as well as an anxiety about 'not keeping up'. Accelerating and the condensing of action episodes represent obvious reactions to the experience of falling behind, which, of course, makes you a systemic and constitutive part of that very same accelerative trend. Speaking in favour of this observation, one can once again refer to one of the major epidemics of our time; the stress-related sick leaves and cases of burnout often relat-

ed to ever-higher demands for flexibility and (social) changes at the workplace in Denmark (e.g. Højbjerg, 2016; Agdokan & Wermelin, 2016). Here it is important to note that different spheres accelerate differently and may even come to a standstill or a momentary deceleration. An example could be the counter-discourse against professional and personal demands for constant self-improvement, as it was introduced in Denmark with the popularity- and following high media-coverage of Svend Brinkmann (2014) with his book "Stå Fast", roughly speaking urging people to *stand still* (e.g. Kjær & Tuxen, 2016; Pedersen, 2016). However, the temporary slowdown of one sphere may not be enough to have a lasting effect on social acceleration in a broader sense, but it may prove that deceleration is indeed possible.

*3.1.3.3 Social acceleration and alienation*

What Rosa is also getting at, as was hinted at the beginning of this theoretical section, is that social acceleration may have sprung out of inherently good ideas linked to modernity; ideas of higher standards of living for all people, ideas of efficiency and as a result: welfare, shorter hours of work and more time for fun and so on. But, as Rosa points out, it could be argued that the accelerative machine has gotten out of hand, to the point where it can no longer live up to the promises of modernity. Rather, it has inverted these promises with total heteronomy as the result. Even though people may be autonomous, self-determined and capable of seeing what they genuinely think is a good and fulfilling life, which Rosa argues they are, the forces of acceleration are enmeshed in every fabric of life to such an extent, that without it there would not be much left. Creativity, democracy and political autonomy are no longer valuable goals in themselves; they are instruments in maintaining competitiveness and thus for staying in the 'rat race'. The corrosion of welfare, with the notion that 'we can no longer afford it', even though we have never been richer, exemplifies the logic, which has given birth to the competition state. Equally, the performance society represents the obvious enactment of a play set by people taught to be individuals in fierce competition with each other from the earliest stages of institutionalized life. As such, the idea is not just to get ahead, but also, and probably more so, to not fall behind and risk exclusion from whatever it is that everyone else is chasing after. This is visible, both in the life of the individual, but also in the overarching political decisions that shape a state in competition with other states. It is not that people are no longer capable of visualizing ideals of what 'the good life' looks

like, that they are not capable of self-determination, reflexivity or true autonomy, rather, argues Rosa, social acceleration comes to dominate and skew the aspects of life, which may have formerly held these ideals in place.

The final product of this tendency, as was mentioned earlier, according to Rosa, is *alienation*. That is, a feeling that you do not belong, a strangeness to the ever-changing world around you, and a feeling that it is you who has to do anything in your power to keep up and adapt to it. We become alienated when we implement and follow reforms that we might not really support or agree with – in fact, we might be openly against and even call upon our colleagues and unions for a strike – but in the end we lose the dispute and return to our desks the following Monday. We become alienated when we have close relations at the other side of the world, but might never have spoken a word to our neighbour. We become alienated when we cancel family celebrations because we have a big paper to hand in, when we have to fire employees we otherwise like in order to cut costs and improve earnings, or when we study for months to get another top-grade only to continue on to the next exam and the one after that with no room left for a genuine interest in any of it. We do these things, even if no one explicitly told us to do so – there *are* actual alternatives – but nevertheless we 'somehow have to'. Alienation, thus, is the total overruling of wholeness in favour for particular functions, of what you 'want' in favour of what you 'should', not according to a common held moral code or shared ideas of right and wrong, but simply because of the temporal mechanism of an accelerating hamster wheel (Rosa, 2010).

## 3.2 Perspectives addressing the individual

So far, the theoretical perspectives have been centred on framing particular aspects of the sociocultural context under which the central investigation of this paper will be carried out, as well as through which meta-theoretical lenses the phenomena will be viewed. In order to shed light on how the individual makes sense of the transition from the educational system to the labour market, that is, as someone also capable of reflecting and making decisions within any given sociocultural context, a way of bridging the ancient dichotomous gap between structure and agent, culture and person, is called for. A central point stated by Jaan Valsiner (2014), which is well deserving of reiteration here, is that structures only exist insofar as people do. Culture

is made up of individuals, and as such, it does not make great sense to seek reduction to either side of the debate. In order to strive for compatibility, and thus locate the individual in relation to culture, I will not be drawing upon the theory of semiosis – the active and contextual use of signs – as the connective theory proposed by Valsiner himself. Instead, attention will be turned to two different theoretical approaches, which nevertheless provides many of the same cross-theoretical advantages. The first approach, *Positioning Theory,* addresses the individual as someone coming in touch with various discourses and forms of knowledge through differing relations and contexts, and as someone both offered- and actively acquiring different positions and thus measures for acting in meaningful ways. Following this perspective, the theory of *Life-course and Transitions* will provide a way of locating the individual, in the light of his/her development, in a context of meaningful relations and environmental elements, which have come to play a particularly big role for where the individual is today, as well as where he/she is going.

### 3.2.1 Positioning theory and the dynamics of agency

According to two of its founding fathers and most proponent frontmen, Rom Harré and Fathali Moghaddam, positioning theory can be termed a 'social constructionist approach', that is, it relies upon the scientific-philosophical outlook that the world in which we live is, first and foremost, described, accounted for and thus constructed through language (Harré, Lee & Moghaddam, 2008). Standing in close relation to (and also partially drawing upon) the vantage point of Foucault, the social constructionists, according to Kenneth Gergen, seek to understand the world in terms of social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people (Gergen, 2003). As such, reality is not some buried, solid object waiting to be uncovered with the truth-exposing shovel of positivism. Rather, multiple realities exist and are often clashing and competing through various social processes (communication, negotiation, conflict and so on). Describing the world is in itself a social act, one that involves the invitation of certain other actions while excluding yet others. Redescribing thus also involves a threat to those affirmed patterns of actions already taking place, which also underlines the power (and agency-inducing properties) of language itself.

*3.2.1.1 The positioning triangle*

Founded on these principles of both ontology and epistemology mentioned above, positioning theory has historically been applied to understanding the ways in which a vast array of different phenomena are socially and contextually contingent; from the subjectivity of journalism, to workplace agency, to the 'right' and 'wrong' sides of war and conflict. The theory offers a way of understanding how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others in a social, cultural and moral order; i.e. what is expected, and what is possible within that particular context according to its rules, customs and conventions. Positioning involves the ascribing of duties as well as the claiming of rights, and not everyone involved in a social episode has equal access to these rights or duties in order to perform meaningful actions at that moment and with those people. Harré & Moghaddam (2008) outline the theory using three key notions, which, put together, comprise a triangle revealing positions as they are manifested in everyday social activities. A) is the notion of *position,* defined as the bundle of rights and duties ascribed to a particular position in order to act in a meaningful manner. It also involves the prohibition from certain other actions, which would be regarded as meaningless. One example could be that of a priest of the protestant church in Denmark uttering: "I now pronounce you husband and wife" at a wedding ceremony in a church in Aalborg, Saturday morning. This has very real and very different implications for the social life unfolding in this particular context, than if someone in the audience had stood up, walked up the isle and uttered the exact same sentence (Brinkmann, 2011). The position of 'priest' is infused with certain rights and duties, and thus also exists in a balance of power outweighing other positions. However, as soon as the ceremony is finished and the priest steps out of his robe to go to the supermarket, quite different positions become possible; ones that do not allow him to perform the holy matrimonial ceremony for a couple by the dairy section.

This leads to the next corner of the triangle: B) is the notion of *actions*, and as has just been crudely exemplified, it only becomes possible to define certain episodes as genuine actions, once they exist as part of concrete and situated practices, which makes them meaningful. The priest pronouncing people man and wife is it itself a meaningless action; it only becomes meaningful once seen as part of a larger whole, and here the robe and physically being inside a church Saturday morning are not in

themselves facets producing meaning. In order to fully grasp why the priest's actions in the church are meaningful, the final corner of the triangle, C) *story line*, covers the aspect that there is always at least one narrative in which the social episode can be located as part of a meaningful whole. Actions are not simply random or local; they exist as part of patterns, which are organized and, at least in part, agreed upon. The couple had planned the date of the wedding months (or years) prior, the church and the priest is situated in an organisational context linked to state law, customs and about a thousand years of Christian traditions in Denmark, to mention but a couple of elements adding up to give this particular social activity – as well as the positions involved – meaning (Brinkmann, 2011).

It is also possible to make the parallel to the more abstract and sociological notions of inclusion and exclusion from Nikolas Rose presented as part of the meta-theoretical reflections presented earlier (section 2.2.2). Here we can see how they become visible as having very real implications in everyday situations; manifested in the moral positioning of people as 'us' or 'them', 'priest' or 'unemployed', 'winner' or 'loser' and so on. The possibilities for acting depend upon the position ascribed to you, but it is important to note that people often (and to an extent) have access to the networks of discourse through which they navigate; as such, they often know why they have the position that they do, and what it would take to claim (and be ascribed) a different one. Because positions, as already mentioned, are inherently contextual and dependant on pre-defined patterns and norms, they do also in effect precede the person, that is, the positions exist as potentials prior to the individual entering the context, but they also change with that same individual (Moghaddam, 2008). This also exemplifies how the notion of positions can serve as a way of overcoming the dichotomy between person and context, and instead vouch for their interdependency. Looking at the problem underlying this paper, positioning theory will provide a valuable tool allowing us to see how people, due to discourses particularly imbedded in the educational system and the labour market, as well as rooted in different societal narratives about what it means to enter the labour market and to live life in a meaningful way, are positioned and position themselves according to a changing grid of expectations and unlocked possibilities. It also allows us to look at the dynamic nature of agency, that different positions are possible – and meaningful – in different contexts and through different relations of power. Here, a more personal narrative;

what is meaningful for the individual in particular, may be seen as either compatible or contrary to the norm.

### 3.2.2 Life-courses and the coherence of agency

In the above, Positioning Theory was presented to provide a theoretical tool allowing the view of the individual as a dynamic agent, as someone who's room for autonomy is very much contextually dependant at every level in a given social episode. In this sense, agency can be seen as a form of fluidity allowing the individual to act in ways that are meaningful here and now, but the perspective could perhaps be seen as lacking in addressing the more coherent aspects of agency. The socio-cultural approach to *life-courses*, particularly with the work of Tania Zittoun (2009; 2012) provides a good addition to addressing agency within complex cultural and social environments, which also dedicates attention particularly to *historicity*; how changes over time make sense for the individual and what they, for the person herself, was seen as particularly influenced by. The life-course, then, is a rational and systematic layout of events. Here, agency can be seen as the product of the complex interplay between multiple levels within a person's life, and with this approach the scope can be particularly set on 'major' acts (ex choosing to quit school and join a circus), and how they reflect the light cast by previous big decisions. It thus addresses meaning making here and now as the culmination of the *development* underwent up to this point. In that sense, it also parallels one corner of the positioning triangle, as it could be argued that a life-course is in effect also a presentable story line – albeit a focused, individualized and detailed one about the person, presented by the person herself. This approach, says Zittoun, is not to be mistaken for the study of outcome; i.e. looking at how someone *is* or *performs* at a given time in comparison to previous times. It is not interested in measurements or comparisons. Rather, it involves the study of the constant field of tension between continuity and change in which a person is engaged, and, in which novelty also emerges; paying particular interest to the social and cultural facets and their influence for the changes in the life of the individual. It is the study of how we change, yet also stay the same over time.

As such, Zittouns approach vouches for the interdependency between the levels of onto-genesis (the person's development), micro-genesis (changes in the person's interaction with other persons) and socio-genesis (changes in the person's sociocul-

tural environment). In order to make sense of this systemic interplay, the approach draws upon the key-notions of *internalization* – translating and making the surrounding cultural environment with its inherent discourses, rites and traditions your own (and thus creating a *personal* culture), and *externalization* of that personal culture through communication, moving, and other semiotic ways of engaging with the world (Zittoun, 2009). Through this continuous process, meaning can be produced both personally and collectively, and it also exemplifies how a person is systemically related to changes in any given context and to what extent agency may emerge.

