Higher Education as a pathway to 'the good life': hope, risk and regret in the post-92 university

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Birmingham City University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Birmingham City University

October 2022

The Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences

Abstract

As a result of widening participation, the number of students who are the first in their family to attend higher education (HE) has significantly increased, yet their experiences are often characterised as being problematic, both in relation to university study and graduate outcomes. Importantly, many first-generation students study within post-92 universities which are also often positioned in deficit within the hierarchical HE field. This aim of this thesis was to explore the lived experiences of non-privileged first-generation students studying within a case study post-92 university. Specifically, this study examines how non-privileged first-generation students framed their decision to attend the university, what they perceived to be significant in relation to their experience and their expectations regarding graduate employment. Additionally, the influence of the social and political context of HE on the participants' lived experiences was explored, particularly in relation to the impact of university status.

Contextualised by policy discourses of massification and marketisation this thesis extends current work surrounding first-generation university students. Existing literature commonly offers a focus on a specific stage of the student lifecycle (frequently the first year). Less attention is paid to first-generation students throughout their student experience, including pre-entry and post-graduation. There is also a paucity of knowledge surrounding first-generation student experiences specifically within low-status, post-92 universities, leading to limited exploration of inequalities in HE within this context. This inquiry addresses this gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on the transitional experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 university throughout the student lifecycle. Additionally, the majority of the participants lived locally, therefore, the local student experience is also pertinent to this inquiry.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm this study utilised a hybrid approach incorporating both a case study research design and a biographical, narrative-based approach. Twenty students at various points in their student journey completed in-depth biographical interviews, including applicants, current students, and recent graduates. The conceptual framework for this inquiry is built on elements of Bourdieu's theory of practice coupled with Berlant's (2011) depiction of "cruel optimism" and "the good life". Whilst Bourdieu's thinking tools are frequently used in educational research, Berlant's (2011) theoretical framework is largely absent from sociological understandings of higher education. This thesis makes a significant contribution, capitalising on this theoretical gap by drawing on Berlant's work to illustrate new understandings of first-generation students' experiences.

Findings demonstrate that whilst university access and participation has widened, the dominant discourse of what it means to be a student has not. Class-based notions of the 'traditional' HE experience have resulted in a model which continually devalues the experience of both first-generation students and post-92 universities, which is challenged by this thesis. The research findings offer a critique of the discourses surrounding studenthood and conceptualise a nuanced understanding of first-generation student experiences through the development of a student typology. fostering wider understandings of non-privileged student transitions. This thesis also offers a unique contribution to knowledge by exposing the "cruel optimism" inherent within HE, revealing the way in which structural inequality and stratification can have damaging emotional impacts on students from post-92 universities. This study calls for a shift from the normative ideology of what it means to be a student and for a re-imagining of the post-92 university that recognises, rather than disregards, its value. Furthermore, findings raise important ethical questions regarding HE institutions and policy discourses which continually position university as a route to graduate employment and financial stability, without acknowledging the wider non-economic benefits of HE. Conclusions therefore offer insights for policy, universities, and schools and colleges with regard to developing a fairer and more just system of HE for first-generation students.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank the participants who gave their time to take part in this study. Without you this research would not exist, and I am eternally grateful for the conversations that I was privileged to have with you.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervision team Dr Rob Smith and Dr Tony Armstrong who have been a constant source of advice and support throughout this journey, I have always found our supervision sessions enjoyable and thought-provoking. Thanks also to Dr Julia Everitt, your advice and feedback as a critical reader was instrumental in shaping the final version of this thesis.

I am also grateful to my colleagues and friends who have supported me throughout this long process. Doing a PhD can be a lonely experience and your encouragement and interest in my work has made all the difference. Special thanks to Shannon, Becky, Laura, Rose, Alis, Alex and Aarron. Also, thanks to Jenny and Faye, your support throughout this process has meant a great deal to me. I also want to mention Lucy, who sadly can't be here to see me complete this. I hope I have made you proud. I miss you always.

I would like to thank my family, particularly my parents and grandparents, for always teaching me the value of education. The care, love and support you have given me throughout my entire life is what has enabled me to achieve everything that I am proud of, including this thesis. Thank you for everything, I couldn't wish for a better family.

I would like to thank my wife Frankie who has been my rock throughout this process and who has made so many sacrifices to enable me to complete this thesis. Your endless love, patience, and belief in me has made more of a difference than you will ever know. I never would have made it to this point without you.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my son Finley who has made sacrifices which he is not even aware of. All the times that mommy has been working will hopefully be worth it and I hope that when you grow up you will be proud of me. Also, I dedicate this to my unborn son Coby, for keeping me company during the long nights I have spent working alone during the past few months. Feeling you move inside my tummy never failed to make me smile. I can't wait to meet you.

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction to the study

As a result of widening participation over the past few decades universities have opened their doors to students whose families historically would have been excluded from higher education (HE) (Bell and Santamaria, 2018), and as a consequence many students are first-generation (in that they are the first generation in their family to engage with university study) (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). However, despite greatly increased numbers (Bell and Santamaria, 2018) the transitions and experiences of this cohort of students are often deemed to be challenging (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013) and inequitable educational and graduate outcomes remain persistent (Britton, *et al.,* 2016; Burke, 2012).

"University as a Pathway to the Good Life: Hope, Risk and Regret in the Post-1992 University" sets out to explore the realities of being a first-generation student studying within a modern university context, as a means to explore issues around equity and social justice within HE more broadly. The findings of this study are significant in the context of on-going policy debates concerning the purpose of HE, widening participation (WP) and the way in which first-generation student experiences are understood, particularly within a post-92 university context. This inquiry also raises important questions regarding the ethical conduct of both higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves and narrow policy discourses which continually position HE participation as a route to "the good life" (Berlant, 2011) of meaningful employment and financial stability, without acknowledging any non-economic benefits of university participation. By examining the lived experiences of first-generation students this inquiry offers a sociological critique of the discourses surrounding studenthood and conceptualises a nuanced way of understanding the approaches taken by students to their studies through the development of a student typology. The impact of systemic elitism in relation to university status within the sector is examined through the lens of students' lived experiences in a post-92 context. Furthermore, the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002) and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) of making false promises to students through the discourse of human capital development and extrinsic economic outcomes is exposed and explored. My hope is that the findings of this research will help to contribute to the development of a fairer and more socially just system of HE.

Much of the existing research on student experiences has focused on the first-year experience as a crucial point (e.g., Bowles *et al,.* 2013; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Clark and Hall, 2010; Leese, 2010; Richardson *et al*., 2012; Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008). The first year is undoubtedly important however student experiences are not limited to the first months of HE study and the experiences of students as they transition through their degree study are also key (Maunder *et al.,* 2013), however less attention has been paid

to the experiences of students at different stages of their undergraduate studies. A significant focus of this research, therefore, is to explore these realities and argue for greater recognition and understanding of the importance of the first-generation student experience at all stages of the student journey. Ideally, this thesis would have been longtitutional by focusing upon the transitional experience of the same students throughout their university experience and beyond, however due to time constraints this was not a possibility. It still seems however that there is much to be gained from examining the stories of students at all stages of the university process (Maunder *et al.,* 2013), as there is a lack of research which focuses on first-generation student experiences pre-entry (Patfield *et al.,* 2021) and post-graduation (Merrill *et al*., 2020; O'Shea, 2020a). This provides the justification for interviewing participants at all stages of the student life cycle, from applicants to graduates.

The post-92 context of this research is important as there is a relative paucity of knowledge in relation to first-generation student experiences of university study specifically within post-92 HEIs, which is problematic given that this student group are more likely to attend this type of institution (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). This inquiry addresses this gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on the transitional experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 university, using a hybrid methodological approach incorporating elements of both case study and biographical research. The theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977) is employed, and this is combined with the application of Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism, in order to examine the participants' experiences with a unique theoretical lens. The theory of cruel optimism is important as it provides a powerful and novel perspective through which to examine the lived experiences of non-privileged first-generation students seeking to ascertain their good life fantasy through studying in a post-92 university. This thesis therefore provides a unique analytical demonstration of how the lived experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 HEI can be underpinned by a relation of cruel optimism.

On a practical level this thesis provides insight into the experiences of non-privileged first-generation students, illuminating what is significant to them and the way in which the wider social and political context of HE shaped their lived experiences. The insight developed within this thesis may be helpful in facilitating HEIs to better understand their students without pathologizing them. For the research community the findings of this thesis help to inform debates around first-generation student experiences in a way which utilises the contemporary theoretical lens of cruel optimism and which seeks to disrupt pre-existing deficit understandings of the non-privileged student experience. This doctoral inquiry is also an attempt to adhere to Stuart's (2015) call for further research with regards to HE and social

justice to ensure that issues of equity are being addressed within both national and institutional policy and practice.

All of the participants within this study are first-generation in that their parents or guardians had not previously engaged with any form of HE (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). This specific category was chosen as a focus for this inquiry as it aligns with understandings of non-traditional students whilst offering the potential to allow for a diversity of characteristics in relation to age, race, ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, my hope was that this term can infer more positive connotations associated with the trailblazer status of being a first-generation student and the feelings of pride this can invoke (Bell and Santamaria, 2018). The participants within this study can be regarded as "non-privileged" as their family occupations largely aligned to National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) groups 5-8 (i.e., non-professional occupations) (see Appendix 9 for an in-depth discussion of the terminology used in this thesis to describe the participants). The participants' experiences within this inquiry are not portrayed as being representative of all first-generation students nor of the wider student experience within the case study institution. The intention of this research was not to make robust transferable conclusions which can broadly be applied to all students but was instead to use the participants' accounts to make sense of the ways in which first-generation students studying within a post-92 university context experience HE. The arguments developed in this thesis contribute to existing research which has disrupted normative ideas about the student experience and in so doing, it adds to the body of work which theorises diverse ways of conceptualising what it means to be a student in a low-status post-92 HEI.

The following section of this chapter focuses on a discussion of researcher positionality, to clarify how my own experiences have shaped this research. Following this, a background context for the study is established and then gaps within the literature are identified which serve to provide a justification for the focus of this research. The research questions which underpin the research are then defined. The methodology of the study is briefly outlined, and the research site is briefly discussed. The chapter finishes with an outline of the structure of this thesis which briefly defines the contents of the forthcoming chapters.

1.2 Researcher Positionality – bringing the researcher into view

It is important for me as a researcher to locate myself within this research study and to clarify how my own experiences have shaped this work. As an interpretivist researcher I acknowledge the subjectivity that is inherent within this research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), as my own experiences and personal background have impacted on this entire study, informing the topic of research, my chosen research actions and my interpretations of the

data (Weber, 2004). Researcher positionality is particularly important to explicitly interrogate in biographical research, as outlined by Merrill and West (2009: 14) who argue that this type of research is often rooted in the researcher's own personal biography (as it is in this case), noting that "it is important to think about how our own biographies may shape our interest in others and their lives". Additionally, Bourdieu argued that researchers must be aware of their own positioning in relation to the research in order to recognise the ways in which the lens of their own experience and their personal biases and assumptions may influence the research process (Heffernan, 2022; Rawolle and Lingard, 2008). Therefore, my own experiences as a first-generation, mature, working-class undergraduate student cannot be ignored and are situated firmly within the framework of this study.

The focus of this research stems, in part, from my own experience as a first-generation student in a post-92 university. I was born and raised in Sandwell which is ranked by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (2019) as the 12th most deprived local authority in England (out of a total of 317). Educational attainment is significantly lower than the national average and currently less than 1 in 4 adults have a Level 4 or higher qualification (Black Country and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group, 2020). As a child I lived with my mom who worked part time as a receptionist at our local hospital, my dad who had a job as a buyer for a local fastenings company, and my younger brother. My parents placed a huge value on education, despite not being highly educated themselves and took a keen interest in my educational achievement.

In terms of education, for the most part I genuinely enjoyed school and doing well academically was always something that I was proud of. After my GCSEs I briefly attended college to study a childcare qualification however the vocational nature of this course failed to ignite my interest. I dropped out after a few weeks and began to work full time as a waitress. I then stayed in that job for nine years, eventually working my way up to restaurant management. As I approached my mid-twenties, I began to feel disillusioned with working in hospitality and trapped in a job which offered limited financial security for physically demanding work. As I had no level three qualifications, I had never considered university, until I became aware of Access to HE courses by chance during a conversation with a colleague. I immediately applied for an Access to Education Professions course at my local FE college and was subsequently offered a place at my local post-92 university. That local HEI was the only institution I applied to, as the campus was located less than a mile from my family home. University status was something I was vaguely aware of but not something I actively considered. As a first-generation student from a primarily working-class background, university offered me a way out of my low-paid and monotonous employment, and I

deliberately choose a degree pathway which would lead me to secure employment (via a PGCE in primary education in addition to my undergraduate degree in education studies).

I really felt that I flourished within university, I thoroughly enjoyed my degree and did well academically. Despite not joining any societies or having the 'traditional' university experience I genuinely felt that university study changed my life and sense of self. Far from feeling like "a fish out of water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127) I actually felt like university was a place where I felt comfortable and at home. This is perhaps due to the welcoming and diverse atmosphere of the post-92 university I attended. Most of my fellow students were first-generation, the vast majority were local and many of them were mature. This had a real impact on how comfortable and at ease I felt in the institution. For me HE was a transformative experience which opened my mind to seeing the world in a whole new way. It awakened my class consciousness and allowed me to think critically; it made my mind feel alive. As a result of my participation, I now have pride in myself and my own ability. Yet I simultaneously feel a distance from my friends and family in that we understand each other less than we did before I entered HE. A move from my working-class roots as a result of my institutionally consecrated cultural capital has presented some challenges in relation to the ties to my family and friends, however this does not negate the pride they have in my academic achievements. Reflecting on my own student journey has forced me to recognise the dissonance between my own (altered) habitus and the field of my social circle where I no longer feel like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127) but instead like an amphibian who can swim like a fish.

Currently, I have achieved my goal of having a career in academia which I am both proud of and enjoy. I have achieved financial stability for the first time in my life and as a result I have been able to buy my own home. In this way, my aspirations have become a reality. However, neoliberal precarity continues to underpin my experiences. As a lecturer in a low-status post-92 HEI my employment is dependent on student recruitment and as a result my career never truly feels secure. This is especially the case at the time of writing this narrative as I currently find myself threatened with redundancy. I also now find myself, as a course-leader and senior lecturer, pushing the 'open doors' narrative to potential students which perpetuates the notion that gaining a degree will lead to sustained professional employment. Given I know this is not always the case I find this position to be problematic and as a lecturer I internalise these contradictions. My work exists in a paradox where I am both bounded by, and contributing to, the fetishism of the university experience and the graduate premium narrative within the neoliberal HE field, whilst simultaneously resenting and arguing against this position within this thesis. As highlighted by Clegg (2011: 102) as an educator in a non-elite HEI I have become "trapped into a series of promises I cannot realise" both for myself

and my students, whilst my colleagues in elite institutions “are largely involved in a logic of reproduction not transformation”. It is evident to me that my own experiences remain framed by neoliberalism as my experience of success remains underpinned by precarity.

I recognise that my own positionality as a researcher is always in flux and will have changed as a result of engaging in this research process (Cousins, 2009) however in analysing my own journey throughout this thesis I accept that as a working-class child my horizons of possibility were informed by own socio-economic position and my educational experiences reflected this. My own experience of HE as a mature, first-generation student has demonstrated to me the transformative impact of university study in transcending class-based limitations, yet the impact of going to a low-tariff HEI as opposed to a selective institution have been long-ranging and have continued as I have become a lecturer within that same low-tariff institution. My own experiences as a first-generation student in a low-status, post-92 HEI therefore have influenced the focus of this research and it is evident that many of the issues and tensions discussed in this thesis mirror those I have experienced in my own life. As outlined by Grenfell (2018), effective reflexivity within research is created within the relationship between the researcher, researched and the reader. This discussion can therefore be understood as an invitation for the reader to also make their own reflections regarding the ways in which my own positionality as a researcher may have impacted on the choices which I made within this study, and the way in which the voices of my participants are represented within this thesis.

1.3 Key Theoretical Concepts

This study aims to build upon the extensive body of research that considers first-generation student experiences in HE, using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ coupled with Berlant’s cruel optimism to explore the realities of being a student in a post-92 university. A number of theoretical tools and concepts are deployed within this thesis and chapter four discusses the conceptual framework of this study in detail. However, for the reader’s clarity, I have included a brief discussion below of key theoretical concepts and how these are utilised within this work.

1.3.1 Bourdieu’s theoretical tools

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural and social reproduction is drawn on within this thesis, rooted specifically within the concepts of cultural capital, social capital, habitus and field, alongside the use of doxa and symbolic violence. Bourdieu’s work highlights how the possession of cultural capital, such as knowledge, skills, and cultural assets, plays a significant role in shaping first-generation students’ transitions into, through and out of HE. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction draws attention to the mechanisms through which

social inequality is reproduced and the role of HE in either challenging or reinforcing these inequities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This theory provides a framework for examining the way in which inequality operates within HE specifically within the context of a post-92 HEI, offering insights into the dynamics of first-generation student experiences.

In the context of Bourdieu's conceptual framework HE can be understood as a social space characterised by specific rules, practices, and power dynamics that shape the distribution and accumulation of capital. Within this thesis, field is drawn upon in a Bourdieusian sense to refer to both the field of Central as a specific setting and is also applied as a theoretical lens to the wider and more abstract notion of the wider HE hierarchy. Bourdieu argued that if social relations are to be understood then their contextual space also needs to be examined (Bruen, 2014) therefore it is important to explore the impact that the post-92 university context had on the participants' experiences. Specifically, field is drawn upon as a conceptual tool to examine the way in which first-generation students navigated university and the way in which they drew upon their personal, social and cultural resources in order to make sense of their university experience and how it fit within the wider HE hierarchy. Further to this, Bourdieu's field is also used to expose the way in which HE reproduces principles of social classification through the differing status ascribed to HEIs. Using field as a conceptual tool allows for a recognition of the way in which struggle, power and privilege operate in HE and is therefore a valuable device to draw in in this thesis.

1.3.2 Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, in the context of this thesis, refers to the ideology and corresponding government policies which prioritise market-driven principles and the commodification of HE, primarily through student choice mechanisms facilitated by metrics such as league tables. Within the neoliberal ideology universities are encouraged to operate as businesses following a market-orientated approach, and students are framed as consumers. A neoliberal perspective emphasises the importance of competition, choice and individual responsibility for success or failure and prioritises economic outcomes over broader societal benefits. Consequently, neoliberalism has resulted in an "ever-intensifying move towards metrics and the failure to appreciate that not everything that counts can be counted" (Springer, 2016: 287). This agenda has sparked debates regarding the implications for social mobility which have clear relevance for the first-generation student narratives featured within this thesis. In essence, the dominance of the neoliberal ideology in English HE policy has profound implications for the role and nature of the post-92 university and the educational experience of the first-generation students who study within it, and therefore neoliberalism provides the contextual, ideological backdrop to this research.

1.3.3 Human Capital Development

Human capital (Becker, 1967) is discussed within this thesis in regard to the specific role it plays in perpetuating a narrow economic focus on HE thus promoting an instrumental approach to education (Rasciute *et al.,* 2020). Human capital theory assumes that students are rational agents who make educational decisions based on instrumental reasoning (Becker, 1967) i.e. they invest time, effort and money in HE solely to improve their future position in the labour market (Sellar, 2013). Viewing HE through a human capital lens therefore means that investment in university study is weighed against future (perceived) benefits of higher income and improved job prospects. A human capital perspective therefore aligns with the neoliberal ideology which emphasises the measurable economic benefits of HE and obscures all other benefits such as personal growth or enjoyment. The sociological critique deployed in this thesis examines the limitations of viewing HE solely through a human capital lens and makes conceptual links between this approach and Berlant's work on cruel optimism.

1.3.4 A Brief Discussion of the Good Life and Cruel Optimism

Laura Berlant's (2011) concept of the good life features in the title of this thesis and is a key concept which is discussed throughout this research. According to Berlant, the good life is characterised by the pursuit of desirable objects such as upward social mobility, job security, economic stability and social equality. For Berlant individuals continue to hold on to good life fantasies, despite "overwhelming evidence that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer be counted on to provide opportunities for individuals to make their lives add up to something" (Latimer, 2013: 22). Berlant (2011) argues that individuals persist in holding onto fantasies of the good life as maintaining hope for a better future helps individuals to cope with the insecurity of the neoliberal present. Essentially then, maintaining an attachment to the good life gives life meaning and offers a sense of purpose (Tiainen *et al.,* 2019). For Berlant, this sense of purpose is underpinned by a "false" form of hope which is "associated with unattainable objects to which people become affectively attached, but which are not realistically within their reach" (Tiainen *et al.,* 2019: 642). This optimistic attachment in the good life, for Berlant, is therefore inherently cruel, resulting in what Berlant terms as "cruel optimism" which she describes as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (2011: 23).

Berlant's work does not focus on education and has not been readily applied specifically to HE student experiences in existing research. It is evident however that applying the concept of cruel optimism and the good life to university study allows for an understanding to develop of the ways in which HE plays a key role in promoting and sustaining the fantasy of the good life, offering (imagined) access to secure graduate employment which is by no means

guaranteed. This thesis therefore draws upon Berlant's theoretical constructs of cruel optimism and the good life and deploys these in a novel way in order to gain new understandings of the first-generation student experience in a post-92 university.

1.4 The Political Context of English Higher Education

Since the Robbins Report in 1963, and more recently the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, successive government policies have sought to widen participation into HE to under-represented groups. Put simply, from a policy perspective, WP policies have aimed to create:

> A system which delivers equality of opportunity and fairness and in which a person's age, ethnicity, gender, disability and/or social background present no barriers to them accessing and succeeding in higher education and beyond. (BIS, 2014b: 7)

In addition to an ongoing focus on WP the English HE sector has been subject to significant ongoing change across the last decades and recent HE policy has largely been driven by an economic agenda strongly underpinned by neoliberal influences (Burke, 2012; Lumb *et al.,* 2021). This rise in neoliberalism (facilitated by a shift in funding from state to student) has involved a discursive shift in understandings of the purpose of HE, from a commitment to public good (Crozier and Burke, 2015) to a "relentless promotion of employability" (Williams, 2013: 89) which perpetuates discourses of individualism. Nixon (2010) concurs that neoliberal discourses of competition and commercialism have reduced the purpose of HE to a means of achieving improved employment prospects. This has led to students conceptualising successful goals and outcomes of HE in purely economic terms (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012) and internalising the dominant narrative of a graduate premium that is widely observed in HE policy discourse. University participation is therefore currently set against a policy rhetoric which posits that a degree qualification will lead to improved employment prospects (Lumb *et al.,* 2021). However, the promise of financial stability and secure, well-paid employment once offered by HE is no longer realistic (Brown and James, 2020) and this narrow focus on economic outcomes can be particularly problematic for non-privileged students in post-92 universities.

Ongoing marketisation within HE has been intensified by widespread usage of institutional league tables and research rankings (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012) and more recent developments such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) have further encouraged market-place competition within the sector. These instruments of neoliberalism have led to the strengthening of imagined social facts regarding the quality of HEI provision which consistently sees the more elite and selective HEIs carrying greater symbolic value than the newer universities with more diverse student bodies (Stich, 2012). Thus, marketisation

instruments entrench inequality in the sector by creating and enforcing tacit processes of unequal valuation (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012), reinforcing the idea that post-92 HEIs have less value than elite institutions.

Neoliberalism has also been significant in sustaining individualisation of blame by perpetuating the meritocratic notion that university study and subsequent labour market success is available to any individual who has enough aspiration and potential to succeed (James, 2018; Taylor, 2012). Consequently, through a neoliberal lens, the only barrier to achieving success is the student themselves (Burke, 2012). This allows structural issues to be concealed and systemic inequality to go unchallenged, whilst any blame for difficulties is ascribed to the individual student (Gagnon, 2016; James, 2018). This thesis challenges the neoliberal values which position first-generation students as lacking in drive or aspiration and seeks to disrupt deficit notions of first-generation students and the post-92 universities which they commonly study in.

1.5 Research context

Understanding the factors which shape transitions into and through university is important for both students and institutions (Bowles *et al.,* 2013) and student transition research generally has become a rapidly growing area of focus (e.g., Gale and Parker, 2014b; McMillan, 2014; Richardson *et al.,* 2012). Despite this, Gale and Parker (2014b) argue that student transitions remain a largely under-theorised area. Furthermore, the majority of studies have focused on one area of transition. For example, many studies have focused on the first-year experience as a crucial point (e.g., Bowles *et al*,.2013; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Clark and Hall, 2010; Leese, 2010; Richardson *et al*., 2012; Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008). The first year is undoubtably significant, however the experiences of students as they transition through their degree study and out into employment are also important (Gale and Parker, 2014b; Maunder *et al.,* 2013; Merill *et al.,* 2020). Moreover, existing research on student transitions tends to focus on non-traditional or working-class students more broadly. Whilst first-generation students are often included within these studies less research has been focused on first-generation students exclusively (O'Shea, 2016), particularly within a post-92 HEI context.

University context can be a significant factor which impacts on student transitions and experiences. Substantial concern has been expressed within the field regarding the limited number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds studying in elite universities with respected reputations (Strathdee, 2009). Consequently, concerns now centre around "who goes where and why" (Ball *et al.,* 2002: 354), meaning the focus of research "is no longer solely about access but rather access to what?" (Merrill *et al.,* 2020: 164). However,

discussions within existing literature do little to challenge the hierarchical structures of HE which continually devalue the post-92 university experience. Furthermore, there has been limited exploration as to how the inequality within the field of HE, which is legitimised by imagined social facts such as league tables, impacts on the experiences of students studying within low-status institutions. This thesis seeks to address this gap within the literature by examining the reality experienced by students studying at a low status post-92 institution, in hopes of challenging notions which perpetuate the devaluation of modern universities.

The post-92 context of the case study institution resulted in the majority of the participants within this study being so-called 'commuter' students; therefore, the local student experience is pertinent to this inquiry. There has been a limited amount of English-based research into the commuter student experience (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013), despite rising numbers of local students (Lightfoot, 2018). The body of research that does exist for this student group generally follows a deficit narrative based on local students missing out on the full student experience (Holdsworth, 2006; 2009b; Johnson and Wiese, 2022; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2020). Dominant constructions of the typical HE student continue to position students as being young, full-time, and living away from their parents (NUS, 2015: 10), reflecting the widely held, implicit belief that there is a certain way to be a student. A key element of this research therefore is the way in which the participants responded to the dominant ideals and images of the typical student which had significant implications for the approach they took to their time in HE.

The literature often positions university study as a challenging process, not only for local students but for all those students who come from backgrounds with little or no HE experience (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Lehmann, 2009a; Patfield *et al.,* 2021). Within existing research first-generation students are commonly portrayed in deficit terms (O'Shea, 2016; Patfield *et al.,* 2022; Wainwright and Watts, 2021) and are positioned as being "deficient, high-risk and problematic" (Crozier and Reay, 2011: 145), experiencing higher rates of academic failure (McMillan, 2014: 1123) and withdrawal (Coates and Ransom, 2011). The literature suggests that the negative experiences of first-generation students may be caused by the "culture shock" experienced when they enter the alien and middle-class context of HE (Krause and Coates, 2008: 500; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). In Bourdieusian terms this culture shock can lead to first-generation students "feeling like a fish out of water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127; Reay, *et al.,* 2009b) as they have no familial experiences of HE to draw upon to help them navigate the unfamiliar context of university study.

This absence of familial experience may mean that first-generation students lack understanding "about what university is, and how one behaves at university" (Meehan and Howells, 2019: 1378). According to Pedler *et al.,* (2022) this could lead to them not experiencing a sense of belonging in HE, something which is widely acknowledged as being key to successful university transitions (Meehan and Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012). However, the dominant "fish out of water" narrative is often based on the experiences of non-privileged studying within elite institutions (e.g., Ingram, 2011; Reay *et al.,* 2009). Research into first-generation students' experiences in a more diverse post-92 context is more limited, which is one key area where this thesis can add value. The findings of this thesis aim to disrupt the deficit positioning of first-generation students and develop a new way of examining student transitions which is reflective of a diverse, post-92 context, reflecting both the strengths and limitations of studying in a post-92 HEI.

1.6 Clarifying Research Aims

As outlined, existing studies commonly identify the struggles and difficulties which are faced by first-generation students within HE (e.g., Krause and Coates, 2008; Patfield, *et al.,* 2022; Pasero, 2016; Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008). These difficulties include first-generation students' limited knowledge of HE (Crozier *et al.,* 2008; O'Shea, 2013; Patfield, 2021; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), limited relevant cultural capital (Hope, 2017), lack of confidence (O'Shea, 2013) and concerns around fitting in with the culture of the institution (Thomas, 2012; Reay *et al.,* 2009a). Furthermore, studies which examine non-traditional student experiences of HE often focus on a pre-92 university context (e.g., Briggs *et al.,* 2012; Christie *et al.,* 2008; Reay *et al.,* 2009b amongst others) and commonly follow a deficit model of first-generation students experiences which frame transitions as being problematic and difficult with many obstacles to overcome (Patfield *et al*., 2022). The complex relationship between these difficulties and the context of the institution which the student is studying in are not always acknowledged and the positive experiences which can stem from studying in a diverse and inclusive post-92 HEI are notable by their absence, something which this inquiry seeks to address.

Numerous studies in the field of student experiences within HE have drawn upon the work of Bourdieu (1986) as a theoretical tool to explore how the HE system can reproduce social inequality (e.g., Bathmaker *et al*., 2013; Crozier *et al*., 2008; Reay *et al.,* 2004: 2006, amongst others). However, given the large body of work which has drawn upon this theoretical perspective, Webb *et al.,* (2017: 3) called for researchers to "think beyond Bourdieu" suggesting that partnering Bourdieu with alternative theoretical lenses will allow for more holistic and nuanced understandings to be realised. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this inquiry draws on both Bourdieu's theoretical lens and the less-utilised

perspective offered by Berlant's (2011) theory of cruel optimism. This theoretical framework and its application in this study is examined in more detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Discussions so far in this chapter have briefly outlined some of the key debates within published literature. There has been a great deal of wider relevant research into the non-traditional student experience which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three (the literature review). To summarise for the purpose of this introductory chapter, an examination of the field of literature around this topic revealed the following limitations:

1. The body of research which exclusively examines first-generation students' transitional experiences within HE is limited, particularly in relation to all stages of the student cycle (O'Shea, 2020a). Research which does exist commonly positions the experiences of first-generation students in deficit terms meaning this group are positioned as lacking in relation to other university students (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). Traditional understandings of studenthood permeate understandings of what it means to be a student, meaning that students whose experiences fall outside of this ideal are often seen to be having a second-rate experience.

2. There is a lack of research which looks exclusively at first-generation student experiences within a post-92 context. The research which does examine a post-92 context may fail to acknowledge the positive impacts of studying within a low-status institution, instead positioning post-92 HEIs as offering a "second-class", (Reay, 2018: 10), "diluted" (Archer, 2007: 639) HE experience which is less worthy than what is on offer in elite contexts (Archer *et al.,* 2003).

3. Whilst Bourdieu's theoretical lens is commonly used in sociological literature which examines the student experience (and with good reason) other lenses such as Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism are largely absent from sociological understandings of HE. This represents a missed opportunity which this thesis capitalises on by drawing on Berlant's work to illustrate new understandings of the way in which cruel optimism and hope for "the good life" underpins first-generation students' experiences, and the ways that this cruelty is exacerbated by neoliberal ideologies and the low status of the post-92 HEI.

As such these current gaps in the body of literature provided a space for this inquiry to add knowledge to these debates and develop a unique conceptual lens with which to analyse student experiences. Given the limited research in this area, this thesis focused upon deepening understandings of first-generation students' experiences within the specific context of an urban post-92 university. Furthermore, this research aimed to address Burke's (2012: 69) call for "theoretical and methodological frameworks that enable us to move

beyond instrumentalist discourses of WP that are underpinned by neoliberal perspectives" by drawing upon a contemporary theoretical framework with the hope of developing new understandings of long-standing issues.

The overall aims of this research were therefore to understand the following:

1. How did first-generation students frame their decision to attend university?
2. What did first-generation students perceive to be significant in relation to their experience at the university, and what were their hopes and expectations for the future?
3. How were the participants' lived experiences influenced by the social and political context of the case study institution and the wider HE sector?

1.7 Research Setting

It is important to foreground the significance of the university as the site for this study as it was deliberately chosen based on its attributes and characteristics and the post-92 university context acts as a backdrop to this research and frames the participant narratives within this thesis. This research is focused on a single case study site of a post-92 HEI located in an urban context within the Midlands. In the interests of anonymity, this institution is referred to in this thesis as "Central". Central is a university located within a city centre context and, like many post-92 HEIs, has a diverse student body with a high number of local, mature, black, minority ethnic (BME), and first-generation students. Central occupies a relatively low league table position (97 out of 121 in a recent league table) and is subject to a lower reputation than its redbrick and plate-glass neighbours which are both located within close proximity.

The post-92 context of this study is important because studying in a newer university is often positioned as being a less desirable option in both published literature and wider discourse, leading to a devaluation of both post-92 universities and the students who study within them. The issue of academic selectivity in HE is discussed in detail in section 2.4 however it remains the case that a 'good' university is taken to be a highly selective one (Blackman, 2017) which has significant implications for students who study in low-status HEIs. Moreover, the local HE context in this inquiry is also significant as it offers a microcosm of the wider HE field, in that it contains two post-92 HEIs, a redbrick university, and a plate-glass institution, all within the local area. This allowed the significance of institutional reputation to be explored in relation to the participants' experiences.

1.8 Brief Outline of Methodology

This study sought to understand first-generation students' transitions at different stages of the student lifecycle and their lived experiences of studenthood. It is therefore based on in-depth biographical interviews with pre-entry students who had applied to study at the case study institution, current students who were studying at the university, and graduates who had completed their undergraduate degree at the university up to four years before. The study had twenty participants and the sample was diverse in terms of age, ethnic background, and degree subject. All of the students in the sample were from non-privileged backgrounds with parents who worked in technical, semi-routine or routine occupations or who were unemployed, and therefore aligned with NS-SEC categories five to eight.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm this study utilised a hybrid approach incorporating elements of both a case study research design and a biographical, narrative-based approach to explore first-generation students' lived experiences. A biographical, narrative-based approach "weaves social context and individual lives together" (Erben, 1998:13) to explore students' lived experiences. Maunder *et al.,* (2013: 139) stress the salience of examining transitions at an individual level in this way by utilising narrative research to understand the ways in which "personal histories are used to interpret university life". Yet although the focus is on participants' unique experiences, Merrill and West (2009: 71) point out that "in constructing a biography a person relates to significant others and social contexts; a biography is, therefore, never fully individual." Similar arguments are made by Stuart *et al.,* (2011) who states that narrative-based methodological approaches allow for an understanding of how an individual mediates societal divisions and how their experience is shaped by their cultural and socio-economic position, whilst also giving an insight into their unique experiences (See Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Earthy and Cronin, 2008; and Goodson and Sikes, 2001 for similar discussions). Combining this approach with elements of a case study research design incorporated the wider context of student experiences in a post-92 HEI. This approach therefore provided an ideal lens to examine the inter-relationship between the personal, the social, the institutional and the political that is inherent within the research questions that frame this inquiry. In this way, by studying the lives of the participants within this thesis, a greater understanding is able to emerge regarding HE and society more generally (Erben, 1998).

1.9 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured in a conventional way, firstly situating the research within the current field of published literature, outlining the research methodology and then guiding the reader through the participants' stories, attempting to make meaning from these.

As this study took place during a time of political uncertainty, turbulence, and instability in relation to the policy context of English HE the following chapter of this thesis (Chapter Two) discusses the political and social context of HE. Chapter Three examines the existing sociological literature within the field of first-generation students, noting key themes and areas of significance and also identifying areas of paucity and limitations within existing work. Chapter Four outlines the theoretical framework which has been drawn upon in this study, examining both the work of Bourdieu and Berlant in order to develop the theoretical lens which was used to analyse the participants' experiences. With the context, literature and theoretical framework for this study established, Chapter Five outlines the methodological decisions taken within this thesis. This chapter discusses the ontological and epistemological positioning of this study, outlining the approach taken to the research, discussing ethical considerations, notions of trustworthiness and the data analysis strategy which was utilised. Practical considerations of in-depth interviews are also considered.

Chapters Six to Eight present the data from the interviews. These are structured according to stage of study, with Chapter Six presenting data from the pre-entry student interviews, Chapter Seven highlighting the experiences of the on-course students and Chapter Eight exploring the findings from the graduate participants. This structure is not utilised to suggest a linear student trajectory but has been followed for the ease of the reader. The significant findings from these three result chapters are drawn together in Chapter Nine which is the discussion chapter. This chapter works to theorise the research findings, collating the findings of this study and situating these within the broader discussions in published literature. It explores how this research extends the body of existing work within this area and sheds light on the key arguments of this thesis. Finally, Chapter Ten of this thesis returns to the original questions posed by this research and clarifies the findings of this study. Implications of this research in terms of policy, institutional practice, and wider discourse are considered, along with potential avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: The context of the HE field

2.1 Introduction to chapter

Bourdieu instructed that any empirical study should begin with an examination of the field (Heffernan, 2022). With the third research question in mind, this chapter establishes the current and historical political context of English HE with a particular focus on the post-92 university. It includes an in-depth discussion of the current context of the HE sector exploring policy discourses around the two driving meta-narratives of past decades: massification and marketisation (Stuart, 2015). The domination of neoliberal reforms which have embedded competition, performance metrics and university rankings into the sector are critically discussed and related concepts of widening participation (WP) and employability are explored. By drawing on student narratives this thesis attempts to locate the first-generation student within the discourses outlined within this chapter, as they have undeniably shaped the context of the participants' experience. It should be noted that HE policy and university status differ across Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales therefore discussions in this chapter and the wider thesis focus exclusively on the English context.

In the last several decades English HE has been characterised by a period of rapid and substantial change (Foskett, 2011) including the move from an elite to a mass system which has seen vastly increased student numbers and diversity in student intake (Reay *et al.,* 2005). HE policy has largely been driven by an economic agenda strongly underpinned by neoliberal influences (Burke, 2012). This has resulted in a shift in what is commonly understood to be the purpose of HE, from a commitment to public good (Crozier and Burke, 2015) to a "relentless promotion of employability" (Nixon, 2010; Williams, 2013: 89). This shift has seen the sector's social contribution overlooked in favour of a focus on individual economic returns, driven by the rise in student fees. This thesis adopts the position that official government rhetoric is not just a reflection of policy but "should also be understood as a means through which social reality is constructed and maintained" (Suspitsyna, 2010: 581). Therefore, the dominant discourses which operate around HE, impact on what first-generation students understand to be the purpose of university, and how they define success.

2.2 Widening Participation (WP)

According to Lightfoot (2009) WP is a complex and confusing concept, however Burke (2012:12) suggests that it is generally concerned with "with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education". A comparable but wider definition is also offered by the National Strategy for Access and Student Success in HE

(BIS, 2014b: 6) who argue that WP is “about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies and progress to further study and/or employment”. WP may therefore take a variety of forms such as alternative access routes into HE, “raising aspirations’ for targeted groups, and providing adequate support for students to succeed in their studies” (Thompson, 2009: 3).

In the literature, under-represented groups are typically depicted as those who have historically been excluded from HE and may include individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, black, minority, ethnic (BME) students, those studying vocational subjects, mature learners, part-time students, students with a disability and care-leavers (Lane, 2015; McCaig, 2016; Moore *et al.,* 2013: 9). Often WP initiatives are focused on students from disadvantaged (i.e., non-privileged) socio-economic backgrounds, within which several of the above categories may be situated (Thompson, 2009), aligning with the consensus from many educational sociologists that “class is the best explanation of educational outcomes” (Modood, 2012: 185). Although the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend HE has increased over the past few decades, the gap in HE participation rates between the richest and poorest students “remains stark” (Crawford *et al*, 2016: 555) with rates continuing to vary significantly by socio-economic background (Ball, 2018; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Brown and Lauder, 2010). Furthermore, despite continual policy drives to increase participation, the under-representation of students from lower-socio economic groups in elite institutions remains a key theme in HE policy discourse (Ball *et al.,* 2013; Crawford, *et al*, 2016; Cooke, 2011) as working-class and BME students tend to be concentrated in post-1992 universities (Boliver, 2013). It is important that the experiences of WP students are explored within university contexts where they form the majority of the student body, and this reasoning forms part of the rationale for the post-92 case study context of this thesis.

A policy commitment to WP is evident in the requirement for HEIs to provide the Office for Students (OfS) with an Access and Participation Plan (APP) which outline how they will promote access to HE for under-represented groups, and how they will support students to progress and succeed once they are enrolled (OfS, 2021; 2022a). OfS also require HEIs to set longer-term plans for access which require England’s most selective HEIs to eradicate the gap in entry rates between the most and least disadvantaged students by 2039. However, it is evident that for OfS the focus is on increasing entry into elite HEIs, as opposed to actually increasing the status and support of the post-92 HEIs who currently serve the majority of non-privileged students and who, paradoxically, are doing the most important work in terms of WP. In this way the OfS appear to be strengthening, rather than

disrupting the HE hierarchy. Skyrme (2008: 8) is critical of the focus on elite HEIs in relation to WP, arguing that discussions around widening access are based upon the premise of a "limited meritocratic paradigm that infinite places are available at leading institutions for deserving students, whatever their background". This serves to further diminish the value of post-92 HEIs and the non-privileged, first-generation students who study within them.

This attitude has been replicated in neoliberal HE policy which often centres around a discourse of raising aspiration rather than addressing the "unequal power relations that are tied to the politics of misrecognition" (Burke, 2013: 111). In this neoliberal context it is the students and their (lack of) aspiration, rather than their social or economic contexts, that are responsible for their success or failure (Tomlinson *et al.,* 2018). In contrast to this, Alan Milburn as director of the Panel of Fair Access to the Professions disputed claims of a lack of aspiration in young people with the following statement:

> It is not that many young people do not have aspirations. It is that they are blocked. It is not that they do not have talent. To coin a phrase, Britain's got talent – lots of it. It is not ability that is unevenly distributed in our society. It is opportunity. (Milburn, 2009:7)

Importantly, in relation to student aspirations, it should also be acknowledged that what is aspired to and what is actually possible may not be the same:

> For the elite […] desire tends to inform possibility: what is imagined is simply made possible. For the marginalised, possibility tends to inform desire: what is possible limits the desirable to what is realistic (Sellar and Gale, 2011: 129).

Yet within the confines of imagined meritocracy the ability to maintain self-belief is viewed as being key to success. As powerfully summarised by Littler (2013: 65):

> This is a discourse which vests not only power but also moral virtue in the very act of hope, in the mental and emotional capacity to believe and aspire. Hope and promise become more integral in an unequal society in which hard work alone has less and less chance of reaping the prizes. Through this rhetorical mechanism, instead of addressing social inequality as a solvable problem, the act of addressing inequality becomes 'responsibilised' as an individual's moral meritocratic task

It is therefore evident that higher hopes and aspirations are positioned as the answer to structural problems within the neoliberal imagination. A failure to have high aspirations is framed as an individual moral shortcoming and the "abdication of responsibility" (Littler, 2013: 66). In this way, social disadvantage only exists as an obstacle which can be overcome by a combination of high aspirations and hard work. It is evident then that the neoliberal, meritocratic discourse of aspirational deficit (Spohrer, 2015) is inherently problematic as it conceals the complex barriers which non-privileged first-generation students may face both in accessing HE and in achieving 'successful' graduate outcomes.

In response to these discourses of aspirational deficit, HE has been positioned by policy makers as the only "acceptable aspiration" (Brown, 2011: 7), aligned to an agenda of increased HE participation. In fact, as pointed out by Quinn (2010: 117) there is "no comparable rite of passage that is so socially sanctioned and unquestioningly accepted as connoting both success and normality". Aspiration to HE can therefore be understood as a universal norm and anything outside of this as "poverty of aspiration" (Sellar, 2013: 247) which results in those who choose not to progress to university being othered or "discursively constructed as abnormal" (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013: 817). Understanding the way in which HE has been normalised as an acceptable aspiration explains how attending HE may be understood as a non-decision for school-leaving students (Ball, 2008: 10). To borrow a phrase from Bourdieu, it could be argued that participating in HE has become framed in dominant discourse as doxa or "a belief which escapes questioning" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). In other words, participation in HE is considered to be common sense, and the next logical step for school-leavers who hope to achieve professional employment (Pationitis and Holdsworth, 2005:88). This discourse has clear significance for the way in which first-generation students frame their decisions to enter HE.

2.3 From public to private good – the story of HE funding

Alongside the recent framing of HE as the most acceptable aspiration for young people, the burden of tuition fee cost has gradually become transferred to the individual student. The WP agenda and sector expansion resulted in a growing number of students participating in HE which created increased funding costs (Cooke, 2011) and an additional financial burden on the taxpayer. The Dearing Report (1997) which led to the Higher Education Act (1997) first addressed growing concerns regarding funding by simultaneously arguing for the expansion of HE to be a central goal for policy whilst also contending that students should share some of the cost of their study. This prompted the then Labour government to introduce tuition fees in 1998, originally set at £1000 per annum (Stevenson and Bell, 2009).

Since then, the burden of cost has increasingly been transferred from state to student as the HE sector moved from a social model of funding, towards a market model which expects students to meet the economic cost of tuition (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). This move aligns with the ideological consensus that participation in HE constitutes personal rather than public gain and therefore should be funded by the individual student rather than from public funds (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2016).

The Higher Education Act (2003) continued this shift in emphasis by introducing top-up fees which allowed universities to charge up to £3000. The move towards a market model was further entrenched by the Browne Review into HE (BIS, 2010) which suggested that the current fee structure was not meeting the financial need of the sector and furthering the notion that HE operates for individual, rather than social, gain:

> Higher education is neither compulsory nor universal. Access to it is determined by aptitude – not everyone is qualified to enter higher education – and by choice – some people choose not to go even though they are qualified to do so. As a consequence, it is reasonable to ask those who gain private benefits from higher education to help fund it rather than rely solely on public funds collected through taxation from people who may not have participated in higher education themselves. (BIS, 2010: 21)

The findings of this report were acted on swiftly by the coalition government and promptly led to the coalition policy document “Students at the Heart of the System” (BIS, 2011) which stipulated that HEIs would be able to charge up to £9000 per academic year in tuition fees (Williams, 2013). Interestingly, despite initial concerns, research has suggested that the rise in fees did not act as a deterrent to HE participation for younger students, the majority of whom see student debt as necessary and as an investment in their future careers (Evans and Donnelly, 2018). This attitude is reflective of dominant policy discourses discussed above which position HE participation (and the associated debt) as high aspiration and self-development, in line with the neoliberal subject position (Kelly, 2006). Debt is therefore framed in official policy rhetoric as a normative part of the student experience, justified by “learning equals earning” narratives (Brown and James, 2020: 1). Nevertheless, the rise in student fees mean that entering HE requires substantial financial investment, which individuals must weigh against potential career prospects and economic rewards (Rasciute *et al.,* 2020).

Currently, students face a debt burden upwards of £40,000 (including tuition fees and maintenance loans). The recent 2019 Augar review examined the economic returns of HE

participation and the relationship between HE study and economic gain. The report called for tertiary education to better address labour market demands (Day *et al.,* 2020), highlighting the "significant, and growing, taxpayer subsidy in the higher education student finance system" (DfE, 2019: 9). In February 2022 the government published their long-awaited response to the Augar review and announced a new package of HE reforms including student fees being frozen at their current level of £9250 for a further two years (Lewis and Bolton, 2022). The full impact remains to be seen, however, there is no doubt that the Augar review solidifies the expectation that university study should lead to better employment prospects, something which may have a significant impact on first-generation students' motivation to enter HE and which may shape their hopes and expectations for graduate employment.

2.4 Marketisation, ranking systems and the post-92 university

The introduction of student fees and the increased cost burden on the student has helped to enable the marketisation of HE and thus has fuelled the neoliberal agenda which now underpins the sector. As has been evident in discussions so far, it is impossible to examine the current context of HE without a consideration of neoliberalism, and it features heavily in many chapters of this thesis. The next section of this chapter discusses the "neoliberal transformation" of the sector (Williams, 2016: 209) in more detail, starting with a specific focus on the post-92 university.

The term "Post-92 University" is commonly used for HEIs which were originally Polytechnic colleges, and which were awarded university status as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Although they offered HE courses, polytechnic colleges originally differed from universities in a number of ways: they generally focused on offering a range of vocational courses, produced less research, and tended to be located in urban locations. The 1992 Act (in theory) dissolved the binary system of polytechnic colleges and universities by bestowing polytechnics with degree awarding powers and allowing them to assume the title of university (McCaig, 2011). This immediately increased the number of universities by 50 percent and effectively doubled the number of university students (Boliver, 2015). As had been anticipated, the new 'unified' HE system remained highly stratified with institutions using various mechanisms to position themselves within the HE quasi-market (Cooke, 2011). The 'original' HEIs retained high entry criteria and continued to deliver traditional academic curricula and focus on producing high quality research. Conversely, the post-92 institutions continued to recruit more diverse student bodies and offer a wider vocational provision (Duke and Layer, 2005). In effect what had been an explicit two-tier system became an implicitly stratified system with elite HEIs using their age as a defining factor in

order to distance themselves from their post-92 neighbours (Boliver, 2015). Several decades later, post-92 universities are still commonly perceived as possessing a lower status than the traditional Russell Group institutions (Baker and Brown, 2007). Reputation has endurance and for Stich (2012), who examined experiences within a community college in the US, it acts as a form of capital within the field of HE which can limit or permit privilege. It is evident then that reputation, prestige and elitism can have a powerful influence on judgements regarding an institution's status, and subsequently, its perceived quality (Boliver, 2015). It also serves to frame the marketised, elitist HE field (and the subjugated position of the post-92 HEI) as being both inevitable and part of the natural order. This obscures the potentially damaging impact this could have on first-generation students who study within low-tariff institutions, both in terms of the symbolic value of their qualifications and the way in which they view their own experiences in low-status institutions.

The deficit position of post-92 HEIs has remained, despite a continued absence of evidence that newer universities offer poor teaching quality, or a reduced likelihood of obtaining a good degree classification (Blackman, 2017). This puts increasing pressure on post-92 HEIs to compete in a neoliberal context where "the need to recruit is paramount for the survival of the university" (Richards, 2018: 17). It seems then, as argued by Blackman (2017:14), that "we appear to be in a world based on snobbery and discrimination rather than evidence, which is socially damaging and could be producing worse educational outcomes overall". This is particularly concerning for non-privileged students who are more concentrated in newer HEIs, with young people from a low SES background constituting around 50% of the student population in post-92 HEIs, compared with 15% in Russell Group universities (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017). According to Reay (2018: 10) this has led to non-privileged students "predominantly ending up in universities seen to be second class both by themselves and others". It is evident that the literature and dominant discourse alike paint post-92 universities in a negative light and this deficit positioning can be very difficult to challenge. The significance for this thesis lies in the way in which the position of a low-status post-92 HEI is understood by the non-privileged, first-generation students who study in it, and the impact this has on their experiences and hopes for the future. HE status therefore has clear relevance to this inquiry.

The stratification of the HE sector has been driven by the neoliberal ideology which underpins the sector and has become so entrenched that it is now commonly understood as being 'common sense' (Barnett, 2010, 272; Morrisey, 2015). Through a neoliberal lens, HE can be understood as being a marketable commodity (Lynch, 2015: 192) which has an important role to play in boosting economic growth (Elliot, 2021). The value of HE is thus

reduced to metrics, data and economic contribution, with wider benefits which have no market value, being ignored, trivialised or manipulated to fit the neoliberal agenda (Elliot, 2021). This is problematic because in education, “not everything that is important is measurable and much that is measurable is unimportant” (Muller, 2018: 18). Indeed, many of the benefits first-generation students may gain from engaging in HE (such as a growth in confidence or enjoyment of learning) are disregarded by a focus on measurable outcomes. Furthermore, the dominance of the neoliberal agenda also raises questions regarding the way in which universities may respond to these pressures, such as by distorting data to put themselves in a more advantaged position within the competitive field. The concern here, as identified by O’Leary and Cui (2020), is that this could result in the metric measurement itself becoming more important for institutional success than the concept it is actually claiming to measure, which has implications for student experiences. This point is echoed by Erikson *et al.,* (2021: 2138) who argue that ultimately, “cultures of audit and measurement are grotesquely distorting the very activities they seek to scrutinise”. Moreover, the result of pressure to perform in metrics which measure ‘good degree outcomes’ or retention/progression of students could also potentially lead to a lowering of academic standards and/or grade inflation (Elliot, 2021) which the OfS have recently pledged to address (OfS, 2022b).

Advocates of the neoliberal approach suggest that applying market principles to the sector will drive up standards by forcing it to be more responsive to economic, societal, and student demands, as evidenced in the government white paper “Success as a Knowledge Economy” (BIS, 2016: 8) which states:

> Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better-quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.

The effects of the dominant neoliberal ideology are clearly evident in the above statement which is overtly forcing HE institutions to compete against one another for students and funding, consequently causing HEIs to adopt business strategies to attempt to secure a successful market position (Stevenson and Bell, 2009). The creation of a neoliberal, competitive marketplace in HE has led to increasing pressure on universities to market themselves in the best possible light in order to attract students. This has led to universities being driven to invest significant amounts of money in non-teaching facilities, such as new modern buildings, sports facilities, social facilities, and landscaped campuses (McGettigan, 2013). In addition, many universities are spending significant amounts of money on

marketing (Nixon, *et al.,* 2018) in order to 'sell' their student experience to potential consumers. Nixon and colleagues warn that this could result in HEIs making false promises to students which result in disappointment and dissatisfaction when students "encounter a reality that is not the "idealised fantasy shaped and potentially intensified by university promotional communications" (2018: 934). This is a key issue in relation to first-generation students' in post-92 HEIs as they may potentially find that their HE experiences in reality do not align with their hopes for both university and/or graduate employment.

A neoliberal HE landscape also drives increased regulation and accountability and this has been evident in the HE sector in recent years, notably since the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 which replaced both the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Essentially, the OfS is a regulatory body which is designed to protect the rights and interests of students as consumers (OfS, 2018) driven by the dominant neoliberal ideology which stipulates students need a powerful, market-style regulator to protect their interests. Importantly, the OfS has a great deal more power over HEIs than HEFCE, including the ability to effectively shut down 'failing providers' (Evans, 2018). The message from OfS, it seems, is not one of collaboration and support for HEIs but instead is one which emphasises accountability and performativity in line with the neoliberal imagination, which can make it increasingly difficult for post-92 HEIs to compete with more elite institutions. This has significant implications for first-generation students who study in low-tariff HEIs in relation to the symbolic value their degree holds in comparison to qualifications from elite universities.

Student choice is a significant concept within this thesis in relation to how first-generation students frame their decisions to enter HE. Since their introduction in the late 1990s League tables have been instrumental in enabling student 'choice' and, as a key instrument of neoliberalism, play a crucial role in framing university reputation and status (Blackman, 2017). The variety of available league tables all have slightly different methodologies but generally all utilise National Student Survey data, entry requirements, research activity, and graduate employment data. For Bartram (2021) the rise of intense market pressures and embedded audit culture which has been driven by ranking system (such as league tables) and 'excellence' measures (such as the Teaching Excellent Framework) have "instigated a form of perpetual competition where the aim is not to maximise human potential but to gain advantage over others" (Lund, 2018: 468). The use of league tables and the creation of a competitive, marketised HE environment has been justified by the notion of "putting students at the heart of the system" (BIS, 2011: 1) via the neoliberal discourse of 'empowerment' for students. However, government policy fails to recognise that student choices may be

swayed by institutional hierarchy and status, which fall largely outside of institutional control. This then raises questions regarding the effectiveness of a market rationale. Raffe and Croxford echo this concern, arguing that:

> The assumption underlying market policies, that consumers base their HE choices on factors that institutions can change such as the content, quality and prices of their programmes, and not on factors beyond their control such as their history, and their past reputation, is questionable (2015: 332)

As is generally the case with instruments of neoliberalism, league tables make no allowances for the make-up of student cohorts or the impact of local contextual factors and perpetuate a narrow view of quality which is inadequate for a diverse, mass HE system (Brown, 2011). It appears that "league tables indeed strengthen the market position of institutions that are already prestigious and well-funded, at the expense of those that may be seeking to build reputation by attending to the needs of students and employers" (Brown, 2011: 16). League tables and the marketisation of English HE could therefore be understood as potentially penalising post-92 HEIs who commonly have lower status, more limited funds and less advantaged student cohorts and are thus at a disadvantage when competing with more elite HEIs within a highly marketised field. Markets always create winners and losers, and it seems that post-92 HEIs are commonly on the losing team in relation to the metric fixation which dominates the HE landscape. As argued by Stich (2012) it seems that "weaker reputations built upon notions of inferiority […] are then buttressed by arbitrary systems of rank and prestige" (2012: 32). This issue is significant for the institutional context of this thesis and as such, university status and the implications of this have clear relevance for the focus of this research. The next section of this chapter will now go on to explore inequalities in graduate outcomes and the difficulties regarding the concept of employability in more detail.

