Institutional and Cultural Influences on Students' Higher Education Aspirations: A Case Study from Slovakia

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List of abbreviations

CAS	Creativity, Activity, Service
EE	Extended Essay
GJH	Gymnázium Juraja Hronca
IB	International Baccaloriate
MYP	Middle Years Programme
SKM	Slovak Maturita
TOK	Theory of Knowledge

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank GJH, and specifically the principal, for granting me access to the school's data, which ultimately formed the foundation of this research. I am also deeply grateful to the participants who took valuable time out of their day to partake in the interviews and make this study possible. It has been a privilege to focus on a topic that is both professionally and personally meaningful to me as a university counsellor, and to conduct research within my home country, Slovakia—especially given how under-researched the Slovak education system remains.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how higher education aspirations are formed and why they differ between students following two academic pathways—the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Slovak Maturita (SKM)—within GJH, a selective public high school in Slovakia. It illustrates how institutional and cultural factors shape students' perceptions, expectations, and decision-making processes, thereby influencing their aspirations for higher education.

Key findings indicate that, at GJH, the IB programme was widely perceived as more academically rigorous and better suited for university abroad—a belief internalised by students, even though their lived experiences did not entirely reflect this. Combined with the persistent negative rhetoric surrounding Slovak universities at GJH, this perception contributed to a high-pressure environment in which students, particularly those in the IB cohort, felt compelled to pursue higher education abroad. In contrast, SKM students—who also viewed studying in Slovakia as undesirable—were affected by negative cross-cohort comparisons and often felt less eligible or capable of applying to universities abroad.

The study draws on ten semi-structured interviews with GJH alumni, analysed using thematic analysis with a partly theory-informed coding approach. The findings are situated within Bourdieu's and Appadurai's theoretical frameworks, particularly the concepts of habitus and field, to illustrate how academic pathways shape students' internalised dispositions and, in turn, their capacity to aspire.

By focusing on students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds in Slovakia, the study addresses gaps in the literature concerning both the Slovak education system and the aspirations of students of middle socioeconomic status. The unique context of GJH—where students have comparable socioeconomic status and academic ability—enables a meaningful exploration of non-socioeconomic influences.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale for the dissertation

This dissertation examines how higher education aspirations are formed and why they differ between students enrolled in two academic programmes within a single public high school in Slovakia. I am interested in, and chose, this topic for three main reasons. First, I am Slovak and work as a university counsellor, which means I am both personally invested in the topic and well acquainted with the research context. Drawing on an interpretivist perspective and the work of Phillips (2014), I believe it is important to conduct studies within contexts that the researcher understands (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tuli, 2010). Second, I am motivated to fill existing gaps identified in the academic literature. Compared to students from high or low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from medium backgrounds are under-represented in international research on higher education aspirations. Moreover, there is virtually no research on this topic within the Slovak context; in fact, the entire field of education in Slovakia remains significantly under-researched (Kosová and Porubský, 2007). Third, my country's ongoing experience with the brain drain phenomenon makes this focus both timely and relevant (Chrancoková, Weibl and Dokupilová, 2021; Martinák and Varsik, 2020). Understanding the underlying causes of this persistent issue is essential for informing policy and practice among educators, schools, and government bodies. This study is therefore significant because it contributes to the wider body of existing literature on higher education aspirations, while addressing specific areas that are under-researched—namely, students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds and the education system in Slovakia.

Given this focus, I needed my research site to be a Slovak high school with students of medium socioeconomic status who have higher education aspirations, ideally ones relevant to the brain drain effect. I identified Gymnázium Juraja Hronca (GJH) as the perfect school for my study, as it is tuition-free, rigorous, and known for many of its students transitioning to universities abroad. Interestingly, GJH is the only Slovak state school offering two academic pathways for students to graduate from—the national Slovak Maturita (SKM) exam and the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme. To begin this study, I contacted GJH with my research proposal and requested access to any data they had collected on their graduates' higher education aspirations over the years. Eventually, the principal sent me a dataset detailing the universities

attended by all GJH students from 2013 to 2021. More recent data were unavailable, as the school stopped collecting them after the COVID-19 pandemic. The dataset included information such as the name and country of the university, the faculty and course chosen, as well as the academic pathway and class the student was part of during their time at GJH. By conducting secondary data analysis on the dataset, I identified a recurring pattern: students from the SKM pathway were most likely to attend university in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, whereas IB students were most likely to study in England or the Netherlands. This presents an interesting case, as it reveals significant discrepancies in students' higher education aspirations despite the absence of the usual explanatory factors—namely, socioeconomic background and academic ability.

Given that both the IB and SKM pathways are offered by the same institution, are tuition-free, and require entrance examinations, students' socioeconomic backgrounds and academic abilities were largely comparable. Moreover, as both programmes operate within the same school, the culture, community, and resources available to students are largely shared. Accordingly, the most apparent difference between the two groups is the academic pathway through which they graduate. While IB is explicitly designed to cultivate globally thinking, open-minded learners—thus encouraging students to consider international university options—I believe a deeper explanation is required to account for the significant discrepancy in aspirations among GJH students (IBO, 2005–2014; Holman et al., 2016). I hypothesise that differences in the culture and environment within each programme, along with variations in the expectations placed on students and the kinds of resources they receive, contribute to this divide. This study is therefore significant in that it is able to investigate influences on higher education aspirations that extend beyond socioeconomic status and academic performance, as GJH offers a unique research site in which institutional context, academic selectivity, and student background are comparable. Fascinated by this, I wanted to learn more and formulated my central research question:

> How do IB and SKM students at GJH form their higher education aspirations, and why do these aspirations differ?

1.2. Context and outline of the dissertation

To address this research question, I conducted an extensive review of academic literature. I began by examining studies on higher education aspirations in order to define the term and establish a theoretical framework to guide my analysis. This framework mostly draws on the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1986) and Appadurai (2004), who emphasise that an individual's cultural, economic, and social capital significantly shape their capacity to aspire and to form higher education aspirations. Moreover, Bourdieu's (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) concept of *habitus* and *field* is used to understand how cultural resources and one's environment influence their perceptions, expectations, and aspirations. In most other literature, however, these forms of capital are discussed under the broader term socioeconomic background, which refers to "the particular set of social and economic circumstances that an individual has come from" (Social Mobility Commission, 2024). This encompasses both material resources and one's social position relative to others, typically measured by parental occupation, education level, and income—factors consistently shown to influence educational trajectories (Sirin, 2005; OECD, 2017; Jerrim and Macmillan, 2015). Accordingly, a substantial body of research on higher education aspirations focuses on the impact of socioeconomic background (Education Policy Institute, 2020; Sirin, 2005; Jury et al., 2017; Gayle, Berridge and Davies, 2002).

Nevertheless, there is also extensive literature exploring key non-socioeconomic factors that shape students' aspirations for higher education, which I further reviewed. While many of these factors naturally overlap, studies vary in their emphasis (Ganie, 2022; Othman et al., 2013; Khadijah, 2017; Khattab, 2015; Gale and Parker, 2015; Fray et al., 2020; Mitsopoulou and Pavlatou, 2024; Hellman et al., 2018). For example, some researchers focus on demographic characteristics such as gender and age (Berrington, Roberts and Tammes, 2016), while others highlight cognitive traits (Khadijah, Indrawati and Suarman, 2017). However, when narrowing the focus from a global perspective to only high-income countries like Slovakia, and excluding socioeconomic factors, two themes consistently emerge as the main influences on higher education aspirations: students' individual characteristics, particularly academic ability, and the high school environment, including teacher quality, available resources, and peer influence. To situate the theoretical and empirical literature within the context of my research, I also reviewed the Slovak education system, as well as the structure and functioning of GJH. With a deeper understanding of the context of my research, I began conceptualising how to approach the research question itself. Given that I was interested in GJH students' subjective and personal experiences of how they formed their own higher education aspirations and what

influenced this process, I employed an interpretivist stance and qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews, specifically, were selected in order to find a balance between collecting comparable data based on standardised questions and individual adaptation based on the specific accounts of my participants. The participants themselves were selected based on being GJH alumni from either the IB or SKM cohort. By being alumni, they could better and more objectively reflect on their high school experience, as opposed to currently being in the process of transitioning to university. Accordingly, ten participants from different year groups were recruited and interviewed, which formed the basis of the findings and discussion for this dissertation.

As a result, this dissertation presents the literature I reviewed, the methodology I employed, the findings I collected, how these elements relate to one another, and the conclusions drawn. Accordingly, the dissertation is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the rationale for the research, explaining both my personal interest in the topic and its broader significance. It also provides the context and an overview of the entire dissertation. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on higher education aspirations, focusing on key socioeconomic and non-socioeconomic influences. It also explores the structure, history, and education system of Slovakia, with specific attention to GJH. Additionally, this chapter presents a secondary quantitative analysis of a dataset from GJH, examining the university destinations of its students. Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study, including the research philosophy, design and approach, participant sampling, data collection and analysis procedures, the researcher's positionality, ethical considerations, limitations, and strategies for ensuring research rigour. Chapter 4 presents the findings generated through the interview data. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to the literature reviewed and considers their broader implications. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a concise summary and presents the overall conclusions of the dissertation.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter of the dissertation reviews the literature used to define and establish the theoretical framework associated with higher education aspirations and the key empirical factors that

shape them. These include both socioeconomic factors—such as financial, cultural and social capital—and non-socioeconomic factors, namely academic ability and the school environment. Additionally, the chapter provides contextual background on the country and school studied, along with their respective education systems. Finally, it outlines the quantitative research conducted on GJH students' higher education aspirations, which forms the foundation of this dissertation and its central research question.

2.2. Definitions and theoretical framework

2.2.1. Definitions

Despite there being no universally accepted definition, higher education aspirations generally refer to the idea that "desired future events will direct and motivate efforts in the present and thereby increase students' chances of succeeding in the educational system" (Trebbels, 2015, p. 37; Caprara et al., 2008; Lent et al., 1994; Quaglia and Cobb, 1996; Rojewski, 2005). They are the means through which educational outcomes are formed (Sewell et al., 1969; Campbell, 1983; Ray, 2006; Hart, 2012). However, distinctions must be made to define higher education aspirations accurately (Hanson, 1994; Rojewski, 2005; Spenner and Featherman, 1978).

In her book, Trebbels (2015) makes a clear theoretical distinction between idealistic and realistic aspirations. Idealistic aspirations are "desired outcomes that are not limited by constraints on resources" (Hauser and Anderson, 1991, p. 270) or the level of academic achievement (Trebbels, 2015). These aspirations can be understood more as one's educational hopes or highest desires. In contrast, realistic aspirations refer to the "perceived likelihood of success", reflecting the level of education students realistically expect to achieve (Trebbels, 2015, p. 38; Rojewski, 2005; Haller, 1968). They "best express what youth are actually striving for" (Wicht, 2016, p. 1827). Like this dissertation, much of the literature on higher education aspirations explores the discrepancy between idealistic and realistic expectations, investigating what causes their divergence and why a mismatch often occurs (Trebbels, 2015; Hauser and Anderson, 1991; Wicht, 2016; Ray, 2006; Hart, 2012; DeWitt et al., 2010; Boxer et al., 2011; Khattab, 2015). In line with this research, this study examines higher education aspirations as both the idealistic dreams and realistic expectations of students, as well as the complex interplay between the two.

2.2.2. Theoretical framework

To explore this concept more deeply, this dissertation draws extensively on Bourdieu's theories (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It particularly focuses on his theory of inherited capital, which is used to understand how GJH students form their aspirations, and his concept of habitus and field, which is used to understand why these aspirations differ between cohorts. In their work, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) highlight how capital—referring to the knowledge, skills and experiences individuals possess—shapes educational outcomes and reproduces social inequality. Initially, they identified three forms of cultural capital, which Bourdieu (1986) later expanded to include economic and social capital alongside cultural capital in his work *The Forms of Capital*. While cultural capital encompasses knowledge, resources and cultural competencies, economic capital refers to financial assets, and social capital refers to one's networks and connections (Bourdieu, 1986). Students from privileged backgrounds inherit these forms of capital from their parents, giving them a significant advantage in developing aspirations compared to their less privileged peers.

Besides his theory of capital, Bourdieu (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) also introduced the interconnected concepts of habitus and field, offering a framework to understand how social conditions and cultural resources shape individuals' perceptions, behaviours and aspirations. Habitus refers to the internalised ways of thinking, feeling and acting that develop through past social experiences, such as the interactions with teachers, peers and family (Bourdieu, 1977). Field represents the broader social context in which habitus is formed and enacted—for example, the school environment or academic track a student is part of (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu's (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) concepts are deeply interconnected—habitus influences how individuals navigate different fields, while the capital they possess determines their resources and opportunities within those fields. A student's inherited culture, habitus and field play a crucial role in shaping how they view themselves, what they perceive as attainable and, as a result, how they form their aspirations (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990). Bourdieu's framework is particularly relevant in explaining why students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who possess less inherited capital and often operate within under-resourced fields, may develop lower aspirations. These students may internalise the belief that their idealistic aspirations are "not for people like them",

leading them to self-limit and ultimately refrain from pursuing those ambitions (Reay, David and Ball, 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Jury et al., 2017; Prodonovich, Perry and Taggart, 2014).

A similar concept is explored by Appadurai (2004), who introduces the capacity to aspire—a useful lens for understanding why students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, with greater inherited capital and access to better resources, are more likely to pursue what they perceive as idealistic aspirations. Appadurai (2004) defines this capacity as the ability to "read a map of a journey into the future" (p. 76). However, just as a map is of little use without prior knowledge of its symbols and language, aspirations also require a foundation of cultural knowledge and experience to be effectively navigated (Bok, 2010; Reay, David and Ball, 2001). Aligning with Bourdieu's concepts (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), if parents do not pass down the necessary understanding and capital to help their children navigate their map, those children will have a much harder time reaching their desired destination. Along these lines, a student's capacity to aspire is shaped by their past success in reading their aspiration map, "in combination with their confidence to explore unmapped possibilities" (Bok, 2010, p. 164). Accordingly, Appadurai (2004) argues that aspirations are not just about having dreams but about possessing the capacity and understanding to realise them. He emphasises that they are formed in the "thick of social life" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67) and are influenced by one's surroundings, which can either enable or constrain the capacity to aspire.