#### *3.2.2.1 Transitions and ruptures*

Even though this approach, as mentioned, is not at all about breaking any given course of life into smaller and more edible bits of information, and thus reducing the person to singular brackets of time stuffed with whatever the researcher finds most interesting, studying a person's life-course does necessarily involve the study of points of particular interest; where changes tend to be catalysed and more substantial. These points, termed *ruptures*, are often metaphorically defined as the fork in the road, the Y-looking bifurcation point involving the opening of some doors and the closing others. This is when the otherwise transitive change becomes intransitive; demanding a process of adjustment, adaptation or complete separation between the individual and his/her environment. These ruptures can be externally caused, (ex getting fired as a middle-manager because people no longer buy the plastic cutlery your company produces), or internally caused and thus also an example of what will here be called agency, (ex choosing to quit your job as a middle-manager at a plastic cutlery factory, because you woke up one morning and decided that being homeless was better). Either way, the outcome, for the individual, is not yet decided, and it involves the *transition* from what could be called one epoch to another. One interesting point also highlighted by Zittoun (2012), is that these ruptures and their following transitions always reflect the social and cultural context in which they arise; that is, they pend between being normative and idiosyncratic. For the individual, this means that some transitions are 'normal', in a sense *supposed* to happen, that there are ways in which they are supposed to be dealt with, and that going against this norm may result in the loss of social acceptance and support often very valuable at these points. Looking at the particular subject of this master's dissertation; transitioning from the university to the labour market could be seen as one such area bound by

norms, where it is possible to either stay *en route* or steer away from that. The presented theoretical approach to life-courses and transitions provides a valuable way of seeing how the individual experiences moving from a life at the university to a life in the labour market as a forthcoming rupture; whether it is even seen as a rupture, and how the individual is preparing for it and capable of acting within his/her social and cultural environment.

# 4. Methodological reflections

The previous sections, up to this point, amount to the complete theoretical framework, which will be essential to shedding light on the problem embodied in the questions posed at the beginning of this master's thesis. With this section, attention will be turned onto the way in which the investigation is carried out, in short; the overall methodology and the reasoning behind. Because this paper, as has already been revealed and clearly hinted throughout the theoretical presentations, is aimed at shedding light on both the individual's meaning-making process, as well as the particular institutional context in which he/she is imbedded, two discrete analytical approaches will be applied on two different forms of data, which put together make up the combined analysis. The first half of the analysis consists of a *Critical Discursive Analysis* (CDA) as it is laid out by Fairclough (2003), using of the contents of the envelope mailed to all soon-to-be graduates from Aalborg University by the Career Centre as the raw data. This envelope consists of a catalogue known as 'Dimittendguiden' (in Engelish: The Graduate Guide), as well as a set of colourful sheets of a4 paper with various information and dates of things that it is possible to participate in throughout the semester as well as an invitation to the Career Exhibition 2017. As mentioned, appendix 6 contains an interesting selection from the material, which will be used in the analysis. As such, this approach can also be termed a document analysis (Lynggaard, 2010), because the material, as documents fixated in space and time, make up the primary empirical data. With this approach, particularly the first set of sociocultural theories will come in to play as well as the meta-theoretical lenses already presented (see section 2 on Foucault and Rose; Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 2003). The second half of this combined analytical approach, then, will consist of an analysis on three conducted, semi-structured interviews with students about to graduate with a master's degree. Here, the Thematic Networks Analysis (TNA) will be applied to treat the transcriptions and initiate the first step of the analysis through the

abstraction of themes across texts (Attride-Stirling, 2001), after which the theoretical framework will allow an in-depth investigation based on those themes. In combination, these two approaches serve the purpose of adding nuances to the understanding of the phenomena, by looking at both the university as a contextualized structure and the graduate as an active agent, as well as how these two sides are interrelated. Furthermore, because the material from the Career Centre is also used in the second half of the actual interviews, through this coupling of approaches, we will be able to take a look at the encounter between person and institutionalized discourse; how they are represented and how they are interpreted, which comprise to give a fuller picture of the meaning making process. I will now continue to elaborate a bit on both of these analytical approaches and the methodology behind.

## 4.1 The Critical Discourse Analysis

A key assumption within the field of critical discourse analysis, as it is laid out by one of its most proponent figures and founding fathers, the British linguist Norman Fairclough, is that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically connected to other elements of social life, and that research always has to take language into (central) account (Fairclough, 2003). It is not to say that everything is discourse – it is not – rather, it is to say that language is a legitimate entry point to understanding various forms social practice, as well as how societal power relations are established and constituted through discourse. It becomes 'critical' in that it is change-oriented, that is, it aims at describing changes (as exemplified by Fairclough on the language of 'New Capitalism'), but also because of its focus on scrutinizing ideologies and revealing (unfair) power relations, so that it becomes possible to act accordingly. As such, the critical discourse analysis is in itself an ideological endeavour, one that entails a subjective interpretation by a researcher with certain beliefs, opinions and moral standpoints. Furthermore, the interpreter and author, in this case, is also the personal receiver of the envelope containing the material, and as such, an attempt at analysing it fully objectively would likely prove impossible. Rather than treating it as a sterile experiment with all variables laid bare, conducting the CDA will be a subjective act, carried out by an interpreter who is equally located in the discursive world that he is analysing. But, it is important to be aware of this relation and its possible implications throughout the interpretive act in order to remain on course according to the method of CDA.

### 4.1.1 Aspects of CDA central to the analysis

Because this analysis, as already mentioned, centres on a certain kind of one-way communication; namely texts formulated by a particular social agent with a particular audience in mind, it does not make sense to draw upon certain aspects of CDA, which focus on a more micro-oriented levels of discourse, as would make sense in a conversational analysis with multiple participants, turn-taking, positioning and so on (Fairclough, 2003). Instead, the level of analysis will be more macro-oriented and pay particular attention to what broader structural elements and contexts the texts can be seen coupled with- and situated within. One of the main points from Faircloughs approach, which will also be of great interest in the analysis of the material from the Career Centre, is that social practices, which are networked in a particular way, constitute a social order – a way of doing (and representing) things within that particular sphere. This order is what allows the individual to act in meaningful ways while rendering other ways meaningless. Here the discursive aspect of that social order is what Fairclough calls *the order of discourse*, that is, a social ordering of semiotic difference – a relationship between different ways of making meaning, which, put together, make up the order and thus also set the frame for possible actions and statements. Some of these ways may become *dominant* while others marginal or even oppositional. Order is maintained, not by the complete overwriting of other forms of meaning, but, rather, by the affirmation of one discursive branch as the 'right' one. Other discursive variations do not vanish from the order; instead they become somewhat illegitimate within that particular structural context (Fairclough, 2003). Here it is important to note that Fairclough stands firmly on the shoulders of Foucault to expand his analytical approach, and, as such, a discursive order is also an *open* system, which, through the activities of social actors, is subject to constant change. No one 'owns' the order, but it is dominated by certain discursive formations, which may be more or less held in place as long as they serve their purpose. The point of the analysis, then, is to shed light on what may be implied with a statement in relation to the order to which it belongs, as well as what actions and subject positions become possible (and, just as interestingly – impossible) in a given context through those statements, and finally what the consequences hereof may be.

As with the present investigation, the material from the Career Centre is not necessarily a representation of the only possible way of doing something; i.e. graduating

from the university and entering the labour market. But it does draw on a vast array of dominating discourses to represent one central view within a discursive order, and, as is also important to note, this very process of *representation* may not only reflect- but also play an active part in affirming that dominant view. It will be the aim of the CDA, particularly through the perspectives presented in section 3.1, which frame the sociocultural context, to map out this discursive order, its multitude of facets, what the dominant view is and how it is represented in actual ink and paper in a particular context. This concludes the layout of methodology for the first of the analyses – the CDA. In the following, we will take a look at the second – the interviews.

## 4.2 The interviews and the treatment of the data

As already mentioned, the second half of the analysis will involve a shift of focus from the discursive, structurally oriented treatment of the material from the Career Centre, onto an approach, which brings the individual to the centre of the picture. With this section, light will be shed on the method for collecting the data for this analysis, how it was carried out and the strategy for treating the data. Overall, three semi-structured interviews were conducted, translated to English and transcribed, after which the analysis was initiated with a Thematic Networks Analysis (TNA) (Attride-Stirling, 2001)[1]. First of all it makes sense to mention that the qualitative approach of interviews, and more precisely semi-structured ones, especially involves an interest in the *lifeworld* of the interviewee. As such, it is not about uncovering truths in the mind of the individual or locating the 'right' answers; rather, it is about understanding the individual and his or her immediate experience of a given phenomena *before* it gets conceptualised with theory and abstract notions. This inductive approach, rooted in phenomenology, considers these immediate experiences to be primary, while the scientifically reflexive and explanatory focus becomes secondary (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). This philosophical foundation deserves a bit of elaboration, which will be the focus of the following section.

[1] The transcriptions of the three interviews are presented in their entirety on appendices 1-3. On appendix 4 an example will be given of the formation of themes, according to the TNA, using rough codes from the transcriptions. Finally, on appendix 5 the interview-guide will be presented.

### 4.2.1 The semi-structured interview and hermeneutics

As with the CDA or any other form of research, it would be naïve to believe in the possibility of conducting an investigation while at the same time removing you, the researcher, completely from the equation. In fact, it might not even be desirable. As such, the semi-structured interview, which revolves around an interview-guide consisting of pre-determined, open-ended questions, which are directed towards an understanding of a phenomena already (and at least in part) conceptualised by the interviewer, is by no means any different. Rather, and in this particular case, it can be said to rely on a circular process of meaning-making; what is also known as *hermeneutics*. This interpretive approach involves a continuous moving back and forth between the wholeness of a text and its individual parts, as well as between preconceptions and the autonomy and uniqueness of the text (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). As with this particular investigation, the interview-guide has been partly based on theoretical preconceptions about power, reforms of the educational system, transitions and positions and so on, which no doubt also found its way into the interviews themselves. But the treatment of the data has nevertheless revealed new and unique facets about the experience of graduating with a master's degree and transitioning to the labour market, as they are portrayed by the interviewees, which I could not have thought of beforehand. This in turn feeds back into the theoretical outset and even to the primary research questions themselves; forcing these aspects to align with the new meanings and understandings produced by the data. In the following, the final interview-guide used in the three interviews will be elaborated a bit on. The guide itself is located on appendix 5.

### 4.2.2 The interview-guide

The interview-guide, overall, is comprised of an introduction to the interview – its 'free' nature, the ethical boundaries, consent, a rough layout of the subject, followed by three overarching parts, which turned out to work nicely as the rough structure under which to frame the questions and let the discussion run its own course. The first of these parts consists of a set of questions, which address demographical factors about the participants such as age, place of living and courses at the university. The second part, then, contains questions that revolve around life as a student at the moment as well as the outlook on being done with it. Here, the initiating questions were particularly free and posed through open-ended words (how, what), where I, as the

interviewer, tried to be as informal and yet as professional as possible. The first question, "how do you find writing your master's thesis?" initially served as a way of breaking the ice, allowing the interviewee and the interviewer to joke in a friendly and equal manner about our mutual situation. But it quickly turned out that this first question sparked some interesting and very valuable reflections, which often set the course for the remainder of the interview. After a series of questions all circling around this aspect, and when the topic seemed in a sense 'emptied', the third and final part of the interview was initiated. Here, the envelope containing the material from The Career Centre, which the participants had not seen prior during the interview, was presented to them, followed by a series of open questions meant to invite any immediate thoughts that the participants may have upon encountering the material again. Here, they were asked what they thought about it when first receiving it, as well as what it had meant to them since. More in-depth questions followed, which particularly addressed aspects of the content, such as the invitations to various events over the course of spring 2017, and whether the interviewee had participated in any of them. After the discussion centring on these aspects seemed to have run its course, a couple of more broad questions were included to inspire the participant to 'take the standpoint of others'; ex with questions such as 'what do you think others get out of this material? Do you think they agree with you?' Which also, for the most part, proved to make for an interesting series of reflections. Finally, when the discussion had been around all the questions on the interview-guide, the participants were asked whether they had anything to add, which then served to round off the discussion. In the following, a bit of information will be presented on the selection of the participants for the interviews.