2.5 Employability – what does success look like?

Employability has become a key driver for the HE sector and given the significant role it plays in this study, it is important to be clear what is meant by the term as it is often criticised for being ambiguous (Arora, 2015). The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) offers a working definition which is interesting to discuss here:

> Employability is the possession by an individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realise his or her aspirations and potential in work (CBI, 1999:1).

This quote provides clear evidence of the individual narrative entrenched in employability discourses, placing individual acquisition of skills at the centre of the concept (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) and ignoring the impact of labour market conditions. A more suitable alternative is offered by Yorke (2006:2), who defines employability as the following:

> A graduate's achievements and their potential to obtain a 'graduate job', this should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a 'graduate job', which is subject to influences in the environment, a major influence being the state of the economy.

Yorke's definition is important because it differentiates between the *capacity* to get a graduate-level job and being able to gain *actual* employment which is governed by external factors such as job availability in local contexts. As pointed out by Wilton (2011: 87) "it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed". When this important contention is understood it makes employability as a concept much more difficult to measure, as the blunt tool of employment surveys can only measure *actual* employment at a given time, rather than the *capacity* for potential employment in the future (Tymon, 2013). Unfortunately, this does not dissuade the government from using employment survey data (such as the graduate outcomes survey) as a proxy for employability and continually pursuing this as a key performance indicator for HEIs (Tymon, 2013). This places HEIs located in economically challenging areas at a greater disadvantage, along with courses such as social care or early childhood which align to sectors with low-paid employment (Day, *et al.,* 2020). This is a particularly pertinent issue for post-92 HEIs which have greater numbers of local students (see chapter 3) who are more likely to stay in the local region for employment after graduation and thus are more restricted by limitations in the local employment market.

The Dearing report (1997) and the Leitch Review (2006) were fundamental in mainstreaming the employability agenda and embedding it into policy and media discourse. As a result, responsibility for graduate employment has shifted away from government and almost entirely onto HEIs (Arora, 2015) and individual students. Universities have little room to challenge this, as they are constrained by their need to attract students within a competitive, neoliberal environment within which employment figures form a key indicator of performance. As outlined here by Tymon, (2013: 844):

> From the higher education institution perspective, the argument is simple: league tables can affect student numbers, which in turn affects funding […] therefore, they [HEIs] need to continue investing in, and promoting, employability development.

Evidently, the government approach to employability endorses what Holmes (2013) calls a "possession approach" meaning one in which graduate skills and attributes are framed as being something which can be taught by universities and possessed by individual graduates, rather than a "social positioning approach" as advocated for by Tomlinson (2008). This is problematic, as outlined below:

> The policy-endorsed formula of graduate employability = higher education qualifications + key employability skills has limitations when understanding the complex nature of graduates' relations to, and outcomes within a given labour market (Tomlinson and Nghia, 2020: 8).

Policy framings of employability align to the meritocratic ideal that competition for jobs is fair and natural, with individuals making rational choices concerning their careers in line with the neoliberal understanding that success is based purely on hard work and determination (Christie and Burke, 2021). Consequently, the focus of employability as a performance indicator for HE conceals structural factors and situates employment success/failure with both individual students and HEIs (O'Shea, 2020a). As argued by Merrill *et al.,* (2020: 165) "employability can only be properly analysed when we are cognisant of rising inequality, increased competition, social precarity and occupational uncertainty". Routes to graduate employment are permeated by social structures such as gender, class and ethnicity and a large body of research has indicated the way in which inequality operates in fields of professional employment (Allen, 2016; Bathmaker, 2021; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013, 2016; Bradley and Waller, 2017; Burke, 2015; Christie and Burke, 2021). As summarised by Christie and Burke (2021: 88) "Rather than higher education being the great equaliser and answering the meritocratic promise made to students upon entering university, experiences of the graduate labour market are heavily classed, and also intersected by race and gender". This has clear implications for the graduate experiences of first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds, particularly those who attend low-status post-92 HEIs as the potentially lower value conferred to their degree may further serve to maintain the existing social order.

2.6 Student Success Criteria

First-generation students' hopes, expectations and experiences regarding graduate employment form key elements of this study. It is therefore useful to ascertain what a 'successful' graduate outcome looks like in dominant policy discourse and the impact this can have on how first-generation students may frame success. The dominant discourse of HE is one of opportunity, in that university study offers a socially sanctioned and legitimate pathway to individual social mobility and employment success (Jarvis, 2021; Merrill *et al.,* 2020). Consequently, the traditional idea of university education as a public good which provides benefits to society has become increasingly overshadowed by economically focussed outcomes (Inglis, 2016). In this way, the primary purpose of HE has been reframed to focus on economic gain and it is assumed that gaining a degree will lead to upward social mobility (Merrill *et al.,* 2020). This shift is consistent with the neoliberal focus of successive governments in the last three decades on serving individual needs, which offer economic benefits for society, rather than being interested in benefiting society itself (Olssen and Peters, 2005). As a result, there has been a tightening of the bond between HE credentials and employment/economic rewards and successive governments have long positioned HE as being "the currency of opportunity" (Brown, 2003: 144), using this as a way of legitimising high HE costs being borne by students (BIS, 2011). The promise of HE has been that obtaining a degree opens the door to improved employment opportunities, stability, and individual upward social mobility (Finnegan *et al*., 2019), (i.e., the good life). HE has therefore been framed in policy discourse as a "silver bullet that can address a host of economic and social challenges" (Keep and Mayhew 2014, 764) which in reality, are beyond its control (Frankham, 2017).

What students/graduates deem to be a positive outcome of HE is therefore very much tied up with the dominant neoliberal discourse surrounding the purpose of HE, coupled with the financial investment students make in their studies. Lynch (2015) states that the neoliberal focus on metrics and competition has driven students to view success as being only related to their own economic self-interest, qualifications and employment prospects, to allow them to recoup their investment (Budd, 2016; Inglis, 2016). Gauging the merits of a degree in line with economic/employment outcomes aligns with a human capital approach (Becker, 1967) which presumes that individuals invest time, money and effort in themselves purely to enhance their labour market outcomes. Essentially, through a human capital lens, investment in HE is only worthwhile if it offers future financial benefits and any intrinsic value of education is disregarded (Rasciute *et al.,* 2020). The literature therefore suggests there is an increasing instrumentality around the purposes of HE, and that, for many first-generation students, the value of their 'investment' is in the end result of employment outcomes

(O'Shea, 2020a), as opposed to the student experience along the way. In this way it seems to have become common sense or "doxic" (Bourdieu, 1977) to view HE purely in instrumental terms, which evidences the profound influence that government policy has on how university study is understood (Weisstanner and Armingeon 2018). This instrumentalization of HE has clear consequences regarding the reasons why first-generation students may elect to enter HE and the ways in which they define their success criteria as graduates.

Despite the reframing of HE as being valued primarily for individual economic gain, the massification of the sector has seen an oversupply of graduates and higher risks of under-employment (Lauder *et al.,* 2012) which are more pronounced for those from non-privileged backgrounds (O'Shea, 2020a). In many cases it now appears that a degree, once an advantage, can now be seen as a prerequisite for a job, even in roles which were previously not considered to be graduate-level occupations (Tomlinson 2008). This is supported by large scale qualitative research by Finnegan *et al.,* (2019) which found that non-traditional students believed gaining a degree would lead to secure employment, but in reality they experienced significant precarity in the labour market. Findings from a large-scale study by O'Shea (2020a) which examined first-generation graduate experiences also support this notion. Brown (2013: 681) argues that the "inconvenient truth" is that the "learning equals earning" narrative is broken and the idea that investment in education will deliver social mobility has "all but evaporated". This problematises a key pillar of the neoliberal ideology which Brown *et al.,* (2011) refer to as "the opportunity bargain": that individuals who invest in themselves as workers will be rewarded for their investment. Instead, Brown and colleagues (2011: 135) conclude that the opportunity bargain has gradually transformed into an "opportunity trap" which forces individuals to spend more time, effort and money on increasing their education level. This paradoxically leads to a reduced chance of success because of the social congestion from the high number of graduates competing for a limited number of jobs. These persuasive arguments raise questions as to why the ubiquitous graduate premium discourse has continually been reiterated by successive governments when it could be damaging to students who potentially enter HE with unrealistic expectations and hopes for their graduate future.

Importantly, the risk of the opportunity trap appears to be more pronounced for those studying in post-92 HEIs as both quantitative and qualitative research has suggested that students who attend low status universities have a reduced likelihood of successfully entering graduate-level employment and accessing higher earnings (Belfield *et al.,* 2018: Crew, 2015). HE has now become what Robertson *et al.,* (2011) term as a "positional good"

in that once everybody has a particular credential (such as a degree) the overall value of that credential decreases. Bourdieu (1986) highlighted that for goods to have value, they need to be challenging to acquire. Therefore, a degree from a selective HEI with stringent entry requirements, can confer greater symbolic value than a degree from a recruiting post-92 HEI which commonly has lower entry criteria, and which is accessible to "people without social value" (Bourdieu, 1993: 98). As argued by O'Shea (2020a: 62) "within the graduate marketplace, the value of a degree seems to continue to depend on the institution that it is derived from". Consequently, graduates of post-92 HEIs can be disadvantaged in competitive graduate labour markets by virtue of the limited symbolic value of their degree which has clear implications for social justice (Leathwood, 2004).

University status inequality is exacerbated by the practices of corporate graduate employers who favour recruitment from a narrow range of universities (Milburn, 2012). The 2017 Highfliers report outlined that Britain's top graduate employers mostly target Russell Group universities and it continues to be the case that "newer institutions…. [are] typically regarded less favourably than their older counterparts" (Brookes, 2019: 205). This creates a vicious cycle that reinforces the superior status of elite universities whilst perpetuating a *doxa of deficit* which surrounds post-92 HEIs. Of course, it must be acknowledged that there are many wider structural factors which could impact graduate earnings, not least socio-economic status, which will be more of a factor for graduates of post-92 HEIs. However, research consistently finds that the more elite the university, the greater the advantage within the workplace (Sutton Trust, 2015). A key issue illustrated in the literature then is that a degree from a post-92 university carries less symbolic value, which potentially places non-privileged, first-generation graduates in a disadvantaged position in the field of graduate employment.

The risk of the opportunity trap is also affected by course choice. Recent research for the IFS (Britton *et al.,* 2020) found that degree subject has a significant impact on earnings with data showing that lifetime financial returns for women are, on average, almost zero for creative arts and languages graduates, but more than £250k for economics, medicine or law. However, studying a subject which has high average financial returns (such as law) can be risky in that these returns are not guaranteed. Vocational degrees (such as nursing or teaching) offer much less scope for high earnings, however, for non-privileged students, studying these subjects offers a stronger guarantee of secure employment and increased earnings, even if they are much less likely to reap greater financial rewards (Britton *et al*., 2020). A vocational orientation in terms of course choice for non-privileged first-generation

students can therefore be understood as a safer choice given the relatively high and risky investment required (Lehmann, 2009a; Thering, 2010).

2.7 Concluding thoughts

It is important to situate this doctoral research within the current political landscape of English HE, which frames the university as “an engine of social mobility, a driver of economic growth and cornerstone of our cultural landscape” (BIS, 2016: 7). Discussions in this chapter have identified the way in which the current dominance of neoliberal policy can be internalised and thus can influence what first-generation students understand to be purpose of HE, and how they frame their success (or failure) as graduates. It is evident that pervasive discourses have framed HE primarily in terms of human capital development and instrumental attitudes towards university reflect this. Key drivers and debates in the political, social and economic context of English HE have been established, with a particular focus on WP, neoliberalism, marketisation and the post-92 HEI. This chapter has illuminated the tensions between the differing purposes of HE, the impact of dominant political discourses, and the sustained period of rapid change which HE is situated within. The next chapter begins to explore literature around first-generation student experiences more specifically, examining student choice, experiences of local students and introducing the significant themes which underpin the first-generation student experience in existing literature.

Chapter 3: Mapping the First-Generation Student Experience (the literature review)

3.1 Introduction to chapter

This chapter builds on earlier discussions by examining literature specifically focused on first-generation students' experiences. In recent years an increasing number of research studies have devoted attention to first-generation students in HE (Wainwright and Watts, 2021), however much of the literature around this topic focuses on the dominant "fish out of water" narrative of first-generation and/or non-privileged students in elite universities (e.g., Lee and Kramer, 2013; Reay *et al.,* 2009b; Reay, 2021; Tett, 2004; Thiele *et al.,* 2016; Walkerdine, 2020). Within this chapter I examine the some of the key literature around student choice, the first-generation student experience and the experiences of local students. Key debates are explored, and notions of risk and belonging are discussed in detail. The analysis of the literature in this (and the previous) chapter is drawn upon to underpin the interpretation of the student narratives examined in the later chapters of this thesis. The following discussions within this literature review are firstly centred on the concept of student choice as this is effectively the beginning of the first-generation student experience and consequently seemed an appropriate place to instigate discussions.

3.2 Student Choice: a persuasive illusion?

Student choice was emphasised by the Browne review (BIS, 2010) as a key driver for HE and was further embedded by the 2016 HE white paper (BIS, 2016) which stipulated that a greater degree of information should be made available to potential students to allow them to make the "right choices". Furthermore, the OfS stated it aimed to "put competition and choice at the heart of sector regulation" (BIS, 2016: 6) evidencing the strong connection the government make between student choice and the metrics which have come to dominate the HE landscape. According to government policy, inequalities in graduate outcomes and the under representation of certain groups in HE are down to "insufficient competition and lack of informed choice" (BIS, 2016: 8). For Wilkins and Burke (2015: 440) this "grammar of neoliberalism" positions students as empowered, independent and self-responsible individuals who act in quest of their educational desires and aspirations. Students are thus positioned within government policy discourse as investors in their own education with the responsibility to make rational and sensible choices as "these decisions are significant factors in determining a student's future life and career" (BIS, 2016: 43). Dominant discourses around student choice therefore frame it as promoting individual freedom and autonomy, whilst market practices are portrayed as being beneficial to all students including those from first generation and non-privileged backgrounds (Callender and Dougherty, 2018; Tomlinson *et al.,* 2020). However, empirical research in the field of student choice is widely

critical of the quasi-market reorganisation of HE, stating that the key principles of competition and choice have actually resulted in inequality becoming further ingrained (Brown *et al.,* 2011; Shiner and Noden, 2015) whilst structural issues are "swept under a blanket of the façade of individual choice" (Baker, 2019: 13). Several scholars (e.g., Baker, 2019; Callender and Dougherty, 2018; Callender and Melis, 2022; Crozier *et al.,* 2008; Reay *et al*, 2005; Wilkins and Burke, 2015) have been overly critical of the neoliberalist discourse underpinning HE, arguing that choice is not a concept that simply locates students as consumers but instead encompasses "multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory elements which cannot be contained through the lens of a singular consumerist discourse" (Wilkins and Burke, 2015: 440). Callender and Dougherty (2018) note that neoliberal policy assumes that students simply need access to the right information to decide on the 'best' HEIs and courses which will procure the highest graduate earnings. Yet these courses require the highest A-level grades, which disadvantage students from non-privileged backgrounds, given the sustained relationship between socio-economic background and attainment (Vignoles and Crawford, 2010). As Callender and Dougherty (2018: 189) point out "no amount of accurate and transparent information on graduate outcomes will change these realities". It is evident therefore that student choice is a much more complex process than neoliberal government policy suggests, and that this complexity is enhanced for those from non-privileged backgrounds. A key limitation of the current student choice policy model then is that it associates greater choice with improved social justice when in reality student choice can legitimate inequality by locating blame with individuals for making the wrong choices (Callender and Dougherty, 2018).

The concept of student choice originated as a topic of research interest due to the realisation that students from non-privileged backgrounds are not only less likely to attend prestigious HE institutions, but that they are less likely to even apply to them (Boliver, 2013; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, over the past few decades, discussions within the field have shifted from who enters HE, to "who goes where, and why?" (Ball *et al.*, 2002: 354). A seminal large-scale, mixed methods study into student choice mechanisms was undertaken by Reay *et al.,* (2005). This empirical study was key in developing a sociology of HE choice and drew attention to an area that had been considerably under-researched (although some previous studies had been undertaken see Archer *et al.*, 2003; Ball *et al.*, 2002, Reay *et al.*, 2002). Reay *et al.,* (2005: viii) concluded that non-traditional students are confronted with differing degrees of choice in terms of HE study, and that this choice is "significantly shaped by their social class". Reay and colleagues found little to support the consumer rationalism that is emphasised by government policy. Instead, the researchers stipulated that non-traditional students are more likely to be swayed by notions of 'fitting-in' coupled with transport

concerns and ties to existing employment leaving their choices both restricted and determined by necessity. Reay *et al.,* (2005) also noted that locality can often be the most salient factor for the majority of working-class students, a finding that is echoed more recently by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018). Furthermore, McVitty and Morris (2012: 4) suggest it is more probable that mature students will be "juggling study and family responsibilities" and therefore their choices are often constrained by their locality (BIS, 2014a; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013), particularly if they are women (Reay, 2003).

Crozier *et al.*, (2009) argue that student choice is likely to be framed by perceptions of belonging, meaning students from non-privileged backgrounds are more likely to opt for less prestigious institutions. Ball *et al*, (2002: 69) term this aversion to particular settings as "choice as self-exclusion". Similarly, Walsh *et al,* (2015) point out that student choice is defined and constrained by students' own internal assessment of which course/institution are likely to accept them, a point agreed upon by Diamond *et al.,* (2014). Importantly, Walsh and colleagues suggests that feelings of 'fitting in' are more important to first generation students than those whose parents attended university. This argument echoes findings of Archer *et al.,* (2003: 17) whose research suggested that non-privileged students felt elite universities "are not for the likes of us" which then perpetuates an institutional culture within elite HEIs "that alienates other students". Evidently the literature suggests that student choice making is socially situated and in relation to this a key role is played by those within a student's network of intimacy in shaping student decision-making (Brooks, 2003; Diamond *et al,* 2012; Greenbank, 2011). This is a pertinent point for first-generation students who may not have anybody in their family who has direct experience of HE. Research continually suggests that students would rather talk to someone they know "rather than someone who knows" due to the value ascribed to advice given from those close to, and trusted by, the student (Greenbank, 2011: 36) which has implications for the information that first-generation students may access. This echoes Ball and Vincent's (1998) seminal discussion of "hot" and "cold" knowledge which stipulated that students rely on "hot" knowledge defined as "first- or second-hand recommendations or warnings related to specific institutions based on some kind of direct experience" (Ball *et al.,* 2002: 338). This is opposed to "cold" knowledge which comes from official sources such as that provided by National Student Survey (NSS) data and league tables, which Ball *et al.,* (2002) suggests first-generation students tend not to value. Similarly, other studies have also disputed the idea that non-privileged students use league tables and course data as a key factor to influence their choice about where to study (Boliver 2013; Davies *et al*., 2014; Walsh *et al.,* 2015).

Ball *et al's.,* (2002) additional discussion of embedded and contingent choosers is useful to draw on in order to further explain the socially and culturally embedded nature of decision

making, specifically in relation to attending university. Ball *et al's.*, (2002) paper describes "embedded choosers" as individuals who have been equipped with dominant social and cultural capital which aligns to university study, meaning that their habitus allows them "to see the field (of HE) as a familiar place where they could easily fit in" (Ball, 2008: 10). For these students, participation in HE is normalised and viewed as a "non-decision" and they make informed choices regarding where to study, utilising forms of both "hot" and "cold" knowledge to inform their decisions (Ball *et al.,* 2002). Conversely, the students who had access to less dominant forms of capital made choices that were "contingent" as they "did not understand much about how HE worked and made choices based on little information and a lack of understanding" (Ball, 2008: 10). For Ball *et al.,* (2002) the choices of contingent choosers are limited by their "surface level knowledge" of HE, coupled with financial constraints, and concerns about fitting in. Given the given the age of the paper and the strong conclusions that it made, it is interesting to see how the theoretical contribution offered by Ball and colleagues can be applied to the choice making processes of first-generation participants within this study, to explore how first-generation students frame their decisions to attend university two decades after Ball's work. Interestingly, similar findings are echoed by Callender and Melis (2022: 497) whose recent large-scale survey showed that "the choices students make reflect their material constraints as well as their cultural and social capital, social perceptions and distinctions, and forms of self-exclusion - all of which are class bound."

3.3 Horizons for Action

When considering first-generation students' choice-making processes this thesis utilises Hodkinson and Sparkes' theoretical lens to examine how students navigate both educational decision making and decisions regarding their careers upon finishing university. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) developed a "sociological theory of career decision making" in an effort to reconcile tensions between the opposing concepts of HE policy (which focus on conscious and rational choices) and sociological understandings of choice (which emphasises the constraints of social and structural factors). Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) horizons for action model frames choices as being neither fully determined nor completely rational. Instead, they understand decision making to be based on a combination of personal experiences coupled with advice from others (Lehmann, 2009a). Although not focused on first-generation students specifically, this model has relevance to this research both in terms of student choices of where to study and their actions regarding graduate employment. Importantly, Hodkinson and Sparkes maintain that decisions are made pragmatically, based on lived experiences and information relevant to the social context of the individual and this

work therefore aligns to Bourdieu's notion of habitus (See section 4.3 for a more detailed discussion of this concept).

Although Hodkinson and Sparkes' model originally focused on career decision making, it offers a valuable tool to also examine first-generation student decision making more widely in a critical and sociologically informed way:

> Career decision-making is never an exclusively individual act. Within any career field, actions of others […] have a significant influence. The ability of any individual to progress is strongly influenced by the resources (economic, cultural and social) at their disposal. Any career theory that does not take account of these complex and unequal power relations is inadequate. Any theory, which assumes that only the individual him/herself makes a career decision, is also inadequate. (Hodkinson, 2009: 10)

In the above quote Hodkinson argues that conceptualising career goals as individual decisions (which are not bound by structural, cultural, social and political forces) is reductionist and unrealistic. In contrast to this Hodkinson and Sparkes describe their model as follows:

> By horizon for action, we mean the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made. Habitus and the opportunity structures of the labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective (1997: 34).

As outlined by Hodkinson and Sparkes "no-one can step outside their habitus so decision making can never be context free" (1997: 34). That is not to say that Hodkinson and Sparkes' work is deterministic, as the authors are at pains to point out that this is not the case, noting that individuals can "exert considerable influence on their own futures" (1997: 37). However, they argue

> That influence can only be understood as part of complex interactions which are, in turn, located within local, national and sometimes global contexts involving institutional cultures and official rules for education, employment, school-leaving, benefit payments etc., which are, in turn, located within the economic, social and cultural environment, with its strong historical dimension (1997: 37).

For Hodkinson and Sparkes, horizons for action both constrain and enable the choices individuals make and how people view the world more widely. In relation to HE participation for first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds, this could relate to students

having the intellectual capacity to attend an elite HEI, but not perceiving an elite HEI as appropriate and a place for people like them and thus never even applying. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997: 31) are critical of the problematic way that government policy ignores these factors and is "underpinned by implicit assumptions of free will and rational action" which frames individuals as being solely responsible for their own decision-making. Although they neglect to name neoliberalism explicitly within their 1997 paper, this model offers a valid sociological response to the neoliberal understanding of student choice making, identifying the impact of both structure and agency in shaping individual transitions and thus is of value to this thesis which seeks to view first-generation students' choice-making through a sociological lens.

3.4 Student belonging

A sense of belonging can be an important factor impacting on first-generation student choices and experiences and literature consistently evidences that students' sense of belonging is strongly associated with academic achievement, student persistence, student satisfaction and a successful university experience (Ahn and Davis, 2020; Cureton, 2016; Humphrey and Lowe, 2017; Masika and Jones 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013; Pedler *et al.,* 2022; Read *et al.,* 2003; Thomas, 2012; Thomas *et al.,* 2017). Given the importance of belonging to student experiences and its relevance to this inquiry, it is important to define and critically discuss the concept. Belonging is complex and multifaceted but is generally accepted to relate to feelings of fitting in and being accepted (Ahn and Davis, 2020). Students who feel a secure sense of belonging should "feel an affinity with their institution, feel that they fit in and are part of the community, and feel accepted and recognised for their abilities" (van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman, 2020: 377). Whether or not first-generation students feel a secure sense of belonging within university is likely to have a significant impact on their experiences and existing research supports this notion (Masika and Jones, 2016; Pedler *et al.,* 2022), noting that peer support and interaction is crucial in developing a sense of belonging for students (Masika and Jones, 2016).

The findings of Masika and Jones (2016) echo the work of Tinto's (1975; 1987; 2003) influential student integration model which identified successful social and academic integration to be key in preventing student withdrawal. For Tinto (1987) students need to become active members of both the academic and social sphere within university, although, Tinto notes that whilst academic success is a "minimal formal condition for persistence […] integration in the social system is not" (1987: 107). Tinto (1997) went on to develop his work by examining the experiences of local students, but his conclusion remained that becoming involved in the broader social communities of the college and engaging "fully in the academic life of the institution" (Tinto, 1997: 613) was necessary to promote feelings of

belonging within HEIs. Whilst Tinto's model has had a significant impact on the way in which student belonging is understood, Merrill (2015: 1860) points out that its focus is limited as "it focuses on middle class, younger students" and as such neglects to account for students' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. However, in support of Tinto's view, Osterman's (2000) detailed literature review concurs that students' social and academic engagement is crucial to developing a secure sense of belonging. More recently, case study research by Ahn and Davis (2020) confirmed this and similarly noted that, in relation to belonging, social engagement was the more salient factor to the students within their research. Despite the limitations of Tinto's work, more recent literature clearly supports the notion that both social and academic engagement are important in helping first-generation students to achieve a secure sense of belonging and have a positive experience in HE.

The influential "What Works?" project (Thomas, 2012) engaged in several research studies across 22 HE institutions and argued that there is a "compelling case that, in higher education, belonging is critical to student retention and success" (2012: 10). Findings from the project echo Tinto's work in that "academic engagement" and "social engagement" are both framed as being important for student belonging and success, although Thomas does also exert more of a focus on institutional practices than Tinto's model. For Thomas (2012: 15), academic engagement refers to academic learning and teaching experiences, curricula and interactions between students and academic staff. Social engagement relates to friendships, engagement in social spaces and wider social extracurricular activities such as clubs and societies. More recently, Thomas *et al.,* (2017) engaged in a further three-year study of practices at thirteen universities to build on the findings from the original What Works project. Findings from the 2017 study echoed the way in which student belonging is crucial in promoting student success

The work of Tinto and Thomas, amongst others, thereby implies that the first-generation students who are most likely to struggle in developing a sense of belonging within HE are those who do not engage in university societies, student union activities, and who do not live in student accommodation. Essentially then "students who live at home, are part-time, older and/or are on courses with extended contact/workplace hours" (Thomas, 2012: 6). Whilst Thomas and Tinto's research is robust it is important to consider what this research means for those first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds whose experiences may not align to dominant ideals and behavior norms of what it means to be a student. Normative models of the student experience are critically discussed in more detail in section 3.8. however, the position of this thesis goes against positioning students in deficit on the basis that they do not (or cannot) subscribe to normative student behaviors.

In relation to student belonging the literature often suggests that there are difficulties in reconciling a working-class background with the middle-class culture of university study (Reay, 2021) which can negatively influence the experiences of non-privileged students within those institutions. For Spengen (2013: 7) this "cultural mismatch" between non-privileged students and HEIs "puts first-generation students at an increased risk for both social and academic issues". Spengen goes so far as to warn against students "overtly display[ing] their working-class backgrounds" arguing that this risks "creating a further disconnect in their ability to establish a sense of belongingness within the university" (2013: 5). This discussion is problematic because it pathologizes working-class culture and suggests first-generation students' authentic ways of being should be concealed as they are inappropriate for academic spaces. Furthermore, Spengen's (2013) arguments, like many other studies in this vein (e.g., Reay *et al.,* 2009b; Reay 2021; Walkerdine, 2020) centre on the experiences of working-class students in elite HEIs where non-privileged students are in the minority and are thus positioned as "fish out of water" in an unfamiliar HE environment which is at odds with their own social and cultural background (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). This normalises the elite university experience whilst disregarding the large number of post-92 HEIs and the students who study within them, who may experience belonging very differently. In relation to a post-92 university context where first-generation students form the majority (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), first-generation students may find it easier to find commonalities between themselves and their peers and thus experience a more secure sense of belonging, something which is agreed upon by Finnegan and Merrill (2017: 318) who noted that the class-make up of HEIs "shapes […] the culture of institutions in a profound way". Crozier *et al*., (2008) concurs that post-92 HEIs which contain larger numbers of first-generation and non-privileged students may place fewer social and cultural demands on them (and thus make it easier for them to feel they belong) but argues that the "problem for these students lies with the reinforcing of low volume social capital and ultimately constrained learning experiences" (Crozier *et al.* 2008: 174). Whilst this is a valid point it is also symptomatic of the negative discourse which operates around post-92 universities, which continually positions them in a deficit way compared to more elite institutions.

It has been evident in discussions so far that the social make-up of an institution can impact on how comfortable students feel, and the literature indicates that relationships are crucial to the development of a sense of belonging (Cureton *et al.*, 2021). Relationships are important both in relation to friendships between students, but also to relationships between students and staff. The importance of supportive staff in fostering the success of adult students has been previously identified in the literature (i.e., Gill, 2021; Merrill, 2015; Merrill, 2012; O'Shea

et al., 2017) and Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) found that staff-student relationships were the most important influence on student belonging. The Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA) project identified that quality learning relationships between academic staff and students were key to promoting achievement (Cousin and Cureton, 2012) and this was agreed upon by Thomas (2012). Cousin and Cureton's (2012) large-scale study indicated the way in which academic staff were able to act as "interlocutors" who could mediate the gap between academic content and professional outcomes which was especially beneficial for first-generation students who lacked other points of reference. Furthermore, O'Keeffe (2013) found that positive staff-student relationships are key to promoting student well-being and Gill (2021) noted their impact on fostering successful transitions into HE. Merrill (2012) concurs that supportive relationships with staff are key, particularly for students from non-privileged backgrounds. The building of trusting and respectful relationships with both staff and other students can therefore be understood as being crucial to student belonging and thus student success (Meehan and Howells, 2019) and it is evident that warm, positive and empathic relationships with teaching staff can make a real difference to first-generation students' experiences.

3.5 First-generation student experiences.

In recent years an increasing number of research studies have focused specifically on first-generation students in HE (e.g., Krause and Coates, 2008; O'Shea *et al.,* 2018; Patfield, 2021; 2022; Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Wainwright and Watts, 2021) due to their growth in numbers as a result of the WP agenda. According to Spiegler and Bednarek (2013: 321) first-generation students often embody an intersection of non-traditional student characteristics:

> Generally speaking, first-generation students are more likely to be from lower income and lower status-occupational homes; they tend to be older; and they are more likely to belong to an ethnic minority in the country they live in.

Gardner and Holley (2011) concur that first-generation students are disproportionately likely to be from low-income homes, however, Stuart (2006: 163) warns against making assumptions regarding the economic background of first-generation students, stating that "first generation students in higher education should not be conflated or confused with students from lower socioeconomic groups", hence the focus in this thesis on participants who were both first-generation and from non-privileged backgrounds. Discussions within the following section of this chapter draw on literature focused on both non-privileged and first-generation student experiences, due to the overlap between these categories and their simultaneous relevance to the participants of this study.

The socio-economic background of students is an important consideration because it remains one of the most stubborn predictors of both educational achievement and employment outcomes, despite decades of policy interventions to try and address this issue (Lehmann, 2014; Reay, 2018). There has been a great deal of research which has focused on the experiences of working-class students in elite universities which has largely suggested they feel out of place (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009b), like outsiders (Coulson *et al.,* 2018) or that they need to 'fake it until they make it' (Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2014). Working-class students are often situated as being cultural outsiders in HE (Lehmann, 2009b) as they may find it more difficult to integrate culturally and socially, particularly in elite institutions (Lehmann, 2014; Merrill, 2015; Reay *et al.,* 2009b). Consequently, students from a working-class background are persistently framed in the literature as occupying a position of disadvantage in HE, financially, culturally and socially which could have implications for feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy (Granfield, 1991).

Within the existing literature there is significant overlap between the way in which working-class and first-generation student experiences are discussed as first-generation students are also often depicted as having difficult experiences in university (Davis, 2010: Gardener and Holley, 2011; O'Shea, 2018; Patfield *et al.,* 2021; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), partly due to their (largely) non-privileged backgrounds. However, challenges for these students are also attributed to the obvious lack of a knowledgeable parent who can equip students with relevant cultural capital and who can provide insider knowledge about studying at university (O'Shea, 2013). As summarised here by Thomas and Quinn (2007: 68):

> Parental education provides access to cultural capital, which is the knowledge, language, values, experiences and ways of doing things that belong to the dominant social group.

Crozier *et al.,* (2010: 185) concur that first-generation students "start out with little or limited knowledge of what is expected of them" and have "little understanding of the structure and overall requirements of their course". Consequently, due to not having a university -level education, the parents and families of first-generation students are viewed as reproducing educational inequality and are often framed in terms of lack (Patfield *et al.,* 2022). However, Gofen (2009) indicates the ways in which these students actually benefit from the support and resources their family provide, particularly if the family have a positive attitude towards education. This support is vital for wellbeing, "even if it does not confer capitals that translate into instrumentalist career benefits" (Christie and Burke, 2021: 98). Hope and Quinlan (2021: 2552) also argue against the negative dominant discourses surrounding working-class relationships with HE, stating that the "commonly-held understanding of working-class

culture as anti-educational is not always true". Instead, they argue that the strengths which working-class students bring with them to HE often go widely unrecognised. Similar thoughts are echoed by Lehmann (2014: 12) who noted that:

> All [participants] considered their decision to attend university not only as the fulfilment of their own educational hopes, but those of their parents as well. Rather than acting as a barrier, their working-class background can be interpreted as the reason they attended university and were successful once there.

This research therefore emphasises that a familial context which values education, even without direct experience of HE, can be a valuable resource to first-generation students.

According to Thomas and Quinn (2007) the value of family support may be a factor underpinning why many first-generation students elect to study locally. Thomas and Quinn go on to discuss the way in which some (young) first-generation students may find participating in HE a greater transition than others:

> For many of these young people nothing dramatically changed, in-fact going to university may have secured stasis for them more than other choices such as employment would have done: they carried on living at home with their family; instead of leaving the house for school or college they left to go to university; they often went along with the same friends they had in school; and they generally continued with the same part time jobs. The university, rather than ushering in a new life, facilitated a continuation of the old one (2007: 56).

Christie *et al.,* (2005) concur that for many non-privileged students HE forms only one component of lives filled with employment and family commitments, noting that, for some, university is less about being and more about doing. This work supports Leese' (2010) idea of the "new" university student who spends little time on campus outside of lectures/seminars and who maintains employment alongside their studies. However, Thomas and Quinn (2007) are quick to point out that this does not mean first-generation students are not experiencing a more difficult transition in other ways, noting that they are less likely to be familiar with academic practices, the services offered by the HEI or the norms and values of the institution. Furthermore, O'Shea (2020b: 106) found in her study that, for first-generation students, entering HE was an "emotionally layered move that had repercussions for both learners and those around them".

Other less obvious challenges may also be present for first-generation students such as a lack of confidence or a sense of entitlement in relation to HE (O'Shea, 2013). Issues such as this are often referred to as the "hidden injury of class" (Sennett and Cobb, 1977) because

according to Lawler (2014) they relate not to the more obvious manifestations of lack but in the hidden self-doubt, shaming and self-scrutiny that occur as a result of being pathologized. This point is supported by Hope (2014: 90) who engaged in a doctoral research inquiry into first-generation students' experience of HE and concluded that they "often lacked confidence in their academic capability and talked about struggling through academic and/or personal difficulties to achieve their goals". This is significant because self-confidence and self-efficacy are known to have a crucial effect on students' transitions and experiences (Bowles *et al.,* 2013; Brooman and Darwent, 2014;).

It is evident then, that there is a great deal of research suggesting that non-privileged students (including but not limited to those from first-generation backgrounds) have a number of barriers to overcome in relation to university study which may impact both on their decisions to attend university and their experiences once they get there. First-generation/non-privileged students have consequently largely been positioned in deficit discourses (Patfield *et al.,* 2022). The work of Lehmann (2014) is a notable exception to this consensus, as his research focused on the experiences of working-class students who were "exceptionally successful" at an (elite) research-intensive university. Lehmann draws attention to the strengths of being a student from a non-privileged background, noting the determination and resilience of students to "get in and stay in" in HE environments which are unfamiliar to them (Lehmann 2014: 12).

Whilst the experiences of non-privileged/first-generation students are often portrayed as being difficult and challenging, it is important that these challenges are not attributed to student lack and that students and their families are not viewed negatively (O'Shea, 2013). Unfortunately, this is often the case and Speigler and Bednarek (2013: 330) note the way in which existing literature often depicts first-generation students as having individual, rather than structural, issues meaning that "ultimately, structural problems inherent in the organisation of education are camouflaged as cultural deficits of individuals". Similarly, Devlin (2013) notes the danger in assuming that if students are resilient enough, clever enough, and work hard enough (i.e., align themselves with the neoliberal ideology) they can succeed. For Devlin this meritocratic way of thinking is problematic as it effectively means that any failings are attributed to the individual student and therefore no blame is ascribed to structural factors which go misrecognised. An example of this is evident in discussions concerning first generation students' lack of preparation for academic study (Speigler and Bednarek, 2013) which can make transitioning into HE a great deal more difficult (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Reay *et al.,* 2002). Post-92 institutions in particular often welcome students with a diverse range of entry qualifications, meaning it is important to examine how well prepared the university is to cater for the requirements of students who

may not have a background in academic study (Hope, 2014). Yet despite the WP agenda and the diversification of student cohorts, the academic practices of universities have been slow to adapt (Burke, 2010; Reay, 2003). Hinton-Smith (2012) utilises a square peg/round hole analogy to illuminate universities' continued efforts to try and integrate non-traditional students into a long-standing HE system which essentially remains modelled around the traditional university student. This is not to suggest that pedagogical practices within HE have not adapted, as in many institutions new and inclusive practices to teaching, learning, assessment and pastoral support have been embedded (Marr, 2012). Nonetheless, although post-92 HEIs have a robust history of recruiting diverse students from under-represented backgrounds (Burke, 2012; Reay 2003) even in universities where most students are first-generation, the dominant culture of academia can be alienating (Read *et al.,* 2003; Reay, 2003) and overly middle-class (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017). The difficulties of navigating academia and potentially feeling lost and out of place is one area of difficulty which first-generation students may have to navigate, as they have limited points of reference to draw upon. However, the risks faced by this student group go far beyond these issues. The next section of this chapter now goes on to outline some of those risks in more detail.

3.6 HE: A risky business?

Risk was a key concept emanating from the literature on non-privileged and first-generation students and thus was significant to this research. Within this thesis, risk is conceptualised not simply as an objective hazard, but as a complex product of an individual's lived experience as it is clearly situated in first-generation students' social and cultural contexts (Jarvis, 2021). Some of the risks encountered by first-generation students in the academy are discussed elsewhere in this thesis, for example the potential risk of feeling lost and out of place (Read *et al*., 2003; Reay, 2003), and the risk to damaging relationships with friends and family (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; O'Shea 2014; O'Shea *et al.,* 2017). A risk of academic failure should also be considered as Reay (2003: 307) notes that mature students (in common with many younger non-privileged students) may bring with them to university "a troubled educational history" and have often followed disrupted and non-linear pathways into HE. This is supported by Mallman and Lee (2016: 690) who echo that mature students may have "fraught former relations to education". This difficult educational history can potentially lead to first-generation students lacking confidence in their own academic ability and having fragile learner identities (Lawler, 2014; James *et al.,* 2015) which has clear repercussions for how they may need to be supported and how universities may need to work to build their confidence and validate their student identities.

Participation in HE also necessitates significant financial costs and economic risks (Archer *et al.,* 2003) and these risks are inevitably higher for students from non-privileged backgrounds.

These risks can relate to economic uncertainty given the high levels of debt which non-privileged students are required to take on, which can be even more problematic given working-class tendencies to be debt adverse (Bathmaker, 2021; Callander and Mason, 2017). Furthermore, non-privileged students suffer an increased financial burden, not only by taking on the debt of student loans and tuition fees, but also in relation to their reduced earning potential whilst taking the time to study. This risk is enhanced by the way in which inequality operates within graduate labour markets (as discussed in chapter two) (Milburn, 2009), particularly during a time when links between HE and graduate employment are increasingly tenuous (Bathmaker, 2021). As highlighted by Burke (2012: 145) there are thus "differential and unequal levels of risk" attached to HE participation dependent on student background and the type of university they study at.

Negotiating financial risks can lead first-generation students to make course choices which they perceive to be safer in relation to promised employment outcomes as they need to ensure that their growth in earnings would be sufficient to warrant the financial cost involved. There has been criticism by some scholars of the "learn to earn" narrative (Brown 2003; Brown *et al.,* 2011) however for non-privileged students the need for financial security has to be prevalent because there they have access to limited financial support and therefore being risk-adverse makes pragmatic sense in this context. As Basit (2012: 186) points out, non-privileged students "cannot afford to waste valuable time and money in pursuit of a degree that may turn out to be unattainable for a variety of reasons or may not lead to a career commensurate with their qualifications". This inherently riskier position occupied by non-privileged first-generation students therefore means that they cannot make choices as freely as their more protected middle-class peers (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). As emphasised by Jarvis (2021: 30), in agreement with Beck (1992), "the individualisation of choice comes with the individualisation of the responsibility and risk attached to that choice", therefore the burden of responsibility rests solely on the individual themselves to make the right decision. It is therefore important to acknowledge the intricate connections between risk, responsibility and neoliberalism and the way in which risk is deemed necessary to access opportunity in neoliberal society:

> A key characteristic of neoliberalism is that the entrepreneurial mode of taking and managing risk is normative not only for capitalists and corporations but also for individual subjects, for whom it is cast as the means of life-building (Joseph, 2015: 498).

Risk is the lifeblood of the neoliberal subject who is expected to embrace it in order to succeed, it is "the oxygen for the entrepreneurial self" (Mirowski, 2013: 96). This point is

emphasised by Bathmaker (2021: 88) who noted the way in which neoliberal society "demands dispositions that are open to uncertainty and risk" in terms of career development. This is problematic for non-privileged first-generation students who may be pragmatically risk adverse and can be made even more difficult by the absence of emotional assets such as a sense of confidence and entitlement (Reay, 2005) which can be limited in non-privileged students (Sennet and Cobb, 1977). Furthermore, as emphasised by Beck (1992) neoliberalism's insistence that individuals are self-interested and solely responsible for their own success means that students are at risk of self-blame and emotional injury if they do not succeed. As summarised by Chisholm (1995: 47):

> Taking one's fate into one's hands in this individualised way also entails high risks because not only success, but also failure, rests with oneself

In a context where structural inequalities are misrecognised as personal problems, it becomes even more important for first-generation students to succeed in order to also protect their self-esteem. In neoliberal society, risk translates into responsibility – primarily in this context the responsibility to make the 'right choices' in order to open the door to the good life (Berlant, 2011) via participation in HE. As argued by Beck, in contemporary neoliberal society, individuals are required to find "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (1992: 137), i.e., individuals are expected to find their own individual resolutions to what are essentially structural problems. This is more difficult for non-privileged first-generation students who are already occupying positions of structural disadvantage. University engagement therefore carries a notable possibility of harm requiring first-generation students to take proactive action to mitigate and minimise risks during their studies (Jarvis, 2021).

The relationship between risk and responsibility may be more pronounced for mature students who often have more significant responsibilities. In relation to this, Brine and Waller (2004) outline the risks negotiated by working-class women on an Access to HE course, outlining four specific areas of risk: "risk of academic failure, economic and material risk, risk to personal relationships and risk to class identity" (2004: 102). Risk of academic failure is also particularly pertinent to students who have had negative previous experiences in education and thus who have fragile learner identities (Brine and Waller, 2004) which would be further damaged by a further lack of academic success. As a biographical inquiry, how these risks are understood, storied and mediated by non-privileged first-generation students is of specific relevance to this thesis.

3.7 Local Students: The Marginalised Majority?

The literature suggests that many first-generation students are also local students, therefore the local student experience was pertinent to this inquiry. There are a number of definitions of local students within the literature, including students who live within 30 miles of their university (Woodfield, 2014), and students who are able to travel to university within a certain timeframe (Thomas, 2020). For clarity the term local students in this thesis refers to students who have not changed address to attend university. Instead, they travel to university daily, as opposed to living with their peers in student accommodation (Stevenson and Toman, 2013). Students that fit this category have also been identified in the literature as “day” students (Christie *et al.,* 2005) “commuter” students (Thomas, 2020) or “stayeducation students” (Pokorny *et al.,* 2017).

The local student experience has traditionally been an under-researched area in the UK, although it has recently been subject to a growing level of attention (e.g., Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Lightfoot, 2018; Maguire and Morris, 2018; Neves and Hillman, 2017; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Thomas 2020), driven by the growth in local student numbers (particularly in post-92 HEIs). Recent data showed that around 25% of students remained in their family home nationally (Pokorny *et al.,* 2017), although this figure rose significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. These figures, however, reflect the sector as a whole; individual institutions offer a very different picture. Lower-entry post-92 HEIs generally recruit a greater number of local students in comparison to higher-entry tariff universities (BIS, 2014b; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). The existing body of research for local students generally follows a deficit narrative based on notions of “missing out” on the full student experience (Holdsworth, 2006; 2008; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2020).

Research has demonstrated that local students are more likely to be first-generation and thus are more likely to embody non-traditional characteristics (Holdsworth, 2006; 2009a; Thomas, 2020) such as being mature, or from a low socio-economic background (BIS, 2014a; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; HEFCE, 2009; NUS, 2015). Specifically, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) state that students from the lowest socio-economic background are over three times more likely to commute to university from home than those from the most privileged backgrounds. Maguire and Morris (2018: 7) summarise the make-up of local students as follows:

> The best available evidence suggests that commuter students are also more likely to be the first generation in their families to enter higher education, have a lower income, be mature and be from an ethnic minority background. In England, they are more likely to live and study in and around London and other large cities.

The findings of Neves and Hillman (2017: 8) similarly found that first-generation students were 25% more likely to study at a nearby university within half an hour of their home. This may be because, according to Donnelly and Gamsu, (2018: 4) “leaving home and attending a distant university is too often the preserve of white, middle class, privately educated young people”. It could also be because student decisions to study closer to home are “steeped in young peoples’ emotional attachments to locally based networks of family and friends” (Christie, 2007: 2446). This has clear significance for first-generation students, particularly regarding where they decide to study.

Despite growing numbers of local students, large-scale research by the NUS (2015) identified that their experiences often remain overlooked in institutional policy and practice. The NUS interviewed staff members at several universities and found that none of them had developed any specific policies for local students, nor had their needs been considered in any real detail. Institutions admitted that welcome and induction processes were often geared towards the dominant model of the ‘resident’ student who was living away from home, which could exclude many first-generation students. In this way the report summarised that the needs of local students are often invisible:

> It was clear that the experiences of students living in the parental home are largely hidden, obscured by the more obvious needs of those moving away from home […] the needs of these [local] students should be considered. Separate provision is not necessarily the solution but considering the needs of these students when creating policies and carrying out activities is essential.

Consequently, the NUS (2015) called for further research to develop a first-hand understanding of the experiences of local students to ensure that they are supported adequately and to address their invisibility in institutional policy and practice. Although the NUS (2015) did not discuss university status, the invisibility of local students may be a more prevalent issue for elite HEIs because Tight (2011: 10) argues they maintain “twentieth century ideals that living in a collegiate atmosphere creates the perfect conditions to foster academic learning in a residential community”. It is also acknowledged in the literature that elite HEIs place a greater emphasis on extra-curricular activities for their students and expect university study to be an all-encompassing experience (Bradley and Ingram, 2012) which is likely to impact local students more significantly. Furthermore, the more privileged student body in elite HEIs are more likely to be more geographically mobile as they are less constrained by financial or family commitments (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). It therefore appears that the dominant model of studenthood reflects traditional experiences of traditional students in traditional (elite) universities. In this way, both post-92 HEIs and the experiences

of the (predominantly local) first-generation students who study within them, remain marginalised in dominant discourse.

Because local students sit outside of traditional student norms, their experiences are more likely to be perceived as being difficult, particularly in relation to belonging. For example, Holdsworth (2009a: 235) indicates that local students may find it difficult to move between home and student localities daily, as this can create a "strong sense of being between two worlds" which can make it difficult to feel a sense of belonging in either context. This is made worse by students' local knowledge not being valued in the university, and their academic knowledge not always being valued within their home environment. Therefore, according to Holdsworth (2009a: 235) local students can be paradoxically both "in-place" and "out of place" at the same time. However, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) drew upon Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field to examine the complexities of local student identity in a more nuanced way. Their findings suggest a messier picture than Holdsworth (2006; 2009a) accounts for, arguing it is class identity, rather than locality, which creates issues around fitting in. Importantly, for Abrahams and Ingram (2013), the majority of local students in their study were able to adapt to both contexts, feeling a sense of belonging at both home and university, rather than at neither. Students were able to switch "seamlessly" between the two fields demonstrating what Abraham and Ingram (2013) term as a "chameleon habitus". Consequently, the authors argue that studying locally is not an inferior or second-best way of being a student and that it should be recognised as a valid and positive choice for many students. This suggests that local first-generation experiences at university may not be as problematic as literature commonly indicates.

Despite Abraham and Ingram's (2013) call for local student experiences to be valued, they argue that moving away to university remains viewed in dominant discourse as a rite of passage which builds upon middle-class norms of geographical motility intertwined with discourses of independence. Holdsworth (2009b) challenges the connotation between motility and independence, suggesting that students who remain living at home actually often maintain a greater level of financial independence than students who move away to study. Holdsworth goes on to argue the following:

> Mobility is not a necessary condition of negotiating transitions to adulthood, particularly for learning about responsibilities, though it is often assumed to be the case. Rather, in celebrating students' mobility, we are valorising a particular model of transition to adulthood which focuses on separation, self-resilience, and responsibility for the self, rather than one based on interdependencies, mutual support and responsibility for others (2009b: 1861).

The above quote demonstrates that discourses which position the typical student as independent and geographically mobile can clearly be related to neoliberal ideals that value individual success and resilience over familial ties and care for others. Dominant neoliberal ideologies continue to shape what is expected of the 'typical' or 'ideal' student, leading to local students who often have commitments at home continuing to be positioned as 'other' in sector policy and practice. This could potentially feed into the deficit way first-generation students are often framed, given their likelihood to also be studying locally.

To challenge this deficit positioning it is important to acknowledge the actual viewpoints of local students themselves. Christie *et al.,* (2005) found that the local students in their research viewed living at home as a positive decision and did not feel that they were missing out or having "a second-class student experience" (Stevenson and Toman, 2013: 18). Similarly, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) make a valid point that local students may not be perturbed by concerns that they are missing out on the social aspects of HE study because often they will have existing friendships and social support at home, and as such have a more pragmatic relationship with university that is based on academic engagement. Furthermore, Mangan *et al.,* (2010) indicated that studying locally in many ways was a positive choice for the non-privileged students in their study as it enabled them to remain in the family home and thus reduced the cost of studying, as well as allowing them to remain in existing employment (Brooks, 2002). For first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds, electing to study locally can therefore be understood as an economically pragmatic decision which meets their needs and helps to mitigate the financial risks of HE.

Local student approaches to HE may differ as a result of them remaining in their existing home. For example, Thomas and Jones (2017: 7) argue that local students follow patterns of "selective engagement" choosing only to engage in activities that they deemed to be worthwhile. Krause (2007: 27) concurs that local students "typically spend less time on campus and have fewer opportunities to make contact with their university peers" and similar findings regarding a lack of social engagement are also echoed by Stuart *et al.,* (2011), Yorke and Longden (2008) and Quinn *et al.,* (2005). This issue may be more pronounced for mature students who, due to caring or employment responsibilities follow what Redmond (2006: 126) terms as a "wash and go" approach, attending lectures but having minimal participation in non-academic aspects of university life. According to Brooman and Darwent (2014) and Thomas (2020) these different patterns of social engagement create a lower sense of belonging for local students, who rely more on their existing friends, as opposed to those made at university.

It is clearly evident then, that research focused on local students often raises concerns about social integration and students missing out on the 'full' student experience (NUS, 2015) contributing to the notion "that living at home represents an inferior model of participation in HE" (Holdsworth, 2006: 495). Negative outcomes for local students are also noted in the literature and concerns are raised regarding lower rates of continuation (Social Market Foundation, 2017), lower degree outcomes (Neves and Hillman, 2017; BIS 2014a) and a reduced likelihood of gaining graduate-level employment (BIS, 2014a).

For Thomas (2020) the reason behind these poor outcomes lies in local students' lack of engagement in the wider "higher education experience", essentially meaning "extra and co-curricular activities" which promote social integration and thus student engagement. According to Thomas (2020: 299) local students "did not appear to value, and therefore prioritise enhancement activities" because they "mistakenly believe that academic success is sufficient to realise their graduate career ambitions". Thomas and Jones (2017:7) argue that:

> Commuter students prioritised academic engagement at the expense of enhancement and social engagement, seemingly unaware of the advantages of these types and sites of engagement to their implicitly and explicitly cited goals of achieving the qualification and secure an enhanced employment outcome.

This quote infers that students who prioritise academic engagement are neglecting the main focus of university which apparently lies within socialising with other students. The notion of the importance of university social activities very much reflects the construction of the traditional student which Stevenson and Toman (2013) call for universities to move away from. Whilst other commentators agree with Thomas (2020) that local students prioritise academic achievement over social integration (Grayson, 2003) in a context of time poverty amid multiple commitments it is easy to see that this is why this priority is necessary.

In contrast to Thomas' (2020) position, a BIS (2014a) report based on large scale, quantitative data concluded that:

> The association of poor outcomes and living at home mainly reflects the pre-existing characteristics of respondents who live at home rather than disadvantages they experience as a result of living at home whilst studying.

Essentially this report demonstrated that students' place of living was not a key influence on employment outcomes once individual, family and institutional characteristics had been accounted for (BIS, 2014a). In effect, it was social and economic inequalities that impacted on students' graduate outcomes as opposed to their local status or related lack of social integration.

Viewpoints such as Thomas (2020) could potentially be problematic in that they risk positioning local students as deviant for failing to align with dominant models of studenthood, as opposed to challenging narrow discourses of what it means to be a student to be more inclusive of local student experiences. The dominant idea of what it means to be a 'student' is problematic not only for local students, but for first-generation students in post-92 HEIs more widely as their experiences often fall outside of these norms, as will now be discussed below.

3.8 The 'typical student' discourse

The creation of the typical student is "very much a creation of contemporary folklore" (Holdsworth 2006: 511) governed by middle-class discourses which focus on the 'traditional student' (Abraham and Ingram, 2013; Christie *et al.,* 2005). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003: 599) argued that the dominant discourse in HE constructs a limited notion of the "ideal student" as being "male, white, middle class and able-bodied, an autonomous individual, unencumbered by domestic responsibility, poverty or self-doubt", an argument which is also echoed by Brooks (2012). Government policy and institutional practice alike have remained built around this notion:

> Government policy is geared around making non-traditional students 'fit' with the middle-class way of accessing university, whereby leaving home and submerging oneself in the university 'experience' and adopting a 'student identity' is perceived as the norm (Abraham and Ingram, 2013).

This quote draws attention to the way in which policy perpetuates a narrow view of studenthood as the norm. This has remained the case despite a growing number of scholars arguing that this dominant conception of a typical student lacks relevance in today's diverse HE context (Lightfoot, 2009; Pokorny *et al.,* 2017) and certainly lacks relevance for many first-generation students, particularly those from non-privileged backgrounds.