Scholars like Hart (2012, 2014, 2016) and Ray (2006) underline Appadurai's (2004) concept, arguing that aspirations are socially determined and unevenly distributed across society. Ray (2006) states that a person's aspirations are shaped by the gap between their present situation and their ideal situation, meaning aspirations must feel at least somewhat realistic for the individual. Consequently, when researching aspirations, it is essential to consider an individual's likelihood of transforming these aspirations into achievable outcomes (Hart, 2016). Referring back to Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1990), a student's habitus, field and capital dictate what they perceive as realistically achievable and internalise as a meaningful aspiration (Hart, 2016). In practical terms, this translates to students from privileged backgrounds having a more fully developed capacity to aspire because they have greater access to resources, opportunities and guidance in comparison to their underprivileged counterparts (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Hart, 2016; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990). While this dissertation focuses more on the impact of non-socioeconomic factors, the frameworks offered by Bourdieu,

Appadurai and other scholars like Ray and Hart provide valuable insight into the nuanced ways aspirations are formed and why they may vary among different students. Similarly, although Bourdieu's work was originally contextualised in the Béarn region of France and Algerian society, and Appadurai drew from his own experiences to construct broader theoretical concepts, their frameworks remain useful for understanding aspirations in the Slovak context as well. Nevertheless, cultural differences and local specificities were considered throughout the dissertation's analysis.

2.3. The impact of socioeconomic background

2.3.1. Low socioeconomic background

As articulated in the theoretical framework, socioeconomic background significantly impacts a student's higher education aspirations. Within this body of research, the fact that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attend university at lower rates is well established. On average across OECD countries, only 26% of students in the bottom quarter of the PISA Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status expect to complete a university degree, compared with 66% of students from the top quarter (OECD, 2019). This discrepancy is observed in every country participating in PISA, indicating a consistent correlation between low family income and reduced university participation rates (OECD, 2019). The reasons why a low economic background leads to lower levels of educational attainment are relatively clear. In countries where tuition fees are required, students from low-income families are less likely to attend university due to the financial burden (Social Mobility Commission, 2024a; OECD, 2023). Moreover, individuals with low economic status are more inclined to enter the workforce early in order to financially support themselves or their families (Anders, 2012; Cassagneau-Francis, 2023; Sirin, 2005). Even in countries where higher education is publicly funded, such as Slovakia, families with limited income may still struggle to afford associated costs such as entrance exam fees, transportation, and school supplies (Salner, 2004; Anders and Micklewright, 2013; Eichelberger, Mattioli and Foxhoven, 2017).

Social background also plays a significant role in shaping educational trajectories. Even when students from low socioeconomic backgrounds manage to overcome financial barriers, their limited cultural and social capital can continue to hinder participation in higher education (Jury

et al., 2017; Bowers-Brown, Ingram and Burke, 2019; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Hoxby and Turner, 2015; Berrington, Roberts and Tammes, 2016; Anders, 2017). Jury et al. (2017) identify four key psychological barriers commonly experienced by such students. First, they often face emotional challenges, including heightened distress and feelings of guilt, particularly when attending university is perceived as diverging from family expectations. Secondly, because they may not have grown up in environments where higher education is normalised, they frequently struggle to identify as university students, leading to a diminished sense of belonging (Nieuwenhuis and Chiang, 2021; Aries and Seider, 2005; Hinz, 2016; Reay et al., 2009; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Moschetti and Hudley, 2015). Thirdly, these students may internalise negative stereotypes, which can lower self-esteem and contribute to the belief that their academic competence is inferior to that of their peers (Ivcevic and Kaufman, 2013; Kudrna, Furnham and Swami, 2010; Ramos-Sánchez and Nichols, 2007). Finally, their motivation is often driven more by a fear of failure and pressure to succeed than by a positive, intrinsic drive to succeed (Bui, 2002).

2.3.2. High socioeconomic background

On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, students from high-income backgrounds typically possess the financial capital necessary to afford university and cover associated costs such as accommodation, transportation, and application fees. Even in countries with high tuition fees, students from privileged backgrounds are more willing and able to take on student loans (Thompson, 2023; Harrison, Hatt and Baxter, 2021). Beyond meeting the financial requirement of paying tuition fees, these students often benefit from enhanced educational resources that increase their likelihood of university admission and boost their academic confidence (Bakour, 2024; Thrasher, 2024; Wyness, 2017). Such resources may include private tutoring, access to university counsellors, and more time to focus on their studies—since they are less likely to be burdened with paid work, household chores, or caregiving responsibilities (Wyness, 2017; Alam and Forhad, 2025; Wang, Liu and Wang, 2022; Jack, 2019).

Beyond the financial capital that students from high socioeconomic backgrounds usually have, they are also granted rich social and cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001; Destin and Oyserman, 2009; Walker and Pettigrew, 1984; Ho, Hu and Griffin, 2023; Koza Ciftci, Karadag and Ergin-Kocaturk, 2023). These forms of capital are frequently passed down from parents and often include an understanding of the link between education and upward mobility, the ability to

evaluate university options, and familiarity with the application process itself. However, more everyday forms of social capital, such as introductions to and support with extracurricular activities, are also highly valuable (Sullivan, 2001; Ho, Hu and Griffin, 2023). Students who receive such social and cultural resources often demonstrate a greater capacity to aspire, as the gap between their realistic expectations and idealistic aspirations is minimal—or may not exist at all (Trebbels, 2015). As Appadurai (2004) explains, this capacity involves "access to the knowledge, resources and social networks required to navigate the path towards achieving that imagined future" (p. 68).

In addition, being raised in an environment where attending university is normalised, or even expected, naturally raises students' aspirations for higher education (Kenway and Fahey, 2014). Privileged families often enrol their children in private schools that foster a strong culture of academic ambition, competition, and prestige (Weis et al., 2014; Kenway and Koh, 2015; Teese and Polesel, 2003). In these settings, the question is not whether students will attend university, but rather which university they will attend. Given the prestige and exclusivity of top-ranked international institutions, students from high socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to aspire towards, and feel entitled to, admission to these universities (Weis et al., 2014; Ho, Hu and Griffin, 2023). Supported by financial stability, abundant resources, and an aspirational peer environment, they are significantly more likely to apply to and gain admission into highly competitive institutions (Sit, 2024).

2.3.3. Medium socioeconomic background

As empirically demonstrated, an individual's socioeconomic background strongly influences the economic, cultural, and social capital they inherit, thereby shaping their capacity to aspire and form higher education aspirations (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Hart, 2016; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This is a significant finding, as it challenges the notion of meritocracy—the belief that educational opportunities are distributed fairly based on effort and ability (Burbules, 2021). Higher education aspirations are often framed within the idea of meritocracy. They are seen as universally achievable, suggesting that "regardless of individual structural conditions, material circumstances, or starting location, education can provide the same opportunities for all to succeed if they only have a desire to do so" (Bowers-Brown, Ingram and Burke, 2019, p. 207). In reality, many governments and policymakers continue to promote the idea that raising aspirations alone can resolve educational inequalities,

despite a strong body of research indicating that the issue is far more complex (Tarabini and Ingram, 2018).

The pervasive notion of meritocracy in policy and public discourse has led much of the research on higher education aspirations to focus primarily on students from either low or high socioeconomic backgrounds, aiming to highlight the role of capital and thereby challenge the validity of meritocratic ideals (Croll and Attwood, 2013; Harrison and Waller, 2018; Martin, 2024; Education Policy Institute, 2020). However, this focus often overlooks students from middle socioeconomic backgrounds, despite the fact that they represent the majority of the population (Croll and Attwood, 2013; Thompson, 2011; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). These students are typically less affected by the extremes of privilege or disadvantage, making them more susceptible to a broader range of influences beyond inherited capital, or lack thereof. This makes their experiences particularly valuable in understanding how higher education aspirations are formed. When factors such as financial resources and parental knowledge are more evenly distributed, other non-socioeconomic influences on aspiration development become more visible and meaningful.

2.4. The impact of non-socioeconomic factors

The following analysis focuses on the two identified key non-socioeconomic factors frequently recurring in the literature as shaping higher education aspirations: students' individual characteristics and the high school environment. However, it is important to establish that this is not to suggest they are entirely unaffected by socioeconomic conditions. As previously discussed, social, economic and cultural capital can influence academic performance through access to better resources, private tutoring or simply more time for study (Wyness, 2017; Alam and Forhad, 2025; Wang, Liu and Wang, 2022; Jack, 2019). Similarly, the school environment can vary significantly depending on whether a school is state or private, rural or urban, or shaped by other contextual factors (Weis et al., 2014; Kenway and Koh, 2015; Teese and Polesel, 2003). While this potential influence is acknowledged, the present discussion will focus on how aspirations vary within a more socioeconomically neutral context.

2.4.1. Individual student traits

As stated, academic ability is a frequently cited factor influencing higher education aspirations. It is well established that strong academic performance in earlier stages of education is closely linked to success in higher education (de Henau, 2024; TASO, 2022; Harris and Halpin, 2002; Fray et al., 2020; Garg et al., 2002). Accordingly, academic achievement serves as a key enabling factor for university aspirations (Khattab, 2015; Sammons, Toth and Sylva, 2016). A student's ability to excel often translates into strong exam performance and higher grades during primary and secondary education (Garg et al., 2002; Fray et al., 2020; Koenka et al., 2021). High academic achievement can positively influence a student's self-perception, boosting both their self-esteem and belief in their academic potential. As a result, these students are more likely to identify with the idea of being a university student, continuing in an area in which they have already experienced success (TASO, 2022; Khattab, 2015; Sammons, Toth and Sylva, 2016; Cao, Mithra and Aravind, 2024). Conversely, students who struggle academically may feel discouraged from pursuing higher education, as they are less likely to feel confident or comfortable in academic environments.

These perceptions also shape internal motivation. Students who perform well academically are more likely to enjoy learning, as they associate it with success, which in turn encourages them to aim higher (TASO, 2022; Ahmad and Bruinsma, 2021; Koenka et al., 2021; Cao, Mithra and Aravind, 2024). Academic achievement not only shapes how students see themselves but also how they are perceived by others, contributing to the expectations placed upon them by teachers, peers and family. When these expectations are positive, they can reinforce students' confidence and motivation (Khattab, 2015; Messersmith and Schulenberg, 2008). This dynamic is closely tied to the structure of the education system. A student's academic ability, self-esteem, motivation and perceived expectations influence not only whether they choose to pursue higher education but also the type of university or course they consider (Ho, Hu and Griffin, 2023; Mullen, 2009; Weis et al., 2014). Most universities have academic entry requirements or entrance exams that students must meet to gain admission. Accordingly, the grades a student earns in high school directly shape their realistic expectations regarding the institutions and programmes they can access (Ball et al., 2002).

2.4.2. High school environment

The student's high school environment is another frequently cited factor influencing higher education aspirations. The high school environment is a complex concept shaped by multiple

interconnected elements, including the influence of teachers, school culture, available resources and peer dynamics — all of which can impact a student's aspirations. First, the influence of good teaching practice can be transformative for a student's experience in the classroom (St. Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Singh et al., 2023; Martin and Collie, 2019). High-quality teaching can enhance student achievement, thereby improving not only their chances of gaining admission to university but their academic confidence, motivation and self-perception — all of which improve their likelihood of pursuing higher education (Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor, 2010; Rice, 2003; Engida, Yasui and Fentic, 2024; Van den Broeck, Demanet and Van Houtte, 2020). Teachers also shape aspirations through the expectations they place on students, influencing how learners view their own potential academic pathways (Martin and Collie, 2019; Van den Broeck, Demanet and Van Houtte, 2020). Furthermore, effective teaching, particularly when combined with a teacher's enthusiasm and subject engagement, can affect how students feel about that subject, potentially sparking or deepening their interest in pursuing it through higher education (Chichekian et al., 2025; Hanson, Paulsen and Pascarella, 2016).

A good teacher and a supportive school environment also play a key role in ensuring that students have access to the necessary resources for pursuing higher education. These resources may include information about the transition to university, guidance from a university counsellor on admissions procedures, access to university fairs and connections to alumni networks (Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna and Swan, 2011; Fray et al., 2020). Such support not only helps to shape or raise students' aspirations by normalising discussions about higher education but also equips them with the practical knowledge needed to turn those aspirations into reality. Access to accurate information and, in particular, support from a knowledgeable university counsellor can help students align their aspirations with their abilities and interests, increasing both motivation and the likelihood of enrolment (Rowan-Kenyon, Perna and Swan, 2011; Poynton and Lapan, 2017; Woods and Domina, 2014). In a study on the effects of university counselling, Devi et al. (2013) found that over 50% of students showed significant improvement after counselling, and 93% considered the sessions to be useful, showcasing just how much the resources provided by a school can shape student aspirations.

Apart from teachers, staff, school practices and curriculum, what truly shapes a school environment are its students and the dynamics between them. Peer relationships play a crucial

role in shaping higher education aspirations. Positive peer interactions can elevate these aspirations through shared expectations, direct comparisons and social networks (Barrios-Fernández, 2023; Van den Broeck et al., 2023; Dickerson, Maragkou and McIntosh, 2018; Centre for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2006). Attending a school where most students expect to pursue higher education increases an individual's likelihood of aspiring to and enrolling in higher education themselves (Dickerson, Maragkou and McIntosh, 2018). Conversely, while ambitious peers can be motivating, they may also have adverse effects through comparison. Students surrounded by high-achieving classmates may feel discouraged if they perceive themselves as less capable, leading to lower aspirations (Rosenqvist, 2017; Yuan and Olivos, 2023). Nevertheless, although it may be unclear whether peer dynamics ultimately raise or lower aspirations for higher education, their impact is undeniably significant.

2.5. Research background and context

2.5.1. Slovakia and the education system

To study aspirations in Slovak students, understanding the country's historical background is crucial. The Slovak education system dates back to the 9th century and has undergone three major reforms since, the most recent and transformative being the post-communist reform of 1989, which laid the foundation for the current structure (European Commission, 2023). Today, Slovakia has a compulsory education system lasting nine years, with primary, secondary and higher education provided free of tuition. The system is governed by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic as the central authority and is decentralised into eight autonomous regions with municipal oversight. Within this structure, individual school principals are responsible for implementing curricula, upholding pedagogical standards and managing budgets (Kosová and Porubský, 2007; European Commission, 2024). There are four types of secondary school that students may attend. This research specifically focuses on grammar schools, where students can choose a 4-, 5- or 8-year programme, all of which conclude with the national examination known as the *Maturita* (Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, 2005; European Commission, 2023).

The history of the Slovak education system has also significantly influenced the development of its tertiary education. Following the decentralisation that occurred after 1993, the distribution of power became unclear, resulting in ineffective governance over universities (Kleňhová, 2010; Lehman, 1999; Kureková, 2010). With the transition to democracy, the number of universities increased and access to higher education expanded. However, without strong political oversight or corresponding increases in funding, the rapid rise in student numbers led to a decline in institutional quality (Horvath and Matlovič, 2024; Matlovič, 2014). Slovakia now has 36 universities, a disproportionately high number given its relatively small population (Orszaghova, 2018). In addition, Slovakia lacks any form of national ranking or quality assurance system, meaning institutions are not held to any clear standard. Even today, the education system is characterised by very high tertiary recruitment, with institutions struggling to maintain quality (Orszaghova, 2018).