### 4.2.3 The participants

Because part of the central problem as well as the major interest underlying this investigation is centered on a very specific phenomena – being the experience of graduating with a master's degree from Aalborg University – this sets a natural and somewhat homogenous benchmark for the sought after participant for the interviews. The material from the Career Centre, which all participants were familiar with, was as mentioned used in the interviews, and certain questions in the interview-guide centered on this material as well as the career exhibition in particular, but it was not a requirement that the participants had attended the exhibition or made use of the mate-

rial in any way. Introductorily, the recruitment process was not as smooth and easy as initially thought. As it turns out, students who are writing their master's dissertation are often quite busy, and this meant that I had to take certain pragmatic measures in order to make the entire investigation possible at all. For the recruitment of participants, two channels were used. First, posters were up put around the major cantina areas at campus (Kroghstræde 3 and Fibigerstræde 5), which invited soon-to-be graduates to a friendly interview in exchange for the bribing of coffee and cake. This rather optimistic approach, however, turned out to be unfruitful. Instead, an ad was placed on my Facebook page, which called upon 'friends' or 'friends of friends', who were in the particular situation of writing their master's dissertation at AAU, to participate, also in exchange for the same bribe. This in turn paid off with a few messages. But, as I did not want any of my 'immediate' friends to participate for fear their knowledge about the project, my interests and other obvious biases, I settled on three individuals who seemed adequately demographically diversified, and all of whom I was peripherally familiar with. As a result, one female – Marie – and two males – Thomas and Kristian – all of whom are students within the fields of human sciences at AAU, between the age of 25 and 27, were chosen to participate. As such, the spread of participants is not as broad as initially hoped for – there were no soon-to-be hydrologic engineers, software designers or marine biologists amongst the messages I had received – and this will also make for an important point in the discussion (section 6.2.1). The interviews, ranging between 35 minutes to an hour, were conducted in Danish on different locations in Aalborg, after which they were translated and transcribed to English. As mentioned, the raw transcriptions are located on appendices 1-3.

### 4.2.4 The Thematic Networks Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, translated and transcribed, the TNA was chosen as the particular approach to treat these raw data and thus initiate the analysis. The main argument for this decision is that the TNA, as it is laid out by Attride-Stirling (2001), allows for the qualitative, data-driven abstraction of themes across texts – in this case the three transcribed interviews – which ultimately opens up the possibility of a thorough treatment of the data both intra- and inter-textually, while living up to the standards hermeneutics. Through this approach, the first step of the analysis is initiated with the free coding of each transcribed interview individually. Here, the

interpreter applies key words or short sentences to particularly interesting pieces of text, which serves to categorise or condense it without losing the meaning itself (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Next, the interpreter connects these codes and the concrete quotations, which they are rooted in, to form the web of the first thematic levels across texts; what is called a *basic theme*. Once these have been formed, the basic themes, which are particularly related to each other, then connect to form the next thematic level; the *organisational theme*. Finally, these organisational themes are further connected to form a single *global theme*. Attride-Stirling (2001) highlights that there is not recipe for how such a network should optimally look. Some analyses may hold dozens of basic themes, a handful of organisational themes and perhaps two or three global themes; others may hold no global themes at all and but a few basic ones. But, as a rule of thumb, the aim should be to make the thematic network as detailed and at the same time as simple as possible, without losing any of the content of the raw data. Through this webbing of themes 'from the ground up' and at three different levels, the data should be allowed to speak for itself, while at the same time providing the interpreter with a manageable and meaningful structure through which to analyse. It is important to note, as has already been hinted, that this treatment of the data is in itself an *interpretive* act; and as such, the analysis can also be said to begin with the very first level of coding. As with this investigation, one global theme, namely that of *'the experience of graduating'* was formed based on three overarching organisational themes, which again was formed from 8 basic themes. Appendix 4 contains an example of the process from code to basic theme, as well as a complete list of themes used in the analysis. Furthermore, the TNA (section 5.2) will be introduced with a model providing the reader with a visual overview of the themes.

# 5. The analyses

With this section, the focus is turned from the previous presentations and reflections onto the analytical taxonomy of the paper, bringing the theoretical framework into play with the respective empirical data. As mentioned, the investigation contains two distinct analyses conducted separately: the first one being the CDA, followed by the TNA.

## 5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis of the material from the Career Centre

In order to conduct the CDA in a somewhat organized and meaningful way, a set of overarching themes standing out across the material have been formulated. These can be seen, as particular threads of discourse, which put together, comprise the discursive order of the material from The Career Centre. It should be noted that aspects of these discourses can be seen as overlapping and that their separation from each other itself is somewhat artificial; they are part of a broader network of discourses, but in order to analyse this order in a meaningful and systematic way, it makes sense to distinguish them from each other. Figure 01 depicts a layout of the order of discourse of the material:

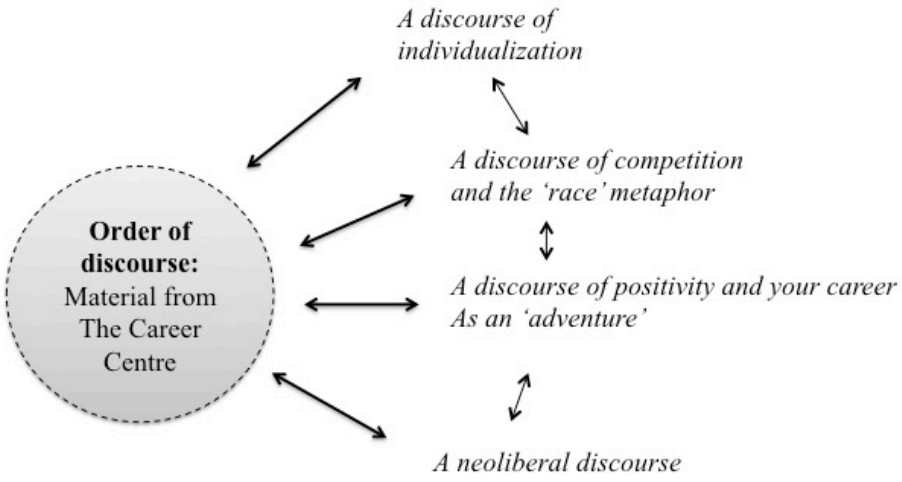


**Figure 01**

### 5.1.1 'You and yours' – the individualization discourse

One of the first things that stand out after opening the envelope and skimming through its various papers as well as The Graduate Guide, is just how much of the material contains formulations directed towards 'you' and 'yours'; in short, what I should do, in order to be able to land a job. This can be said to emphasize a discourse of *individualization* (section 2.2.3), which very much puts me, the soon-to-be graduate from AAU at the center of everything that is going to happen throughout this transition. One example of this is found on the introductory page in The Graduate Guide:

> "*Congratulations! Now you will soon have your diploma in your hands (...) it is now, that you really have to think about, how you are going to land your first job. All the qualifications and competences that you bring in your backpack from the University have to come into play, and it is important to get a head start (...) If you have not landed your first job before the day of graduation, you will get instructions on how to make life as unemployed as short as possible"* (appendix 6, p. 5).

This example is interesting, because it sets the tone for the remainder of the 67 pages of the catalogue. It is *now* – being February 2017, just as I have started writing my master's thesis – that I have to do what I can get to get a head start, here understood as having the best possible chances of landing a job some time before my graduation. And if I am not that lucky, I will be instructed on how I can make my unemployment as brief a duration as possible. Section 5.1.2 will centre on the accelerative and competitive aspects also contained in this statement, but here it makes sense to direct the attention towards how the individualizing discourse inherent plays upon a discourse, which involves the erosion of collectives over an individual consisting of manageable bits. As the example states; it is *my* 'competences' and 'qualifications', which will be the determinant factor, and the guide will then help *me* out, if I by any chance should not land a job before graduating. In doing so, it relates to the notions of personhood and inclusion and exclusion, as they were presented through Rose (section 2.2.2), and they set the standard for what forms of identification (competences and qualifications in particular) will make it possible to be included in the circuit of security afforded by employment. Through these discursive formations of the Graduate

Guide, it appears that there is something that the individual should 'contain' in order to be successful on the job hunt. This is reoccurring throughout the remainder of the 67 pages, and it is underlined by the fact that none of these pages are dedicated to a more structural elaboration on topics such as the unemployment rates in various fields, economical factors, the political status quo etc. Thus, the consequence of this sole focus on you, the graduate, is that the responsibility is the individual's alone, and this is where all fingers point, if it does not work out. Another example of this individualizing discourse is given through a presentation of a student and participant in Scandinavian Talent Program 2016, Claus Sørensen, who states:

> "*The talent program is a great opportunity to develop my knowhow, my competences, my network and not least my CV. The program has strengthened my professional level and optimized my chances to get a job when I graduate"* (appendix 6, p. 12).

As this example of one of AAU's more talented students also hints, the labor market and the employer can be seen as more or less removed from this particular equation. The attention is fully directed at what the individual can do to make himself attractive to the labor market – to 'optimize his chances' for a job. Another example of the individualizing discourse can be seen on the invitation for one of the events, which took place on the 27th of April: "*Nail or fail your job interview – we look into preparation, strategies, nerves, body language etc.*" (appendix 6, p. 4). As such, the job interview is something to be 'nailed' or 'failed' by the individual, where particular biological factors such as nervousness, as well as 'skills' such as the right posture, strategic speaking, brushing your teeth and wearing the right shirt, are isolated as the most important points of foci when meeting your potential employer for the first time. This serves to imply that the employer has nothing to gain from this meeting at all. Because of this logical outlook, aspects of the interview such as getting a feel for the workplace, asking *them* the right questions about what the job involves etc. would be meaningless. If one were to ask: "how do I make sure that I get a fair treatment from my boss?" The answer, according to this dominating discourse, would likely be, that you should not ask any such questions, because if it does not work out, it is because you are not capable of living up or adapting to the demands. On the first page of The Graduate Guide it reads: "*we build bridges between students*

*and the labor market*" (appendix 6, p. 4). This is interesting, because while 63 out of its total of 67 pages are dedicated to instructing the graduate on what he/she 'should' do, as well as provide the necessary inspiration and motivation showing how it has been done by some of AAU's successful graduates in the past, only 4 of the remaining pages provide brief information about unions. And, even then, these 4 pages are dedicated to inspiring the individual to get out of unemployment as quickly and efficiently as possible through special schemes such as becoming a 'Growth Pilot' (Appendix 6, p. 7). As such, it seems that it is very much the individual who has to cross that bridge to reach the destination of employment; itself something unquestionable. Furthermore, because the Career Centre of Aalborg University mails out the material, this also means that it originates from a powerful authority, an expert of this area, thus making the contestation of any of its contents very unlikely for the individual in focus. This particular point will also be valuable in the discussion (section 6.1). As such, I, the individual, am the one with everything to gain from crossing the bridge, while the labor market is what may be reached – if I have earned it.

One paradox, which can be mentioned here, is that the advice on how to stand out draws upon a discourse, which makes standing out a normative requirement and a mode of identification as ordinary as carrying a driver's license or owning a credit card. Because of the normativity inherent in the discourse of individualization, this may also in turn accelerate and continuously escalate the demands on the individual wishing to 'stand out' from the ones already standing out. The finite consequence of not getting a good start, of failing to make yourself attractive enough, which is highlighted in the material, is that you may 'lose' the race to land a job before graduating. Exactly this aspect, the discursive logic of competition and the use of metaphors revolving around 'racing' – winning and losing – will be the focus of the following section.

### 5.1.2 The 'race' metaphor and a discourse of competition

As mentioned above, another central discursive thread running throughout the material is that of *competition*, which can be seen particularly manifested in words normally attributed to a world of motorsports and racing. Besides the quotation in the section above, this is recurring in the jargon throughout the material and can be seen exemplified on the page listing the events happening in the spring of 2017:

> "*7/3: Kick-Ass from Basement to Billion – Jesper Buch from 'The Lion's Den' kicks the Career Exhibition into motion (...) 26/4: Tour De Hjørring – Jump on the bus and meet exciting companies in Hjørring (...) 27/4: Kick-start the Collaboration Exchange – Get good advice on your sales pitch and how to cultivate your network*" (appendix 6, p. 2).
>
> "*Kickstart your career: (*) find a job, student job or internship, (*) make yourself visible, (*) get advice and a cv-check from professionals, (*) have your picture taken for your CV and LinkedIn*" (appendix 6, p. 2).