These culturally prevalent discourses of the typical student are enforced by the media, government policy and institutional materials alike and can be cruel in that they "contribute to a student's self-conception of otherness" (Read *et al.,* 2003: 267), leading to students who do not (or cannot) access what could be considered to be an 'authentic' student experience being framed in deficit terms. These issues apply to non-traditional students, including those from non-privileged backgrounds and first-generation students who sit outside of idealised middle-class student norms. As emphasised by Burke (2012: 116) "there is evidence to support an argument that the first-generation student is subject to a major re-shaping in order to be measured against the ideal-student subject". Consequently, normative student discourses can be exclusionary and first-generation students who are positioned outside of

this construction may internalise these discourses and position themselves as lacking in comparison (Read *et al.,* 2003). It seems that, as discussed by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003: 599) "the masses who can now benefit from university education are pathologized by comparing them to typical students and labelling them as non-traditional", whilst transitions to university continue to be ritualised in the media as a rite of passage which assumes students will be leaving home (Holdsworth, 2006).

Notions of the "ideal-student subject" (Burke, 2012: 116) underpin dominant conceptions of 'the student experience' which encapsulate the "norms and expectations attached to contemporary studenthood" (Pötschulat *et al.,* 2021: 4). Holdsworth argued in 2006 that the "normative student experience, as stereotyped by popular portrayals of student life, is becoming less relevant" (2006: 496). However, since then, dominant depictions of the student experience have remained largely unchanged and stereotypical ideals of the student as a young, binge drinking, socially active person living on campus and engaging in extracurricular activities at university, are commonly evoked in popular discourse (Holton and Finn, 2017). The link between university students and alcohol consumption is well established and ongoing reinforcement by the media has meant that drinking is entrenched as a normalised part of student culture and the student experience (Hebden *et al.,* 2015).

Bourdieu's concept of doxa offers a useful tool to explore why dominant discourses surrounding the ideal student subject and the expectations of the student experience have remained largely unchanged. For Bourdieu (1977), doxa contributes to the reproduction of dominant ideas which go largely unquestioned, become taken for granted and thus are gradually internalised. In this way, individualistic discourses of the student experience have become so entrenched in the mind-set of individuals that the exclusionary nature of this discourse can often go unchallenged which can misrecognise the experiences of non-privileged first-generation students and frame these as lesser, missing out or otherwise deviant. This view of the student experience can influence undergraduates' expectations of what university life might be like and can be particularly powerful for first-generation students who may have limited points of reference to demystify the student experience. In this way, the doxic ideal-student subject may permeate first-generation students' understanding of what their student experience should look like, even if this is not the experience that they actually want.

3.9 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has explored relevant literature examining both the first-generation student experience and relevant concepts such as student choice, notions of belonging, and elements of risk have been examined. It is evident that the literature suggests that first-

generation, non-privileged students who study in post-92 HEIs may experience university in a different way to traditional students, those studying in elite contexts, and also those who live in student accommodation. There is a strong consensus in the literature that living at home compromises the ability of students to develop social networks within HE, although if this is the case within HEIs where the majority of students are local is not clear. The body of research around both first-generation and local students also suggests that there may be tensions and areas of contention in relation to the way that universities currently support these students and the ways in which they construct their own identities and create a meaningful sense of belonging. Consequently, it is vital that research critically engages with and challenges the binary, socially constructed concepts that have become so embedded in the typical student discourse (Finn, 2017). The participants in this study embody an intersection of identities that sit outside of the 'traditional student' which need to be theorised and explored to allow for different ways of conceptualising student experiences to emerge. These tensions are both investigated and challenged within this study which aims to address the lack of research concerning the lived experiences of first-generation students within a post-92 HEI.

This review of relevant literature has illuminated a number of issues which this thesis will endeavour to explore. Existing literature often offers a focus on a specific stage of the student lifecycle (often the first-year experience) and research around non-privileged students in HE often focuses on working-class students in elite institutions. There is less attention paid to the experiences of first-generation students in post-92 HEIs at all stages of the student life cycle. This study seeks to address that gap in the literature by drawing on biographical student narratives in order to explore a range of non-privileged first-generation students' experiences within a post-92 case study university.

Chapter 4: Mapping the theoretical framework

4.1 Introduction to chapter

The conceptual framework for this inquiry draws on elements of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice (notably the tools of habitus, capital, field, doxa, and symbolic violence) coupled with Berlant's (2011) depiction of cruel optimism and the good life. This study is therefore able to extend the knowledge base on first-generation students by examining their experiences from a unique theoretical vantage point. Given the existing range of studies within the literature that have focused on first-generation student experiences, I felt it was pertinent for my research to uncover a new way of analysing their narratives to enable a deeper and more holistic understanding to be revealed. Utilising a unique conceptual framework in this study allowed me to draw on different ways of seeing and analysing the experiences of my participants with contributions from both Bourdieu and Berlant as distinct theories. It is not my intention within this thesis to try and neatly merge these theoretical perspectives together as whilst some similarities exist between them, there are also differences concerning their approach. I feel that together they enable an enriched way of theorising first-generation student journeys in a post-92 HEI that "speak to the multiplicity of students' experiences" (Abes 2009: 150). Although these theoretical tools are referred to throughout the remaining chapters of this thesis, this chapter offers a focused, in-depth discussion in order to clarify and justify the theoretical framework which underpins the research.

During the initial discussions within this chapter, I outline the sociology of Bourdieu and offer an examination of the concepts of habitus, capitals, field, doxa and symbolic violence to articulate how these concepts relate to HE and the context of this research. Following on from this, the discussion turns to Berlant's (2011) idea of cruel optimism and the good life, including a discussion of hope which is a key concept in relation to Berlant's theory. I evaluate the reasons I was drawn to this framework in the undertaking of my research and the ways I felt that this offered a novel yet important lens to partner with Bourdieu's thinking tools.

4.2 A Discussion of Bourdieu

> The unfairness of allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society (Wacquant, 1998: 216).

This quote captures what initially underpinned my motivation for undertaking this research. I have been continually troubled by the injustice of the education system and found Bourdieu's work offered powerful tools to illuminate this injustice within my research. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1977; 1986) has wielded a powerful influence over the field of educational sociology in recent decades and the use of Bourdieu's theoretical tools have dominated contemporary research around issues of class and HE (e.g., Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013; Crozier *et al.,* 2008; Merrill *et al.,* 2020; Reay *et al*., 2004: 2006, Webb *et al.,* 2017, amongst many others). Several researchers within the field have made extensive use of Bourdieu's conceptual framework noting that Bourdieu is "enormously good for thinking with" (Jenkins, 1996: II). It is important to note that any of Bourdieu's thinking tools (such as capital, habitus and field) that are discussed within this thesis are not designed to be used in isolation but exist in an interlinked relationship (Bourdieu, 1993). These tools are now discussed and explored in more detail.

4.2.1 Field

Field, in a Bourdieusian sense refers to both social settings such as individual classrooms or universities, and also wider and more abstract notions such as the field of HE (Reay *et al.,* 2005). The concept of field is important to this inquiry, as for Bourdieu, social relations can only be understood if the space they exist within is also examined (Bruen, 2014). For Bourdieu, the field represents an arena of struggle and conflict over access to specific resources (Jenkins, 2002). It refers to the discourses, values, rules and regulations which both authorise and produce practices (Webb *et al.,* 2002). According to Bourdieu, individual agents (e.g., individuals, groups and institutions) within the field will be able to position themselves in various ways according to the different forms of capital that they have at their disposal, and this position allows them to convene differing levels of power or status (Maton, 2005: 689). The field within this inquiry is a post-92 university which sits within a wider field of the hierarchical English HE landscape. Using field as a conceptual tool allows for a recognition of the way in which struggle, power and privilege operate in HE and is therefore a valuable device to draw in in this thesis.

Bourdieu often used a game analogy to describe the field, defining the ways agents will use a variety of strategies to enable them to enact success and maximise their position (Thomson, 2008). Therefore, the way in which a field is conceptualised is dependent on the capital and habitus at the disposal of the individual agent (Bruen, 2014). Consequently, the field is dominated by inequality and uneven power relations which explains why some people (or institutions) are more able than others to be successful (Grenfell, 2008). Applying this logic to the field of HE from the student perspective demonstrates how participation is unequal according to the resources or capital that students have access to and their

awareness of the “rules of the game” of university study (Crozier *et al.,* 2008). For example, some (middle-class) students may be able to mobilise their advantage in the field via social contacts from family members to help them gain valuable work experience or economic support from parents. Likewise, they may also be more aware of the value of gaining relevant work experience or engaging in extra activities to accumulate additional capitals and strengthen their graduate employment prospects (Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013). The symbolic value of a degree qualification also differs in the field of graduate employment depending on the status of the degree-awarding institution which can position graduates in a deficit way (Belfield *et al.,* 2018: Crew, 2015; Stich, 2012), therefore potentially compounding social inequalities. Bourdieu’s concept of field as a theoretical construct thus offers a useful lens to examine the experiences of first-generation students in a low-status post-92 university before, during and after students’ time at university.

4.2.2 Cultural Capital

The concept of capital is crucial to understanding a Bourdieusian interpretation of field, and vice-versa. Bourdieu (1986) outlined three principal forms of capital: economic, social and cultural, all of which are interlinked. The notion of capital shifts the lens away from focusing upon purely economic relations by also acknowledging the importance of cultural and social resources and the ways in which these have currency and value in various fields. Bourdieu (1986) depicted cultural capital as existing within three subtypes: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. Embodied capital is acquired both consciously and unconsciously over time via socialisation from family and community (Reay *et al.,* 2005). Objectified capital comprises the ownership of physical objects and cultural goods that carry economic and/or cultural value such as books or works of art. Institutionalised capital comprises institutional recognition such as credentials or degree-level qualifications which convey competence and authority (Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Cultural capital impacts upon the strategies that players (i.e., students/graduates) have to draw upon when entering the field (of HE) to play the game (attempt to gain a degree/obtain graduate employment). As outlined above, having valid forms of cultural capital when engaging in HE can enhance the opportunities and success of a student. Conversely, lacking valid forms of cultural capital can reduce the chances of success. For example, if a student has parents that have themselves attended university this is likely to be beneficial to them in their own study. Conversely, a first-generation student may lack any informed knowledge of what to expect in HE and what strategies will be helpful, and so may be at a disadvantage (O’Shea, 2013; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Cultural capital can also be drawn upon to highlight the “affective aspects of inequality” (Skeggs, 1997: 10) such as levels of confidence, self-certainty, and a sense of entitlement and which are related to the

possession of high levels of (dominant) cultural capital and which can impact on first-generation students' perceptions and experiences within the field of HE.

Bourdieu (1986) depicted qualifications (such as degrees) as institutional capital which offer social status. It is important to be reminded that Bourdieu suggested that the scarceness of academic qualifications is what gave them value and allowed them to operate as material and economic currency. For Bourdieu (1986) therefore the rapid growth of student numbers as the result of the massification agenda in HE may lead to some students having a reduction in the cultural and economic return gained from their investment in a degree (Brown *et al.,* 2011). As discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, growing numbers of graduates in the workplace also means that the status of the degree-awarding university is increasingly important in a context of qualification devaluation (Belfield *et al.,* 2018: Crew, 2015; Stich, 2012). It is therefore evident that cultural capital as a concept is useful in exploring the experiences of the first-generation students within this thesis, given the low-status university context of this research.

4.2.3 Social and Economic Capital

Social capital refers to the resources that exist within an individual's social networks and the value these can offer (Reay *et al.,* 2005). Ball (2003: 82) found that a wide disparity exists between the social capital of working and middle-class students. The social capital invoked by working class students was largely related to familial and immediate social ties that offered support and encouragement but limited pragmatic information in terms of HE. In contrast middle class students were more likely to have access to useful personal and professional contacts that could be mobilised to help them make more informed educational choices. Middle-class students were also more likely to have contacts to help them gain experience or entry into their desired career paths (Ball, 2003). It is evident then that social capital illuminates the way in which privilege can operate through social contacts and as such has relevance for exploring both university choice-making and graduate career outcomes of non-privileged first-generation students.

Finally, economic capital refers to financial wealth, which can be used to generate other forms of capital, such as by purchasing a private and elite education (Reay *et al.,* 2005). Bourdieu (1986) emphasised the interplay between the different types of capital, stressing the way in which they can be converted into one another and that the use and availability of one form of capital is often dependent on the other capitals which are at an individual's disposal. Economic capital therefore can underpin other forms of capital and as such is relevant to the experiences of non-privileged, first-generation students who are likely to have limited levels of economic capital at their disposal.

4.2.4 Habitus

The habitus, according to Bourdieu (1984) refers to the (conscious and unconscious) rules, values and dispositions which are gained from an individual's cultural history and which transpose across different fields. These inherent values and dispositions are acquired from various contexts such as family, education, and wider class and cultural contexts, and impact upon the response of an individual in any given situation (Webb *et al.,* 2002). Bourdieu referred to habitus as "a structuring structure which organises practices and the perception of practices" (1984: 170) and used it as a conceptual tool to negotiate between the opposing concepts of agency and structure (Reay *et al.,* 2005; Webb *et al.,* 2017). As evidenced here by Maton:

> Habitus is the link not only between past, present and future, but also between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective (2008: 53).

Grenfell (2008: 53) concurs that habitus essentially bridges the gap between the personal and the social, as the dispositions generated by the habitus underpin the individual actions that contribute to social structures. In this way the habitus is able to generate a choice of possible actions that allow the individual to decide on both transformative and/or constraining action (Reay *et al.,* 2005). Habitus is therefore relevant in terms of exploring first-generation students' choice making processes as well as exploring how their habitus shaped their student experience and their expectations/experiences of employment.

It is important to acknowledge that habitus is agentic (James *et al.,* 2015) as although it reflects the social and classed position within which it was developed it is also relates to agency and "goes hand in hand with vagueness and indeterminacy" (Bourdieu, 1990: 77). From my reading of Bourdieu, choice is at the heart of habitus, but the choices offered are bounded by internalised frames of possibility and a pre-disposed tendency to engage in behaviours for "people like us" (Reay *et al.,* 2005: 25). Therefore, although habitus may pre-dispose first-generation students to act or define themselves in certain ways, it is important to acknowledge that there remains a sense of agency in how they do so, to refrain from habitus being perceived as overly deterministic.

4.2.5 Habitus Clivé', cleft habitus and hysteresis

Using habitus as a lens allows for an understanding to develop of the ways in which participation and engagement in HE (and in subsequent graduate employment) may lead to first-generation students potentially developing new identities that may be incongruent with their previous habitus and sense of self (Lee and Kramer, 2013). Bourdieu himself was affected by his own experience of upward social mobility, and as a result of this he extended his later writing on habitus to discuss the concept of habitus clivé or divided habitus

(Mallman, 2016). This occurs when an individual is subject to the "contradictions of succession" leading to "successive allegiances and multiple identities" (Bourdieu, 1999: 510-511) that forces them to alter their class-bound habits (Hanley, 2016). According to Bourdieu (2000) this can create feelings of uneasiness, internal division and disloyalty in working-class individuals who access upward social mobility via education, potentially leading to an internal conflict of identities.

Bourdieu's work illuminates the hidden cost of being socially mobile, particularly if that social mobility happens abruptly, as opposed to gradually over a long period of time. During moments of profound change (such as when starting university) when habitus and field are not aligned, this can result in what Bourdieu termed "the hysteresis effect" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 78; Friedman, 2016)

> As a result of the hysteresis effect […] practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are objectively confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 78).

Essentially, the hysteresis effect can be understood as occurring when "dispositions which are out of line with the field", experience negative internal sanctions (Bourdieu, 2000: 160) which can have profound emotional implications (Bourdieu, 2004). In support of this, Freidman (2016:145) engaged in detailed interviews with 39 "upwardly mobile participants" who were graduates from working-class backgrounds and found that becoming socially mobile can result in a "profound psychological impact" causing difficult emotions such as insecurity, inferiority, guilt and abandonment. These findings echo the work of Ingram (2011) who also discussed the "psycho-social" impacts of experiencing a cleft habitus, noting the pain a shift in field and habitus can cause socially mobile individuals, who may feel as though they are torn between two competing worlds.

Diane Reay has utilised Bourdieu's theoretical lens abundantly in her research (e.g., Reay, 2000; 2004; 2005; 2009; 2015; 2018, Reay *et al.,* 2009a; 2009b) and takes a nuanced approach to the concept of cleft habitus, using it to highlight the feelings some students may have as a result of entering HE. Reay (2004) discusses the emotional cost of becoming something different as a result of HE study, such as feelings of fear and guilt, but also highlights the positive emotions of pride and excitement that non-privileged students may feel. Similarly, the later work of Ingram and Abrahams (2018) examined the concept of cleft habitus and developed a typology of "habitus interruption" to examine issues between class and educational achievement in a more nuanced way. Ingram and Abrahams' (2018) concept of a reconciled habitus conceptualises habitus disruption in an overly more positive

way, framing it as a rearticulation of habitus, rather than a fracturing or division. This work is useful to draw upon when exploring non-privileged, first-generation students' experiences, both in relation to how their sense of self is affected by both their time at university and their experiences upon entering graduate employment.

4.2.6 Misrecognition, Symbolic Violence and Doxa

Misrecognition is a thinking tool offered by Bourdieu that has been less widely utilised within research, despite its close links to habitus. Bourdieu (1977) suggested that misrecognition occurs because people develop "accurate recognitions in line with the practices of the field" which legitimise an unquestioned hierarchy of different worth (Webb *et al.,* 2017: 9). For Bourdieu, individuals are conditioned through their existence in an unequal world to accept "the order of things", which is to say that they accept a number of "postulates, axioms, which go without saying and require no inculcating" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 273). The process of misrecognition is therefore crucial to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence which was developed by Bourdieu as a way to "explain how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination" (Reay, 2004: 37). This may take several forms such as being denied resources, being treated in an inferior way or being considered to have diminished capabilities and/or aspirations (Webb *et al.,* 2002). Importantly however, this violence is not conceptualised by individuals as being anything other than natural and "the way things are". Consequently, individuals within dominated groups can become complicit in reinforcing their own domination (Bourdieu, 1998) by misrecognising disadvantage and inequality as normal. In relation to HE this allows for discriminatory discourses to become taken for granted which masks the inherent inequality experienced by some non-privileged first-generation students and the low status HEIs they predominantly study in.

Finally, the last Bourdieusian tool to be discussed is doxa which refers to social reality which is taken for granted and which remains largely unquestioned. The power of doxa in shaping individual understandings is significant, as evidenced in the following quote whereby Bourdieu (1992:14) described doxa as:

> a formidable mechanism [...] a wonderful instrument of ideology, much bigger and more powerful than television or propaganda.

For Bourdieu doxa consists of dominant ideas and generative principles that mostly go unchallenged by those that are subject to its rule because of its naturalised position (Morrin, 2016). It represents "a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view" (Bourdieu, 1998: 57). Doxa can therefore be understood as the norm in social or cultural situations which is given a sense of legitimacy through misrecognition and thus which can cause symbolic violence (Bourdieu

1977; Deer, 2012: 117). Specifically in relation to this thesis, doxa can be understood as the unquestionable orthodoxy of market competition, elitism and hierarchy which operates as if it were the objective truth. It can also be drawn upon to problematise narrow and exclusionary depiction of the normative student subject and thus has clear relevance to exploring first-generation student experiences within a post-92 HEI.

The concept of meritocracy can also be understood as doxa, in that it is widely accepted in modern society that hard work will lead to successful outcomes. This relates to misrecognition regarding the way in which individuals within the education system believe and invest in meritocratic fictions, which they misrecognise as accurate and fair. As Bourdieu explained:

> Misrecognition of the social determinants of the educational career – and therefore of the social trajectory it helps to determine – gives the educational certificate the value of a natural right and makes the educational system one of the fundamental agencies of the social order (Bourdieu, 1984: 387).

This symbolic violence is inherently cruel as it "allocates blame [...] perpetuates its doxic practice and legitimates practices which continue to differentially distribute capitals to those who are already advantaged in the field" (Thomson, 2014: 92). Doxa and symbolic violence are also useful tools to deploy to examine government HE policy. Within both government green papers and white papers "Fulfilling Our Potential" (BIS, 2015) and "Success as a Knowledge Economy" (BIS, 2016) applying the concept of symbolic violence illuminates the depiction of doxic neoliberal practices as being in the best interests of all, including non-privileged students. Both documents depict success as being down to individual ambitions: "we will not truly begin to reduce inequality unless more students fulfil their aspirations" (BIS, 2016: 13). In this way, symbolic violence is evident in the way non-privileged students are framed as being accountable for their achievements whilst privileged students who benefit from their inherited cultural, social, and economic capital have their advantage legitimised (Tomlinson *et al.,* 2018). Policy documentation is crucial in allowing symbolic violence to be "fully exercised while disguising its true nature […] and gaining recognition, approval and acceptance" (Bourdieu, 1990: 85). Policy documents like this therefore use strategies of misrecognition to sustain engagement in HE for non-privileged students whilst masking "deeply ingrained classed, gendered and raced structural inequalities in education and the labour market" (Chadderton, 2020: 25). This potential for symbolic violence has clear relevance for non-privileged first-generation students who attend low status universities.

4.3 Criticism of Bourdieu

Discussions within this chapter so far have explored Bourdieu's theoretical tools and have justified their use within this thesis. However, I also felt it was important to respond to the criticism of Bourdieu's work in order to strengthen my justification for using this framework. Bourdieu has been subject to a significant level of criticism by some commentators largely for being overly deterministic and for the over-simplication of class cultures (Archer, 2007; Giroux, 1983; Nentwich *et al.,* 2015; Perez, 2008; Sayer, 2005; Sullivan, 2002). Whilst it is important to acknowledge these criticisms it could be argued that they misappropriate Bourdieu's intentions, particularly in relation to habitus which Maton (2008: 49) contends is "one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu's ideas". In response to these criticisms, I adopt the position of Reay *et al.,* (2005) that habitus is often subject to criticism for reasons that ironically dispute Bourdieu's original understanding of the concept. Agency was central to Bourdieu; however, it is always situated within cultural structures (Webb *et al.,* 2002). This thesis draws upon habitus in a nuanced way and conceptualises it as the "internalisation of possibility" (Horvat, 2003: 7) which is fluid and changeable as individuals experience and interact with new fields (Lee and Kramer, 2013; Reay, 2004).

From my perspective Bourdieu offers an interpretative rather than a legislative framework and I adopt the position of Wacquant (1992: xiv) within this thesis that "an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required". The combining of Berlant and Bourdieu's work within this thesis aligns with the suggestion from Webb *et al.,* (2017: 138) that partnering Bourdieu with alternative theoretical lenses will allow for more holistic and nuanced understandings to be realised to counteract what they term the "Bourdieusian hangover" within HE research. The next part of this chapter will discuss Berlant's theoretical lens of cruel optimism, making links between this and Bourdieu where appropriate.

4.4 Berlant, Cruel Optimism and the Good Life: the politics of wanting things.

American cultural theorist Laurent Berlant (2011) developed the term "cruel optimism" to define the relations between an individual and the social world they inhabit. Berlant uses the idea of cruel optimism to describe the gap between what individuals aspire to and what is actually good for them (Bessant and Watts, 2014). Essentially it describes "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (Berlant, 2011: 23). As explained here by Moore and Clark:

> Put simply, a relationship of cruel optimism involves situations of attachment to hopes and aspirations in which not only are the latter likely to remain unfulfilled, but

> the very sustaining of the attachment itself has negative, constraining effects in relation to one's life and development (2016: 668).

This relational dynamic is driven by "everyday neoliberalism" (Mirowski, 2013: 89) which shapes the hopes and dreams of individuals towards goals which align with (and serve) the neoliberal economy (Moore and Clarke, 2016). This thesis draws on Berlant's notion of cruel optimism both as an effect on first-generation students' lived experiences and as a mechanism used within public policy to promote and sustain first-generation student engagement in HE. Unlike Bourdieu, Berlant's work does not offer an explicit focus on education, nor does she focus on class (or any other social characteristic) as a defining subject, instead she draws on neoliberalism as the central concept underpinning her work. That being said, much of Berlant's writing explores the relationship between the affective attachment of the individual and the external domain of public policy therefore the relevance of cruel optimism to education is clearly evident. Berlant's work has largely been overlooked in relation to HE research and the few times this theory has been drawn upon in relation to HE it has been applied to staff rather than students (see Bone, 2020; Joseph, 2015; Lipton, 2017) or has been applied in non-UK contexts (see Joseph, 2015; Shirazi, 2019). This thesis therefore utilises cruel optimism in a unique way, as (to my knowledge) it has never been applied to first-generation student experiences before. Using this lens can therefore allow for new understandings of the first-generation student experience to be developed. In the context of this thesis, cruel optimism as a concept can shed light on the gap that may have exist between students' hopes and aspirations when entering HE and the outcomes which they experience post-graduation. In this sense cruel optimism has relevance in the critique of WP initiatives and the framing of HE as the most acceptable aspiration within a meritocratic context, through the examination of first-generation students' lived experiences.

The role of HE is not explicitly discussed at any point by Berlant however the role of institutions in promoting cruel optimism is implicitly woven throughout Berlant's writing. Specifically, Berlant (2011: 3) refers to "precarious public spheres" as sites which feed into a dynamic of cruel optimism (Ryan, 2020). For Berlant, the good life narrative encourages decision-making in the precarious present which is driven by a fantasy for a secure future (Bone, 2020). Applying this to university study allows the significance of the temporal dimensions of HE to become significant as the future may act as a site of optimism and sustained hope for students which universities are able to use to their advantage. Within this thesis the historical present is characterised as the neoliberal post-92 university within the competitive and hierarchical marketplace of HE. This framing of the neoliberal present is critical to understanding the experiences of the first-generation students within this study as

the concept of the later graduate future acts as a means of facilitating engagement with HE in the present

From a Berlantian perspective, the cruel optimism of education is itself tied up with the neoliberal *purpose* of education and the fundamental common-sense understandings regarding what HE is for. Viewing education from a Berlantian perspective allows the cruelness of the dominant human capital approach to become illuminated; in the neoliberal imagination there is no such thing as education for education's sake. Instead, education is all about progression towards individual goals and the ways in which engaging in learning can ensure personal future economic success. As described here by Di Paolantonio:

> There is a cruel optimism in education that drives us to constantly work at improving ourselves; that is, we optimistically attach to things that promise us fulfilment but that actually perpetually defer any such fulfilment and rather end up impoverishing us. We often undergo an education with the confidence that it will secure our success in a future good life. Education seems inextricably bundled up with this elusive drive of bettering ourselves; it offers incitements and exhortations of limitless possibilities to manage and mortgage our own success (2016: 148).

The instrumental focus on HE has exacerbated the opportunity trap as increasing numbers of students have led to a saturated graduate jobs market (Brown *et al.,* 2011; Burke and Christie, 2019; Tholen and Brown, 2017) which has placed graduates of post-92 HEIs at an increased disadvantage (Belfield *et al.,* 2018: Crew, 2015). Furthermore, any non-economic benefits of HE such as personal growth, fulfilment and enjoyment are deemed to be valueless (Di Paolantonio, 2016).

Earlier discussions in this thesis have outlined the way in which hope for a better future is crucial for promoting participation and sustaining engagement in HE and is therefore fundamental in relation to first-generation students' experiences. Hope is central to the concept of cruel optimism because according to Berlant (2011), the actions of individuals are driven and sustained by their hope and optimism for a better future. This hope is inherently emotional, in that it involves affective attachment to the desired goal. As summarised here by Berlant:

> Whatever the experience of optimism is […] the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of the fantasy that enables you to expect that, this time, nearness to the thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way (2011: 2).

For Berlant it is the affective attachment to goals which may be out of reach which is inherently cruel as it embodies a sense of false hope. In this way hope can be understood as helping to maintain existing power structures, extending the unequal present into the future (Dawney *et al.,* 2017). First- generation student hope may be sustained by what Hage (2009: 103) terms as "imaginary mobility" - the sense that one is going somewhere within their life, however this hope can become increasingly difficult to sustain over time as experiences can be constrained by social position (Cook and Cuervo, 2019). Put simply, whilst at university hope can more easily be sustained by the idea that the individual is taking action to move forward towards their goal. However, upon graduation if first-generation students find themselves faced with a dream that does not appear viable this could invoke negative feelings of frustration and unhappiness (Cook and Cuervo, 2019). This relates to cruel optimism as, from a Berlantian perspective, optimism can be considered as cruel when it "enables individuals to endure ongoing suffering or sacrifice" (Bone, 2020) in the hope of achieving something better. As emphasised by Finnegan *et al.,* (2019: 167) "when desired, or anticipated futures are seen as rapidly receding into the distance, it is far more difficult to feel you are flourishing in work and life". It is evident then that privileged individuals in elite HEIs may be "afforded greater access to the conditions under which hope can be easily sustained" than non-privileged, first-generation graduates from post-92 HEIs, thereby suggesting that "sustained forms of hope may constitute a way in which inequalities are manifest" (Cook and Huvero, 2019: 1113). Hope for a better future, and the cruelty within this optimism, is therefore significant in relation to what drives first-generation students to enter HE and the ways in which they hope for and experience their graduate futures.

Cruel optimism can therefore be understood as essentially describing a relationship between an individual and something they desire which they believe will improve their life. As Berlant explains (2011):

> All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.

This cluster of promises, for students, is embedded in the HEI which they attend. The institution symbolises the promise of obtaining the good life through graduate employment, financial stability and professional success. HE participation can "ignite a sense of possibility" (Berlant, 2011: 2) for first-generation students and thus drives a sense of hope. Debt is optimistically undertaken by students as well as time and effort dedicated to their studies driven by the promise of reward. This is problematic, as summarised by Tiainen *et al.,* (2019: 642) because evidently "in contemporary late-capitalist societies […] education no

longer guarantees economic or job security or an esteemed position in society" meaning "there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built" (Berlant, 2011: 192). Therefore, if the promises made by universities do not materialise then HE study can be "toxic to the extent that even with some sort of academic employment as payoff, the promised life, burdened by debt, is not a sustaining, good life" (Joseph, 2015; 493). Attachment to HE can therefore be understood as having the potential to be cruel, even if it is not cruel in every instance. The presence of student fees and the substantial debt incurred by first-generation students is significant here because this raises the financial stakes and thus the risks that students are taking by entering HE, driving an instrumental focus on outcomes which make this debt worthwhile.

4.5 The Good life

It is evident that, for Berlant (2011), cruelness rests on the way in which an individual is affectively attached to pursuing a goal, which may be difficult to obtain, but which is considered to be a necessity within the neoliberal ideology. This illusion of necessity maintains the individual's drive to pursue the goals of what Berlant (2011: 3) terms as "the good life" despite the way in which pursuing these goals could ultimately be damaging to the individual's wellbeing (Tiainen *et al.,* 2019). Aspiration to achieve the good life is therefore at the centre of cruel optimism. For Berlant, the good life can be grouped into four categories: "promises of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy" (Berlant 2011: 3). The good life can thus be characterised by offering upward social mobility, job security and social equality, which clearly relate to the promises offered by HE. For Berlant the pursuit of the good life is significant as it gives individuals a sense of purpose in life however its inaccessible nature results in some individuals becoming trapped in a struggle of constant self-improvement (Tiainen, Leiviskä and Brunila, 2019).

Primarily through analysing literature and film, Berlant (2011) discusses how people remain attached to increasingly unachievable fantasies of the good life which, as a result of neoliberalism (and the resulting precarity it engenders), has become increasingly difficult to achieve. This results in what Berlant (2011: 10) terms as "crisis ordinariness". For Berlant, rather than a decisive event, crisis in the neoliberal life exists as "a persistent vulnerability for an undetermined duration, or as a contemporary form of life itself" (Shirazi, 2019: 2). Essentially "crisis ordinariness" exists in the everyday, mundane, normalised suffering which characterises precarious life in neoliberal society. This framing of crisis as part of everyday life challenges the doxic neoliberal view that hard work, education and adaptability will address the insecurity that continues to permeate the lives of students as they work towards achieving the good life (Shirazi, 2019). Engaging in HE can therefore be understood as a means of coping with the crisis ordinariness of the continual precarity of life in neoliberal

society, in the hope that it will lead to something better (even if this is not always the case in reality). In this sense the concept of the good life may be important when exploring what drives individuals to enter HE and what they hope to achieve in their future. This research therefore seeks to illuminate the extent to which a relation of cruel optimism and hope for the good life has a part to play in the stories of first-generation students in terms of their decision-making, experiences and outcomes.

Mobilising Berlant's theoretical lens also draws attention to the role played by language and public policy discourse in the promotion of HE as a means to achieving the good life as policy documents encourage potential students to "to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture" (Berlant, 2011:167). HE policy can therefore be viewed as an instrument of cruel optimism which is used to "sustain belief in a possible better (better education, better future, better society, better world) at the same time as often keeping those better's achievement out of reach" (Moore and Clark, 2016: 668). Berlant (2011) suggests that this affective attachment leads individuals to renegotiate their hopes and expectations as the promise of the graduate good life (of achieving career aspirations, financial stability, job security and upward social mobility) becomes increasingly unrealistic. The cruelty lies in the disparity between the social and economic promises offered by HE and the absence of any guarantee that these benefits will be delivered (Bessant and Watts, 2014). This cruelty is exacerbated by the way in which individual responsibility and freedom are given equal status in policy rhetoric, perpetuating the notion that the good life of social and financial success is within the reach of every hardworking individual regardless of individual context (Moore and Clarke, 2016). It is compounded further by the lower symbolic value conferred by qualifications from post-92 universities which are framed as 'second-class' in dominant discourse (Brooks, 2019) leading to first-generation graduates from these institutions potentially facing additional structural barriers to access the good life.

4.6 Cruel optimism and the myth of meritocracy

It is evident that the concepts of cruel optimism and the good life are particularly relevant to an educational context as contemporary western education has long operated under a meritocratic construct which aligns to the formula that "merit = ability + effort" (Young, 1958: Allen 2011: 368). As discussed in chapter two, the meritocratic discourse that hard work pays off can be understood as a neoliberal construct in that it masks structural barriers to achievement rendering them invisible, producing a false promise of hope. It also therefore leads individuals to believe that lack of success must be down to their own lack of ability or effort.

Importantly, when it comes to meritocracy, the success of the *minority* acts as a convincing way to legitimate the belief that the failure of the *majority* is caused by lack of ability or individual deficit. This understanding consequently serves to strengthen existing hierarchies of exclusion/inequality within the field. The genius of the discourse lies in its ability to use the success of the few to punish the many. As emphasised by Wallerstein (1983: 132),

> Meritocratic ascent remains very much the attribute of a minority. For meritocracy is a false universalism. It proclaims a universal opportunity that, by definition, is only meaningful if it is not universal. Meritocracy is intrinsically elitist.

Therefore, it can be argued that the universalist meritocratic promise is a fiction (Sellar and Zipin, 2019) and it is this fictive hope which sustains individual efforts in HE as students are driven by the meritocratic promises of an "opportunity bargain" which cruelly conceals the realities of "the opportunity trap" (Brown *et al.,* 2011). In current neoliberal society there are diminishing opportunities for stability and consequently it becomes harder for individuals to achieve the good life (Berlant, 2011). As Brown *et al*., (2011: 5) articulate, "the promise of the good life for those with ability and the willingness to work hard has been broken". Brown and colleagues go on to state that not only is demand for professional jobs "far less than commonly assumed" but also that "the quality of working life and rewards associated with these jobs will not live up to expectations" (2011: 5). This may lead to individuals settling for achieving a less bad life rather than the good life they aspired to (Berlant, 2011: 180).

Berlant (2011) frames meritocracy through an affective lens, in that people engage with the world affectively and so experience emotional injuries when their aspirations or desires do not come to fruition. This raises important moral questions concerning the emotional implications for first-generation graduates who may find they are unable to realise their career aspirations. To maintain the doxic fiction that social background plays no role in determining life chances ignores the structural inequalities faced by many first-generation students which could have a significant impact on how they understand their experiences both at university and post-graduation, particularly if their career expectations do not come to fruition.

4.7 Bringing Bourdieu and Berlant Together

It is evident that both Bourdieu and Berlant's theoretical frameworks allow for an illumination of the relationship between first-generation students and the exterior structures which govern, limit and impact on the choices and actions which they take. The conceptual framework drawn upon in this thesis allows for an illumination of the way in which government and institutional policy may be internalised by first-generation students and the impact this has on the way in which they understand their experiences. This thesis seeks to

make visible the way in which first-generation students' social and cultural contexts, government policy and institutional actions can impact on their understanding of themselves and their circumstances and the cruelty which lies within the neoliberal discourses which sustain unreliable good life fantasies.

This chapter has shown that there are clear similarities between Bourdieu's understanding of doxa and Berlant's depiction of neoliberal fantasies such as meritocracy. Both theoretical lenses also illuminate the cruelty and symbolic violence inherent in neoliberalism and the individualised blame this discourse invokes. It is evident that Berlant echoes Bourdieu's argument that "the state has a monopoly of power to carry out both legitimate and symbolic violence" (Ryan, 2020: 136). In this way Bourdieu and Berlant align by illuminating the impact of "fractured state policies and state violence practiced on a population in the context of social norms of optimism" (Ryan, 2020: 136). However, Berlant's lens perhaps extends further as she is interested in the way in which neoliberal fantasies are internalised by individuals to create desire and attachment which then shapes their behaviour and emotions. Both Bourdieu and Berlant agree that neoliberal governments foster the powerful myths that individuals are independent and autonomous, and furthermore that this freedom (and associated precarity) is in fact liberating (Chadderton, 2020). Insecurity is thus normalised as part of daily life and HE plays a key role in this structural normalisation by promoting the unproblematic equation that degree level study equals successful employment, when in fact this is not necessarily the case. Graduates of the neoliberal university operate in a "state of insecurity" (Lorey, 2015: 3) whilst neoliberal discourse promotes this insecurity as freedom (Chadderton, 2020). Ultimately however, Lorey (2015: 3) reminds us that the insecurity and self-development promoted by neoliberalism is "not an expression of independence, but rather the crucial element in the pastoral relationship of obedience".

Berlant (2011) views the neoliberal imagination as redirecting the individual's energy and effort towards discrete goals and individual achievements therefore contributing to the maintaining of the status quo and preventing the possibility of collective action or from pursuing alternative ways of being. It is evident through a Berlantian lens, in a similar way to Bourdieu's work, that cruel optimism encourages and maintains adaption to current circumstances and ways of being, rather than engaging in questioning or challenging them. Both theoretical lenses offer clear relevance when exploring first-generation student choice-making, experiences of a post-92 HEI and expectations for graduate employment.

4.8 Concluding Comments

This chapter has outlined the conceptual framework utilised by this thesis which draws upon both Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice coupled with Berlant's (2011) depiction of cruel

optimism and the good life. Bourdieu's thinking tools have been outlined and situated within the focus of this thesis, and Berlant's theoretical arguments have been considered and discussed. In this thesis, I utilise the concept of cruel optimism alongside Bourdieu's tools to provide an innovative theoretical framework and analytical tool to exemplify how first-generation students seek to ascertain their good life fantasy through engagement in university study. Utilising Berlant's contemporary theoretical lens alongside Bourdieu's work creates an innovative theoretical framework to examine first-generation students' lived experiences in a post-92 HEI and extends current research in this area by developing a unique analytical lens to allow new understandings to be developed.

The following chapter in this thesis critically examines the methodology of this study, starting with a reflective discussion of the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research. Methodological decisions will be reflexively considered including research design, data collection techniques, trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter outlines the methodological thinking behind this thesis. The chapter begins with a discussion of the philosophical foundations of this study, detailing my ontological and epistemological reflections and providing a justification for the study's paradigmatic positioning. The case study approach is discussed, along with narrative and biographical research. This is followed by a detailed consideration of the data collection methods, also outlining the sampling process and the implications of being an insider researcher. Ethical considerations are discussed and questions around reliability and trustworthiness are debated. Finally, the chosen data analysis framework is explained in depth. For this study, data was analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013) and Wolcott's (1994) depiction of thematic analysis to answer the following research questions:

1. How did first-generation students frame their decision to attend university?
2. What did first-generation students perceive to be significant in relation to their experience at the university, and what were their expectations/experiences in terms of graduate employment?
3. How were the participants' lived experiences influenced by the social and political context of the case study institution and the wider HE sector?

The below table summarises the research design for this study

Table 1:

Research Approach	Interpretivist
Research Design	Case study/Narrative Hybrid
Data collection method	In-depth biographical interviews
Data Analysis technique	Thematic analysis

5.2 The Research Philosophy

Before considering any methodological decisions I followed Bracken's (2010: 2) recommendation to reflect on my own ontological perspective as a researcher. According to Grix (2004) doing this is essential as it facilitates an appreciation of the philosophical foundations which underpin research aims, methods, processes and my own actions as a

researcher. Prior to reflecting on my own ontological positioning however it is useful to briefly offer a definition of key terms. Cohen *et al.,* (2013: 3) characterise ontology as "assumptions about the nature of reality", which underpin our epistemological assumptions which "concern ways of ways of researching and enquiring into the nature of reality". Distinct approaches concerning what knowledge is and how it is created align to various research paradigms which encapsulate shared principles and belief systems (Cohen *et al.,* 2018; Scott and Usher, 2011). Essentially then, my own individual ontological and epistemological beliefs drive the philosophical basis of this thesis and thus which paradigm both I as a researcher and my research align to (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

As an emerging researcher I situate myself as being firmly aligned to the interpretivist paradigm as I conceptualise reality as being socially constructed and largely existing within the minds of individual people. My ontological position is therefore aligned to the relativist position that reality is constructed according to an individuals' lived experience (Bassey, 1999; Weber, 2004). I support a subjectivist approach to research which recognises the crucial differences between the social world and the natural world, meaning that it is impossible for a social researcher to be fully removed from the focus of research (Scott and Usher, 2011). The ontological positioning of this thesis thereby stresses that the 'situatedness' of HE study means that the experience of being a first-generation student is lived and understood in different ways by individuals in differing contexts who have had contrasting experiences (Bassey, 1999; Mack, 2010).

From my epistemological position knowledge is conceptualised as being personal and subjective, and people are viewed as having agency (Cohen *et al.*, 2013) and the ability to interact with one another to actively create meaning (Bracken, 2010). This epistemological standpoint specifies that knowledge is made up of individual interpretations which are gained from personal lived experience (Mack, 2010) which are impacted on by an individual's social identities. This position advocates that people affirm their knowledge and view of the world via communication and interaction with others, therefore social background impacts on individual perceptions and understandings. Interaction with others leads to the development of a consensus of shared understandings within groups in society (Pring, 2000) and also leads to the social construction and affirmation of individual and collective identities. This may be challenged when individuals engage with discourses and experiences outside of their usual domain (such as when undertaking university study as a first-generation student) which means that new consensuses of understanding and notions of identity are constantly being reached (Pring, 2000).

The paradigmatic position of this inquiry means the positivist view of a measurable and objective reality is rejected (Bassey, 1999; Lambert 2012). From my position the inherent drive within positivist research to measure human experience in a way which facilitates the development of transferable conclusions invokes a sense of de-personalisation. The emphasis on quantifiable conclusions in positivist research risks ignoring the agency of participants and the role their collective and individual experiences play in creating meaning (Cohen *et al.,* 2013: 15). This research concurs with Habermas (1972) that positivist research is limited because the fundamental need for control diminishes individual choice and behaviour to "technicism"; it objectifies the human experience, reducing it to a statistic. I adopt the position of Bourdieu (1992: 227) that the scientific rigidity warranted by positivist approaches should not be conflated with notions of academic rigour. The positivist approach goes against my own values and position as a researcher as I feel that experiences, feelings, emotions and context are vital in educational research. Consequently, a positivist approach was rejected within this study, however this is not to say that I disregard the value of quantitative research outright as I recognise Cousin's (2009: 5) call for "respect for different perspectives". I simply recognised that a positivist approach was not the right fit for me or for the focus of this research.

5.3 Research design

The ontological and epistemological positioning of the researcher, coupled with the focus of the research study should underpin the consideration of the research design and data collection methods (Pring, 2000; Scott and Usher, 2011). As this study focused on first-generation student experiences within a single institution, a hybrid approach drawing on both case study and narrative methodologies was decided upon, in alignment with the interpretivist positioning of the research (Weber, 2004). I initially considered the study to be following a case study design as it aligned with the following definition offered by Simons (2009: 20):

> Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular […] institution in a real-life context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led

Similarly, Merriam (1998) understands a case study to fit with the following definition:

> An intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit (p. xiii)

Denscombe (2007: 36) adds that "case studies tend to be holistic rather than deal with isolated factors" and it is the holistic experiences of first-generation students within a single post-92 HEI that this study aimed to explore. However, as the study progressed, I realised

that the research also incorporated many elements of narrative research in terms of wanting to examine student stories in depth, hence the hybrid between the two approaches. Utilising a hybrid methodology between case study and narrative approaches recognises the wider context of student experiences in a post-92 HEI whilst also illuminating the rich and personal data within first-generation students' stories.

Case study research has many definitions and Gomm *et al.,* (2000) warn that the term 'case study' can be used in multiple ways within the context of research. This can result in a degree of confusion regarding "what a case study is and how it can be differentiated from other types of qualitative research" (Merriam, 1998: xi). To address this degree of ambiguity within case study research Stake's (1995: 2005) influential publications categorise the broad scope of case studies into three distinct forms: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. In this research, I wanted to understand the specific case of first-generation students' experiences of a post-92 HEI because of personal experience of both the post-92 university and experiencing first-generation status. Consequently, this inquiry was driven by "an intrinsic interest" (Stake, 1995: 3) as I had a personal interest in the topic. Furthermore, this study utilised a "single-case design" which examines "a singular case or phenomenon" (Cohen *et al.,* 2013: 291), in this instance the first-generation student experience within a post-92 university.

Denscombe (2014: 54) emphasises the value of case study research by affirming that it is able to "illuminate the general by looking at the particular". Bassey (1999) adds that case study research also values the rooted nature and intricacy of social truths and thus offers a meaningful way of exploring the discrepancies between participants' viewpoints and experiences. Following a case study approach allowed space to explore the complexities of first-generation students' lived experiences and the nuances surrounding these experiences within the context of a single post-92 institution. This approach allowed for the complexities of lived experiences to be interrogated and allowed the study's core research questions to be addressed. Guba and Lincoln (1981: 378) caution that case studies can oversimplify a situation by making conclusions that may appear to apply to all cases when actually the case study only offers "a slice of life". The slice of life which was explored in this research offers some clues as to the experiences of first-generation students in post-92 universities which help shed some light on effects of HE social policy and sector inequality in relation to the lived experience of individual students. The case study HEI holds a unique position within the field of HE but can be examined as an example that can inform understandings of similarly located universities within the HE system (Stich, 2012). Focusing on Central as a single institution and bounding the research to this context allowed for a deeper

understanding of the educational, social and cultural contexts within which the participants' university experience was situated.

5.4 Methodological Approach

Whilst following a case study research design, this study also utilised a social biographical, narrative-based approach that "weaves social context and individual lives together" (Erben, 1998: 13). This study followed a hybrid approach encapsulating both case study and narrative approaches as I felt this acknowledged the specific context of students' experiences whilst also recognising the profound and personal data within the participants' stories. In relation to first-generation student experiences, Maunder *et al.,* (2013: 139) stress the salience of examining student transitions at an individual level by utilising narrative research to understand the ways in which "personal histories are used to interpret university life". A narrative approach was also selected as a means of giving a voice to first-generation students who embody characteristics that have historically been excluded or marginalised within HE (such as mature, ethnic minority or non-privileged students) as called for by Gale and Parker (2014a). According to Stuart *et al.,* (2011) narrative-based methodological approaches allow for an understanding of how an individual mediates societal divisions and how their experience is shaped by their cultural and socio-economic position, whilst also giving an insight into their unique experience (See Earthy and Cronin, 2008; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000 and Goodson and Sikes, 2001 for similar discussions). As outlined by Burke (2012: 75) narrative acts as "an interpretative device which is drawn on by people in processes of self-representation". Narratives are therefore not simply descriptions of experience but are products of specific social, cultural and historical contexts (Lawler, 2002). This methodology therefore provides an ideal lens to examine the inter-relationship between the personal and the social that is inherent within the research questions which frame this inquiry.

This approach was also deemed fitting for this study as it is congruent with my own ontological and epistemological position that reality is constructed according to an individuals' lived experience (Bassey, 1999; Weber, 2004) and that knowledge is filled with individual interpretations (Mack, 2010) which are impacted on by individuals' social identities. Narrative research is pitched as being a response to the "crisis of representation" within education which according to Clough (2002) had been overly reliant on large-scale positivist studies. In contrast to positivist studies, narrative approaches are highly interpretative (Chamberlayne *et al.,* 2000) and reject traditional realist assumptions in favour of an interpretivist position that stipulates that uncovering a single 'truth' is not the object of analysis (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: Earthy and Cronin, 2008; Plummer, 2000; Rosenwald and Ochburg, 1992).

I selected a social biographical approach as a particular strand of narrative research for this inquiry as biographical approaches are credited by Merrill and West (2009) as being able to offer valuable insights into the complexities of students' experiences that are often neglected in empirical research. Merrill and West draw upon Thompson's (2000: 6) definition of biographical research which is particularly relevant for this study:

> Biographical methods are a way of […] producing knowledge from the inside about gender, class and education, deriving from personal, particular and shared experience, not in the pursuit of ultimate truth but in the search for greater, more nuanced understanding.

Biographical research is credited with providing rich data and insight into students' lived experiences at the "interface between the personal and the social" (Stuart *et al*., 2011: 492) as according to Plummer (2000) the meaning that participants make from their experiences are dependent on the structures that have shaped them. Within the context of this inquiry a biographical approach allowed for a holistic exploration of the ways in which student characteristics intersect and shape their experiences, by focusing upon narratives that depict individual lived experience and how these are implicated by both the structures of HE (Merrill and West, 2009) and the wider policy landscape. Importantly, from my own perspective as an interpretivist researcher committed to social justice within education, biographical researchers seek to give voice to marginalised groups in order to challenge assumptions and "build a more just social order" (Merrill and West, 2009: 4).

As with case study approaches, narratives and biographical research are open to criticism (Barrow, 2009) and there are a number of concerns raised in the literature. Andrews *et al.,* (2009: 9) assert that "narratives both reveal and conceal, enable and constrain". As a researcher I had to be aware of classifying individuals based on their experiences and also recognise that narratives can be "partial, fragmented or contradictory…(an)incoherent or incomplete representation of experience" (Squire, 2008: 40). Furthermore, a recognition of time, context and environment means that narratives can only ever offer a snapshot which represents that particular participant's truth at that particular time. However, no method is without its limitations and the rich data that can be offered by biographical approaches allows an insight into the subjective truths of how HE appears in the mindset and is framed by the experience of the first-generation students within this research.

5.5 Data Collection Methods: a conversation with a purpose

This thesis makes no claim regarding the uniqueness or creativeness of the data collection methods used, rather it is aligned to Plummer's (2000: 1) explanation of research as being "characterised by lack of pomposity and pretension about methods". The methods used in

this thesis were selected not for their innovation or creative nature but for their ability to allow the participants to tell their stories in a rich and meaningful way, and in the hope of addressing the power relations as much as possible between myself and the participants. I chose to undertake biographical interviews with my participants, following a conversational approach which I hoped would "enable and encourage participants to open up and feel at ease, without the intervention of a tool, or any connotations of a task or exercise" (Barrow, 2009: 4). As such, the primary data collection method for this study was in-depth, biographical interviews which were loosely structured as suggested by Scott and Usher (2011). The general preference in biographical research is for informal, unstructured, conversational type encounters (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Merrill and West, 2009) as a tightly defined structure may mean privileging the agenda of the researcher over that of the participant, something I was keen to avoid. Participants were encouraged to navigate the direction of the interviews and to examine the key personal and social factors that had shaped their experiences and their hopes and expectations for the future. Given the focus of the research questions, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate data collection method as they allowed the participant journeys, hopes and experiences to be explored in depth (Cohen *et al.,* 2018). The interviews provided a powerful methodological tool for allowing the voices of participants to be heard in a way which allowed me to explore the impact of their social and cultural contexts on their educational experiences. They facilitated the participants in providing a personal account of their educational journeys, without imposing a restrictive agenda on the discussions which meant I could access rich and 'thick' (Wolcott, 2001) accounts of the participants' experiences of HE.

I started each interview by asking the participants to "tell me about yourself" in order that I could see which information they choose to disclose early on and what was important to them and their identity. I then asked the participants to "tell me about your journey as a student" which again enabled them to show me what they deemed to be significant in getting to that point. Some participants spoke openly about their experiences in depth, whilst others needed more prompts to develop their responses. During the interviews the participants were encouraged to dictate the direction of discussions to an extent, however an element of structure in the interviews was utilised by open and loose questions to stimulate narrative responses (Merrill and West, 2009). Prompts and probes were used to elicit further detail when appropriate (such as by asking participants about their educational history, or the role of other people in relation to their decision making), however a rigid interview structure was not followed (an example interview schedule can be found in Appendix 5). Instead, I aimed to have "a conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984: 102). The flexibility of the interviews meant that I was able to explore participants' unique educational and socio-cultural

experiences in a way that allowed their stories to be articulated and elaborated upon in their own words (Cohen *et al.,* 2018). This flexibility also meant I was able to follow interesting tangents during the conversations which opened new avenues for exploration that a more structured approached would not have allowed for.

As the interviewer I aimed to be open, interactive and responsive taking inspiration from Oakley's (1981:49) suggestion of "no intimacy without reciprocity" which calls for collaboration "between the researcher and the researched" (Lather 1991:57) to democratize the interview process and to enable me to act not as an "owner" of the data but instead as a "majority shareholder" (Tripp, 1983 in Lather, 1991:58). This feminist inspired approach is important because my position as a researcher aligns with Scott and Usher (2011) that research is a social practice which encapsulates unequal power relations and I wished to take steps to address the power imbalance as much as possible in the research process. Taking inspiration from Oakley, I offered an initial meeting to all participants where I shared details of my own background and discussed why the research was important to me. This also gave the participants the opportunity to engage in a conversation with me about the study. I wanted the initial meeting to be as natural as possible to enable a rapport to be built with the participants and to put them at ease, as developing a rapport with participants is credited as being "the key to effective interviewing" (Best and Kahn 1989: 187; Cohen *et al.,* 2013). I therefore made the decision not to audio-record the initial meeting, although I did make some notes immediately afterward of any areas of interest to follow up during the interview itself. The participants made the choice regarding how and when we met, therefore for some participants the initial meeting happened a week or two before the actual interview, for others we went for a coffee immediately prior to the interview taking place.

The location and time of the interview is significant (Denscombe, 2007) and the participants were interviewed at a time and place that suited them, to limit their inconvenience. Locations were selected that offered a degree of privacy and were therefore "conducive to the intimacy of an interview" (Powney and Watts, 1987: 130). The interviews took place at a range of locations including non-teaching rooms on campus, quiet corners of coffee shops, in participants' homes and in the local library. All of the interviews took place in locations which were familiar to the participants to help them to feel relaxed and at ease (Mellor *et al.,* 2013). Interviews generally lasted for around an hour and a half, with the shortest interview being 45 minutes (Pre- entry 6th form student) and the longest taking just over two and a half hours (Graduate, media studies). At the beginning of each interview, consent was gained verbally and in-writing and the ethical procedures regarding confidentiality and the right to withdraw were reiterated to the participants (see 5.7 for an in-depth discussion of ethical considerations).

Care was taken to ensure participants felt as comfortable as possible during the interview process and both verbal and non-verbal encouragement (such as verbal agreement, nodding and smiling) were offered throughout the participants' narratives to offer reassurance and affirm what they were saying. At times participant responses were verbally summarised both to encourage them to continue and to check that my interpretation of their point was accurate. I was careful not to change their original meaning when doing this. I dressed in a relaxed and informal way when conducting interviews to help reduce the formality of the interview and create a relaxed atmosphere, bearing in mind Powney and Watts' (1987) comments regarding the impact that the personal presentation of the interviewer may have on the participant.

All interviews were audio recorded via a dictaphone (after consent had been gained) and were then fully transcribed by hand. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) raised concerns that the presence of a recording device may impede participants in speaking freely during interviews however Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) argue that participants "quickly disregard the fact that they are being taped", a point echoed by Oliver (2010). I felt that recording the interviews was essential in order to provide an accurate record of the conversations which took place with the participants for subsequent analysis and recording also allowed me to focus my attention fully on the participants without taking notes, meaning I could "attend to the direction rather than the detail of the interview" (Bassey, 1999: 81).

5.6 The Research Site

Denscombe (2021) argues that the researcher's decisions regarding the selection of the research setting need to be made explicit and justified within the methodology. As a case study, the research site was deliberately chosen based on its attributes (Denscombe, 2021). Firstly, Central is typical of a post-92 university in terms of its student make-up and thus findings from this study are likely to have relevance to other post-92 HEIs. Secondly, Central's location in relation to other local universities offered a microcosm of the wider HE sector which allowed for the impact of the social and political context of the sector to be explored. A detailed description of the research site will now be discussed in order to provide the reader with a justification as to why Central was an appropriate setting for this research.