As a result, Slovakia has been experiencing significant brain drain, driven largely by high rates of student emigration. The primary motivations behind this emigration include inadequate research opportunities, low salaries and limited career prospects within the country (Williams, Baláž and Kollár, 2001). In 2016, 17% of Slovak tertiary students were studying abroad—an increase from 10% in 2010—making Slovakia the country with the second-highest student mobility rate in the OECD (Bystrianska, 2020). It is worth noting that many of these students relocate to the Czech Republic, attracted by its close proximity, tuition-free study and minimal language barriers (Fischer and Lipovská, 2015). However, whether to neighbouring countries or further abroad, this volume of emigrating students is concerning for Slovakia as it represents a substantial reduction in its labour force and GDP growth (Williams, Baláž and Kollár, 2001). Facilitating the reintegration of returning graduates is essential for promoting knowledge transfer, strengthening research and development and fostering economic growth (Šramová, Závodská and Lendel, 2015).

2.5.2. Gymnázium Juraj Hronca

Since studying abroad is so popular in Slovakia, many Slovak high schools promote themselves by highlighting the number of students who go on to attend international universities. GJH is one such school, widely regarded as one of the best in Bratislava (INEKO, 2020). Its reputation stems from both strong academic performance and high student aspirations, with many graduates continuing their studies at top-ranked universities abroad (Dulaková, 2015;

Partikková, 2021; Gránska, 2023). However, what really sets GJH apart from other Slovak high schools is that, in addition to preparing students for the national Slovak Maturita exam, it offers an alternative academic pathway through the International Baccalaureate programme. GJH students can choose among three academic tracks: the standard Slovak pathway, a bilingual Slovak–English pathway—both ending in the SKM—or the IB programme—ending with IB examinations. All pathways at GJH are tuition-free and each requires entrance exams. However, approximately 50% of the IB cohort comes from GJH's Middle Years Programme (MYP), which begins in primary school and transitions directly into the IB. Students must take entrance exams to join the MYP but are not required to reapply for the IB (Spojená škola Novohradská, 2025).

The SKM is a compulsory school-leaving examination for all high school students in Slovakia. Students are typically required to take exams in four subjects: Slovak language and literature, a foreign language and two additional subjects of their choice. The exam is divided into two parts: an external and an internal assessment. The external part is required only for the mandatory subjects and, if selected, mathematics. These exams are taken simultaneously across Slovakia and are marked using a standardised system. The internal part is required for all subjects and is organised by each individual school. For language subjects, the internal exam includes both a written and an oral component. The oral component is conducted at the school in front of an examination committee. The external part is marked as a percentage, while the oral portion of the internal exam is assessed with a numerical mark on a scale of 1 to 5. The final grade for each subject is typically assigned by the committee, taking into account both the percentage result from the external part and the numerical mark from the internal part. To pass, students must achieve at least a satisfactory mark of 4 in all parts of the exam for each subject. Upon completion, students receive the Maturita Certificate, which is required for university admission, along with any entrance examinations conducted by individual university faculties (European Commission, 2025; NÚCEM, 2025; 2010).

The IB is an internationally recognised curriculum, requiring students to take six subjects: one from studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, sciences, mathematics and the arts (with the option to substitute the arts with another subject from the other groups). Three subjects are studied at higher level and three at standard level, which students select based on interests. In addition to these subjects, students must complete three compulsory core components: the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course, an Extended

Essay (EE) and the Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) programme. Assessment is divided into external examinations, which are written tests marked by external IB examiners and taken simultaneously worldwide, and internal assessments, which are marked by teachers, including oral presentations, laboratory work and coursework. However, these marks are also moderated by the international IB board. Each subject is graded on a scale of 1 to 7, with up to three additional points available from the core components. A minimum of 24 points is required to receive the IB Diploma (International Baccalaureate, 2024; 2025). International university admissions boards then consider these points as entry requirements for prospective students. However, some institutions or courses may require additional entry examinations.

2.5.3. Higher education aspirations of GJH students

The uniqueness of GJH as a research site, along with the specific data provided by the school, formed the foundation of this dissertation—its objectives, research question and overall focus. When conducting secondary quantitative analysis on the provided data, I adopted a positivist approach, which holds that objective knowledge can be obtained by applying scientific methods to measurable, observable phenomena. This approach was suitable because it minimised bias and provided a more objective foundation for interpreting the qualitative portion of the study (Punch and Oancea, 2014; Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). The specific methods used were categorisation and trend analysis. Categorisation involved systematically organising the data into groups based on shared characteristics—in this case, the academic pathway each student followed (Miller, Wiley and Wolfe, 1986). Trend analysis was then applied to identify patterns and compare the proportions of students from each pathway who pursued university studies abroad versus those who remained in Slovakia (Mazov, Gureev and Glinskikh, 2021).

After thoroughly reviewing the data, I observed that a higher proportion of students from the IB pathway chose to study abroad compared with those from the SKM pathway. To quantify this, I calculated the number of students going abroad versus staying in Slovakia within each pathway from 2013 to 2021 and determined the average proportion per year, accounting for the unequal sizes of the two groups. The results showed that, on average, 57% of SKM students stayed in Slovakia while 43% went abroad, compared with 14% of IB students who stayed and 86% who went abroad. I conducted further trend analysis by tallying the specific countries students chose for their studies abroad. This analysis revealed that SKM students most

commonly went to the Czech Republic, while IB students predominantly chose England. Calculating the proportional distribution of destinations, I found that 54% of SKM students stayed in Slovakia, 35% went to the Czech Republic and 4% to England. In contrast, 33% of IB students went to England, 23% to the Netherlands and 15% to the Czech Republic. These results indicate that, according to data from GJH students between 2013 and 2021, those from the SKM pathway were most likely to attend university in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, whereas IB students were most likely to study in England or the Netherlands.

In order to research this identified discrepancy fairly, several contextual factors needed to be considered. First, the IB programme at GJH is taught in English, which could naturally influence students' university destinations due to varying levels of English proficiency. However, half of the students in the SKM pathway were enrolled in an English–Slovak bilingual track and were therefore fluent in English. Even among students in the monolingual SKM track, English was commonly chosen as a second language, with most graduating at the B2 level—sufficient to meet the language requirements of many English-speaking universities. Nevertheless, this factor was carefully accounted for in the study: participants were drawn from both SKM tracks, and all had completed English B2 as a subject. Secondly, because students must apply to the IB programme, it might be assumed that these students already differed in academic aspirations. However, they accounted for only 50% of the IB cohort; the remaining 50% were MYP students who were placed into the IB pathway automatically. Either way, the research question remains relevant and worth exploring, whether students' aspirations were shaped before or during their time in the IB programme. In conclusion, although the study sample was small, it included both MYP and non-MYP students as well as bilingual and monolingual SKM students, representing all of the school's academic pathways and possibilities within them.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Research philosophy

The philosophical stance underpinning this research is interpretivism. Interpretivist researchers utilise qualitative methodologies to capture the subjective meanings and individual experiences

of participants. They understand reality as context-specific, socially constructed and shaped through interpretation (Matta, 2015; Tuli, 2010; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018; Bradley and Schaefer, 1998; Lather, 2007). This stance aligns with this study as it explores the higher education aspirations of individual participants—a highly subjective, personal and socially constructed theme.

3.2. Research design and method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, structured to explore and understand participants' experiences and perspectives in depth. Qualitative research does not involve data in numerical form (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Instead, it is concerned with capturing the richness and complexity of human experience, often through methods such as interviews or observations. In this study, interviews were selected as the primary method for data collection, as they are well suited to gathering detailed, subjective accounts and understanding how and why participants form their aspirations (Robinson and McCartan, 2016).

Within this qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the specific methodology. Semi-structured interviews involve a set of guiding questions with predetermined wording and topics, which can be adapted depending on the flow of each interview. This format allows for unplanned follow-up questions in response to participants' answers (Robinson and McCartan, 2016). The semi-structured interview guide used in this study included 13 questions, some with suggested follow-up prompts, reduced from an initial set of 15 based on feedback from a pilot interview and the dissertation supervisor. The pilot interview, conducted with a fellow master's student experienced in qualitative research, provided valuable insights for refining the questions. All interview questions were developed based on the literature review, prior knowledge of the study context and the study's quantitative findings.

3.3. Participant sampling

This study employed a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. Convenience sampling is a technique used to recruit participants based on their ease of access and availability to the researcher, as opposed to

systematic or random selection (Golzar, Noor and Tajik, 2022). Snowball sampling is a technique used to recruit participants whereby one individual refers the researcher to another potential participant, who may then refer a third, and so on (Vogt, 1999; Atkinson and Flint, 2001).

In this study, convenience sampling was applied by contacting friends and asking whether they knew anyone who met the participant criteria. These criteria included being a GJH alumnus from either the IB or SKM pathway (either the bilingual programme or with English B2 as a subject) and not having a personal relationship with me. Once a potential participant was identified, my friend reached out to them, shared the participant information sheet along with a brief overview of the research topic and planned interview process, and asked them to contact me directly via email if they were interested in taking part. Snowball sampling was also used, as some established participants referred other eligible participants, allowing the sample to expand through their networks. Finally, ten GJH alumni from a variety of year groups were identified as participants: Gabriella, Patrik, Michaela, Bruno and Kristina from the IB cohort, and Mat, Juraj, Viktor, David and Tereza from the SKM cohort.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams during April and May 2025. Once participants reached out via email, they were sent the meeting link, the participant information sheet (see Appendix F) and a thank-you note (see Appendix C). Before each interview began, participants were asked if they were comfortable conducting the interview in English, and all confirmed that this would not be a problem. This step was included to reflect the participants' high level of English proficiency and to maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by avoiding potential issues of meaning being lost in translation. Once this was established, participants were informed that audio recording would begin. After confirming their readiness, the oral consent form (see Appendix G) was read aloud and verbally agreed to by the participant. The interview then officially began. Each participant was asked 13 pre-prepared questions (see Appendix D), along with tailored follow-up questions based on their responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and after completion their recordings were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word on the Outlook platform.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with a partly theory-informed coding approach. While the process was guided by existing literature—particularly the frameworks of Bourdieu and Appadurai, as well as empirical studies on key factors influencing aspirations—the themes themselves were developed inductively from the data, without reliance on any predefined categories. My thematic analysis followed the six-step framework provided by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). First, I read and re-read the interview transcripts to familiarise myself with the overall content. During this process, I annotated the text with initial notes and wrote short summaries of the key points mentioned by each participant. For example, I bullet-pointed the three most important factors influencing each participant's aspirations and some additional points unique to that interview, such as having lived abroad. With a total of ten interviews, I was able to engage in depth with each transcript and develop a strong understanding of the content. Next, I identified emerging ideas across interviews. Any idea mentioned by at least two participants was noted and added to a list of preliminary codes (see Appendix B1). For example, multiple participants mentioned considering the costs of university, so I noted "tuition fees" as a preliminary code. I then reviewed and organised these codes into ten sub-themes by grouping overlapping concepts. For instance, "tuition fees" and "cost of living abroad" were combined into the sub-theme "finances" (see Appendix B2). I applied a colour-coded system across transcripts, assigning each sub-theme a specific colour and highlighting relevant sections of the interviews accordingly (see Appendix B3). This system also helped me extract and group quotes under their respective sub-themes. Additionally, I noted any instances where a participant made contradictory statements or did not mention a particular theme—for example, not considering financial constraints at all.

Using the sub-themes identified, I constructed the first draft of my thematic map (see Appendix B4). Initially, I grouped sub-themes under two broader categories: a) whether to attend university and b) which university to attend. However, upon further review, it became evident that almost all sub-themes related exclusively to the second category. This suggested that the decision to attend university was not a meaningful point of differentiation among GJH students and so would not help answer the study's research question. Accordingly, I created the second and third drafts of my thematic map, ultimately identifying two themes which offered clear and logical groupings: a) high school and home-related influences and b) university and university-city-related influences (see Appendix B5 and B6). These themes identified the factors that influenced students' higher education aspirations and, importantly, emerged in the interviews with both IB and SKM students. This provided a strong comparative framework for exploring

how their aspirations are formed and why they differ, thereby addressing the central research question. This final thematic map was also used to structure the findings chapter. During the writing process, I regularly referred back to the map, the colour-coded transcripts and the relevant quotes to ensure accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness in the analysis.

3.5. Positionality

First coined by Merton (1972), the terms insider and outsider in research refer to whether a researcher shares similar or differing characteristics with their participants. The concept was expanded by Dwyer and Buckle (2009), who argue that positionality is not binary and researchers often occupy both insider and outsider positions simultaneously. They state that by acknowledging this, researchers can enhance transparency regarding their positionality. Drawing on this, I position myself as both an insider and outsider within my research. On one hand, I consider myself an outsider because, unlike my participants, I attended a different high school and do not know any of the participants, teachers or staff at GJH personally. As a result, I had no prior knowledge of the internal dynamics or discourses within GJH or its individual classrooms. This outsider position allowed me to maintain a level of detachment and approach participants' accounts more holistically, with a neutral perspective (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Rabe, 2003).

On the other hand, I also consider myself an insider because, like my participants, I am in my twenties, I am Slovak, I attended high school in Bratislava, I completed the IB programme and I have friends and family members who have completed the SKM programme. These insider characteristics give me a strong understanding of both academic pathways, as well as the broader social and cultural environment in which the participants grew up. This shared background and understanding likely helped participants feel comfortable, encouraging them to speak openly and honestly (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002). However, this insider position also carries the risk of bias, which made me especially conscious of my role throughout data collection and analysis. For example, as someone who completed the IB myself, I had to be mindful of my assumptions about the stress participants may have experienced during the programme. This was particularly important when phrasing follow-up interview questions, to ensure they were not leading or loaded, and when coding the responses I received.

3.6. Ethical considerations

This research was designed with a strong emphasis on ethical integrity, adhering to the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* and approved by an Oxford University ethics committee (see Appendix E). At every stage of the process, care was taken to respect participants' autonomy, privacy, and well-being. Potential participants were provided with the Participant Information Sheet on two separate occasions and were explicitly informed that they should contact the researcher only if they were interested in taking part. This approach was intended to eliminate any perceived pressure to participate, thus safeguarding voluntary consent. In addition, all participants were re-contacted and confirmed that they were comfortable with the institution being named in the dissertation.

Before each interview, participants were read an oral consent form that clearly outlined the research process. This included a detailed explanation of their rights, such as the ability to skip any question they found uncomfortable and to withdraw from the interview at any point without providing a reason. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw their data up until the end of July, ensuring they retained agency beyond the point of initial participation. Furthermore, participants were notified that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed. An alternative was offered in which no audio recording would take place and only written notes would be taken, thereby offering a less intrusive option for those who preferred it. In all cases, specific consent was obtained for participation, audio recording, the use of direct quotations in the final write-up, and the explicit naming of their high school.

