Building Strong Foundations:

Understanding and Enhancing International Student Transitions to Undergraduate Study

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of six international foundation students at a Russell Group university in the UK, focusing on their transition to undergraduate study in business and law-related disciplines. International foundation programmes play a vital role in preparing students for further study, yet variations in content and curriculum exist due to limited statutory regulation. By amplifying the nuanced voices of these students, this research aims to inform and enhance foundation programme provision, supporting positive academic and social experiences that enable a smooth and successful transition to higher education.

Grounded in Bourdieu's theory of social practice, including the concepts of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), this study adopts a creative and participatory-inspired methodology to capture the perspectives of international foundation alumni. Innovative approaches such as listening rooms, where pairs of friends discuss their experiences without researcher intervention, and walking interviews for deeper exploration, were employed to gather rich, qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) identified three key areas in students' transition to undergraduate studies: Navigating new fields, accumulating and converting capital and belonging, identity, and social integration. Students expressed a need for more robust support in developing career and employability skills, academic literacies, and a clearer understanding of UK pedagogical practices. They also valued opportunities for mentoring, managing time and stress, and building meaningful connections with undergraduate peers. Additionally, they recognised the value of studying in a multicultural environment and called for greater acknowledgment of its benefits.

This research makes a significant contribution to knowledge by deepening understanding of international foundation students' experiences and advancing creative methods that centre student voices in educational research. It offers practical insights by recommending enhancements to international foundation programmes, including embedding employability skills, fostering stronger social and academic networks, and leveraging the multicultural nature of these programmes. By

amplifying the voices of students, this study provides actionable strategies for improving the planning, provision, and ownership of education, ultimately benefiting learners, educators and international foundation programme providers.

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Key Abbreviations:

EAP	English for Academic Purposes (A module on the IFP)
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IFP	International Foundation Programme
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (Route to access HE)

Glossary of Terms:

Academic Capital

The knowledge, skills, qualifications, and dispositions valued and rewarded within educational institutions. It includes competencies such as critical thinking, academic writing, research skills, and familiarity with academic norms and expectations.

Capital

A broad term used by Bourdieu to refer to resources that confer power and advantage within a field. Capital can take many forms including economic, cultural, social, or symbolic, and it influences one's position within a given field. The forms of capital interact with each other and are valued differently depending on the field.

Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1986)

A form of capital referring to non-financial social assets that promote social mobility, including language, tastes, attitudes, values, and educational credentials. Cultural capital exists in three states: embodied (ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving), objectified (books, instruments, etc.), and institutionalised (qualifications, degrees).

Field (Bourdieu, 1992)

A structured social space with its own rules, values, and power relations. In this study, the 'field' refers to the context of UK higher education, including the foundation programme and undergraduate study. Each field positions individuals differently depending on the capital they hold and recognise.

Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977)

The system of dispositions, embodied history, that shapes how individuals perceive, think, and act. Habitus is formed through past experiences, particularly during early socialisation, and influences how students navigate new fields such as UK higher education.

Social Capital (Bourdieu, 1986)

The networks of relationships and social connections that provide individuals with support, information, and access to opportunities. In educational contexts, social capital can be crucial for accessing academic help, mentoring, and a sense of belonging within the institution.

Symbolic Capital (Bourdieu, 1991)

The form of capital that is recognised as legitimate within a particular field, such as prestige, reputation, or authority.

Transition

In the context of this thesis, transition refers to the process by which international foundation students move from the international foundation programme (IFP) into higher education (HE) in the UK. This process is not only academic but also social, cultural, and emotional, involving adaptation to new norms, pedagogies, and expectations.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Preamble

This study explores the academic development of international foundation students' capital from their own perspectives as they navigate an International Foundation Programme (IFP) and transition to undergraduate studies, in the UK. It examines what academic capital entails for these students and how they engage with its development. The study also investigates how IFPs can better support students in building the skills, knowledge, and practices necessary for a successful transition to higher education (HE).

This chapter introduces the study by providing an overview to guide the reader. It begins with a discussion of the researcher's positionality, acknowledging how personal and professional experiences have shaped the study. The chapter then explores the context of international students in the UK, with a particular focus on international foundation students and the cultural value of international education. It differentiates between home and international foundation courses, examining their structures and the teaching approaches used with international foundation students. The chapter then outlines the research aims and questions, before concluding with a summary of the thesis structure, which provides a guide for the chapters that follow.

1.2 The Researcher's Positionality

I have worked with international foundation students for approximately nine years in my role as a module tutor, course director, and personal tutor, and have always been impressed by the diverse skills and qualities they bring to the classroom. This perspective contrasts sharply with some of the deficit narratives found in the literature. While I acknowledge that IFPs aim to deliver high-quality courses that

prepare students for successful undergraduate transitions, my experience has revealed a gap in research-informed and student-voice-driven strategies to support them. Too often, programmes address students' implied needs rather than their expressed needs (Noddings, 2005). This observation frames the discussion in my literature review, where I critically examine how the existing research portrays international foundation students, the assumptions underpinning current practices, and the importance of centring student voices to ensure continuing programme development.

As an IFP teacher, my role is to support international business management and law students in developing their capacity to think critically, value diverse perspectives, and appreciate complex ideas, as “to educate is to develop the capacity to think, to value, to understand, to reason, to appreciate” (Pring, 2010, p.201). I achieve this by encouraging students to question taken-for-granted theories and assumptions, using authentic case studies to challenge their perspectives and foster critical thinking (Mills, 2000). I am mindful of the diverse educational backgrounds and cultural habitus that my students bring, shaped by their countries of origin and varied experiences of education. Sheridan (2011) suggests that international students often arrive with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that may not align with the expectations of UK HE, highlighting a need to support the development of academic literacy. However, rather than viewing this as a deficiency, I approach this as an opportunity to expand students' academic and cultural capital (see Glossary of Terms), recognising the richness of their existing knowledge and experiences.

The hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) plays a pivotal role in this process, encompassing both the explicit and implicit norms, behaviours, and practices embedded in educational contexts. It shapes how and what students learn, including norms for classroom engagement and academic expectations. Teachers, therefore, hold significant responsibility for shaping students’ behaviours, beliefs, and skills through this hidden curriculum (Alsubaie, 2015). For international foundation students, engaging with the hidden curriculum becomes an integral part of

developing academic capital and navigating the academic culture of UK HE. This is not about acculturating them to "compete" with home students, but about creating equitable spaces where their diverse forms of capital are recognised, valued, and enhanced, allowing them to thrive on their academic transition to undergraduate studies in the UK.

1.3 International students in the UK

The term "international student" generally refers to individuals who move to another country specifically for educational purposes, with their permanent residence being outside the UK or EU (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024a). In the UK, international students form a vital component of HE, contributing significantly to institutional finances and local economies. Recent figures demonstrate the economic benefit of international students rose from £31.3 billion to £41.9 billion between 2018/19 and 2021/22 (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2023). In 2022/23, the UK recorded a total of 2,423,010 students across all levels, of which 630,005 (26%) were classified as international (non-EU) students. Notably, 15% of undergraduate students (see Figure 1) and 51% of postgraduate students (see Figure 2) were non-UK nationals (Higer Education Statistics Agency, 2024b).

HE student enrolments by permanent address

Academic years 2018/19 to 2022/23

Country of HE provider: England

Entrant marker: All | Level of study: All undergraduate | Mode of study: All

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
UK					
England	1,242,300	1,250,795	1,339,635	1,374,880	1,391,885
Wales	25,335	25,035	25,525	26,450	26,450
Scotland	6,025	5,860	6,015	5,985	5,870
Northern Ireland	10,810	10,195	10,010	10,075	9,585
Other UK	3,345	3,300	3,290	3,340	4,210
Total UK	**1,287,815**	**1,295,190**	**1,384,475**	**1,420,725**	**1,438,000**
Non-UK					
European Union	80,580	83,925	89,385	69,930	52,900
Non-European Union	148,365	167,095	174,235	187,385	206,070
Total Non-UK	**228,945**	**251,020**	**263,620**	**257,320**	**258,970**
Not known	10	40	225	5	930
Total	**1,516,770**	**1,546,250**	**1,648,320**	**1,678,050**	**1,697,900**

Figure 1: All undergraduate students in England (Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024a)

Academic years 2018/19 to 2022/23

Country of HE provider: England | Entrant marker: All | Level of study: Other undergraduate | Mode of study: All

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
UK					
England	102,250	90,165	98,395	94,140	101,235
Wales	1,130	1,025	1,085	1,185	1,320
Scotland	840	770	785	755	810
Northern Ireland	315	260	300	280	275
Other UK	240	120	140	140	505
Total UK	**104,775**	**92,340**	**100,710**	**96,500**	**104,145**
Non-UK					
European Union	2,440	1,700	1,625	1,315	1,175
Non-European Union	9,150	12,120	9,755	12,370	13,870
Total Non-UK	**11,590**	**13,820**	**11,380**	**13,680**	**15,045**
Not known	10	15	145	5	145
Total	**116,375**	**106,175**	**112,235**	**110,185**	**119,340**

Figure 2: Other undergraduate figures for England (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024a)

The UK attracts students from around the world, bolstered by its reputation for academic excellence and diverse opportunities. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2024), in 2022/23, 61,110 international undergraduates were accepted into UK universities via UCAS for the 2024/25 academic year, a slight decline of 0.6% compared to the previous year (Jack, 2024). This evolving landscape of international student mobility reflects the importance of fostering supportive pathways, such as IFPs, to sustain the UK's standing as a global education destination.

1.4 International foundation students in the UK

A small number of international students in the UK are international foundation students. These students represent a unique subset of international learners who

have enrolled in preparatory education programmes prior to transitioning to undergraduate degrees. These programmes, known as international foundation programmes (IFPs), support students in gaining the qualifications and skills needed to transition to undergraduate degrees, addressing challenges such as differing educational systems and potential language barriers. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (2024a) reported that in 2022/23, 15,045 non-UK students were enrolled in “other undergraduate courses,” a category that includes IFPs (see Figure 3). These students predominantly come from countries such as India, China, and Nigeria, reflecting a diverse and growing demographic (Higher Education Statics Agency, 2024a).