Central is a large post-92 inner-city university which has a relatively large student cohort of around 24,000 students studying across four faculties and two main campuses. The university has recently invested a great deal of funding into campuses and facilities. The majority of the student population study full time (79%), at undergraduate level (82%) and originate from within a 30-mile radius of the campus (69%). A high number of students are mature. Central's student population is typical of a post-92 HEI in that the majority of

students are from socio-culturally diverse backgrounds, and there are a high number of first-generation entrants. 98% of current students attended state schools and Central is in the top twenty UK higher education institutions by percentage of fulltime, UK domiciled, undergraduate students classified as living in “Parental/guardian home” (Maguire and Morris, 2018).

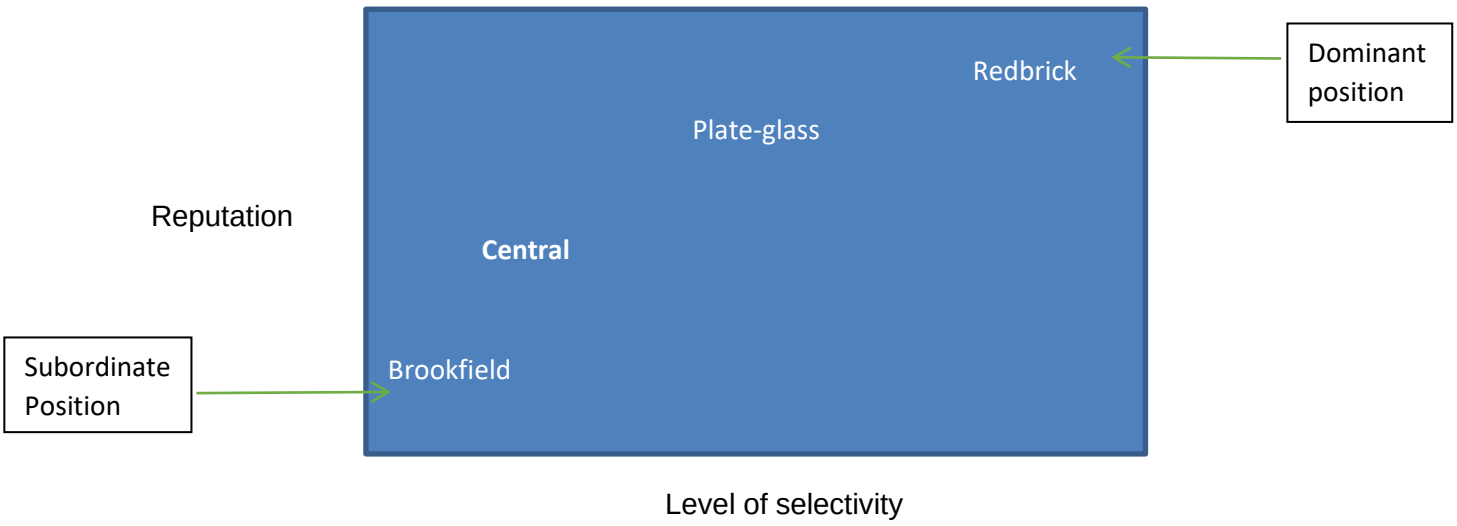
Like many newer universities, Central tends to occupy a position within the lower half of university league tables (although the exact position depends on the varying methodologies used by the variety of league tables which are available). As an example, in the 2019 Sunday Times Good University Guide (O’Leary, 2019) Central ranked in the bottom third of the table. A key element to this study is understanding the position of Central, in relation to its neighbouring HEIs as there are a number of other universities within close proximity. These include an elite “Redbrick” Russel Group university, a semi-elite “Plate glass” institution, another post-92 university, and a large university college. The pseudonyms used for these HEIs within this thesis are detailed in the table below:

Table 2:

University	Year given university status	Pseudonym
Russell Group University located in the same city	1900	Redbrick
Plate-Glass University located in the same city	1966	Plateglass
Post-92 University in neighbouring town 11 miles away	1992	Brookfield

The close proximity of neighbouring HEIs means that competition for local students is fierce. Bourdieu’s field as a conceptual tool exposes the way in which HE reproduces principles of social classification through the differing status ascribed to HEIs. As the below diagram shows, Central, as a post-92 HEI is located within the subordinate position within the local HE field relative to the positions of some of the other institutions it is in direct competition with.

Fig. 1



Evidently, the context of the local HE field offered a small-scale version of the wider HE sector, which enabled the significance of institutional reputation and status to be explored within the study, through the lens of the participants' experiences and understandings. The local HE field therefore forms an important backdrop to discussions within this thesis.

Part of the hybrid case study approach to this inquiry involved examining institutional policies and marketing materials in order to ascertain information relevant to the institutional culture. Marketing materials in particular are key in 'selling' a university to potential students, particularly in an area where competition for local students is fierce. Marketing materials can also play a part in promoting a narrow view of studenthood, resulting in those who sit outside the "ideal-student subject" (Burke, 2012: 116) being overlooked not just in government policy but also in institutional discourse. The invisibility of local students was highlighted in section 3.7 and they are rarely acknowledged or widely recognised in institutional marketing (NUS, 2015). This issue is evident in Central's own marketing materials, for example a recent undergraduate prospectus mentions that the city's public transport system is "excellent" however offers no detail regarding specific transport links to campuses, local student services, or opportunities for flexibility in academic, enhancement or social activities. It does however offer ample detail regarding accommodation options and the social experiences of living as a student in the city.

Furthermore, Central's website has a section dedicated to "preparing for university". This section of the website contains links including the following:

- What small-town students need to know about going to a big city university
- A guide for what to pack when moving away to university
- A quiz to find out how ready students are to live away from home.
- Information on the local accent and popular locations to visit in the city
- A list of things to do during the first week of university (which details activities such as cooking a meal for friends in university accommodation, joining university societies and attending nights out at the student union).

The university webpage titled “settling in” also stated what a “big deal” moving away to university is, as students have to meet new friends and learn how to take care of themselves and manage their own money once their parents have dropped them off.

It is evident then that institutional discourse reinforces traditional conceptions of the typical student and does not appear to reflect the large number of local students that make up the majority of Central’s undergraduate student body. Furthermore, little mention is made of those who are first in family to attend HE. This is reflective of much earlier research from Archer and Hutchings (2000) who noted that university promotional materials can convey institutional constructions of otherness and can infer notions of the ideal student that many students cannot live up to. Similarly, mature students are not mentioned in Central’s prospectus or marketing materials and the images within these materials clearly constructed students as young (under 21), child-free and socially active. There is a page dedicated to mature students on the website, but this is in a separate section to all of the other student information. According to Read *et al*., (2003: 265) these discourses strengthen the notion that students above school-leaving age are in the minority and have left it too late for university, which may have implications for students’ sense of belonging within the institution.

5.7 Ethical considerations

Within this research, ethics is understood as having consideration for participants in all social interactions throughout the research process. The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) have developed a set of robust guidelines which I adhered to throughout the research. Part of these guidelines suggest that researchers should focus on maintaining an “ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research they are undertaking” (BERA, 2018: 5) and I kept this in mind when considering the ethical implications of this study. Further reflection on the research process after the pilot study however also emphasised the reciprocity that I wished to develop with my participants. Phillips and Zavros (2013: 53) suggest that researchers should aim to embed “an ethic of care”, emphasising the value of dialogical conversations between researcher and participant in strengthening this approach.

As I wanted to democratize the research process, I therefore aimed to approach the entire study with an ethic of care for the participants. I hoped that this would mean that any ethical issues could be handled in a caring and reflexive way which actively focused on both supporting and empowering the participants. Although the research did not result in any ethical dilemmas, had any arisen they would have been dealt with thoughtfully and carefully, drawing upon a virtue ethics model (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012).

I utilised both the BERA (2018) guidelines and guidelines provided by my university and ensured that all research was undertaken in a way which was consistent with these. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant university ethics committee for both the pilot study and the main study. It was important to be aware that the research topic may be a sensitive issue for some students particularly those who may have had negative experiences in relation to their education. As Lambert (2012) points out, unintentional harm can sometimes occur to participants by drawing attention to any perceived deficiencies or personal difficulties. I had details of relevant support agencies to signpost participants to if required, and I included these on the debriefing sheet which all participants were given at the end of the interviews (see appendix 8). I also ensured that I phrased my questions carefully and thoughtfully, based on the participant responses. I made sure that in all interviews I remained sensitive to the participants emotional states. In several interviews participants became upset when discussing their stories and each time I followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidance of acknowledging their distress and allowing them to express it. I always gave the participant the option to take a break or end the interview, however all participants expressed their willingness to continue after taking a moment to collect themselves.

One of the most crucial of the BERA (2018) guidelines relates to informed consent which requires participants "first to comprehend and second to agree voluntarily to the nature of the research and their role within it" (Israel and Hay, 2006: 59). In relation to this, Israel and Hay emphasise the importance of researchers equipping potential participants with key information regarding the "purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences, discomforts and possible outcomes" of the study including how the research will be disseminated (2006: 59). In this inquiry all participants were given an information sheet in advance which included the relevant information about the research, including how data would be stored (Oliver, 2010) (see Appendix 6). Information sheets were emailed to participants at least a week in advance of interviews with the aim that this would give them the time and opportunity to "understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway" (BERA, 2018:5). Furthermore, as mentioned, I met with all the participants informally prior to the research interview taking place. This allowed for the participants to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the study and also gave them ample opportunity to ask

questions before any data collection took place, thus strengthening my assertion that consent was fully informed. I also sent the consent forms to participants via email before interview dates, so they had time to digest them fully, and then I discussed the consent forms when meeting the participants face to face. All consent forms were then signed by participants prior to any data collection taking place. In agreement with Brooks *et al.,* (2014: 140) informed consent was understood as an "ongoing process, rather than a one-off form to be signed" and even after forms were signed by participants, I gained verbal consent from them throughout the data collection process.

Confidentiality was also an important issue that was carefully considered in this research. All research participants were promised confidentiality and it was explicitly explained to them, both verbally and in writing, that this meant they would not be identifiable in the research or presented in any recognisable form (Bell, 2010). However, I decided to give participants the option of their first name (and first name only) being used within the research if they wished, to avoid objectifying the participants and to allow them to have an element of choice in relation to the research. Those participants who chose not to keep their first name have been given a pseudonym of their choosing and I have not identified which participants kept their first name and which did not. The name of the case study university is also a pseudonym and I have taken reasonable steps to protect the anonymity of the institution. This means that I have not explicitly named the institution itself nor any of the faculties within it and the names of any staff members mentioned in the participant narratives have not been identified. Blaxter *et al.,* (2010) suggest that in order to achieve complete confidentiality then any identifying features of the institution should be changed. However, given the case-study nature of this research and the centrality of the institutional context to the research questions some information is shared in this research that could potentially be identifiable (such as contextual information regarding the make-up of the student body). This was agreed when I was granted ethical approval for this study.

All interview data was transcribed as soon as possible after the interview taking place and was immediately anonymised. The interviews were recorded on an encrypted dictaphone and audio recordings were deleted immediately following transcription. Any specific people/institutions named during data collection were also given fictional names in transcription. Data was all stored electronically in an encrypted file, except for the hard copies of participant consent forms which were stored securely in the institution, as per institutional and GDPR guidelines. Once this study has been completed all electronically stored data will remain on encrypted devices for a period of no longer than five years. Following this period, all data will be destroyed.

As outlined by BERA (2018: 6) all respondents were “free to withdraw from the research process at any time and for any/no reason” and participants were reminded of this both verbally and in writing prior to the research being undertaken. It was also made clear to the participants that they did not need to answer any questions which they did not feel comfortable with, and that they could end or pause the interview at any time without explanation. Participants were given my contact information to enable them to ask any additional questions if required, either before or after interviews had taken place, and were told that questions were welcomed at any point during the research process. This was important as it was difficult for me as a researcher to predict everything which the participants may have wished to know (Israel and Hay, 2006). As an additional safeguard, participants were informed that they could fully withdraw from the research up to six months after their interview date and any data provided would be returned to them if requested within that time period (Oliver, 2010).

Whilst the steps discussed above do not prevent the risk of unanticipated harm to participants, it nonetheless evidences how risks to participants were mitigated and outlines how an ethical approach underpinned this study as a whole. It is hoped that the measures detailed above, coupled with critical reflection and careful thought throughout the research process, minimised the risk of harm to participants as much as possible. Throughout the study I aimed to ensure that research participants felt valued and hoped that the research process may help them to develop an enhanced sense of self-worth (Oliver, 2010). The act of reflecting on their own journeys through HE may have helped to add clarity to students’ own identities and could potentially make the ways that they have grown or developed as a result of their studies more tangible for them to view, possibility resulting in a growing sense of self-confidence. This idea is supported by Stuart *et al.,* (2011: 493) who engaged in educational life history research with HE students and found that participants commented upon how valuable they found the research process in enabling them to reflect upon their student journeys and develop their sense of self. In a similar way many of the participants in this study expressed their enjoyment of the research process and many stated that they were “glad they had done it” as it enabled them to reflect on how far they had come.

5.8 The Pilot Study

A single participant was recruited for the pilot study and the same methodological approach was utilised as in the main study (Basit, 2010). This was useful in predicting any potential problems with the research process and in establishing the viability of the main doctoral study therefore adding to the trustworthiness of the overall research. Piloting was also valuable in allowing me to gain experience in interviewing in a conversational way and to

identify flaws and difficulties in the data collection process, such as those related to the demanding nature of biographical interviewing.

The pilot study took place with Naomi who a twenty-three-year-old student who had graduated from Central the year before and who was currently studying a PGCE to be a teacher in the post-compulsory sector. A colleague sent an email to all of the PGCE students, detailing information about my research and asking for volunteers who fit the criteria and were willing to be interviewed to get in touch. Naomi was the only student who offered to take part. As Naomi was on the university campus regularly for lectures I offered to meet her for an informal coffee so she could find out more about the research before the interview took place. As a research student I was also quite nervous about engaging in my first interview so thought meeting informally beforehand might help my nerves. It soon became evident that meeting informally for coffee worked well in breaking the ice and allowing us both to feel comfortable. Naomi and I were able to develop a rapport and I was able to share some of my own student story to contextualise why the first-generation student experience was important to me. I was also able to use humour, in a similar way that I do in my practice when teaching new students, with the aim of making Naomi feel comfortable and able to ask questions. During our initial coffee Naomi also shared some of her own background and I made a note of everything she mentioned to me after our meeting, so that I could follow it up in the interview if needed. We then met for our interview two days later and because we had already met, the interview felt comfortable and Naomi opened up quickly and talked openly about her background and experiences as a student. I left the interview feeling proud and excited that it had gone so well, which I largely put down to us both feeling comfortable and relatively at ease.

It was after the pilot study that it became clear to me how much the power dynamic and relationship between myself and the participants mattered to me. As an educator I have always been driven to try and position myself as being relaxed and approachable and have tried to create classrooms which are safe spaces for open and honest discussions, where students feel empowered and able to ask questions. I realised that my values as an educator very much align to my values as a researcher, and that I wanted to mirror this approachability and dialogic approach within my research, hence meeting all participants informally beforehand. The pilot study was therefore extremely valuable in shaping my approach to data collection moving forward.

5.9 Participant recruitment

In terms of sampling a purposive approach was utilised (Denscombe, 2014), as the participants embodied characteristics which fit with the research aims (i.e., being a first-

generation student and from a non-privileged background) (Wilmot, 2005) rather than being selected in order to be representative of the wider population (Punch, 2009). Purposive sampling is aligned to the ontological and paradigmatic foundation of this study as generalisability was neither anticipated nor required. It is my argument that the competence of this study should be judged on the richness of the data rather than the large quantity of participants (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). To adopt a representative approach to sampling assumes that the experiences of a group who share similar characteristics/social identities (such as being first-generation students) could be representative of the wider population which is a notion I reject. Also, as noted by Merrill and West (2009: 166), "sampling […] in biographical research, is driven by a need to engage with particulars […] despite accusations of atypicality or even of the eccentricity of single cases". The target sample of twenty participants was selected to allow for a range of experiences to be explored in depth. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 201) the object should not be to focus on similarities to create generalisations but instead "to detail the many specifics that give the context its unique flavour". Participants were all first-generation students and were recruited from a range of subject areas and stages of study. Pre-entry participants were recruited from a 6th form at a local secondary school and from an Access to HE programme at a local further education college. On-course participants were recruited from a range of courses across the university, and graduate participants were recruited from various channels including university alumni social media accounts and via university staff members. The table below details the specific way in which the participants at each stage were recruited:

Table 3:

Participants	Recruitment Strategy
Pre-entry (6th form)	An email was sent to the head of 6th form who then forwarded this on to all year 13 students in the school detailing participant requirements and asking them to email me if they were interested in taking part. The head of 6th form also reiterated this information verbally to students. Interested students who fit the criteria contacted me via email.
Pre-entry (Access Course)	I was given entry to the Access Course students' Facebook group and posted a

	message about the research in there. Interested students who fit the criteria then got in touch via email.
On-Course Students	Emails were sent out to course leaders across the university and these were then forwarded directly to students' email accounts. Interested students who fit the criteria then got in touch via email.
Graduates	The research study was promoted via the university alumni social media channels. Academic staff also forwarded details of the study to alumni who they remained in contact with. Interested participants who fit the criteria then got in touch via email.

Emails that were forwarded to students detailed key information about the study and invited participants to self-select and opt-in to the research. Potential participants were informed via information sheet or information on an email that they needed to meet the criteria of being first-generation students who had applied to, were studying at, or had studied at Central (within the past five years) and whose parents/guardians worked in occupations aligning to NS-SEC categories 5-8 (a hyperlink to more information regarding NS-SEC categories was included in information sheets). It was also made clear that they should be willing to take part in the study as participation was entirely voluntary. Once participants had expressed an interest in the study and it was established that they fit the criteria, they were offered an information sheet (see Appendix 6) if this had not already been shared, and a copy of the consent form (see Appendix 7), to allow them to make an informed decision regarding their participation. Arrangements were then made with those that were happy to participate for the initial meeting and subsequent interview.

Erben (1998: 5) advocates purposive sampling in studies such as this one, noting that samples in biographical research should be chosen carefully to "correspond to the aims of the study". The initial target sample size for the study was twenty participants from a mixture of departments and stages of their student journey, in order to explore a range of findings (Matthews and Ross, 2010). What can be understood to be an 'appropriate' sample size in

qualitative research is much debated, and as indicated by Cohen *et al., (*2013: 144) there is no “clear cut answer”. Twenty-five participants expressed an initial interest in the study but five participants either did not respond to communication to arrange interviews or withdrew from the process before interviews took place. As a result, a total of twenty participants were interviewed. The table below gives some brief information regarding the participants. More detailed information on the participants can be found in Appendix 1, 2 and 3.

Table 4:

Participant	Stage of student Journey	Subject studied	Local Student?
Farhaan	School – 6th Form	Applied to study computing	Yes
Cherry	School – 6th Form	Applied to study criminology and Policing Studies	Yes
Leena	School – 6th Form	Applied to study social work	Yes
Liz	College – Access Course	Applied to study mental health nursing	Yes
Freya	College – Access Course	Applied to study paramedic science	Yes
Arieta	Current student -2nd year (Level 5)	Studying drama	No
Caprice	Current student – 1st year (Level 4)	Studying psychology	Yes
Shamsun	Current student – 2nd year (level 5)	Studying psychology	Yes
Karolina	Current student – 1st year (Level 4)	Studying psychology and criminology	Yes
Chrissie	Current student – 1st year (Level 4)	Studying English literature and creative writing	Yes
Danni	Current student – 3rd year (Level 6)	Studying textiles	Yes
Olivia	Current student – 1st year (Level 4)	Studying early childhood studies	Yes

Beccy	Current student – 2nd year (Level 5)	Studying English Literature	Yes
Malisa	Graduate (two years ago)	Fashion	No
Emma	Graduate (three years ago)	Children's Nursing	Yes
Joe	Graduate (three years ago)	Media Studies and English	No
Abbie	Graduate (two years ago)	Criminology	No
Eddie	Graduate (one year ago)	Media and Radio Production	No
Afia	Graduate (three years ago)	Psychology	Yes
Leah	Graduate (two years ago)	Criminology and Criminal Justice	Yes

5.10 Insider/outsider research – fitting somewhere in between

Silverman (1998: 109) reminds researchers that participants will respond to the researcher in individual ways: "we take into account who the other is, what the other person could be presumed to know, where that other is in relation to our self in the world we talk about". Researcher positionality and social/cultural background as well as the characteristics which the researcher embodies can influence the way in which the participant relates to them, and thus how much of themselves they feel able to reveal. Consequently, there has been a great deal of discussion by scholars of the value of matching the background of researchers and participants (e.g., Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Skeggs, 1997).

The importance of reflecting on your own insider/outsider positionality when undertaking research is widely recognised in the literature (Hellawell, 2006). Despite being highly educated and having taught in universities for a number of years, I still feel working-class at heart, in alignment with Skeggs (1997) that class is an ongoing process and is more complex than an individual's occupation, as it also relates to state of mind. I have retained my broad local vernacular accent which clearly identifies me as a working-class, black-country woman and I was upfront with all the participants regarding my own background and educational history. This was important to me, in alignment with Oakley's (1981: 49) notion of "no intimacy without reciprocity". Therefore, my position as a white, (originally) working-class woman was clearly communicated to participants and in some ways may have

positioned me as an insider in relation to them. In this way it may have been easier for participants to share personal details with me as I may have been perceived as more likely to understand their perspectives. It was evident that many of the participants identified me as being similar to them in some way as often in their narratives they referred to "us" (meaning me and them) in relation to their experiences:

> You know how it is for people from backgrounds like us, it's not always something you think about (Joe, Media Studies graduate).

The benefits that come from the researcher and participants having similar backgrounds are highlighted by Skeggs who suggests that being positioned in a similar way to the participants offers the researcher a degree of "epistemological authority" (1997: 363). Mellor *et al*., (2013) also agree that researcher and participant coming from a shared class position can create empathy on the part of the interviewer which can encourage openness from the participant. However, Beedell (2009: 116) warn against researcher and participants imagining that "they know each other's lives" which can invite the expectation of particular responses. Therefore, it was imperative that I remained reflexive and avoided making assumptions about participants based on similarities (or differences) in relation to our backgrounds.

Furthermore, I concur with Hellawell's (2006: 489) point that "there are varying shades of insiderism and outsiderism" and that the researcher can move along the insider/outsider continuum in both directions during the research process. In fact, as Hellawell points out, there is not one single insider/outsider continuum but "a multiple series of parallel ones" (2006: 490) meaning there will always be dimensions of both insiderness and outsiderness for the researcher. As class experiences are intersected by positions such as age, ethnicity and gender, all experiences are diverse and a unified class position does not exist (Reay, 1996) meaning that a shared class background may not always lead to greater rapport between researcher and participant (Mellor *et al.,* 2013). Pragmatically, I agree with Lawler (2014) that identities are multiple, fluid, and changing, rendering it impossible for researcher and participant to fully align (Archer, 2002). Therefore, the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, coupled with my role as researcher, means I refrained from ever being a complete insider (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

Moreover, the high level of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which I had acquired in the form of my education, meant that there were many differences between my position and that of my participants, which they may have been acutely aware of (Skeggs, 1997). During data collection I heeded the warnings of Wakeling (2010) who argued that academics cannot objectively be considered to be working class. However, in my case I feel it is

important to draw a distinction between full time academics with secure employment and PhD students working on temporary and insecure contracts (Mellor *et al.,* 2013). At the time of data collection, I was still working as a waitress alongside my PhD studies and hourly paid lecturing so certainly did not enjoy the status or financial security of an academic during that time.

Overall, what was important to me during data collection was that I was able to convey empathy and understanding to help put the participants at ease. I do feel that being from a similar background as many of the participants (and my sharing this with them initially) allowed them to openly discuss difficult backgrounds or circumstances with less shame or fear of being judged (Mellor *et al.,* 2013). Furthermore, reflecting on my class position as a researcher is important to understand in relation to the data collection process and the complex ways that power operates within interviews. It is important to acknowledge that if someone else have undertaken this research they may well have found different results, but that does not make the participants' narratives, nor the analysis and conclusions I have drawn from these, any less reasonable.

5.11 Trustworthiness

Issues of validity, transferability and generalisability present areas where case study and biographical research (and indeed interpretive research in general) are commonly criticised (Mack, 2010; Yin, 2013) due to the limited size of these inquiries. However, the tighter focus of a smaller study can be advantageous as it facilitates a detailed examination of the research topic that allow unexpected yet significant issues to come to light (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001; Simons, 2009). Despite the benefits of a smaller sample size, I do recognise that a limited number of participants can restrict the representativeness of conclusions (Atkins and Wallace, 2012; Pring, 2000) but highly transferable conclusions were not the aim of this research. Consequently, as noted by Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) it is unnecessary and almost impossible to apply the concepts of validity and reliability into case study or narrative research as these concepts were generated in the positivistic tradition. As summarised by Robson (2002) the extent to which the findings in this thesis can be deemed to be 'true' depends on whether there is a singular 'truth' to be found, which from my perspective there is not. Therefore, as this research is couched within an interpretivist paradigm, it is not aiming for a positivist goal of transferable conclusions (Scott and Usher, 2011). Instead, the research is focused upon the exploration of the idiographic student experience to gain a greater level of understanding around first-generation student transitions in a post-92 HEI. I agree with Tracey (2010: 838) that "applying traditional criteria like generalizability, objectivity, and reliability to qualitative research is illegitimate"; akin to "Catholic questions directed to a Methodist audience" (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 202)

As outlined by Bassey (1999: 44) research "may offer possibilities, but no certainties, as to the outcome of future events". Certainly, this thesis does not seek to offer certainties, and many of the research findings may not be generalizable to elsewhere (Rozsahegyi, 2019). That being said, reducing the "distorting effect of personal bias" remains essential, therefore steps should be taken to establish data credibility (Lather, 1986: 63). Considering Lather's (1986) advice, I initially turned to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of "trustworthiness" as an alternate notion to validity that was more congruent with my epistemic commitments. I then found Tracey's (2010) "eight criteria of quality in qualitative research" which I found useful in offering a step-by-step mechanism for strengthening the quality (and thus the trustworthiness) of my research. Tracey (2010: 839) outlines that high quality qualitative research should meet the following criteria:

- (a)worthy topic – the larger significance of this study is justified in chapter one and two of this thesis
- (b) rich rigor – evident in the complex theoretical constructs utilised in this thesis, coupled with the robust and clear data collection and analysis processes explained in this chapter.
- (c) sincerity - apparent in my self-reflexivity regarding my own position, inclinations and values within the research, and transparency regarding methodological decisions and challenges
- (d) credibility – marked by thick descriptions in results chapters to enable showing, rather than telling, of findings. Further supported by "crystallisation" of multiple theoretical frames in data analysis to enable a more complex, in-depth understanding of the issue and by an element of participant validation to "determine whether the participants recognize the findings as true or accurate" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 242)
- (e) resonance – through the "evocative representation" of participants' lived experiences, and the sharing of findings which have relevance for other post-92 HEIs and the sector as a whole.
- (f) significant contribution – this thesis provides a unique and significant contribution theoretically in the understanding of the first-generation student experience (see Chapter 10)
- (g) ethics – ethical considerations have been carefully considered throughout the research process

- (h) meaningful coherence – this coherently answers the research questions which underpin the study, drawing on appropriate methods which fit the stated goals of the research and meaningfully connecting findings and conclusions with existing published literature.

I found that applying these criteria to my research helped strengthen my confidence that my research claims were "defensible" (Weber, 2004). I hope that readers' examination of the research process set out in this thesis should lead to the conclusion that the findings and conclusions of this study are plausible and have a degree of credibility. I also hope that by "describing the specific contexts, participants, settings and circumstances of the study in detail" that readers can "evaluate the potential for applying the results to other contexts and participants" (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 282). As highlighted by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the issue of transferability essentially rests on the reader. In order to further evidence the quality of my research, the next section of this chapter outlines strategies which I followed to enhance the trustworthiness of this research.

5.12 Participant Validation

The first strategy that was drawn upon was piloting which was discussed in section 5.9. An additional key strategy that was drawn upon to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study was an element of participant validation (Simons, 2009). Participant validation is a prominent feature in biographical research (Scott and Usher, 2011) and is advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as an important technique for enhancing the credibility of interpretivist inquiries. Similarly, Stake (2010) emphasises that participants should be given the opportunity to verify interview transcripts and review how they have been represented, quoted and interpreted.

Participants in this study had interview transcripts emailed to them to check for any anomalies and to see if they had any information that they wanted to add or change to their interview transcripts. Basit (2010) warns of the difficulties with using this strategy as participants may regret some of the comments they made once they see them transcribed on paper and wish to retract them however it was important to me that participants were consulted as "shareholders of the data" (Lather, 1991:58). Several of the participants did not respond to my email of the transcript as I had explained that no response meant I would assume they had nothing further to add. The participants who did respond to me all agreed that they were happy that their transcript provided an honest and accurate account of our conversation. None of the participants felt they had anything to add to their responses, although several made positive comments regarding how enjoyable or thought-provoking they had found the interview process.

I could have gone further with participant validation and asked participants to also review my data analysis and interpretation, however upon reflection I decided not to do this, primarily because of my ontological positioning. I understand my research results and analysis to be an interpretation which is underpinned both by theoretical lenses and my own subjectivity (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The analysis in this thesis goes beyond the experiences of my participants as they understand them and as such participants are not able to give the 'stamp of truth' to my analysis. I felt that by asking the participants to check the accuracy of their transcripts and make additional comments to these if required, I was allowing them to have a voice in the research, without betraying my own ontological position that truth is subjective, multiple and is always filtered through our own experiences.

My aim throughout this research was to be transparent and explicit regarding the process of the research and the way in which the data was analysed and interpreted, thus allowing readers to see how I arrived at the conclusions which are drawn from this study. As an interpretivist researcher I was not concerned with scientific notions of validity and transferability, and instead I concur with Tracey (2010: 841) that "the most important issue to consider is whether the data will provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant claims". The next section of this chapter will now go on to discuss the data analysis which was followed in this study in order to reach the claims which are made.

5.13 Data analysis strategy

As Merrill and West (2009) note interview data is being interpreted and analysed by the researcher from the outset of an interview taking place meaning that the process of data analysis is profoundly intertwined with the data collection itself. Merrill and West (2009: 129) also stipulate there is "no one correct way of analysing biographical data" and suggest an initial approach of immersion in data by self-transcribing interview transcripts. Consequently, all interview recordings were transcribed personally by hand which allowed a familiarisation with the data to emerge and which formed the first step in the data analysis process. Interview recordings were listened to again post-transcription to check for accuracy. Verbatim transcription was used to allow nuances and contextual factors to be included (Cohen *et al.,* 2013), meaning that pauses, laughter and other verbal nuances were recorded. The focus of analysis in this study was therefore on the content that was shared during the interviews (both verbally and non-verbally in forms of body language, gestures etc). Data was analysed thematically, drawing upon Wolcott's (1994) three stage approach and Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis.

I elected to decipher my findings using thematic analysis, firstly because I had some previous experience in this method of data analysis and secondly (and more importantly)

because I agreed with Braun and Clarke (2006: 5) that “thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data”. Both Wolcott’s (1994) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2013) frameworks offer an inductive approach to creating themes and both detail a structured yet flexible approach for researchers to follow (Maunder *et al.,* 2013). The flexibility which is offered by thematic analysis was important as this aligned with my paradigm position as someone who rejects the rigid rules of positivism.

To interpret my findings, I followed a staged approach. Wolcott (1994) depicts three stages in the process of analysing data, which are detailed below:

- Description which focuses on exploring, “what is going on here?” Initial observations are made by the researcher.
- Analysis addresses the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them – in short, how things work.
- Interpretation addresses processual questions of meanings and contexts: “How does it all mean?” “What is to be made of it all?” (1994: 12).

Within the three above categories I also followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis as I found this structure helped me to identify and analyse patterns and areas of significance within the data. I utilised an inductive, data-driven approach to data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) meaning that the themes identified came directly from the data itself, as opposed to trying to fit the data into a pre-developed coding framework derived from existing literature around the topic. In line with the interpretivist position of this research, data was analysed at a latent level, by moving from description to analysis to interpretation, in order to examine the underlying ideas and assumptions which informed the semantic contents of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For this to happen, the development of themes needs to involve interpretation, which was facilitated by following Wolcott’s three stages as explained below:

5.13.1 Stage One – The descriptive stage

Transcribing is “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” (Bird 2005: 227) and formed an important part of the meaning-making process. Although time consuming, and at times tedious, transcribing the interviews allowed me to really become immersed within the data and meant I started to become familiar with “the depth and breadth of the content” (Braun and Clark, 2006: 87). I found that during transcription, connections and areas of interest started to become evident, which I noted down informally.

After transcribing all of the interviews I then re-read them all actively, looking closely at the data, and played back the audio transcriptions to compare these to the transcriptions for accuracy. When initially re-reading the transcripts, I kept Braun and Clarke's (2013: 205) key questions in mind to help me look beyond and beneath the participant narratives to the key assumptions and ideologies which informed them:

- How do the participants make sense of their experiences?
- Why might they be making sense of their experiences this way and not another way?
- In what different ways do they make sense of the topic discussed?
- How 'common-sense' is their story?
- How would I feel if I was in that situation?
- What assumptions do they make in talking about the world?
- What kind of world is revealed through their account?

I then wrote what I can only describe as a descriptive stream of consciousness based on my initial thoughts from the data. This allowed me to describe the data as I understood it, noting areas of significance and interest which stood out for me.

Following that I went back to the transcripts and began to produce initial codes from the data to try and start to organise it into meaningful groups. This involved going "systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data set item and identifying interesting aspects in the data items that may form the basis of repeated patterns" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89). I then assigned labels "that captured the meaning of each data segment" (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013: 421).

I found this process quite overwhelming, due to the sheer number of codes which were developed from over 30 hours of interview data. Initial coding was done manually as I wanted to stay as close to the data as possible. Using track changes, I added notes to the text and also highlighted areas of text in different colours corresponding to different areas of interest. I then collated data relevant to each code together in a separate document in order for me to focus on each code distinctly to help me in identifying themes. Some data extracts were coded multiple times for different themes, other extracts were not coded at all. Following this process, I then moved onto identifying themes, which is discussed below.

5.13.2 Stage Two – Analysis

The second stage of Wolcott's model is analysis. Moving from description to analysis meant that I was aiming to:

> Expand and extend upon a purely descriptive account with an analysis that proceeds in some careful, systematic way to identify key factors and relationships among them (Wolcott, 1994: 10)

At this point I needed to go further than the descriptive account of my data and the initial codes which I had developed, to focus on systematically recognising significant relationships and patterns. To do this I firstly examined the initial codes I had identified in relation to the pre-entry, on-course and graduate participants separately in order to identify areas of commonality and significance across these different stages. I then analysed the data together to see repeated patterns of meaning, similarities and differences across the three data sets. This was very much an iterative process which took a significant amount of time as I went back over the data to ascertain if key issues for participants at one stage (i.e., pre-entry) also had significance for participants at other points in their student journey. As outlined by Rapley (2011: 285) "qualitative research is an iterative practice; its strength can lie in the process of collecting something, drawing out key issues, then going to discover how relevant that issue is in a different context with a different person".

The analysis stage incorporated Braun and Clarke's third phase of "searching for themes" whereby I refocused my analysis by sorting my long list of codes, into a more succinct list of broader themes. Initially I found this step quite difficult, in that I struggled to see how I could sort the different codes into themes. To try and address this I followed Braun and Clarke's advice and wrote each code onto a post-it note and spread them out over my dining table. I then grouped together similar codes to organise them into theme-piles, including a miscellaneous pile for the codes which had no clear alignment with the others. This allowed me to see areas of similarity between different codes and the way in which these could be submerged into themes and sub-themes. As a result of this process, key themes were identified which included avoidance of risk, hope for a better future, strategies of self-protection, pride in first-generation status, and negotiation of precarity.

After going through the above process, I still had a large number of themes, which I needed to refine to decipher which themes were most significant in relation to my research questions. Given how useful I had found visual aids in the previous stages of analysis I then developed a rough thematic map, in line with phase 4 of Braun and Clark's analysis which allowed me to see all of the themes and subthemes which had been developed from my analysis so far. Following this, I went back to the transcripts and re-read them, along with my

initial notes and description. This refreshed my memory and allowed me to see if the themes I had identified offered an accurate representation of the participants' narratives. Consequently, I was able to see that some themes I had identified, had a lack of participant data to warrant being a theme, and/or had a lack of relevance to my research questions. I was reminded by Braun and Clarke that "the keyness of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question". After developing and refining my thematic map I then felt that I had a fairly clear idea of what my different themes were, how they fit together, and what the overall picture was of my data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 92).

I knew however that I needed to strengthen my understanding of my data. I also wanted to try and ensure that the voices of my participants remained central to my analysis and results. I therefore followed phase five of Braun and Clarke (2006) and returned to the data extracts relevant to each theme, in order to allow me to see how my themes fit into the overarching story of my data. Returning to my data and the voices of my participants helped me to develop clarity regarding the essence of what each theme was about. I then wrote a rough analysis of my understanding of each theme to see how they inter-related and to try and prevent overlap between themes. As a result of this process, I identified that some themes were similar (e.g., being valued, feeling included) and so combined those themes together and developed sub-themes within the larger combined theme instead. For example, "being valued", "feeling included" and "secure sense of belonging" were combined to develop the theme "Central as a place of affirmation" with the sub-themes "belonging" and "recognition".

5.13.3 Stage 3: Interpretation

Essentially, the final stage of the data analysis process required a shift from a focus on "how?" to understanding "why?". Wolcott (1994:10-11) maintains that the interpretation stage of data analysis necessitates "making sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis". Likewise, Braun and Clarke (2006:94), in their sixth phase of data analysis explain that "claims need to be grounded in, but go beyond, the surface of the data". This final stage of analysis incorporated the writing up of my results chapters, where a deeper level of thinking and writing, coupled with engagement with published literature and the thinking tools from my conceptual framework, enabled me to relate to my themes on a deeper level and recognise the political and social context within which the participants' narrative had arisen (Riessman, 1990).

Writing my results and using thinking tools from theory and published literature enabled me to explore the wider societal, cultural and political influences on the participant narratives and to understand the way in which these macro contextual factors had shaped the participants' understandings. It was at this stage of my analysis journey that the use of conceptual frameworks and thinking tools offered by Bourdieu and Berlant really enabled me to broaden my analytic focus to make the invisible visible. The conceptual framework of this study enabled me to understand not only the factors which influenced the participants' journeys into, and out of HE, but also how these transitions could be viewed through a wider lens of political, social and cultural significance.

5.14 Conclusion of chapter

This study sought to develop a hybrid methodology combining a case study approach with biographical research to reveal the complexity of first-generation students' lived experiences. This chapter has provided detail of the philosophical underpinning of this study has outlined important information regarding the research site. The chosen research strategy has been discussed and justified, outlining methodological considerations in detail and carefully considering relevant ethical considerations. Data analysis has been explained in depth.

In the following chapters of this thesis findings from the data are explored and analysed. In chapter six the pre-entry participant experiences are discussed. Chapter seven explores the experiences of the on-course participants and chapter eight discusses the narratives of the graduate participants. The results chapters are presented separately according to student stage, firstly for clarity and the ease of the reader, and secondly to encourage readers to identify similarities and differences across the chapters, which correspond with the different points the participants were at in their student journeys. Following those three chapters, chapter nine is a discussion chapter which pulls together all of the themes identified in the three results chapters and utilises Berlant and Bourdieu's theoretical lenses to develop new and unique understandings in relation to the first-generation student experience.

Chapter 6: Findings pre-entry

6.1 Introduction to Chapter

This thesis explores the university transitions and experience of non-privileged first-generation students. The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss the findings in relation to the five pre-entry participants who were interviewed in relation to the research questions underpinning this study, with a particular focus on how the students framed their decision to attend university. The chapter begins with a discussion of student choice-making processes before going on to discuss participant perspectives on staying local vs moving away to study. The impact of league tables and the local HE field on participants' decision making is also considered.

For this chapter five pre-entry students were interviewed, as detailed in the table below:

Table 5:

Name	Student Status	Current Course	Central Firm Choice (Y/N)	Course applied for
Farhaan	School (6th Form)	A Levels	N	Computing
Cherry	School (6th Form)	A Levels	N	Criminology/Policing
Leena	School (6th Form)	A Levels	Y	Social Work
Liz	College	Access to HE course	Y	Mental Health Nursing
Freya	College	Access to HE course	Y	Paramedic Science

All of the participants had applied via UCAS to study at Central, however only Leena, Liz and Freya at that point had selected Central as their firm choice. Farhaan and Cherry remained undecided at the time of the interviews. Discussions in this, and the following, chapters are structured thematically and focus on how the participants understood and made sense of their experiences and decisions. The significant factors that influenced their choices are explored and contextualised and links are made to literature throughout.

For a breakdown of more detailed key information about each participant please see Appendix 1.

6.2 Student choice

Findings from the pre-entry participants in this thesis suggested that student choice was influenced significantly by the viewpoints of participants' parents, siblings, and other family members (such as cousins), as opposed to institutional information, social media or websites such as Unistats:

> Well, my cousin did business at Central and he said it was alright, good facilities and that so (Farhaan – 6th form student).

This "hot" insider knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) from their significant others (Ball *et al.,* 2002) was what students primarily drew upon to inform their choices, reflecting the findings of previous literature (Boliver 2013; Callender and Melis, 2022; Davies *et al.,* 2014; Fuller and Heath, 2010). A critical factor affecting the 6th form participants' choices was the opinion of their parents. Although each participant felt that their parents were supportive and allowed them to make their own decisions, all three of the 6th form participants clearly took their parents' viewpoints very seriously. This finding mirrors Fuller's qualitative research (2014) which found that working class 14–17-year-old students' aspirations for HE were closely influenced by parental expectations. Whether the parents of the participants valued university as the best choice was significant in determining if participants considered it to be the right option for them. For example, Farhaan's family had concerns regarding his employment prospects after finishing university and so encouraged him to apply for apprenticeships as a preferred option, leaving university as a 'back up plan':

> They've told me not to go to uni, because you know they've seen how difficult it is, and they've talked to other people and they've kind of said you know, the degree it holds value, but it would be better to just, because everyone is asking for experience nowadays so it would probably be better to go for an apprenticeship.

Similarly, Cherry shared that her parents had expressed concerns around the employment prospects offered by a degree versus the perceived certainty offered by an apprenticeship:

> They'd rather I went for an apprenticeship I think because of the job prospects really, because you're learning skills which will get you a job, rather than a degree that's why I don't know if uni is for me, I don't know.

The above quotes illuminate the risk of precarity that Cherry and Farhaan wished to avoid, revealing a (possibly class-based) need to minimise risk and follow a route to employment which was as safe as possible. The narratives of these two participants exposed a familial

mistrust in the promise offered by HE, revealing a suspicion of the “learning equals earning” narrative (Brown and James, 2020: 1). The interviews with these two participants revealed the way in which negotiation of risk and avoidance of precarity was the key theme underpinning their decision making, as they were focused on following what they perceived to be the clearest (i.e., safest) pathway to employment. Despite this Cherry and Farhaan still both saw university as “a good option” (Farhaan) and, given what they perceived to be the competitive nature of apprenticeships, the most probable next step after leaving school, albeit one which posed a level of risk. Essentially, Cherry and Farhaan were prepared to invest in HE as a vehicle of social mobility even though they demonstrated an understanding that “the social contract that education is woven into is fraying” (Shirazi, 2019: 2) due to limited other options at their disposal.

All of the five pre-entry participants revealed dispositions regarding the instrumental purpose of HE and the idea that it must lead to employment to be considered a viable option:

> Well, I wanted to choose something that would lead directly to a job really (Liz – Access Student).
>
> That’s a big thing for me to get a good paid job, that’s what it’s all about isn’t it at the end of the day (Farhaan – 6th form student).

There was very little mention by any of the participants about the general value of learning, or the holistic development of self that learning in HE can offer (Hart, 2012). This is reflective of the dominant neoliberal discourse of recent decades which has positioned HE largely in individualistic terms and which has necessitated an instrumental focus on the end product of the degree (Budd, 2016; Lynch, 2015). It was evident that “hot knowledge” (Ball and Vincent, 1998) concerning an overcrowded graduate labour market coupled with media depictions of this issue (e.g., Weale, 2019) had raised concerns about the gamble of HE study for some of the participants:

> A lot of people that I talk to that go to uni end up getting a degree and everything but end up getting a job that’s not related to what they study, like working in a call centre (Cherry – 6th form student)

It was evident that the risks involved in HE participation were significant for the participants in this study as their economic circumstances required a focus on employment prospects. This is at odds with the bold assertions from the Browne Review (BIS, 2010: 3) that “for all students, studying for a degree will be a risk-free activity”. Instead, elements of risk avoidance, mediated by hope, compelled the participants to view HE in purely instrumental terms, which led them to forge a clear path between their choices (of what and where to

study) and the likely employment outcomes. As highlighted by Finnegan *et al.,* (2019: 160) "it is the individual, the responsibilised subject, [who] is tasked with resolving social problems and overcoming risks on their own". These decisions were therefore deemed necessary because the participants carried the weight of this responsibility. A negotiation of cruel optimism can be perceived, as the participants constructed a narrative of escaping employment precarity via vocational course choices, even if they were unsure if their chosen 'vocation' was really right for them. Leena's narrative provided a clear example of this as she had been offered a place on the social work degree at Central. This is a vocational degree that leads directly into a profession, thus mitigating Leena and her mother's concerns about employment prospects. Interestingly, mid-way through her interview Leena revealed her passion for art. She became very animated during this part of the discussion and offered to show me some drawings from her bag which she had done earlier that morning. Interestingly, Leena then revealed she did not consider art to be a viable option for further study due to the high risk it posed in relation to employment prospects:

> I'd love to do an art degree but I'm just like [sigh] it's not going to get me anywhere so there's no point even stressing about it. There's no jobs for it and I just think that like they don't really tell you about the careers you can have after it as well, so I don't know, that's why I didn't choose art

Leena was clearly conflicted about this choice as she was apprehensive about doing a course such as social work when she was unsure if this was a career she really wanted to do, but felt unable to study art, despite her clear enjoyment of it, because of the higher risk involved:

> I know if I did art I'd be so much more happier, like I think I'd be a lot more calmer, but then at the end of the degree what is there for me really, what's the point of three years. With the social work degree, you're qualified with that degree so that's going to be easier for me.

By "easier" Leena is in fact referring to the more secure employment prospects offered by a vocational degree, the benefits of which far outweigh the risks of studying a subject which she fundamentally enjoyed and was extremely passionate about. An interplay between desire (to study art) and possibility (of gaining secure employment) is evident in Leena's narrative, which evidences what Bourdieu (1990: 59) termed as "disparity between aspirations and their realisation". Leena's social position meant that the likelihood of obtaining a successful career in art was perceived to be slim, despite her talent and passion. This positioned her aspiration to study for a degree in art as "an abstract and impossible possibility" (Bourdieu, 1990: 16). It was evident that for Leena, in her (neoliberal)

imagination, it was better to be financially secure doing something she did not enjoy, rather than risk precarity doing something she loved. The structural limits on Leena's aspirations are a result of her social, cultural and economic position, and the capitals which she had at her disposal. This positioning has informed Leena's habitus and the choices she felt able to realistically make (Sellar and Gale, 2011).

Acknowledging the distinction between desire and possibility is vital in understanding the way in which injustice and symbolic violence operate. Leena had been forced to renegotiate her hopes and dreams to comply with the neoliberal social order, as it was evident that her non-privileged social position meant that studying art, with its tenuous and unclear links to employment, was unrealistic and out of reach. The cruelty here is that Leena's pragmatic understanding of the neoliberal "opportunity trap" (Brown *et al.,* 2011: 1) led her to take decisions to protect herself from cruel optimism, but this came at a cost of understanding she would never truly achieve the good life of doing what she loved. Leena's non-privileged background, limited social, cultural and economic capital, and risk-adverse habitus meant studying art did not feature as a viable option in her horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Instead, it could only be viewed as a hobby on the periphery of her experiences. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) maintain that decisions are made pragmatically, based on lived experiences and information relevant to the social context of the individual and this was certainly the case for Leena as she was clearly aware of the tenuous links between an art degree and employment and as such made a pragmatic decision to avoid art altogether.

Similarly, the lower risk of studying a vocational degree was seen as an attractive option by the mature applicants - Freya (who had gained a place on paramedic science) and Liz (who was going to study mental health nursing). Both participants' narratives evidenced the way in which the high possibility of employment had informed their desire to study a vocational degree:

> I think it's so important to have that knowledge that you can go straight into a job after your degree, that you won't struggle to find a job (Liz).

Liz had previously studied drama at college when she was 18 (six years earlier) and had initially planned to go on to study drama at university. However, in a similar way to Leena, Liz was dissuaded by the limited employment prospects offered by studying drama at a local HEI, meaning that this desire did not translate into a viable possibility. Instead, Liz had moved into employment as a receptionist for a number of years prior to enrolling on the access course and opting to study a vocational course. There are clear echoes here of Leena's position, although for Liz these decisions had been made six years earlier. Liz was

clearly passionate about drama and talked about how she would have loved to have become an actress, which she described as “a pipe dream”. For Liz, being an actress was an abstract concept, not something that could have happened in reality. Self-protection caused her to reject this risky option outright and gain employment until she could find a safer (i.e., more vocational) route into HE.

The decision to attend university (and the access course to get there) meant that Freya had already taken a considerable risk by having to leave her full-time salaried employment and instead engage in part-time work as a waitress on a zero-hour contract. For Freya this loss of income could only be sustained in the short-term and this cost had to be outweighed by the benefit of being able to gain secure employment after graduation:

> I know that by doing paramedic science, I’ll be able to hopefully get a job as soon as I qualify, so I’ll be able to be earning a decent wage straight away, otherwise there’s no way I would have done this [the access course], because it wouldn’t be worth it.

Furthermore, the hot knowledge and experience of Freya’s work colleague served as a warning and acted as a deterrent to Freya from considering subjects that did not offer a clear route into employment:

> My friend from work has a degree in history and is still working as a restaurant manager, which she was doing before. She gets really annoyed because she’s paying back her student loan for a degree she hasn’t even used but it’s so hard for her to find a job.

The fear/risk of the degree not leading to graduate level employment was what led the pre-entry participants to all either choose vocational degrees (Leena, Freya and Liz) or to apply for apprenticeships with a vocationally orientated course at university being a back-up plan (Farhaan and Cherry). As discussed by Beck (1992) risks are unevenly distributed in society, which work to strengthen class inequalities. The greater risks faced by the participants meant they had “adjusted their aspirations to their objective chances” (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) and their horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) were limited to safer vocational options which offered less earning potential but a safer route to security.

Research by Stich (2012) suggested that middle-class students often have the privilege of pursuing more obscure subjects, however, notes that working-class students tend to gravitate toward vocational knowledge and preparation for the workforce. Subject and course choice can thus illuminate class-based distinctions between intellectual work and manual labour (Ayers, 2014: 371; Hart, 2012), which are evident in the pre-entry participant narratives. Similarly, Bourdieu outlined the way in which options which are a “reasonable

possibility" for the dominant (such as university study) are possible for marginalised groups only if they are placed in "different conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1990: 17), i.e., by choosing 'safe' vocational subjects such as social work or nursing above 'risky' abstract choices such as art or drama. A narrow vocational focus in relation to course choice can therefore be understood as a mechanism of mediating the threat of cruel optimism which underpins HE.

For the participants in this research, HE acted as "the vehicles for the dream they held most strongly – a financially and emotionally secure adult life" (Brown, 2013: 425). For most of the participants their hopes for the future centred around financial stability and protection from precarity, as evidenced in the quotes below:

> I think just getting a good job really, finding good employment, to get the job, and that's what matters really, that's what I want. (Cherry)

> I think just being secure, you know not having to worry about bills or anything like that, being able to relax without worrying. (Leena)

The participants all demonstrated an awareness of the competitive individualism which underpins neoliberal society but misrecognised this as normative and something which was their own responsibility to mediate by making the right choices. In this way they had internalised neoliberal doxa which positions students as being autonomous individuals with accountability for their own success and failure. A significant point here is that viewing these narratives through a Berlantian lens reveals that the cruel optimism lies within the notion that making an informed choice will lead to students achieving the good life. An important finding to emerge from this chapter is that the participants seemed to imagine themselves as "solitary agents who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture" (Berlant, 2011: 167) which led to them engaging in HE only in the hope that it would offer a pathway to financial and job security. The misrecognition of the cruelty inherent in neoliberal discourse invoked a sense of symbolic violence as it framed the participants as being responsible for their own success or failure whilst concealing the underlying power structures which determined the opportunities available to them (Tiainen *et al.,* 2019).

6.3 The importance of staying local vs getting 'the full experience'

For the three 6th form participants one of the key factors influencing their choice of where to study was related to locality – namely whether they decided to stay local or "live out" (move away). Decisions about where to study were made in a web of complex factors such as wanting to stay close to family and save money, versus gaining independence and having 'the full experience'. The full experience was mentioned several times in the participant narratives reflecting how university study is commonly depicted in dominant discourse as an

entire lifestyle, embodying particular practices such as being socially active and living independently as typical student behaviours (Hebden *et al.,* 2015). The 6th form participants repeatedly expressed concern that by choosing to study locally they would be missing out:

> I think you do get the full experience more (if living away from home), because you'll be living in like a like a dorm with other people and everything and otherwise, you're just in your room at home, you know, by yourself, doing the same thing you always did basically (Cherry).

> I think I'd like to live out, I'd get more of the full experience and get like independent living and not have to answer to anyone (Farhaan).

For Cherry and Farhaan moving away to university offered the chance to engage in new experiences and presented a tempting way to reinvent themselves and gain independence from their parents (Clayton *et al.,* 2009; Holton and Riley, 2013). It was apparent that moving away to university was viewed by them as an important steppingstone in terms of becoming an adult (Holdsworth, 2009b), free from the constraints of home and family life (Clayton *et al.,* 2009). In this way 'living out' was perceived to be an all-encompassing experience which invoked images of transformation and becoming. Consequently, concerns around having a "second-rate" experience, isolated from the social indulgences of studenthood (Christie *et al.,* 2008; Holdsworth, 2006) created real apprehension about choosing to study locally. Moving away was also deemed to be significant for social integration which all three of the 6th form participants perceived to be important.

> I think it's really important to make friends at uni, like the social aspect of it. I really want that experience (Cherry)

For both Cherry and Farhaan, the social life, gaining independence and having 'the student experience' were perceived as key benefits of studying at university.

Deciding where to study was a real source of concern for Leena, who discussed this at length during the interview. Leena felt that she should stay at home to study as her mom was a single parent and she was an only child, so she did not want to leave her mother on her own. She also expressed several times that she wanted to stay at home as it offered a safe haven which provided comfort and reassurance to help mediate the stress of studying:

> It's like a comfort knowing I can go home, like even at school sometimes I think I don't want to be in today but then I think after I can go home, get some food, watch some tv and just have a cup of tea and it makes me feel better. It's something to like, like a comfort and that's a good thing about living at home as well if I'm going to be

> going to uni it's going to be nice to think that I can just go back home after, I don't have to live here.

Leena's narrative aligns with research by Clayton *et al., (*2009) which suggested that students manage anxiety around the unfamiliarity of HE by choosing to stay at home where they can draw on their existing networks of support and sustain their emotional attachments to their family and friends (Christie, 2007). However, Leena's imagined immersion in the field of HE as a local student evoked concerns around missing out. Staying at home, whilst offering the promise of reassurance and familiarity, resulted in higher risks in terms of the threat it posed to accessing 'the student experience'. It often felt in the interview that Leena was trying to persuade herself that staying at home was the best choice for her. Several times she expressed clear concerns around missing out and fitting in as a result of her (future) local student status:

> I'm worried that I'm not going to get the full experience, even though it shouldn't be about that, but it is about that when you think about it. It shouldn't be, but it is.

Leena confessed she had previously experienced difficulties making friends at school which clouded her expectations towards university. Her concerns were further heightened as she framed her upcoming experience of being a local student as deviant and outside of the norm. It clearly troubled Leena that her experience would not align to the ideal-student subject (Burke, 2012: 116). If the dominant discourse of studenthood was more inclusive, rather than othering, of local student experiences this may have had reduced Leena's anxieties significantly. Leena's narrative suggests that 'the student experience' discourse is exclusionary and can result in problematic emotional injuries for younger students who plan to study locally, particularly if they may already lack confidence and self-belief.