Data protection and anonymity were key priorities throughout the research process. All participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and no additional information, such as their gender, age or university course was revealed. Audio recordings were captured on a device that was not connected to any cloud-based storage service, minimising the risk of data breaches. These recordings were then immediately transferred to the University of Oxford's secure Outlook OneDrive and deleted from the original device. All raw audio files and any personal identifying information were permanently deleted after transcription. The transcribed data will be securely stored on the University's password-protected Outlook OneDrive and retained for a period of three years following the submission of this dissertation.

3.7. Limitations

This study was at risk of bias due to my insider characteristics as a researcher, which may have shaped how I conducted and coded interviews (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Kanuha, 2000). To mitigate this limitation, I remained reflective and conscious of my positionality throughout the research process. First, I conducted all interviews in English, which reduced the potential bias that could arise from translating participants' responses. Secondly, I regularly revisited the original transcribed interviews to ensure that the sub-themes I identified were accurate and grounded in the data. Thirdly, I took care to phrase all interview questions in a neutral and non-leading manner. These questions were reviewed and refined following pilot interviews and were approved by my dissertation supervisor. Despite these measures, the potential influence of researcher bias must still be acknowledged and was carefully considered throughout the study.

In addition, although the aim of this study was not broad generalisability but rather to highlight individual narratives, a larger sample size could have enriched the data collected. However, due to time constraints, the sample remained small, and the findings are therefore not widely generalisable. This limitation is particularly significant for Slovak schools outside GJH, which is currently the only institution offering both the SKM and IB pathways in the country.

3.8. Rigour

Rigour in educational research has been conceptualised in various ways by numerous scholars (Rickinson, 2005; White, 2017; Shavelson, 2002; Hostetler, 2005). In considering how to ensure rigour within my own study, I drew on the framework presented in *What Should Count as Quality Education Research in Education? Continuing the Discussion*, published in the 2014 edition of *Educational Researcher* (Vol. 43, No. 1). I chose this text because it explicitly addresses the concept of rigour within the field of education research, making it particularly relevant to both the aims of my study and my interpretivist stance.

In the first article, Rudolph (2014) argued that rigorous research in education requires methodologies that are well matched to the unique characteristics of the field. As a result, what

constitutes an appropriate methodology is largely influenced by the philosophical perspectives, such as interpretivism, that are prioritised within educational research (Punch and Oancea, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018; Bray, Adamson and Mason, 2014; Coates, 2020). Hence, since interpretivist ontology believes that multiple, local, and individual realities exist, interpretivist researchers frequently employ qualitative methods, such as interviews, which are particularly effective at capturing subjective experiences (Punch and Oancea, 2014; Junjie and Yingxin, 2022; Coates, 2020). Accordingly, as discussed in sections 3.1 and 3.2, this study exemplifies Rudolph's definition of rigour. Its methodology is consistent with an interpretivist ontology and its objective to understand participants' personal higher education aspirations and how they are formed.

In the second article, Phillips (2014) argues that rigorous research in education should be context-specific and requires the researcher to have a deep understanding of the setting being studied. As established in the introduction, this study is highly context-specific to its unique research site. Moreover, as discussed in section 3.5, I bring insider characteristics and a strong familiarity with the research context, thereby aligning with his definition of rigour. Phillips (2014) also highlights that a key challenge in educational research is accounting for all relevant factors, many of which are difficult to control. However, due to the distinctive nature of the research site, this study was able to maintain comparability across factors such as socioeconomic status, academic ability, geographic region, and the overall school environment.

Similarly, in the third article, Wieman (2014) argues that highly focused, context-specific research can reduce the influence of uncontrolled factors while enhancing accuracy, reliability, and validity. He further cautions that "bad research" often stems from the failure to consider important factors and a lack of critical reflection on the researcher's own biases. As discussed in sections 3.5 and 3.7, this study sought to acknowledge all relevant factors and actively mitigate bias through ongoing self-reflection. To ensure rigour, the research context was deliberately kept specific, key factors were carefully examined, and the researcher's positionality and potential biases were critically considered throughout both data collection and analysis.

Lastly, in the fourth article, Gutierrez and Penuel (2014) argue that rigorous research should be meaningful and address persistent issues within the field of education. As discussed in Chapter 1, this study seeks to align with their definition of rigour by addressing under-

researched topics—namely, the Slovak education system and the higher education aspirations of students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds—and by identifying potential underlying issues within a school institution that lead to symbolic yet significant differences between its two graduating cohorts. By doing so, I hope this study is meaningful and represents a first step towards addressing the unequal environment at GJH. In line with Gutierrez and Penuel's (2014) recommendation, the research approach focused not only on the "what", but also on understanding the "why", "how", and "for whom"—a perspective that shaped both the development of the interview questions and the overall research design.

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from the interview data. As outlined in the methodology chapter, ten sub-themes were identified through coding, grouped under two overarching themes. These themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that shape higher education aspirations among GJH students. Accordingly, the chapter is structured as follows: sub-themes related to curriculum and teachers, peer influences and general discourse, and family and community are discussed under the overarching theme of high school and home-related influences. Sub-themes concerning university ranking and prestige, opportunities, course selection, university location, and convenience are examined within the theme of university- and university city-related influences. The sub-theme of finances, which intersects both overarching themes, is addressed within a separate section on academic ability and socioeconomic background. Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring the participants' retrospective views and providing a summary of the findings.

4.2. Academic ability and socioeconomic background

To ensure that academic ability and socioeconomic status were comparable across both cohorts, and thus not the reason for differences in higher education aspirations, each participant was asked to report the grades they received upon completing their programme. Four out of five SKM students earned a grade of 1, the highest possible score in that system. Among the IB

students, two scored above 30 points, two above 35, and one above 40 (see Appendix A3). Although the grading systems are not directly comparable, these results suggest that IB students are not significantly more academically rigorous than their SKM peers, nor do they have a substantially higher likelihood of admission into top-ranked universities based solely on academic performance. Participants also assessed the socioeconomic composition of their classrooms—using a scale from 1 (lower-class) to 5 (upper-class)—as well as their own status, by indicating the extent to which they felt they fit into that composition. The average rating reported was 3.6 among SKM students and 3.2 among IB students, with five participants stating that they fit in, four saying they mostly fit in, and one reporting not fitting in (see Appendices A1 and A2). While there is some variation, these responses suggest broadly similar socioeconomic backgrounds across both groups and among individual participants. Accordingly, academic ability and socioeconomic status are treated as comparable factors in this study. However, finances are identified as a sub-theme , as participants from both programmes mentioned them as influencing their higher education aspirations. Specifically, two IB and two SKM students cited tuition fees and the cost of living as factors in choosing universities outside England. These findings suggest that while financial considerations influenced decision-making, they did so similarly across both groups. Hence, although finances, socioeconomic status , and academic ability help explain how participants formed their higher education aspirations, they do not explain why those aspirations differed between pathways.

4.3. High school and home-related influences

4.3.1. Curriculum and teachers

4.3.1.1. Describing one's own academic cohort

The sub-theme of curriculum and its associated teachers and staff represents the clearest distinction between the two groups of participants and is therefore central to the research question. Both SKM and IB participants were aware of the limitations and strengths of their curriculum , and they recognised and articulated key differences in their respective curricula well. IB participants generally appreciated the programme's academic rigour, the ability to choose subjects aligned with their interests, and the development of key skills, particularly in essay writing. When comparing it to their past education in the Slovak school system, IB

students described being part of a more internationally minded environment. Kristina illustrated this by contrasting the SKM focus on national history with the IB's global orientation. However, they were also critical of the intense pressure, heavy workload, and lack of adequate school support. For example, with regard to university counselling, their reviews were mixed, with four IB participants wishing the services were more comprehensive. However, some did acknowledge having access to more support than the rest of GJH. Patrik, for example, noted that key information about UCAS entry exams was shared only with the IB cohort, questioning why such guidance was not extended to all graduating students at GJH.

On the other hand, SKM participants critiqued their system as "rigid", "post-communist" (Viktor), and overly reliant on memorisation (Bruno) , yet most expressed overall satisfaction with their high school experience. For example, Tereza ,who pursued university in the Czech Republic, initially worried that her academic background might not match that of her Czech peers. However, she found herself better prepared than expected, having already encountered some of the content during high school. Similarly, Viktor, who studied in England, noted the need to adjust to a system that emphasised different skills and assessment methods but reported performing well after his first year. At the same time, he admitted that attending a university like Oxford, which he perceived as more demanding, would have likely overwhelmed him. With regard to university counselling, SKM participants acknowledged receiving little targeted application support, although many felt they didn't need it or assumed they could have received it if they had asked. Juraj reported that only two students from his SKM class went on to study in England, and when they required help with the UCAS application, they had to proactively seek assistance from the IB coordinator.

4.3.1.2. Describing the other academic cohort

The most interesting part of the interviews arose not when participants described their own curricula but when they perceived and compared their experiences to the other pathway. Among SKM participants, and reportedly at GJH more generally, a belief emerged that the IB programme better prepared its students for university and was overall more academically rigorous. David, for example, remarked that "the IB programme had books that were four times thicker than ours," equating this with greater academic rigour, despite acknowledging that he wasn't close to any IB students and lacked detailed knowledge of their curriculum. This perception , along with comparisons with the IB pathway , fostered feelings of self-doubt about academic readiness among SKM students. Interestingly, a negative cross-comparison was also

evident among IB participants, who perceived the SKM pathway as less demanding but offering similar university admission outcomes. Michaela even expressed regret, saying she wished she had chosen the SKM track instead, which she viewed as more manageable, stating, "the students who took Maturita got the best marks so easily… and they got to the university they wanted to as well."

However, the narratives reported about each pathway did not always align with the actual experiences within those tracks, particularly in the case of the IB. While the IB curriculum is indeed more aligned with international education systems, SKM students frequently overstated its advantages compared with how IB students described their own experiences. This was well exemplified in the area of university application support, which was far less extensive than SKM students perceived. While some IB students felt well supported, others did not. Patrik, for instance, reported missing the first UCAS deadline because the school failed to inform him of it. Similarly, two other interviewees recounted negative experiences with the IB coordinator, who was responsible for application support. These reflections suggest that IB students did not receive the level of resources and guidance they — and their SKM peers — had expected based on the widespread narrative around the IB at GJH. Likewise, many SKM participants pointed to the IB's use of English as a key advantage; however, IB students, by contrast, claimed that while the programme was delivered in English, it did not necessarily lead to higher language proficiency—a claim supported by this study, which found strong English skills across both groups. Accordingly, the common reasons participants gave for the difference in university aspirations between the two cohorts, such as the level of application support or English proficiency, do not fully explain the disparity.

The tendency of participants to idealise the alternative pathway—whether viewing it as easier and more effective, or harder and more advantageous—highlights how coexisting academic tracks within a single institution can foster unproductive comparisons and reinforce misleading narratives among students. At GJH , this was also underlined by the institution and teachers , for example by the fact that the teacher assisting with applications was referred to as the 'IB coordinator' , which likely reinforced the divide between the programmes and discouraged SKM students from seeking similar assistance. Linking back to the research question, the different curricula shaped students' higher education aspirations not only through their content, such as the national versus international focus and the support and resources they offered but, more importantly, through the perceptions and expectations attached to them.

While IB participants did not report feeling better prepared for university than their SKM peers, they expected to be. This expectation alone is a key distinction, as it likely influenced their self-perception and confidence, increasing their likelihood of applying to universities in England and the Netherlands.

4.3.2. Peer influence and general discourse

4.3.3.1. Peer pressure

Aside from the curriculum and teachers, the sub-theme of peer influence and general discourse is the only other factor that is distinctly different between the two groups studied, making it a crucial component in addressing the research question. Two specific ideas recurred within this sub-theme, the first being peer pressure. Four out of the five IB participants spoke about their classes being extremely competitive. They felt that their classmates were highly academically driven, and that simply entering the IB programme came with the expectation to uphold a high standard. All participants described the IB cohort as a source of pressure—though the way they perceived that pressure varied. Some students, like Gabriella, viewed it positively, explaining that it pushed her to improve her work ethic and ultimately perform better in high school. Other participants, like Michaela and Patrik, reflected more negatively on their IB experience, emphasising the stress and lack of personal freedom it entailed. SKM students, on the other hand, did not describe experiencing peer pressure within their classrooms but acknowledged that GJH was one of the best high schools in the country and held its students to a high standard. Rather than emphasising individual competition, they highlighted feeling pushed to perform well due to the school's prestigious reputation. This contrast suggests a link between peer dynamics and the discrepancy between students' higher education aspirations. While all participants were aware of the school's high expectations, peer pressure to excel academically, which is closely associated with high aspirations, was particularly pronounced within the IB cohort.

4.3.3.2. Negative discourse on Slovak universities

The second most recurring and prominent idea, expressed explicitly by nine out of ten participants, was the negative perception of Slovak universities. It was not subtle but addressed directly and repeatedly throughout the interviews. This perception was consistent across both

cohorts, with many participants stating that staying in Slovakia was seen as somewhat of a failure:

> I remember a pervasive attitude at GJH that now that we're in this English programme, we should go to a university outside of Slovakia. You know, all of our discussions, like across the cohort, were about where in the Netherlands, where in the UK, where in America, where in the Czech Republic, will you apply? And then the Czech Republic was seen as the substitute for Slovakia. Like, you know, Slovakia would be seen as a failure. Czech Republic would be seen as good already. (Patrik)

Both SKM and IB students described the pressure to leave Slovakia as a significant factor in shaping their higher education aspirations, with some placing it among their top three considerations. In fact, the way participants described wanting to study abroad made it seem as though it was widely accepted as the default option. As Juraj reflected, "there was kind of an assumption that you're gonna go abroad. The question was how far west are you gonna go, so I just uncritically accepted that I'm going abroad." Naturally, such strong rhetoric at GJH significantly shaped the higher education aspirations of its students.

While the pressure to study abroad was present in both cohorts, it was significantly more pronounced within the IB programme. This can be attributed to a stronger peer influence **,** which — when combined with the widespread narrative that Slovak universities were undesirable — resulted in IB students feeling intense pressure to apply to non-Slovak institutions. Kristina even described her IB cohort as feeling "like a cult," while Tereza remarked that "to go abroad is a common thing and you are weird if you don't want to." This pressure also created a hierarchy of preferred destinations, with a widespread belief that the farther west one went, the better. Consequently, the Czech Republic was often considered only a backup — viewed as better than Slovakia, but not truly "abroad." As Viktor put it, "I would say that in IB, Czechia does not count as abroad, right?" Ultimately, this offers the clearest explanation for the discrepancy in higher education aspirations between the two groups. While all students associated ambition with studying abroad, largely due to prevailing anti-Slovak sentiment, IB students experienced more intense peer pressure and a more forceful rhetoric. As Viktor's comment highlights, even the Czech Republic, though preferred over Slovakia, was not considered a fully legitimate option, which reinforced the pressure to aim farther west — manifesting in most IB students applying to England or the Netherlands.