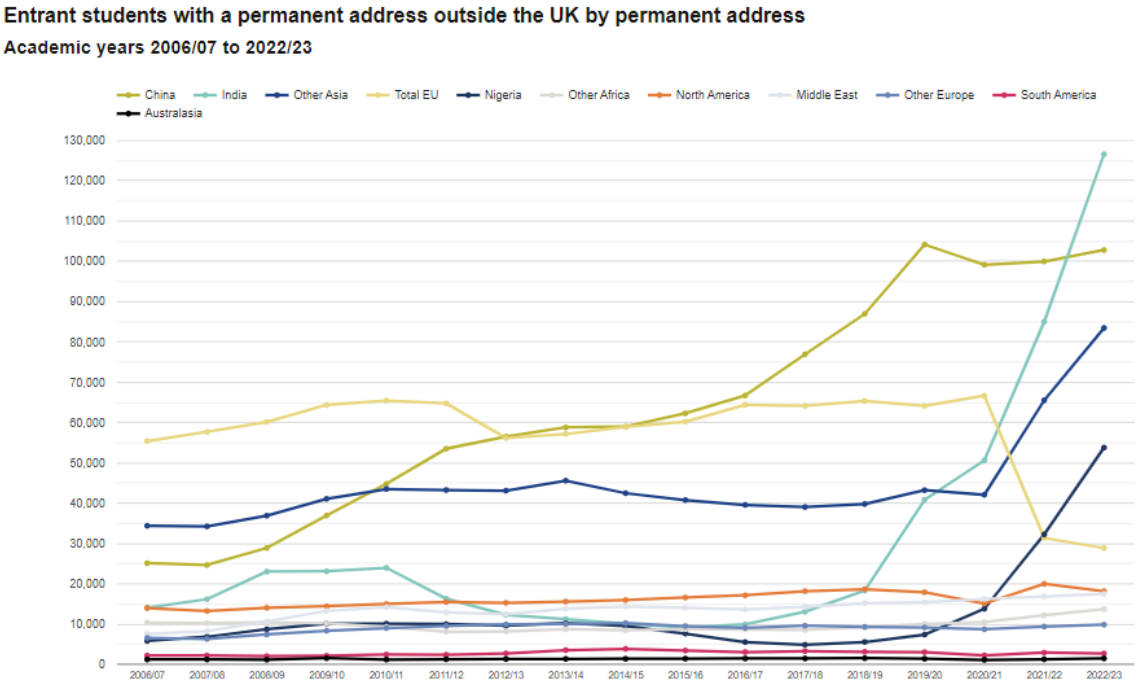

Figure 3: Entrants to HE (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024a)

1.5 The cultural value of international education

The cultural value of international education is well recognised, with scholars highlighting its role in shaping students' academic and social trajectories

(Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Lee and Morrish, 2012). Bourdieu (1988) conceptualised cultural capital as the knowledge, skills, and qualifications accumulated over time, influenced by an individual's social and educational environment. This capital is legitimised through formal educational credentials, such as those awarded by IFPs, which facilitate students' transition to and participation in UK HE. Waters (2006) further explored the expansion of the international education market, driven by students' aspirations to enhance their cultural capital through spatial mobility and the attainment of a "Western" university degree.

While the concept of cultural capital offers valuable insights into students' educational journeys, it has been interpreted and critiqued in varying ways across the literature. Sheridan (2011) emphasises its practical dimensions, focusing on how it is shaped by individual agency and influenced by both social and academic factors. However, Kingston (2001, p.48) critiques Bourdieu's concepts for incorporating "too many conceptually distinct variables," leading to a fragmented understanding of what contributes to academic success. These critiques are particularly relevant in the context of international students, who are often perceived as possessing forms of cultural capital that may not align with UK HE norms, such as expectations around independent learning, critical thinking, classroom participation, and familiarity with academic conventions like Harvard referencing or essay-based assessments. Despite this, they are frequently expected to conform to existing standards (Sheridan, 2011). Some studies further highlight challenges such as culture shock (Arkoudis and Tran, 2010) and unfamiliarity with the "rules of the game" (Tran, 2016). More recent research, however, has shifted focus towards the importance of students' connections and feelings of belonging within educational settings (Bovill, 2020), while also critiquing structural limitations within HEIs, such as insufficient teacher training and power dynamics that can negatively impact international students' experiences (Heng, 2019). These themes will be further explored in the literature review, where I critically examine how cultural capital and student experiences are framed and the implications of these perspectives for supporting international foundation students.

1.6 Foundation Courses in the UK

Foundation courses in the UK are pre-degree programmes designed to prepare students for undergraduate study by developing their academic skills, subject knowledge, and, where needed, English language proficiency. These courses typically last one year and are offered by UK universities, further education institutions and private providers, with distinctions normally made between those aimed at home students and those designed for international students.

1.6.1 Home Foundation Programmes

Foundation year programmes for home (UK) students emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s, driven by declining HE participation rates. In response, HEIs developed these courses to broaden access, a goal further reinforced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) as part of wider participation initiatives. Designed to attract underrepresented groups, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, these programmes have become increasingly integrated within universities. Many HEIs now offer in-house foundation years, sometimes referred to as "year zero" programmes, allowing for greater control over entry requirements, curriculum design, and academic oversight. Successful completion typically guarantees progression to the first year of undergraduate study.

Home foundation programmes typically provide subject-specific preparation and academic skill development for students who do not meet standard entry requirements, including those with non-traditional qualifications, educational gaps, or returning to study after a break. These foundation programmes are often delivered by the same subject-specific academic departments as the corresponding undergraduate degree, ensuring consistency in teaching approaches and academic standards. Students on these pathways may experience distinct difficulties

compared to those entering directly into degree programmes. Practical barriers, such as balancing studies with paid employment, and social challenges, including limited cultural capital, can shape their academic journey (Reay et al., 2005; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Bailey and Marsh (2010) and Ainley (2002) highlight concerns related to retention and the need for additional support during the transition to HE. Similarly, Seal and Parkes (2019) found that foundation students often contend with negative educational labelling and feelings of "othering," which can undermine their sense of belonging. They advocate for approaches that encourage students to critically reflect on their experiences, shifting away from deficit narratives and fostering readiness for university-level study. Despite these challenges, research highlights significant benefits for home students completing foundation years. Hale (2020) observed that these students often develop greater confidence in seeking support, engage more actively in extracurricular activities, and become familiar with university systems, facilities, and support services. This preparation strengthens home students' transition into undergraduate study and may similarly benefit international foundation students who progress within the same institution.

This research focuses specifically on international students and IFPs. While literature on IFPs remains limited, insights from home foundation programmes provide a useful framework for understanding common themes, including fostering a sense of belonging, challenging deficit perspectives, and supporting transitions into HE. However, foundation courses for home and international students are typically delivered separately, reflecting their distinct needs. For instance, IFPs often incorporate additional components, such as English language development, to enhance academic success.

1.6.2 International Foundation Programmes (IFPs)

Many international students come from education systems with fewer than 13 years of schooling, meaning their qualifications may not meet the entry requirements for direct admission to UK undergraduate programmes. IFPs bridge this gap by providing subject-specific preparation, academic skills development, and, in many cases, English language support to ensure students are equipped for successful progression into HE (Leech et al., 2016).

IFPs are delivered either as integrated routes within undergraduate faculties or as stand-alone programmes, offered by universities, private providers, or through partnerships between the two. Lawrence (2024) identified seven distinct modules commonly included in IFP curricula, reflecting the diverse academic and skill-based preparation required to support international students' transitions to undergraduate study. The entry requirements to access undergraduate courses also vary significantly across universities, reflecting a fragmented system. While some institutions permit progression with a minimum pass mark of 40%, others impose stricter criteria, such as achieving grades above 70% and requiring students to apply through UCAS. This inconsistency highlights the lack of standardisation in IFP provision.

The rising global demand for UK education, increasingly viewed as a profitable commodity, has intensified competition in the IFP market, often at the expense of the social, cultural and educational value of these programmes (Naidoo, 2004). While university-run IFPs are subject to institutional quality assurance processes, there is no sector-wide regulatory framework ensuring consistency across all providers (Lawrence, 2025). Unlike foundation programmes for home students, IFPs do not fall under the direct oversight of bodies such as Ofsted or the Office for Students (OfS), leading to significant variation in curriculum design, assessment standards, and student support structures. Although many providers voluntarily align with OfS

requirements to demonstrate their commitment to quality, Lawrence (2025) highlights the absence of a formal level descriptor for IFPs, which contributes to inconsistencies in programme delivery. To address this, the University Pathway Alliance (UPA) is developing a standardised level 3 descriptor, which aims to provide greater clarity and uniformity across the sector. However, until such measures are widely adopted, the IFP landscape remains highly fragmented, shaped by institutional priorities and commercial pressures, rather than a unified regulatory standard. This inconsistency can lead to unequal student experiences, affecting the quality of academic preparation, access to support, and ultimately, the readiness of international foundation students to transition successfully into undergraduate study.

Despite these challenges, IFPs remain essential in equipping international students with the academic and linguistic skills necessary for undergraduate success. They also play a crucial role in supporting students' adaptation to the UK education system, which often differs significantly from their prior learning experiences. Many international students come from education systems that emphasise didactic teaching, rote memorisation, and exam-based assessments, whereas UK HE promotes critical thinking, independent learning, and collaborative engagement (Trenkic and Warmington, 2019). Adjusting to this new academic culture can be particularly challenging for students whose previous education did not encourage active participation or the development of analytical skills (Jones et al., 2020). The challenge is further compounded by studying in a non-dominant language, requiring students to master both subject content and complex academic communication styles (Schwiening and Tranter, 2019). These factors can impact students' ability to engage with course material, contribute to discussions, and succeed in assessments.

HEIs have an ethical responsibility to support international students through this transition. Schwiening and Tranter (2019) highlight the importance of targeted interventions, such as language development workshops and academic writing tutorials, to help students overcome linguistic barriers and fully engage with their

studies. Scaffolding techniques, as emphasised by Trenkic and Warmington (2019) and Jones et al. (2020), can enhance student outcomes by gradually developing their academic and linguistic skills. A holistic approach that acknowledges students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is essential for fostering their success in HE (Bisai and Singh, 2020).

1.6.3 Teaching of international foundation students

The teaching of international foundation students requires a holistic approach that integrates scaffolded learning strategies, targeted language support, and inclusive pedagogical practices. These measures are essential for bridging gaps in prior knowledge, fostering critical engagement, and countering the deficit narratives that international students frequently encounter. By aligning teaching approaches with the diverse needs of IFP cohorts, educators play a crucial role in levelling the playing field and ensuring these programmes serve as equitable pathways to HE. However, as previously highlighted, the teaching of IFP students lacks formal legislative oversight, both in terms of curriculum development and the qualifications required of educators in this sector. Many IFP teachers have not received specific training focused on supporting international students or preparing them for the transition to undergraduate studies. This lack of structured professional development further complicates efforts to provide effective support for students navigating a new academic culture.

For most IFP students, English is not their dominant language or, as Bourdieu (2024) would describe their linguistic habitus. This can impact their confidence in participating in class discussions, collaborating with peers, and engaging with course materials. Ryan and Hellmundt (2005) highlight the academic shock many international students experience upon arriving in the UK, emphasising the need for sociocultural learning approaches that do not disadvantage students from diverse educational backgrounds. A study comparing the experiences of domestic and

international students found that home students generally outperformed their international peers, particularly in coursework, whereas international students tended to perform better in exams (Kelly and Morgan, 2012). While there is extensive research on the attainment gap related to gender and ethnicity among UK undergraduates, there is limited research on international students, despite many institutions recognising their comparatively lower grades (Gemmell and Harrison, 2023).