Aside from all the aspects further underlining the focus on the *individual* in the above, the use of words and metaphors such as the recurring 'kickstart' is interesting, because it connotes that your career is something that has to be ignited with the kick of a foot, like the engine on a motorbike, after which it, implicitly understood, becomes possible to accelerate and thus 'get ahead'. It is not hard to see how this connects to a logic of acceleration as well as discourses in broad society such as the ones linked to a competition state or the performance society (section 3.1). These discourses find themselves reproduced through the various measures that you can – or, rather imperatively – are ordered to take throughout the spring and particularly on the career exhibition, in order to get a competitive advantage over other competing students. Through this lingo, your career can also be interpreted as an actual race; that is, a competition where all participants race against each other, where everyone has a fair and equal starting point with the same bikes, the same distance, the same asphalt or mud, and when the light turns green, as hinted on the picture of the stop lights on (appendix 6, p. 13), what will decide if you win is your capabilities and motivation alone.

The cheerful use of these racing metaphors throughout the invitations in the material also serves to imply that the events themselves have the power to make the victory of the race happen; that just by participating, by going to a pep talk with the billionaire and online-entrepreneur Jesper Buch – the archetypical performing individual in any competition state – I myself will also, somehow, be capable of kicking myself into motion. One of the results, however, as is also linked to the discourse of individuali-

sation, could be that no one questions the race itself; its rules, whether it is rigged or even there at all. It is represented as an unquestionable truth, and with the terminology of Foucault and Rose (section 2) we can see how this is a prime example of the mechanisms behind (late-)modern governmentality. The race is there, everyone around you is your competitor, and you could lose if you do not prepare yourself adequately. This representation of the transition from a life of studying to a life of work as some form of competition through metaphors related to racing, though, also necessitates the logical outlook that there is something to be gained from participating in that race – that there is a *finishing line* and a *prize* if you are the first one across. Even though this, by far, remains implicit and perhaps not even in need of being stated, the career as the end-goal does appear in the material to thoroughly depict what the trophy looks like, as well as what I might miss out on if I do not accelerate as the race predicates. This is also underlined with case-examples of previous students from AAU, all of whom managed to land 'their first job' around the time of graduating by applying eagerly throughout writing their master's dissertation (see appendix 6, pp. 7-10). In the following, we will take a closer look at this discourse of the career displayed as an 'adventure', as well as how it finds itself expressed in the material.

### 5.1.3 'Your career – your adventure' – the unknown as something positive

As mentioned above, it is possible to identify yet another discursive formation, which is central to the order of discourse imbedded in the material. This formation, as exemplified with the bold slogan "*Your Career – Your Adventure*", seen in the colourful image (appendix 6, p. 10), which also in part plays upon the discourse of individualization, seems to indicate that landing your first job will also hold the promise of something *more* than just the job itself. It is recurring throughout the material, that this is the ticket to your career and thus also to your personal adventure. According to the dictionary, an adventure is: "*an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks* (…) *an exciting or remarkable experience"* (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Besides the representation of a full-time job as an 'adventure' in accordance with this dictionary definition of the word, the example is also interesting because it instigates that the by-products of social acceleration in relation to the labour market such as globalization, the constant organisational makeovers and reformations in the name of new waves of management, as well as the resulting feelings

of alienation and so on, are, in fact, to be welcomed as something positive (section 3.1.3.3). The development may result in the individual feeling alienated from the world, things may change exponentially and evoke feelings of danger, but this is also what makes it a journey into the unknown; an *adventure*.

The very positive connotation linked to the idea of an adventure, however, may also mean that being critical towards certain elements from the material or other organisational and societal aspects involved in applying for a job, can be delegitimized as negativity, pessimism or simply kvetching. An adventure, per definition, is bound to have its ups and downs, but this is not to be complained about, because in the end it may result in an exciting or remarkable experience. Drawing upon the notions from Foucault and Rose once again, we can also see that refusing to participate in the race, as it is metaphorically laid out here, may result in the exclusion from the circuit of security, which this adventure, and indeed part of your entire identity, is contingent upon. When the individual is first and foremost understood through the language of 'psy' as well as its more contemporary management-oriented derivatives; that is, manageable bits on the inside such as core competences, strengths and weaknesses in relation to work, habits of consumption and fantasies about a dream career, as both Brinkmann (2011) has argued this material underpins, then being invited on an adventure based on those very bits is no doubt going to be very 'self-affirming'. Another central consequence of this discursive formation, then, is that the work place – or even the entire labour market – is situated in a highly powerful position in relation to the individual transitioning from the educational system. They are the ones who can offer you the adventure – a normative 'must' in order to be a performing person with a valid identity in Denmark anno 2017 – and the individual is the one with everything to gain. This newfound inner drive based on a discourse of positivity, from a governmental point of view, is quite different from the more explicit and disciplinary approaches of the whip or the harsh foreman, but their end-goals, to 'motivate' and normalize the individual, can be seen as more or less the unchanged.

### 5.1.4 'A talent for creating growth'– The neoliberal discourse

One final discursive formation, which stands out of the material, is that of the neoliberal discourse manifested in what could be called 'economized' lingo. Standing in close relation to that of the individualized language, which directs the complete at-

tention towards the person through aspects such as competences and a good CV, the neoliberal discourse can be seen as the marketization of these individual aspects. Through terms, which are often related to neoliberalism and more broadly capitalism, and, which are also present in broad society as logical 'truths' about what we ought to be working towards, we can see that there are prizes to be won for being a particularly talented graduate. The example comes from AAU's Scandinavian Talent Program, and reads as follows:

> "*Are you innovative and do you have a talent for creating growth? -*
> *Then you can become one of the 30 specially selected participants in AAU's Scandinavian Talent Program, which is targeting you who has the drive to create growth and development in micro companies"* (appendix 6, p. 12).

This example is interesting, because it shows how a neoliberal ideology, particularly manifested in the capitalistic logic of growth, has also become the standard of measurement for the highest possible achievements that you, as a talented graduate, can attain. The talent program is not about being particularly good at what you do; that is, the courses that you study, nor is it about being particularly involved in university politics, the student board etc. Instead, it is about doing whatever you can to earn more money for a micro-sized company. This means that 'creating [economic] growth' has, through this broader logic, not only become a skill on its own, it has also become the most important skill and the ultimate end-goal; so important that only the 30 'specially selected candidates', with a special kind of 'drive', get to join the talent program. While the adventure of a career may be the individual's own gain, producing economic growth in a small company as well as in society as a whole is here portrayed as the highest of talents that you could master and do 'for others'. As such, it is a prime example of the logic in a competition state, as Pedersen formulated it (section 3.1.1), and it sets the standard for how you, the individual, will be able to excel and accelerate in the race that you are about to participate in. Another example of this lingo is found amongst the few pages, which give information about unions and unemployment benefits. Here, two schemes are presented which are also designed to make sure that "you find work as quickly as possible":

> "*Growth Pilot and Innobooster* -
> *Via these deals you will have the opportunity to be hired in small and medium-sized companies (SMV's), where the company, for a period, will receive grants for your pay"* (appendix 6, p. 14).

Here, the information proceeds to explain that if you have a higher education (a cand. in Denmark, the equivalent of a master's), you can have the opportunity to be offered work in SMV's via the unions, who will then, instead of paying you the unemployment benefits, pay part of your salary to the company hiring you. This, of course, necessitates than you are part of a program; either being a 'Growth Pilot' or an 'Innobooster'. This is also an interesting example, because it shows that the unions; who have their origins in the *organisation* of labourers, a collective form of 'resistance' against the purely capitalistic interests of employers looking to increase profits, have, also true to the logic of Denmark as a competition state, been included in the neoliberal machinery. As such, they are individualizing rather than collectivizing; inspiring competition rather than unity by singling out its members with a particular talent for 'boosting innovation' or 'piloting growth' and offering them favourable deals with companies. Put together, these examples paint the picture of a discourse, which is manifested in the material, but also found as an all-engulfing logic in society; one that has made growth not just a means to an end but the end itself. It is rooted in a logical outlook that endless growth, in a world with limited resources – both psychological and natural – is nevertheless possible (Rosa, 2010). And via this outlook, it is also only logical that creating growth, no matter how you go about it, is the highest of purposes.

This concludes the analysis of the singular discourses of the material. In the following, particularly important points will be made about how the discursive formations, which have been individually scrutinized in the previous sections, can be seen as part of a larger whole; what Fairclough (2003) terms 'the order of discourse'.

### 5.1.5 The order of discourse in the material from the Career Centre

In the above, we have looked at the material sent out by the Career Centre from AAU through a particular meta-theoretical scope and with the use of a theoretical framework addressing the sociocultural context, in which this material can be said to exist.

The analysis shows that overall, the order of discourse can be seen as made up of four organised themes, or discursive formations, all of which overlap and constitute each other throughout the material. First, the material was shown to lean heavily on a discourse of individualization, by placing you, the receiver of the material and soon-to-be graduate, at the centre all the aspects, which the material portrays as important in relation to graduating from the University and entering the labour market. It also underlines this by breaking 'you' into smaller bits; your competences, CV, qualifications and so on, which further enhances the weight put on the individual. Next, light was shed on how the material, particularly through metaphors related to the world of motorsports, was interlaced with a discourse of competition, which works to make the transition to the labour market a highly competitive endeavour; one that requires 'kickstarting' and getting a head start. Thirdly, the material was also seen to play upon a discourse of positivity, one that focused on the unknown aspects of the transition; and here the career was particularly made out to be an adventure, something that may involve hardship, but at the same time inherently fulfilling and 'worth it'. Finally, a discursive thread, which revolved around the wave of neoliberalism particularly linked to the competition state, was scrutinized through an economized form of lingo linked to key notions often found in economy and business, such as growth and innovation. Again, it makes sense to point out that none of these discourses are completely separable, and they rely on each other in order to fully make sense. In the following, a point will be made about this combination of discourses and how they fit into one order.

As Fairclough, with his roots in Foucault, points out (section 4.1): discourses are never static or unalterable. They vary according to contexts as well as throughout a single text fixed in place and time, and there are bound to be areas where discourses clash, become dominant and subordinate. One such instance in this particular investigation has to do with the representation of the career as an end-goal unto itself, similar to that of the notion of growth, which was treated as part of the discourse of the career as an 'adventure'. A career can be defined as: "*a field for or pursuit of consecutive, progressive achievement especially in public, professional or business life (...) Washington's career as a soldier*" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). As such, this also implies that the end-goal itself is one of consecutive progress, a process rather than a finite destination to be reached. This relates to what Rose (section 2.2.1) refers to as

*lifelong learning*; in which case it could be argued that the career is one's entire life; only to be ended upon death (or retiring, but, even here you cannot be said to be done with learning). This stands in a somewhat paradoxical relation to the discourse of the career as a competition, portrayed through metaphors attributed to 'racing', because it entails that the finishing line is also the race itself; that there is no point to be raced towards other than another lap on the elliptical track (at least until you die, which, hopefully, few would consider a 'victory' in itself). The crossing of the two discourses in this order; on one hand the career as a competition *a la* a race, where it is important to kickstart yourself into a good start, and on the other hand the career as a personal and lifelong adventure, does, then, hold certain contradictions. If you have your whole life to race around the same track with no real goal other than never-ending progress, surely it cannot be that important to compete fiercely with your fellow students over who gets the best start, becomes an 'Innobooster' or wins a talent competition in 'growth'. And if you do indeed race around the same track over and over; after how many laps does the idea of an adventure find itself questioned and perhaps even criticized? As such, these discourses crossing swords within the broader order can also be seen as a manifestation of the self-propelling feedback system driving social acceleration, or, as Rosa (2010) depicts it rather simply: the hamster wheel.