4.3.3.3. Source of pressure and discourse

Interested in where the anti-Slovak rhetoric and intense pressure to study abroad were coming from, participants were given follow-up questions, which identified two reasons. First,

participants mentioned that simply enrolling in a cohort reinforced particular aspirations. IB participants reported that being in the programme came with the expectation that they wanted to study abroad, and so it felt as if this decision had already been made. As exemplified by Kristina's quote, their choice of university was, in a sense, predetermined by the cohort they had chosen:

> We already got here, so why would we go back? You were expected to continue challenging yourself, and the challenge was to go abroad to a good university. Staying in Slovakia or in the Czech Republic, I think, was seen as something like going backwards. (Kristina)

Participants from the SKM programme did not explicitly report a similar feeling. However, it is reasonable to assume that the sense of university destinations being predetermined by the programme may have influenced them as well, but in the opposite way. Being in a high school that offers the IB programme may have made SKM students feel less prepared or less entitled to apply to universities outside Slovakia and the Czech Republic, as opposed to high schools where they would not have any other academic programme to compare themselves with.

A second reason why the desire to study abroad was especially strong among IB students was that many of them chose the programme precisely because they already intended to pursue university outside Slovakia. All ten participants stated that the IB programme is closely associated with studying abroad — either because it is believed to improve students' chances of being accepted by foreign universities, or because only students with such ambitions tend to apply in the first place. When asked directly, participants struggled to determine whether the IB programme has this reputation because internationally minded students self-select into it, or because the programme itself cultivates and reinforces aspirations to study abroad. The most common reflection was that both were true: while students entered the programme with some initial ambition to apply abroad, this sentiment was significantly amplified by the peer culture and environment within the IB cohort:

> Well, I feel like in IB, we just got subliminally reinforced to choose a university abroad because that was the predominant reason why all of us chose to go there. You know, it was heavily advertised that if you go to IB it's like a free ticket to schools abroad. (Michaela)

This perception was echoed by SKM participants, who also noted that IB students seemed more determined to study abroad. Three SKM students attributed this to the IB cohort being more academically rigorous and drawn to the prestige and challenge of the programme. However, this perception did not fully align with the experiences shared by some IB participants, who

admitted to struggling with the programme's demands rather than enjoying them. This contrast highlights a recurring gap between how SKM students perceive the IB experience and how IB students actually live it.

Along these lines, there also appears to be a gap between how students perceive the IB programme before enrolling and how they reflect on it after completing it. As discussed earlier, the IB programme was often marketed and perceived as a pathway to prestigious international universities — an image that plays a significant role in students' decisions to apply. However, upon reflection, multiple IB alumni questioned whether the programme actually improved their chances of gaining admission to universities abroad. While they appreciated the skills and academic rigour the IB offered, describing it as a high-quality international education, participants like Kristina, Michaela, and Patrik noted that they did not entirely enjoy the programme. They reflected that their SKM counterparts seemed to have more free time to cultivate their extracurricular portfolio while still managing to earn top grades, prompting further doubts about whether the IB was worth it. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned wanting to apply to the IB programme out of a desire to develop important skills or challenge themselves academically. While some expressed retrospective appreciation for what they had learned in the IB programme and noted that it suited them better than their previous experience with the Slovak system, these reflections came after the fact, not as initial motivations for transitioning to the IB pathway. The most common reason for applying was the belief that the programme improved their odds of transitioning to tertiary education abroad, aligning with the fact that they were most likely to apply to England or the Netherlands.

Though two sources of discourse were identified, none of the participants were able to give a concrete answer as to where the negative rhetoric about Slovak universities was coming from. Most admitted they had never even spoken to a peer studying at a Slovak university to confirm whether the experience was truly negative.

> Now that you say it, I don't know if anyone actually knew someone studying at a Slovak university and including me, like I never did my research, I never went and interviewed people who were studying at a Slovak university because it was just agreed amongst us that that's the reality. (Kristina)

Tereza reflected on this extensively, stating that she was extremely surprised by the quality of education when she returned to Slovakia for her master's degree. She even felt it surpassed her undergraduate experience in the Czech Republic. Despite this, Tereza remained somewhat sceptical about the overall quality of Slovak higher education, attributing her positive

experience to the fact that she studied mathematics and physics — subjects she described as among the best and oldest disciplines within Slovak universities. This finding suggests that the discourse — one of the most significant factors shaping higher education aspirations among GJH students — is often reinforced among peers without necessarily being grounded in concrete evidence. This aligns with earlier findings that the assumption that IB students have a significantly better chance of gaining admission to universities abroad is not entirely accurate , but rather based on a perpetuated narrative.

4.3.3. Family and community

The influence of family and community was also frequently cited by participants from both cohorts, revealing how those higher education aspirations were formed. Four participants mentioned the influence of their parents, particularly in terms of their know-how, expectations, and role-modelling. Participants explained that their parents' professions and interests shaped their own, ultimately influencing the courses to which they applied. Two participants also highlighted the impact of older siblings or cousins whom they admired and viewed as role models. Bruno noted that his older cousin not only set an example but also provided him with practical support during the university application process, helping him both form and achieve his higher education aspirations. These findings demonstrate that family background strongly influenced students' higher education aspirations across both pathways. Interestingly, parental influence was also cited by two SKM participants when asked why they believe the aspirations of IB and SKM students differ. They suggested that parents who enrolled their children in the MYP programme, which leads directly into the IB, had a clearer understanding of what was 'best' for their children. SKM students' perceptions of families who place their children in MYP demonstrate how impactful parental social capital can be in shaping children's aspirations indirectly. Additionally, it underlines previous findings about SKM students viewing the MYP and thereby the IB programme as superior.

In terms of community, five participants discussed the influence of friends and communities outside school. SKM students, in particular, emphasised the role of extracurricular activities and the peers they met through them. Two SKM participants identified academic extracurriculars, particularly debate and civic involvement, as among the top three factors shaping their higher education aspirations. Both of these students went on to study abroad in England and the Netherlands. One noted that if he had not found his extracurricular community,

he would not even have considered applying abroad. These findings highlight the impact of peer communities in shaping aspirations, not only through the thinking they help develop but also by expanding access to resources and role models. Participants naturally aspired to follow the higher education paths of those around them. This trend marks a clear difference between the two programmes: while extracurriculars and out-of-school communities were significant influences for SKM students, they were not as prominent for IB students. This supports the participants' own reflections on the IB programme as being more demanding and time-consuming, which left less room for extracurricular involvement compared to the more flexible SKM pathway.

4.4. University and university-city related influences

4.4.1. Ranking and Prestige

One of the most frequently recurring sub-themes in the interviews was university ranking and prestige, both of which played a significant role in shaping students' higher education aspirations, particularly in determining which universities were considered desirable. This theme was mentioned by eight out of ten participants, and four identified it as one of the most important factors influencing their university choices. Notably, all four of these participants were from the IB programme. IB students demonstrated a strong awareness of international ranking systems and often heavily relied on them when making university decisions. Kristina and Patrik, for instance, admitted that rankings were the primary factor guiding their choices.

> I had an excel, it had the three university rankings, you know, THE, then QS, and then one more I forgot the name of and then I would put the ranking there and the average ranking of each university and then I went down the list and then that's what I applied for my top five universities. Like that was it. There was no other thought process behind it. (Patrik)

Interestingly, most IB participants initially described their aspirations using terms like "best" or "top" universities. It was only upon receiving follow-up questions that they clarified they were referring specifically to international ranking systems. This indicates that their perceptions of what constituted a "good" university were largely shaped by these rankings. This is a significant finding because it indicates that IB students shape their higher education aspirations around international university rankings, and it strengthens the earlier observation that peer pressure to excel academically is closely linked to the expectation of studying abroad.

In contrast, when SKM participants mentioned university rankings in interviews, it was often in reference to why students choose the IB programme—suggesting that IB students are drawn to prestige and tend to aim for top-ranked universities. Michaela noted that studying abroad is perceived as "more cool" because it is associated with ambition and social status. David stood out as the only SKM participant who explicitly considered rankings when choosing between two universities in the Netherlands. In fact, he identified ranking as the third most influential factor shaping his aspirations. However, the remaining SKM participants did not typically cite rankings as a direct influence on their own university decisions. Instead, they referred to broader impressions, such as selecting a university that was "bigger" or had a "better name" (Tereza). Even among SKM students who applied to universities in England or the Netherlands, references to rankings were vague, indicating a lack of detailed knowledge. Rather than consulting rankings, SKM students tended to rely on personal networks or word of mouth. Viktor, for example, considered the University of Warwick superior to King's College London simply because he knew several people who had studied at Warwick, while he knew no one at King's—making it seem less desirable by comparison:

> Obviously everybody knew Oxbridge, but only few really motivated people knew UCL or universities like that, or the difference between the rankings of these other non-Oxbridge universities in western countries. (Viktor)

Interestingly, as Viktor pointed out, five participants particularly mentioned the University of Oxford or used the term "Oxbridge" in their interviews, despite none having applied. This raises an interesting point: the frequent references to Oxford and Cambridge by both IB and SKM students suggest that these universities were framed as the highest form of academic aspiration within the GJH environment. Nevertheless, even though SKM students were broadly aware of university rankings and recognised the prestige associated with institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, they did not fully understand or actively use rankings to shape their higher education aspirations. This stands in clear contrast to the IB participants' deliberate and informed use of ranking systems, and helps explain the divergence in aspirations between the two cohorts: because universities in England and the Netherlands tend to be positioned higher on international rankings than those in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, IB students were more likely to pursue studies in those countries.

4.4.2. Opportunities

In order to gain a deeper understanding of what participants meant by prestige or why they labelled a specific institution as "best", follow-up questions were asked to explore their reasoning. Participants often cited the opportunities offered by certain universities, which is why it was identified as a sub-theme. The opportunities included research possibilities, extracurricular activities, and partnerships with other institutions or companies. For example, Bruno identified these opportunities as one of his top three reasons for choosing Imperial College London, particularly emphasising the research and career prospects it offered. In contrast, Mat expressed regret about not investing more money in his tertiary education by studying in a country like England instead of the Czech Republic. He believes that attending a university with strong industry ties would have benefited his career. While participants' explanations clarified why they viewed certain universities as desirable and how they formed their higher education aspirations, this sub-theme does not explain why the aspirations of the two cohorts differed.

4.4.3. University Course

It is unsurprising that course selection emerged as a sub-theme, as it represents one of the most important decisions students make when transitioning to university. Given its highly subjective nature, course selection affected each participant individually, though some overlap emerged. For instance, in the cases of Mat, Tereza, and Bruno, knowing what they wanted to study also meant being certain they wanted to pursue higher education in general. Interestingly, the most significant pattern identified related to course availability. Students noted that foreign universities offered a broader range of programmes, which was a common reason for choosing to study abroad. For Mat, staying in Slovakia was not even an option, as local universities did not offer the course he was interested in, demonstrating how course selection can directly shape higher education aspirations and outcomes. When probed further on this issue, Tereza suggested that the lack of course diversity in Slovakia might stem from limited support for the humanities and social sciences during the communist regime. However, when it was pointed out that the Czech Republic shares a similar communist legacy yet is still perceived as a more desirable destination by many GJH students, she acknowledged that her explanation might not fully account for the difference. Nonetheless, her response illustrates how GJH students tend

to rationalise, rather than critically question, the dominant narrative that Slovak universities are less desirable, highlighting how susceptible their aspirations are to broader discourse.

4.4.4. University Location

University location was mentioned by six participants from both cohorts, as it naturally influenced students' higher education aspirations and eventual destinations. Participants expressed wanting to experience a different culture, with those moving to England or the Netherlands specifically highlighting their interest in living in large, international cities. Another frequently cited reason was the desire for independence. Mat and Tereza, both SKM students who chose to study in Brno, a city close to the Slovak border, identified this as a motivating factor, even though they remained relatively near home. Other considerations included personal connections to a city, previous visits, or preferences for a particular type of university environment, such as a campus-based setting. For example, Kristina explained that she wanted to avoid large cities, which led her to choose Edinburgh—a place she had visited before and where the strong student presence made her feel comfortable. While it is clear how location influenced the formation of higher education aspirations, this factor alone does not help explain why the two cohorts' aspirations differed.

4.4.5. Convenience

Another sub-theme mentioned by three participants as influencing their higher education aspirations was convenience. This included factors such as simpler application requirements, proximity to home, and access to information about the university. Gabriella and David, for example, chose not to apply to certain universities because doing so would have required additional subjects or entrance exams they preferred to avoid. Similarly, Tereza decided to attend a university in Brno after receiving all the information she needed during a university fair. Tereza, Michaela, and Mat also cited the benefit of studying in cities just a short drive from their hometowns. Notably, convenience was mentioned only by students who chose to study in cities nearer Bratislava, offering insight into how some participants form their aspirations: students who prioritise convenience may potentially be more likely to remain close to Slovakia. However, this sub-theme does not distinguish between IB and SKM students and therefore does not fully address the central research question.

4.5. Retrospective views

Although not identified as a sub-theme, another point of distinction among participants was whether they felt GJH could have done more to support their transition to higher education. David, Juraj, and Bruno were satisfied with the support they received and did not feel the school should have done anything differently. In contrast, other participants highlighted several areas where they felt the school fell short. Gabriella and Michaela criticised the IB coordinator, Viktor and Patrik said they would have benefited from more information about applying to universities abroad, and Mat and Kristina noted they would have appreciated more guidance in subject selection. Additionally, several IB students expressed a desire for a less stressful, less competitive classroom environment. Some participants also challenged the narrative that Slovak universities are inherently inferior. They reflected that studying in Slovakia can be a valid and respectable choice and found it disheartening that this option was not more positively portrayed:

> It would be nice if the school tried to somehow work with this 'what's cool and what's not cool' rhetoric because for some people it was really a pressure. You know all the options are really good and you can do whatever and you will be good enough. It would be nice if the school tried to help us feel good just the way we are and be less competitive maybe. (Tereza)

While these views do not address the central research questions, they do support earlier findings: in retrospect, participants were able to identify certain narratives within GJH as misleading or exaggerated—specifically, the idealised expectations surrounding the IB pathway and the negative portrayal of Slovak universities.

4.6. Summary of findings

The study reveals that the SKM and IB cohorts demonstrated comparable academic ability and socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting that higher education aspirations among students at GJH were shaped by a complex interplay of other factors. These included curriculum type, student perceptions and assumptions about that curriculum, peer dynamics within each track, a prevailing negative discourse around Slovak universities, differing decision-making processes, and other individual influences such as family.