Although IFPs are designed to prepare students for undergraduate study, Pring (2010) highlights the need for evidence-based policies to evaluate which strategies are most effective. Advocates of evidence-based practice argue that there has been little systematic investigation into how educational evidence is gathered and applied. This highlights the importance of research-informed teaching approaches that are both effective and responsive to the diverse needs of international students. My research explores these challenges through the lens of student experience, focusing on the transitional adjustments required by students whose prior education differs markedly from UK HE. Educators must not only support students' academic and linguistic development but also foster their sense of belonging and confidence in an unfamiliar academic culture.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions about how IFPs can effectively support international foundation students by examining their development of academic capital through Bourdieu's (1988) concepts. It explores the knowledge and skills students perceive as valuable and the factors they believe contribute to a successful transition to undergraduate study. By centring students' perspectives, this research investigates how international foundation students actively develop their own capital and how UK HEIs can better facilitate this process, enabling students to thrive rather than merely survive.

1.7 Research aims and research questions

The purpose of this research is to contribute to research-informed approaches to IFP provision by engaging with a small group of international foundation alumni, at one HEI to understand their lived experiences. Using creative student-centred research methods such as listening rooms and walking interviews, this study explores the complexities of their academic journeys, including the challenges they encountered and the support mechanisms that shaped their foundation year. As Hartas (2010) emphasises, educational research should engage with the voices of teachers, learners, and policymakers to inform and improve practice. By conducting research with, rather than on, international students, this study adopts an inclusive and authentic approach that actively works to rebalance the power dynamic between researcher and participants. This collaboration fosters mutual learning, strengthens students' sense of belonging, and enhances both the research process and its outcomes (Tranter, 2023). By centring student voices, this research aims to offer insights into how IFPs can better support students' transitions to undergraduate study. It seeks to inform policies and practices that facilitate smoother academic integration while also highlighting the need for evidence-based strategies that genuinely reflect the experiences and needs of international students.

This study draws on Bourdieu's (1988) concepts of habitus, capital, and field to examine the development of knowledge, skills, and resources that support students' success. It explores how international foundation students identify and cultivate forms of capital that enable them to succeed in undergraduate education. Additionally, it investigates students' perspectives on their role in developing their own capital and how UK HEIs can better facilitate this process.

To explore these themes, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What academic capital do international foundation students develop and value during their foundation year?

- How can international foundation students become more actively engaged in the development of their own capital?

- What can UK higher education institutions do to facilitate international foundation students' development of capital and enable a successful transition to undergraduate studies?

This research approach is grounded in the belief that education is not merely a commodity, and that co-production within education fosters innovation (Rubalcaba, 2022). The study involved six international students, from the same HEI, who had completed the same IFP during the 2021/22 or 2022/23 academic years. To preserve anonymity, participants selected their own pseudonyms and determined how they wanted their home country to be described.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 examines the limited literature available related to international foundation students and therefore draws upon research on both international and foundation students to explore the distinct position these students occupy within the field of HE. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on the deficit model, which emphasises the skills and knowledge that international students are perceived to lack. This chapter shifts the focus by exploring the strengths and experiences of international students, aiming to identify ways in which these can be utilised to more effectively support international foundation students in their transition to undergraduate studies.

Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical concepts underpinning this study, which draws primarily from Bourdieu's (1977; 1988) theory of social practice, particularly his concepts of capital, habitus, and field. Bourdieu's concepts offer a lens through which to understand how international foundation students navigate the complexities of HE and the transition to undergraduate studies. This theoretical approach allows for a deeper exploration of the students' lived experiences and offers a way to understand the intersection of their personal histories, educational practices, and institutional expectations. The chapter also discusses how Bourdieu's concepts align with the study's methodological approach, informing the research methods used to gather data and ensuring the voices of international foundation students are central to this study.

Chapter 4 details the methodological approach to understanding the experiences of international foundation students. Two phases of data collection methods are used: listening rooms and walking interviews. These methods are designed to foreground the voices of students, allowing them to share their experiences in an inclusive and authentic way. Data gathered through these methods is analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), with Bourdieu's (1988) lens of habitus, capital, and field informing the analytical process. These theoretical concepts offer a deeper insight into how students navigate their transition to undergraduate study and the forms of capital they develop in the process.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and discussion of the data collected from the listening rooms and walking interviews. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), key themes are developed around students' academic capital, social integration, and their sense of belonging. The analysis draws on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field to interpret how students' cultural, social, and academic resources influenced their experiences during their foundation year and their transition to undergraduate study. This chapter explores the interplay between students' perceptions of their academic abilities and the support they received, highlighting the tensions between their expectations and the challenges they faced. It

also examines how students navigated their social and academic environments, and the ways in which their sense of belonging was shaped by both institutional structures and peer relationships. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, addressing the gap in research on international foundation students and considering how the insights gained can inform future pedagogical practices.

Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarising the key findings, drawing connections between the research questions and the data analysis. The chapter reflects on how this research has contributed to a deeper understanding of international foundation students' experiences of the IFP, particularly in relation to the development of their academic capital, social integration, and sense of belonging and how these factors have supported their transition to undergraduate studies. It highlights the importance of listening to students' voices and rethinking the support mechanisms offered through IFPs to better facilitate their transition to undergraduate study. The chapter also presents reflections for enhancing IFPs, including the integration of employability skills, increased mentoring opportunities, and strategies for fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the study's contribution to original knowledge is discussed, emphasising its novel application of Bourdieu's theory to the context of international foundation students, as well as the use of creative research methods to engage students as active contributors to educational knowledge. By addressing a significant gap in the literature and offering practical reflections, this research provides valuable insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers aiming to improve the experiences and outcomes of international foundation students in the UK.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The transition of international foundation students to HE represents a critical phase in their academic journey, influencing not only their immediate success at university but also their long-term academic and personal development. This literature review explores existing research on the lived experiences of international foundation students, with particular attention to the challenges they face, the support mechanisms available to them, and their academic preparedness as they transition to undergraduate study. By analysing the literature, this review highlights the key factors that shape a successful transition, including cultural adaptation, language proficiency, academic support systems, and institutional practices, while also identifying gaps in current knowledge. Additionally, by synthesising existing studies, I highlight areas where further research is needed and demonstrate how my study contributes to a deeper understanding of HE transitions for international foundation students.

2.2 Conducting the Literature review

2.2.1 Selection Criteria and Sources

To conduct the literature review, I selected several academic databases highly relevant to educational research, ensuring extensive access to peer-reviewed studies. These included Google Scholar for interdisciplinary insights into global mobility trends and international student experiences, ERIC for education-specific literature on student transitions and institutional support systems, and Scopus for articles in high-impact journals focusing on educational theories and concepts.

Additionally, JSTOR, SAGE Journals Online, Taylor and Francis, and specialist education repositories provided access to a broad range of scholarly materials, including book chapters and policy documents. Sources were chosen based on their alignment with the research themes of international students' experiences, educational transitions, and the conceptual frameworks underpinning this study, particularly Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field. This review prioritised publications from the year 2000 onwards to ensure contemporary relevance.

2.2.2 Search Strategy and refinement

The initial search phrase, "international foundation students transitioning to undergraduate studies in UK HE," yielded a limited number of sources which offered insights directly relevant to my subject area. This lack of targeted research is significant, as international foundation students face unique challenges that differ from those of direct-entry international students or home foundation students. To address this, narrower searches were conducted using iteratively developed keywords and phrases, such as:

- "international foundation students"
- "foundation students"
- "international students"
- "transitions to higher education"
- "academic capital"
- "social capital"
- "linguistic capital"
- "academic shock"
- "Bourdieu and transitions"
- "Bourdieu and international students"

These terms were combined using Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) and truncations to ensure comprehensive and focused results. For instance, searches such as "international foundation students AND higher education transition" and "Bourdieu AND international students" were employed to capture relevant studies. Once key literature was identified, search terms were refined further to concentrate on IFPs and their role in academic transitions. Alongside comprehensive database searches, I employed snowballing techniques by reviewing the reference lists of key studies to identify additional influential works. This method ensured that seminal studies and emerging research were incorporated into the review. The combination of a strategic thematic search process and snowballing allowed me to build a comprehensive and focused understanding of the experiences of international foundation students transitioning to HE in the UK, providing a robust foundation for my research.

To maintain academic rigor and ensure relevance, additional inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied (see Table 1 below). This iterative process allowed for the identification of both interdisciplinary perspectives and a focused examination of the experiences of international foundation students.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion
Predominant publication date post 2000 to ensure academic rigor and the literature reflects contemporary challenges, practices and innovations.	Publication date pre 2000 except where seminal or relevance to Bourdieu and the development and application of the concepts of capital, field and habitus.
Peer reviewed journals and academic literature.	Non-peered reviewed articles such as blogs, opinion piece
Studies specifically addressing international foundation students or those exploring similar populations (e.g., home foundation students or international students) with direct relevance to the transitional experience.	Research focusing on transitions within primary or secondary education as they are distinct from transitions in HE.
Predominant focus on studies from the UK, US, and Australia, which have IFPs and host diverse populations learning in a non-dominant language.	Irrelevant topics not addressing international students, foundation students or transitions or Bourdieu's concepts.
Official data repositories**,** statistical agencies**,** or official datasets to provide relevant statistics, for example Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).	

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Search Criteria

In addition to the criteria in table 1, I also searched for relevant studies which aligned with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field. This approach emphasised the structural and relational dimensions of students' experiences, making it essential to select studies that explore the interplay between individual agency and broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Studies were included if they provided insights into international students' transitions, focusing on aspects such as cultural adaptation, identity formation, and academic and social integration. In particular:

- Habitus: Literature exploring students' prior educational and cultural backgrounds, examining how this influences their engagement with the foundation program and adaptation to HE.

- Capital: Studies addressing the forms of capital (social, cultural, linguistic, academic) that students bring to or develop during their transitions, and how these resources shape their experiences.

- Field: Research focusing on the structural and institutional dimensions of HE and how these influences or constrain students' ability to navigate and succeed within the new academic environment.

By including studies that engage with these themes, the review ensures that the selected literature contributes meaningfully to understanding international foundation students' experiences through a Bourdieusian lens. This inclusion also provides a theoretical consistency that strengthens the analysis and interpretation of findings. More information on the theoretical concepts utilised within this study is included within Chapter 3.