## 5.2 The Thematic Networks Analysis

In this section, attention will be turned to the second part of the analysis, which steers the focus away from the material from the Career Center, onto the three conducted interviews with the participants Marie, Thomas and Kristian. Here, the analysis will be conducted around a structure, where each of the 3 overarching organisational themes headlines a section, under which the respective basic themes headline a subsection. Put together, the themes revolve around the global theme of '*the experience of graduating and entering the labour market*'. This provides a meaningful grid under which to analyze, however, it should be noted, as with the discourse analysis, the distinction of each of these themes is in effect somewhat artificial. The point is that the thematic layout and the division of sections makes it possible to conduct the analysis and flesh out the data in a structured and comprehensible manner. In the following, figure 02 provides a visual overview of the thematic build-up:

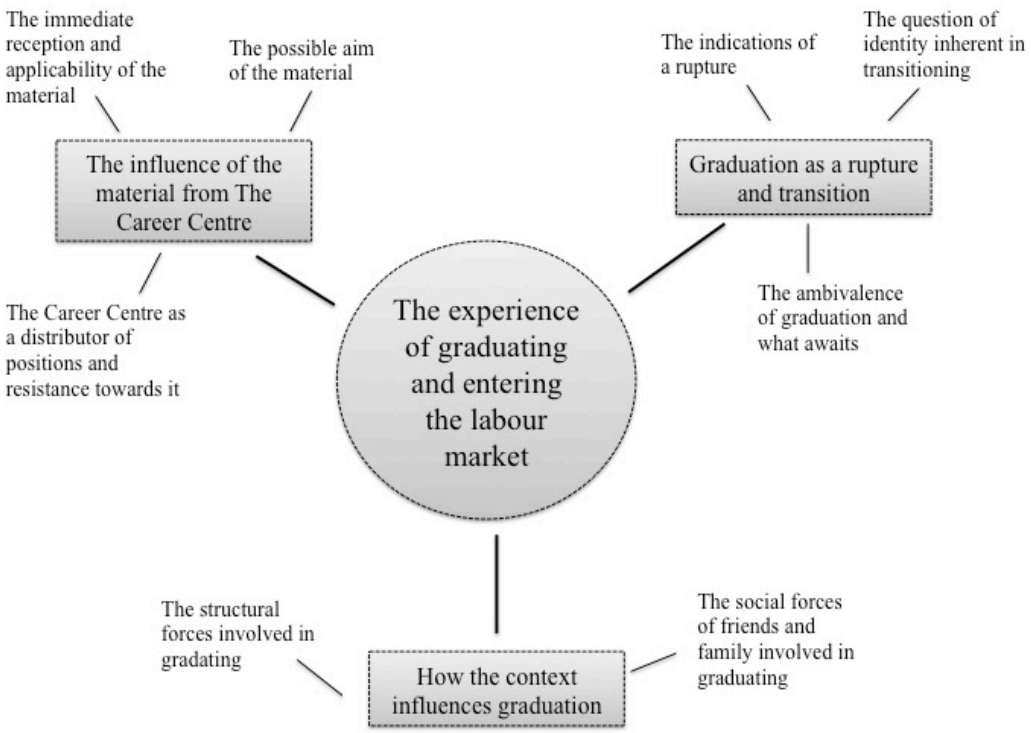


**Figure 02**

### 5.2.1 Graduation as a rupture and transition

One interesting aspect that quickly became apparent throughout all three of the interviews was the outlook on graduation, which was, not surprisingly, repeatedly portrayed as a major change in the lives of the participants; and one that was linked to an inherent ambivalence as well as a question of identity linked to making the transition. We will look into these aspects in the following.

#### *5.2.1.1 The ambivalence of graduation and what awaits*

All three of the respondents described mixed feelings about being done with their studies, which related to each of the participant's unique situation, history and outlook on the future. For Marie, it became clear early in the interview that it was a rather complex affair involving many facets, as the following quotations will also support:

> MA: "*(...) So now I'm finally finished after five years, so I'm looking forward to being done with that, like, this whole thing that there's always a new semester, there's, uhm, all those things (IT: mhm), but it's also this,*

> *now we're going to enter the labour market, but what kind of a labour market is it? Can I get a job? How do you write application? How do you make CV's, where am I going to be, can I stay where I'm living, if I can't can I get a job in time for that? (...)*" (appendix 1, p. 2, l. 36-40).

As Marie describes here, finishing after five years of university is in itself a thing to be looked forward to. Life as a student is hectic, but, as also becomes clear early in the interview, the outlook on the labour market, as a fundamentally new and different context from the one of education and studying, is connected to a lot of worries and insecurities. When asked if she has a 'dream job', or something that she particularly wants to do once she has graduated, a job in psychiatry was the quick answer, but this just as quickly became mixed with the same ambivalence that she had previously described:

> MA: "*(...) But then I think it's just this, I really have to be careful with what I'm thinking, because, like, now I think I've just found my dream job, but then you're going to be sitting in that job and thinking, like, this isn't what I thought it would be, and it's not really great anymore, but what does that mean, like, what should I do then (...) should I be a psychologist at all, or should I be something else, start something else, where am I, then*" (appendix 1, p. 6, l. 130-133; 135-136).

This apprehension about looking forward to something 'too much', for the fear of disappointment, which may result in an even greater state of doubt forcing her to change her field completely, is also influenced by experiences of the past. As she describes later in the interview, she has been disappointed with certain courses and with the university in general, and certain things were perhaps not as fascinating and magical as they appeared or had been presented to her. This point will also be of interest later on, but first it makes sense to turn the attention to Thomas, who also describe his experience of graduation as a rather mixed matter:

> TH: "*(...) I would say that for every day of writing the master's, the more I'm looking forward to being done (IT: yeah), but it's not really the joy of*

*being done, that's there too, but it's more a joy of not having to write the master's thesis (...)* " (appendix 2, pp. 1-2, l. 22-24).

"*(...) And this whole educational life, where you have been in education since you were 6 years old, uhm, it comes to an end, where there has been a clear road ahead, where there was a clear idea of what was going to happen ahead, like, then there would be another semester (IT: yeah), a new year (IT: mhm), with some new courses, and now it just stops (...)*" (appendix 2, p. 2, l. 37-41).

As Thomas describes in the above, up until now, since he was 6 years old, there has been a clear road ahead of him, paved by the educational system and its institutions, and he has had a clear idea of what was going to happen. Even if, of course, this has not always been fun, and, as he describes, it is more the idea of not having to write his master's thesis, rather than the idea of graduating in itself, that seems alluring. As such, both Thomas' and Marie's experiences, seem to clearly indicate the experience of a forthcoming *rupture* and to pose the need for a *transition*, as the notions are laid out by Zittoun (section 3.2.2). In the following we will take a closer look at those aspects.

*5.2.1.2 The indications of a rupture*

As the above quotations also reveal, it is possible to identify certain indications that the forthcoming event of graduation represents that of a rupture. With graduation, the clarity of it all 'just stops', as Thomas puts it, and with it goes part of the security linked to being in an institution where the there is only one visible direction. What lies ahead, then, may be a fork in the road, a Y-looking bifurcation point, or it may be even more complex or blurred than that. In describing his situation, Thomas, similar to Marie, also draws upon his own historicity, the time after graduating from high school where he had two gap years: " (…) *but then I always knew that I was going back to the institutions, back to education (IT: mhm), so I had that to look forward to*" (appendix 2, p. 2, l. 46-47). As such, this experience may be of some use, but it cannot completely provide Thomas with a comprehensible guideline of how graduation will play out in the future.

Marie's situation, as already mentioned, also appears to resemble that of a rupture, in which her transition seems intransitive, where development to an extent has become discontinuous, involving the need for adaptation in order to enter the next epoch in her life-course. As she goes on to elaborate, writing her master's thesis has been particularly troublesome for her:

> MA: "*(...) I've been in the process regarding that I was in a group, which decided to split, after which the two others decided to join up in one group (IT: Okay), so, it's like me who's the shit, if you can say that, uhm, I think this process, because I had already started looking for jobs and like, what can I do, what can I apply for and so on, uhm, yeah, and send some applications and so on (...)*" (appendix 1, p. 3, l. 53-56).

As this quotation indicates, the breakup of her group has further enhanced the experience of being in a place where the future is insecure. As she also points out, certain ideas and preparations surrounding job seeking were shattered with the breakup of her group. She is now considering postponing her master's thesis, which also sets in motion a volley of new considerations and worries about graduating and whether it is worth it to try to make it in time, as she elaborates in the following:

> "*Uhm, I think it's a bit scary, but also this, like, what's awaiting me when I get out, what does it mean, can I get something, can't I get a job, what kind of job can I get out to, how difficult is it, am I going to be unemployed for a year and could I have just as well postponed my master's thesis and done it even better (...)*" (appendix 1, p. 5, l. 104-107).

Put together, it seems that for both Marie and Thomas, writing their master's dissertations and graduating represents something fundamentally new and different, where past experienced ruptures and transitions may lend little consolidation for what is about to happen, and little inspiration for what there is to look forward to and how to deal with it. This also underlines the point that it is especially in the midst of these major changes during the individual's (experienced) life-course, that we look to our past for answers regarding our future. When the answers are not to be found, when our previous activities as agents of our own lives do not resemble what is to come,

we more so need to look elsewhere in our social and cultural environment for guidance and vicarious inspiration. This point will also be of value in section 5.3, where the interview takes a turn towards the Graduate Guide.

*5.2.1.2 The question of identity inherent in transitioning*

As both Marie and Thomas also hint in the above, the idea of transitioning into something fundamentally new and unclear, also involves a more implicit question of identity. Marie, who is now 'the shit' following the split of her group and considering postponing her master's, gives another, slightly clearer, example of the question of identity triggered by graduation:

> MA: "*(...) For me it's perhaps also about, if I can make it for the deadline, or will I have to postpone it, and then, I think, there's also a bit about this, who are you, when you postpone your master's thesis?*" (appendix 1, p. 7, l. 41-43).

As this seems to indicate, the question of identity is very much linked to what she is doing. Not graduating in the right way, not finishing her master's in time, in part affects 'who you are'. As such, it also seems to become a social matter; one that cannot be answered by you alone. Rather, it depends on whether you make the transition in a normal or idiosyncratic way. This social aspect of graduation and transitioning to the labour market will be dealt with more thoroughly in the forthcoming section, but it makes sense to point out that in the eyes of others, and in our social and cultural context, there may be certain socially constituted *positions* available for those who cannot graduate in time, where you 'become someone else', and this positioning may result in a loss of social acceptance and care, which is very valuable during such a fundamental rupture (section 3.2.1). As Marie states, quite seriously: "*when they've scheduled this amount of time for it, that means you can also do it within that time, end of discussion*" (appendix 1, 168-169). Here, going against the norm of how much time you are supposed to take to write your master's dissertation (and one that has been severely reduced with the latest reformations of the university) (section 3.1.1.1) means that you, somehow, could not live up to something that you otherwise '*can* do, end of discussion'. This rather tough outlook from a young woman who has seemingly always been used to doing things as they ought to be done, conflicts with the

disruptions caused by the breakup of her group, and her troubles seem to particularly revolve around the fact that her present state may not be compatible with who she has been up until this point.

Going back to Thomas, who as mentioned felt particularly ambivalent about the unknown and unfamiliarity of what is to come, he gives an example of another aspect of identity playing a role for making the transition; here it is not so much not as a matter of who he should be, as it was for Marie, but rather who he already is, and how this impacts his:

> *"I don't know why I do what I do [not applying for jobs at the moment], it's very unconscious, I think, that's just the way I work, uhm, I work that way, like taking things as they come, I normally don't plan so much, so I think that's just what I feel the best about, taking it along the way (IT: yeah), and I was never one that, for example some people in my class knew exactly what they wanted to be in the 7th grade of primary school*" (appendix 2, pp. 5-6, l. 159-163).

As such, his outlook on the future as something unclear, a clear road splitting or becoming blurry, seems linked to a historicity of not looking too much ahead, where the educational institutions may have allowed this habit of just taking things as they come. But, as Thomas points out, with graduation this may very well come to an end, forcing him to think about what he wants to do, and thus also in part to change along with it. Put together, graduation appears to be an endeavour inspiring many questions and providing very few answers beforehand.

### 5.2.2 How the context influences graduation

Following the above organisational theme on the more personal influences of graduating, it makes sense to take a closer look at the social and structural forces involved, which are also particularly related to the ambivalence experienced as well as the question of identity.