The findings indicate that the curriculum and its associated teachers, particularly the underlying narrative around each curriculum, emerged as a key differentiator in shaping students' aspirations. The presence of two distinct academic tracks within the same institution fostered an environment of comparison, giving rise to a "grass is greener" effect, where students in both cohorts perceived advantages in the programme they were not enrolled in. At GJH, the IB programme was strongly associated with perceived academic rigour, high ambition, better preparation for studying abroad, and somewhat greater access to resources—such as the presence of an IB coordinator. However, IB students themselves did not consistently report feeling significantly more prepared for university than their SKM peers. In fact, several questioned whether the stress and pressure of the IB programme were justified, viewing the SKM pathway as less demanding yet equally effective. Nevertheless, being part of a cohort surrounded by these narratives led participants to internalise them, shaping their self-perception, expectations, and ultimately influencing their aspirations to pursue universities abroad. On the flip side, this narrative around the IB programme caused SKM participants to feel less prepared and less academically adequate by comparison, which also shaped their self-perception and influenced their higher education aspirations.

Among IB students, these expectations around the cohort, combined with a sense of having already committed to an international academic track, resulted in an intense peer pressure to continue their education abroad. This peer dynamic was further compounded by a pervasive narrative at GJH that remaining in Slovakia for higher education was a form of failure. While this perception was present in both cohorts, it was especially prominent among IB students, since their programme was perceived as ideal for transition to international universities. Although the Czech Republic was generally viewed more favourably than Slovakia, it was still not perceived as "truly abroad", which explains why IB students most frequently applied to institutions in England and the Netherlands. In addition, IB students were also more likely to rely on international university rankings as a core decision-making tool, reinforcing their aspirations to attend prestigious universities outside Slovakia or the Czech Republic. In contrast, SKM students typically based their aspirations on word-of-mouth, personal impressions, and input from their extracurricular and community networks.

Family and community influences played a strong role across both groups. Parental expectations and the example of older siblings or peers had a notable impact on students' choices. Other factors, such as course offerings, location, and logistical convenience, also

played a role, though they did not account for the discrepancy in higher education aspirations between the two cohorts. Retrospective reflections from students in both groups highlighted a gap between expectations and lived experiences. Some students challenged the idealisation of the IB pathway, as well as the widespread negative portrayal of Slovak universities. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the divergence in higher education aspirations at GJH is driven by the perception that the IB programme better prepares students for international education, the widespread pressure to study abroad, IB's more demanding peer environment, and greater reliance on international university rankings.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter connects the findings of the dissertation to the reviewed literature, situating them within relevant theoretical and empirical frameworks. First, it aligns the established definition of higher education aspirations with how participants in the study understood and articulated the concept. Second, the reported socioeconomic status of students, along with the knowledge and resources inherited from their families, is examined through Bourdieu's theory of economic, social, and cultural capital, as well as the broader literature reviewed. Additionally, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are used to explore the non-socioeconomic factors examined in the dissertation. His habitus and field framework aligns closely with the dissertation's key findings, and helps explain why higher education aspirations differed between the IB and SKM students at GJH. Furthermore, two non-socioeconomic factors—perceived academic ability and peer dynamics—are explored separately, as the findings build on and extend the empirical literature reviewed on these topics. Third, participants' perceptions of Slovak universities are contextualised within the historical development of Slovakia's education system and the ongoing brain drain phenomenon. Based on these discussions, the chapter concludes by offering practical implications for GJH specifically, and for high schools, university counsellors, and educators more broadly.

5.2. Situating the findings within the reviewed literature

5.2.1. Definitions and theoretical framework

The conceptualisation of higher education aspirations established in the literature review strongly aligns with the definition of higher education aspirations provided by participants (Trebbels, 2015; Hauser and Anderson, 1991; Wicht, 2016; Ray, 2006; Hart, 2012; Dewitt et al., 2010; Boxer et al., 2011; Khattab, 2015). Although not explicitly stated, the distinction between idealistic and realistic aspirations, as discussed by Trebbels (2015), clearly emerged in the participants' accounts. For instance, the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, often referred to by participants as 'Oxbridge', were frequently mentioned as idealistic universities, but none of the participants submitted applications to these institutions. This gap illustrates how Oxbridge served as a symbolic representation of the highest or most idealistic form of aspiration among GJH, whereas participants' actual application choices reflected what they perceived as realistic and attainable. This finding also aligns with Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire and the importance of being able to read the map of aspirations. According to Appadurai (2004), for aspirations to translate into action, individuals must perceive them as achievable and have access to the knowledge and resources needed to pursue them. When participants referred to Oxbridge as their ideal aspiration but lacked critical information, such as knowledge of application deadlines, they were unable to navigate the pathway towards those institutions. As a result, these aspirations remained idealistic and were not actively pursued.

5.2.2. The impact of socioeconomic background

Bourdieu's (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) theory of social, cultural, and economic capital also aligns with the dissertation's findings. The type and volume of capital participants reported inheriting were consistent with Bourdieu's theory as well as with the broader literature on how socioeconomic background shapes aspirations. Participants identified as middle to upper-middle class and described how inherited resources from their families or communities influenced them—sufficient to support higher education, yet limited enough to create a gap between idealistic and realistic aspirations (Trebbels, 2015). For instance, university attendance was largely taken for granted, particularly because participants had university-educated parents, which shifted their focus from whether to attend university to which university to attend (Kenway and Fahey, 2014; Weis et al., 2014; Ho, Hu and Griffin, 2023; Sullivan, 2001). Participants did not report typical financial barriers to applying to tertiary

education, such as needing to work part-time, struggling with application fees, or lacking time and resources for exam preparation, suggesting they benefited from a degree of inherited economic capital that enabled basic access to higher education (Salner, 2004; Anders and Micklewright, 2013; Eichelberger, Mattioli and Foxhoven, 2017; Anders, 2012; Cassagneau-Francis, 2023; Sirin, 2005). However, financial considerations, particularly related to tuition fees and the cost of living abroad, did influence their decision-making. Moreover, none reported access to high-cost resources such as private tutoring, elite educational networks, or specialised university counselling beyond what was available through their schools (Weis et al., 2014; Kenway and Koh, 2015; Teese and Polesel, 2003). However, because these accounts were comparable across cohorts, Bourdieu's theory on capital nor the reviewed literature on socioeconomic background help sufficiently explain why aspirations differed between the two cohorts.

5.2.3. The impact of non - socioeconomic factors

Alternatively, Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 1990) concepts of habitus and field offer a valuable framework for understanding the divergence in GJH students' higher education aspirations. In this study, habitus refers to students' internalised beliefs, expectations, and decision-making processes regarding university, while field refers to the academic track (IB or SKM) through which this habitus was formed. Each field carried distinct connotations and forms of institutional and symbolic capital, as explored in the findings. Specifically, within the IB cohort, there was greater pressure to apply to top universities abroad, driven by GJH's rhetoric around the IB programme and its anti-Slovak university narrative—a pressure and rhetoric that IB students internalised as part of their habitus. This shaped their decision-making processes and their sense of what was desirable, manifesting in a strong emphasis on international university rankings, which provided a clear hierarchy of institutions. As a result, IB students were more likely to apply to universities in England or the Netherlands, which were both international and prestigious. On the other hand, in comparison to their IB peers, SKM students expected to be less prepared to apply to universities abroad, experienced a less pressuring peer dynamic, and developed a more relational, experience-based approach to decision-making, which they similarly internalised. Consequently, SKM students tended to apply to universities in Slovakia or the Czech Republic—options that were more convenient, culturally familiar, and where they had stronger personal and community ties. In this way, the academic

programme (field) shaped students' self-perception, expectations, and decision-making processes (habitus), ultimately influencing the formation of their higher education aspirations. Accordingly, the way aspirations were shaped by academic pathways at GJH offers a grounded, real-life example of Bourdieu's theory in practice.

The study also aligns with the idea that an individual's habitus is shaped by a complex interplay of multiple fields (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990). While the findings show that the academic field, specifically the academic programme and cohort, significantly influences students' aspirations, they also reveal important contradictions and counter-examples that highlight how habitus is shaped by more than one field alone. For instance, Juraj and Viktor, both SKM students who transitioned to universities in England, did so despite being part of a cohort whose members were more likely to pursue higher education in Slovakia or the Czech Republic. Both students were more influenced by their extracurricular communities than by their high school community. These cases suggest that while Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital remain relevant, they are shaped through the interaction of multiple social fields rather than solely the academic one. In this dissertation, Juraj and Viktor exemplify how alternative environments can offer distinct forms of capital and influence, enabling students to develop aspirations separately and individually.

In addition to aligning with the reviewed literature, the findings also, at times, contribute to and extend it. First, as covered in the empirical framework, individual academic traits, particularly strong academic performance, have been shown to significantly influence students' self-concept and how they are perceived by others (Sullivan, 2001; Weis et al., 2014). Extending this argument, the findings show that participants' aspirations were shaped not necessarily by their actual academic ability, but by how academic ability and university preparedness were perceived within the specific contexts of the IB and SKM programmes. At GJH, all students had passed competitive entrance exams, establishing a shared baseline of high academic ability. However, despite this comparability, the IB and SKM cohorts were perceived differently in terms of academic prestige and rigour. As mentioned, the IB programme, in particular, was widely regarded as more demanding and better aligned with studying abroad. This perception shaped how IB students viewed themselves and how they were viewed by others. Positioned within what they viewed as a more prestigious academic track, many IB students internalised expectations to attain top grades and secure admission to top-ranked universities abroad (Khattab, 2015; Messersmith and Schulenberg, 2008; TASO,

2022; Sammons, Toth and Sylva, 2016; Cao, Mithra and Aravind, 2024). Accordingly, the findings demonstrate that it was not simply academic ability that drove IB students to apply to universities in England or the Netherlands, but more so the symbolic value and reputation of their programme.

Second, as discussed, peer relations can shape aspirations in both positive and negative ways: they may motivate students through shared expectations and direct comparisons, or discourage them if students perceive themselves as less capable than their peers (Barrios-Fernández, 2023; Van den Broeck et al., 2023; Dickerson, Maragkou and McIntosh, 2018; Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2006; Rosenqvist, 2017; Yuan and Olivos, 2023). At GJH, both types of peer influence were reported, but a key contribution of this study lies in showing that comparisons occurred both within and across cohorts, and functioned differently in each context. Within their own classrooms, students from both academic tracks generally described positive peer dynamics, often feeling motivated by the academic potential and achievements of their classmates. However, more negative peer dynamics emerged in cross-cohort comparisons. Participants explicitly stated or implied that the coexistence of two academic tracks within the same institution led to unfavourable comparisons. Many SKM students felt that, by not being part of the programme perceived as more rigorous and internationally oriented, they were less equipped to study abroad, while IB students felt that their course was unjustifiably more demanding and overwhelming.

Lastly, the findings align with and build on the literature on meritocracy. As highlighted in the reviewed research, the concept that educational opportunities are fairly distributed based solely on ability and hard work is increasingly challenged (Croll and Attwood, 2013; Harrison and Waller, 2018; Martin, 2024; Education Policy Institute, 2020; Burbules, 2021). This dissertation reinforces that view, showing that factors beyond socioeconomic background, namely cohort culture, peer dynamics, and decision-making processes, can have a strong influence on students' educational trajectories. The findings demonstrate that even when academic ability, socioeconomic status, and access to resources are relatively comparable, structural inequalities embedded within academic programmes can still shape students' opportunities and aspirations. In doing so, the study reveals how non-socioeconomic factors and underlying social dynamics may undermine the meritocratic ideal by influencing which students feel that a certain educational path is for "people like them".

5.2.4. Research background and context

The findings of this study also mostly align with the reviewed literature on the broader context of Slovakia and its higher education system. The participants' desire to leave Slovakia and study abroad emerged as the most frequently recurring theme in the interviews, reflecting both the current state of the Slovak higher education system and the ongoing brain drain phenomenon discussed in the literature (Williams, Baláž and Kollár, 2001; Bystrianska, 2020). As outlined in the research, the historical development of Slovak higher education has been shaped by long-standing challenges, including political transition, chronic underfunding, and limited government oversight. These systemic issues correspond with participants' perceptions of Slovak universities as underfunded and lacking in teaching quality, resources, opportunities, and course diversity (Kleňhová, 2010; Lehman, 1999; Kureková, 2010; Horvath and Matlovič, 2024; Matlovič, 2014; Orszaghova, 2018). While it is regrettable that Slovak high schools may perpetuate such negative discourse, some of the criticism directed at Slovak tertiary education is grounded in historical and empirical realities. Nevertheless, similar to the participants, the existing literature does not fully explain where this negative rhetoric originates or why it is so readily perpetuated. Moreover, as several participants retrospectively acknowledged, Slovak universities remain a valid option and can offer quality education—particularly within historically strong disciplines such as mathematics. In light of these findings, further research is needed on the brain drain phenomenon, the persistence of negative discourse surrounding Slovak universities, and the Slovak education system in general.

5.3. Implications of the findings

The findings and discussion of this dissertation highlight the powerful role that nuanced social and cultural factors, beyond broader determinants such as socioeconomic background, academic ability, or access to resources, can play in shaping students' higher education aspirations. While the findings are not generalisable due to the study's small sample size and the uniqueness of the research site, they may still offer valuable insights for GJH and other high schools, particularly those offering multiple academic pathways. Such institutions are advised to recognise the impact of university counselling and, accordingly, provide equal access to university application resources across all cohorts, minimise cross-cohort comparisons, and ensure that students are well informed about the nature and expectations of

their chosen academic pathways. GJH, in particular, is also advised to improve the rhetoric surrounding Slovak universities to help address the brain drain phenomenon in Slovakia.

5.3.1. Implications for GJH

First, GJH should prioritise providing equal access to university application resources for both of its graduating cohorts. According to the findings, the school currently shares more information about applying to universities abroad, such as UCAS deadlines, with the IB cohort than with the SKM cohort. Furthermore, the fact that the staff member responsible for university counselling holds the title of 'IB coordinator' reinforces this imbalance. While SKM students may independently seek support from this coordinator, the services offered are not equally accessible due to both the role's title and limited availability. Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to "read the map", this unequal access to guidance directly impacts students' ability to form and pursue their aspirations. As emphasised in the literature review, a well-informed and supportive university counsellor can significantly influence students' higher education trajectories. Therefore, GJH must ensure that application information and counselling support are equitably provided to all students, regardless of academic programme. However, while providing equal access to resources across cohorts is a relatively straightforward administrative change, the unequal support provided to different cohorts reflects a deeper systemic issue. It suggests that resources for international university applications are more appropriate or necessary for IB students, reinforcing the belief that they are better suited to study abroad. IB students then internalise these assumptions, which in turn shape how they aspire and make higher education decisions.