As mature students, Freya and Liz's focus was quite different. Both Freya and Liz had a deep-rooted connection to their localities exemplified by their embedded social ties and desire to stay close to their families (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013) which meant that they prioritised the local and the familiar over 'the full experience'. This finding is supported by existing literature regarding the focus of mature students (e.g., McCune *et al*., 2010; McVitty and Morris, 2012). Although both participants expressed that they would like to make friends at university they did not reveal any of the concerns about missing out seen in the 6th form student narratives and whilst discourses of 'the student experience' were present in their narratives, they both distanced themselves from typical student norms, instead positioning themselves as focused and hardworking:

> That's not what I'm there for to be honest, I mean obviously I want to make friends, but I'm not interested in going out and drinking and that, I mean I've done all that you

> know what I mean? I just want to focus on my work, on getting my work done. (Freya)
>
> I'm not a big drinker anyway and I don't go out a lot so it's not that important to me. Obviously I would like to make friends but I'm going to study not to go out partying. (Liz)

The access students' academic focus meant that they were less worried about social integration and neither of the participants expressed any concerns in this regard. However, despite their growth in confidence during their access course, they did express concerns about being "clever enough" (Freya) to succeed at university, demonstrating an underlying lack of self-belief in their academic ability (Bowl 2001; Reay 2003). This lack of confidence could potentially be related to their previous negative experiences in education, meaning that the access student participants projected their prior educational experience of failure onto their future HE context.

It is notable that the 6th form pre-entry participants did not express any real concern in meeting the academic expectations of HE study as they were seemingly more concerned with social and financial aspects. In fact, the academic demands of university study were not discussed in the 6th form participant narratives at all. It may be that perhaps their limited points of reference for HE meant that their expectations centred more around 'the student experience' depicted in the media which commonly disregards the level of academic study required by universities. This could be problematic given the struggles many students have with the academic writing and independent learning demanded by HE (Hardy and Clughen, 2012). A further reason that could account for the lack of academic concerns could be perhaps because the 6th form participants had all been academically successful within school and were studying A-levels which offer a well-sanctioned route into HE:

> School is a lot of work to be fair, but I've never really struggled to be honest (Farhaan)
>
> I've always quite liked school, I'll be sad to leave in a way (Cherry).

These experiences may have given the 6th form participants a greater sense of legitimacy in the field of education and a more robust student identity, in comparison to the mature participants who had negative school experiences and had been out of education for several years. Similarly, it could also be interpreted as reflecting the notion that transitioning to university after school is seen as a "natural progression" (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005: 88), and is widely promoted in schools and wider public and policy discourse as the only "acceptable aspiration" (Brown, 2011: 7). For the 6th form participants, applying to university

was seen as inevitable and as being “just another chapter really” (Farhaan) as their aspirations were effectively (re)directed into university study. Combined pressure from school and government policy meant that university study was framed for these participants as the best option, regardless of their class background, achievement levels or actual aspirations. This was evidenced in participant narratives where the push from teaching staff for all students to apply to university was interpreted by the 6th form participants as support:

> The teachers helped us a lot. They sat us down and we did our UCAS applications in school. They helped us loads with our personal statements, especially Miss P, she helped me a lot with mine, and she talked to me about what I wanted to apply for because I wasn’t sure (Cherry).

> The teachers have been really supportive, yeah they really have. You can always go to them and ask for help with UCAS they were always willing to sit down with you and help (Leena).

However, Cherry and Farhaan’s interviews revealed that this same level of support was not available for students when they wanted to apply for apprenticeships:

> They haven’t really been talked about a lot to be honest (Cherry).

The narratives of the 6th form participants therefore evidenced the way in which schools frame university as a universal norm and the natural next step after finishing school:

> It was always that I was going to go, that I’d apply to uni, it was always the plan. It’s just what’s expected. Like in 6th form they don’t really talk to you a lot about other options, it’s mainly about uni really (Leena).

The 6th form participants evidenced the way university study has become normalised to the extent of being a rite of passage for young people. The strength of the discourse and the support of the teaching staff helped to frame university as a safe and legitimate option that did not threaten the 6th form participants’ student identity and that was foreseen as being for people like them, regardless of their classed or ethnic background. The strong promotion of HE, driven by government policy and the use of student destinations as a school performance measure, appeared to come at the expense of allowing students to explore a wider range of future opportunities. This is despite secondary schools being legally required to ‘inform’ pupils about technical education and apprenticeship opportunities (DfE 2018). Subsequently, the alternative aspirations of students like Cherry and Farhaan appeared to lack the school sanctioned support that was given to university study. This raises questions concerning whether some students actually enter HE in spite of their aspirations, rather than because of them. The narratives of the 6th form students demonstrated the way in which

university study is framed to A-level students as what this thesis terms as a *doxic aspiration*, i.e., an unquestioned belief that engagement with higher education is a positive decision which is equated with success. This finding has implications in terms of the way in which the universal promotion of HE in schools may feed into discourses of cruel optimism by framing HE as the safest pathway to the good life when the reality is much more complex than policy and school discourses portray.

6.4 League tables and the local HE field

During the interviews the participants were all asked about what impacted on their decisions regarding where to study, including the impact league tables had on their decisions. As outlined in section 5.7, Central is located in an area that has a dense population of local HEIs and FE colleges, therefore there was a keen element of choice for the participants. The participant narratives revealed that going to different universities posed varying levels of perceived risk. Most of the participants knew someone who had either applied to or studied at Central, which framed the university as a safe space that was regularly accessed by people of a similar background as the participants. However, the 6th form participants also demonstrated an awareness of the local HE hierarchy which meant that, due to its lower status, Central could be perceived as a riskier option. Farhaan had applied to Plateglass as well as Central and hoped to achieve the grades to study there as he had "heard it was better" and felt that a degree from Plateglass carried "more value" in the labour market than a degree from Central. The 6th form participants all showed an awareness of league tables and the fact that Central had a lower league table position. Interestingly, the participants commonly used the other local post-92 HEI (Brookfield) to justify their choice of Central as a 'better' university:

> Things like that [league table position] do matter because I had an offer from [Brookfield] University and I was saying to everyone "oh yeah I'm going to go there" and they were like "that's a really bad university" and then by people saying that it really puts you off. And then I looked at the actual [league] table and they are right at the bottom and that must mean something if they're right at the bottom, so obviously that put me off, so I declined that one straight away (Leena).

> They [Brookfield] put loads of exceptions like to make people come to the university, like they say like if you don't, like their grades are really low because they want so many people coming in because they know no-one goes because people aren't going to choose it so that kind of put me off (Cherry).

Leena declined her offer from Brookfield based on the hot knowledge about its poor reputation (Ball and Vincent, 1998) coupled with low league table position that "must mean

something", and Cherry was put off by the low entry criteria. Both participants used Brookfield's low position as a way to signify that Central was the better and more selective choice. In this way, although Central occupies a relatively low league table position, the fact that it had a higher position than Brookfield, and asked for higher grades, allowed the participants to frame it as a superior HEI and thus a safer choice. Chapter two outlined the way in which HE has now become what Robertson *et al.,* (2011) term as a "positional good" in that once everybody has a particular credential (such as a degree) the overall value of that credential decreases. It appears that this understanding had, to some extent, been internalised by the participants who used Brookfield's lower position in the local HE field to reassure themselves that a degree from Central would offer greater symbolic value in local contexts of graduate employment. It is evident that league tables and marketisation instruments do have significance regarding decision-making for first-generation students, and that students may utilise the position of universities within their local HE field in order to justify and reassure themselves when making decisions. Whilst the use of league tables in regard to student decision-making has been discussed at length in the literature (e.g., Reay *et al*, 2005; Crozier *et al.,* 2008; Wilkins and Burke, 2015), the role of hierarchy in the *local* HE field has been given less attention. An important finding to emerge from this chapter then is that the local HE hierarchy (both in terms of local reputation and league table position) can play an important role in local first-generation student decision-making.

6.5 Conclusion

The pre-entry participants' narratives regarding their prospective transition to university were complex, making it difficult to develop a hierarchical set of factors which influenced their decisions. Facing the transition to university study invoked mixed emotions in the participants, predominantly a mixture of excitement and apprehension, underpinned by uncertainty (regarding if they would be good enough, or if the financial risk would pay off). The 6th form participants looked forward to "meeting new people" (Cherry) and building new social networks. This excitement was mediated by concerns that studying locally meant that participants would be denied the "full experience" that was perceived to be accessible only to students who lived away from home. Studying locally also had important implications in terms of the role that the local HE hierarchy played in impacting on students' choices regarding where to study. In this way the "cold" knowledge of league tables coupled with the "hot" knowledge of local university reputation both played a significant role in determining where would be an appropriate choice to study.

University is often portrayed in the literature as a risk for non-privileged/first-generation students in moving them away from their social class norms into the unfamiliar territory of university study (e.g., Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Crozier *et al*., 2008; Reay *et al*., 2009b),

particularly as they may lack familial experience of HE and the cultural capital associated with this. Interestingly, these concerns were not prevalent for the pre-entry participants in this study. This may be due to decades of WP meaning that university is pitched as being open to people from a plethora of different backgrounds. The role of the institution could also be significant here as Central, being a post-92 HEI, offered a more familiar context where participants would be surrounded by people from similar backgrounds hence positioning integration as being less complicated. A salient finding in this chapter is that the 6th form participants viewed university with a sense of entitlement that literature suggests is usually reserved for middle-class students as a result of the framing of HE as a *doxic aspiration,* primarily driven by the encouragement they received from school. This entitlement was fractured by the insecurity of graduate employment prospects. This is a risk provoked by neoliberal restructuring which has driven notions of individual choice and responsibility and thus individual risk and blame inherent with making the wrong choice. Significantly, the findings in this chapter have evidenced the ways in which first-generation student choice making processes are saturated with perceptions of risk management and avoidance of precarity which demonstrate the ways in which non-privileged first-generation student choices are bounded by structural limitations which determine their horizons for action. The findings discussed in this chapter therefore add to existing understandings of first-generation student choice-making processes, accentuating the role of risk avoidance and evasion of precarity.

The next chapter of the thesis explores the narratives of the on-course participants, illuminating the factors that influenced their transitions into and through university, and the way in which their aspirations and horizons for action were influenced by their experiences studying in a post-92 HEI.

Chapter 7 – On-course participants

7.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter presents and discusses the findings in relation to the eight on-course participants who were interviewed for this study. The themes that are discussed in this chapter are revisited in greater detail in chapter nine, which engages in a more in-depth level of theoretical analysis in order to synthesise the key findings of the research. For this chapter the eight participants were studying a range of subject areas and were at varying levels of study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38. All of the on-course participants lived locally, with the exception of Arieta who lived in student housing. Discussions in this chapter are structured thematically and focus on how the participants made sense of their experiences as students, including the way in which the 'promise' of HE was experienced and understood by the participants studying in a post-92 university context. The significant factors that influenced the participants' choices, experiences and hopes/expectations for the future are explored and contextualised and links are made to relevant literature throughout.

For a breakdown of key information about each participant please see the table below:

Table 6:

Name	Age	Year of study	Subject studied	Local Student?
Arieta	22	Level 5 (2nd year)	Drama – Central School of Acting	No
Caprice	18	Level 4 (1st year)	Psychology	Yes
Shamsun	19	Level 5 (2nd year)	Psychology	Yes
Karolina	18	Level 4 (1st year)	Psychology and Criminology	Yes
Chrissie	38	Level 4 (1st year)	English lit and creative writing	Yes
Danni	22	Level 6 (3rd year)	Textiles	Yes
Olivia	18	Level 4 (1st year)	Early Childhood	Yes
Beccy	20	Level 5 (2nd year)	English literature	Yes

7.2 Student Choice

The decision-making of the on-course participants was largely pragmatic and informed by personal experience and the "hot" knowledge of those around them (Ball and Vincent, 1998). The participants' decisions to study locally aligned with findings of existing literature (Callender and Melis, 2022; Clayton *et al.,* 2009; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013) in that they were mediated by familiarity, close familial ties and financial concerns. The participants often cited staying close to their partner/family as being a key factor in their decision to study at a local university:

> I feel like I would be a lot more anxious [if living away from home] and wouldn't have as many friends as I do now. I dunno I feel like it's too far, because I've never liked moved away from home, and I wouldn't be able to see my boyfriend as much so that would have been separated, my friends would have been separated, my family, I wouldn't have got a job, so I'm glad I stayed local (Karolina).

The on-course participants had elected to study subjects which were less vocationally inclined, and so which posed a greater risk, which caused difficulties with some of their families. Several of the participants spoke about their family's general mistrust of HE and the concerns their parents or friends felt about university (and the subjects they wanted to study), as being risky and precarious. For example, Danni's family had strong reservations about her going to study textiles at university. Both her parents worked in low-paid jobs and were in their late sixties:

> My mom was dead against it, she was always worried about money. She's very money like, you've got to save and if you go to uni you've got this loan above your head and no guarantee of a job when you get out. She would have liked me to have studied to have become a lawyer or a teacher to do something that leads to a profession.

Similarly, Chrissie, the oldest participant at 38, faced a great deal of negativity from her family and friends upon choosing to enter HE. Chrissie had previously worked for 13 years in the stockroom of a large bookstore but had recently opted to leave her job and enter HE to study English (which she had a longstanding passion for). Choosing to leave regular paid work to study for a degree which had no clear links to employment was upsetting for Chrissie's family and difficult for her friends to understand:

> I actually fell out with a few people, it's just like I had people, I mean people coming out of nowhere telling me that I was making the worst decision of my life. My friend who I was really close to, when I told him I'd applied to uni he started telling me all these reasons why I shouldn't do it, you know you should do nursing. It wasn't just

> him it was other people as well. Telling me I shouldn't be doing an English degree because that's not going to get you anywhere in life, saying you know you're making a mistake, you should just get another job.

Further probing revealed that Chrissie's friend had previously attended university himself to study a degree in social work, because "he thought it would get him a good job" but which had actually left him trapped in a job which he found extremely stressful and did not enjoy. His experience therefore served as a warning for Chrissie that taking the 'safe' route of a vocational degree actually carried much higher risks in terms of job satisfaction and personal fulfilment. This, coupled with Chrissie's previous long-term experience in a job that she "completely hated", pushed Chrissie to study something she was passionate about, despite the higher risks in terms of links to employment. This went against Chrissie's family and friends' understanding of HE as only being a viable option if it led directly to employment, meaning that Chrissie's decision to study English literature felt risky and invoked anger and distress. Transitioning to university for Chrissie led to fractured social relationships (Christie, 2009) and the violent impact of her degree choice was particularly acute because it deviated from the norms of her social circle (O'Shea *et al*., 2017). Rather than backing down, Chrissie stated that she had cut contact with many of her friends who disapproved of her decision, evidencing her commitment to her studies and the costs of going against class-based expectations of 'appropriate' (i.e. vocational) subject choices. Chrissie's narrative evidences the difficulties and emotional costs mature first-generation students may face when making the decision to leave employment to enter HE, making the decision even more risky.

Bourdieu (1990) suggested that habitus may lead to the exclusion of certain practices which are unfamiliar to individuals and their cultural groupings however Chrissie's actions and perseverance illuminate the element of choice within habitus (James and Bloomer, 2001). Chapter 4 noted that although habitus reflects the position within which it was developed it is also agentic, leading Chrissie to make decisions which went against her social and classed position. Past experiences are also crucial in terms of understanding habitus (Grenfell, 2008; Reay *et al*., 2009a) as it refers to a historical context and is inextricably "linked to individual history" (Bourdieu, 1993: 86). For Chrissie her life story was characterised by difficult educational experiences, unsatisfying employment, and a perception of unreached potential. This was what drove Chrissie to re-enter HE to study a subject she loved, despite the potential risks in terms of employment and actual costs to her personal relationships.

The narratives of the on-course participants regarding student choice suggested that, for first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds, choices are bounded by social

contexts and are risky, not only in terms of making the 'right choice' but also in terms of the emotional costs when decisions go against the expectations of an individual's social circle.

7.3 Local HE Hierarchy

A key focus of this study was examining the way in which the participants framed their decision to enter university, and in relation to this, the on-course participants made repeated (unprompted) references to the other local HEIs to explain and justify why they had elected to study at Central. The participants had a clear understanding of the local HE hierarchy and openly discussed the way that Central was less "prestigious" (Caprice) than Redbrick or Plateglass yet was superior to Brookfield.

Interestingly however, most of the participants generally seemed to place little importance on the league table position of Central outlining that they were more concerned with the feel of the institution or the "hot" knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) from those around them:

> I did look at them [league tables], but to be honest it was more, more about how it felt and the facilities for me (Danni).
>
> No, I didn't look at them. I went off what I saw and what I got told and when I came to meet people and look round I went off that (Olivia).
>
> I mean people say it matters about what uni, about where they are in the league tables, but to be honest with you I don't think anyone really cares. I don't think people really care what uni you go to unless its Oxford or Cambridge [laughs] you know I don't think anyone really cares, they're all the same aren't they really, I guess, to a degree (Chrissie).

The participants' rejection of performative measures such as league tables could be understood as agentic in refusing to adhere to neoliberal norms but in reality, suggesting "they're all the same" (Chrissie) does little to negate the varying levels of symbolic value which are ascribed to qualifications from different HEIs. In this way, the participants' optimism that league table position was unimportant could be understood as cruel in that it did not reflect the reality of institutional hierarchy (Boliver, 2015).

Karolina's view differed from the above participants in that league table position had been an important factor in her decision making and had originally dissuaded her from wanting to study at Central:

> I wanted to go to Plateglass because it's like smart people go to Plateglass so I'm going to go there. The reputation of Central did scare me, because so many people told me not to come here. But I'm glad that I did because I've made so many friends

> here and I like the way things are set out here, it's really supportive. I don't have any regrets (Karolina).

The notion that "smart people go to Plateglass" implies that less smart people go to Central, and this belies the way in which (class-based) notions of intelligence act as a structuring device within meritocratic discourses, obscuring the impact of cultural capital and class advantage. Karolina had internalised a meritocratic disposition which misrecognised university cohorts as being related to individual intelligence as opposed to unequal distribution of privilege and power (Bourdieu, 1984). It was evident that Karolina's perspective had internalised an understanding that more elite universities are inherently superior to post-92 HEIs. This aligns with findings from Archer *et al.,* (2003) who indicated that working class students felt that the universities they could access most easily represented a second-rate form of HE that was held in lower esteem (and was therefore less attractive).

Central's post-92 status meant that it operated in a precarious position within the local hierarchy and the participant narratives revealed a number of practices employed by Central to help it compete for position in the field. One of these was unconditional offers which was a practice which had risen sharply at the time of data collection as a result of the fierce competition between HEIs needing to attract students (Turner and Kirk, 2019). Several of the on-course participants had been offered an unconditional offer to study at Central which acted as a pressure selling technique in persuading them to 'choose' Central as a safe and risk-free option (as their place was guaranteed). This low-risk entry strategy however became much higher-risk when participants considered the impact of studying at a low status HEI on their graduate future. Shamsun offered an interesting example of this as she had been offered a place to study at both Redbrick and Central but chose Central as her firm choice because they gave her an unconditional offer and therefore was perceived as a safer option. When she did in fact obtain the grades for Redbrick, Shamsun regretted her choice but felt like it was too late to do anything about it. Entry to a new part of the field brings habitus most clearly into view and evidences "the ways in which the social is incorporated into the self" (Lawler, 2014: 145). The below exchange clearly evidences the way in which the class-based dispositions of risk aversion and low confidence within Shamsun's habitus limited her horizons for action when deciding where to study:

> Shamsun: I wish I didn't accept it [unconditional offer]. I wish I went to Redbrick because I did have the grades to go there. I just didn't want to take the risk, I didn't, because I knew that I wanted to come to Central but I never thought like I'd get

> accepted into Redbrick, so I thought I don't want to take the risk. And then after I was like "why didn't I!"
>
> Beth: Why would you have rather have gone to Redbrick?
>
> Shamsun: I think it's more like a prestigious university and employers value that I think. Like whenever I went to talks for employment and uni at school they're like "Redbrick" and then [pause] but to be honest with you I don't feel like Central was a bad mistake because I have friends that went to Redbrick and they don't have no support whatsoever, but the support, the support system here is quite good.

In a similar way to several other participants, Shamsun uses the notion of "support" as the silver lining in the cloud of missed opportunity. Despite regretting her decision, and the cost she felt she may have to pay in terms of reduced employment prospects, Shamsun positioned the support she received from the university as a desirable good. However, Shamsun's narrative also revealed a sense of individualised regret which raises concerns regarding the ethical implications of making unconditional offers to students. Shamsun's experience is an injury of the neoliberal ideology which has forced the hand of institutions to engage in questionable ethical practices, such as pressure selling techniques, in the name of recruitment (and thus survival) in the competitive and hierarchical HE field.

Interestingly, both Beccy and Karolina had achieved lower A Level grades than they had been predicted, leading to them not meeting the entry requirements for their courses. They both discussed their level of confusion that, in spite of this, they had still been offered a place at Central. This led to feelings of gratitude towards Central for being accepted:

> I didn't get the grades I needed to come here, I think I needed to get BCC and I got BCD, but they still let me in, and I was like oh my God thank you, that was a massive relief (Beccy).
>
> I was really confused because the entry requirements for here and Plateglass were quite similar so I was like "I didn't get into Plateglass so how did I get into here?" But then I don't know, I don't know why they took me. I didn't get the requirements so I just got lucky that they let me in I guess (Karolina).

These practices employed by Central helped to develop a *façade of selectivity* by asking for relatively high entry requirements which may not have always been required in practice. This could be understood as a pragmatic practice in a heavily marketised HE system where entry requirements form part of the methodology in deciding league table positions. This practice meant that some participants felt as though they were attending a slightly more selective (and therefore somewhat higher status) institution. Blackman (2017: 15) offers an interesting

perspective on this issue, suggesting that post-92 HEIs commonly make lower offers to students to allow them the opportunity to succeed yet "sadly they still often feel it necessary to have higher published tariffs to avoid reputational damage because of the dominant selective model". Therefore, it may be the case that Central publishes higher entry requirements as a result of marketised pressures such as league tables, which has implications for first-generation student choice-making. Whilst higher entry requirements may create feelings of being at a more selective HEI, they also can potentially invoke feelings of gratitude for being admitted entry despite not achieving the advertised grades/points. This is a clear example of the way in which the marketised, neoliberal HE field can influence first-generation students' engagement with HE.

In relation to the local HE hierarchy the other local universities were mentioned by the participants several times to justify why Central was the appropriate choice for them. Beccy's partner was studying at Redbrick which allowed Beccy to make some interesting comparisons between his experience and her own. The following exchange from Beccy's interview details the way she perceived her partner's experience to be different to hers due to the social make-up of the institution:

> Beccy: he's at the fancy one but he doesn't like it as much as I like this one.
>
> Beth: oh really, that's interesting.
>
> Beccy: mmm, they're all a bit stuck up [laughs] he don't, he don't get on, like he don't really speak to anybody there. Everybody kind of, they speak to him as if he's like foreign, like as if they can't understand him at all. They don't understand him, at all and some of them come from [local city] and they still don't understand him. But I'm like, as soon as you see that type of person, you know straight away that they'm just ignorant and they aint going to understand you at all so.

Beccy's above response (transcribed verbatim in her local dialect) illustrates how important it is for first-generation students to share a sense of common identity with their peers in order to assist social integration (Hope, 2014) and that this in turn can have an impact on feelings of legitimacy and confidence. Accent and dialect are an important distinction of class and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) which marked Beccy's partner out as not fitting within the middle-class culture of Redbrick, which led to him feeling like "a fish out of water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). It is evident that Beccy's partner's cultural capital did not translate effectively into the field of elite HE, leading to him being mocked for his accent, feeling alienated and doubting his academic ability. This aligns with findings of earlier research on working-class students in elite HEs feeling out of place as a result of the cultural

mismatch between their own habitus and the context of the university (e.g., Ostrove, 2011; Reay *et al.,* 2005; Reay, 2021; Spengen, 2013).

In contrast, Central was not interpreted in the same way for Beccy as it offered a site of belonging and a place where she felt comfortable and accepted. Beccy's strong local dialect posed no difficulties within Central due to the diverse makeup of the student body and high percentage of local students:

> I really love it here. I don't, I thought it would be like a massive step but I feel quite comfortable here, I feel like I know my way around and I feel comfortable.

Beccy's narrative indicated the way that university was not, in reality, "a massive step" which drastically changed her life, but actually facilitated the continuation of her existing life in a way which echoes the findings of Thomas and Quinn (2007). Integration for Beccy at Central was relatively uncomplicated in comparison to her partner's experience as it provided a much neater fit with her existing habitus. As a first-generation student from a non-privileged background Becky felt a secure sense of belonging at Central which was at odds with her partner's experience in an elite HEI. This evidences that non-privileged first-generation students may find it easier to feel comfortable and valued in post-92 contexts due to them serving a more diverse range of students.

The local HE hierarchy was also significant in relation to the other participants' choice-making. Chrissie had applied to Redbrick and had visited the campus prior to starting university and also made some interesting comparisons with Redbrick in her narrative:

> I just found them friendly when I come in, it was you know, it weren't, it was just a bit more friendlier than it was at Redbrick, it's quite casual here, quite relaxed really. You know it's quite diverse as well, they're all different types of people here.

Caprice also made some interesting comparisons to the local Plateglass in her narrative:

> Like Central is different. It opens a lot of doors as opposed to Plateglass. I feel like Plateglass is very closed in and prestige and it's all like, I'm not saying Central doesn't have prestige students but it opens up for everyone, people with disabilities and people who, you know, are not that like, I just feel like they welcome every single person here whereas I feel like with Plateglass it's very, it reminds me of like parliament like it feels really old and you know we're like A* students and you know they only talk about education. Whereas here they talk about education but they're not as, they're strict but you know, you can talk to them like a normal human being.

Caprice's description of Plateglass as being "closed in" demonstrates the way that she perceived it as a place which was closed off to students from her background, unlike Central which was full of "normal human beings". Central therefore offered a place which evoked feelings of fitting in and being accepted and valued. For Caprice and Chrissie, it is evident that their habitus led them to make an informed choice to study with people they could relate to, in a "relaxed" setting (Chrissie) which posed less threat to their existing identity and ways of being. Their horizons for action were clearly informed by their social and cultural contexts (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), but in a way which suggests a lack of entitlement to study in more elite HEIs. Symbolic violence can be understood as being evident in the way the participants had unconsciously accepted the social hierarchy of the HE field and had developed "a sense of one's place", thus internalising the legitimacy of their own exclusion (Bourdieu, 1984: 471) from elite HE. However, symbolic violence also lies in the way in which post-92 HEIs are consistently devalued in dominant discourse, league table metrics, and by employers. As discussed in earlier chapters, the way in which university status (and reputation) remains a salient category, despite low-status HEIs having little chance of challenging this, bestows symbolic violence on the predominantly first-generation students who study within these institutions. Central was clearly doing important work in fostering a welcoming and diverse culture which was perceived to be significant by the first-generation students in this study, however this important work is not valued in the wider socio-political context of HE hierarchy.

7.4 Central: A place to belong?

The welcoming and diverse culture of Central was instrumental in allowing the participants to develop a sense of belonging, despite not fully engaging with the social aspects of 'studenthood'- something which Thomas (2012) states is key to successful integration. Much of the literature suggests that non-privileged/first-generation students struggle to adapt and belong in HE (e.g., Meehan and Howells, 2019; Ostrove *et al.,* 2011; Pedler *et al.,* 2022; Read *et al.,* 2003; Reay *et al.,* 2005), arguing that their habitus is at odds with university culture. It is difficult to reconcile the participants' narratives in this study with the findings of this literature. Instead, the participants articulated feelings of successful integration and the ability to move across fields with the ease more usually associated with middle-class students: "I feel comfortable here, it's like my little home, it's nice" (Karolina).

This ability to adapt and enact success whilst being in an unfamiliar environment suggests that the diverse and welcoming culture of the post-92 environment allowed the participants to be more like what this thesis terms as *amphibian students* rather than the "fish out of water" that the literature often paints them to be (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127; Reay *et al.,* 2009b: 1106). The consistency between their class-based habitus and the culture of

Central meant it was perceived as “comfortable” (Karolina) and “welcoming” (Chrissie) and thus easier to integrate into. This allowed the participants to successfully move between the field of HE and their home life, merging loyalties to their social circle and habitus with academic learning identities developed as a result of their experience as a HE student.

Conversely it was Arieta (the only non-local student in this group) who spoke about feeling distanced from her home life and who seemed to be developing what Bourdieu (2000: 16) termed as a “habitus clivé” or a divided habitus; a sense of self “torn by contradiction and internal division”. Arieta’s experiences differed in several ways from the other on-course participants, firstly in that she was not a local student, and secondly because she studied at Central’s School of Acting (CSA) which can be understood as a different context to the rest of the university. The provision of CSA is well regarded and is consistently rated amongst the best drama schools in the UK. As a result of this high market position, CSA does not align with the reputational framework of Central and holds a particular distinction of privilege and elitism which had a notable impact on Arieta’s experiences as a non-privileged, first-generation student. Arieta spoke openly about the way in which “acting is a very middle-class thing” and revealed she thought her course was “probably going to be full of really rich people, which it is”. This experience of living away from home and studying in a largely middle-class environment had a profound impact on Arieta’s habitus which contrasted with the other on-course participants.

Arieta spoke at length regarding her feelings that her parents and friends at home did not understand her anymore, which consequently led to growing feelings of distance between them:

> It’s weird going back as well to my friends because they’re just so bored […] they ask me questions and I almost don’t want to answer them because I’m having such a good time. And I’m just like “so what are you doing?” and they’re just like “oh you know working at the shop, thingy has split up with thingy again” and like all this, it’s just like, it’s so almost like, so far away from me. Like I’ve got this other life, that’s the thing sometimes. You have this life when you’re here, then you go back and you get in this routine (Arieta).

Arieta’s narrative is imbued with a sense of having had to leave something behind to allow her to become worthy of the status she associated with studying at CSA. It was evident that through Arieta’s experience at university she had attained new and different cultural capital and consequently her habitus was undergoing change. As a result of this she found she had less in common with her friends and family at home and felt more comfortable with her friends at university. This left Arieta with concerns about feeling superior invoking a sense of

class disloyalty which aligns with Reay's (2004) work on the emotional costs of becoming something different as a result of HE study:

> They, I understand them [friends] they don't understand me. They're in the exact same position as they were five years ago, like they haven't done […] the only thing they've moved on from is like a job whereas I feel like I am hopefully I'm bettering myself and trying to educate myself more. It's that thing as well, God I sound awful, but you don't want to feel superior. It feels like you're putting things on, it's like when people are kind of like "oh alright then look at you!" and it's like no, but like just let me be myself.

The resulting changes to Arieta's identity and habitus as a result of her HE experiences in a more elite context came at a cost of affecting relationships with her 'home' friends and family, even down to altering the types of conversations she had. Arieta's experiences align with existing literature concerning the impact of HE on existing relationships (Lee and Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2014; O'Shea, 2014). As noted by existing research (e.g., Ingram, 2011; Reay 2002), change to the habitus can lead to "huge emotional hurdles, guilt and dislocation" (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). Arieta's narrative aligns with Bourdieu's (2000) depiction of "hysteresis" as she was experiencing negative sanctions as a result of a change to her habitus, which resulted in her experiencing difficult emotions such as guilt (Friedman, 2016). Part of this guilt was evident in Arieta's concern to avoid sounding pretentious, something which Lawler (1999) identifies as a strongly gendered pitfall of upward mobility.

Interestingly, later on in the interview Arieta discussed how she was determined "not to change" as a result of being at university in terms of remaining loyal to her working-class roots. Despite the difficulties being across two competing fields Arieta was clear that she did not position her working-class background as a disadvantage, but actually conceptualised it in terms of strength:

> I'm really, really proud of that, of being working class. That's definitely my my kind of, my inner strength for carrying on because I'm like "why the hell can't I do that?" Because other people have lots of opportunities because their parents have really great jobs and that's great for them but I've had to do this on my own and that encouragement has come from myself.

Arieta's narrative bestowed a strong sense of agency in going against the grain and not making a pragmatic vocational course choice but instead electing to follow her passion and study a subject she loved, despite the risks it posed in terms of employment prospects. The above quote from Arieta reflects her working-class dispositions of determination and resilience (Lehmann, 2009b; 2014) which she directly linked to her non-privileged

background. Arieta's experience as a first-generation student was very different to the experiences of the other on-course participants as a result of the more privileged make-up of CSA. This evidences the importance of the social make-up of the institution in facilitating a sense of belonging for first-generation students, and demonstrates not only the significance of cultural context, but also the key impact of grit and resilience in having a successful university experience as a first-generation student.

7.5 The impact of being first-generation

There was a real sense of pride when the on-course participants discussed being a first-generation student.

> I'm kind of glad I'm the first, because I feel so proud, and I get to say I'm the one that did it and that experienced it and I think it's nice like for my younger cousins to see well if I've done it then they can do it. I think everyone is proud and they were so glad I got in so to me it's a good thing yeah (Shamsun).

> It's kind of gave me the boost to go more because I'm the first in my family to go (Danni).

This sense of pride drove the participants' motivation to succeed in HE and many of them emphasised the emotional support their families provided during their studies, echoing the findings of Gofen (2009). This informal familial support appeared to have a key impact on the participants' wellbeing, even if it did not confer capitals that translated directly across fields into HE (Christie and Burke, 2021).

Despite the benefits the participants felt in terms of being a first-generation student they also openly discussed some of the frustrations they encountered in terms of the lack of understanding from their family, and their inability to offer any meaningful help with their studies (above emotional support). This finding aligns with previous research by Thomas and Quinn (2007) and O'Shea (2013) who highlighted that HE may be more difficult for first-generation students to navigate because they are not able to gain insider knowledge or guidance from their parents:

> They don't understand at all, it's frustrating really because they're just like "oh have you done all your work" like they have no idea about the reality of it at all and yeah that is frustrating sometimes, it is hard (Arieta).

For Chrissie being the first person in her family to attend university was one of the reasons she had not attended until later in life.

> I think if you're from a family where everyone has been to university and that's the norm, well that's what's expected of you, it's more of a natural process for you to go. But I think if you're from a family where no-one has been it's like a strange thing, it's kind of classed as a strange thing to do. It's harder to get here. I think maybe because I've come from a background where no-one has done this before, ever been to uni, that might be a reason why I keep doubting myself you know, keep thinking I can't do it.

However, despite the difficulties and hidden injuries of coming from a background where HE was classed as "strange", attending university had given Chrissie the means to change her life and escape the cycle of working in a low-paid job which she did not enjoy:

> I saw university as like a way out because I felt trapped in that job, completely trapped, like there was just no way out, and university was the way out for me. It's just like a new beginning isn't it. The start of something new.

For Chrissie, as a mature student, the move to HE was a chance to start a new life, one that she was determined to make the most of. This was even more crucial given Chrissie's previous negative experience in education and the emotional injuries she had suffered as a result of this. Chrissie's narrative was striking because for her (in a similar way to Arieta) university study was about much more than improved employment prospects; it was about being free to follow her passions and do what she loved. For Chrissie and Arieta, the good life was taking place in the present, whilst they were studying, and this was liberating for them, particularly as Central offered the first positive educational experience either of them had encountered. Chrissie, in particular, had suffered a terrible time at school, being bullied so badly that she rarely attended, which led to her leaving without a single qualification. Her experience had clearly had a negative impact on her and it was the first thing she talked about when I asked her to tell me about herself:

> I had a really bad experience at school, a really bad experience. I was badly bullied. I hated school, it was just horrible. But I really did want to learn, I always wanted to learn but I think if you leave school with nothing I think you're labelled as someone who doesn't want to learn. I was the opposite, I did want to learn but the education system let me down (Chrissie).

Reay (2003: 407) notes that mature students often bring with them "a troubled educational history" and have often followed fraught and disrupted pathways into HE, a point also echoed by Mallman and Lee (2016). This was certainly the case for Chrissie, although difficult experiences in school were a common theme across the narratives for most of the on-course participants, not just the mature learners. These difficult experiences in formal

education led the participants to lack confidence when beginning their studies, however a unifying theme across the narratives was that of affirmation from the university. Although transitioning to university involved overcoming uncertainty, studying at Central allowed the participants to feel affirmed as students and was key in (re)building their confidence and self-esteem. A key finding here is that Central offered an opportunity to heal some of the wounds of the participants' past educational experiences and repair some of the damage caused by the structural injustice they had suffered in their time in education. In this way, studying at Central was transformative because it allowed participants to prove they were more capable than their previous educational experience had suggested and this evidently had a positive effect on their self-worth (Merrill *et al.,* 2020):

> I believe in myself more now, I know that I am capable and I can do it (Beccy).

This is evidence of the important work undertaken by Central as a post-92 HEI which is largely absent in existing published literature.

7.6 The local student experience: expectations vs reality

The participants' decisions to study locally were largely made because remaining at home offered ease and familiarity, the benefit of being able to remain close to family and friends and reduced financial costs. This finding largely supports existing literature on local students (e.g., Clayton *et al.,* 2009; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013).

> I think I get more done at home and I like being there, it's all familiar, so I'm not ready to move away I think. As well it's the cost, I'd rather just have the loan for the fees and save up and move out when I want to. They [parents] want me at home as well, definitely they want me at home [laughs] and I'm happy where I am (Olivia)

Olivia had chosen not to take maintenance loans, choosing to stay at home and work part time to manage financially instead. This was encouraged by her parents who were worried about the level of debt incurred by studying at university. Similarly, Danni's family were overly concerned about student loans, and it was only when they saw the student loan system explained by Martin Lewis on television that they felt reassured about the debt Danni would incur by gaining a degree. This fear of debt links to existing research regarding the debt-adverse nature of the working class (Bathmaker, 2021; Callender and Mason, 2017) and supports the notion that participation in HE for working-class students is "more influenced by financial factors than higher social classes" (Wilkins *et al*., 2012: 6). This is understandable given the higher financial risk for students from less financially secure backgrounds (Callender and Mason, 2017; Evans and Donnelly, 2018).

Interestingly, Karolina had a different understanding of student debt:

> The debt doesn't concern me at all to be honest, not at all. Like I don't have money, I've never had money, and I'm not going to have money unless I do this, so it doesn't scare me, like I'm going to have debt in my life so I may as well use it to my advantage.

Karolina had internalised policy normalisations of student debt, framing it as a necessary investment in her future career (Evans and Donnelly, 2018). Her attitude is reflective of policy doxa which position HE participation (and the associated debt) as self-development, in line with the neoliberal subject position. Karolina's comment that "I'm not going to have money unless I do this" revealed she had internalised doxic "learning equals earning" narratives (Brown and James, 2020:1) reflective of the 'graduate premium'. For Karolina, debt was necessary to access the good life and she believed that this would be worth it by reaping the desired rewards of the economic security she yearned for. The significance here is that Karolina understood that the pathway to the good life was paved by debt, and yet misrecognised this as normal and necessary.

Another pervasive discourse which influenced the students' narratives was that of 'the student experience'. In a similar way to some of the pre-entry participants, the on-course students used discourses of socialising and partying to distance themselves from traditional notions of studenthood and instead position themselves as hardworking. An example of this can be seen in the following extracts from Chrissie:

> A lot of them [other students] probably I imagine most of them probably go out clubbing and stuff, I'm not really interested in that. You know I'm 38 I've been there and done that, I just, I mean I hardly drink these days, I don't really drink […] I'm just not interested in that, in the club scene or anything. For me university is about learning, I just really want to, to be honest I just want to learn as much as I can.

This extract evidences the way in which Chrissie used alcohol-related behaviours to distance herself from notions of traditional studenthood and instead position herself as dedicated and hard-working. Chrissie's imagining of her peers as being binge drinkers is informed by the dominant studenthood discourse, as highlighted by Holton and Finn (2017) and Hebden et al., (2015). This discourse had permeated Chrissie's understanding of what typical student behaviours are. Similar thoughts were echoed by many of the other on-course participants:

> They [live-in students] are probably going out partying and going to different places but that's just not me. I'm not a partier, I'd rather stay at home and get what I need to do done. Whereas certain people I know go out every night and get nothing done so they're behind and that's not me, I'm not really bothered, I don't care. I'd rather do me and not bother about it. (Olivia)

Olivia used the phrase “that’s not me” repeatedly during this discussion. She, along with many of the other participants, was keen to make sure I understood that although her experience differed to dominant student ideals, this was not a bad thing. It appeared that the participants were not attempting to fit their experiences to the mould of the ideal-student subject but were agentic in defining themselves in a different way: as committed students. For these participants their academic journey alone constituted the majority of their student experience, and this was framed by them in a positive way. This finding differs from much of the literature surrounding local student experiences which often positions local students as “missing out” (e.g., Christie *et al.,* 2008; Holdsworth, 2006). This suggests that some local first-generation students may not desire a ‘traditional’ student experience which encompasses social as well as academic spheres and evidences the agency of some first-generation students in relation to developing a university experience which aligns largely with their focus on academic study.

Conversely, there was some evidence of feelings of missing out for Caprice and Shamsun. As argued by Holton and Finn (2017), Caprice had entered university with expectations that were formed from the media and dominant discourses around student life, as she did not know anyone in her immediate social circle that had been to university. This led to Caprice expecting university to be a primarily social experience with lots of partying and social activities. When this failed to materialise for Caprice she felt that this was because her local student status left her locked out of the relevant knowledge of parties and social events:

> There’s two types of students; there’s people who stay at home and then there’s people who live in accommodation. People who live in accommodation they party 24-7 because their parents are not around so they can literally do whatever they want, whereas at home, it’s just like, for me like I have a lot of responsibilities, and I feel like the people who live in the accommodation they know everyone, because they’re partying every single day they probably even know the bloody security guards and you know they’re creating their own party events and stuff and I think they’re like the core of the university because they know everyone. And then the people who go home they’re missing the opportunity to go out […] and even then you don’t even know where the party is happening unless you know someone who has been or who is running it or who is going there, so yeah it is a big difference living in accommodation to living at home.

Caprice’s narrative suggests she felt she was missing out on the full studenthood experience by studying locally and her experience aligns with existing research (e.g., Holdsworth, 2006; 2009a; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2012). Caprice craved the independence of living away from

home (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) but felt unable to do so because she felt a duty of care towards her mom (who was a single parent on unemployment benefits) and her younger brother. Caprice's decision to stay at home for her studies was borne of "the taste for necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984: 374) as she lacked the luxury of choosing to move away. Importantly, there was an element of cruelty here in the way that dominant neoliberal discourses which value individual success and geographical mobility over familial ties and care for others (as emphasised by Holdsworth, 2009b), led to Caprice feeling othered and marginalised when comparing her student experience to that of the dominant ideal. Unlike the other participants who largely distanced themselves from traditional notions of studenthood and instead positioned themselves as hardworking, Caprice wanted to adopt these normative behaviours and felt that her social integration into university was disrupted by her local student status.

Shamsun also struggled with her local student status, revealing that she would have liked to have moved away for university "to like have that experience as a student" but that her parents would not allow it.

> Like its hard like the social aspect because you have to go home when it starts to get dark really and on my course everyone goes clubbing and stuff and I can't do that so it's really different for me in that way.

The literature review highlighted the way in which dominant understandings of the student experience are centred around the experience of 'traditional' students at older, more selective institutions (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Pokorny *et al.,* 2017; Pötschulat *et al.,* 2021: 4). Consequently, both the local student and the post-92 institution that they often study at are othered in mainstream discourse. The impact of this led to the participants in this study either consciously distancing themselves from this discourse and developing their own ways of being a student or feeling as though they are missing out and that their experience was lacking in some way because it failed to live up to this ideal. A key finding from this chapter is that first-generation students will respond to the dominant 'student experience' discourse in different ways depending on what they deem to be the purpose of HE and what they want to achieve during their time at university. Findings have evidenced that for some local first-generation students the narrow definition of 'the student experience' invokes feelings of missing out, which aligns with the findings of existing literature (Johnson and Wiese, 2022; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2020). However, the participant narratives evidenced that other first-generation students have their own ideas about what they want their student experience to be, and do not view their local student status in a deficit way. A key argument of this research is that is important to listen to first-generation student voices

to ascertain what they actually want from their experiences, before viewing them through a negative lens which reinforces the *doxa of deficit* which operates around local first-generation students.

7.7 Hopes for the Future

The on-course participants had internalised the dominant narrative of the university enhancing their employment prospects and had entered into the field of HE fully believing in and "pursuing the prize it offers" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 19). Consequently. they seemed largely optimistic about their graduate futures:

> Going to university is an opportunity, it can open doors can't it you know (Shamsun).

> I feel like I can do bigger things, like just because my family doesn't have much money that doesn't mean I can't be successful. Just because my nan is a cleaner it doesn't mean I have to be a cleaner. Just because my mom works in a shop, it doesn't mean that I need to work in a shop, even though I do now. Being at uni can open those doors for me, I can do myself proud (Karolina).

Optimism for a better future, in line with a meritocratic discourse, was a reoccurring theme within the data analysis of the on-course participant narratives, revealing itself in a myriad of different ways. This optimism transcended the structural conditions of the participants' non-privileged backgrounds, revealing an element of "excitement at the prospect of the change that's gonna come" (Berlant, 2011: 2). When asked about their hopes for the future the majority of the on-course participants focused on being financially secure, as opposed to obtaining particular career occupations. An important finding to emerge in relation to this was how university was framed as a site of desire for the first-generation student participants, driven by the "cluster of promises" (Berlant, 2011: 23) which HE offered. It was evident that the participants hoped that by gaining a degree they would be able to achieve secure and relatively well-paid employment:

> Like I think like will I ever get a job and earn that much? [over the loan payment threshold of £24,000] that does worry me constantly like will I ever earn that much. But I do really want to like get into a good job, because you know that's what you want financially, because in the future that's, you need money to survive that's what I see it as and I know getting a degree will help me to get there (Shamsun).

> Really I just want to earn good money in a job I'm happy in, you know, to be comfortable (Beccy).

It is evident that the participants' hopes were structured by an economic environment which, in recent decades, has been characterised by growing income inequality, low pay and

employment precarity (The Equality Trust, 2019). The students' hopes for the future were conditioned by an acceptance of this environment and a wish to essentially avoid financial instability. The goal of gaining a degree appeared to be an avoidance of precarity, as opposed to gaining entry into a professional career per se.

Interestingly, Caprice had very much bought into the discourse of labour market fulfilment as she felt that gaining a degree in psychology would allow her to realise any number of aspirations:

> When it comes to the job aspect I either want to go travelling or be a neuroscientist or a neuropsychologist and I know that when I get my doctorate I can do what I want then, I can get my own company and then make sure that my company has some kind of degree and that they have like a scientific way of helping people so yeah I've always wanted to do that. And yeah just travelling and having my own business

However, Caprice then went on to reveal her insecurities about her future:

> But I've never done business in my life and I'm very bad at time management. Sometimes in the back of my head I kind of have to think of like a backup plan because I don't know how I'm going to get, there are so many people with psychology degrees and I don't know how I'm going to set up my own company. I don't know where to start really. I've got my goal but… [trails off].

Karolina (who was also studying psychology) planned to go on to study a masters after her degree and then was unsure after that:

> I either want to be a psychology teacher or a a I don't know if it's called a psychologist or a psychiatrist, I don't know the difference! [laughs] I want to be a counsellor, put it that way!

Both Caprice and Karolina had high aspirations, but these were vaguely defined and they did not necessarily have the means to realise them. As they were both first year students, graduation seemed a long way off, and something that they had time to worry about further down the line. This finding demonstrates that there is a temporal dimension regarding first-generation students' aspirations which suspends time and allows them to imagine a plethora of possibilities which could become available to them after graduation. There is clear relevance here to the ideas of Berlant (2011) who argued that the good life narrative is driven by a "fantasy" of a secure future (Bone, 2020) which conceals the cruelty of the increasingly precarious present. For the on-course participants the future acted as a site of optimism. This sustained the hope of those participants who were at the start of their degree and concealed the neoliberal compromised conditions of possibility which may affect them

when they complete their studies. Findings from this chapter suggest that the concept of the participants' "later" graduate futures sustained their engagement with HE in the present, and "suspend[ed] questions of the cruelty of the now" (Berlant, 2011: 28).

Olivia, who was also a first-year student, wanted a career in play therapy after completing her degree, stating that she felt "certain" that she would realise her career aspiration because "if you work hard and do your best you can get where you need to go". Olivia's engagement in HE was again driven by the meritocratic promises of an "opportunity bargain" (Brown *et al*., 2011: 1) which concealed the realities of "the opportunity trap" (Sellar and Zipin, 2019). Olivia clearly believed and had invested in doxic meritocratic fictions of hard work being rewarded, which she misrecognised as being accurate and fair (Bourdieu, 1984). A risk of cruel optimism is clearly evident here (as is symbolic violence) because if Olivia was unable to achieve her career goals, her individualised meritocratic framing could lead her to misrecognise this as being down to her own shortcomings, rather than to structural barriers. A key argument made by this thesis is the way in which the meritocratic framing of HE fuels cruel optimism by perpetuating the notion that success is in reach of every student, if they have the potential and are willing to work hard enough, when the reality is much more complex than this.

Conversely, Danni was only a few months away from completing her degree. When asked what her plan was after graduation she replied:

> Hopefully to go full time at [DIY retail store] as they have a design role so hopefully I'll be able to step up into that maybe. But I also want to set up my own business at some point when I've got some money behind me, but I guess that depends how much money I have, that's my five-year plan [laughs] you never know, you never know what's going to happen, the dream job might fall at your feet but… [trails off]. Like I'm going to graduate and walk across that stage and have that degree, and yeah I might not use it in relation to my course but it'll be on my CV so it still means something.

Danni's comments evidence the level of uncertainty and lack of control she felt about her impending graduate future. During her narrative Danni commonly discussed graduate destinations in terms of luck which evidenced the lack of agency she felt in relation to this issue. The social and cultural capital that Danni was able to draw upon was limited to her current employment in a DIY retail chain, which she was attempting to merge with her graduate skills and experience to create a meaningful opportunity. Danni displayed "a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits" (Bourdieu, 1984: 471) in that she was prepared to continue working in the company where she was

already employed and was unsure where/how else to proceed. Applying Berlant's (2011) lens here suggests that as Danni approached the end of her studies it became evident to her that "there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built" (Berlant, 2011: 192), leading Danni to renegotiate her hopes and expectations in line with what she perceived to be achievable. A key finding in relation to Danni's narrative is that the effect of cruel optimism required Danni to adapt in order to survive "the impasse" (Berlant, 2011), which meant improvising with her current employment to avoid the insecurity of the graduate job market. The cruel optimism in Danni's case was characterised by the threat of insecurity which caused her to reaffirm her framing of the good life, to fit with what she deemed to be realistic and achievable. Danni's horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) narrowed as a means of protection against the risk of precarity which became an increasing threat as she neared the end of her degree.

Chrissie offered an interesting perspective in relation to her aspirations and hopes for the future, as she revealed that she had always wanted to be a writer, however she spoke about this almost as if it was a secret:

> It's summat I don't really tell people but I've, from when I was a child you know, from forever, I've always wanted to be a writer. To get a novel published, that's always been my dream, it's not realistic though, it's not summat people, it's not like a job that's advertised. It's like a dream, it's just a dream you know.

Despite her passion and desire to be a writer this career did not feature meaningfully in Chrissie's horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Chrissie's narrative really emphasised the interplay between desire and possibility but in a different way to Leena's (in the previous chapter). For Chrissie her desire to become an author seemed impossible but rather than discard this altogether she had attempted to develop cultural and social capital which would help her to obtain other careers related to her desire, but which were more accessible (and thus possible to achieve). She had developed an interest in editing since beginning her degree and so had joined an editing association to help develop her skills and capital in that area. Chrissie had also started editing for the internal newspaper within Central, was involved in an online national student blog site, and had arranged to go abroad over the summer to teach English as a foreign language. In this way Chrissie was taking meaningful steps to develop her cultural and social capital and thus her employability skills for the industry she wanted to work in.

Chrissie provided an interesting contrast to the majority of the other participants, as for her the good life was about more than secure employment, it was about being able to do something she truly enjoyed, and she was taking active steps to make this a reality in

whatever way possible. Chrissie was the participant most free of neoliberal constraints as she gained genuine joy from her studies, in a way which is at odds with neoliberal framings of education as only being of value in relation to human capital development (Connell, 2013). This allowed Chrissie, and similarly Arieta, to bypass some elements of the cruel optimism which threatened the other participants' experiences by seeing HE as more than just a pathway to employment and economic security. Instead, university represented the experience of joy, passion and the chance to spend time doing something they intrinsically enjoyed.

7.8 Conclusion of chapter

This chapter has outlined how the on-course participants' choice-making processes were mediated by those around them and were constrained by social and economic factors, against a background of hierarchical institutional positioning within the local HE field. It has evidenced the way in which the students' habitus structured their decision making, positioning Central as a safe space, but one which carried potential risks in terms of employment prospects. Findings have suggested that neoliberal reforms of marketisation and increased competition in the sector may have potentially led to questionable ethical practices (such as unconditional offers and inflated entry criteria) by low-status institutions such as Central, battling to maintain their precarious position in the field. These mechanisms could have a marked impact on first-generation students' decision making.

The findings of this chapter have indicated that normative construction of studenthood, and the student experience, can influence how first-generation student view their time at university. The impact of this dominant discourse led to some of the participants forging new ways of being a student and positioning themselves as committed as opposed to 'a typical student'. However, for the younger first-generation participants concerns around missing out on a more socially fulfilling university experience due to studying locally appeared to be more prevalent. The participant narratives in this chapter have revealed that the dominant discourse of studenthood needs to be more inclusive, rather than othering, of local student experiences. Findings also evidence that it is important to ascertain what first-generation students hope to gain from their university experience, in order for HEIs to support them effectively.

The participants' depiction of how they experienced studying at Central reveals that they interpreted the environment as being welcoming and diverse, a place of educational sanctuary. However, the non-employment related benefits of study (such as growth in confidence and broadening of horizons) that Central offered the participants featured less strongly in most of their narratives. Their main focus was on gaining improved employment

and the participants largely remained optimistic that gaining a degree would “open doors” for them. However, for some, the pathway to a good job (and thus the good life) was viewed as tenuous due to the uncertain and congested labour market and these concerns became more prominent for the participants who were nearing graduation. Findings in this chapter have illuminated the way in which avoidance of precarity and hopes of financial stability appears to be what drives first-generation students to enter HE and what sustains their engagement as students. These hopes are underpinned by an undercurrent of cruel optimism as the “cluster of promises” offered by HE are in no way guaranteed, which may leave some students with limited options of achieving their original aspirations.

Chapter 8: Results chapter – Graduates

8.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter presents and discusses the findings in relation to the graduate participants who were interviewed for this study. A great deal of HE research has examined issues of access and participation however less research has focused on what happens to students after graduating from university (Merrill *et al*., 2020; O'Shea, 2020a). This chapter focuses on the experiences of seven first-generation graduates from Central, who graduated between one and four years previously. It explores both their time studying at Central and their experiences in employment since finishing their degrees. The chapter begins with a discussion of the students' choice making processes both in relation to entering HE and in deciding where to study. The participant reflections on their time at Central are then discussed in terms of what the participants deemed to be significant, before discussions move onto their experiences in post-graduation employment.

All of the graduates interviewed for this study were in some form of full-time, paid employment. The table below details key information about the graduate participants (see Appendix 3 for more detailed information):

Table 7:

Name	Age	Subject Studied	Time since Graduation	Occupation	Local Student
Malisa	23	Fashion	Two years	Retail worker	No
Emma	30	Children's Nursing	Three years	Neonatal Nurse	Yes
Joe	24	Media Studies and English	Three years	Academic Staff – Education development	No
Abbie	23	Criminology	Two years	Prison Educator (on temporary contract)	No

Eddie	22	Media and Radio Production	One year	Graduate Intern (within Central)	No
Afia	45	Psychology	Four years	PhD Student (within Central)	Yes
Leah	26	Criminology and Criminal Justice	Two years	Restaurant shift manager	Yes

8.2 'Getting in' – the decision to attend university

The first research question underpinning this thesis examined the way in which first-generation students framed their decision to attend university. Previous chapters have outlined that university participation can be viewed as a non-decision, particularly for recent school leavers. This was also the case for the some of the graduate participants (Joe, Abbie and Malisa) who framed university as being the natural next step for them after finishing school. For example, Joe stated "I think I actually went to university because I felt like that was the thing I should be doing rather than because I wanted to", noting that his school "were very pushy, they really did push towards university", particularly when he was studying for his A-levels. Similarly, Abbie shared that she applied to university because "it just didn't seem like there was any other option", going on to say, "it wasn't really thought about, it wasn't really discussed, it wasn't really considered, it was just that it was going to happen". Malisa and Joe's narratives add further weight to the way in which university is often positioned by schools and wider policy discourse as the only "acceptable option" (Brown, 2011: 7), or what this thesis terms as a *doxic aspiration;* a dominant belief which escapes questioning.