*5.2.2.1 The social forces of friends and family involved in graduation*

As was also hinted in the two last quotations from Marie in the section above, graduating with a master's degree from the university, as it was portrayed throughout the interviews, quickly revealed itself to be an inherently social affair, and one that involved many insecurities of what was to come. Marie's question; 'who you are if you postpone your master's', is not a question that you can answer completely by yourself, as she reveals in the following:

> MA: "*Yeah, I think it's both in my own eyes and in the eyes of others, when you are one of those that can't finish in time, like, even though it's not principally a shame (IT: Mhm), to postpone it, or take a leave of absence, that's just the way it is* (appendix 1, p. 2, l. 43-46).

> *"(...) And that's also what's ridiculous, because it's not like my parents told me 'oh no, you really have to pull yourself together, of course you will make it within the scheduled frame of time, and you just have to do it, because anything else would be silly"*" (appendix 1, p. 8, l. 185-188).

As these interesting, and perhaps a bit contradictory quotations exemplify, it is not an explicitly laid out social pressure – her parents openly *demanding* her to do it in the set amount of time – that functions as 'the eyes of others'. As such, the pressure seems to be more of a reciprocal one, where the eyes of others are always also the eyes of yourself; something fundamental to being a self-reflexive *individual* today (section 2.2.3). As Marie also reflects upon later in the interview, certain people in her surroundings do have a particularly important meaning for central aspects of who she is, or rather, who she *should* be:

> MA: "*(...) maybe there's this pressure from myself, that I have to be this idol who goes through it, and, now my brother just finished and he graduated within the normal time, and of course it wasn't at the university or anything, so you can't compare it in that way, but that's also like, what is it I'm presenting for my smaller cousins* (…) (appendix 1, pp. 8-9, l. 210-216)

As this quotation underlines, Marie's family does play an intricate part for the pressure and state of ambivalence she experiences – and perhaps more so, than she initially had thought. Drawing upon the notion of positions as laid out by Harré & Moghaddam (section 3.2.1) to supplement the notion of life-course in relation to agency, Marie's state of doubt whether she should postpone her master's or not, can also be interpreted as a crossing point where her possibilities for agency emerge. There are elements, such as the uniqueness of her situation as well as the fact that she is the only person in her family with a university education, which opens up a multitude of positions across differing contexts, opting for a high degree of dynamics, because she does not have to follow in anyone's footsteps. But, at the same time there are elements in her life-course, her family relations and her 'idol' status amongst her younger cousins in the light of her historicity, as well as previous experiences with disappointments, which opt for a more coherent form of agency – that she should act in ways that are meaningful in relation to her family and what she has done in the past. The result of this crossing point, then, is a state of doubt and ambivalence, where acting in ways that are meaningful to both you and everyone else, is particularly difficult to the point that it becomes almost debilitating. In the following, we will take a look some of the more structural forces involved.

*5.2.2.2 The structural forces involved in graduation*

Looking at the third of the participants in the interviews, Kristian, who, as a matter of fact has already made the decision to postpone his master's thesis so that he has an extra three months to write it, we see another unique situation and a different set of rationalities and influences. In the interview, the discussion with the rather critical Kristian very quickly takes a turn towards political and societal aspects, and how these have influenced his decision:

> KR: "*At least I feel that with the structures that we have today, you are an investment, the longer we withhold you as an investment, the more you have to show your worth once you come out the other side (IT: mhm), I think, actually, that it makes really good sense when you see it, like, politician wise, but on the other hand I think that value can be discussed, like, value is a lot of things (…)"* (appendix 3, p. 4, l. 79-82).

> "*(...) It seems a bit like you have to become something at a later point, which you do not honour at the moment (IT: mhm), so it's a bit like, education is an artificial kind of oxygenation, if you look at it that way, where you're in the hospital or something like that, and they put you in a respirator after surgery (...)*" (appendix 3, p. 3, l. 64-67).

As these quotations exemplify, the idea of graduating from the university, for Kristian, is very much a point in his life interwoven with- and affected by the political and economical context that he sees himself as part of. As he states, 'value' can be a lot of things, and for him, they appear to conflict with seemingly economical values 'of the structures that we have today'. As such, his choice of postponing his master's, so that he has the time he needs in order to write a better dissertation, can also be seen as an act of resistance towards these structural forces that he finds himself in conflict with, a point which will also be elaborated on in the final theme addressing the influence of the material from The Career Centre. Similar to Marie, he has considered the question of 'who you are', when you postpone your master's, but for him, the answer seems to be given more so in the relation between him and the educational system, rather than with any particular persons in his immediate surroundings. During the discussion, Kristian also refers to an earlier and similar experience; a years leave of absence, which he had about a year ago: *"(...) and I think it was one of the biggest things, learning wise, in all of my study time, actually (...)*" (appendix 3, p. 3, l. 47-48). As such, Kristians decision can also be seen as a form of agency, which is perhaps less bound to positions and more historically coherent than Marie's, where an experienced rupture and transition of the past, as well as its rather positive outcome, comes to play a much bigger role for his actions of the present.

However, the interview also reveals that even though Kristian seems to look more to his own personal values and life-course for answers, and even though he describes experiences with art and playing music as some of the most meaningful and fulfilling experiences for him, he cannot, as he also describes, rid himself completely of 'the eyes of others' and of the idea, that there might be something that he has to live up to:

> KR: "*(...) And I don't think you can wriggle your way out of that, you can't just say that you're going for a 'two' [grade] (IT: no), maybe you could say that and still graduate, but it's not a great 'two' under any circumstances, so I think that you are a bit interwoven with that, like, (IT: mhm) (-) you can't really escape from it (IT: no), and I think that's a bit sad, that this is the only frame that we have to measure, like, this performance frame we have for measuring whether we are good for society or not*" (appendix 3, p. 4, l. 96-100).

And again, when describing his passion for playing music during the time of writing his master's dissertation, which conflicts with his studying:

> KR: "*(...) Even though it makes so much sense for me, personally, where I can feel it through all my senses, that this is what I'm supposed to do, then there is still something inside me saying that 'this is not what you're supposed to do' (...)*" (appendix 3, p. 5, l. 110-112).

As these examples imply, even though Kristian is highly critical of his role as a student and the positions that are seemingly available to him, he cannot rid himself of the same urge to perform, to get good grades, which is not just a demand, but the only frame of measurement that we have to measure success. 'You can't really escape from it', as he puts it, and the decision to postpone his master's, even as an act of resistance against those dogmas, does not completely rid him of their impact. In fact, his decision could also be interpreted as partly a result of them; because receiving a 'two' for your master's thesis, even though you pass and get to graduate, is by no means a great grade, and it is perhaps even more important than the graduation itself. As this seems to underpin, acting in ways that are consensual with your life-course and personal values, going against the normative ways of how you are *supposed* to graduate and thus transition to the labour market, is nevertheless influenced by powerful social and structural forces, which bring about stings of guilt and ambivalence.

### 5.2.3 The influence of the material from the Career Centre

With the final organisational theme and the following three basic themes, attention will be turned to the part of the interviews, which particularly address the material from The Career Centre, after it was presented to the participants.

*5.2.3.1 The immediate reception and applicability of the material*

As mentioned, the participants were already familiar with the material mailed out by The Career Centre at AAU. They had all received it in a personally addressed envelope and looked through its contents, however, the reception of it, as will be made apparent in the following, were rather mixed.

Upon skimming through the material, Marie quickly identified a couple of events that she had already participated in, including the major event of the Career Exhibition held in Gigantium, as well as a smaller event known as a 'Drop-in CV Check'. Upon asked if the event had helped her, she gives the following example:

> MA: "*It did, definitely, it was a lot about, like, 'what you have written is actually alright, but the order has to be changed, something has to be moved around, something has to be before something else, what about competences, what sort of differences do you make, what about your profile, they spend 30 seconds reading your CV', and all these things, which you hadn't really considered yourself, which are relevant for getting through the needle's eye*" (appendix 1, p. 11, l. 289-293).

She also goes on to elaborate on an experience regarding an application for a specific job to which she had sought advice from the consultant: "*(...) I think it's also about the time I have to spend writing my application, can I spend that more wisely when I know I have to have my graduation and the following experience (-) I don't think I could justify that for myself, to make that application*" (appendix 1, p. 12, l. 310-312). Because this particular employer explicitly placed high emphasis on experience, something that Marie as a student had none of; she could not justify spending the time writing the application, which she had otherwise sought help for. This is interesting, seeing that Marie, who is already struggling with her master's dissertation over the breakup of her group, who is very ambivalent and doubtful whether she

will even graduate in time or have to postpone it, nevertheless finds it necessary to spend time and resources on preparing applications, improving her CV, applying for various jobs and going to offers that are meant to ready her for the labour market. This section will not deal with the student's position in relation to the labour market – getting through 'the needle's eye' – which will be dealt with in the final basic theme under this section (5.2.3.3), but it does make sense to highlight that the material, for Marie, seems to be received based on that logical outlook. From this point of view, spending time applying for jobs, even though you are barely certain that you will have the diploma necessary to be hired, is not only justifiable, but in fact required, if you are to fit through that microscopic gap between educational system and labour market. As such, the material and the offers linked to it also come to serve as valuable aids in making that happen.

*5.2.3.2 The possible aim of the material*

Looking at one of the other participants once again, Thomas, who, as already stated, is also writing his master's thesis and looking very much forward to being done with it, we find another, slightly less enthusiastic reception of the material:

> TH: "*I think, holy shit, there's a lot, look at it, it's also falling out of it while I'm sitting here (a paper falls out of the catalogue) (giggles) (IT: yeah), no, I think, uhm, I get tired just from looking at it, I think it's perplexing, uhm, the whole spring we have also received e-mails of all kinds of extra courses that we can attend, both via our AAU mail, but also via my own mail from my A-Kasse [unemployment union], all kinds of things that I can do in order to prepare myself for the job afterwards (IT: mhm), and I haven't used any of it (...) I would also like to just be able to do that, to just write my master's thesis and be within that (...)* so *all of this just annoys, yeah, it actually annoys me*" (appendix 2, p. 8, l. 199-206; 208).

As this quotation exemplifies, Thomas was not as excited about opening the envelope and reading its contents, nor about coming in contact with it once again in the interview, as Marie appeared to had been. He quickly distances himself from the material in a slightly humorous way, making a parallel to e-mails that he has received throughout the spring of 2017 while writing his master's thesis. As such, the material

becomes a disturbance, which hinders Thomas from just writing his master's thesis and 'being within that'. Thus, it can also be interpreted as the conscious and coherent act of an agent, who is distancing himself from influences that conflict with his values and preferences of 'not looking too much ahead'. The result, then, as both the quotations and the remainder of the interview underline, is that Thomas has completely discarded the material; not making use of any of it, and decided that it was better to safeguard himself from its influences and to laugh at 'what they've come up with this time'. In the interview, Thomas goes on to elaborate a bit more on why he is displeased with the material, as well as what he sees as the aim of it:

> TH: "*(...) well, I think there's a lot of, uhm (-) a lot of it was directed towards what you were supposed to do, what you could do as a newly graduate, a bit like a requirement or a hidden demand or expectations, about what you can do to get a job (IT: mhm), and I think it's just a bit one-sided (...) it doesn't say it directly, but it does read between the lines, that you're not going to be able to get a job, if you don't start dealing with it now, you are going to have to deal with it, or else (-) (...) for example employment consultants, or consultants from the A-kasse writing 'what you can do', but it quickly goes from what you 'can' do, to what you 'should' do, to what you 'have to' do*" (appendix 2, p. 9, l. 249-252; 253-255; 257-259).

As Thomas lays bare in the above, his problem with the material goes a bit deeper than to just an immediate nuisance over its disruptive qualities while he is trying to focus on his master's thesis. Rather, between the lines, he reads these possibly well-meant pieces of advice as also containing a kind of hidden demands and expectations, which, as he puts it, very quickly can become the norm for what newly graduates 'have to do'. Thomas is ideological and morally opinionated in his reasoning and takes a standpoint, which is clearly well argued and coherent in accordance with what he believes is right and wrong. This is interesting, because while he is able to distance himself from the material from the Career Centre in this way, he also admits that he may actually have to put his beliefs aside one day, when it is his turn to look for a job: "*(...) so if everyone else is doing it, then I can't just say, I can't just sit here and stand a hundred per cent firmly on my ideological principles and my resistance*

*towards it (IT: no), then I also have to deal with it in some way, I have to take it seriously*" (appendix 2, p. 9, l. 269-271).