Along these lines, GJH should aim to foster an equal and realistic perception of both academic pathways. The IB programme should not be viewed as academically superior or as the only route that adequately prepares students for what both cohorts described as idealistic aspirations. While the curricular differences between the programmes are clear and should be acknowledged, they should not carry such strong connotations that they create a sense of inadequacy among students in either cohort. It is crucial that GJH ensures students fully understand the nature and demands of each programme, as this could help reduce the gap between expectations and actual outcomes. For example, as reflected in the interviews, IB students did not report feeling better prepared for university than their SKM peers, despite this being a widely held belief at GJH. To address such misconceptions, GJH should promote the

message that both cohorts offer distinct but equally strong pathways with high prospects for university admission. The IB cohort benefits from a challenging, internationally oriented, English-speaking curriculum, while the SKM cohort offers a narrower subject focus, allowing for deeper academic engagement and more time for extracurricular activities. While the IB programme may be more internationally recognised and more closely aligned with Western education standards, it can also be more overwhelming, time-consuming, and often comes with higher university entry requirements. Accordingly, neither course is inherently superior; rather, each allows different types of students to excel. Ultimately, students' expectations and perceptions of the IB and SKM programmes should be grounded in accurate information, enabling them to choose the pathway best suited to their interests and higher education goals.

Addressing this deeper systemic issue presents a more complex challenge. However, given the significant influence teachers have on students' aspirations and classroom dynamics, GJH could leverage this relationship to reshape its school culture (Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor, 2010; Rice, 2003; Engida, Yasui and Fentic, 2024; Van den Broeck, Demanet and Van Houtte, 2020; Martin and Collie, 2019). School leadership should encourage teachers to foster a more balanced discourse across both cohorts. For example, teachers could reassure SKM students that they are eligible for admission to top-ranked international universities and that GJH provides support and resources for those pursuing that path. Conversely, they could help ease the pressure on IB students by emphasising that a wide range of institutions, including those in Slovakia, can offer high-quality, fulfilling academic experiences. More broadly, GJH should encourage students to adopt a holistic view of university options by focusing on factors such as course content, faculty expertise, and extracurricular opportunities, rather than relying solely on global rankings or peer assumptions. Helping students prioritise what matters most to them individually can lead to more informed and confident decisions. For example, students who value proximity to home or affordable living costs may feel more secure choosing to study in Slovakia if that aligns with their personal priorities. In this way, GJH can work towards transforming not only the student perceptions across both cohorts but also the rhetoric surrounding Slovak higher education.

5.3.2. Implications for high schools, university counsellors and educators

Other high schools should be cautious about generalising and applying the implications of this study to their own local contexts. However, the findings may still offer valuable insights, particularly for public high schools that offer two distinct academic pathways, such as Glenunga International High School in Adelaide or Lessing-Gymnasium in Düsseldorf, both of which offer a choice between the IB and their standardised national curriculum. Like GJH, these schools should prioritise providing equal access to university application resources and support across all cohorts, minimise negative cross-cohort comparisons through teacher and staff engagement, and ensure that students are well informed about the nature and expectations of their chosen academic pathways. Doing so may improve peer dynamics, help reduce unrealistic expectations and increase students' agency in making informed decisions. Moreover, schools should recognise how critical it is to offer consistent and supportive guidance during the transition to higher education. As the findings highlight, students often face considerable pressure to achieve their higher education aspirations, yet may lack the information needed to pursue them effectively. Therefore, high schools should aim to have a well-informed and accessible university counsellor available to guide all students through this important process.

As touched on in the literature review, university counsellors can have a significant and far-reaching impact that extends well beyond improving university admission rates (Woods and Domina, 2014). Research shows that they positively influence students' habits and behaviours, including increased attendance, improved discipline, and heightened ambition (Carey and Dimmitt, 2012). Furthermore, counsellors play a crucial role in reducing stress within the school environment and in supporting students' emotional and social development (Paolini, 2019). Importantly, they help level the playing field by addressing disparities related to income, privilege, and cultural background (Wyatt, 2009). In addition, counsellors enhance the overall school climate by assisting teachers in recognising and responding to the diverse needs of their students and by fostering community cohesion through initiatives such as school events and outreach (O'Connor, 2018). In light of these findings, university counsellors may also find this study informative. It underscores that, beyond offering essential information and guidance on university applications, counsellors have the capacity to influence broader school discourse and culture, and to support educators in addressing students' individual aspirations and circumstances. At GJH, for example, a well-supported and effectively positioned university counsellor could play a pivotal role in fostering a more equitable environment between the IB and SKM cohorts by actively encouraging and supporting students from both tracks equally.

That being said, it is important to acknowledge that not all public high schools have the resources to employ a full-time, certified university counsellor who can offer valuable resources and help foster an equitable environment for all students. For example, many Slovak high schools are underfunded, often struggling to meet more basic educational needs such as teachers' salaries (OECD, 2023b; Pupala, Kaščák and Rehúš, 2020). Placing that within a global context, Slovakia is still a high-income country that has relatively strong resources and expenditure on education (OECD, 2023b; Karwowska, 2023). Like so, the value of this study also lies in the broader message it conveys. By highlighting the significant influence that nuanced forms of social and cultural capital can have on students' higher education aspirations, I hope to encourage educators to support their students in ways that do not require additional funding. Simple acts, such as expressing belief in students' abilities and encouraging them to identify and pursue their idealistic aspirations, can have a profound impact. In my experience as a university counsellor in both public and private Slovak high schools, while providing practical guidance around applications is important, it is often encouragement, inspiration, and emotional support that prove most transformative for students.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine higher education aspirations among Slovak students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds. After accessing and analysing data on where GJH students enrolled in university, and identifying a significant discrepancy between the university destinations of students in the SKM and IB pathways, it aimed to answer one central research question: How do IB and SKM students at GJH form their higher education aspirations, and why do these aspirations differ? This focus contributes meaningfully to the existing literature by addressing key gaps—namely, the under-researched Slovak education system and the aspirations of students from medium socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the research site allowed for the comparability of major characteristics such as socioeconomic background and academic ability, enabling a deeper investigation into non-socioeconomic factors driving the differences in student aspirations. Thereby, the dissertation exemplified how underlying discourses and nuanced differences among cohorts can alter a student's self-perception and what they believe is right for "people like them," shaping their higher education aspirations and overall outcomes.

To inform this research process, this dissertation reviewed an extensive body of literature. It established a theoretical framework grounded primarily in the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and Appadurai (2004). It also examined a wide range of empirical studies, particularly those exploring the influence of both socioeconomic and non-socioeconomic factors on student aspirations, identifying individual characteristics and the high school environment as especially relevant to this study. In addition, the review explored the contemporary functioning and historical development of the Slovak education system, highlighting issues such as the ongoing brain drain phenomenon. Drawing on this literature, key questions were formulated to guide the research and answer the central research question. Accordingly, ten GJH alumni were recruited as participants, and a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews was employed.

Using thematic analysis, the ten interviews were coded to generate the dissertation's findings. In summary, while factors such as family and community background, finances, opportunities, course selection, university location, convenience and the various resources offered by GJH were influential in shaping how students formed their higher education aspirations, they did not fully explain why these aspirations differed between cohorts. This aspect of the research question was primarily accounted for by the perceptions and expectations attached to each academic pathway, the peer dynamics both within and across cohorts, and the different decision-making factors students prioritised. Specifically, the IB programme was widely viewed as more academically rigorous and better suited for international universities—a belief internalised by students, even though their real-life experiences did not reflect this advantage over their SKM peers. Combined with the persistent negative rhetoric surrounding Slovak universities at GJH, this created a high-pressure environment in which students, particularly from the IB cohort, felt compelled to pursue higher education abroad. Interestingly, this also led to negative cross-cohort comparisons: SKM students, who similarly viewed studying in Slovakia as undesirable, expected to be less prepared and less capable of applying abroad. Finally, these distinct cohort cultures influenced and reinforced the factors students focused on when making university decisions. IB students tended to place significant value on international university rankings to define their ideal options, whereas SKM students relied more on peer recommendations.

Placing the findings within the reviewed literature helped explain them. First, the findings aligned with Trebbels' (2015) distinction between the idealistic aspirations students articulated—such as attending "Oxbridge"—and the more realistic goals they ultimately pursued. Next, Bourdieu's (1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) notion of inherited capital, along with existing empirical literature on the effects of socioeconomic background, helps explain how students' family and community environments, finances, and access to resources shaped their general aspirations. However, the key explanation for why aspirations differed between cohorts lies in Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field—specifically, how the students' academic pathway (field) shaped their internalised beliefs, expectations, and perceptions (habitus). As explained, the IB programme, perceived as more rigorous and internationally oriented, exposed students to greater pressure to study abroad and placed a stronger emphasis on international university rankings. In contrast, participants in the SKM programme felt less prepared by comparison, experienced less peer pressure, and relied more heavily on advice from their community. IB and SKM students internalised these underlying cohort cultures as part of their habitus, influencing their self-perception, expectations, and decision-making processes, which ultimately shaped their capacity to aspire. Moreover, the findings of this study extend certain aspects of the reviewed literature. They demonstrate that it is not only actual academic ability but also perceived academic ability—and not just comparisons within a cohort but also across cohorts—that shape students' self-perception and sense of what is attainable for "people like them." In this way, the dissertation challenges meritocratic ideology by building on literature that shows a student's capacity to aspire is shaped not only by socioeconomic background and resources but also by more subtle, symbolic distinctions.

As a result of these findings, this dissertation offers valuable implications for GJH specifically, as well as for public high schools that offer dual academic tracks, university counsellors, and educators more broadly. It recommends that high schools, particularly GJH, prioritise providing equal access to resources for students in both pathways and that teachers actively work to mitigate the exaggerated perceptions around each cohort, to ensure that one is not viewed as more rigorous or better preparing for study abroad. This would help manage student expectations and reduce negative cross-cohort comparisons. One way to achieve this is by ensuring students receive accurate, balanced information about both academic tracks, enabling them to make informed, critical, and well-rounded decisions about which course best aligns with their individual interests and aspirations. This reflective approach to decision-making

should also be encouraged when choosing universities, helping students value more meaningful factors beyond rankings and prestige and ultimately leading to more satisfying outcomes. Additionally, schools are advised to recognise the crucial role a university counsellor can play in supporting students through this transition and fostering an equitable school environment. For schools that may lack the resources to employ a dedicated counsellor, it is important to acknowledge the significant impact that encouragement and active support from all educators and staff can have on shaping students' higher education aspirations.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Data on participants' socioeconomic status and academic ability

Appendix A1 – Table of the reported socioeconomic composition of classrooms

Class	IB	SMK
Lower	0	0
Lower-middle	1	1
Middle	1	2
Upper-middle	2	2
Upper	1	0

Appendix A2 – Table of the reported socioeconomic position within classroom

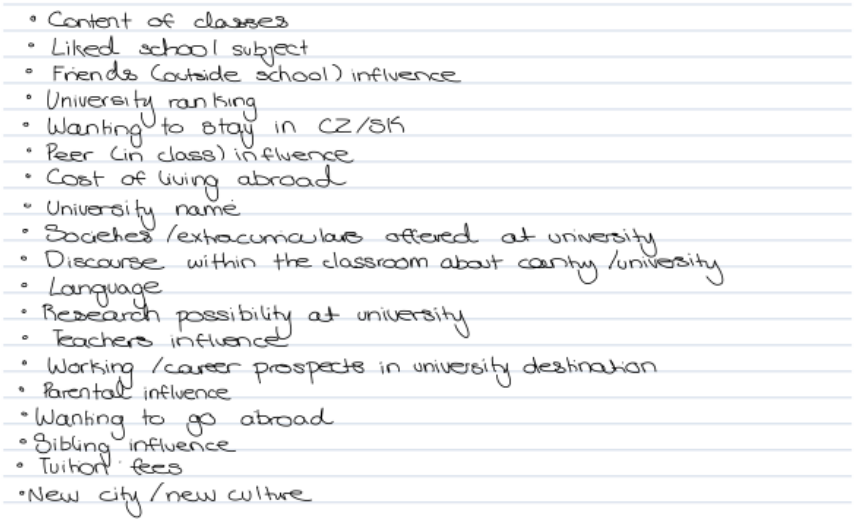
Program	IB	SMK
Fit in	2	3
Mostly fit in	3	1
Didn't fit in	0	1

Appendix A3 – Table of the final grades recieved

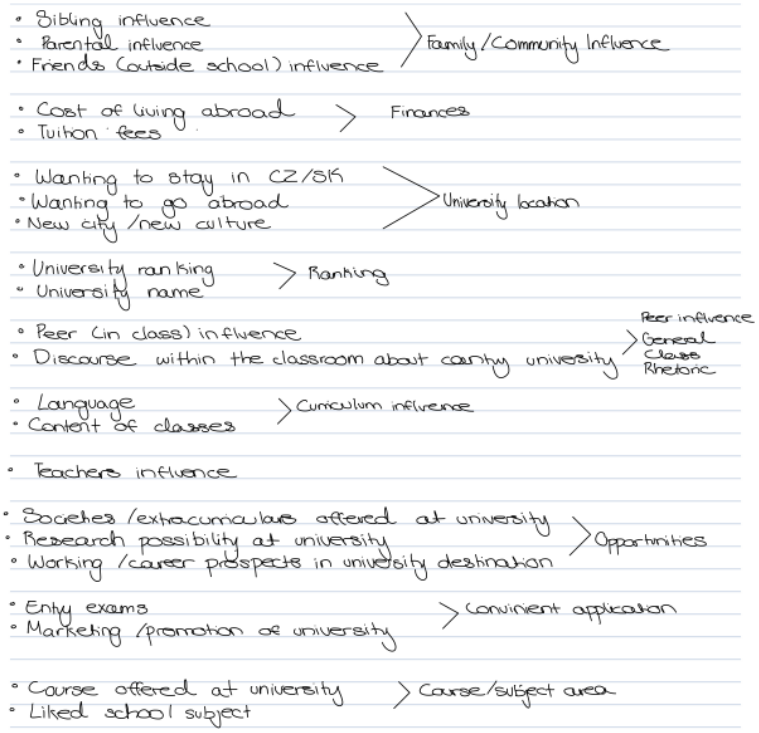
Grades	IB	SMK
All 1/40+	1	4
Mostly 1/35+	2	0
Some 1/30+	2	1
No 1/25+	0	0