However, for two of the older participants (Emma and Leah), HE only became a tangible option when one of their friends went to university which then opened up Emma and Leah's horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), and allowed them to see university as being within their reach:

> There was someone I knew who went and did an Open University course and I was quite shocked at how easy it was to… [sigh] to explain a little bit more, my family aren't educated, not very well. So, they, and myself, didn't know how to signpost to get to towards that kind of education you know those kinds of skills or whatever. So,

> watching somebody else do it, I was quite surprised at how easy it was to get into higher education (Emma).
>
> I had no idea you could go to uni if you didn't have A-levels so I'd never even thought about it. But my best friend found out about the access course from someone she knew and she went and did it and she absolutely loved it, she loved it. So, the next year I applied for access too, she really encouraged me and I thought why not (Leah).

The key role of those within a student's "network of intimacy" in shaping students' decisions is widely noted in the literature (e.g., Diamond *et al*, 2012: 33; Fuller and Heath, 2010; Greenbank, 2011), however in this case Emma and Leah were not only influenced, but were inspired, by someone in their social circle. Their horizons for action were significantly extended by witnessing someone in similar circumstances opting to go to university, thus situating access to HE as a viable option. Before this, university had not featured in their realms of possibility because they were being socialised into considering this option in school and did not have access to the forms of social and cultural capital at home which would facilitate and normalise university participation (Crozier *et al.,* 2008). This evidences the key influence of having role models who engage in HE for mature first-generation students who lack familiarity with university study.

8.3 Deciding where to study

Deciding where to study was an important factor for the participants in this chapter and studying locally presented a lower risk option for some. For example, Leah, Emma and Afia's decision to study locally related to their emotional attachments to their networks of family and friends, coupled with pragmatic decisions about needing to stay in existing employment. These students were all mature and this finding aligns with themes in existing literature surrounding the decision making of mature students (McCune *et al*., 2010; McVitty and Morris, 2012). The other four (younger) participants elected to move away to study, for some this was to gain "the full experience" (Joe), and for others it was because there was no university in commuting distance from home (Abbie and Eddie), or because the HEIs local to home had a poor reputation in local discourse (Malisa).

Interestingly, despite demonstrating an informed awareness of the HE hierarchy (as discussed later within this chapter) the participants indicated that they had little interest in league tables when they were deciding where to study:

> For me it [league table position] didn't mean anything it really didn't, you can work hard anywhere. The environment you are in doesn't make you any more academically able, it's the work you put in. I didn't even look at them (Afia).

> To be honest I didn't really look at league tables, that kind of thing doesn't really appeal to me. Because I'm from a working-class background people I've always known have worked in things like public service, my mum works in the council and my dad is a tradesman. I've never really had a particularly high aspiration to go and work to go to like Harvard law school you know what I mean, so it didn't really matter. (Joe)

The insignificance of league tables for the participants is aligned with Ball and colleagues (2002) notion of "contingent choosers" which they described as working-class first-generation students who consider university status to be unimportant. More recent research echoes this finding with Walsh *et al.,* (2015) suggesting that first-generation students are less likely to consider university reputation as a deciding factor when choosing where to study.

None of the graduate participants had been made unconditional offers by Central, however Eddie had been made unconditional offers from other universities, which had an interesting impact on his choice making:

> I had no desire to come here at all. But I didn't have an interview at Salford that was the issue. They just gave me an unconditional offer from the application. Gloucester sent me for an interview so I went there and then they gave me an unconditional offer, so I thought "okay, two unconditional offers, what's going on?" Came here, got a conditional offer and was like "oh I've got a conditional offer", and there was something about this place that just made me go well they haven't just said "yes come on in".

The act of placing 'conditions' on Eddie's entry to Central meant that he perceived the institution as more selective and this helped to position it as a more desirable place to study in relation to the other HEIs which he was considering:

> So, I put Central as my first choice and that was, so you know it wasn't the lazy way of saying you know, I can just go there regardless, I had to work for it.

Eddie's narrative reveals a cultural disposition concerning the meritocratic notion that "hard work pays off", thereby the fact that he had to "work" for his place at Central invoked feelings of greater worth. Malisa (Fashion graduate) felt similar about Central as she felt the staff there took a real interest in the samples of work which produced for her interview, and she felt they "cared about grades" more than other HEIs which she had considered. This gave Malisa a feeling of achievement that she had been offered a place at Central, positioning it as a worthy place of study:

> You want that feeling so you understand that they did care, that they did actually look into your application, the time that you had spent on your application you know that portfolio that you spent ages putting together that they actually took time to go through it.

This interest in her work, coupled with the new facilities offered by Central, and its city centre location positioned it as the most attractive choice for Malisa. These discussions reveal some of the practices employed by Central in response to the overly marketised HE field where competition for students is fierce and where HEIs employ various practices to enhance/maintain their position (Elliot, 2021). The strategies revealed in this data, such as interviewing students and asking them to produce portfolios of work, help Central to position itself to potential students as a more selective HEI and one which valued students' talents and achievements. An important finding to emerge from this study in relation to first-generation student choice-making, is that understandings of a university are related to notions of selectivity and feeling valued, which has clear implications for academic credibility and the esteem in which individuals hold an institution. In this study elements of selectivity had consequences for the graduate participants' own feelings of self-worth as a result of being awarded a place to study at Central. The university hierarchy and the profound distinction between 'high' and 'low' status universities commonly discussed in the media, policy, and academic literature can mean that students in low status institutions may, by association, position themselves as 'low status' individuals, who have less talent and intelligence than those at more elite HEIs (Blackman, 2017). Therefore, a salient finding from this study is that practices within the HEI which relate to notions of selectivity can create feelings of value and self-worth, which are key to challenging the affective injuries created and perpetuated by the hierarchical HE field.

8.4 Pride of being first generation – being a trailblazer

The graduate participant narratives revealed that they perceived their first-generation status to have had a key impact on their experience in university. The pride of being a first-generation student was evident throughout the graduate participant interviews and they generally conceptualised their first-generation status in a positive way. In an echo of the on-course participants, the graduates all emphasised the emotional support their families offered and how proud their families were of them, which was particularly pertinent to their first-generation status:

> I think this is a first-generation thing because I was the first one going, they were so proud of being able to say to people that they knew, you know my son has gone to university (Eddie).

> My mum is insanely proud of me, still to this day, she talks about it often. I don't think she understands the classifications if I'm really honest so when I told her I got a first she was like "oh that's nice well done" type thing but I don't think they realised the gravity of actually getting a first and what I had to do to achieve that, I don't think she fully understood, but I didn't mind because she was very proud and that means so so much to me (Emma).

> My mom and dad are very proud you know. Because there hasn't been anyone before me that has graduated in my family before, and now I just keep on graduating! (Afia)

The majority of the participants displayed a strong sense of class consciousness which directly linked to the sense of pride that they had in their own achievements (Crozier *et al.,* 2008). However, for some of the participants their families also had a general mistrust of education. Joe talked at length about his parents' (and particularly his father's) concerns:

> My dad is kind of really deep rooted working-class and he always had quite a negative view of people that went to university. Because when he grew up you wouldn't get anyone from our background going to university then because number one it was funded for smart students, for the ones who had done really well academically.

It is interesting to note the way in which Joe positions being "smart" as being at odds with being "from our (working-class) background" as though the two notions are incompatible with each other. This misrecognition of opportunity and privilege as being related to intelligence suggests that working class people lack intelligence, when in reality they were historically prevented from attending university by structural disadvantage (Jobbins, 2013). This extract encapsulates the way in which notions of academic intelligence can be used as a structuring device which helps to legitimise inequality within society by suggesting success is down to merit, rather than privilege. This itself is clear evidence of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 2000).

Joe went on to discuss how his dad "warned" him to maintain his sense of self and not be changed by the university experience, demonstrating the way in which he viewed university as a potential threat:

> He really talked to me about how important it was not to get lost in yourself you know. I know I wouldn't but it was important to him that I kept grounded yeah. Which was quite a good a good piece of advice actually.

The phrasing "not to get lost in yourself" and "keep grounded" is significant because it belies the way in which Joe's father perceived HE as a potential threat to his son's working-class

roots. Research has shown that for many families in working-class communities, moving away to university is perceived as being a risky endeavour with potential for undesirable outcomes (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Holdsworth, 2006). Joe's father's concern reflects his worries that university would create a change in Joe's class-based habitus which could have caused a sense of dislocation between Joe and the rest of his family. However, Joe's gradual career journey, and the fact he had progressed in a place that was familiar to him, meant that he had not experienced the disrupted habitus that his father had feared. What was important in Joe's narrative was that his background was congruent with the background of many staff and students within Central, therefore he had never felt "like a fish out of water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). Ingram and Abrahams' (2015) concept of a "reconciled habitus" is relevant to Joe, as it appeared he had experienced a "rearticulation of habitus", rather than the fracturing or division which his father had expressed concern about, and as such he avoided the effects and emotional injuries of hysteresis (Bourdieu, 2000: 2004). This evidences the significance of a diverse social make-up of an institution in facilitating first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds in having positive experiences where they do not experience a fracturing of identity as a result of engagement in HE.

Interestingly, for some of the participants, their parental lack of understanding of HE was perceived to be an advantage because it allowed them a greater sense of independence:

> I think it was good that she didn't come [to university] because she didn't have any expectations for me […] she couldn't be judgmental (Abbie).

However, the participants also reflected on the way in which their parents' lack of understanding could be problematic when they needed support with their academic work, which echoes earlier findings from Thomas and Quinn, 2007. Many of the participants shared that they had experienced similar feelings when they were at school, with their parents being supportive but unable to offer much help in the way of their studies:

> I kind of got used to it after a while I got used to the fact that actually I couldn't get the help that most people could've got and did have because I'd always been doing it pretty much alone so I didn't know any different […] I have had times when I really struggled and I was completely on my own. You know I couldn't call my mum for help in doing my work because she wouldn't have a clue, she wouldn't even know what I was on about really (Malisa).

Importantly however, overcoming these struggles gave the participants a real sense of pride and made gaining a degree feel even more of an achievement because they were the first in

their family to have achieved this milestone. Related to this sense of pride was the idea of being a role model to younger family members:

> I'm the eldest of five sisters and brothers and even my cousins as well none of them have gone to university. So, I felt like I wanted to show them that it was possible for us. I was sick of our family just being cleaners, restaurant workers, carers, you know like just just these kind of like mundane jobs. I'm saying mundane but I don't want to be patronising, as in like I wanted someone to achieve something, a bit of a higher, I wanted to show them that we could achieve more (Emma).

> I've had four family members, my sister and cousins, come to uni after me. They jumped onto the access course after I did it, so it's been absolutely brilliant seeing that. We've got a little study support group on WhatsApp which has been fantastic to support each other (Afia).

In this way, some of the participants positioned themselves as trailblazers or "educational pioneers" (May *et al.,* 2016: 393) who led the way in making a positive change for their families by demonstrating that university could be a place for people like them. The graduate participants' decisions to study at university were not made *in-spite* of their class background but *because* of it. They wanted to achieve "something more" (Emma) and saw university not only as a way of escaping the financial insecurity their families had struggled with, but also as a means of providing a positive role model. For many of the graduate participants, their social class position, rather than being limiting, created a strong incentive for change. This finding aligns with the narratives presented in Merrill (2015) but provides a contrast to much of the literature surrounding first-generation students which tends to emphasise the difficulties of coming from a family with no higher-education experience (e.g., Crozier *et al.,* 2010; Thomas and Quinn, 2007; O'Shea, 2013).

8. 5 The 'traditional' experience?

Once the participants had made the transition to university they reflected on their experience in various ways, drawing on a number of mechanisms to align or distance their own experiences with the 'traditional' student experience. As outlined earlier, Joe, Abbie, Eddie and Malisa had all moved away from home to study at Central and lived in university accommodation and they had all stayed living in the city after graduating. During their time at university Eddie and Joe got very involved, working as student mentors, becoming course reps and generally becoming embedded into university life. Both considered the social elements of university study to be key to their experiences, which aligns with existing research on the experiences of students living away from home (Thomas, 2012; Quinn *et al*., 2005; Wilcox *et al*., 2006). Engaging in traditional studenthood behaviours such as drinking,

playing sports and joining societies: “the usual stuff really” (Joe) was viewed as key to making friends. Engaging in wider university activities was particularly important for Eddie and Abbie who did not get on with their housemates in halls during first year, so had to find other ways of making friends.

Conversely, for the local participants social integration was less important as they all had part time jobs outside of the institution meaning they had less time to focus on wider aspects of university outside of their academic studies (Crozier *et al.,* 2008). The local graduate participants focused almost solely on the academic aspects of their studies as this was their priority. Although they made friends at university, their main friendships continued to be the ones they already had outside of HE which aligns with findings of existing literature on local students (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Christie *et al.,* 2005; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). The three local participants explicitly side-lined the social aspects of HE altogether and distanced themselves from what they deemed to be ‘typical’ student behaviour:

> We may have got confused now about why we are going to university in the first place perhaps. Like oh I'll go to university, yes we'll make lots of friends and move somewhere different and party away and study as well, studying always seems to be an afterthought a little bit. Whereas my main focus wasn't to socialise and do that, my focus was to go to university and get good grades (Emma).

The above quotation demonstrates the way in which Emma utilised traditional notions of studenthood as a distancing technique (Keane, 2011) as she deliberately located herself away from dominant understandings of the student experience. In a similar way to the participants in the previous chapter, Emma differentiated herself from other students by framing them as being less committed to their studies and thus elevating her own position as a hard-working student who was now reaping the rewards of her dedication. Leah and Malisa also discussed their commitment to their studies and their focus on their work during their time at university which appeared to act as a tactic of self-defence: a way of demonstrating to me that the difficulties which they faced as graduates were not down to laziness or disengagement when they were students.

8.6 Institutional hierarchy – a devalued degree?

A key element of interest in the study was the way in which the wider social and political context of Central, and the wider HE sector, influenced the participants’ lived experiences and institutional hierarchy has been a salient theme in relation to this focus. Some of the graduate participants articulated a developed understanding of the wider systematic inequalities present within the HE system (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2011), which, they felt had direct implications for their experiences. Participants reflected on the way in which Central

was positioned in the HE hierarchy and responded to this with a notable level of frustration and anger with regards to the way in which their degree status may be devalued in wider discourse:

> I do think maybe I'd have been, I'd have a better chance at getting a job if I'd gone to somewhere more prestige like redbrick. I know employers really care about that don't they. I feel like if I'd been to Redbrick my degree would be worth more (Leah).

> Depending on what university you go to depending on what course you do it's very, your job opportunities very much differ (Joe).

> Now I'm in a position where I work with students from Redbrick and they are, they're just absolute snobs. One girl that I work with from Redbrick actually said "you went to Central and I went to Redbrick so my degree is worth more than yours". Can you imagine! It's so blatant, they just say it. And that frustrates me, because the value of my degree doesn't depend on that, it doesn't make her any better than me, but they think it does (Emma).

These quotes highlight a significant and unique finding by revealing some of the affective aspects of cruel optimism (such as anger and regret) that can be felt by studying at a low-status HEI which is considered to be "second class" (Reay, 2018:10). These emotional aspects are largely absent in existing published literature relevant to this issue. Eddie was particularly passionate about this matter as his choice to study at Central had been met with disdain from some of his own family members. Eddie clearly found it frustrating that the value which he attributed to his degree did not translate outside of the institution because of Central's post-92 status.

> I am proud to have said I come from Central University and I don't know how many students would say that, which is one of the issues I have with higher education at the moment is about the inequality of the status stuff. My mum has absolutely no idea about university status, no idea whatsoever. She is just so proud that I went to university and graduated with a first-class degree. So mum would say "oh Eddie's going to [City] University, or Eddie is at university in [City]". Well if you say [City] people think University of [City] and so then I say, I say [Central] University, not the Redbrick. And then that gets a lot of negative reactions from people.

Eddie had first-hand experience of the way in which the hierarchical nature of the HE field simultaneously values the older (selective) HEI whilst devaluing the newer universities, a point emphasised by Stitch (2012). It is evident that the *doxa of deficit* which operates around post-92 HEIs permeates people's viewpoints and the value they ascribe to low-status

institutions. Eddie was understandably frustrated by this and the way in which his positive experiences at Central were misrecognised by wider society, resulting in symbolic violence due to the low symbolic value of his degree. Viewing Eddie's experiences from a Berlantian perspective allows the cruelness of the university hierarchy to become illuminated as it meant that Eddie's positive experiences did not translate across the wider field, and the exchange value of his degree lay in the status of the awarding institution, rather than in the substance of the qualification itself. This had profound emotional implications, causing feelings of anger and frustration as Eddie found his agency was bound by structural limitations of hierarchy and status. These findings provide a new insight into the relationship between university hierarchy and first-generation students, revealing that ultimately university hierarchy can have profound emotional implications for those who study in low status HEIs.

8.7 Central as a place of affirmation.

At odds with the diminished status of Central as a post-92 HEI is the experience which the participants had within the institution which did not fit with the "fish out of water" narrative often cited in existing published research (e.g., Lee and Kramer, 2013; Reay *et al.,* 2009a; Reay, 2021; Tett, 2004; Theale *et al.,* 2017; Walkerdine, 2020). The participants all expressed how positive they felt about studying at Central, particularly in comparison to their previous educational experiences. In a similar way to the on-course participants, the graduate participants had largely had a difficult time at school (with the exception of Eddie who enjoyed school but had a "very bad" experience at college). Most of the participants felt that they had not achieved well in school or reached their potential, citing that they lacked motivation and interest or were badly bullied. Emma in particular had a tough time in education and was misrecognised as lacking in ability due to her dyslexia going unnoticed:

> I hated school […] I was always very anxious. I was bullied quite a bit as well for being different or poor. So, no I didn't enjoy it really, and it wasn't a good school at the time. And the teachers I assume because it was such a big classes with so many kids they didn't really have time to focus on any single child so they never realised I had dyslexia. So, they kind of just put it down to me being dumb I guess. So, they put me in all the lower levels with all the other children that were acting up, or misbehaving, or same as me not achieving. So, I was put in an environment that I would've struggled in anyway. So yeah, no I didn't enjoy it, at all. It was horrendous.

This experience had a marked impact on Emma's sense of self and meant her learner identity was very fragile, which led to her time at university initially being plagued by self-doubt. However Central offered a place of affirmation for Emma which confirmed to her that

she was capable and “deserving” of being in education. Emma talked at length about her personal tutor in particular as being a person of significance in her educational journey as “he took the extra time” to get to know her and offered Emma a lot of encouragement and positive feedback which had a key impact on the way Emma saw herself:

> Yeah it did develop my confidence, it really, really did. Because I put myself down a lot, a lot. So, when I had like good feedback and stuff like that it makes, it just confirmed to me that I should be here and that I did deserve it. Sorry [crying] I feel a bit emotional now.

Emma’s experience is reminiscent of Merrill’s (2012) work which indicated that supportive relationships with personal tutors can have a significant impact on students’ confidence and self-belief and can reduce feelings of inadequacy. Findings revealed that the experience of university was seen as transformative for many of the participants because it provided them with an opportunity to disregard the negative labels which had previously been ascribed to them in education, and this set the basis for a greater sense of self-worth. Being deemed as ‘deserving’ was important to some of the participants who had fragile learner identities after negative experiences in school and the absence of enjoyment in education:

> I think because I underperformed on my A-levels I didn't think it was really, that I was really worthy really, I didn’t think I was capable of achieving what I have done (Joe).

The teaching staff at Central had played a key role in developing the participants’ feelings of self-worth and in fostering the participants’ self-confidence and supporting them through their transitions. The staff allowed the students to feel a sense of belonging and as though they were “more than just a number” (Joe):

> Even lecturers remembering someone's name is really important. You know even just hearing "hello Eddie” in the corridor is powerful, or somebody saying why weren't you there at so and so, it's just those little conversations that make you think, make you feel part of something and having those relationships (Eddie).

> The lecturers really allowed time for me. They knew my name which was a big thing, sometimes at school they didn't even know my name, literally. But there are some lecturers in particular that really stand out to me that allowed me extra time like my personal tutor, he would talk about not only my uni life but me personally if I was having any struggles at home, he really upped my confidence as well (Emma).

These findings reflect existing literature which has emphasised the importance of supportive staff in fostering feelings of belonging and promoting the success of adult students (Gill, 2021; Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Meehan and Howells, 2019; Merrill, 2015; Merrill, 2012;

O'Shea *et al.,* 2017). However, in addition, the interview data identified that lecturers were also able to act as social capital for some of the participants, helping them to make connections with key contacts in the field and sharing relevant insider knowledge about their industry which they would otherwise have been unable to access. Malisa and Abbie shared that their lecturers had helped them set up work placements alongside their degree to help them increase their social and cultural capital and gain relevant first-hand experience. Similar points were echoed by Joe and Afia. Lecturers may have access to industry specific capital which can potentially go some way to compensate for the relevant social and cultural capital which Crozier *et al.,* (2008) suggest is lacking within the family of many first-generation students. It is important to recognise however that the social capital offered by lecturers is limited in comparison to the capital that can be mobilised by the families of students from more privileged backgrounds, as it is not realistic for institutionally held social capital to be mobilised for all first-generation students within a HEI.

Findings from the participants in this chapter support previous research by Crew (2015) and Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) which suggested that non-traditional students gain many personal benefits from HE, such as enjoyment of learning, improved sense of self and increased confidence. The graduate participants all reported a strong sense of personal achievement in completing their degree, even if this had not led to the employment outcomes they had hoped for:

> It's definitely opened me up to be more confident and things like that. It's given me the key knowledge that I needed. I've always got that (Malisa).
>
> Uni for me was life changing, that's really corny but I think sort of my journey sort of before I came to university to when I graduated, the difference in myself was just incredible. So just sort of confidence building, person building, I suppose sort of finding out who I am, so I think university has allowed me to be, to find out who me is (Abbie).
>
> My life is completely different, the conversations I have with people. It's given me a voice. I was the shyest person on the planet […] It's crazy when I think how far I've come (Afia).

The interviews revealed that all of the graduate participants gained some important benefits from studying in HE, however the salient issue here which needs to be taken into account is that these benefits (such as increase in confidence) offer little currency in a neoliberal society. They are not something easily captured by metrics and it was evident that the participants did not hold these benefits in the same esteem as graduate employment. The literature review highlighted that, as a result of neoliberal doxa, there is an increasing

instrumentality around the purposes of HE and the value of students' 'investment' is commonly viewed solely in relation to employment outcomes (Budd, 2016; Inglis, 2016; O'Shea, 2020a) and the findings of this study reflected this consensus. This has implications for how positively graduates view their experiences after leaving university, with personal developments becoming less valued if instrumental hopes for employment are not met.

8.8 'The promise' and the search for security in precarious times

All of the graduate participants had engaged in HE for instrumental reasons and in the hope that it would provide them access to what Berlant (2011: 1) terms as "the good life". For the participants the good life related to several factors including obtaining a job they found enjoyable and rewarding. The most salient factor though lay in the participants' hopes for financial stability. Engaging in HE was seen as offering a pathway which would eventually lead to this good life being obtained: "actually if you've got a degree, you're alright, you know you, you can do stuff, it opens doors" (Eddie). The persuasive notion that obtaining a degree opens the door to improved employment opportunities, stability, and individual upward social mobility (Finnegan *et al.,* 2019; Jarvis, 2021; Merrill *et al.,* 2020) had clearly been internalised by the graduate participants in this thesis and the power of neoliberal doxa in shaping individual understandings was evident in all the interviews. For example, Afia talked about a friend who had studied psychology but who had been unable to obtain graduate employment so had continued her student job at Sainsburys. Afia expressed surprise at this:

> I find it really shocking, because for me, it's a stepping-stone, it's a degree, you can take it just about anywhere. You have to make the opportunities […] a lot of people don't step away, step out of their little comfort zone. And I think you have to be ready to do that, even if it's not your specialism or your background.

Afia's beliefs are in line with meritocratic doxa, suggesting she believed the risk of failure can be minimised through hard work and flexibility. Afia had clearly internalised the neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility and felt that success or failure is down to individual (in)action. In this way Afia placed blame at the door of the individual for failing to realise their potential and "find opportunities". Afia felt that a strength of her own approach was that she had been open to consider opportunities outside of her immediate area of expertise and this flexibility had allowed her to reach her goal of studying at doctoral level (in an area which was different to her undergraduate degree subject). In this way Afia had adjusted her actions towards goals which aligned with the neoliberal economy. A key finding in this research is thus the way in which neoliberalism was internalised by the participants and shaped not only their horizons for action, but also their viewpoints and the way in which they understood adversity as being down to individual, rather than structural limitations.

Interestingly, Afia's narrative did also suggest that students were being sold misleading information, indicating that she did have an awareness of the way in which cruel optimism was being mobilised in HE:

> I do think universities need to be honest, in their interviews, when it comes to certain degrees. They need to have those conversations in the interview process because a lot of people are deluded when they start because their expectations are unrealistic. They think they're going to get from A to B really quickly and it doesn't work like that.

Afia's narrative is reflective of the dominant discourse of employability which Brown *et al.,* (2011) argues firmly places the responsibility for graduate employment at the door of individual students and HEIs, irrespective of the actual opportunities for employment that are available in the local area. However, Afia does raise an interesting point, in that the growing focus on employability by HEIs has made the sector increasingly complicit in obscuring the precarious realities of the labour market (Tholen and Brown, 2017), thus fuelling the potential for cruel optimism in HE, particularly for first-generation/non-privileged students.

Abbie had struggled with finding employment after her degree and had eventually elected to undertake a PGCE in post-compulsory education as this offered a clearer route into employment. Abbie talked openly about how frustrated she felt at the end of her degree when she was unsure about where to go next:

> I was frustrated because I felt like I've chosen this degree, and I really enjoyed it, it wasn't because I didn't enjoy it, but I felt like I've chosen this degree and then all of a sudden it's nearly over and I don't know what to do with it. And all I could think of was teaching. So, I was frustrated because I was like "why have you done this why have you suddenly changed your mind, you've wasted like three years and a hell of a lot of money" and I was just frustrated with myself.

Abbie had started her degree with high aspirations for her future career, stating that she had been interested in becoming a criminal psychologist. However, when reflecting on her immediate future after graduation, which was mediated by the social and cultural capital at her disposal, Abbie's horizons for action narrowed (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). She began to consider teaching as a viable option as it presented a safer route into employment and thus offered a means of facilitating access to something better, even if it was not the good life she had originally hoped for. Abbie's career decisions were characterised by an avoidance of risk, and the renegotiation of her career aspirations to fit with what she deemed to be achievable at the time. Abbie also talked openly about the pressure she felt from those

around her towards the end of her degree and the lack of understanding from her family regarding the competitive nature of graduate employment.

> I think they all just thought, like "well you've got a degree so that means you're going to get a job. And that means you're going to get a job in this field". And I was like because I've got a degree that doesn't matter it doesn't mean I get a job. That was the case before because not many people had a degree whereas now they're sort of, everyone is throwing them around, like everyone has a degree.

Abbie showed a clear awareness that "the degree was not enough" (Tomlinson, 2008: 49) due to the overcrowded graduate labour market (Lauder *et al.,* 2012). Applying for the PGCE offered her a safer route into employment and allowed Abbie to appease the concerns of her family. However, at the time of the interview Abbie had still not been able to obtain secure employment despite being a qualified teacher. She was working on a temporary contract as a prison educator so remained in a precarious position and was unsure if the risk she had taken to study at university had paid off. Interestingly, Abbie bought into the narrative of delayed gratification to comfort and reassure herself that her hard work would eventually reap the rewards of financial security:

> My Dad makes comparisons with all my sort of friends, he's like "well they didn't go to university and they've got a job and a house and all this", and I'm like yeah but that's different they've had that job for like three years now but they might be doing better than me, but in ten years' time I'm probably going to be doing better than them, in ten years' time I will have all of that but for the moment I don't really care, I don't really want all those adult responsibilities.

Despite showing some awareness of the structural conditions of employment Abbie still viewed her own future trajectory in line with the meritocratic discourse of individualised success. Abbie's hope appeared to be being sustained by what Hage (2009: 103) terms as "imaginary mobility", driven by the sense that she was slowly moving forward towards her aspirations. Abbie's attachment to the good life remained optimistic and she felt positive, despite her struggles to obtain permanent employment, as she hoped she would eventually receive the gains she had been promised. This hope for the future allowed Abbie to protect herself from the psychological injury of being unsuccessful as she framed her precarity as freedom from "adult responsibilities". Abbie's experience aligns with Lorey's (2015: 3) argument that graduates often operate in a "state of insecurity" however Abbie had internalised neoliberal discourse which promotes this insecurity as freedom (Chadderton, 2020). Abbie's optimism may have been down to the relatively short time since she had graduated, as Cook and Cuervo (2019) point out that hope becomes increasingly difficult to

sustain over time, meaning that if Abbie's hopes continued not to materialise, she risked experiencing emotional injuries. The results of the graduates in this chapter provide a clearer understanding of the power of neoliberalism in shaping the outlook of first-generation students. Findings provide an insight into the way in which hope (or as Berlant would term it, "optimism") becomes a key method of self-protection in the face of the neoliberal precarity which individuals enter HE in the hope of avoiding. The graduate narratives have evidenced the way in which hope functions as a protective strategy for coping with the uncertainty of graduate outcomes in an unequal and precarious graduate employment field. Importantly, the cruelty here is that the structural barriers which reduce the likelihood of hopes becoming a reality remain concealed and misrecognised due to neoliberal doxa, thus invoking risks of self-blame and emotional injuries if graduates continue to feel that their hopes are not coming to fruition. The risk of disappointment when entering the graduate labour market (and the associated self-blame and emotional injuries which this disappointment can result in) presents a danger to non-privileged students' sense of self, which has been commonly overlooked within existing literature

Leah and Malisa struggled with finding graduate employment and for them the reality of their experiences post-graduation invoked a powerful emotional response. Both Malisa and Leah shared clear frustration that studying at Central had not opened the doors they thought it would:

> I just wonder if it's all for nothing, I felt so positive about the future when I graduated, because I never thought I'd get a 2:1, never [...] but then I didn't really know where to go from there or what to do so it hasn't really worked for me (Leah).

> I've really struggled to find a job that I actually want […] At times you feel like oh I've got a dream that I can't even really put to use, it's quite frustrating in a way. I don't want to be stuck in retail (Malisa).

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997: 37) argue that decisions related to future employment involve "the integration of pragmatically rational decision-making within a socially and culturally grounded habitus". For Leah, the competitive nature of graduate employment, her lack of relevant work experience, and what she felt was a devalued degree, led to her disengaging with graduate employment after she had unsuccessfully applied for a small number of jobs. Instead, Leah made the pragmatic decision to stay in her current place of work, which aligned with her habitus and was where she felt secure. It appeared that for Leah, over two years after graduation, obtaining a graduate job had ceased to feature in her horizons for action at all. Leah's family background was marked by poverty and financial instability and this first-hand experience of financial difficulty (including experiencing

repeated home visits from debt collectors) meant that Leah valued a stable (albeit low) income and was not prepared to risk this for more precarious employment:

> I know where I am at work now, and obviously because I'm a shift manager now obviously that helps because the hours are more and the pay is higher so I know, you know, I have enough to live off and pay my rent and my car and I know what I've got coming in.

Leah's choices were bound by structural inequalities and within these conditions any form of secure paid employment was framed as desirable, even if this was the low paid work she was currently in. Despite engaging in the process of HE and successfully obtaining a 2:1 degree, Leah had neither the economic, cultural, and social capital, nor the appetite for risk, to seek alternative employment and felt there were a lack of available employment in her degree area. During the interview Leah pointed out that she would have been promoted to shift manager a great deal sooner had she not spent three years at university. This led Leah to believe that she was actually in a worse position now than she was before she entered HE as her employment had not improved and she now also had to manage expectations and pressure from those around her to "get a proper job" which she felt unable to do:

> Like everyone goes on at me, my dad every time he rings me he asks if I've applied for any jobs. They don't get it. My dad he thinks I can just walk into a job now but it isn't like that. I've got no experience, I haven't been to a prestigious uni, no-one is interested.

Leah's narrative was the one which was most overshadowed by cruel optimism. Viewing Leah's experiences through Berlant's lens evidenced that Leah was maintaining "an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (Berlant, 2011: 23) which in this case was her original graduate aspirations. For Leah, studying at university had "ignited a sense of possibility" (Berlant, 2011: 2) of what she might achieve. Yet in reality, it had not only left her hopes for the good life unfulfilled, but the very attachment to these hopes had had a negative impact on her levels of happiness and sense of self as Leah blamed herself for these shortcomings and felt she had "nothing to offer". For Leah, hope was becoming more and more difficult to sustain as time went on and she appeared to feel trapped in a frustrating situation without a way out.

Leah's narrative aligns with Ball *et al's* (2013) argument that working class students may blame themselves for their lack of achievement, however importantly in this case, self-blame appeared to have had a damaging impact on Leah's self-esteem. In this way Leah had suffered an element of psychological harm by misrecognising structural limitations as personal shortcomings which is indicative of the internalisation of neoliberal notions of

individualised life choices (O'Shea, 2020a). Leah's narrative therefore encapsulates the way in which neoliberal ideals mask structural inequalities and lead to an individualisation of blame as outcomes are positioned as being the result of right or wrong choices by individuals (James, 2018) which can lead to damaging emotional injuries. A key finding here is that Leah's narrative reveals the problems at the heart of the instrumentalism of education. The relationship between university study and graduate employment is much more complex than government policy or institutional marketing materials suggest, and this can be damaging to graduates whose experiences do not align with the cluster of promises made by HE.

Leah felt that she has not been able to benefit from her degree in terms of employment both because of her own shortcomings and the low symbolic value of her degree. She had to make what Bourdieu (1984: 171) terms "the choice of the necessary" as her position in the field and the capitals she had at her disposal had structured her position and shaped her horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Importantly, in contrast to Abbie, Leah felt hopeless as her post-university experience meant that she had lost what Hage (2009: 103) describes as "imaginary mobility" - the sense that one is "going somewhere" within their life. Because Leah could not see any way to make her hopes come to fruition, any optimism she had for the future became increasingly difficult to sustain (Cook and Cuervo, 2019), leading to her experiencing emotional injuries. The significant finding here is that ultimately, these injuries were harmful to Leah's overall wellbeing, suggesting that the cruel optimism sustained by HE is capable of creating significant emotional harm.

In a similar way to Leah, Malisa experienced emotional injuries and her narrative revealed a clear sense of resentment that she had worked hard, networked, engaged in work experience in London, and was still unable to realise her ambition to work in fashion design. When asked if she enjoyed her current employment as a visual merchandiser at John Lewis (a non-graduate role on the same pay grade as a shop assistant) Malisa was clear that she "did not really enjoy it at all":

> Like I did a degree and it's not really anything to do with my degree […] We don't get paid for what we do I feel really undervalued. I feel really undervalued.

Similar to Leah, Malisa clearly felt angry, frustrated and understandably resented that she had not been able to progress into a graduate level career in her field despite having also completed an MA in Fashion Design after her undergraduate degree. Malisa felt as though she had played by the rules and had "ticked all the boxes" but had still been unable to achieve success. The class-based dissonance between Malisa's feel for the game and the game itself (Bourdieu, 1990) was clearly evident. Malisa was frustrated because she

believed that studying at Central had allowed her to evolve as a professional, yet she was not able to use the graduate skills she had developed and her professional identity was not warranted by key others (Holmes 2015: 232). It was evident that in the two years since completing her studies Malisa's excitement at the prospect of "the change that's gonna come" (Berlant, 2011:2) had progressed to anger and frustration that the change did not appear to be coming. As emphasised by Finnegan *et al.,* (2019) "when desired, or anticipated futures are seen as rapidly receding into the distance, it is far more difficult to feel you are flourishing in work and life" and this was certainly the case for both Leah and Malisa. The promise of HE had not delivered for either of these participants leaving them feeling a sense of "blighted hope or frustrated promise" (Bourdieu 1984: 150). Leah and Malisa's narratives are reminiscent of O'Shea's (2020a: 59) study which discussed first-generation graduates "making do" with underemployment due to a lack of relevant social and cultural capital. As neither Leah nor Malisa had achieved the employment they hoped for, their good life fantasy remained unfulfilled and they were trapped in an ongoing relation of cruel optimism. Malisa and Leah's narratives reveal that cruelness can be evident in the way in which non-privileged first-generation students are affectively attached to pursuing their career goals, even if these are unrealistic or prove to be unobtainable. Applying Berlant's lens to these narratives illuminates the emotional injuries sustained by experiencing cruel optimism, which led to these participants experiencing difficult and negative emotions such as frustration, disappointment, helplessness and crucially, self-blame.

8.9 Staying in the institution - managing precarity by staying in a 'safe space'

As demonstrated in the above discussion of Leah and Malisa's experiences the social capital possessed by graduates from less advantaged family backgrounds may lack relevance or value in the graduate labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009; Thomas and Jones, 2007). This can have a significant impact on an individual's ability to obtain graduate employment (Clarke, 2017). This led to some of the graduate participants becoming reliant on the social capital which they had developed *within the institution* to enhance their career prospects within the university, which was actively constructing itself as a graduate employment provider. At the time of the interviews both Joe and Eddie worked for Central in professional roles. Joe as an Education Developer and Eddie as a graduate intern within a service designed to enhance student employability. Since the time of the interview Eddie's internship ended and he was subsequently promoted to the centre manager. Joe and Eddie both had similar experiences in that their social integration and involvement in wider university life allowed Joe and Eddie to build social capital within the institution which they were then able to mobilise to secure employment. Both of their roles were based around education (Joe's in particular), despite their degrees being based on media studies:

> I ended up working for the university one day a week. Yeah they have a habit of trying to employ students […] and then yeah I got the graduate assistant role so I did that for a couple of years and then I am where I am now. So, I'm still working at the university, I can't leave, I'm part of the furniture now (Joe).

Eddie's original aspiration after graduation was to work in radio as this was had been his lifelong passion and he had spent a significant amount of time working on community radio in his hometown, and on the student radio at Central. However, at the end of his degree Eddie decided to apply for the graduate intern role at Central as he already had contacts in that area and had worked two days a week at the employability service alongside his degree. This experience led Eddie to alter his aspirations to fit with their objective chances as it became evident that successfully gaining employment within the university was more likely than developing a successful career in the radio industry. Graduate employment was able to be a reasonable possibility for Eddie because he had created "different conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1990: 17) by forging a career in a field where his capitals and experiences carried value. In the interview at some points, it appeared that Eddie was trying to persuade both of us that this was the right choice for him:

> Eddie: Originally I wanted to do radio because that was my passion, still is my passion. That changed from university, my tutor actually he said I should do it and go into industry but I sort of resisted there I don't know, that might have been a mistake and I always look back at it, and think about it, and I nearly applied for a presenting job because they really encouraged me and said go on, go and work on something, go and be a presenter, one was the British forces station but I didn't put an application in for it, I sort of decided not to.
>
> Beth: Why was that? What made you not want to?
>
> Eddie: Mainly because that job was overseas long term and it would have been really competitive so, but also like I say working full time in industry, it's not, it's education that I'm passionate about.

Eddie talked about how his experience at Central helped him to consider what he wanted to do with his life "properly, not just this fictitious plan I had", describing his original ambitions as "massively unrealistic". It was evident that Eddie's expectations did not align to his aspirations, so he adjusted his aspirations to accommodate this. Viewing Eddie's narrative through a Berlantian lens (2011) demonstrates that Eddie (in a similar way to Abbie) had renegotiated his hopes and expectations in line with the neoliberal order as his original hope (the "fictitious plan") for a graduate good life, characterised by achieving a professional career in radio, became increasingly unrealistic.

Likewise, Joe discussed how much he enjoyed working in education but had elected to study both his undergraduate and master's degree (which he studied alongside working in education) in media studies, suggesting that perhaps this was where his true passion lay. It is interesting to note that Eddie and Joe both had degrees related to media studies, which is a subject area with historically low graduate employment levels (Higher Education Careers Service Unit, 2014: 17). The high level of under-employment and thus the significant risk of cruel optimism for media studies graduates made leaving the safety net of Central even more of a risky prospect for Joe and Eddie who felt they could avoid these precarious employment conditions by staying employed within the institution. This provides further evidence that avoidance of risk and precarity was a key theme in the participant narratives. Staying in the institution functioned as a self-protection strategy, protecting the participants from the risk of cruel optimism, rejection and subsequent emotional injuries which may have been encountered in the wider graduate job market. An important finding to consistently emerge from this study is the powerful impact that risk management and avoidance of precarity (and thus cruel optimism) has on first-generation graduates' career decision making. The graduates' horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) were significantly limited by what they deemed to be safe, realistic, and achievable.

8.10 Conclusion

The participants in this study had all experienced change as a result of their participation in HE but this change had not resulted in a rejection of their original selves. Central provided a comfort zone for the participants where they did not feel out of place and where they could be accepted and given a sense of validation without having to change who they were. Negotiation of risk and avoidance of cruel optimism played a significant role in the participants' experiences, and this led to some graduates feeling reluctant to move out of the comfort zone which Central offered. Those participants that did move into other fields risked being exposed to feeling a "sense of one's place" and "a sense of the place of others" (Bourdieu, 1990) as their degrees did not necessarily open the doors for them which they had hoped and thus an element of cruel optimism was clearly evident in their experiences. The findings shared within this chapter evidence that, for first-generation students, the post-graduation pathway to secure graduate employment is complex and precarious.

This chapter evidenced the way in which the framing of employability as an exclusively individual issue, as opposed to a social and structural phenomenon (Tholen and Brown, 2017) is inherently cruel as it can lead to first-generation students misrecognising structural limitations as individual shortcomings. Findings in this chapter have indicated that when aspirations are not realised this can result in significant emotional injuries and can have a negative impact on graduates' sense of self, leaving them in a precarious position which can

lead to feelings of frustration and regret. These emotional injuries could potentially counteract the wider benefits first-generation students gain by participation in HE, such as growth in self-confidence and self-pride. The ethical implications of these findings raise questions regarding if it is morally responsible for universities and policy discourses to sustain optimism by perpetuating a narrative of “learning equals earning” narratives (Brown and James, 2020: 1) when this is unrealistic and clearly poses negative implications for first-generation students.

Chapter 9 - Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This thesis set out to explore how first-generation students framed their decisions to attend university, what aspects of their student experiences they perceived to be significant and how their lived experiences were influenced by the social and political context of Central and the wider HE sector. This chapter collates the findings outlined in the previous three chapters and works to situate these findings within the broader discussions in published literature. It will explore how this research extends the body of existing work within this area and will answer the three research questions which underpinned this study. The previous three chapters have examined the experiences of participants at different stages of the student lifecycle, to allow the reader to identify areas of similarity and difference at the different stages. Whilst these discussions have offered only a snapshot of the student experience, and it is recognised that each student's experience is individual, this research has illustrated key factors in the contemporary first-generation student experience at various points. The significant themes which have been revealed in the previous chapters will now be discussed and theorised, identifying areas of similarity and significance, to clarify the contribution which this thesis is making to existing knowledge.

This chapter begins by discussing findings in relation to the first research question, drawing on Bourdieu's work to offer a particular focus on the *doxic aspiration* of HE and the way in which the participants' choice making processes were mediated by the HE field. Discussions then move on to focus on the second research question, looking specifically at the way in which the participants' differing understandings of the purpose of HE altered their focus and experiences as students, and the impact this had on their horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). The chapter then moves on to consider the way in which the wider social and political context impacted on the participants' experiences, with a particular focus on neoliberalism. The theoretical lens of Berlant (2011) is deployed here to develop a unique understanding of the way in which neoliberalism fed the cruel optimism which underpinned and/or threatened many of the participants' experiences. This theoretical lens has not previously been applied to first-generation students and thus provides a new insight into the relationship between first-generation student experiences, HE and neoliberalism. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter summarises the discussions and draws together the key knowledge claims of this research.

9.2 The Doxic Aspiration of HE

The first research question of this study focuses on the way in which the first-generation students framed their decisions to attend university. The findings in relation to this research

question can be divided into two key areas: why the participants initially elected to enter HE, and why they made the decision to study at Central in particular.

The participants within this study had a variety of motivations for wanting to attend university which included a number of factors relating to past and present situations (O'Shea *et al.,* 2017) such as having experienced low household income, family employment precarity, or low job satisfaction. Their motivations were also a result of a number of factors relating to their aspirations for the future, underpinned by a desire for stability, discourses of betterment, and increased levels of opportunity. Additionally, university offered a chance for the participants to not only better themselves, but to also set a positive example to their families, which supports existing findings from Wainwright and Watts (2021). Consequently, being a first-generation student invoked a great deal of pride for the participants.

The theme which came across most strongly in the participant narratives was the way in which their hopes for the future centred on financial stability. The participants hoped to gain jobs which offered a stable income and a means of protecting themselves from the precarity which they, and their families, had experienced. Chapter two outlined that government policy commonly depicts HE participation in purely economic terms, with personal freedom and intellectual development coming a poor second to (imagined) improved labour outcomes: "the most important outcome of HE is finding employment" (BIS, 2016: 11), and the findings of this research align with that notion. Participants largely entered university with the hope that it would act as a vehicle to the good life and would provide them with the financial security and job satisfaction which had been largely absent in their lives so far. In this way a desire for stability was the most salient factor which underpinned most of the participants' decisions to attend HE. A key finding is that this emphasis on stability illuminates an anxiety which has its roots in neoliberalism, and the wider context of low-paid employment and growing income inequality. Investment in HE has been legitimised via the neoliberal imagination as the dominant means of increasing human capital, promoting an instrumental approach to education (Rasciute *et al.,* 2020). Consequently, HE was seen by the participants as an effective means of self-investment and way of improving one's labour market position.

For the younger participants HE was framed as what this thesis has termed as a *doxic aspiration*, building on Bourdieu's concept of doxa which he referred to as a "belief which escapes questioning" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). This doxic framing was the result of a political climate of WP which posited that university was the natural next step in students' educational journeys. This *doxic aspiration* was encouraged and legitimised by participants' schools and colleges, and by wider policy discourse underpinned by several

decades of WP. Consequently, university study was seen essentially as a non-decision for many of the younger participants, legitimised by policy discourses which went some way to mask the high levels of risk involved. The way in which HE was widely promoted to these participants as the most "acceptable aspiration" (Brown, 2011: 7) made it easy for them to imagine themselves studying within HE. Indeed, the persuasive discourse which positioned HE as a natural progression within their secondary schools (Pationitis and Holdsworth, 2005) meant that it felt difficult for some of the participants to imagine viable alternative options. The findings of this study therefore raise questions regarding whether some first-generation students enter HE not because they believe it offers *a pathway* to employment security, but because they have been led to believe it offers *the only option*. The strength of HE as a *doxic aspiration* which has been identified within this thesis has clear implications regarding why first-generation students enter HE and what they believe they will achieve as a result of their engagement. In this way the framing of HE participation as a *doxic aspiration* has a significant role to play in fuelling the cruel optimism underpinning HE by alluding to first-generation students that it is the natural next step in their education, without leaving room for critical discussion of the realities, possible downfalls, or alternative options.

For other first-generation students (particularly the mature participants) university only began to feature in their horizons for action as a result of a significant other (i.e., a friend, colleague or relative) attending university before them, which then allowed them to position it as a tangible option. This aligns with findings from existing literature which has highlighted the positive impact of university participation on individual's close social contacts (Wainwright and Watts, 2021). However, all the participants bought into the discourse that HE would open doors and create meaningful employment opportunities. The uncritical promotion of optimistic attachment to HE as a means to promised economic futures and the good life is where this thesis argues that the cruel optimism of HE arises as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (Berlant 2011: 24). In this way the limited possibility of success which characterises what Brown *et al.,* (2011) term as the "neoliberal opportunity bargain" can lead students to strive for a better future which may not be straightforward or easy to obtain.

9.3 Central and the Local HE Field

There were a variety of reasons underpinning why participants elected to study specifically at Central. For the local and distance participants alike the institutional culture of Central was significant in guiding their choice making processes. The participants saw Central as being more inclusive and welcoming, reflecting a demographic, dispositions, and values, which aligned with their own habitus. In this way the participants' choices can, in part, be explained by consistencies between their own habitus and the class-based culture of Central which

they perceived as being for “people like us” (Reay *et al.,* 2005: 25). This finding echoes previous research on non-privileged student choice-making which has mobilised Bourdieu’s theoretical tools to understand students’ preferences (e.g. Ball *et al*., 2002; Reay *et al.,* 2005; Walsh *et al.,* 2015). The welcoming and inclusive feel of Central, coupled with its achievable entry criteria, city-centre location and heavy investment in facilities positioned it as an attractive choice for local and distance students alike and went some way to compensate for the lower status of the institution.

Many of the participants’ decisions were formed by the “hot knowledge” (Ball and Vincent, 1998) of those around them as several of the participants knew someone who had studied at Central, which framed the university as a safe space and one which posed a lower level of risk. For other participants (including those who were not from the local area) elements of selectivity in the application process made the participants feel valued, which had positive implications for the level of esteem with which they viewed the institution. Central was also compared to other HEIs which had lower entry criteria and this helped the participants to position Central as a higher status HEI than others within the field. It is evident that notions of status and selectivity can have a significant impact on the decision-making of the first-generation students who find it easier to justify their decisions if they can invoke some element of selectivity in relation to their university choice.

The participants who had decided to study locally did so for a variety of reasons which align with previous literature (e.g., Clayton *et al.,* 2009; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013) such as a sense of ease and familiarity, maintaining ties to family and friends and mitigating financial concerns. For these students, the local HE field was a significant factor affecting their choice-making processes regarding where to study. As previously discussed, Central is located in an area that is highly populated with universities, meaning that competition for local students is fierce. This allowed the local HE hierarchy to act as a microcosm of the wider sector and the local participants reacted in various ways to the relatively low positioning of Central in the local HE field. For some participants electing to study at Central (as opposed to Plateglass or Redbrick) invoked a sense of personal disappointment or regret, that they did not push themselves to enter a more “prestigious” institution. These participants expressed concern that studying at Central risked experiencing negative repercussions in the labour market upon graduation. Other participants took a different approach and drew upon the notion of “support” that was offered by staff at Central as a key advantage which was denied to students in elite institutions. This approach could be understood as a form of self-protection from the wider discourses which worked to devalue Central in the local HE field. This finding evidences the way in which the institutional hierarchy had been internalised by the participants, and it was telling that they felt they

needed to justify their decision to study at Central, either by emphasising the supportive environment or by using Brookfield's lower status to elevate Central's position. It was evident that the first-generation students within this study felt the need to defend themselves from the inequality in the sector which served to devalue the institution they studied in, and thus devalued themselves as students/graduates. Yet Eddie was the only participant who directly challenged the stratification in the HE sector. This is evidence of the misrecognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002) which is bestowed upon students in low status HEIs. The findings of this thesis have shown that an acceptance of the HE hierarchy, even by those students actively disadvantaged by it, serves to strengthen and legitimise inequalities (Wacquant, 1998).

9.4 Institutional Reputation and the Misrecognition of the Post-92 University

Regarding league tables, participants' responses were varied; however most of them showed a clear awareness that Central's lower league table position and status carried connotations regarding its worth. Stich (2012:33) argued in her US based study that "reputation has endurance, the kind that leaves behind a long historical line of constructed social reality" and that notion certainly seems relevant to the findings of this thesis. This social reality was perpetuated and legitimised by marketisation instruments such as university league tables (Brown *et al.,* 2011) which Amsler and Bolsmann (2012) regard as symbolically violent practices which create and enforce tacit processes of unequal valuation. Some participants rejected the importance of league tables outright, suggesting that they were unimportant as all university degree qualifications carried value. This dismissal of performative ranking systems operated as a self-protection strategy to protect participants from the symbolic violence of studying at a low-status university. Conversely, for some of the participants the mention of league tables invoked a sense of regret. The research findings revealed that for some students the profound distinction between 'high' and 'low' status institutions had profound consequences for their own feelings of self-worth. Importantly, for the students who struggled to achieve graduate success, it was evident that the larger discourses of stratification in the local HE field resulted in smaller discourses of injured identities.

For other participants the mention of league tables evoked a sense of irritation that their positive experience at Central was misrecognised in wider discourse concerning what was considered to be a 'good' university. This frustration is understandable as ranking systems consistently infer that the institutions with the best reputations or highest league table positions will offer students the 'best' experiences (Raffe and Croxford, 2016), however, the findings of this research dispute this notion. The participants had positive and transformative experiences at Central, and their narratives did not reflect that they had received a second-

class or substandard experience. The salient point here is that these positive aspects of studying in a low-status HEI are largely absent in dominant discourses. Elliot (2021) argued in the literature review that the value of HE has been reduced to arbitrary metrics and data, with wider benefits being ignored or trivialised as they do not align with the neoliberal agenda. The findings of this thesis show that this metric fixation does a dis-service to the important work undertaken by post-92 HEIs which cannot be easily captured by performance data. This research builds on Elliot's work to illuminate the emotional impact that the deficit view of post-92 HEIs can have on the students who study within these institutions. Although rankings and reputation can be understood as imagined social facts (Stitch, 2012) an important finding from this research is that they can have real and damaging effects on students who study in lower ranking institutions. The *doxa of deficit* which operates around low-status, post-92 HEIs can thus be understood as ensuring reproduction rather than transformation and as such operates as a tool of symbolic violence. This can have a negative impact on first-generation students in post-92 HEIs, both in terms of how they view their experiences, and in relation to their actual graduate outcomes

9.5 Student Typology

As discussed throughout this thesis 'the student' is an ideal subject maintained by dominant discourses, and the term 'student' itself infers expectations regarding lifestyle and behaviours (Holdsworth 2006; 2009a). The literature review discussed the way in which moving away to university is essentially ritualised and embodies middle-class norms which reflects the elitist nature of the English HE system (Holdsworth, 2006; 2009a). The findings from this thesis demonstrate that student experiences fall on a spectrum and do not neatly align to predetermined ideals around what it means to be a 'typical' student. The participants adopted various approaches to university during their time as students which reflected their understanding of the purpose of HE, e.g., whether they saw it solely in terms of improved employment prospects, if they wanted to access 'the full student experience', or if they were driven by their love of their chosen subject. Through the analysis of the participant narratives in this study, three types of first-generation student trajectory have been developed: The Pragmatic Student, the Involved Student and the Passionate Student, with each implying different understandings regarding the students' expectations for HE. These categories were arrived at through the identification of commonalities within the data (as discussed in the methodology chapter) and as such have not been rigidly imposed on the participants but are founded within the participants' lived experiences.

This typology involves a deliberate shift away from binary notions of the 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' student experience which often invoke deficit connotations for non-privileged students such as the individuals within this thesis. The findings of this thesis offer a response

to the entrenched discourse that constructs first-generation students as being “at risk” in relation to their studies (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; McMillan, 2014; Patfield *et al.,* 2022; Wainwright and Watts, 2021). As such, a key contribution of this study is that this typology helps to provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 institution. It is important to note that these categories are not intended to be rigid or impermeable but are conceived as being flexible and fluid. Some students had elements of their experiences which bridged different categories and this thesis acknowledges that human experience does not neatly slot into pre-defined classifications. However, there were undeniable similarities between the students’ experiences which lent themselves to these different approaches.

The student typologies very much relate to what the participants deemed to be the purpose of HE. As discussed, most of the participants had a largely instrumental focus on university as a means to secure improved employment, but there were other aspects of the student experience which were significant to them which created additional layers to their priorities. The following section will now explore each of the student categories in greater detail. The table below illustrates where each of the participants fit in relation to this typology:

Table 8:

Pragmatic Student	Freya, Liz, Danni, Olivia, Beccy, Malisa, Emma, Afia, Leah, Leena
Involved Student	Farhaan, Cherry, Shamsun, Karolina, Joe, Eddie, Abbie, Caprice
Passionate Student	Arieta, Chrissie

9.5.1 The Pragmatic Student

The Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines the word pragmatic as:

> Solving problems in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist now, rather than obeying fixed theories, ideas, or rules.