2.2.3 Thematic Categorisation

The retrieved literature was organised into sub-themes such as international students, foundation students, transitions, belonging and student experience. This approach ensured a thorough and well-organised identification of literature, offering a solid basis for analysing the multifaceted experiences of international foundation students in their transition to HE. Engaging critically with the literature enabled the identification of patterns, gaps, and under-represented perspectives. This process contextualised my study within existing scholarship and demonstrated its alignment with ongoing debates in the field. By organising and analysing the literature

thematically, I was able to build a strong foundation for exploring the complexities of international foundation students' transitions and their implications for educational practices and policies.

In addition, following the thematic analysis of the data, the theme of employability emerged as particularly prominent. Recognising its significance, I conducted additional research to explore this area in greater depth. As a result, the theme of employability has been incorporated as a later addition to this chapter.

2.3 Scarcity of the literature

Research on the transition of international foundation students into HE remains relatively underexplored on a global scale (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017). This lack of targeted research is significant, as international foundation students face unique challenges that differ from those of direct-entry international undergraduate students or home foundation students. Given this gap in the literature, it was necessary to adopt a broader approach to the review.

To ensure a comprehensive perspective, the literature search criteria were expanded to include studies on international foundation students in other countries, such as Australia and the United States, both of which host IFPs. While literature on both "international students" and "foundation students" was reviewed, it was crucial to recognise that these students occupy a unique position, in that they are neither solely international students nor solely foundation students but a distinct group with their own identity. Consequently, only certain issues highlighted in the broader literature on "international students" and "foundation students" were directly relevant (See Figure 4: below).

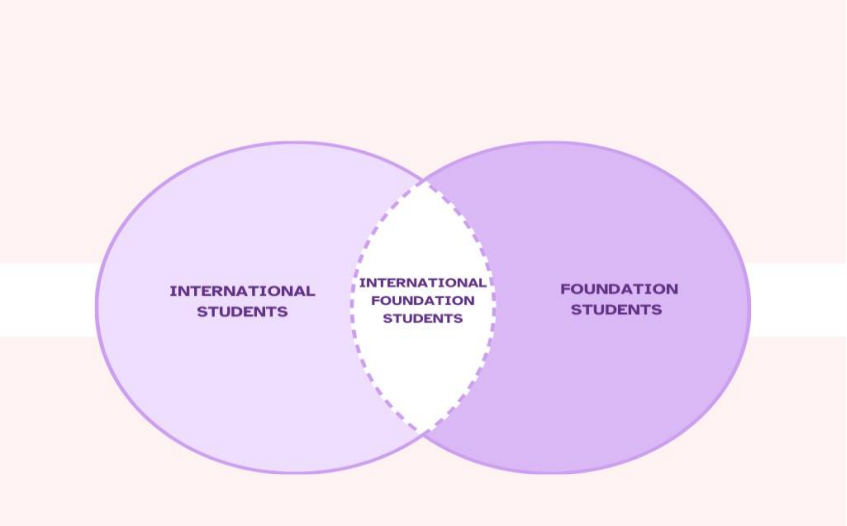

Figure 4: Cross section of where international foundation students are situated (Author's own, creating using Canva, 2025)

To effectively support international foundation students, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of their individual narratives and experiences, or we risk a scattergun approach (Brooman and Darwent, 2014) to interventions. While the literature on international students and foundation students offers valuable insights, it does not fully capture the distinct challenges faced by international foundation students. Therefore, this study has taken the approach of reviewing the literature on international students, foundation students, and transitions separately while also embracing the synergy within these themes. It has specifically focused on the academic and social capital that students need to successfully develop during their foundation year to enable them to progress to undergraduate study at an HEI. Additionally, it examines how IFPs can support students in becoming more actively engaged in their development and transition.

Building on this exploration of academic and social capital, understanding the specific challenges international foundation students face, particularly in the context of academic capital, is critical to developing effective educational practices and policies that support this distinct group. By fostering greater integration among students, institutions can contribute to the broader goals of internationalisation and

social justice, creating an environment that enables all students to develop as future global citizens. This collaborative approach is essential for shaping inclusive educational communities where students from diverse backgrounds can thrive together. Addressing this gap, my study explores the experiences of international foundation students and examines how their academic capital influences their transitions into HE in the UK.

2.4 How current literature represents international students

2.4.1 International students as a homogenous group

The literature on international students often conceptualises them as a homogenous group with similar needs and experiences, which risks neglecting the considerable diversity within this population (Carroll, 2015). For example, Hanassab (2006) conducted a study involving 640 international students from a single U.S. university, investigating their perceptions of discrimination both on and off-campus. The research concludes there are significant differences in students' experiences based on nationality, with Hanassab (2006) emphasising the importance of future research focusing on individual nationalities to better capture the nuanced challenges and unique experiences faced by diverse groups of international students.

More recently Heng (2016) extended this argument, asserting that the exploration of international students' experiences must go beyond simplistic categorisations based on nationality. Conducting a year-long qualitative study with 18 students from Mainland China studying in the U.S., Heng (2016) researched the complexities and diverse experiences of these students. The research highlights challenges stemming from differences in educational systems, societal norms, and cultural expectations between China and the U.S., which reinforces the importance of avoiding reductive generalisations based on nationality, emphasising the need for a more in-depth understanding of the diverse and multifaceted experiences of students. Heng's

(2016) work also highlights the importance of recognising the individual agency and diverse experiences of international students.

2.4.2 Challenging the deficit model

Historically, international students have often been portrayed through a deficit lens, shaped by negative stereotypes. Earlier studies suggest they are reluctant to participate in class discussions, rely on a single source of information (Barron, 2007), expect explicit instructions on what to learn, and struggle to grasp that questions may have multiple valid answers (Robertson et al., 2000). Similarly, Choi (1997) and Moon (2003) describe international students as intimidated by academic staff, hesitant to seek help, or fearful of appearing impolite. These portrayals reinforce stereotypes that obscure the diverse strengths and contributions of international students, who are often inaccurately treated as a homogenous group. This historical framing aligns with broader critiques within academic discourse regarding the negative representation of international students. Lomer and Mittelmeier (2021) argue that fragmented literature, characterised by varied practices and conclusions, has hindered the development of cohesive, evidence-based strategies to support international students. Instead, much of this research has framed them as passive rather than active participants and contributors.

However, a growing body of literature challenges these deficit-based narratives, instead advocating for a more positive perspective that highlights the resilience and adaptability of international students as they navigate new academic and cultural environments (Leask, 2015). Jones et al. (2018) critiques the normalisation of Anglo-Western academic standards, which often position international students as deficient in critical thinking, language competence, or cultural integration. Such perspectives fail to acknowledge the active contributions and positive impacts international students bring to HE (Deuchar, 2022). Reframing these narratives provides an opportunity to recognise international students as valuable collaborators who enrich

academic communities through their diverse perspectives. Rather than viewing them through a lens of deficiency, their practices should be understood as integral to the educational field, actively shaping classrooms, campuses, and social spaces. This shift emphasises their role as cultural resources, enhancing HE through cross-cultural interaction and the sharing of cultural capital, benefiting both home and international students alike (Summers and Volet, 2008).

2.4.3 Recognising and empowering international students

International students often excel in their home countries, bringing diverse perspectives and innovative problem-solving skills to HE (Wu et al., 2015). However, persistent deficit narratives continue to frame them as passive learners (Karram, 2013), reluctant to engage in discussions (Straker, 2016), or lacking critical thinking skills (Song and McCarthy, 2018). These stereotypes obscure the significant contributions international students make to academic communities. Leask (2009) advocates for integrating multicultural group work into teaching practices to foster intercultural learning and mutual understanding. However, systemic barriers, such as inadequate teacher training and limited professional development, often hinder educators' ability to support international students effectively (Heng, 2019).

Andrade (2006) highlights the importance of HEIs acknowledging the unique challenges faced by international students and implementing strategies that foster their success. A recent qualitative study by Stickels et al. (2024) highlights the value of empowering international students by actively engaging them in shaping their own learning environments. In this study, four international undergraduate and postgraduate students facilitated six focus groups with 44 international peers across various disciplines and conducted seven individual hour-long semi-structured interviews. The research explored students' perspectives on the challenges they face, their adaptive use of pedagogical practices, and the students' recommendations for improved teaching strategies. The student co-researchers

proposed various practical suggestions, including incorporating interactive elements and pauses during lectures, facilitating peer-led academic tutorials to exchange skills and strategies, and fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual support. They also advocated for co-creating assignment briefs and revising marking schemes into more accessible language, enabling students to view these materials as tools for success rather than barriers.

Stickels et al. (2024) further argue that HEIs should prioritise developing academic skills over covering extensive content. By reducing content delivery in favour of equipping students with the skills to engage deeply and critically, HEIs can create more meaningful learning experiences. By adopting such approaches, institutions can cultivate a supportive environment that recognises and builds upon the strengths of international students. Stickels et al. (2024) emphasise that international students not only adapt to challenges but also provide valuable insights into improving their academic experiences. Creating platforms for students to share their perspectives and actively shape their educational environments fosters student agency and positions them as co-creators of their learning experiences.

This research centres on the experiences of international foundation students during their transitions into HE, exploring how they actively construct academic and social capital. By challenging deficit narratives, it aims to showcase their strengths and agency, offering a richer understanding of their contributions to the academic and social fabric of HE.

2.4.4 International students as agents of change

Scholarly work, including Tran (2016) and Tran and Vu (2018) critique recurring literature that portrays international students as passive recipients of education. Marginson (2014) instead identifies international students as strong agents of change who are in charge of their own lives. Through their agency, these students

actively leverage their cultural and social capital to navigate the “culture and language shocks” that come from pursuing an international education (Bai and Wang, 2024, p.2). Bai and Wang (2024) deliberately use the term “shock” rather than “deficit” to acknowledge the real challenges international students face while also capturing the emotional states of disorientation, distress, and frustration that can accompany their transition into a new educational environment.

Similarly, Luckett and Luckett (2009) explore the development of agency among first-generation HE students in South Africa, highlighting parallels with the experiences of international students. Both groups navigate unfamiliar academic and social environments, often encountering significant challenges that require tailored support to realise their full potential. Like international students, first-generation students are at different stages of identity formation. Some are beginning to develop a professional identity, while others are still shaping their personal sense of self. These shared experiences highlight the critical role of universities in fostering agency and providing targeted support that enables students to overcome barriers, develop their identities, and thrive in HE.

Despite growing recognition of their active role in HE, the agency of international students in shaping their educational experiences is often overlooked in the literature. Deuchar (2022) critiques this tendency, highlighting how much of the existing research emphasises the challenges international students face while minimising their active contributions. Lomer and Mittelmeier (2021) note that international students remain underrepresented in research and advocate for a shift toward acknowledging the complexities of their experiences. Rather than being defined solely by their differences, international students should be recognised as agents of change who not only navigate their own transitions but also contribute new perspectives, ideas, and cultural insights that enrich institutional practices and the wider learning environment.