Appendix B – Coding

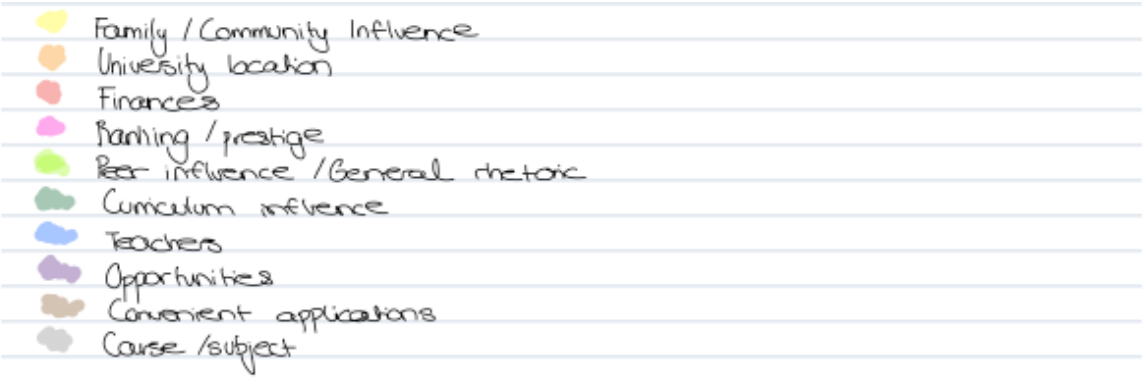
Appendix B1 – Preliminary codes



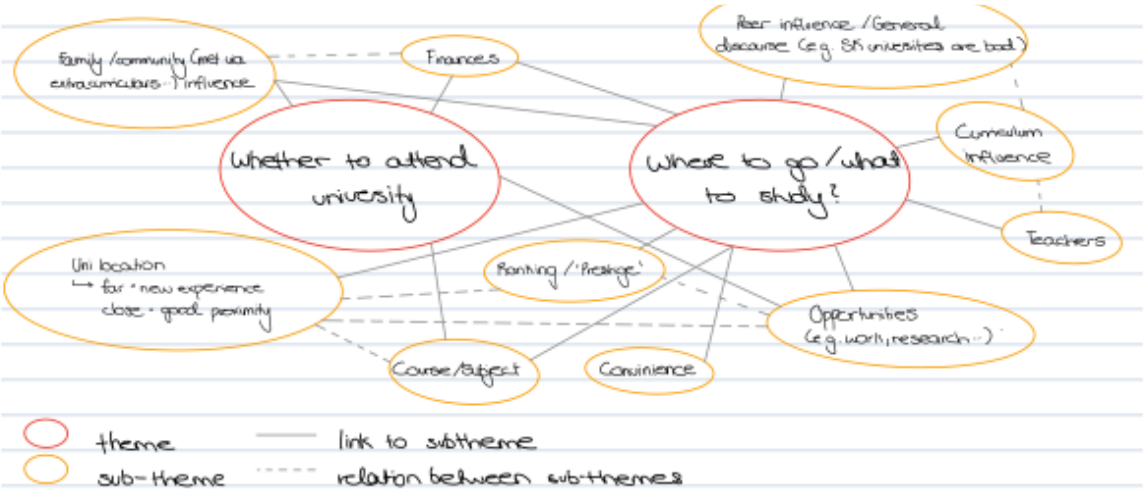
Appendix B2 – Grouping codes to sub-themes



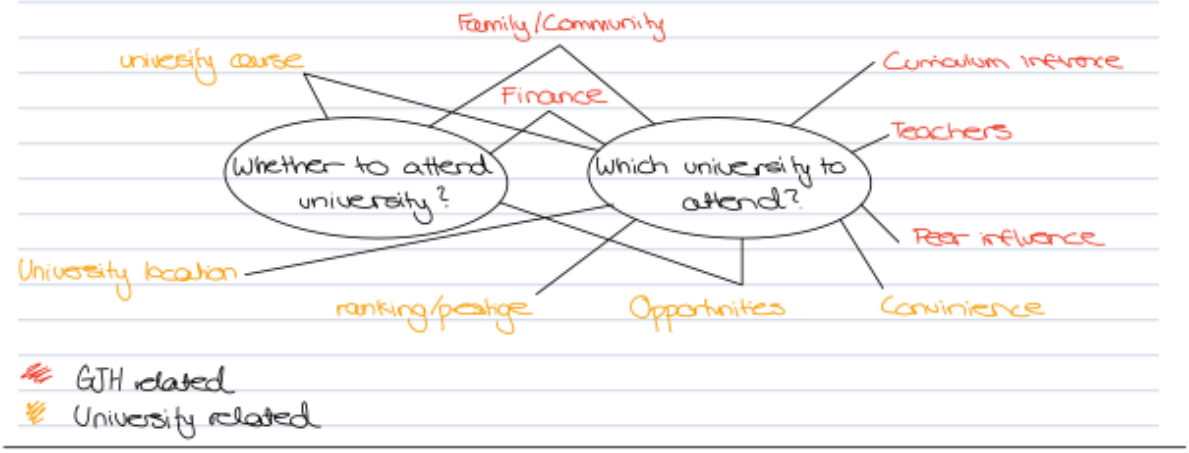
Appendix B3 – Themes colour-coding key



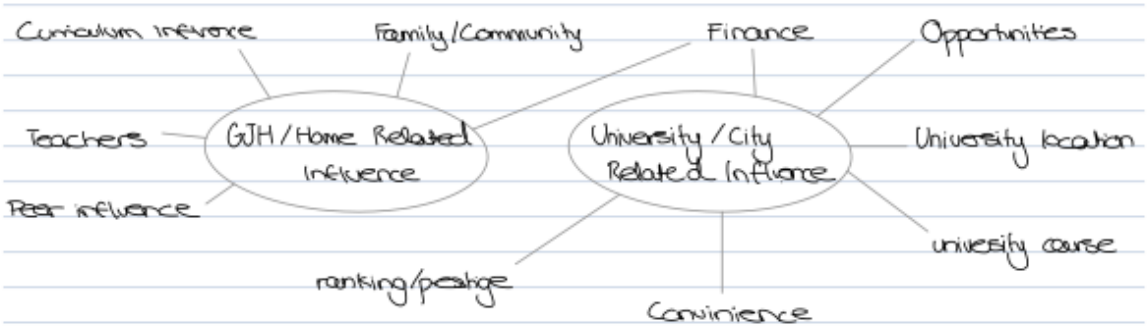
Appendix B4 – First thematic map



Appendix B5 – Second thematic map



Appendix B6 – Final thematic map


Curriculum influence
Family/Community
Finance
Opportunities
Teachers
GJH / Home Related Influence
University / City Related Influence
University location
Peer influence
university course
ranking/prestige
Convinience

Appendix C – Invitation Letter

Dear [participants name],

Thank you very much for your interest in participating in my dissertation research.

Please find attached the Participant Information Sheet, which contains all the key details you may find helpful. I kindly ask that you review it carefully before our interview to fully understand the process. Of course, feel free to reach out at any time if you have any questions or need clarification.

If you are happy to proceed after reading the information sheet, you can join the interview via the following link scheduled for the [date and time]: Join the interview via Oxford's Microsoft Teams.

Thank you so much in advance. Your participation is extremely valuable for my research, and I truly appreciate your time willingness to help.

Looking forward to speaking soon,
[redacted]

Appendix D – Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

"I have started the recording, is that ok?"
*Read out oral consent.

1) Can you tell me about your transition from high school to university?

a) How did your academic background prepare you for it?

2) Is it true you studied at x program at GJH, and you then went on to study program y at university z?

2) What subjects did you take at GJH and why?

3) How would you describe the socioeconomic composition of your classroom?

a) Where would you fit in?

4) May I ask what final grade you received?

5) What other universities and courses did you apply for?

6) Why did you end up choosing x university and program?

7) Are you satisfied with your choices and outcome?

a) Would you make a different decision today?

b) If yes, then why?

8) How did you define HEA then and how would you define them now?

a) Why would you define them in this way?

b) Why did that definition change (if it did)?

9) Do you feel like you have achieved your HEA? Why yes, why no?

10) What are the 3 most important factors that influenced your HEA when at GJH?

a) Did your individual background influence your decisions and if so how?

b)Did your school environment influence your decisions and is so how?

c) Did your program influence your decisions and is so how?

11) I have analysed data about where GJH students went to university. My findigs show that Slovak Maturita students overwhelmingly stayed in Slovakia and Czechia

compared to IB stdunets who were most likely to study in the UK and the Netherlands. Why do you think there is a difference?

a) Do the influences from your school and program differ and if so how?

b) What specific resources did GJH or the program offer in regards to your transition to HE?

c) Were/are you happy with this support?

12) What do you wish they would have done differently? What could have retrospectivelly really helped you?

13) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Appendix E – CUREC approval

Applicant: [redacted]
Principal Investigator: [redacted]
Department: Education

Study title: How do students from the Slovak Matura and IBD program form their higher education aspirations?
(Version: 1.0)
Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1074316

Dear [redacted],

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion
Subject to the following conditions:
Decision Date: 16 Mar 2025, 23:08
Opinion End Date: 16 Sep 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team.

Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

Appendix F– Participant information sheet

How Do Students From The Slovak Matura And IBD Program Form Their Higher Education Aspirations?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_1074316

1. **Introductory paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. **Why is this research being conducted?**

The purpose of the study is to investigate how higher education aspirations differ between students who completed the Slovak Matura and the International Baccalaureate programs, to examine how educational systems influence students' decision-making, ambition, and aspirations. Ultimately, I want to understand what forms aspirations and how to improve university application guidance and support.

3. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited to participate as an alumnus of Gymnázium Juraja Hronca (IB or Maturita) in order to share your insights into how you decided to attend your chosen university and what influenced your decision.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision by the end of July. If you wish to withdraw the data that has been collected about you will be deleted and not included in the dissertation.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

- The semi-structured interviews will be conducted online via Microsoft Teams. You will receive a meeting link beforehand through email.
- You consent will be obtained verbally at the beginning of the interview, during which all details of the study will be explained. You are free to withdraw at any time if you choose to do so.
- Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will only need to participate in one session, with no follow-up interviews planned.

- The interview will cover topics such as the universities you applied to and attended, the reasons behind your choices, the factors that influenced these decisions (e.g., academic support, program structure, or personal ambition), and their experiences with university application support, including areas you feel could be improved.
- With your consent, the interviews will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate record of the conversation on a separate university device. The recordings will be securely stored and used solely for transcription and analysis.
- The interview will be conducted in a conversational style to create a comfortable and open atmosphere. While specific topics will be addressed, you are free to share additional insights you consider relevant.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The following risks are involved in taking part - you may feel uncomfortable answering certain questions, such as those about grades or family influence. However, you are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer. However, reasonable precautions will be taken to address any discomfort or risks, and participants will not be easily identifiable from the research findings included in research outputs. Additionally, you are free to pause for a break or stop the interview altogether whenever you wish.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for those participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to a better support system for future students at GJH.

7. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

What will be collected:

- The program you completed (Slovak Matura or IB), your final grade, your level of English proficiency (B2 or higher for Slovak Matura graduates), the universities you applied to and attended, your fields of study, and the factors influencing your decisions (e.g., school support, family, peers).

Why it is relevant:

- This data is essential for comparing how the IB and Slovak Matura programs shape higher education aspirations, uncovering patterns in decision-making, and assessing how schools can improve support for students during the university application process.

How long will the information be stored?

- I will be deleting the interview recordings at the end of the project, but this data (in transcripts) must be retained for the minimum period of three years after the end of the project.

8. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

Consent forms, research findings, and identified trends will be stored in the dissertation, which, once submitted and published, will be publicly available on ORA. However, this will not include any identifiable data.

As much personal data as possible will be removed by the end of the project. Once the project is completed, research data must be retained for a minimum of three years, but it will be stored on university servers.

The research findings will be presented in the form of patterns and trends, meaning they will not specifically mention you. If relevant, I may include a quotation or specific example you provided, but you will remain anonymous and unidentifiable. In such cases, I would like your permission to use direct quotations without identifying you in any research outputs.

9. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

10. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **EDUC_1074316)**.

11. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Aneta Luptakova at [redacted]ox.ac.uk, my supervisor, Maia Chakseliani at [redacted]education.ox.ac.uk or the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480 and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact

12. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

[redacted]
Department of Education
5 st. Margarets road, Oxford OX2 6RU
[redacted]
[redacted]ox.ac.uk

Appendix G – Oral consent form

Introduction (*): Hello, my name is [redacted]. I'm currently a master's student the University of Oxford in the Department of Education.

Project details and aims: In my study, I want to investigate higher education aspirations in high school students. I'm interested in exploring how they are formed in the Slovak Matura and the IB programs at GJH. If you choose to be a part of this project, here is what will happen:

Interviews description: I will have a conversation with you for about 30 minutes where I will ask a range of questions about the universities you applied to and attended, the reasons behind your choices, the factors that influenced your decisions (e.g., academic support, program structure, or personal ambition), and your experiences with university application support, including areas you feel could be improved.

Data confidentiality: The answers you give will form the basis of my MSc dissertation.

Data storage: I will transcribe the date from the recordings and delete it after publication.[1]

Audio Recording: With your permission, I would like to record your answers on the voice memos feature on my phone which is not linked to iCloud and will only be store on my phone till the date of submission. If you would prefer so, I can take notes in my notebook instead of recording your answers.

Keeping contact details: I would also like your permission to keep your contact details so that I can re-contact you to clarify information you gave me in your interview.

How identifiable you will be: Most of the data will be used to identify patterns and trends meaning it will not mention your answers specifically. Nevertheless, if relevant I may include a quotation or specific example you provided, but you will be kept anonymous and not identifiable. If that will be the case, I would like your permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you in any research outputs.

Risks: The following risks are involved in taking part - you may feel uncomfortable answering certain questions, such as those about grades or family influence. However, you are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer. However, reasonable precautions will be taken to address any

[1] This should be a minimum of three years after publication according to University Policy, or longer depending on funder requirements.

discomfort or risks, and participants will not be easily identifiable from the data or research outputs. Additionally, you are free to pause for a break or stop the interview altogether whenever you wish.

Rights: Also please remember you don't have to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage of the interview without giving a reason. After the interview you can withdraw your information/ data until.

Publication plans: The project will be published in my dissertation.

Complaints/ concerns procedure: If you have any complaints or concerns, please feel free to contact me. My phone number is [redacted]. You can also reach me at [redacted].ox.ac.uk.

Ethics review details: This research project has been reviewed and approved by an Oxford University ethics committee. The ethics reference is EDUC_1074316. If, after contacting me with any concern, you're still unhappy and wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk.

(*) **Data Protection statement**: The University of Oxford is responsible overall for ensuring the safe and proper use of any personal information you provide, solely for research purposes. Further information about your rights to information you provide is available from the University's data protection website. [If research participants ask for more information, this is available here https://compliance.web.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights].

Questions/ concerns:

- Do you have any questions?
- Do you give your permission for me to interview you and take your audio recording?
- Do you give me permission to quote you directly without identifying you?
- Are you happy to take part?

Ok, thanks, let's start.