This term certainly fits with the focus of the participants within this category. Their approach to studying at university fitted the conditions which they were operating within (such as maintaining paid employment and existing social ties), and they resisted the notion that university should be an all-encompassing experience. They choose to deliberately distance themselves from dominant student ideals, preferring instead to locate themselves as hardworking and committed. Their choice of university was also largely pragmatic with the majority of these participants electing to study locally because it better suited their needs at the time. The pragmatic students felt that they needed a university qualification in order to improve their economic prospects and HE, for these participants, was valued almost exclusively as employment preparation. Much like Leese's (2010) discussion of the "new" students in HE, the pragmatic students adopted what they deemed to be a sensible approach to university, following patterns of "selective engagement" (Thomas and Jones, 2017), and engaging only in the activities which they considered to be worthwhile. Generally, this involved a focus on attending taught sessions and being committed to their academic studies.

In terms of social integration, the pragmatic participants felt they were socially integrated insofar as they had all made friends on their course. A key finding here is that, in contrast to findings in existing literature, (e.g., Pedler *et al.,* 2022; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Yorke and Longden, 2008), these students did not appear to struggle with feelings of exclusion or a lack of belonging despite their limited extra-curricular engagement. This signifies that social engagement may be less important to developing a secure sense of belonging that previous literature has suggested, particularly for students who adopt a pragmatic approach to their studies.

As is commonly the case for first-generation students (Spengen, 2013) all of the pragmatic students (with the exception of Malisa) lived locally and maintained paid employment. For the pragmatic students being a student was something they *did*, as opposed to something they *were* and studenthood was not perceived to be the most significant aspect of their identity. This finding signals an active (as opposed to passive) mediation of their different identities. In agreement with findings from Christie and colleagues (2005) the local pragmatic students in this study did not frame living at home as a constrained choice which caused them to miss out, but rather as a positive decision which worked well for them. Studying locally allowed these students to continue to save money and to draw on their existing networks of support (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) and meant they did not need to fracture their emotional attachments to family and friends (Christie 2007; Clayton *et al.,* 2009). The pragmatic students were more likely to choose vocational courses which led directly to employment as this in itself was considered to be a sensible choice which offered a level of

protection from employment precarity, and thus from the cruel optimism which underpinned their experiences.

The tendency to lean towards vocational subjects was symptomatic of the participants' non-privileged habitus. The participants' view of education as a means of improving economic circumstances supports previous research (e.g. O'Shea *et al.,* 2017; Thering, 2010) in signifying the way in which vocational course choice can be explained by the working-class need to translate education into practical employment (Lehmann, 2009a). Choosing a course which clearly aligned to a vocation offered a safe route into the secure employment which the participants craved. However, the position of the pragmatic participants who had not elected to study vocational courses was more contradictory due to the greater level of risk involved; on one hand they bought into the notion that HE would open doors for them in terms of employment, on the other they narrated fear that their degree would not guarantee them a job.

By distancing themselves from traditional notions of studenthood and limiting their student experiences solely to the academic sphere the pragmatic participants only partially engaged with HE, and thus were only partially confronted by the HE field during their time at university. This potentially limited the wider impact that university had on their home lives and minimised the risks of disruption to their habitus (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). Although the literature highlighted that a lack of immersion into the wider aspects of university life could be understood as problematic in relation to opportunities to develop social and cultural capital (i.e., Ahn and Davis, 2020; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1989) this was not deemed to be an issue for the pragmatic students themselves. The experiences of the pragmatic students in this thesis identify that dominant models of belonging in the literature, such as those offered by Thomas (2012) and Tinto (1989) should be evaluated in relation to their relevance for first-generation students in low status HEIs. When the majority of students within a HEI are first-generation, local, employed, mature, and/or on vocational courses then it is evident that the model of belonging suggested by Tinto (1989) or Thomas (2012) may not always be appropriate.

The primary focus of the pragmatic students was on their academic studies and for them this in itself constituted a valid student experience. It could be argued that the approach of the pragmatic students illustrates the way in which the neoliberal imagination has infiltrated understandings of the value of education, reducing it to a means of developing human capital (e.g., skills, knowledge, abilities) (Becker, 1967). It showcases the way in which economic instability has impacted upon the way in which the participants framed the value of their education largely as a means of increasing their earning potential. However, it is

important to note that these students were being agentic in creating a way of being a student which worked for them and which should not be viewed in deficit terms simply because their approach does not align with dominant student ideals.

9.5.2 The Involved Student

The involved students placed much greater importance on wider social integration within the university (even if this was not something which they had actually been able to access) and the local participants in this category expressed greater concerns about 'missing out'. The students who elected to move away to university did so for 'the experience' and as a way to gain independence (Holton and Riley, 2013) as well as wanting to increase their human capital and job prospects. Moving away offered the involved students a way to reinvent themselves and was perceived as an important rite of passage to adulthood (Clayton *et al.,* 2009; Holton and Riley, 2013). The involved students wanted university to be a fun time and their expectations were much greater in terms of the impact university would have on their lives. For these participants being a student was a lifestyle, it was something they *were* or *hoped to become*, as opposed to something which they *did*.

In contrast to the pragmatic students who perceived their choice to study locally as a positive decision, the local involved students viewed their local student status as problematic and they expressed concerns about missing out due to a lack of insider knowledge regarding where social events were taking place. For these participants studying locally was perceived as a barrier to accessing the social benefits of student life (Christie *et al.,* 2008). The involved participants' understandings of what university life would be like were formed largely from the media and dominant discourses of studenthood, as their first-generation status meant they had limited points of reference for the realities of university. This meant that their *expectations* of university life did not necessarily match the *reality* they experienced as students. The pragmatic students were protected from this disappointment as they had altered their expectations to be in line with what would cause the least level of disruption to their life, i.e., engaging in academic activities only, but for the involved students this posed more of an issue.

The graduate involved students credited their involvement with wider university life as being vital to their success as students, implying that it had a positive impact on their academic achievement as well as their levels of enjoyment. This is significant because it shows how the involved students had subscribed to the dominant ideals of studenthood and conceptualised engaging in 'the full experience' as the right way to be a student, something which Central as an institution also invested in. Unlike the pragmatic students, who used distancing techniques to reject this way of being, the involved students were all keen to try

and align themselves to the socially constructed norm of the ideal-student subject, to fit with the dominant discourse of studenthood.

Despite being more fully engaged in the wider aspects of university life, the involved students did not experience the sense of habitus clivé or dislocated habitus commonly discussed in the literature (e.g., Friedman, 2016; Lehmann, 2009b; Spengen, 2013) and thus the experiences of the involved students differ from findings of previous research. The demographic make-up of Central is significant here, which itself is an effect of the stratified market of HE. As Central is an institution with a diverse and largely working-class student intake, the students' peers were similar to them in many ways and the participants' non-privileged background was not something which they felt the need to conceal as their habitus was not at odds with the institutional culture. This went some way to help the participants feel a sense of belonging and did not lead them to feel that they had to change, adapt or hide who they were in order to fit in. This contrasts with the findings of previous research around working-class students in elite HEIs which suggests students feel out of place or that they need to "fake it until they make it" (Granfield, 2013; Reay *et al.,* 2009b). It also may be significant that the involved students maintained a focus on employment outcomes and achieving labour market success, which may have helped alleviate the concerns of their family.

9.5.3 The Passionate Student

Although this model of studenthood only really applies to two of the participants within this study, it is significant because these two students had experiences which were notably different from the other participants, and this difference stemmed from their understanding of the *purpose* of university study. Both Chrissie and Arieta had an informed understanding that the subjects which they had elected to study (English and drama) had tenuous links to employment and may not have offered an easy route into well-paid work. Although the passionate participants hoped to be able to achieve employment, their informed understanding of the difficulties they may face actually helped to protect them from the cruel optimism felt by the other participants. Instead, they were driven by a true passion and love of their subject, which meant that they were able to enjoy education for its own sake and were pursuing HE as a form of self-development as well as a means of improving their employment prospects. These two participants were able to use their alternative motivations to distance themselves from the neoliberal human subject and instead recognised and valued the personal growth that HE can offer.

Both Chrissie and Arieta gained joy and personal fulfilment from their studies which, to them, outweighed the risks and precarity they faced in relation to their employment prospects.

There was an element of pragmatism in relation to their experience as their informed understanding meant that they had both taken steps to engage in extra-curricular activities to help develop their cultural and social capital. However, their love and passion for their chosen subject of study meant that university offered a transformative experience which transcended the boundaries of employability. For the passionate participants university offered a means of escape from their previous lives and a way of experiencing the educational fulfilment which had previously been denied to them. Having the "full experience" for the passionate students was not about socialising, joining societies, or traditional notions of studenthood, but instead meant becoming immersed in their subject of study.

Interestingly, Chrissie and Arieta were the two participants who experienced the greatest sense of dislocation from their families and friends, as they had both elected to study subjects which deviated from the norms of their social circles, and which went against the class-based expectations of appropriate (i.e., vocational) subject choices. For Chrissie this was compounded because she left full-time paid employment to enter university, which was considered by her family to be a risky decision, as Lehmann (2009a) indicated can often be the case in working-class families. Chrissie's narrative evidenced that not following an instrumental approach to HE can potentially cause tension in first-generation students' existing relationships. Arieta did not experience such strong resistance from her family and friends regarding her course choice. However, moving away from home to study in Central's School of Acting (which was a prestigious area of Central) meant that she appeared to experience a sense of habitus dislocation (Friedman, 2016) as her experiences studying with privileged peers created a chasm between herself and her existing social circles. As a result of the "dialectical confrontation" (Bourdieu 2002: 31) Chrissie and Arieta experienced upon becoming immersed in their studies they experienced a growing sense of distance from their families and home lives, which invoked a sense of hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1986) as they experienced negative sanctions both from their families/friends and also internally, resulting in feelings of guilt and frustration. This evidences what first-generation students risk by entering HE in relation to the potential costs to their existing relationships when studying in privileged contexts or going against class-based understandings of appropriate course choices.

9.5.4 Summary of typology

As evidenced above, a key finding in relation to this study is that the participants' approaches to university study were underpinned by what they determined to be the *purpose* of HE. The way in which they all, to some degree, placed an emphasis on HE as a means to improve their employment prospects was unsurprising given the shift in focus on university

outcomes which has taken place over the past few decades (O'Shea *et al*., 2017). However, for some of the participants, tied up with this promise of improved employability was also the opportunity for independence, social engagement, or personal fulfilment. What participants considered to be their priorities whilst engaging in HE impacted on the approach they took to their studies. This typology has evidenced that the first-generation student experience is diverse, complex and differs depending on what students want to gain from their experiences. This has significant implications for HEIs when considering how to 'improve' the student experience. It is important that universities ascertain what students wish to gain from their time in HE, as the approach of many first-generation students does not fit with traditional notions of studenthood. The first-generation student typology developed by this thesis adds an additional layer of complexity to existing literature which has focused on the first-generation student experience. It provides a more nuanced way of understanding (and thus supporting) first-generation students.

A further theoretical contribution offered by this typology is the way in which the approach taken by the students intersected with the dynamic of cruel optimism. It was evident that cruel optimism operated on a gradient, posing a bigger risk to some students than others, dependant on their approach. Ironically, it was the pragmatic students, who aligned most strongly to instrumental discourses of HE as a vehicle to secure employment, who were at greatest risk of cruel optimism. This is because they had taken the promise of HE at face value and therefore their entire focus was on improving their employment prospects which meant that they held the other aspects of HE such as social experiences and personal fulfilment in lower esteem. Consequently, if the promise of HE was not realised for them (as was the case for Malisa and Leah) this left the participants at greater risk of feeling disappointment, regret, and crucially a sense of self-blame. A key finding of this thesis is that an individualisation of failure, in line with the neoliberal ideology (Burke, 2013), was prevalent in the participant narratives and they commonly misrecognised structural limitations such as a lack of local graduate employment as personal shortcomings or the result of poor decision-making, which ignored layers of social determination. This finding supports recent research on first-generation graduates undertaken by O'Shea (2020a). For Malisa and Leah in particular this self-misrecognition invoked strong feelings of regret and was particularly damaging in terms of the impact it had on their wellbeing and happiness. This evidences the emotional injuries risked by first-generation students as a result of studying in a neoliberal context. Many of the participants revealed real pressure and concern regarding whether or not they had made the right choice (both in terms of university and career options) and negotiation of risk was a prevalent feature in all of the participant narratives. This itself is a clear injury of neoliberalism. Existing literature highlights the risks

taken by first-generation students in relation to feeling out of place (Read *et al.,* 2003; Reay, 2003), damaging existing relationships (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; O'Shea 2014; 2017), or mitigating financial concerns (Bathmaker, 2021; Callander and Mason, 2017). The findings of this thesis, facilitated by the use of Berlant's lens, add to this list the risk of *emotional injuries*, particularly if participants' hopes for the future do not come to fruition. This is an important issue and universities have an ethical implication to help first-generation students navigate this by emphasising structural factors in relation to graduate outcomes.

Interestingly, the approach of the passionate students told a different story, largely because they rejected neoliberal ideals concerning the instrumental value of HE and instead fostered an intrinsic approach driven by the love for their subject. Archer (2007) makes an important point that neoliberal ideology is not a determinant, but instead operates as a powerful attempt to *influence* individual actions. This relationship between societal narratives and individual agency is particularly prevalent to the passionate students as their actions did not align to neoliberal discourses. The passionate students used their individual agency to make choices which were not constrained by neoliberal forces, nor by their own habitus, and for them HE offered a form of emancipation which freed them from what Brown *et al.,* (2011) termed as the "neoliberal opportunity bargain". Consequently, the passionate students were positioned at the other end of the cruel optimism spectrum, because they gained intrinsic value from their time in HE, experiencing joy and a sense of liberation from their study. The key finding here is that the value the passionate students ascribed to these intrinsic factors, and their implicit rejection of neoliberalism, went some way to protect them from cruel optimism, because their goals encapsulated more than gaining employment. University was about much more than that for these individuals and their outlook had powerful implications for how they understood their experiences. This study suggests that a wider focus on HE, driven by the passion and joy of learning as much as by an instrumental approach to improving employability, could go some way to protect first-generation students from the emotional injuries experienced by some of the other participants in this study. This is a unique finding which offers new insights into the first-generation student experience in relation to how the approach taken by students intersects with the dynamic of cruel optimism which can threaten first-generation student experiences.

9.6 Horizons for action

The findings of this study in relation to participants' career expectations and related horizons for action were characterised by a desire to minimise risk. This is understandable as existing literature has shown that not all those with degree qualifications are employed in "graduate occupations" (Tholen and Brown, 2017) and graduate pathways for non-privileged students are often more uncertain than for those from more privileged backgrounds (Bradley and

Bathmaker, 2013; Ward, 2015). Mirowski (2013: 96) discusses the way in which “risk is the oxygen for the entrepreneurial self”, something which is unavoidable and should be embraced by individuals. However, the non-privileged students in this study lacked the luxury of access to economic capital should their gamble not pay off, therefore it is understandable that they viewed risk as something to be minimised. It was this aversion to risk which drove the participants to enter HE in the first place in the hope of obtaining security and stability (i.e., the good life) and aversion to risk also structured their actions post-graduation.

Despite the differences outlined previously concerning the diverse approaches of the participants during their time at university there were some marked similarities in their horizons for action, particularly for the pragmatic and involved students. As emphasised by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) the amount of influence someone has on their individual career is strongly affected both by their position in the field and the resources (i.e., capitals) which they have access to (Hodkinson, 2009). This applied to both the pragmatic and the involved Students. For example, Joe and Eddie (involved students) both adjusted their career aspirations to align with working within Central, when it became apparent that there was a higher probability of them achieving employment within the institution than trying to gain success within their respective industries. Likewise, Leah and Danni (pragmatic students) both elected to stay in their current place of work (in retail/hospitality) because this offered security and was deemed to be more achievable than competing for employment in a competitive graduate role. The risk averse actions of the participants evidences how inequality can be maintained by a non-privileged habitus which can shape an individual’s desires to align with what seems to be obtainable, or what Bourdieu describes as “the taste for necessity” (Bourdieu, 1984: 374). These findings provide a new insight into the relationship between first-generation students and their horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). This thesis argues that both the pragmatic students and the involved students’ horizons for action would actually be more accurately defined as horizons of *probability* – in that the actions they took (both in relation to university choice and careers) were based around what was deemed by them to be most *probable*, i.e., what they were most likely to be able to achieve. The participants’ *horizons of probability* evidence the way in which class structures are reproduced through individual feelings of doubt and anxiety which manifest in risk-averse behaviour. In Bourdieusian terms it seemed that some of the participants had acquired a “sense of one's place” because of their non-privileged habitus, which led them to exclude themselves from the places where they felt they may be excluded, such as an elite HEI or competitive graduate-level employment (Bourdieu, 1984). It could therefore be argued that some of the participants had internalised the legitimacy of their own

exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986) as their dispositions were significant in limiting their actions to what they deemed to be the safest options. The non-privileged background of the participants played a significant role here as it meant that they lacked the safety net of economic capital and did not have the financial stability to engage in a long search for employment, leaving some to seek (or continue in) non-graduate work. Risk aversion for first-generation students therefore relates to both economic circumstances and the "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett and Cobb, 1977) that can come from not having access to dominant forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This finding is significant in adding to existing understandings concerning first-generation students' choices and career decision-making as it evidences that, more than career interests or financial incentives, risk aversion is the most salient factors influencing the actions of first-generation students and graduates.

Interestingly, some of the first-year participants (such as Caprice) appeared to have much wider horizons for action. As discussed in Chapter Seven, Caprice had bought into the discourse of labour fulfilment and at first glance appeared to have a wide range of graduate possibilities which she considered to be able to achieve. However, Caprice's narrative revealed that despite having ambitions to "be a neuro-scientist", "get a doctorate" or "own my own company" in reality she was acutely aware that she had neither the knowledge nor the means to achieve those imagined aspirations, thus her *expectations* were much more limited. However, because Caprice was a first-year student at the time of the interview, the temporal dimension of her experience allowed her to imagine that by the time she had finished her degree she could be in a position to achieve her ambitions. As she was at the start of her university journey Caprice could suspend the risks which governed her horizons for action and the narratives of the other first year participants also reflect this finding. Consequently, a key addition to existing debates on students' career aspirations, is that time and level of study is a key factor in structuring a student's horizons for action. The wider ambitions of the first-year participants signifies that first-generation students' horizons for action gradually narrow to become *horizons of probability* as they approach the end of their studies and face the impending pressure of what to do next.

Remarkably, the horizons for action of the two passionate students appeared to be markedly different. The approach that these students had taken with their studies, and the greater risks they had already taken to study on their selected course, indicated a greater appetite for risk. This widened their horizons for action beyond what was considered to be likely. Both of these participants hoped and planned to work in careers which were competitive and difficult to get into (professional acting and journalism/editing) and both showed a clear awareness of the difficulty they may face to access their chosen careers after graduation.

However, the passionate students' deep and consistent enthusiasm for their subjects allowed these participants to imagine a wider range of graduate futures. They were not as tethered to the instrumental ties to employment as the other participants, because they had not entered HE solely for that purpose. In this way both the participants were working hard to widen their horizons for action during their studies by exposing themselves to as many opportunities as they could. Their focus on learning for learning's sake actually appeared to *enhance* their career expectations and increase their appetite for risk; they knew they had taken a chance with their chosen courses, but they embraced the opportunity this had given them to study the subjects which they loved. The salient finding here is that the passionate students were able to have a more fulfilling and transformative experience because of the passion they had for their degree subjects, which minimised the risk of cruel optimism which underpinned the narratives of the rest of the participants. This finding evidences a paradox, which has been overlooked in existing literature, in that the participants who least conformed to the neoliberal ideology, were actually the greatest risk takers. Yet the passionate students took risks in a way which counteracted neoliberalism, rather than embraced it. Their approach freed them from the constraints of neoliberalism and widened their horizons for action as a result.

9.7 The context of the case study institution - Central as a place of affirmation

The previous discussions within this chapter have centred around the first two research questions. This and the following sections of this chapter outline the way in which the context of the case study institution and also the wider social and political context of HE influenced the participants' lived experiences, in alignment with research question three. A key theme which was consistent across the on-course and graduate biographies, regardless of student typology, was the way in which Central was conceptualised as a place of educational sanctuary which offered affirmation. In this way the inclusive context of Central was significant in having a positive impact on the participants' experiences. Central was perceived to be a welcoming place which validated the students' existing identities and aligned with their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) whilst also recognising them as having academic potential. A lack of self-belief was evident in many of the participants' biographies, fuelled by their difficult experiences in compulsory education which meant that many of them had originally misrecognised themselves as lacking in potential (James *et al.,* 2015). Central allowed these scars of self-doubt to heal and encouraged the students to realise that they were capable of succeeding in their academic studies. The low starting point in terms of the participants' self-confidence was significant in relation to the value they gained from their experience at Central as it changed the way they conceptualised themselves and their abilities.

The sense of comfort and ease which the participants felt at Central is symptomatic of the way in which their embodied cultural capital was synonymous, at least to some extent, with the institutional culture of the university (Bourdieu, 1986). The diverse make-up of the student body positioned Central as welcoming and did not create concerns around legitimacy and belonging. Instead, the participants' habitus positioned Central as a safe choice, one which did not threaten existing ways of being. In contrast to the majority of the existing literature regarding first-generation and local student transitions (e.g., Holdsworth, 2009a; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), the participants in this study did not appear to struggle with managing their student identity formation (O'Shea *et al.,* 2017). Rather than the "fish out of water" which the literature often paints them to be (Read *et al.,* 2003; Reay *et al.,* 2009b), the participants in this study were more like what this thesis terms as *amphibian students* who were able to adapt to studying in the unfamiliar HE environment with relative ease. Participant narratives suggest this was largely due to the welcoming and diverse institutional culture of Central which valued the non-privileged students who made up most of its intake. The majority of the participants did not experience "negative sanctions" as a result of engaging in HE (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 78) which echoes findings of previous research by Finnegan and Merrill (2017) who found similar experiences in the working-class students they interviewed who were studying in a post-92 HEI.

It is important to acknowledge that the participants' transitions to university were not trouble free as even in a welcoming and diverse HEI such as Central the dominant academic culture can still be confusing to students who have little family experience of university study (Read *et al.,* 2003). Therefore, although the participants did express feelings of belonging and security within the institution, some experienced difficulty at times in relation to navigating the unfamiliar world of academia. This was exacerbated by the participants' first-generation status which meant that they lacked academic support at home which made the support that was offered by Central even more valuable. Furthermore, the friendships that the participants were able to make on their course of study provided another invaluable means of support and their transitions were also eased by the emotional support offered by the majority of their families and the sense of pride they felt at being the first person in their family to enter HE.

The academic staff at Central played an important role in smoothing the participants' transitions through university, which supports existing findings in the literature (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Gill, 2021; Merrill, 2012; 2015; O'Shea *et al.,* 2017). As outlined in the previous chapters, university lecturers were able to act as a form of social capital for some of the participants, helping to demystify their chosen career areas and sometimes sharing

contacts with students to help facilitate work experience opportunities. Also, of particular significance in this thesis was the *pedagogy of care* which teaching staff showed to some of the participants, taking the time to get to know them and supporting them through personal difficulties when required. The participants appeared to have a great deal of respect for the lecturing staff on their courses, perceiving them as experts in their field. Consequently, the findings evidenced that praise and affirmation from teaching staff was hugely significant in developing the confidence and sense of legitimacy the participants felt. This confirmed to the participants that they were academically capable and deserving of a place in HE which allowed them to discard the negative labels from their previous education (Merrill, 2012). The way in which Central was able to bestow this growth in confidence and self-respect for the participants is an important finding which supports previous research in demonstrating the important affective impacts of having a positive educational experience (see Field, 2011; O'Shea *et al*., 2017; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007). Findings from this thesis build on this existing research by highlighting the key strengths of a diverse and inclusive HE context. The way in which the participants felt a secure sense of belonging and legitimisation within the institution, despite being from first-generation, non-privileged backgrounds, is testament to the important work which is carried out by post-92 HEIs, which is rarely reflected in the wider discourse, and shows the way in which HE can be crucial in promoting a sense of self-fulfilment. Cooke (2011) suggests that aspects such as self-fulfilment are absent in dominant discourse because they are difficult to measure which is problematic in a sector which is increasingly reliant on metrics as a proxy for quality (Furedi, 2011). The increasing drive for marketisation within the sector, underpinned by a relentless neoliberal ideology (Burke, 2012) has diminished the value ascribed to education as a public good (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012). The findings of this thesis draw attention to the importance of the holistic benefits of HE which go above and beyond instrumental notions of employment success. A key argument of this thesis is that an instrumental focus on HE to purely deliver hoped-for employment outcomes is reductionist and concerning as it leaves students more vulnerable to cruel optimism. The value attached to university study is much more than metrics can account for, it can emerge through friendships, a sense of fulfilment, joy, knowledge and growth in confidence.

Unfortunately, whilst the participants had clearly gained a great deal in terms of personal growth from their studies, findings demonstrated that a lack of labour market success could lead them to question their potential and could slowly break down the confidence they had found. The dominant policy discourse and "everyday neoliberalism" (Mirowski, 2013: 89) had clearly had a key impact on how the participants in this study framed 'success' and their viewpoints aligned with the doxic neoliberal view of HE as only being valued for

economic/employment success (Lynch, 2015). For the majority of the participants (with the exception of the passionate students) non-measurable impacts such as self-development remained in the shadow of employment outcomes. This finding aligns with previous research such as Lynch (2015), Inglis (2016) and Budd (2016) who argue that the neoliberal focus on metrics has driven students to view success as being only related to their own economic self-interest, qualifications and employment prospects. The findings indicated that this narrow focus fuelled the risk of cruel optimism as it caused some of the participants (such as Leah and Malisa) to misrecognise what they had gained from their time at university, leaving them with a sense of regret and self-blame. It was evident that the participants' identities and growth in wellbeing was fragile and easily damaged if it was not validated by others once they left HE. These findings signify that way in which neoliberal doxa fuels cruel optimism by narrowing the viewpoints of the participants to only value outcomes which align with the neoliberal order, which undermine the other positive aspects of HE. An argument at the heart of this thesis is that the non-measurable benefits of university study (such as a growth in confidence or a sense of self-fulfilment) are under threat due to the instrumental focus endorsed by government and institutional policy. A purely extrinsic focus on HE which only values employment outcomes obscures the intellectual, personal and social benefits and leaves students much more at risk of cruel optimism.

Understanding HE in this way also reveals the way in which universities themselves occupy a difficult position as they are both constrained by neoliberal conditions of possibility and complicit in the discourses of cruel optimism which neoliberalism creates. Neoliberal common sense has created a doxa which deems the current way of operating to be 'the only way' despite the cruelness and questionable ethics inherent in a discourse based on selling unrealistic promises to potential students. HEIs can therefore be understood as being complicit within the unethical exploitation of student desire for the good life, driven by their need to maintain/enhance their position within the hierarchical field of HE.

9.8 Cruel Optimism

Berlant's work has not been applied to first-generation student experiences previously, therefore utilising this lens when analysing the participant data allowed for novel ways of looking at their experiences. Applying Berlant's (2011) work to the narratives in this study made visible the dynamic of cruel optimism, highlighting the affective impacts of studying in a sector marked by inequality and false promises. The narratives in this thesis have evidenced the way in which HE participation is framed as what this thesis has termed as a *doxic aspiration* that is deemed to be natural and common sense. This *doxic aspiration* is legitimised by policy discourses which mask the high levels of risk and uncertainty faced by non-privileged students, particularly those who study in post-92 HEIs. The risks which first-

generation students take upon entering HE (both financial and otherwise) remain conspicuous by their absence in discourse which position university study as a universal norm and anything outside of this as "poverty of aspiration" (Sellar, 2013: 246). The participant narratives in this study have indicated how the dominant discourse that HE is good and necessary (Thomas and Quinn, 2007) was internalised by the participants even when they showed an awareness of the risks involved.

As discussed, most of the participants' desires to attend university were motivated by an extrinsic longing for financial security, job satisfaction, and, for the involved students, a desire to access 'the student experience'. The participants had attached themselves to the promise of the good life which, through participation in HE, could be made possible for them. In this way the participants' involvement in HE was framed by a "personal politics of hope" (O'Shea *et al.,* 2017: 99), underpinned by "false promises of aspiration" (Sellar, 2013: 251-52) which fed the underlying dynamic of cruel optimism. O'Shea and colleagues (2017) argue that the basis of hope is a positive feature in student biographies, and suggest that "universities worldwide, and those who fund them, should be working to widen the arc of hope and deepen the support to bring that hope to fruition" (2017: 99). Whilst this is a valid point, O'Shea *et al.,* have failed to acknowledge the limited impact a supportive HE environment can have in terms of actual labour market opportunities. The participants within this thesis felt well supported within the institution and were offered a range of relevant practical experience as part of their degree. However, this could not offer a guarantee that their hope would be realised, as the university had little control over graduate employment markets or the symbolic value a degree from Central carried within the hierarchical field of HE. Herein lies the problem of instrumentalist and marketised education policy which offers no account for structural factors and therefore which fuels a dynamic of cruel optimism which threatens first-generation students' experiences.

The argument this thesis is making regarding cruel optimism is that it is captured by the neoliberal imagination which positioned the participants' understanding of HE as a means of conveying economic advantage by human capital accumulation. The way in which most of the participants entered HE in order to gain a competitive advantage in their desired job market is in alignment with the "neoliberal opportunity bargain" as depicted by Brown *et al.,* (2011) which "promises economic rewards to those who pursue human capital investment through HE" (Sellar, 2013: 247). This understanding largely applied to the participants within this study, particularly for the pragmatic and involved students whose primary focus was on acquiring better employment prospects. The narrow extrinsic focus of most of the participants highlights the intense influence that government policy agendas have on

individual understandings of HE which has clear implications for the ways in which first-generation students frame their graduate outcomes as success or failure.

The participants invested in HE as a "fantasy of mobility" (Shirazi, 2019: 18), although some of them did acknowledge the potential shortcomings in this promise. Much of Berlant's (2011) work grapples with why individuals continue to cling to false promises (Ryan, 2020) and Shirazi (2019: 18) also raises a similar point, questioning why the attachment to education as a pathway to the good life persists, despite growing inequalities. It is a key argument of this thesis that students continue to invest their hope and optimism in HE because frankly, in contemporary neoliberal society, alternative options are extremely limited. HE cannot guarantee successful graduate employment and, to some degree, all of the participants seemed aware of this. Yet they still invested in the doxic aspiration of HE in the hope of gaining extrinsic economic rewards. Frank (1985: 10) describes the characteristics of a positional good as the following: "[...] all spectators in a sports arena leap to their feet to get a better view of an exciting play, but in the end everyone's view is no better than if all had remained seated". However, it is also the case that those who remain seated when everybody else is standing have no view at all. Thus, the findings of this thesis outline that, for first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds, it is perhaps safer to enter the game (of HE) and have a chance of winning, than to stand on the side lines and be out of the race altogether.

Importantly, outside of employment prospects, the student stories which have featured in this thesis also show that university participation can offer a range of other non-economic benefits including the means to act as a role model for others and the development of the self in terms of confidence and self-belief. A key argument of this thesis then is that HE has the potential to offer an important transformational experience encompassing intellectual, personal and social as well as economic factors. These benefits sit outside of neoliberal discourses (O'Shea *et al*., 2017) and are not recognised in what is deemed to be success within the neoliberal imagination. Thus, an important finding to emerge from this study is that the perceived value of the benefits offered by HE participation, which fall outside of job market advantage, are misrecognised as lacking in value even by students themselves, as they do not align to their instrumental understanding of HE. This misrecognition fuels the dynamic of cruel optimism as it leaves students at greater risk of experiencing emotional injuries if their narrow definition of 'success' is not met.

However, these wider benefits do act as a counter argument to Berlant's (2011: 1) assertion that cruel optimism "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing". Berlant's work did not focus on education; however, the use of her theoretical

lens in this thesis has added nuance to the way in which cruel optimism can be understood to operate in HE. The findings of this thesis have evidenced that engaging in university study did bestow some positive impacts on the participants (such as a growth in confidence), even if these impacts may have diminished when their hopes for the future were not met. The unique way in which Berlant's lens has been applied in this thesis outlines that HE participation is not an obstacle to individual flourishing per se, in fact it can allow for the individual to flourish in ways which were neither expected nor considered. The participant biographies in this thesis showed that it was only when the participants' hopes for the good life were not realised that the threat to their flourishing really became apparent. It is when individuals (such as Leah and Malisa) are left striving in "hope sustaining anticipation, only to find their position stagnating or becoming worse" (Sellar, 2013: 246) that the continuum of cruel optimism is really revealed, as it becomes evident that the promise of graduate employment may not materialise. The unique partnering of Bourdieu's thinking tools with Berlant's work in this thesis has revealed that the cruel optimism of the participants' experiences relates to what Bourdieu termed "the disparity between aspirations and their realisation" (1990: 59). The exception to this was the passionate students whose alternative focus on what they wish to gain from HE offered a layer of protection from this threat of cruel optimism. Essentially then, the findings have evidenced that what makes HE cruel in the context of this study is the way in which HE is framed as a way of accessing the good life and improving an individual's economic future, yet in reality is ineffective at fulfilling the cluster of promises it offers.

Applying Berlant's (2011) lens to the first-generation student narratives within this thesis has offered a unique contribution to knowledge by illuminating the vague and illusory nature of the promise offered by HE, revealing the way that the economic transaction of fee paying is mediated through the symbolic promise of access to the good life. The novel deployment of cruel optimism in this thesis has drawn attention to what is said, but more importantly, what is left unsaid with regards to the interaction between fee paying students and the institution. Importantly, the findings facilitate an understanding of how time and hope enables a suspension of reality for pre-entry and on-course students which allows for an imagining of their aspired futures during their time in HE. This time delay (i.e., between attending university and gaining desired employment) was significant in this study as it created space between expectations and subsequent outcomes and was therefore filled with uncertainty but was also a time where the participants' hope for the good life were sustained. This temporal element allowed the participants' expectations of their futures to be held in the realm of fantasy and illusion during their time at Central, fed by the graduate premium discourse. The considerable financial investment and risks that the participants had taken

were in return for something vaguely defined and loosely promised and as they completed their studies, they became increasingly aware that there was no obligation for their promise to be realised. The relationship between the institution and the participants was bounded by the students' hoped-for return on their risky investment. A key finding from this thesis is therefore that time and imagination are key mediators in the exchange between students and HEIs. This thesis suggests that students maintain an attachment to HE as a site of hope and means of achieving the good life, which can be understood in Berlantian terms as a "technology of patience" (2011: 92) which sustains participation in HE.

For the graduate participants, time and imagination was no longer suspended upon graduation. For some participants the promise was kept and a version of the good life was obtained. For others the illusion was shattered, leaving them disappointed, frustrated and regretful. This is where it becomes apparent that there are ethical implications in making promises to students which may not be delivered. Essentially, the way in which the majority of the participants had internalised the dominant narrative of a graduate premium left them vulnerable to experiencing the negative emotions which characterise cruel optimism. Berlant's (2011: 62) notion of "crisis ordinariness" can be applied here, meaning "circumstances of having to bear an unintended burden of vulnerability for an undetermined duration" (Shirazi, 2019: 24). This was the case for Leah and Malisa whose "crisis ordinariness" was evident by the way in which graduate life had become characterised by precarity and the emotional injuries of self-blame and disappointment. Previous research into first-generation/non-privileged students has highlighted the risks they face in entering HE, for example, Brine and Waller (2004: 102) outline four specific areas of risk: 'risk of academic failure, economic and material risk, risk to personal relationships and risk to class identity'. However, the use of Berlant's lens in this study has evidenced that risk of disappointment and emotional injuries should be added to Brine and Waller's (2004) list. The findings discussed in this chapter concur with Merrill *et al.,* that the full extent of the risks taken by students only become evident when their experiences are explored post-graduation, particularly "in a period characterised by increased precarity and competition in the labour market" (2020: 173). The graduate narratives explored in this thesis therefore highlight the potential emotional risks of disappointment, disillusion, self-blame, and regret which first-generation students risk experiencing as a result of their engagement in HE.

This thesis has evidenced that, in the context of neoliberalism, a belief that HE offers a safe pathway to the good life sustains the presence of cruel optimism. The potential cruelty lies in the way in which first-generation students are located in a situation where engagement in HE is seen as a prerequisite to accessing the good life, however graduate life itself is enmeshed with uncertainty, compromise, and disappointment. The unique application of Berlant's lens

in this study has evidenced that the notion of HE itself is not inherently cruel, but "becomes cruel when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant, 2011: 1). Utilising Bourdieu's (1977; 1986) tools has evidenced that symbolic violence is inherent in the notion of university being portrayed as a *doxic aspiration* which "sustains people in hopeful anticipation" (Sellar, 2013: 253) when in reality there is no guarantee it will deliver on the change that it promises. This symbolic violence is intensified by the structural inequality and stratification within the field of HE which enables some degrees, and thus some graduates to carry greater symbolic value and therefore be considered as being more worthy than others. This results in what Bourdieu described as "disillusionment driven by the structural mismatch between aspirations and real probabilities" (1984: 144) leading to the "blighted hope or frustrated promise" (Bourdieu 1984: 150) experienced by some of the participants within this study. These emotional injuries would perhaps have gone some way to being healed if the participants had viewed HE participation as offering more than simply economic and employment benefits. A key finding is that the outlook of the passionate participants evidenced the importance of valuing the wider benefits of HE (such as joy and fulfilment) to counteract the potential for cruel optimism. There are implications here regarding the impact of the current narrow instrumentalist focus on those graduates for whom the cluster of promises remain unfulfilled. These implications will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

9.9 Conclusion

This thesis offers a unique contribution to knowledge as it exposes the cruel optimism which is inherent within HE and reveals the way in which structural inequality and stratification can have damaging emotional impacts on students from post-92 HEIs. Furthermore, this thesis has developed a new model of conceptualising first-generation student experiences which involves a deliberate shift away from binary notions of the 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' student experiences which often invoke deficit connotations for non-privileged students. The typology developed from the student stories in this thesis demonstrate a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 institution and recognises that students have different approaches to university based on their own priorities and underpinned by what they deem to be the fundamental purpose of HE. It is evident that instrumental approaches to university study as a means to improve employment prospects underpin the majority of students' drive to enter HE but that there are other factors which are also significant and which inter-relate with the dynamic of cruel optimism.

The findings of this thesis have demonstrated that not all first-generation students wish to have 'the student experience' and that there are multiple ways of being a student which should all be equally valid and recognised. Traditional notions of studenthood are rejected by

some students whilst causing others to feel they are missing out. For local students this means that the typology they align to has implications as to whether they feel that their local student status impacts on their access to 'the experience'. Therefore, an assertion of this thesis is that it is important to ascertain what students actually wish to gain from their experience at university before imposing a deficit narrative on to their experiences. This thesis calls for policy and media discourses to be wider and more inclusive, as opposed to continually perpetuating a traditional notion of studenthood which is othering of alternative student experiences.

Cruel optimism exists in desires for social mobility, employment security, and equality – the "cluster of promises" which Berlant (2011) argues make up the good life. This thesis has uncovered novel ways of understanding the first-generation student experience by applying Berlant's lens of cruel optimism and the good life in a unique way which adds a new theoretical contribution to existing research. The findings of this study have shown that that the first-generation student participants viewed university as a vehicle to the good life, when in fact they were maintaining an attachment to a concept which was "significantly problematic" (Berlant, 2011: 24) by leaving them at risk of feeling disappointed, angry and regretful if their aspirations were not realised. The narratives in this thesis have shown that a university education can be a powerful and transformative experience for individuals and can have positive impacts on self-esteem and wellbeing. However, the journey to graduate employment for students from post-92 HEIs is not always a smooth one and a student's lack of privilege, limited social and symbolic capital and risk-adverse habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) coupled with a lack of employment opportunities can impact on their experiences post-graduation. This thesis argues that the conditions of growing income inequality (The Equality Trust, 2019) and precarious employment (Bone, 2020; Finnegan *et al.,* 2019) mean that the post-92 HEI is commonly a site of cruel optimism. This is driven by the nature of the hierarchical HE sector which creates obstacles to achieving the good life and means post-92 HEIs find it more difficult to deliver on their anticipated promises. The findings add a new layer of complexity to existing research by forcing a recognition of the affective impacts of studying at a low-status institution which raises questions regarding the hierarchical nature of the HE field which serves to legitimise inequality. This thesis argues that the lack of value and status ascribed to the post-92 university fuels the potential for cruel optimism for the students who study within these HEIs. This cruel optimism is magnified by a discourse which highlights the graduate premium as the only positive benefit of HE but fails to mention this may only be on offer for the right students from the right universities.

The findings of this research evidence the way in which the neoliberal meritocratic rhetoric had become embedded in the consciousness of the participants as they shared beliefs that

hard work would be key to their success. This “everyday neoliberalism” (Mirowski, 2013: 89) masked the structural inequalities which bound individual life chances, rendering them invisible. The outcomes of this research indicate that students need to be better placed to understand the opportunity costs associated with HE participation. Findings have demonstrated that universities and government policy both have a key role to play in this, as it is unethical to sell a promise of the good life to potential students, when there is a real danger that this may be difficult to realise, and for some it may not be realised at all. The government’s instrumentalist emphasis on HE reduces the purpose of university study to improving employment outcomes and thus causes students to misrecognise the wider values of degree-level study which exacerbates the potential for cruel optimism. This has implications for the emotional injuries which graduates may suffer if their hopes are not realised. It is a real concern that university participation for non-privileged first-generation students, with all the associated risks that accompany this, could actually contribute to perpetuating cycles of inequality. A recognition of the wider benefits of HE (which sit outside metrics and employment outcomes) and a value of learning itself may go some way to challenge this cruel optimism, as the passionate students’ approach suggests that education for its own sake has an important bearing on the meaning and worth of the degree. It may be that cruel optimism can to some extent be overcome by a different kind of hope – one that is largely unmeasured and goes against the grain of the neoliberal subject.

Chapter 10 – The Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis returns to the original questions posed by this research and seeks to clarify the key findings of this study. The chapter begins with a summary of findings and an explicit discussion of the unique contribution which is offered by this thesis. This chapter also reflects upon the theoretical framework utilised within this study, which coupled Berlant's (2011) lens of cruel optimism with Bourdieu's (1977) conceptual tools. The findings of this thesis encapsulate the way in which neoliberalism and the wider hierarchical field of HE sustains the cruel optimism which underpins first-generation student experiences in a post-92 university. It examines the various approaches taken by the participants which went some way to either protect them from, or expose them to, the cruel optimism which threatened their experiences.

The insights developed from this thesis build on the existing body of research surrounding undergraduate student experiences and raise significant implications for HE as a sector. Specifically, this chapter raises important questions regarding the ethical conduct of both government policy and universities in selling the promise of the good life and the moral implications of the current ways HEIs operate. The implications section of this chapter goes on to discuss the consequences of this research in terms of policy, institutional practice, and wider discourse. Following this, a reflection on the research process and researcher positionality is included and finally, possible avenues for future research are considered and suggestions are made for the way in which other studies can build upon this work.

10.2 Summary of Findings and Contribution to Knowledge

10.2.1 Research Question One - How did first generation students frame their decision to attend university?

Applying Berlant's and Bourdieu's ideas to the experiences of the first-generation students in this study facilitated a unique way of examining the participants' experiences which developed novel understandings of students' choice-making processes. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of doxa has been developed to illuminate the way in which university study is framed in dominant discourse as a *doxic aspiration.* The participants in this study all (to some degree) bought into this *doxic aspiration* that HE could act as a vehicle to the good life and offer them the financial security and stability which they hoped for. This study has made a contribution to knowledge by revealing that the (lack of) fulfilment of these hopes is where cruel optimism is evident. Within this study the participants' university experience was driven and sustained by feelings of optimism, but this was tempered by the shadow of risk and regret which threatened to undermine their experiences. This risk was particularly profound

for those students who adopt a pragmatic and/or involved approach to their studies. In contrast, students who were driven by a passion for their subject mitigated this cruel optimism by finding joy and fulfilment through learning itself. This finding shows that what first-generation students deem to be the purpose of university study has a significant impact on how cruel optimism intersects with their experiences.

The findings of this thesis concur with previous qualitative research which argues that student choice is a far more complicated concept than government policy discourse implies (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Reay *et al.,* 2005; Wilkins and Burke, 2015). Participants' choices were bounded by social and economic factors and often by ties to the locality. Decisions regarding where to study were based on students' mitigation of financial concerns and negotiation of risk, set against a backdrop of hierarchical institutional positioning within the field of HE. The institutional culture of Central was significant in mediating the participants' choices as it was reflective of their own habitus and as such did not pose a threat to their existing ways of being (Bourdieu, 1986). This supports existing research in allowing the participants to situate Central as being "for people like us" (Reay *et al.,* 2005: 25). The contribution to knowledge here relates to university status. It was evident that Central's subordinate position within the field was legitimised by the imagined social facts created by ranking systems and league tables in the marketised neoliberal imaginary, which were internalised by some of the participants. This had profound consequences for how participants felt they needed to justify their choice to study at Central, and also had wider implications for some participants' feelings of self-worth. Bourdieu's lens has been utilised when analysing the findings of this thesis to highlight the symbolically violent practices of university ranking systems which neglect to acknowledge the positive aspects of studying in a lower-ranking, inclusive and diverse HEI such as Central. Using field as a conceptual tool has facilitated a recognition of the way in which struggle, power and privilege operate in the HE sector in a way which sustains inequality. This thesis has revealed the way in which this structural inequity, driven by stratification and notions of elitism, can have damaging emotional impacts on non-privileged students in low-status HEIs and thus can also fuel the dynamic of cruel optimism by placing graduates at a disadvantage in employment fields.

10.2.2 Research Question Two - What did first-generation students perceive to be significant in relation to their experience at the university, and what were their hopes and expectations for the future?

A key finding relevant to research question two relates to the way in which this thesis inverts traditional understandings of studenthood and rejects outdated deficit categories such as 'non-traditional' which are commonly used by existing literature (e.g., Hinton-Smith, 2012; James *et al*., 2015; Read *et al.,* 2003; Reay *et al.,* 2005). In response to the deficit terms

commonly bestowed upon first-generation students, three types of first-generation student experience have been developed. This typology is founded in how the students saw university (i.e., what they viewed as the main purpose of HE) as opposed to how university saw them (i.e., as non-traditional or WP students). The findings of this research therefore add new layers of complexity to the dominant model of studenthood currently found in literature and government policy which has implications for how first-generation students are understood and supported whilst at university. The proposed categories which have been discussed in this thesis foreground the students' experiences and viewpoints and capture their diversity, recognising them as worthy in their own right. As Barrow (2009) asserts, categories such as 'non-traditional' result in the othering of students such as those who are first-generation, and the term is particularly inadequate in post-92 HEIs where 'non-traditional' students are in fact the tradition. This thesis addresses this issue by conceptualising first-generation student experiences in a more nuanced way. Although these categories have been applied to first-generation students within this study, the typology is likely to have wider application to other student groups across HE.

The typology outlined that the participants adopted various approaches to university during their time as students, choosing to either reject or aspire to normalised studenthood ideals. Mobilising Berlant's (2011) theoretical lens in a unique way in this study demonstrated that the different strategies taken by the participants went some way to either protect them from, or expose them to, the cruel optimism which threatened their experiences. This study has extended Berlant's ideas by arguing that, in relation to HE, the dynamic of cruel optimism exists on a spectrum, posing a greater threat to students who enter HE with purely extrinsic goals of improving their employment prospects (i.e., the pragmatic participants). This narrow focus leaves students more at risk of negative emotional injuries if they experience failure or disappointment in relation to graduate employment outcomes.

The approach of the passionate students offers a valuable contribution here as by disregarding a purely instrumental focus on HE, they were in fact protected from the threat of cruel optimism. Analysing the passionate students' narratives evidences that an outlook which values education in its own right can have an important bearing on the way in which individuals understand the meaning and worth of their degree. An important finding to emerge from this study is that cruel optimism can be bypassed by a different kind of hope – one that is largely unmeasurable in terms of metrics and which goes against the grain of the idealised neoliberal subject through being driven by joy, passion and enjoyment. Education has always been about far more than what can be measured in a league table or a wage packet and the findings of this thesis serve as a reminder of this.

In relation to career aspirations and decisions, the findings of this thesis extended Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theoretical concept of horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) by arguing that first-generation student decision-making is typically defined (and confined) by *horizons of probability,* characterised by a pragmatic aversion to risk. In this study the participants' actions were limited by their habitus to what they deemed to be probable and achievable, and thus a safer choice. Bourdieu (1990) argued that choice is at the heart of habitus, but it was evident that for most of the participants in this study, choices were limited by the participants' internalised frames of possibility, as a result of the limited cultural, social and economic capital at their disposal. Consequently, both the pragmatic and involved students' career decision making was governed by an instrumental focus on employment outcomes coupled with a desire to find the safest option, as they lacked the economic capital or appetite for risk to gamble any more than was necessary. Conversely, the passionate students' subject choice and the way in which they distanced themselves from neoliberal dimensions of study, revealed them to have a greater appetite for risk, characterised by their determination to study a subject they loved, despite the potentially difficult consequences in relation to employment. The absence of instrumentalism in their approach allowed the passionate participants to have wider horizons for action, and a greater sense of agency, driven by their passion for their subject of study. Findings have therefore evidenced that a less instrumental approach to HE can potentially widen first-generation students' horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), beyond that which is considered to be probable to achieve.

10.2.3 Research Question Three - How were the participants' lived experiences influenced by the social and political context of the case study institution and the wider HE sector?

In relation to the final research question both the social context of the institution and the wider social and political context of the HE sector were significant in structuring the participants' experiences. In contrast to previous research which has outlined that first-generation students have difficult experiences within HE (e.g., Davis, 2010; Gardener and Holley, 2011; Meehan and Howells, 2019; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) the findings of this study have shown that the welcoming and inclusive experience of studying in a diverse post-92 HEl allows first generation students to flourish and enjoy their time as a student. An important finding to emerge from this study is therefore that it is possible for non-privileged students to feel a sense of belonging in HE if the institution is diverse, welcoming, and recognising of their experiences (and thus aligns with their habitus), facilitating first-generation students in being more like *amphibian* students than "fish out of water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). However, findings have also shown that the wider social and political context has significant implications for first-generation students in low status HEIs,

most notably due to the limited symbolic value ascribed to the post-92 university experience. Bourdieu (1986) argued that the scarceness of academic qualifications is what gave them value and allowed them to operate as material and economic currency, and it was evident that a degree from a low-status HEI such as Central which is available to “people without social value” (Bourdieu, 1993: 98) was perceived by the participants to reduce the symbolic value which their degree offered. Central’s low position within the hierarchical HE field impacted on the participants in a number of different ways, invoking both either a sense of defensiveness or regret. Most notable was the impact on some of the graduate participants who struggled to realise their original aspirations and who became increasingly aware of the limited symbolic value which their degree held.

This thesis therefore adds to current debates in the literature by highlighting the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) which lies in the misrecognition of the post-92 HEI experience, arguing that this can be damaging to the students studying within it. It draws attention to the way in which neoliberal mechanisms such as league tables and other marketisation instruments produce doxic imagined social facts regarding the quality of HE on offer. The doxa of university status consistently sees the more elite and selective HEIs given value and post-92 universities viewed as “second-class” (Reay, 2018; 10), offering a “lesser” or “diluted” version of HE (Archer, 2007: 639). This allows the market to maintain existing social divisions and legitimises degree devaluation (Bourdieu, 1993), which has led to some graduate employers filtering applications by university league table ranking (Total Jobs Group, 2019). This thesis contradicts the notion that low-status HEIs are less worthy, as the participants had positive and transformative experiences at Central, and their narratives did not reflect that they felt they had received a second-class or substandard experience. These positive aspects of the post-92 experience are largely absent in the wider discourse of HE, which is a gap which the findings of this thesis can begin to address.

Consequently, one of the many contributions of this research is the way in which this thesis uncovers the cruel optimism of being a non-privileged, first-generation student in a low-status HEI. It has shown that this cruelty is driven by structural inequalities, fed by a neoliberal ideology and marketisation instruments such as league tables, coupled with a narrow human capital development approach to HE. The findings of this thesis have highlighted the way in which neoliberalism operates as a mechanism which ‘promotes competition, entrepreneurial risk-taking and individualised responsibility’ (Houghton, 2019: 280) which is problematic for non-privileged students. The dynamic of cruel optimism has been deployed in a unique way in this thesis to illuminate the paradox of university participation whereby aspirations, for some students, may act as a barrier to their wellbeing. This is largely due to the way in which neoliberalism has perpetuated a meritocratic rhetoric

in HE, promoting individual hard-work, talent and aspiration and positioning those who do not achieve success as lacking in these attributes (Littler, 2013). All of the participants in this study had approached university with a degree of optimism, largely fed by the neoliberal belief that hard work and human capital development would protect them from the financial precarity which was an ever-present threat to them. Unfortunately, this was not always the case. Previous research has evidenced that HE does not guarantee a straightforward trajectory into employment, particularly not for non-privileged students studying at a post-92 institution (Belfield *et al.,* 2018: Crew, 2015; Finnegan *et al.,* 2019; Houghton, 2019) and the findings of this study support this. This thesis argues that the idea of a degree as a guarantor of future financial security, as is implied by government and institutional policy alike, is what is truly cruel, particularly for students who may misrecognise structural factors as personal shortcomings fed by the logic of neoliberal aspiration (Alexander, 2019). The unique findings of this study have shown that the narrow instrumentalist emphasis on employment outcomes can cause individuals to misrecognise the wider values offered by university study, such as experiences of joy, growth in confidence, and self-fulfilment. This strengthens the dynamic of cruel optimism and has significant implications for HEIs and policy makers alike.

10.2.4 The Role of the Post-92 University

As outlined in the discussions above, the significance of the post-92 university in relation to the findings of this research cannot be overstated because it framed the experiences of all of the participants within this study and formed a backdrop to the research questions underpinning this thesis. As discussed, Central's institutional culture played a significant role in relation to the experiences of the participants, providing a space which offered a sense of belonging and which facilitated the participants in becoming *amphibian students* as opposed to fish out of water.

Despite the welcoming and inclusive institutional context which facilitated a sense of belonging for the participants, the low status of Central in both the local and national HE field had a significant impact on the way in which the participants understood both themselves as students and the value of their degrees and fuelled the cruel optimism which underpinned their experiences. The wider neoliberal landscape of HE driven by a fixation on metrics and league tables devalued the strengths of the post-92 experience and positioned the university and its students in a deficit way. In this way the university was not simply a site for study but also acted as a mediator between neoliberal government policy and the first-generation student experience, resulting in the participants within this study having to navigate the impact of studying within an institution which was devalued by neoliberal mechanisms and metrics. In many ways this study features more than just the stories of the non-privileged first-generation participants who feature in it. Woven into all of the participant narratives is

the story of the post-92 university and the policy discourses which constrain and control it. The discussions in this thesis have revealed the ways in which the post-92 university has to navigate competing push and pull factors; the push of meeting individual students' needs and offering a positive educational experience versus the pull of neoliberal ideals which fail to recognise value in any outcomes which cannot be measured and quantified. In many ways, through its inclusive and welcoming practices, Central was challenging the dominant hegemony of HE where inclusivity is resisted in favour of an independent student model which is not fit for purpose in post-92 HEIs. In this way the findings of this thesis highlight the neoliberal injuries caused by arbitrary ranking systems and notions of privilege and elitism which misrecognise the important work undertaken by low-status HEIs and disadvantage the students who study within them. It is evident that social and institutional stratification go hand-in-hand which limits the impact a post-92 HEI can have in regard to determining first-generation students' opportunities to achieve the 'promise' of the good life.

This thesis has exposed the cruel optimism inherent within the HE sector, revealing the way in which structural inequality and stratification can have damaging emotional impacts on students from post-92 universities, and indeed on low-status universities themselves. The findings of this thesis call for a re-imagining of the post-92 university that recognises, rather than disregards, its value. Only then can the cruel optimism which underpins HE really be challenged.

10.2.5 Overall Contribution to Knowledge: mobilising a unique theoretical lens.

The above discussions have summarised the key contributions to knowledge made by this thesis in relation to the research questions underpinning this study. However, the theoretical contribution made by this research in relation to the novel application of Berlant's work should also be emphasised. Berlant's theoretical perspective has been overlooked in existing research within the field and has not previously been applied to first-generation students, therefore utilising this lens when analysing the participant data allowed for novel ways of looking at their experiences. The application of Berlant's work has therefore added an important theoretical dimension to existing work in the field of HE research, providing a powerful and unique perspective through which to examine the lived experiences of non-privileged, first-generation students seeking to ascertain their good life fantasy in a post-92 university. By mobilising Berlant, this thesis clearly offers a unique contribution to knowledge by exposing the cruel optimism inherent within HE, revealing the way in which structural inequality, driven by a neoliberal metric fixation and an instrumental view of HE, can have real and concerning impacts on students from post-92 universities. The arguments developed in this research have highlighted the affective impacts of studying in a sector marked by inequality and false promises, raising important ethical questions as a result.