Building on this perspective, the research methods in this study were intentionally designed to showcase the agency of international foundation students. By actively engaging them in the research process and recognising their expertise, this study challenges the deficit model of education and the tendency to "other" international students (Dervin, 2016). Acknowledging their agency and participation in shaping their academic journeys provides a richer understanding of their experiences, moving beyond challenges to highlight their strengths and influence within HE.

2.5 Transitions, belonging and student experience

The transitions international foundation students undergo when entering HE are deeply intertwined with their overall student experience and sense of belonging (Berry, 2005). These transitions involve navigating a complex interplay of academic, cultural, social, and psychological adjustments (Arthur, 2017). Students must adapt to unfamiliar pedagogical practices, often manage language barriers, and reconcile differing cultural norms, all while building new social networks and navigating the pressures of academic performance in an unfamiliar educational system (Hughes and Smail, 2014). These multifaceted challenges not only shape how students perceive HE but also influence their ability to establish a sense of belonging within this new environment. By highlighting these critical issues, this section examines the diverse factors influencing the transitions of international foundation students into HE, followed by a discussion on student belonging and student experience.

2.5.1 Transitions

Understanding transitions in HE

Recent definitions of transitions in HE often emphasise their multifaceted nature, involving shifts in academic, social, and personal identities. While traditionally conceptualised as a short-lived period of adjustment before reaching a new equilibrium, more contemporary perspectives recognise transitions as dynamic and ongoing processes that may be non-linear and recur at different stages of a student's journey. Dias and Santos (2023) describe transition as a dynamic process of acquiring new skills and adapting to new lifestyles while balancing personal and academic roles, conceptualising it as a form of "craft." Similarly, Sá (2023) highlights the importance of academic and social engagement in fostering integration and persistence, highlighting the role of extracurricular activities alongside academic work. These perspectives build on the broader literature, which consistently highlights the complex and evolving nature of transitions in HE. Critical elements such as belonging, social integration, and student expectations play pivotal roles in shaping successful transitions (Wilcox et al., 2005; Walton and Brady, 2017). When expectations are unmet, students may experience disengagement, reducing their likelihood of persistence (Kantanis, 2000). Post-pandemic challenges, such as disrupted schooling, limited socialisation opportunities, and heightened mental health concerns, have further intensified these difficulties, illustrates the need for sustained and tailored support (Pownall et al., 2022; Yates et al., 2020).

Scholars have increasingly focused on the concept of transition to better understand how students navigate new academic and social environments. Transition is widely recognised as a multifaceted process involving academic adjustment, cultural adaptation, social integration, and psychological well-being (Tinto, 1993; Gale and Parker, 2014). However, despite its prominence, the concept is often applied uncritically, leaving room for further exploration and refinement (Gale and Parker, 2014).

Tinto's (1993) model of student integration is a foundational framework in transition studies. The model emphasises the importance of academic and social integration in fostering student persistence and success. Tinto (1993) argues that students are more likely to succeed when they establish meaningful connections within their academic and social environments. While widely applied, this model has faced criticism for its institution-centric perspective, which often overlooks the agency of students and the diverse contexts they bring to HE (Thomas, 2002). More recently Gale and Parker (2014) were commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council to analyse twenty-four exemplars of effective institutional practices for supporting student transitions in HE and to conduct a systematic review of national and international literature on student transitions. Gale and Parker's (2014) analysis drew on a critical sociology of education and broader critical social theory, influenced by scholars such as Bourdieu (1988, 1990a), Bauman (2000), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Their review highlights three key strands in the literature: programmatic accounts detailing initiatives aimed at supporting students, particularly during their first year of HE (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Engstrom and Tinto, 2008); analytical studies employing quantitative and qualitative methods to explore HE student experiences (Hillman, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008); and theoretical conceptualisations of transitions that extend beyond formal educational contexts (Colley, 2007; Ecclestone, 2009).

The literature on transitions in HE often focuses on a variety of frameworks and factors that influence student success. Gale and Parker (2014) conclude that there are three conceptual frameworks of transition. The first framework, "transition as induction" views the process as structured and linear, focused on institution-led programs such as orientations that help students adapt to the rules, norms, and expectations of HE. While prevalent, this approach has been critiqued for placing the burden of adjustment solely on students, often ignoring systemic barriers and broader social or cultural challenges. The second framework, "transition as development" shifts attention to the personal growth and identity transformation students undergo. This model frames transition as a trajectory of self-improvement

and professional formation. For example, this can be seen in the focus on developing skills such as critical thinking or teamwork through structured workshops and extracurricular programs, which are designed to build students' competencies over time. While these initiatives acknowledge individual differences and foster growth, the framework often retains a hierarchical and linear progression, implicitly focusing on students' deficits, such as the assumed lack of critical skills, rather than addressing the systemic inequalities inherent in HE systems. The third framework, "transition as becoming" treats transition as a fluid, dynamic, and nonlinear process. This model considers the complexity of students' lived experiences, emphasising that transitions are shaped by a continuous interplay of social, cultural, and institutional factors (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018). Gale and Parker (2014) argue that this approach is more inclusive and student-centred, challenging fixed institutional definitions of success and advocating for systemic change. This framework underpins my analysis by offering a lens through which to interpret the nuanced and evolving nature of international foundation students' transitions, particularly in relation to their development of academic, social, and cultural capital.

Bowles et al. (2014) study explores students' perceptions of factors enabling a successful transition to HE, employing a mixed-methods approach to combine qualitative and quantitative insights. Through interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, the researchers identify 15 themes, which were refined into seven key enablers using an 80-item survey administered to 771 first-year students at an Australian university. These enablers were categorised into student-centred factors (effort, study skills, and cultural belonging) and university-led factors (orientation, learning resources, facilities, and social opportunities). The findings highlight that intrinsic motivation and accessible learning resources had the greatest impact on transition success, while social activities were found to be less influential. The study emphasises the interplay between endogenous (student-driven) and exogenous (institutional) factors. Endogenous factors refer to characteristics that originate within the student, such as personal effort and motivation, while exogenous factors are those external to the student, such as university support systems and resources. By balancing these two types of enablers, HEIs can create tailored support strategies

that foster belonging, academic engagement, and effective resource utilisation, ultimately supporting the diverse needs of students.

In addition, literature on transitions highlights the growing impact of the increased reliance on targets, performance criteria, and narrow metrics to measure success in HE (Erikson et al., 2021). In a competitive market, HEIs use tools such as outcome data, league table rankings, and branding to secure their position and ensure survival. For students, the shift to the neoliberal university repositions them as customers, prioritising their consumer-like relationship with education (Adisa et al., 2022). Tate and Glazzard (2024) contend that multiple transitions often occur simultaneously, with institutional or individual transitions triggering related shifts for others, within their connected networks. They emphasise the profound identity, cultural, and psychological transitions students undergo in HE and raise ethical concerns for those whose aspirations do not align with the employability-driven objectives of neoliberal universities.

In contrast, my research prioritises the voices and experiences of international foundation students, recognising them as active participants in shaping their educational journeys, rather than as customers of education. By engaging students directly in the research process, I aim to empower them, giving them the opportunity to influence the study's findings and ensuring their perspectives are recognised. This approach challenges the transactional view of students in contemporary HE, focusing instead on their agency, strengths, and contributions to the academic and social landscape of HE.

When viewed through Bourdieu's theoretical lens, these conceptualisations of transition can be understood in relation to habitus**,** capital, and field. Gale and Parker's (2014) "induction model" of transition reflects the assumption that students must adapt their habitus to align with the dominant norms and practices of the

academic field. This expectation often fails to acknowledge the mismatch between the cultural and social capital that students, especially international students, bring with them, and the forms of capital that are most valued in HE. As a result, students who are unfamiliar with the dominant academic culture may experience feelings of alienation or exclusion. The “development model” aligns with Bourdieu’s emphasis on capital accumulation but focuses primarily on the acquisition of academic capital within a predefined framework. While this acknowledges students' agency in adapting to new roles, it often fails to critique the structural inequities that shape their experiences. The “becoming model”, however, resonates deeply with Bourdieu’s recognition of the dynamic interaction between habitus and field. By acknowledging the multiplicity of experiences and the ongoing negotiation of identity and agency, this model highlights the transformative potential of education. It shifts the focus from student deficits to the need for HEIs to adapt and create more inclusive environments that validate and incorporate diverse forms of capital.

This research adopts the “becoming model” as a lens through which to analyse the experiences of international foundation students, linking it to their evolving habitus and the negotiation of capital within the academic and social fields. This perspective is central to the analysis of the data, where themes such as employability, belonging, and cultural adaptation are examined to illustrate how students navigate and shape their transitions. By drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs, the study highlights the agency and resilience of students while also identifying areas where HEIs can enhance support for them, providing an in-depth understanding of their educational journeys. For a detailed discussion of these themes, see the data analysis chapter.

Transitions for international students

Transition theories play a crucial role in shaping support strategies aimed at enhancing student experiences in HE. Traditional approaches often focus on early-

stage adjustments, such as induction programmes, under the assumption that minimal ongoing support is required once students have integrated (Winstone and Hulme, 2019). However, research increasingly emphasises the need for sustained and responsive support throughout the transition process (Bowles et al., 2014). For international students, transitions are particularly complex, involving cultural adaptation, academic adjustment, and the alignment of pre-existing cultural capital with institutional norms (Bourdieu, 1988; Sheridan, 2011). Misalignment in these areas can hinder relationship-building with peers and faculty, impacting students' overall experience. Creating inclusive environments that recognise cultural diversity as an asset is essential in fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing students' educational journeys (Pedler et al., 2022).

Bell (2016) explored the challenges faced by international students across 19 Scottish HEIs, highlighting issues such as socio-cultural integration, linguistic barriers, and academic misalignment. Difficulties in forming friendships, participating in social activities, and collaborating with domestic students often hinder integration. Many students also experience culture shock and “learning shock,” which can contribute to isolation, academic anxiety, and a diminished sense of belonging. While some overcome these difficulties through motivation and strategic adaptations, these efforts often come at a significant personal cost. For example, international students may feel pressure to suppress aspects of their identity to conform or spend excessive time on academic work to compensate for unfamiliarity with academic conventions, often leading to isolation and increased stress.

Despite meeting institutional entry requirements, many international students continue to face language-related challenges that impact their academic and social integration. These include navigating classroom discourse, understanding regional dialects, and engaging in academic discussions (Ramachandran, 2011). The transition from rote learning to more critical and independent learning approaches in UK HE can further exacerbate adjustment difficulties (Quan et al., 2016). International students often rely on familiar study strategies that may not align with

host institutions' expectations, resulting in suboptimal academic performance despite considerable effort (Burdett and Crossman, 2012). Addressing these gaps requires tailored support mechanisms that bridge prior educational experiences with the demands of UK HE.