Exactly this point, that the Career Centre also draws upon- and re-constitutes a logic about what it means to graduate, and how the individual positions himself and is positioned in relation to the labour market, which also relates to the social and structural forces involved in graduating dealt with previously (section 5.2.2), will be the focus in the following and final basic theme of the TNA.

*5.2.3.2 The Career Centre as a distributor of positions and resistance towards it*

As has been highlighted in the previous themes up to this point, graduation from the university and entering the labour market appears to be a complex and mixed endeavour, one that can be seen as a forthcoming rupture and leap into the unknown, which also necessitates the individual to adapt and make sense of his or her historicity up until now and the possibilities that are available. The Graduate Guide, and the rest of the material contained in the envelope from The Career Centre, as was shown in the previous theme, has also been met with mixed appraisals. However, one thing that seems reoccurring throughout the interviews is that no matter what you think of it, whether you choose to openly follow its advice or ridicule it, you cannot completely rid yourself of its impact. As was a central point under the theme of graduation as a forthcoming rupture, it is particularly at these points during the person's life-course, where neither the social environment nor the historicity lends much inspiration for what is about to happen, that guidance is needed. As such, the material draws upon a wider array of societal discourses about the labour market and how new graduates are supposed to fit into it, and The Career Centre, with its authoritarian status as part of AAU, serves as the only real place of guidance for the students about to graduate and very much in need of it. As will be the point of this theme, it thus also serves to set the frame of possibilities for the individual; especially by laying out a particular story line about graduating; the C) corner of Moghaddams positioning triangle (section 3.2.1.1) through which the possibilities for acting in a meaningful way emerges. As is also the point from positioning theory, and as the interviews reveal, the individual often understands why he or she is positioned as they are, and also what it would require to attain a new position. As such, you can be more or less critical about- or appreciative of the material, more or less looking to

position yourself differently within that particular context of graduation, but going against the broader frame of possibilities and the circuits of power to include and exclude, which the material draws upon, bares with it certain consequences. As Thomas puts it in the above; if everyone else is doing it in a certain way, graduating and doing 'what it takes' to enter the labour market, he cannot just stand firmly on his ideological principles – he has to abandon them, at least to an extent, if he wants to be able to land a job as well. This underlines the power held in a piece of material, which in part re-presents the norm for how you are supposed to graduate. Looking at the interview with Kristian, who as already revealed is highly critical of his role as a student, and who, not surprisingly, also met the material with a certain degree of reluctance, we can see how distaste for the material also turns into a form of anger and dystopian layout of the status quo, one which is not based on his own relation to the material, but more so a broader social normativity – 'what everyone else is doing' – that the material can come to re-present:

> KR: "*(...) But I think that it's totally, it totally shows how far behind we really are, when we don't even ask any questions at all about the demands that are put on us, whether they are fair to begin with, is it even fair that we should give that much power to those that have the workplaces, uhm, (IT: mhm), what is it that we have to perform for, what is that we have to be 'talent workers' and so on, you don't ask any questions about that at all, and I just think that it's totally medieval in a way (IT: mhm), like, it's almost like you go back to the middle ages to some group of monkeys or something (...) and the one who has the best way of dancing for the monkey father, he will, uhm, he gets monkey father's favour, and then it's just like, then you're accepted and you won't be killed and it's not you who's getting thrown to the hyenas*" (appendix 3, p. 8, l. 206-216).

As this quotation exemplifies in abundance, the very sceptical Kristian has a bleak outlook on what the material, to him, portrays life on the labour market to be like. Similar to Marie, who described the transition as 'getting through the needle's eye', Kristian sees the material to empower the employer to such an extent that it becomes primitive, as he lively depicts it. When asked why he thinks other people might then agree to what the material offers, he answers: "*you fully believe that it's a criterion,*

*and the media confirms it, and in your everyday life you being confirmed in, that this is just the right thing to do (...)*" (appendix 3, p. 10, l. 257-260). As such, Kristians opinion can also be seen as a kind of resistance towards the discursive logics and the positions supposedly 'offered' to him through the material by society as a whole. But, as was also dealt with previously, this act of resistance does seem to have a relation to the fact that Kristian decided to postpone his master's dissertation, that he feels guilty about doing other things that make more sense to him such as playing music, and that he has now excluded himself from the collective of his fellow students, all of whom are set to graduate in June, 2017. As this depicts, not accepting a position, or at least postponing its acceptance, is possible, but it means going against the current – a point that will also of great value in the discussion later on (section 6.1).

Going back to Marie, she gives an interesting and quite different example of how the material served to provide her with a story line and thus also partially set the frame of possibilities for her. As the interview was coming to an end, she remembered that one of her old schoolmates, who graduated from sociology last year, was depicted in The Graduate Guide and was telling (happily) about life as newly employed in a good job:

> "*I thought it was very weird and surreal, because she has been a student for so many years, like myself, but of course, (IT: mhm), we all have to move on in some way, we all have to (...) I think it just dawned upon me that she was of course finished last year, and of course she was supposed to be, but now it's a bit like, I was always one year after her, so now it's dawning upon me that I have to remember to, the next time it's going to be my turn (...)* " (appendix 1, p. 16, l. 423-425; 428-431).

As this also shows, Marie, who was in a state of limbo about whether she could even finish her master's dissertation in time for graduation, was thoroughly reminded, through her friend depicted in the material, that 'the next time it is her turn' and thus she has to 'remember' to make it. As with both Kristian and Thomas, although from a less critical and sceptical vantage point, we can see that the material comes to serve as a distributor of positions for Marie, exemplified with portraits and biographies of

previous students from AAU who now find themselves merrily employed, which helps set the frame for how she, the soon-to-be graduate, can possibly act.

Put together, this final theme has highlighted that the material from The Career Centre, whether you agree with it or not, comes to play a vital part for how you find yourself positioned in relation to graduation and the labour market that you are about to transition into. In the following a brief summary will be presented, which sketches out the major findings under the previous four organisation themes from the TNA.

**A brief summary of the TNA**

Under the first organisational theme, it became clear how graduation, for Marie, Thomas and Kristian, was seen as a major event, a forthcoming rupture and an intransitive transition, which for the each of the participants was also inherently ambivalent and unlike anything they had experienced before. This fact, that it was a venture into the unknown, also means that guidance from elsewhere is increasingly important. It was a seen as a change of epochs, which also brought forth the question of identity; of who they were, who they are and who they are about to become through the transition. The next organisational theme centred on the social and structural forces involved in graduating and transitioning to the labour market. Here it became apparent that friends and family, social expectances and shared vs. personal values were powerful influences in shaping the transition and setting the standard for what was normal or idiosyncratic. With the final organisational theme, attention was turned to the part of the interviews revolving around the material from The Career Centre. Here it was shown that the reception of the material was rather mixed, and that some participants encountered it with more criticism than others. Furthermore, light was shed on how the material from The Career Centre could be seen as an institutional agent, a central place of guidance for the participants and thus also distributor of positions for them. Here, the different receptions of the material was linked to a notion of resistance, where the participants were seen to act in either normative or idiosyncratic ways, based on those positions 'offered' by and through the material. As was shown, The Career Centre was seen to be in a powerful and authoritative position; being the only 'guide' for the soon-to-be graduates, and because of this it plays a major role in supplying the graduates with a story line and thus also meaningful ways of acting, whether they agree with the message or not. These main points, as

well as the ones made under the CDA, will be of great interest and dealt with in further detail as part of the following discussion.

# 6. Discussion

With this section, attention will be turned to the final step of the investigation, which involves a more critical and evaluative illumination of central aspects of this master's dissertation as a whole. The aim of this is, first of all, to get even closer to an understanding of the phenomena of graduation from Aalborg University, 2017, as well as answering the problem formulation and its underlying statements, which were posed as part of the introduction of this paper. There are aspects of the paper that could have been worthwhile discussing, which due to limitations will not be included here. Instead, focus will be on points found to be particularly interesting and important in relation to how the investigation was carried out, the results yielded from the two analyses, as well as how they combine in order to propose the central arguments of this paper as a whole.

## 6.1 Between individual and context: combining the analyses

One of the main reasons for choosing to combine the CDA with the TNA was, as already argued, that this allows for a better look at the interrelatedness between agent and structure. It was a personal preconception that graduation is a highly complex matter, and that in order to understand this phenomena, neither a sole focus on the lifeworld of the person nor on the overarching institutions and discursive climate would be satisfactory. In the following, a couple of key points will be made about how the two analyses combine to show us something about the encounter between the soon-to-be graduate and the context that he or she is reciprocally related to.

### 6.1.1 The Career Centre and the power of guidance

One of the central points, which is repeated in both the CDA of the material and in the interviews, is that The Career Centre can be seen as playing a large role for setting the standard for what it means to graduate, in the eyes of the institution, as well as how you are supposed to go about it. As the first organisational theme from the TNA of the interviews revealed, graduation from the university can be seen as a crucial moment, a rupture in the life-course of the young individual, which, for the participants, necessitates a transition unlike anything previously experienced. Here, The

Career Centre attempts the role of a central guide, one that supposedly offers the graduates all the tools they need to have a success in their professional lives. As we saw in the interviews, the encounter with the material was met with both open arms and fierce criticism, its offers were accepted and ridiculed, but, as also became apparent, no matter the attitude towards it, its inherent discursive logics, which seem reproduced in broad society, were seen to have had an impact. For Kristian, this meant that he also felt guilty even though he was doing something that he otherwise felt was absolutely right for him, while Thomas admitted that he was probably 'shooting himself in the foot' by being stubborn and not paying the material any attention, and that he might have to abandon his principles later on. Going a bit further with the notion of power and knowledge from Foucault and Rose, as well as the arguments already made in the CDA (section 5.1), it becomes possible to see how the material, by serving as a guide at a point in life where guidance is greatly needed, through its authoritative status, whether resisted or not, in the end comes to *predefine* life on the labor market. With this perspective, the material is not just an accurate reflection of what that sphere of life looks like, it is also in part constructing it, by producing a set of truths that the graduates, due to their increasingly powerless and individualized status, by large will have to accept. It is important to note, though, that true to the notion of power as it is laid out by Foucault, that no one 'owns' the right to this pre-definition. It is no ones premeditated master plan. Rather, it is to be seen as a self-sustaining system, one where the employers, who were also students once, are just as interlaced with its logics and truths as are the soon-to-be graduates and everyone else taking part in the society of our day and age. It may be that The Career Centre is genuinely interested in helping the graduates by providing them with cutting edge information on what comes next and how they can deal with it the best way possible – it is hard to imagine otherwise. But it is equally hard to imagine that the major companies and organizations, which are represented throughout the material as well as on the grand Career Exhibition in Gigantium, are not playing a role for what pieces of advice are seen as most 'useful' for the graduates to come in touch with. Regardless, a consequence of the complete focus on what the graduate can do, as was also pointed out by the skeptical Thomas, is that: 'it quickly goes from what you can do, to what you should do, to what you have to do'.

As such, whatever makes you unique and attractive for the labor market today, is bound to become the norm of tomorrow, exemplifying once again the accelerative result of a system bent on never-ending growth and competitive advantage. Feeling ambivalent or worse about graduating, then, seems natural enough given that the material itself, as we saw in combining the distinct discourses to one whole order (section 5.1.5), holds certain self-contradictory messages. It is going to be your own personal adventure, and yet it is also going to be an endless race against everyone around you. As a result it seemingly feels like a big change, an end of something and a beginning of something else, a major change of epochs unlike anything in the past, and yet it represents no real end of anything; only another step on an endless ladder that you hurry up until you are too old to hold your grip. Taking this rather critical argument a bit further, The Career Centre at AAU, even if altruistically grounded, comes to serve as another cog in the neoliberal machinery, as well as the final governmental adjustment made to the troops freshly trained to replace the retired combatants by the frontline in this global growth war.