The theoretical discussions in the thesis not only shed new light on existing issues but also offer a catalyst for future research to employ Berlant's work to further develop the understandings illuminated by this study, particularly in relation to university status. By recognising the way in which cruel optimism operates in HE this research has facilitated a new way of considering university status and the impact this has on students who study in low-status institutions. It also invokes a reimagination of the purpose and value of HE in order for future students to be liberated from harmful attachments to narrow human capital understandings of HE which sustain a dynamic of cruel optimism. This study's unique findings indicate that, in regard to HE, a narrow focus on employment outcomes can cause individuals to overlook the broader values offered by university education, such as joy, personal growth, and self-fulfilment. This reinforces the dynamic of cruel optimism and has significant implications for both HE institutions and policy makers.

10.3 Implications

The findings of this thesis have been developed through combining the theoretical lens of Berlant (2011) with Bourdieu's (1986) thinking tools. This unique theoretical lens has provided an original insight into the research topic, exploring how non-privileged first-generation students negotiate their experiences both within a post-92 university and when moving into employment. The findings of this research have key implications for HEIs, schools and colleges and government policy.

10.3.1 Implications for Universities

The typology developed within this thesis offers a conceptualisation which post-92 HEIs can draw on to better understand their student body. This could facilitate institutions in offering more effective support to their students by aligning their practices to a broader model of studenthood which recognises the varying approaches taken by students in relation to their studies. The OfS (2018) and a great deal of practice-based literature (e.g., Masika and Jones 2016; Thomas, 2012; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Tinto, 1989) urges institutions to focus on 'the student experience' to ensure positive retention and success rates for students. However, the findings from this thesis have shown that 'the student experience' in itself is a problematic concept which is based on ideologically driven, middle-class notions of studenthood. The typology developed by this thesis has highlighted the way in which student experiences are nuanced and, in many ways, fall outside of dominant models of what it means to be a student. Findings therefore emphasise that current understandings of the student experience are not fit for purpose and that HEIs have an obligation to be inclusive of alternative student experiences which sit outside of the dominant model. In particular, the needs of local students and those who adopt a pragmatic approach to their studies (and thus

whose lives do not and cannot revolve around campus) should be more widely recognised and valued in institutional discourse, policy and practice.

The findings of this research therefore call for post-92 HEIs to develop practices that recognise the diversity of the student body. Specifically, the typology developed in this thesis has significance in terms of institutional marketing/promotional and informational material, which can often construct local, mature and pragmatic students as 'the other' on the periphery of university participation. Universities need to reflect on the ways in which they may promote exclusionary notions of the 'ideal student' in their materials and should recognise that there are multiple ways of being a student which should be valued. For example, HEIs should be mindful that the images they utilise reflect diverse student bodies as a way to challenge the *doxa of deficit* which operates around non-traditional students. They should also ensure that their materials include information which is relevant to local students such as public transport information, and material for non-privileged students such as tips for combining studying with existing employment. Information regarding what to realistically expect from university would also be useful as findings indicated that first-generation student expectations for university life are formed largely from the media and dominant discourses of studenthood. Furthermore, institutional marketing and information for prospective students should provide reassurance that the pragmatic student experience is a valid and purposeful way to experience university to mitigate potential concerns of 'missing out'. The findings of this thesis have evidenced that the students at Central often made the choice to study there in-spite of neoliberal metrics and key performance information, rather than because of it. With this in mind HEIs such as Central should focus on sharing information to prospective students that they actually want/need, rather than marketing towards a neoliberal student ideal which does not reflect the reality of many students' lives.

There is also work to be done concerning institutional policies and practices to make them work more effectively for the non-privileged/first-generation student body. Policies should recognise the realities of the post-92 student body, particularly in HEIs such as Central which have a large number of local students. When local, first-generation students form the majority they should not be marginalised in university policy which is constructed around a uniform model of the ideal student subject and thus is not fit for purpose. Policies such as timetabling lectures on as few days as possible to help students manage existing employment or caring responsibilities is one way to address the needs of local students. There should also be practices specifically to help develop the social capital of non-privileged students such as helping students to develop networking skills, holding networking events and offering multiple placement opportunities. These additional activities should be built into timetabled taught sessions to ensure they are accessed by all students, including

those who adopt a pragmatic approach to their studies. Furthermore, HEIs should also consider the ways in which local students could be facilitated in accessing aspects of the traditional experience if they so wish, such as by ensuring information about social events is made accessible to students who live off campus. In practical terms HEIs need to listen to the voices of their students and understand their priorities and concerns and then should use this knowledge to lead institutional practice to ensure an inclusive environment for all students, regardless of whether or not their approach fits with dominant studenthood ideals.

Berlant (2011: 23) outlines the ways in which cruel optimism emerges through attachment to a "cluster of promises". By applying this notion to HE this thesis has shown that universities offer such promises through a vision of a successful template of the future which invokes notions of financial security and employment success (i.e., the good life). The disjuncture between expectations and reality is critical here, particularly in relation to first-generation students' expectations for graduate employment and the actual reality or likelihood of this occurring. The good life which students hope to obtain is by no means guaranteed and the cruel optimism of uncertain futures was a constant threat to the participants experiences in this study. This raises important questions for HEIs regarding how students can be (and should be) given more realistic advice regarding what to expect both during and after engaging in HE. Universities need to be honest and clear regarding the length of time it may take to achieve graduate employment and also need to focus on support for students who are transitioning out of university at the end of their degree, as much as they do for students when they enter HE. First-generation students need access to sustained, realistic and useful careers' support for a prolonged length of time after graduation, to ensure they feel supported and can actively take steps to improve their circumstances.

It is acknowledged that universities cannot ignore the market and the confines of neoliberalism which they have no choice other than to operate within. However, the way universities respond to this has to be morally responsible as their conduct has real, and potentially damaging, impacts on students' lives. The findings of this study therefore have significant implications regarding the moral conduct of individual HEIs and the wider sector. There should be more optimism and less cruelty, and universities have a key role to play in this by widening discussions concerning the purpose and benefits of HE to encompass individual, social and intellectual benefits as much as economic outcomes and by providing realistic advice and careers support to both current students and graduates.

The participant narratives featured in this thesis evidenced the crucial role that academic staff play in relation to first-generation student experiences. The teaching staff at Central had a key role in developing the participants' feelings of self-worth and self-confidence, and in

supporting them through their university journey. Tutors were also able to act as social capital for participants, helping to demystify career progression and facilitating work experience opportunities. The *pedagogy of care* demonstrated by academic staff within the narratives included in this thesis was crucial in healing the wounds of difficult previous educational experiences. Indeed the warm and welcoming culture of central which fostered a sense of belonging for the participants was largely a result of the staff who worked with them. The way in which the participants felt a secure sense of belonging and legitimisation within the institution, despite being from first-generation, non-privileged backgrounds, is testament to the important work which is carried out by staff in post-92 HEIs.

It is therefore vital that individual HEIs and the wider HE sector both recognise and reward the crucial role staff play in positively mediating the experience of first-generation students. The ways in which academic staff create a positive learning experience goes some way to challenge the dynamic of cruel optimism in HE and should be widely celebrated. The hard work undertaken by staff should be valued, despite the way in which this is hard to quantity in neoliberal metrics. Unfortunately, the current disputes between HEIs and university staff unions regarding pay and working conditions suggest that in many cases the opposite is true, and at the time of writing this thesis university staff have been involved in the biggest strike action in the history of HE (Dickinson, 2023). The findings of this thesis serve as a reminder of the important work undertaken by staff and highlight that, in terms of student experiences, a HEI is only as good as the staff who work within it.

10.3.2 Implications for Schools and Colleges

There are messages in this thesis too for schools and further education institutions in terms of their framing of university as a *doxic aspiration* which serves to exacerbate the cruel optimism of the university experience. These institutions have an ethical imperative to be honest with students about the way in which studying at university does not necessarily offer a trouble-free pathway to graduate employment, perhaps by widening the narrative regarding the benefits of HE entirely. Challenging the neoliberal preconception that HE is valued solely in terms of employment outcomes could contest the reductionist view which obscures the wider benefits of engaging in university study and which leads some graduates to potentially misrecognise what they gained from their university experience. The value attached to going to university needs to encompass more than employment outcomes alone, and schools and colleges could play a key part in changing that narrative. This could help to counteract the cruel optimism which threatens student experiences by ascribing value to the joy of education and learning itself. Additionally, stronger links between universities and FE colleges and schools would be helpful in helping to challenge some of the misconceptions

regarding university study, which would help prospective first-generation students to be more informed and confident about the realities of being a student, particularly in post-92 HEIs.

Furthermore, the way in which transitioning to university after school is seen as a "natural progression" (Pationitis and Holdsworth, 2005: 88), and is widely promoted in schools and wider public and policy discourse as the only "acceptable aspiration" (Brown, 2011: 7) is problematic. This is because the simplistic framing of HE as a desirable good sustains students' hope but does little to inform them about the risks and potential regret they may incur as a result of their participation in HE. In this way, the framing of HE participation as a *doxic aspiration* has a significant role to play in fuelling the cruel optimism underpinning HE by alluding to first-generation students that it is the natural next step in their education, without leaving room for critical discussion of the realities, possible downfalls, or alternative options. Schools and colleges should ensure that pupils are as informed about non-academic routes such as apprenticeships as they are about HE, and that they receive the same level of support and encouragement for more practical or vocational aspirations. It is evident from discussions in this thesis that schools and colleges need to be given more encouragement to promote a wider range of post-compulsory options in order to widen students' horizons for action. Specifically, this encouragement needs to be supported by government policy which has sustained the focus on university as the next logical step in students' educational journeys.

10.3.3 Implications for Policy

Government policy has a role to play in relation to the implications for schools as the current focus on metrics has seen school destination data (i.e., how many students go on to university) become a key performance indicator for schools, thus increasing the pressure on school staff to frame university as a desirable option. In reality, promoting HE primarily as the only route to better career prospects is misleading. In a context where engaging in university study is deemed to be the educational trajectory of highest legitimacy there is a need for more honesty in government policy discourses regarding the potential risks in following that trajectory. The commodification of HE qualifications, driven by student debt, is problematic in that it increases cruel optimism and continues to diminish wider aspects of learning such as self-fulfilment and growth in confidence. The findings of this thesis therefore call for a recognition of the value and benefits of a positive learning experience which are currently overlooked by government policy. The passionate students in this thesis demonstrated that recognising and valuing the intrinsic value of learning may go some way to mitigate against the cruel optimism which is fuelled by a narrow focus on 'success' being limited to obtaining graduate employment. In addition, for the wider benefits of HE to be given the recognition which they deserve, a significant reduction in student fees is

warranted. The current funding model requires students to undertake a significant financial burden, which is all the more significant for those from non-privileged backgrounds. This financial risk means the benefits of HE continue to be weighed against employment outcomes. A shift in funding to take the burden off students is required to challenge the current narrow emphasis on monetary returns which fuels the risk of cruel optimism.

The narratives throughout this thesis have demonstrated that the post-92 experience is not "second-rate" (Reay, 2018: 10), "diluted" (Archer, 2007: 639) or less worthy (Archer *et al.,* 2003) as has commonly been portrayed in existing literature, but in fact is both valid and valuable. A key argument from this thesis is that the deep-rooted inequality inherent in HE and graduate outcomes can only really be addressed if the hierarchy of the field which underpins HE is challenged. Government rhetoric which argues that "Higher Education can be a powerful engine of social mobility" (BIS, 2011: 54) is at odds with the marketisation mechanisms which perpetuate the continued devaluation of both post-92 student experience and qualifications. This is not only deeply unfair but is also profoundly inaccurate and risks significant emotional injuries for the non-privileged first-generation students who study in low-status HEIs. This thesis argues that recognition of the value of all universities, not only 'the elite', is crucial to challenging the cruel optimism which underpins the experiences of non-privileged first-generation students in post-92 HEIs. Only if the hierarchy of the field which underpins HE is challenged by government policy, can the deep-rooted inequality inherent in HE and graduate outcomes really be addressed. The findings of this thesis should be used to help to inform this political debate which has crucial implications for wider issues of social justice in HE. Worth is not, and *should* not, be deemed by status.

10.4 Limitations and reflections on the process

The findings discussed in this thesis are the result of a doctoral study which took place over a limited period of time. As such both data collection, and the number of participants included within the study were subject to time constraints. Ideally this study would have been longtitutional and would have followed the participants both throughout their time at university and after graduation as they moved into employment. Alternatively, the study could have incorporated follow-up interviews with the participants at a later date to explore any changes in their circumstances and experiences. Either of these options would have allowed a more in-depth biography of the participants to have been explored and would have enabled conclusions to be even more robust.

However, it is important to remind readers that it was not my intention as a researcher to obtain generalisable findings from this study. The ontological positioning of this research emphasised that the 'situatedness' of HE experiences means that the reality of being a

student is lived and interpreted differently by individuals in varying contexts (Bassey, 1999; Mack, 2010). As such, transferable findings do not align to my ontological and epistemological position as a researcher. Furthermore, the findings of this research have been filtered through my own lens, so this thesis does not aspire to offer a complete knowledge of the first-generation student experience, merely “a way of looking at it" (Bourdieu, 2000: 53). This research was evidently a small-scale qualitative study which focused exclusively on a small number of first-generation students in a single institution. Whilst this has generated meaningful findings which contribute to existing knowledge on first-generation student experiences, it must be acknowledged that the experiences of the participants in this study are individual and may not be mirrored in alternative contexts and it is not claimed that the discussions in this thesis are representative of all first-generation students. That being said, it is worth noting that whilst this study may not be generalisable, it is nonetheless generative in terms of its findings. The study may be limited in scope, but it is not self-limiting. The findings of this research have an element of transferability in terms of their relevance to other HEIs and the experiences of first-generation or other non-privileged students and there are significant implications for HEIs, schools and colleges, and government policy.

The design of this research incorporated a hybrid of a case study, narrative approach. On reflection, I feel that utilising this approach worked well in facilitating not only the individual stories of the participants, but also weaving the institutional context of Central as an institution into those narratives. I concur with Merrill (2015: 1861) that biographical research transcends the individual, revealing the impact of class structures and “the interplay between structure and agency, and history and the present”. I found that adopting a feminist-inspired approach helped to put the participants at ease and developed a “trusting space” between myself and the participants which facilitated rich and in-depth interviews (Merrill, 2015: 1861). As such, there is little I would change in relation to the methodology if I were to undertake this study again.

The findings of this research and the subsequent analysis means that Berlant’s (2011) theoretical ideas have been utilised more heavily than Bourdieu’s work. This is not a downfall of the research as Berlant’s lens facilitated a unique understanding of the participants’ stories which has been significant in developing the study’s contribution to knowledge. However, I do feel that perhaps a singular focus on Berlant’s work may have allowed for greater scope of analysis, given the novel approach this theory offered. Furthermore, in terms of the participants it became evident during the data collection process that the graduate participant interviews provided much richer data, as the participants were in a position to reflect not only on their time at university but also on their

experiences post-graduation. Additionally, there is very little research which explores the experiences of first-generation students after graduation (Merrill *et al*., 2020; O'Shea, 2020a). Therefore, if I were to conduct a similar study again in future I would consider focusing on graduate participants exclusively, as opposed to including participants at different stages of the student cycle.

10.5 Scope for future research

This thesis highlights a range of potential avenues for new research into first-generation student experiences, both within and beyond post-92 HEIs. It is important for future research to examine the impact of current government policy and neoliberal rhetoric on the way in which students view university and the value which they place upon education. It would be interesting for similar research to be conducted at a number of other post-92 HEIs to establish whether the themes in this study are consistent across similar institutions. Furthermore, it would be useful for future studies to apply the typology developed in this thesis, both to post-92 HEIs but also to Redbrick institutions to see if/how this typology translates into more elite university contexts.

This study had a lack of gender diversity with regards to the sample of participants, which was largely unavoidable due to the opportunistic approach to sampling and the opt-in nature of the research. Gender may be an influencing factor regarding the type of approach students take to their studies, potentially due to the gendered nature of caring responsibilities and domestic work (Skeggs, 1997). Due to the limited number of male students who opted into this research the impact of gender could not be explored in detail but this remains an interesting area which would benefit from further exploration in future research. Furthermore, it would be useful for future research to focus on specific subject areas to explore the way in which course choice may influence student experiences both during university and post-graduation. A closer focus on specific subject areas would also add to understandings of the way in which cruel optimism operates across different subject disciplines.

Although the sample of participants in this research was racially diverse, detailed exploration of the impact of racial background on student experiences in HE fell outside the remit of this study. Existing literature outlines the way in which students from a BME background can have challenging experiences in HE and issues around the BME degree attainment gap are well publicised in existing literature (e.g., Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Richardson, 2015; Stevenson, 2012). Findings which suggested that race was a significant factor in structuring the students' experiences were not reflected within the data of this study, possibly as a result of the diverse ethnic make-up of the student body at Central. However, future research could

explore racial and cultural issues further, particularly in relation to the impact which studying within a diverse and inclusive HEI such as Central may have on BME student lived experiences compared to a less diverse institution.

10.6 Final Reflections on Researcher Positionality

My positionality as a researcher within this study was outlined at the beginning of this thesis (see section 1.2) as it underpinned the focus and direction of this entire inquiry. Researcher positionality is something which will shift and change as a result of engaging in the research process (Cousins, 2009) and as such it is pertinent to offer a final reflection on the changes that occurred as a result of my engagement with this doctoral study. These changes have particular relevance to my practice as a senior lecturer and course leader in a low-status post-92 HEI. The findings of this thesis have evidenced the way in which cruel optimism is sustained by good life narratives perpetuated by both government policy and individual HEIs who are bound to operate within the confines of neoliberalism.

As I outlined in section 1.2, my employment (and thus my own version of the good life) has grown increasingly precarious as it rests almost entirely on the success of course recruitment. Accordingly, outreach and marketing activity has become an increasingly significant element of my job role. I have always found this 'sales' activity uncomfortable and the process of completing this thesis has accentuated that discomfort. I now ironically find that my own version of the good life is dependent on me engaging in practices which have the potential to perpetuate cycles of cruel optimism for the potential students I am aiming to recruit.

Completing this study has also illuminated my own frustration with university hierarchies which serve to maintain privilege and elitism. Upon reflection, I would argue that it is increasingly important to challenge this narrative by evidencing the important work of the post-92 HEI and the benefits of studying in a diverse and supportive context. This is one way that I feel I can challenge the cruel optimism of a sector marked by inequality, selectivity and notions of superiority. During outreach and marketing work I now try not to focus solely on the potential employment outcomes offered by degrees but instead emphasise to potential students (who are mostly first-generation) the *pedagogy of care* offered within my institution. I talk about the impact of small-group teaching, the relationships which staff build with their students and the way in which staff focus on building confidence and supporting students to feel a sense of belonging which is meaningful to them. This thesis has shown me that these are the strengths of a post-92 context, and whilst neoliberal metrics may continue to devalue these in favour of instrumental employment outcomes, this does not mean that I need to do the same as an educator. I am grateful to this thesis for enabling me to feel pride in my own

institution (with its many similarities to Central) and for allowing me to reflect on the ways in which I can work to challenge cruel optimism in my own small way through my own practice and the practices of my colleagues within my institution.

10.7 Concluding thoughts - hope, risk and regret

This thesis has offered a sociological critique of the discourses surrounding 'studenthood'. It has conceptualised a more nuanced way of understanding the approaches taken by students to their studies, through the development of a typology which has relevance for understanding non-privileged student transitions more widely. The participant narratives have evidenced the cruel optimism which can be experienced when participants use HE solely to achieve their goals of financial security and stability. This cruel optimism was fed by the neoliberalism which structured the participants' experiences and which had embedded an unrealistic meritocratic rhetoric in their beliefs about employment success. This research has therefore made visible the cruel optimism which can underpin first-generation students' experiences in a post-92 HEI and has revealed the ethical implications of this both for institutions and wider policy discourse. At the heart of the arguments made by this thesis is the damaging impact of the narrow instrumental focus on HE which is currently promoted by government policy, and the way this narrow focus intersects with the potential of cruel optimism. The discourse around the purpose of HE needs to widen to encompass the joy in learning.

The title of this thesis encompasses three key terms: hope, risk and regret. It was these three concepts which really underpinned the experiences of the participants within this study. The majority of the students were driven to enter HE and engage with university study in hope of obtaining the good life and gaining the financial stability which they craved. This hope sustained their journeys through HE and made the difficulties they encountered as a result of university study appear to be worthwhile. However the findings highlight that this hope was inherently cruel as it was tempered by the risks which the participants were constantly forced to mediate: the risk that they may have chosen the wrong course and/or institution; the financial risk of reduced earning potential whilst studying and incurring a high level of student debt; the risk of disruption to their existing life and relationships; the risk of not being able to gain the student experience which they desired; and most importantly the risk that their gamble may not pay off and they would not achieve the future they had hoped for. These risks, which the majority of the participants encountered in some way, were fed by their narrow focus on employment success and meant that the threat of regret was never far away. Indeed, for some of the graduate participants who had not (yet) successfully achieved what they had hoped for, feelings of regret, anger and self-blame characterised their narratives. It is these three emotive concepts of hope, risk and regret which really

characterise the dynamic of cruel optimism in HE for non-privileged first-generation students.

This thesis has demonstrated the way in which cruel optimism lies in hoping a university degree will lead to the good life of employment and economic security and act as protection against future precarity and insecurity, when in reality this is by no means guaranteed. It is this fractured promise that HE participation will lead to a secure and prosperous future which is where this thesis argues the cruel optimism really lies. This cruel optimism is particularly acute for non-privileged participants in post-92 universities and is something which creates real questions around the ethical conduct of individual HEIs, the sector and successive governments. The institution has an obligation to nurture the hope of its students, but to do so in a morally responsible way which helps to mitigate the risks faced by students and which acts to prevent graduates experiencing a sense of regret. Yet HEIs are trapped in a neoliberal policy landscape which has had a profound influence on both society and individual's understanding of the function of HE, reducing it solely to a means of achieving improved employment prospects.

This narrow instrumental focus has led to students conceptualising successful goals and outcomes of HE in purely economic terms (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012) which leaves the wider benefits of HE ignored. Reigniting a focus on learning for learning's sake may go some way to extinguish the dynamic of cruel optimism which currently characterises higher education. Unfortunately, the era of self-funding, coupled with the current messages coming from the OfS regarding the "crackdown" on "low quality courses" (i.e., courses with "poor graduate outcomes") (OfS, 2022c) seems to indicate a move in the opposite direction. It follows that challenging the narrow ideology that HE only exists to meet economic priorities requires both a change in policy direction and also means addressing the issue of who funds university study. If society is to value the holistic worth of HE then this requires an overhaul of the current funding model which puts the financial burden solely onto students, thus driving a narrow focus on employment outcomes which leaves students at greater risk of cruel optimism. It may be that, without a change in government ideology, the threat of cruel optimism for non-privileged students grows ever more prevalent.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Information about pre-entry participants

Name	Student Status	Course	More detailed information
Farhaan	School	A Levels	18 years old, lived locally with parents and older siblings. Applied to Central to study computing but keen to get into the workplace so also considering an apprenticeship.
Cherry	School	A Levels	17 years old. Lives locally with parents and younger sister. Applied to Central for criminology and police studies. Also considering an apprenticeship.
Leena	School	A Levels	17 years old, lived locally with her mom who was a single parent. Going to Central to study social work. Would prefer to study art but decided not to because of the limited employment prospects.
Liz	Access Course	Access to health	24 years old, lived locally with parents. Suffers from mental health issues including anxiety and depression. Got a place at Central to study nursing as wants to give something back to the health service. Previously worked as a doctor's receptionist and before that she studied drama at college which she planned to study at university but decided not to due to the limited employment prospects.

Freya	Access Course	Access to health	32 years old, lived in a local small town with partner. Applied to Central and other local universities to be a paramedic. Previously worked in hospitality management

Appendix 2 – Information about on-course participants

Name	Level of Study	Course of Study	More detailed information
Arieta	Level 5	Drama – University school of acting	Aged 22 and from a town in East Anglia. She arrived in the UK with her family when she was 2 years old as refugees from Kosovo.
Caprice	Level 4	Psychology	Aged 18 and had come to university straight from college where she did a BTEC in sport and A levels. She lived locally with her mom and younger brother and worked at a local sports centre.
Shamsun	Level 5	Psychology	Aged 19 and lived in a small town a few miles away, with her parents and siblings. She was studying psychology and came to university after studying A levels at 6th form.
Karolina	Level 4	Psychology and criminology	Aged 18 and originally from Eastern Europe. She moved to the UK with her mom and younger brother when she was seven. She lived locally and commuted to university on public transport.
Chrissie	Level 4	English literature and creative writing	Aged 38-year-old mature student who lived on her own in the city.

			Chrissie left school with no qualifications and had previously worked a number of low-paid jobs including in a book shop.
Danni	Level 6	Textiles	Aged 22 years old and had almost completed a degree in textiles. She lived locally with her partner and worked part time at a hardware store.
Olivia	Level 4	Childhood Studies	Aged 18 years old and lived in a local town. She studied a CACHE Childcare diploma at a nearby college before coming to university. Olivia had severe illness as a child and missed a lot of school.
Beccy	Level 5	English literature	Aged 20 and lived locally in a small town with her boyfriend (who was studying at Redbrick) and her parents. She planned to complete a PGCE after her degree and hoped to become a primary school teacher.

Appendix 3 – Information on graduate participants

Name	Status	Area of study	Contextual information
Malisa	Graduate	Fashion	Aged 23 and from London. Her parents are Portuguese and moved to England before she was born. Malisa studied a degree in Fashion at Central, followed by a master's which she completed a year ago. She remained in the city after graduating and was employed at a local department store as a visual merchandiser.
Emma	Graduate	Children's Nursing	Aged 30 years old and worked as a children's nurse. She graduated from Central three years ago with a first-class degree in nursing. Emma is the oldest of 5 siblings and left home at seventeen as she had a turbulent home life. She was a local student and completed an access course before coming to university. Previous to that she worked in hospitality.
Joe	Graduate	Media studies and English	Aged 24 and graduated from university three years ago with a first-class joint degree in English and Media Studies. Joe has an MA in Media Studies which he studied for part time whilst working at the university. Joe was from the East Midlands however he moved to live near Central and worked within the institution on an academic contract.
Abbie	Graduate	Criminology	Aged 23 and worked part-time as a prison educator on a temporary contract. She graduated from a criminology degree two years ago before going on to do a PGCE in post-compulsory education. She is from a small village in the south

			of England where she lived with her mother who was a single parent, however she has stayed living in the city after graduation as it offers better employment prospects.
Eddie	Graduate	Media and radio production	Aged 22, he is an only child from a small village in the East Midlands and his family are from a mining background. He graduated one year ago with a first-class degree in media studies and radio production. Eddie had found employment as an intern at Central after being employed part time as a student.
Afia	Graduate	Psychology	Aged 45 and lived locally. Her family were of Pakistani descent. At the time of data collection, she was a full time PhD student on a studentship after graduating three years ago. Afia decided to do an access to HE course and then a psychology degree when her youngest child was in secondary school. She gained her PGCE immediately afterwards followed by an MA in Education.
Leah	Graduated 2 years ago	Criminology and Criminal Justice	Aged 26 and graduated two years ago with a 2:1 in Criminology and Criminal Justice. Leah was a local student who had originally planned to work with a large organisation such as the police or the probation service however was still working in the same restaurant chain where she had worked since she was 16. She had recently been promoted to shift manager. Leah lived locally in a flat with her friend, close to her mom who was a single parent on a low income with three other children.

Appendix 4 – example interview transcript (Jamie)

B. okay so to start with can you tell me about you and your educational experience

J. Erm so I'm from Leicester, I grew up in a small town just south of there. Quite working class I actually grew up on a council estate with my... I lived with my mum my dad and my sister at the time. So relieved in on a council estate for about 10 or 11 years and then eventually my mum and dad saved enough money to move into another area of Leicester which was a bit of a better area. Because the council estate was quite a rough area with quite a bad reputation, there was a park across the road where people used to blow up cars so that was quite interesting (laughs).

B. that sounds exciting!

J. yeah it was there is always lots going on lots of fireworks (laughs) so yeah we moved to a better area, I went to a standard comprehensive school and I probably wasn't the most well-behaved kid I put that partly down to my own personality and partly down to the culture of the school that you're in as well. Not everyone wanted to be educated some people you can probably imagine had a very negative view towards education. Particularly in subjects like maths this kind of like a cultural assumption that when people think it's okay when you can't spell but you can get it sometimes where people were quite open about not being able to do maths like it's quite cool.

B. Yeah i know what you mean it's like the dominant narrative to hate maths

J. Absolutely yes. So I did my GCSEs and A-levels there and I didn't do very well in my A-levels either, or as well as I should've done. Then ended up coming to Central because they had the right course because I always wanted to do an English literature course but my own view English literature and English studies in general was a that it was a very valuable subject discipline but I wanted to make my...I suppose my degree more contemporary so I ended up doing an English literature a joint honours degree with media studies. Because both subjects use very similar erm theoretical positions things like marxism you just apply it to a different medium if that makes sense?

B. Yeah like the same lens you just use it in a different way

J. Yeah absolutely yeah so yeah I did that and actually Central was actually the time of my life really because as I said before I didn't do very well at school again as well as I should've done and I got involved in the student partnership project student academic partners and after and after that I just found myself being very much involved in the student engagement

initiatives that the University does and I ended up working for the university one day a week yeah they have a habit of trying to of trying to to employ students. Employing students to work in the office in general working on things with staff so that everything they do is kind of informed by students so like student interns, graduate interns things like that so I worked one day week on a couple of projects and I think that was the turning point because as soon as I started working I had my I don't know it just changed my mentality. I coasted through my first year and you could say that says a lot about the first year whether things like your results should count towards your degree in first year, I was very much aware of that.

B. Yeah I think students are

J. Yeah yeah and I coasted, I coasted through. So then in second year when I started working hard I almost feel like my employment made me better at my academic studies at times. I feel like it made me more organised and I ended up getting a first

B. wow that's great well done

J. Which yeah I was I was even I was shocked at that that I managed to get a first. All my family were in celebration mode because none of them have gone to gone to university so they found it amazing. And then yeah I got that graduate assistant role that we were talking about earlier yeah so I did that for a couple of years and then I am where I am now so I'm still working at the University I can't leave I'm part of the furniture now.

B. yeah literally (laughs)

J. but yeah at this university I've had a really positive positive experience here and yeah I just put it down to mostly (DEPT) and the staff in (DEPT) but also to one of my tutors who told me about this opportunity and that it was available there and so pretty much started with I was coming into a module and the tutor said I've been speaking to one of my colleagues in the University and wondered if you fancied getting some mentoring or teaching experience because I knew I wanted to either be teaching or be involved in teaching

B.so you knew at that stage that you wanted a teaching related role?

J. (Sigh) I didn't I didn't always know that I wanted to be a teacher I knew I always liked speaking to people and helping people but that didn't necessarily translate into teaching directly because there is a lot of professions where you can do that. Erm I did have a conversation with my parents and I remember this ages ago this was before I came to university about what I wanted to do and I think I did have an idea that I wanted to be a teacher then erm but everything was very much dependent on what grades I got because Depending on what university you go to depending on what course you do it's very, your job

opportunities very much differed so I think I always knew I wanted to go into something like teaching but it wasn't until I got to university that I became dead set on it. Erm actually I came into university not necessarily knowing what I wanted to do as a profession so that's quite interesting so that's my experience again at the University that led me into that and put me on that path really. I owe a lot to this place I think

B. So, it was a member of staff it kind of suggested the initial part time job for you?

J. Yeah yeah pretty much this member of staff was a particularly engaged one so she engaged a lot with subject material, she was one of my media lecturers not one of my English tutor she was I media tutor and she she was quite well known for being quite engaging she was a bit kind of loopy but in a good way so she was quite entertaining to watch and she knew what she was talking about, and besides that she was very involved in things like personal tutoring she believed in things like student engagement outside the classroom and being a media professional herself she knew that you have to do a lot of things outside of the job networking that kind of stuff she believed in the importance of all that because my degree pathway because it was a joint honours pathway we didn't necessarily feel a sense of belonging as a cohort which I think you often get with joint honours anyway. So we had a professional studies module on our degree where we looked at properties associated with our English and media discipline and she ran out workshop group, and she advertised it to all of us and a couple of us said yes. And it kind of led on from there really. From that I worked with her also and got involved in a student mentoring project so you can see there was a lot of luck a lot of luck involved for me that I was able to get involved in all of these things. So I was involved in lots of stuff like that so it was quite a heavy, a heavy workload. Now I'm thinking of it how much I did but I was so organised and so motivated by this point that I I somehow managed to do my degree and all this as well. But yeah like what you were saying it was just for a chance encounter really, or what I thought was a chance encounter it was probably planned by the staff member but then me saying yes kind of led into...

B. Yeah so it just kind of opened all these doors just from you making that one decision

J. Yeah just from me saying yes to that because I wanted some teaching experience I got all that and more and led me into the job I'm in now. So I'm in a job now in EDS probably because of that decision so I've got lots of experience with that so yeah it's been pretty, pretty insane actually.

B. It's weird how one decision can change the course of your life

J. Yeah yeah. I mean I never had a bad life before coming to university just it was probably a product of my own decreased motivation in the education system. The school, yeah I didn't particularly enjoy school, I had friends and things like that I just didn't really enjoy... there were only a couple of teachers who I really liked actually and because it was a state comprehensive they can't be selective as they would do say in a private school where you would have to be able to afford to go so... so the mixture of students, you probably had the same, you'd get groups of disruptive students and as much as people don't like to say they do have an impact on other people's learning so yeah until I came to university it was yeah it was pretty it was pretty I wasn't really motivated. I think I went to I think I actually went to university because I felt like that was the thing I should be doing rather than because I wanted to. It was quite yeah, because out of my three siblings, we're all smart but I think I probably perform better academically than most of them. So, I think there was an expectation, not explicitly mentioned, yeah but I think there was an expectation from family because I'd had, they saw me as having the potential to go to university so I went and it was probably the best decision I ever made I just didn't know it at the time.

B. So, when you were younger and that school university was always on the horizon?

J. I don't know actually because I think it was on the horizon and I actually I wasn't going to go to university I actually took a gap year. I think because I underperformed on my A-levels I didn't think it was really, that I was really worthy I really had a crisis of confidence really. I worked at Greggs since I was 16 part-time and I work there full-time for a year and just earned a bit of money to go travelling to a few a few countries. Yes I went to Russia that was an interesting experience yeah. But yeah so I took a year out and then I just thought you know what, I'm just going to go to university and see what courses there are, and I found the one at Central. I actually it was a toss-up between the De-montford University, so a local university, and here. But for me although it cost more I wanted to get out of Leicester. Because I felt like I'd got as much as I could from the city and I wanted to experience something new which I know doesn't cross everybody's mind because people have other responsibilities. So yeah I opted I opted to go to [Central] even though De-Montford had the same course I went to [Central] because I wanted the experience.

B. Did you get offers at both?

J. Yeah because I already had my grades so I got unconditional offers. So yeah it was, you don't get that nerve wracking period when it's leading up to your A-levels which I saw other people go through. I didn't have that, I just very casually applied and got accepted. So, I just decided to go to [Central] really. It was funny though because at school they did really push you towards university at A-level but that attitude was distinctly different from the staff whilst I

was doing my GCSE's. So they didn't really talk about university at all when I was doing my GCSEs and I don't know if that was the culture of that particular school but they never mentioned it, and this might of been a mixture of the sets I was in, because I was always in either mid to high sets but mostly mid sets so it might have been it might of been a mixture of the students who they didn't expect to go to university because they weren't as academically gifted as the people in the top sets or whether it was just, I don't know, maybe it was just the culture of the school. But yeah definitely when I got A-level there was much more active encouragement.

B. So they were quite pushy?

J. Yeah I wouldn't say, actually yeah pushy is the right word actually, it's a good word for it actually. They were much more open about people having to go to university when they've done their A-levels and perhaps it's because it's to do with that tiered system as well, some kind of performance measure.

B. Did things like university league tables matter to you?

J. I did some research on Central I think at the time I think we were in the 50s somewhere. But to be honest I didn't really that kind of thing doesn't really appeal to me. Because I'm from a working class background people I've always known have worked in things like public service my mum works in the council and my dad is a tradesman (pause) they've never really struggled for money except in the early years now they're absolutely, they're absolutely fine but I've never really had a particularly high aspiration to go and work to go to like Harvard law school you know what I mean. And that's I think that's probably because the culture that you're in when you're that age and in that particular socio-economic status where you're very working class and you don't necessarily have really high aspirations you just want to be like your mum and dad.

B. Yeah for me it wasn't discouraged it just wasn't on the horizon for me

J. Yeah absolutely and that says a lot of things about the current state of higher education. And you're thankful that there are universities like this that are widening participation and that are getting people in that aren't perhaps academically gifted because that isn't everything so I'm glad there are universities like this. Erm but my motivation was more about getting the right course it wasn't about going to a higher-level university. I wanted something very specific it wasn't your traditional course doing something like marketing that leads to high-paying jobs so yeah that didn't really (pause) I was dead set on the course it was more about that transformative experience of myself as a person as well as being engaged in academia and English literature and media theory and things like that. There

was more to it than that. You know there's a lot of students here now but don't necessarily have the same background of wanting to move away a lot of students have kids responsibilities and I know Central recruit a lot of local students from [local city] which is great so yeah it's a changing landscape and a changing demographic. It would be interesting to make some comparisons between this University and [Redbrick] in terms of their demographic you could make some assumptions about that but it be interesting to explore.

B. Definitely. Tell me about being a first-generation student and the impact that had on your experiences

J. Okay so I don't think it necessarily had an impact it's not something that came to mind until someone asks you “oh you know are you the first in your family to go”. And actually, when I moved into my student accommodation the people that I met were all I met a really mixed set of people actually. So, I was in, my flats were with there were a few posh people, I knew that they were posh because they had a stereotypical southern accent. So, we joked about that and they called me a chav and the various kind of jokes like backwards and forwards like that. But I don't think it ever really played a part in my attitude towards university. And it's not something I really considered but now I'm talking there kind of... there's loads of implicit things about how I kind of... you know earlier when we were talking about there's loads of when you're from a particular background you kind of have a way of life and until you meet other people and doors open it's kind of a bit like a threshold concept. Until you move to university you just kind of all these different doors and avenues open and until you start speaking to people and learning from them depending on you know the various cultures they're from you don't really realise some of the positives and negatives of society as a whole until you start to meet people that are quite privileged and, I had this one, this one, this one who lived in my flat so she lived in our student accommodation, but she got all the things like she got a car bought for her so she rolling in the first day in life it was like a brand-new like a ford focus like a 2010 model, so it had gone at that year have been bought with cash by her parents to supplement her time at university. Obviously I I I…my first car was a £300 Corsa like 98 Reg so I... but I had to get rid of that when I started university because I couldn't afford it. So I think so I think to answer your question very broadly I don't think it necessarily had a an impact on my overall experience but on my kind of way of life during university and learning from other people yeah there were lots of implicit things about society and the way that universities work as well that became more clear so it was an educational experience more so when I considered my first generation status. That's quite an interesting question, I feel really reflective now.

B. Good! That means I'm doing my job properly. (laughs) what was the hardest thing about being at university was there anything that you found difficult?

J. I struggled in the first year with some of the academic content and this, a lot of this goes back to my previous education. So, you forget how because I'm now used to it so much, how hard things like referencing were for example and things like engaging with academic literature because I didn't we didn't really engage with it at all during a-level anyway. they might do this differently in other schools but we didn't really engage with any literature. They told us one theoretical position we could use in our exams which we could reference in exams but apart from that there was no kind of detailed structure of how to Harvard reference, so I did really struggle with some of the academic stuff. So my academic results for the whole year actually I was getting like high 40s mid 50s but then like I said as I've got more engaged in my second year I started to get more high 50s and in the 60s in English, and eventually firsts so it's weird how it kind of shifted there.

B. I think it's kind of knowing the rules isn't it

J. Yeah yeah. I mean it's interesting as well because that whole mentoring thing that I mentioned earlier that was kind of born out of my own feedback that I mentioned to a staff member. Because I struggled with that gap especially having had an unconditional offer as well. So I had to actively pursue speaking to people which if I hadn't of done I would've been even more nervous coming into university and coming into that first week. I think for myself and especially that first week coming into my flat it was it was quite nerve-wracking thinking about whether I was going to make friends or not. You know where people going to like me or not. The usual kind of insecurities. I'll always remember the first time I arrived, and I was quite happy they did this anyway because my mum and dad just arrived help me unpack and then left again. whereas I saw lots of other parents milling around there was this one mum and dad and when you after you've unpacked you have to get all your electrical appliances tested and the cues are really long. And lots of people had their mums and dads waiting with their sons and daughters in the queues which was quite funny to watch. They'd go with them to the doctors because you have to have a routine check-up and they'd do all that whereas mine just dropped me off and dumped me. Which was quite good because it made me socialise. It kind of put the onus on me to think right I'm on my own and as nerve wracking as it was you know it puts the pressure on you to go and make friends. So that's what I was mostly nervous about was induction week. So, there is a period of time that I'd got this offer but I was more nervous about making friends. So, it was this personal engagement that I was more worried about. Then as soon as the semester hit and you're happy with the friendships you focus more on the academic stuff. So, I had like a period where it was very

much I was struggling with lots of different things depending on the time at which they arose. So yeah it was when those difficulties arose that I really started to doubt myself and think can I be here, can I do this? When I look back I can see all the various spheres, like the academic and social side. So yeah I think it really depended on which stage of the year it was but I definitely struggled most in my first year. Leading up to and then the first year yeah.

B. Is there anything that you would do differently if you went back?

J. Hmmm I should've tried harder at school and secondary education. Yeah if I'd of gone back I would've tried harder at school. And try to perform better than I did have.

B. do you feel you could've performed better if you tried?

J. Yeah definitely. Especially I think in GCSEs I was okay but in A-levels I was really demotivated so I could have tried a lot harder in my A-levels looking back. I don't think I would've done a different course or anything because I've had such a transformative experience so because of coming here I don't think I would change much. Because you know I'm I got this job now and I'm on an academic contract, so you've got this first generation, working-class student on a lecturing contract, I I was in dreamland and all my family were just like gobsmacked you know.

B. They must be really proud

J. Yeah I think they all and that's I suppose testament to Central and what it's done for me. Obviously I've worked hard as well so it's been a combination so for me apart from the years leading up to higher education then I don't think I would change anything. And again, maybe if I had maybe if I had done better I would've gone to a different place and not had the same experience. Because you know just because you do better at school and if I'd of gone to a Russell group or something it doesn't necessarily mean you know I'd either be happier or do better. it's just a matter of several coincidences really have led to where I am. So no, I don't think I would do anything differently actually.

B. Have your family always been supportive of you while you were at uni?

J. Oh God yeah. I think this is a first-generation thing because I was the first one going they were quite proud of being able to say to people that they knew, you know my son has gone to university. So yeah they were always supportive. Again, because they were because they were working class again they were working class they were still kind of educated in terms of formal education I know that my dad is kind of really deep rooted working-class and he always had quite a negative view of people that went to university. Because when he grew

up you wouldn't get anyone from our background going to university then because number one it was funded for smart students, for the ones who had done really well academically. And that unfortunately as far as conversations with my dad go it used to be people that were quite well off as well. People that could already afford to go to university were also receiving grants to go to university.

B. And also they didn't need to go to work to provide for the family

J. yeah definitely. Yeah so he was always supportive but I think that he had some preconceived ideas about the type of people that would go to university. And what they would be like. So so he really talked to me about how important it was not to get lost in yourself you know. I know I wouldn't but it was important to him that I kept grounded yeah. Which was quite a good a good piece of advice actually. So yeah always been supportive but yeah. The UK HE system has evolved thankfully it has evolved since since even 10 15, 20 years ago when my dad was talking about it it hasn't always been the case.

B. Tell me about the social side of uni how important was that to your experience?

J. yeah I think it was one of the, in the first year it was really important because I spent a lot of time with my mates going out. Doing lots of things with them, social stuff basically, going to the gym, playing sports, the usual stuff really. I think it was important for me to get my relationships sorted with friends so I'd have that support network, there was a lot of times I'm really thankful they were there, because they talked me out of dropping out of university, because I did consider it.

B. why did you consider it?

J. Because, it was after that six weeks wobble when I got my first results back and I thought "I can't do this" yeah it was good that I had that support network there. But then again they all, my friends that I made, they were one of the important bits to me you know one of the benefits of coming to university because I still speak to them, they're really good friends. They're coming to my wedding this weekend. We still see each other quite regularly even though One lives in London and the other one lives in Manchester. We all live in totally different places but I still see them quite often. But yeah and then after the first year you're not worried about that because there's foundations there, you know you've made good friends, so again that might of been one of the other important factor of me doing so well during my second year because I had that established. Because I'd got that foundation, almost like a bedrock of support. So, it is important but those things kind of take care of themselves after the initial first year and all the awkward conversations you have to have in

that first week. I had some awful bits of small talk in that first week (laughs). It was scary so yeah you really gravitate towards the people particularly who are the ones that say hello. There was this one, I don't speak to her anymore actually, but this girl was just saying hello to everyone that was coming in, just things like that and said, "I'm doing something in the flat later", something like that do you want to come along and they're the kind of things that you always remember.

B.so you did halls the first year?

J. Yeah we did for the first year and we kind of got lumped in this big flat so there were eight flats with six people in each. Then in my second year we moved into our student house with the two mates that I was talking about earlier there were five of us living in the house a couple of people changed between second and third year but we stayed there for the full two years. This was in (local area), our house got broken into in the last year but they didn't nick anything. We think they were looking for gold or cash or something. It doesn't tarnish our experience or anything it's just one of those things it probably would've been different if they've taken all our stuff (laughs). Yeah then after I graduated I moved back to Leicester and commuted to [local city] for a while because of my financial status because I wanted to move into the city centre which eventually I did on my own for a year but I was paying £500 a month rent which was expensive and that's excluding bills. And then I met my partner during my MA course which I did part time here in media. I looked at the role of video games

B. To finish some up your experience of being a student at Central in three words

J. Very positive indeed! (Laughs)

B. Is there anything you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

J. No I think that was it!

B. great, well I'll be in touch soon with an email of your transcript once I have typed it all up and if you have any questions in the meantime just drop me an email, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

J. Brilliant, thanks.

Appendix 5 – pre-entry interview guide

Interview lines of enquiry for 6th form students

Start with:

Tell me about yourself

Tell me about your experience of education so far

Key aspect of enquiry:

Student choice –

Tell me about why you want to go to university?

Tell me about what made you choose this university and this course?

Who or what influenced your decisions?

Have there been any important people or important moments that have impacted on your decision to go to university?

Why did you choose to apply to a uni close to home?

Expectations

What do you expect uni to be like?

Why do you think it will be like that?

How do you feel about starting uni?

Are there any aspects you are particularly nervous about/looking forward to?

Do you think that going to uni will change you in any way? If so how?

Aspirations

What are your hopes for the future?

What are your career goals?

What job do you hope to get after going to uni?

Reflection

Have you always wanted to go to uni?

Have you had a good experience of education so far?

Do you think that going to uni will change your life? How?

Appendix 6 – example participant information sheet (on-course participants)

Dear student,

My name is Beth Sumner and I am currently studying for my PhD here at [redacted]
My research involves looking at first-generation students' experiences of higher education and their student journeys that have led them to this point. I am interested in finding out about the factors that have shaped students' experiences and what they have found to be limiting or enabling in relation to their university study. As a mature, working-class student myself I went through some difficult transitions as an undergraduate and it is important to me that my doctoral research gives other students the opportunity to tell their stories.

I am looking for participants who are from a first-generation background (meaning that your parents/guardians did not attend higher education in any form or at any point). Additionally your parents/guardians should work in non-professional roles which align with NS-SEC classes 5-8 (see this link for more detail: https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010)

If you decide that you would like to participate in this research then you will be asked to undertake an interview to hear your student story and to find out your thoughts and opinions regarding your experience as a student. This interview will be informal and will only involve talking to me, as the researcher. The interview will take place at a time and location that suits you. I expect that the interview will last around an hour, although it may take less or more time. Prior to the interview I would like to meet up with you for a brief chat so you can find out more about me and my research and so you have the opportunity to ask any questions that you might have.

It is really important that you are aware that participation in this research is entirely voluntary and that you will not face any negative consequences if you choose not to take part. If you do choose to take part you would be able to withdraw yourself (and your interview data) from the research process at any point within 6 months after the interview date, without having to explain why.

The research interviews are entirely confidential and you will not be identified at any point during the research process. A pseudonym (fake name) will be used at all times for your contribution when discussing and presenting the research, unless you wish for your first name only to be used in the research. All interview data (including audio recordings and transcripts) will be stored securely in a password protected file on a personal computer. All interview data use and storage will comply with the Data Protection Act and GDPR guidelines.

If you are interested in taking part then please email me at Bethany.Sumner@[redacted] and we can have a chat.

Warmest regards,

Beth Sumner

Appendix 7 – Example Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Dear…….

Please read the below information carefully and then ask me any questions that you may have. If, after reading the information, you are happy to consent to being a participant in this research then please indicate your consent on the following page.

Research Title:

First-Generation Student Transitions

Summary of project:

This doctoral study is aiming to explore non-privileged first-generation students' experiences of higher education (HE) in order to gain an understanding of the factors that shape their transitions and form their experiences within the context of a post-1992 university. This study aims to examine students' transitional experiences into university, through university, and from university to employment. It will explore students' personal accounts of transition to examine how educational life chances and the acceptance and/or resistance of these are constructed through participants' lived experiences, and the ways in which these lived experiences are implicated by the social and political structures of the case study institution and the wider higher education sector.

Participant Requirements

As a participant you will be asked to undertake an interview to find out your thoughts and experiences around your student journey. With your prior consent the interview will be recorded using a dictaphone to allow me to transcribe (type up) the data after the interview has taken place. When the interview data is transcribed your name will be removed from the transcription document immediately (unless you have elected to keep your first name) and the audio recording will be deleted. The interview transcription will be stored in a password-protected computer file and backed up on a password-protected external hard-drive. As detailed in the participant information sheet that you were given all interview data is entirely confidential and although quotes from the interview may be given in academic journals or conference presentations this will be done anonymously and you will not be identified.

Voluntary Participation

Your engagement with this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any or no reason. You are also free to refuse to answer any of the questions asked in the interview and can stop the interview at any point without reason. If you wish you can pause the Dictaphone at any point during the interview. Any interview data collected in discussions with you can be withdrawn from the study and returned to you at your request up until six months after the interview has taken place.

If at any point you decide not to participate in this research this is entirely your choice and will not affect you adversely in any way.

Please read the statements on the following sheet carefully and then indicate your consent by ticking the appropriate boxes.

1.	I have read and understood the information sheet and understand the purposes of this study and what participation entails.	☐
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research.	☐
3.	I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary.	☐
4.	I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.	☐
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained and I understand that any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material. I understand that the data I provide will be kept securely.	☐
7.	I agree to being interviewed by the researcher	☐
8.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded by a dictaphone	☐
9.	I would like my name to be changed to a pseudonym (fake name) within the research. I would like this pseudonym to be…….. **or** I would like for my first name (only) to be kept and used within the research	☐ ☐

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study and any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware that I can continue to ask any questions I may have throughout the study. I consent to participate in this study as it has been outlined to me and confirm that this consent is being given freely and voluntarily.

Participant:

_____ _____ _____

Name Signature Date

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked have been answered honestly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the

individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Researcher:

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

Appendix 8 – Example participant debriefing form (on-course participants)

First-generation Student Transitions

Participant Debriefing Form

Thank you for taking part in this research project concerning your journey as a first-generation student in higher education and the factors that have shaped and affected your experiences. Your participation is greatly appreciated and will play an important role in this doctoral study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or any thoughts or comments regarding your participation then please feel free to contact me: Bethany.sumner[redacted]

In the event that any aspect of being involved in this research has caused you any form of distress or upset, please be reminded that the university offer a free counselling service. The Service is professional, confidential and free of charge. Further information about this service is available via i[redacted]

Alternatively, you may wish to contact the university wellbeing service for support and advice on a range of issues including relationship difficulties or anything that may be impacting on your time as a student. The contact details for this service are as follows:

Telephone:[redacted], Email: [redacted]

As a participant I will contact you via email after I have transcribed (typed up) your interview to enable you to review the transcription and add any comments that you wish to. You are under no obligation to respond to my emails but any response you do give will be carefully considered. If you do not respond I will assume that you are happy with the interview transcription. If you do not wish me to contact you via email then please do let me know and I will respect your wishes.

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Beth Sumner

Appendix 9 – a discussion of terminology

I grappled with the terminology I used in this study and felt that it was important to discuss and define the key terms which I utilised, primarily 'first-generation', 'non-privileged' and (for the majority of participants) 'local'. The term 'first-generation student' (sometimes referred to as 'first-in-family') has various definitions within the literature and the difficulty in defining the term is highlighted by both Davis (2010) and Thomas and Quinn (2007). Most definitions focus on parental education levels (i.e., that neither parent has ever attended university) however many studies include siblings within their definitions. The growth of blended families with stepparents and stepsiblings further complicates the definition, as do other issues such as parents who withdrew from university before completing their studies, or those whose parents may currently be in university at the same time as their children (Gagnon, 2016). I grappled with the issue of siblings, as Thomas and Quinn (2007:50) point out that "a student may not be first in the family to go to university, if an older sibling has already entered, but they would still be of the first-generation" so eventually decided to focus on simply on students whose parents/guardians had not attended university or HE in any form or at any point.

First-generation students are by default non-traditional in the sense that it has not been the tradition within their families to engage with HE and therefore they often come under the widely used umbrella term of "non-traditional student". Trowler offers the following definition of "traditional" student characteristics:

> Native British, mostly white from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or 'decent' state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of A-levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full time (2015: 299).

This detailed definition therefore infers a definition of a non-traditional student as someone who does not embody the above characteristics. The participants in this thesis do embody some of the characteristics which Trowler describes above (in that some were white, most were British natives, and all were able-bodied and studied full time). However, the participants were also all first-generation, and were all from backgrounds which could be defined as non-privileged, which is the term I eventually settled on using when describing their backgrounds. I grappled with alternative terms but eventually settled for non-privileged because I felt that it recognised that the participants came from a range of backgrounds but that none had parents in professional occupations, nor did any have a history of university participation within their families. Therefore, the participants were not privileged in economic, social or cultural capital congruent with HE and thus were from backgrounds which could

reasonably be defined as being non-privileged in relation to university study. I do recognise that the participants embodied privileged identities in other ways (such as being cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, and for some participants white and/or male) however given this study is focused specifically on HE, the term non-privileged applies only to their social positioning within that specific context.

Initially, I had considered using the term 'working-class' to describe the background of the participants in this thesis, primarily because this was the most widely used term I saw used in literature within the field (e.g. Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bradley and Ingram, 2012; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Crozier *et al.,* 2008; Granfield, 1991; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Ingram, 2011; Reay *et al*., 2009a; 2009b). However, from my position, class is messy and difficult to define. For some, class can refer to a level of household income or occupation, and for some it is also a state of mind (Hanley, 2016). The term 'working-class' as a singular category does also not reflect the fragmented labour market of the current day, as identified by Savage (2015) whose seminal research depicted seven social classes as opposed to the traditional three tiers. The fact that I, as a senior lecturer, continue to in many ways feel working-class despite being employed in a middle-class profession, demonstrated to me the messiness of using class as a category. I did not feel comfortable imposing a classed status on my participants as a result of their background, occupation or income, nor did I consider it appropriate to ask participants to self-define their class background as my own definition showed that this was problematic. I therefore elected not to use the term working-class as a way of defining the participants within this thesis, although at times some of the participants did self-define as working class during the interviews. I do also draw on the term in relation to published literature throughout.

I could have simply used the term 'non-traditional student' to describe the first-generation students in this study, however I agree with Barrow's (2009) that this term may not be appropriate, particularly in some universities (such as Central) where non-traditional students are the norm (and indeed the tradition). It is also my contention that the term is problematic because it carries deficit connotations and can be understood as othering students who do not align with dominant models of studenthood. I therefore settled on focusing on first-generation students from non-privileged backgrounds.