Beyond academic challenges, linguistic and cultural differences influence social integration. International students must quickly adapt to new environments, from navigating public transport and healthcare systems to adjusting to unfamiliar social norms and financial demands (Ramachandran, 2011). Forming relationships with host students can ease this transition, improve language skills and foster a sense of belonging (Bai, 2016). However, cultural differences, such as social activities revolving around alcohol, can create barriers, particularly for students whose personal or religious values do not align with these norms (Wu et al., 2015). A lack of meaningful intercultural engagement can further isolate international students, highlighting the need for proactive interventions (Khojanashvili et al., 2023).

Ecochard and Fotheringham (2017) identify three key areas of adjustment for international students: academic expectations, language proficiency, and socio-cultural integration. These factors are interdependent, for example language proficiency affects academic performance and social integration, while academic challenges can amplify stress and feelings of isolation. Addressing these interconnected challenges through tailored support, such as phased transitions (Bell, 2016) and mentoring programmes (Morgan, 2015), is crucial to facilitating international students' successful transitions. The "becoming model" (Gale and Parker, 2014) offers a useful framework, viewing transitions as iterative and dynamic rather than static, reinforcing the need for ongoing, adaptable support.

Unlike their home and non-foundation peers, international students navigate additional complexities, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, and

balancing academic and familial expectations (Morgan and Nutt, 2020; Hughes and Smail, 2014). While traditional transition support often prioritises initial adjustments (Winstone and Hulme, 2019), research suggests that transitions are ongoing, shaping students' academic and personal experiences over time (Bowles et al., 2014). By centring international foundation students' experiences, this study not only examines their challenges but also highlights their strengths, contributing to the development of more inclusive and sustainable support strategies in HE.

Transition from international foundation programmes (IFPs)

As stated previously, research into the transition experiences of international foundation students to undergraduate studies in the UK is limited. Jones et al. (2018) addressed this gap with a sequential mixed-methods study, using qualitative and quantitative methods to explore this transition. In-depth interviews with 24 first-year international undergraduates, including both IFP and non-IFP students, provided detailed insights into their personal experiences and challenges. These interviews informed a survey distributed to 108 first-year students across four UK universities, which identified significant differences in academic and social integration.

Jones et al. (2018) highlighted both the potential of IFPs to support international students' transitions and the ongoing challenges in achieving this goal. Their study provides valuable insights into the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and academic confidence, yet practical difficulties persist. While IFPs aim to build resilience and prepare students for university life, challenges such as limited integration with UK home students and mismatches between students' socio-cultural and academic capital and university expectations remain prevalent. In addition, Jones et al. (2018) highlight the significance of creating inclusive environments and offering tailored support to help international students overcome challenges during their transition to HE. Bell (2016) similarly emphasises the necessity for cultural

awareness among staff, extended induction processes, and student-centred support models that cater to diverse needs. Both studies advocate for mutual adaptation, enhanced peer mentoring schemes, and aligning institutional practices to better meet the nuanced needs of international students.

Additionally, Jones et al. (2018) suggest that IFPs should gradually reduce the level of support provided, fostering students' development of independence through targeted training in workload management, meeting deadlines, and academic writing. To address the persistent lack of integration between international and home students, universities are encouraged to promote greater interaction through orientation programmes, extended induction activities, and shared modules. A stronger emphasis on internationalisation within the curriculum is also recommended to foster inclusivity and better prepare students for global citizenship. Both authors stress the need for robust social and academic support networks, such as peer mentoring and faculty engagement, to build a sense of belonging and confidence during students' transitions. However, many IFPs focus primarily on academic preparedness, often overlooking the broader, holistic needs of international students (Winstone and Hulme, 2019).

Bell (2016) emphasises that HEIs must take responsibility for sustaining high-quality provision for international students, which may require a cultural shift away from expecting students to fully assimilate into existing academic norms. Instead, HEIs should demonstrate a willingness to understand students’ educational backgrounds, academic expectations, socio-cultural contexts, and individual needs. Creating a welcoming environment involves staff reflecting on their own cultural biases and values, ensuring these do not inadvertently create barriers for international students' transitions. While induction activities, such as Freshers’ Week, are often designed to foster inclusion, they can unintentionally exclude students who arrive late or face cultural and religious constraints (Baik et al., 2015).

Bell (2016) recommends a multi-level approach to improve international student transitions. At policy level, Bell (2016) advocates for stronger pre-arrival engagement through alumni videos and social media, more personalised and sustained induction activities, expanded peer mentoring schemes, and enhanced language support integrated with academic literacy programs. Student services should shift from a deficit model of support to proactive development, managing campus spaces to promote socio-cultural integration. Additionally, Bell (2016) urges the use of data to monitor and improve support services, while students' associations could strengthen networks for international students through increased collaborations with home students. Ultimately, Bell (2016) calls for a move towards mutual adaptation, where both institutions and students engage in intercultural competence development. By fostering inclusive teaching practices, cultural awareness, and sustained support, HEIs can create more responsive environments that empower international students to thrive during their transitions into HE.

This research builds on these insights to explore the lived experiences of international foundation students in a stand-alone IFP. By amplifying their voices and adopting a creative, student-centred approach, this research aims to improve existing support structures. It positions the foundation year not as an isolated preparatory stage but as an integral part of a sustained transition process. In doing so, it seeks to inform the design and delivery of IFPs to better support the academic and social integration of international students as they navigate the complexities of transitioning into UK HE. Crucially, this research emphasises student-informed improvements, ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of international foundation students directly shape the evolution of policies, practices, and pedagogies within IFPs.

The problematisation of transitions

In much of the literature, transitions are often framed as distinct, linear phases rather than ongoing, fluid processes. This framing also tends to rely on deficit narratives, portraying students as needing to "bridge gaps" or overcome "hurdles" to align with institutional norms (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017). Such models risk positioning students as inherently lacking, with responsibility placed on the HEI to "fix" perceived shortcomings rather than acknowledging the complexities of individual student experiences. Gravett (2021) critiques these linear metaphors for focusing on institutional success metrics, such as retention and completion rates, rather than the lived realities of students themselves.

Bowles et al. (2014) highlight the critical importance of aligning students' experiences with their perceptions of transition, arguing that this alignment is essential for achieving educational goals. When misalignment occurs, it can lead to long-term impacts on students' engagement and sense of belonging, key factors in their overall success. However, these perceptions are often addressed only during the initial stages of a student's university journey, with limited consideration of how they evolve over time. Building on these critiques, Gravett (2021) extends Gale and Parker's (2014) concept of transitions as processes of "becoming," emphasising their ongoing and dynamic nature. This perspective shifts the focus from predefined endpoints, such as graduation or employment, and towards understanding who students are becoming at various stages of their educational journey. By doing so, Gravett (2021) challenges the neoliberal emphasis on fixed outcomes and instead celebrates the fluid, emergent aspects of student development. Such an approach recognises the diversity and individuality of student experiences, rejecting one-size-fits-all interventions in favour of more flexible, student-centred strategies.

Rather than viewing transition as a linear or uniform process, this study challenges the oversimplified notion of smooth progression, advocating for a richer understanding that considers students' agency, diverse trajectories, and the transformative nature of learning. Central to this approach is the recognition of students' own voices in articulating what has supported them throughout their transition. Rather than relying solely on institutional perspectives or predefined success metrics, this study foregrounds the lived experiences of students, acknowledging the relational and evolving aspects of their educational journeys. By doing so, it highlights the specific strategies, interactions, and support mechanisms that students themselves identify as meaningful, ensuring that their insights inform more responsive and student-centred approaches to transition support.

2.5.2 Student belonging

A sense of belonging, defined as feeling valued, included, and accepted within an academic or social community, plays a pivotal role in facilitating transitions (Thomas, 2012). This concept of belonging has emerged as a critical dimension of student success, particularly in the context of transitions to HE. Literature on both international students and foundation students note that students' feelings of belonging or mattering are an important feature of successful educational transitions (Hughes and Smail, 2014). Belonging encompasses the sense of being valued, accepted, and included within academic and social communities, and it is closely linked to retention, academic performance, and overall well-being (Pedler et al., 2022). For international foundation students transitioning to HE in the UK, belonging takes on additional complexity, as they must navigate unfamiliar cultural, social, and academic norms while striving to find their place within a different educational system.

However, belonging is not just about individual adjustment; it is deeply connected to institutional practices and power dynamics. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital,

and field provide a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics. International students often arrive with cultural capital such as knowledge, skills, and experiences, that may not align with the dominant norms of the host institution (Sheridan, 2011). This mismatch creates tension, as students are implicitly expected to adapt their habitus to fit the institutional field, often without reciprocal efforts from institutions to value or integrate their diverse forms of capital. Such unidirectional adaptation risks reinforcing the deficit model, where international students are perceived primarily through their challenges or "gaps" rather than their potential contributions (Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021). The following chapter builds on this discussion by exploring Bourdieu's theoretical concepts in greater depth and outlining how they are applied within the context of this study.

Literature on belonging highlights its multidimensional nature, encompassing academic, social, and cultural dimensions. Thomas (2012) developed this further, in that the sense of belonging should relate to the department rather than the university as a whole, and that links should be made to the students' discipline, and students taught to start thinking like a person situated within their chosen career. For example, those wishing to pursue an economics degree, should be encouraged to start thinking like an economist. Kitching and Hulme (2013) also conclude these activities need to be timetabled within students' core time, as otherwise it excludes students who have other responsibilities and those wishing to participate in extracurricular social activities. This resonates with the work of Palmer et al. (2009), who emphasise the importance of "meaningful connections" in fostering belonging.

Student belonging for international students

For international students, belonging extends beyond the university environment to include integration into the host country's culture (Arthur, 2017). Positive perceptions of belonging enhance academic engagement, motivation, and retention (Pedler et al., 2022; O'Keeffe, 2013)). However, the diverse cultural capital that international students bring often misaligns with the dominant institutional habitus (Bourdieu,

1988; Sheridan, 2011), exacerbating feelings of isolation and hindering their ability to form meaningful connections. Addressing this misalignment is essential to fostering belonging and supporting successful transitions for international students.

There is also the underlying assumption that international students must adapt to the dominant cultures in their host country, which distracts from focusing on the positive social connections international students make (Andrade, 2006). Much of the literature talks about acculturation of international students being defined as the "dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005: p.698). Acculturation takes place both at a group level, including changes at institutional levels and individual level, including changes to students' behaviour (Berry, 2005). However, a significant portion of the literature on acculturation primarily addresses immigrants and refugees, rather than international students (Smith and Khawaja, 2011) who have actively chosen to come to the UK to study and intend to return to their home country. Factors like personality, age, gender, openness to the host country, and attitudes influence how students experience and adapt to their new learning environment (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022), with the process of adapting to a new socio-cultural and academic setting being not linear (Zhou et al., 2008). Rienties and Tempelaar (2013) also emphasise that each student undergoes a unique acculturation experience, further highlighting the point that international students are not a homogenous group, as previously mentioned. This is another reason why this research was undertaken with and not on foundation alumni, so that their individual experiences can be shared and understood.