### 6.1.2 The Career Centre and resistance towards a dominating discursive order

As the interviews also revealed, resisting the material, in the form of laughing at it, throwing it in the wastebasket and never going along with it is indeed a possibility. But, in the end that would also mean the exclusion from a circuit of security and in the end possibly a good job – which you have spent the last 20 years of your life progressing through the educational system working towards. Furthermore, with the dissolving of collectives such as unions and student communities not based on internal competition, as we saw exemplified by individualized and economized initiatives such as the chance of becoming a 'Growth Pilot' or an 'Innobooster' (section 5.1.4), unemployment has also become an increasingly competitive and isolated place to be. It is a place where you do not contribute to the definitive goal and the highest of values held by the competition state of Denmark 2017; namely that of economic growth. It is a place to escape from, not just because you genuinely want to find a job that is meaningful to you, but also, and perhaps more so, because you are a financial minus, as Kristian puts it. When we have no other scales for measuring value and performance, or at least when the economical scale is by far the most dominating one, as both the material and the participants of the interviews seem to indicate, not finding the same value in competition or growth creates a fundamental schism between you

and the world around you, or as Rosa puts it: *alienation* (section 3.1.3.3). For Kristian, this means, amongst other things, that he gets to graduate by himself in September instead of in June with the rest of his classmates. For Marie, it has meant that the goals set by politicians about how fast you are supposed to get through the educational system (which have been radically sped up since the politicians themselves were in school), has become a solid truth and permeated her way of thinking about what she should do. This truth has turned into 'the eyes of others' and thus also forced her to live up to her 'idol' status for her younger cousins, despite major setbacks in her final project. As these individual examples seem to point out, resistance, in the form of going against a certain norm such as the one of graduation time, then, is in the end a very lonely endeavor carried out by an individual, who in the eyes of everyone else has simply fallen off the train. You have this amount of time to write your master's dissertation, and that means you can do it, end of discussion. Hence, its reception from the world around you will also be more so unsympathetic, pitied as weakness or sickness, the incapability to perform (section 3.1.2), or perhaps simply waved off as laziness. Going against the current, then, is not only much harder and against everything you have worked for so far, it may also be completely futile. That is, at least as long as you attempt it alone.

### 6.1.3 The alienating consequences for the individual entering the labour market

As has already been touched upon, The Career Centre serves to both reproduce and construct a set of discursive logics; which can be seen to place the individual in a position of powerlessness in relation to the employer. The employers can offer you a job, and thus they also hold the key to inclusion in a circuit of security that your identity and worth as a person, in this day and age, is contingent upon. Aside from the omnipresent competition amongst the possible candidates for a vacancy, this can also be seen to create unfavourable positions of power for those already employed in relation to their workplace, which again plays a role for how the labour market is represented. If so much of who you are depends on that workplace, not just in the form of a salary, but also as a valid proof of identification and personhood, then you are not likely to speak your mind or resist when treated unfairly or pushed beyond your boundaries, nor are you likely to feel happy about being in a place of no control. Quite contrary, you will be willing to compromise your own interests in favour of your employer, you will discard your own and commonly held ethical and moral

values, you will press yourself to the breaking point and beyond, you will accept alienation and live on whatever you are fed, not because you enjoy it, but because it is the norm, and the fear of being excluded as a nobody, and thus wasting what you have already worked so much for, is too great. This may be speculative, but the statistics on rises in cases of depression, stress-related sick leaves and other ailments connected to demands for performance exceeding the capabilities of the individual at the workplace (section 3.1.2) seem to indicate that there is something to it. As such, the material from The Career Centre may very well give an indication of some of the mechanisms behind this development. Recent times seem to have proven that the American dream did not last in America, but it seems we have come to believe that the Danish dream will somehow work out for us. The irony, then, is that these discourses found in the material from The Career Centre that teach the graduates to view themselves as lone adventurers, as competitively driven and masters of their own fate, in turn comes to represent employment as some rare, far away island only to be reached via the bridge built by AAU, and through doing all that the material proposes. In the end, this may very well end up suppressing and impairing the graduates that The Career Centre, one must assume, really is supposed to help.

## 6.2 Methodological points worthy of discussion

In the following, the discussion will take a turn towards a critical look at aspects of this paper's methodology as well as its combinatory nature, which especially deserve attention. First of all, we will take a look at the combination of participants and their importance for the results produced from the TNA.

### 6.2.1 The participants and the validity of the results from the TNA

As was hinted as part of the methodological reflections (section 4.2), the semi-structured interviews and the following analysis conducted, which had the particular aim of shedding light on how the *individual*, in an interview, makes sense of graduation, was subject to certain limitations. One of these was the somewhat scarce diversity amongst the possible participants to choose from, which resulted in the choice of three young individuals, all of whom are students within the field of human sciences (Marie – from the field of *psychology*, and Thomas and Kristian – from the field of *pedagogical psychology in social work*). This degree of homogeneity amongst the participants has likely had an impact on the thematic networks that were formed

based on this data, and thus also on the results as a whole. One could imagine, for example, that the participants would draw upon their respective fields as well as their knowledge about qualitative methods and interviews in particular, to make sense of graduation in a more theoretically bound manner, as well as to 'please' me, the interviewer, by providing me with the 'right' answers. Furthermore, one could imagine, as was also a point highlighted by Marie who had participated in The Career Exhibition but not found it as useful as her friend who studies mathematics, that the material from The Career Centre may generally have been aimed at students to which many of the big companies represented at the exhibition may be future employers. As students within the fields of human sciences generally find work in public institutions or in smaller private clinics (who were not represented at the exhibition except for a couple of municipal divisions), they may in a sense have been 'outside' the core target group. As such, one could only imagine that the results may have been even more interesting, and provided an even clearer and perhaps less critical glimpse of the power held in the material, had a mechanical engineering student, who for example was looking to land a job in Mærsk A/S, participated.

Nevertheless, as the interviews quickly revealed, and as the analysis also serves to exemplify, Marie, Thomas and Kristian had very different outlooks on graduation, and their portrayals, although in some cases critically founded and sceptical, were genuine and un-intellectual, and throughout the discussion their answers seemed more so direct and inwardly reflexive, a chance to speak their mind and vent, rather than an attempt to say the right thing to make me happy. They do, no doubt, represent a certain demographical 'cut', and a broad generalisation based on the results of three interviews, no matter how different or interesting or 'true' they may have been, would be hard to defend. But, as is a central argument behind an investigation placing high value on a sociocultural understanding of the world, it would be more than naïve to believe that these three individuals were somehow secluded and cut off from the shared, historically contingent logics and discursive fluctuations, which seem inherent to the context of Aalborg University, Denmark, 2017. Even if a software engineer or a student of business may have provided a more interesting supplement to the investigation, the interviews show that soon-to-be graduates from Humaniora are by no means 'the same', nor are they differently bestowed or sacred when it

comes to entering the labour market, with all the broader socio-structural forces that this involves.

### 6.2.2 The combination of approaches and the morality connecting them

One final point, which deserves attention as part of the methodological discussion here, has more to do with the ideological and moral nature of this investigation and the master's dissertation as a whole. It is no secret, as was also explicitly laid out as part of the CDA, that this paper is inherently critical of certain tendencies found to be problematic and in need of attention, and as such it is from the very first page rooted in a certain ideology held by the author with a personal interest in the matter. One could easily ask the question, if and why it is even considered a problem that graduation from Aalborg University in 2017 seems to be an accelerative endeavour, one where competition appears to be the key to an adventure in the form of a race, and where economical growth is an end-goal unto itself? Is it not good that we live in one of the richest, most competitively capable and yet 'happiest' countries in the world? Many good things can, no doubt, come out of competition. It is what makes a game of football or Monopoly fun. It is what children make part of their interaction and play from the earliest stages of life. And it is arguably also what can guide students in the direction of what they are good at, and hopefully also what they enjoy doing the most. This master's dissertation is by no means an attempt at expelling all aspects of competition, nor a call for the immediate demolition of The Career Centre, even if such things were possible.

Rather, it represents one perspective, and its focus is on what is considered the problematic fact that competition, as part of a neoliberal logic, has become blindly institutionalized to such an extent, that it dissolves many of the democratic values and societal *glues*, which do not, somehow, fit into the logic of growth. This investigation problematizes the inflation of professional competition, which is lodged as part of the growth machinery, meaning that if we perform at x percentages this year, we will have to perform the same with added interests the year after, otherwise we will experience what we call an 'economical crisis'. This logic completely neglects the fact that we will one day reach the limit of our material and mental resources – if we have not already. This paper problematizes the development of the educational system, which, as the latest reforms have shown us (section 3.1.1.1), has become ever more

tied to demands by the labour market, overwriting a wholesome, democratic education. And finally, this paper problematizes the consequences that this has on the person graduating from the university, supposedly coming to an end of an epoch, only to find that there is no real end, and that their education, rather than empowering them, has only opened up positions of individualized powerlessness, and that all of this will only get worse, as long as the dominating value held in society translates to the amount of Kroner that you can earn for yourself, your company and for Denmark – before you can retire and once again become a societal burden.

# 7. Conclusion

This master's dissertation sought to shed critical light on the phenomena of graduating with a master's degree in the context of Aalborg University (AAU), Denmark anno 2017. More precisely, it aimed at addressing the overarching problem: "*how does the individual experience transitioning from the educational system to the labour market? And how does the sociocultural context of Aalborg University in Denmark anno 2017 affect this process?"* This was done through a theoretical framework combining sociocultural- and agency perspectives through the meta-theoretical vantage point of Michael Foucault and Nikolas Rose with key notions of power and discourse. The investigation, by combining two distinct analytical approaches addressing both the discursive aspect of graduation as well as the meaning-making process of the individual graduating, has likewise sought to overcome the structure-agent dichotomy inherent in the problem and the paper in its entirety.

This paper serves to unfold graduation as a complex and multi-faceted endeavour; a subjectively experienced change of epochs and at the same time a governmental rectification. On the grounds of the critical discursive approach, it was shown that graduation from AAU, through the material mailed by a department of the institution to all soon-to-be graduates, was interlaced with a set of discourses that serve to represent the labour market – first and foremost as a place in which the individual had to live up to a wide range of demands, without asking questions about the state of things. And if they managed to do that, they would stand 'everything' to gain. Through the portrayal of the career as a personal adventure and yet also a competitive race, it also became apparent that the order of discourse of the material was inherently self-contradictory and a clear-cut example of the self-propelling system driving forth social acceleration. The approach centring on the individual as a meaning-maker and agent highlighted that a wide range of influences, from personal historicity and experience, to socio-structural forces, and finally to the material from AAU, came to have an impact on graduation. Here, it was shown that the material was received with varied degrees of appraisal, and that in spite of a highly critical attitude amongst some of the participants, the material nevertheless came to influence how they made sense of graduating. A main point connected to this analytical point was that discarding the material was indeed possible, but this also bared with it

the consequence of denying a powerful source of guidance and thus also being left your own devices throughout the transition.

In its entirety, this master's dissertation paints the picture of a broader system rooted in a capitalistic logic, strengthened through deregulations wrapped in the slightly more edible notion of 'neo-*liberalism*', praised by a blind faith in the prosperous effects of endless growth, to which graduation from AAU, true to the logic of the competition state, has become intricately tied to. It paints the picture of graduation as a great milestone in the individual's life-course, a place where the question of identity is asked and through the transition perhaps also answered, a jump headfirst into the unknown, and a place where guidance is often greatly valued. It argues that through the role of a guide, The Career Centre, instead of empowering the students, has skewed the balances of power in favour of the employers, the labour market and thus also the system itself, leaving the individual enthralled to keep up or be excluded. It argues that through the individualizing tendencies, change has become a matter of refitting the person to the system – something particularly visible at these points of rupture – and as a result everyone is trying to fit into something that no one fully comprehends, where the end-goal is also the starting point. As a result, so-called liberalism has come to confine us, and the 'winner' appears to be the one with the biggest cage or the longest chain. One central argument, however, which it is possible to derive from this paper as a whole, and particularly with references to the meta-theoretical standpoint, is that power is not absolute. The individual *is* capable of visualising the good life, of being critical and sensing when something is wrong. But, it appears that re-evaluating these fundamental societal logics also requires getting past the idea of the individual. Through this standpoint, structural change, then, first and foremost becomes a matter of engaging people in communities and building up the collectives that the waves of neoliberalism and individualization have dissolved, of shedding light on norms that do not have to stay norms, and of devising a system that serves the people and not the other way around.

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