Gibson et al. (2023) conducted the largest study to date on the impact of studying in a different country. The study analysed data from 1,858 American students studying abroad in 27 countries over six years (2014–2020). While the research focused on English-speaking students studying overseas, some of its principles regarding the transition to a new country and education system are broadly applicable. One of the key findings was that students' intercultural growth during their study abroad is largely influenced by the level of disorientation they experience. A moderate degree

of disorientation was found to be beneficial, as it prompts students to question their assumptions, reflect on their cultural positioning, and develop new perspectives. These are key components of intercultural learning and adaptation. However, the study also identified a need for structured support and guidance, particularly in culturally and linguistically distinct settings, to ensure students are able to make sense of these challenges and use them as learning opportunities rather than feeling overwhelmed.

Gibson et al. (2023) further conclude that, in the post-COVID era, economic pressures have reshaped study abroad, leading to smaller programmes and an increased focus on risk mitigation, which can sometimes limit students' exposure to challenging and disorienting experiences. Financial constraints have also resulted in cuts to mentorship and instructor training, impacting programme quality. The study argues for study abroad models that balance financial realities with investments in cultural mentorship, emphasising that discomfort and unfamiliarity are crucial for transformative intercultural learning and for advancing global citizenship values in HE.

Wintre et al. (2015) observe that international students, unsurprisingly given their primary purpose for pursuing HE abroad, place greater emphasis on academic achievement than on adapting to their host country's culture. Meanwhile, Aladegbaiye et al. (2022) highlight how personal, social, and academic factors shape the acculturation experiences of international master’s students at a Dutch university. Important issues included university resources (such as study space, library, catering and sports facilities) and whether these met the students’ expectations, and the design of the programme and the flexibility of delivery and whether students had the opportunity to personalise the delivery of the programme. However, there is often a mismatch between international students’ expectations and their lived experiences (Aladegbaiye et al, 2022), which may impact psychologically, academically, and socially, leading to depression, feelings of isolation and poor academic performance (Dentakos et al., 2017). Aladegbaiye et al (2022) also identify academic workload,

time available for social activities and information on academic procedures as negatively impacting on students' acculturation. Other academic factors recorded, which had both a positive and negative impact, were students' interactions with teaching staff and how teachers played a role in developing intercultural groups within classes (Aladegbaiye et al, 2022, p.526).

Whilst Smith and Khawaja (2011) highlight the need for further research into supporting the acculturation of international students, they highlight the need for host countries to recognise their pivotal role in the acculturation of international students into university and wider society. A later study concluded this could be improved through greater opportunities to engage with academic staff and procedures, programme design and university facilities (Aladegbaiye et al, 2022). The study also identified the importance that universities have in working with and supporting international students to have the best student experience to support their acculturation motivation enabling them to thrive. Hence the last research question of this study focuses on the role of the IFP and what can be done at an institution level to support foundation students to transition to undergraduate studies.

2.5.3 Student experience

Within the field of education, students' sense of belonging is closely related to the notion of "student experience" and both are key to ensuring that students' transitions into HE are successful. There is a strong emphasis on capturing and measuring student experience, as a way of generating knowledge and measuring the learning process (Dewey, 1986). However, there is little written about the notion of experience and when one experience begins and another ends (Fox, 2008). The focus on "student experience" tends to mean a snapshot of that moment in time, rather than considering how students are actively engaging and influencing that experience over the course of time. This research adopts a similar perspective on the term "transition," viewing it as a holistic experience. Students were asked to reflect on

their foundation year as a continuum, from their initial arrival in the UK to the commencement of their undergraduate studies.

International students' experience

Much of the literature on international students assumes they should simply "assimilate" to Westernised pedagogical practices (Ploner, 2017) and the habitus of the university (Bourdieu, 1989). This perspective reinforces a deficit model, implying that international students do not truly "belong." However very few studies consider the experience of the international student and their experience of acculturation, which may be very different from what is imagined. For example, during my pilot study, an international undergraduate student reflected on her foundation year and stated that one of the reasons she chose to come to the UK to study was that, in her country, education had been very different, and she wanted to learn more "Westernised academic skills." She commented that it was not about being forced to adopt these skills to fit in, she actively wanted to acquire these skills (see methodology chapter for more details on the pilot study).

Deuchar (2022), in his review of current research on international students' experiences, identifies a key limitation: transition is often conceptualised as a relatively passive process. Researchers frequently conceptualise the student experience as something that happens to international students, rather than a process in which they are actively involved. This means that the literature focuses on the past in terms of what did or did not happen, and not the positive outcomes of this time. International foundation alumni in this research are in a unique position to be able to share their experiences, which may illuminate the discord between the aims of the IFP and the experience of those receiving it (Page and Chahboun, 2019). Student experience also tends to homogenise students, as it fails to identify how individual students are impacted by issues such as class, race, gender and ethnicity (Sabri, 2011). Homogenising students experience also fails to identify how services can be designed to support the diverse needs of all students (Jones, 2017).

International foundation students often face challenges transitioning to UK undergraduate study, as they move from didactic teaching methods to an academic environment that prioritises independent learning, critical thinking, and active participation (Turner, 2013). Developing skills such as reflective practice, self-expression, and academic debate takes time, yet these competencies are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and success (Jones et al., 2018). When students feel unprepared for these academic demands, they may experience self-doubt or imposter feelings, which can undermine their confidence and engagement (Thomas, 2012). The pace and structure of UK HE, however, often conflicts with the time students need to build this confidence. Clift et al. (2021) suggest that the managerial focus of neoliberal universities, characterised by an emphasis on efficiency, standardisation and measurable outcomes, can hinder the development of meaningful relationships and trust between researchers and participants. For international foundation students, this pressure can feel especially acute, as they must simultaneously navigate cultural adjustment, academic skill development, and language barriers (Leese, 2010; Tran, 2016). Students who have experienced more directive educational environments may require extended opportunities to build relationships with staff and peers, gradually gaining the confidence to share ideas and participate fully.

Many international students report they experience psychological and physical stress symptoms due to expectations to participate in classroom discussions and give presentations to their peers, with students having to employ different learning strategies rather than memorising text (Robertson et al, 2000). Many international students compare themselves to home students, and in doing so report their lack of study skills, their poor English language, time management, techniques for revision and examination techniques (Burns,1991). International students also report a lack of confidence with their English language which results in them being “trapped in a vicious cycle of isolation and silence” (Kaiser et al.2019, p.4). Their language skills further impact on their ability to develop “cultural knowledge, tarnishing their classroom experiences and their attempts at social interaction” (Kaiser et al, 2019,

p.4). As a result, international students may develop support strategies including additional work, reading, and writing groups with their peers which in the longer-term lead to feelings of isolation and increased educational difficulties. Common themes include minimal interaction with home students, a lack of feeling connected to their host country and a lack of effective teaching within the classroom (Arkoudis et al, 2013). As a result, international students are likely to have a very difficult educational experience than home students (Barron, 2007). However, many also report positive aspects, such as personal growth, increased independence, and the opportunity to develop intercultural skills (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Bai and Wang (2024) explore the experiences of 22 Chinese students in 2+2 joint programs between an Australian university and four Chinese institutions. The study recognised the recurring terms of “language and academic culture shocks” within the literature, when discussing international students and their experiences. Bai and Wang (2024) conclude that these students actively used four types of community cultural wealth: navigational capital, linguistic capital, social capital, and inspirational capital to manage these challenges. The study also concludes that students' agency is both socially and temporally shaped, influenced by their backgrounds, evolving needs, and future aspirations, which links to concepts such as Bourdieu (1988) habitus, field and capital. However, the terms “language and academic culture shock” also perpetuate a deficit-based perspective and a narrative of dependency (Fakunle, 2021a, p.674; Lomar and Mittelmeier, 2021, p.11).

The literature often fails to highlight the value of international foundation students’ contribution to HE and the positive and productive approaches of how students integrate and engage with their new educational journey and how they assist one another in both social and academic settings (Arkoudis and Tran, 2007). Deuchar (2022) argues that literature on international students should move away from focusing on experience and “othering” (Dervin, 2016) and instead highlight the practices of these students. This would enable the celebration of the creative ways international students have overcome these challenges and encourage policy makers to rethink interventions as a way of developing students’ capabilities and

resilience rather than filling a deficit (Arthur, 2017). International students should be viewed as individuals with diverse heritage and perspectives, who are able to enrich their host countries, increasing cultural awareness and appreciation (Harrison, 2002).

2.6 Employability skills

This section of the literature review was added following data collection, as employability and career-related skills emerged as significant themes in the students' narratives, an area I had not initially anticipated. Throughout the listening rooms and walking interviews, participants frequently expressed concerns about preparing for their future careers, discussing activities such as CV writing, maintaining a LinkedIn profile, and pursuing internships or similar opportunities. These discussions highlighted employability as a central concern, shaping students' perceptions of the foundation year and HE.

2.6.1 Definition and scope of employability skills

Employability skills refer to the essential attributes and competencies that enable individuals to gain employment, succeed in the workplace, and progress in their careers. These skills include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, and a range of other interpersonal and technical capabilities necessary for workplace success (Yorke, 2006). Career-related skills often refer more specifically to the knowledge and abilities required to secure employment, such as CV writing, interview techniques, networking, and career planning (Brown et al., 2003). In the context of this study, employability skills encompass both the broad set of skills needed to function effectively in a work environment and the specific career-related skills that students need to develop to enhance their employability prospects after graduation.

Within the UK, it is acknowledged that high quality careers guidance is essential for all students to realise their full potential (Department for Education, 2021). Research by the Department of Education and Ofsted in 2022, resulted in the Department of Education issuing statutory guidance for schools and guidance for further education colleges and sixth form colleges in January 2023 (Department for Education, 2023). This means that all home students should have received guidance prior to entering HE, however the quality of the guidance is dependent on the students' prior learning establishment. Once students enter HE, guidance on implementing employability skills is provided by Advance HE (2020). However, critics such as Tight (2023) argue that the emphasis on employability devalues the broader purpose of HE, reducing it to mere preparation for a lifetime of production work. Tight (2023) further contends that there is no clear definition of employability skills and no compelling evidence that employability initiatives are effective. In contrast, Healy et al. (2022) highlight the positive value of integrating both employability and career development skills, suggesting that such initiatives can enhance learning and support students' academic and professional growth.

2.6.2 The Relevance of Employability Skills for International Students

Educational policies related to employability skills in UK HE are predominantly designed for home students, often excluding international students from these initiatives (Fakunle, 2021b). This exclusion persists despite the significant economic contributions international students make to the UK economy. For international foundation students, the impact may be particularly pronounced, as they face unique challenges in developing employability and career related skills due to the diversity of their prior educational experiences. Many enter HE in the UK with varying levels of exposure to career services, internships, or professional networks, which may affect their readiness for the job market.

These challenges are even more critical given that employability is a key motivation for many international students choosing to study abroad (Soares and Mosquera, 2020; Nghia et al., 2019). Fischer (2015) also observed that career success, particularly for Chinese students, is often seen as essential not only for the students themselves but also for their families, which emphasises the immense pressure international students may feel to develop employability skills during their studies. However, despite the significant importance placed on employability by students, educational policies related to the development of these skills are typically designed for home students, thereby excluding international students from access to the full range of career support services (Fakunle, 2021b).

This exclusion is further compounded by the limited attention given to international students' experiences of employability skills in the literature (Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020). A potential reason for this gap is the assumption that international students are unlikely to remain in the UK after graduation due to visa restrictions, which limits their perceived contribution to the UK economy. While most international students face restrictions on paid employment, they are still able to engage in voluntary work, internships, and roles within university societies. These opportunities contribute to their personal and professional development by enhancing their academic and social capital, critical components of employability. However, the lack of targeted policies and support for international students in the development of employability skills exacerbates their feelings of exclusion and marginalisation within UK HE.

Although many international students return to their home countries after completing their studies, the development of employability skills remains crucial as they prepare for careers in their home contexts. Their exclusion from employability-focused initiatives in the UK thus reflects broader systemic inequalities within the field of HE and career services. From Bourdieu's perspective, this exclusion highlights the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital, which disadvantages international

students within the HE. These students often lack access to the tailored career resources and networks that would allow them to build transferable skills applicable both in the UK and internationally. Disparities in access to employability initiatives not only constrain international students' ability to build capital, but also reinforce feelings of marginalisation and underrepresentation. As Bourdieu (1990a) notes, habitus intersects with the structures of the field to influence students' ability to navigate these systems. For international students, unfamiliarity with UK-specific career expectations and norms further complicates their engagement with employability initiatives. By neglecting the unique needs of this group, HEIs risk perpetuating a misalignment between the support available and the aspirations of international students, ultimately hindering their ability to fully leverage their educational experiences in both their host and home countries.

2.7 Contribution to the literature

This research aims to contribute to the literature by emphasising the importance of understanding the nuanced experiences of international foundation students and the role of HEIs in fostering environments where these students can build trust, confidence, and academic skills over time. Effective transition support should centre on relationship-building and meaningful engagement, recognising that success involves not only academic achievement but also a strengthened sense of belonging, inclusion, and self-efficacy. By acknowledging the diverse cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds of foundation students, HEIs can more effectively support their evolving academic identities and overall experiences within HE.

This research seeks to challenge deficit-based perspectives of international students by focusing on their agency, resilience, and active participation in shaping their educational experiences. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2018) concepts of habitus, capital, and field, alongside Gale and Parker's (2014) "becoming" framework, the study

explores how international foundation students navigate and contribute to both the academic and social dimensions of HE. This reframing presents transition as a dynamic, multidimensional process where students are not merely adapting but actively influencing their academic identities and pathways to success.

2.8 Summary of literature review

The literature on international foundation students in HE highlights a critical need to move beyond deficit-based models that often focus on perceived shortcomings or challenges faced by these students. Instead, there is a growing call for a more thorough understanding that recognises the agency, resilience, and valuable cultural contributions of international students (Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021). Researchers argue for a shift towards embracing the complexities of international students' experiences, framing them as active agents in their education rather than as individuals defined solely by their differences. This includes recognising the positive contributions international students make to academic communities and rethinking the principles underpinning international education to prioritise learning from international students rather than imposing prescriptive approaches upon them (Deuchar, 2022).

The next chapter focuses on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework to explore the views and experiences of the international foundation students as they progress on to their undergraduate courses.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Approach

3.1 Introduction

The transition to HE represents a complex and multifaceted journey, particularly for international foundation students navigating unfamiliar academic and cultural landscapes. These transitions are often characterised by a tension between students' existing cultural and social dispositions and the expectations of their new educational environment. To better understand these dynamics, this research uses Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts as analytical tools for examining the interplay of habitus, capital, and field in shaping students' experiences. The following sections explore Bourdieu's concepts in detail, demonstrating their interconnectedness and their relevance to the experiences of international foundation students transitioning to UK HE.

3.2 Understanding student transitions through Bourdieu's lens

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher whose work has had a significant impact on the study of education, culture and social power. His theoretical approach, often described as constructivist structuralism, seeks to understand how individuals navigate social structures while simultaneously shaping them. Central to Bourdieu's work is the idea that social life is structured by fields, which are distinct social and academic spaces with their own rules and hierarchies. Within these fields, individuals' success is shaped by their habitus (deeply ingrained dispositions) and their accumulation of capital (cultural, social, and economic resources).

Bourdieu's concepts offer a valuable framework for examining the experiences of international foundation students as they transition into UK HE. In particular, his

theory of cultural capital highlights how students from diverse educational backgrounds bring varying levels of knowledge, skills, and familiarity with academic norms, which directly shape their engagement with university life. Reay (2004) applied Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to examine how working-class students navigate university, showing that those lacking institutionalised forms of capital often face challenges in academic integration and experience a sense of "otherness" in elite institutions. Likewise, international foundation students must navigate unfamiliar academic expectations, linguistic adjustments, and new pedagogical approaches, all of which are shaped by their existing cultural and social capital.

The concept of habitus offers further insights into how students' ingrained dispositions, shaped by their prior education and cultural background, influence their engagement with HE. International foundation students move between different fields, from their home educational system to the foundation programme and subsequently to undergraduate study, each with its own norms, hierarchies, and expectations. Understanding these transitions through Bourdieu's concepts enables an exploration of how students adjust, the challenges they encounter, and how institutions can better support their academic and social integration.

The literature on international foundation students reveals several recurring themes, particularly regarding students' perceived deficits in academic and social capital and their lack of familiarity with "the rules of the game" (Tran, 2016). These themes align closely with Bourdieu's theories on capital, habitus, and field, which provide a critical perspective for examining how students experience and navigate these transitions. Bourdieu's sociological approach is particularly valuable in bridging key debates in social theory, such as structure versus agency and material versus symbolic capital. His work offers important insights into the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures in shaping student transitions. This study applies Bourdieu's theoretical perspective to critically evaluate the factors influencing international foundation students' transitions. It considers not only the personal dispositions and resources students bring but also how the structures they navigate, both social and academic, affect their integration into HE. By drawing on these concepts, this study

seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which international foundation students adapt to UK HE and how institutional practices can be refined to better support them.

Bourdieu's work, often described as *"*enormously good to think with*"* (Jenkins, 1992, p.11), offers a comprehensive approach to examining the practical realities, power relations, and reflexive processes that shape student transitions. His theories reveal how individuals' behaviours are shaped by their social environments, while also critiquing the hierarchies and power dynamics that reinforce existing inequalities (Wacquant, 1998). Applying Bourdieu's perspective enables this study to move beyond a deficit view of international foundation students, instead recognising the diverse forms of capital they bring and exploring how these resources can be better leveraged within HE. However, it is acknowledged that Bourdieu's sociological lens may not fully account for individual psychological motivations or emotional experiences, which are also important aspects of student transitions. As Reay (2004) notes, while Bourdieu's concepts are powerful for analysing structure and power, they offer limited insight into personal agency and affective dimensions. These aspects, though beyond the scope of this study, represent areas for future exploration.

3.3 Bourdieu as an analytical tool

Bourdieu's analytical concepts of habitus, capital, and field provide valuable insights into the nuanced social dynamics that shape the experiences of international foundation students as they transition into HE. Bourdieu's concepts allow for a deeper exploration of complexity, offering fresh perspectives and valuable insights (Grenfell and Lebaron, 2014). For example, an international student from a system where rote learning is predominant, may initially struggle with the more interactive, critical thinking-based teaching style in UK universities. This mismatch between their habitus and the academic field may create both challenges and opportunities for adaptation. A student with strong cultural capital in their home country, such as

advanced knowledge of academic writing or fluency in English, may find it easier to adapt to the linguistic and academic demands of HE in the UK. However, a student who lacks this cultural capital might initially face difficulty in engaging with the academic discourse, requiring additional support and time to build that capital. Similarly, students with greater social capital, such as those able to form connections with peers, faculty or support services, are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and successfully navigate the institutional field. In contrast, students who lack these networks may experience isolation or marginalisation.

Habitus reflects the ingrained dispositions and attitudes that students bring with them, often shaped by their cultural and educational backgrounds. Capital, in its various forms (cultural, social, economic), can influence students' access to resources and support systems, affecting their adaptation to new academic and cultural environments. Finally, the concept of field allows for an examination of the HE landscape itself, framing it as a structured space where individuals with varying levels and types of capital interact. Applied together, these concepts demonstrate how international foundation students navigate their foundation courses and the broader university context, adapting to or reshaping these environments to support their educational trajectories. These concepts are explained individually below; however the concepts are intertwined, and Bourdieu would argue that they should not be considered separately (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

3.3.1 Habitus

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus offers a valuable lens through which to understand the transition of international foundation students into UK HE. The dispositions, attitudes, and ways of perceiving the world that students develop through socialisation in their home countries can profoundly shape how they engage with the academic and cultural environment in the UK. These prior experiences, rooted in specific learning habits, communication styles, and educational expectations, may lead students to interpret the demands of UK HE in ways that differ from those familiar to them

(Bourdieu, 1990b). For many international students, habitus reflects educational backgrounds that prioritise teacher-led instruction, structured learning environments, and guided rather than independent study (Ploner, 2018). These approaches contrast with the pedagogical norms in UK HE, where independent learning, critical engagement, and open academic debate are often encouraged, particularly in research-intensive universities (Turner, 2009; Montgomery, 2010). However, the extent to which these expectations apply can vary by institution and discipline, with some universities, explicitly promoting student autonomy and critical inquiry as part of their academic culture (Ryan and Louie, 2007). Bourdieu (1993) suggests habitus reflects the often-unconscious relationship individuals maintain with the field they inhabit, and this relationship can either facilitate or hinder adaptation to new educational contexts. However, habitus is not a static or fixed entity. As international foundation students navigate their new academic field, their habitus is likely to shift and evolve. Throughout their foundation year, as students engage with the new academic and cultural demands of the UK, they begin to internalise new norms, such as questioning ideas openly and developing independent study habits. The process of adapting to these new expectations involves a gradual reshaping of their habitus, as students learn to adjust their dispositions to fit within the academic and cultural field of HE in the UK (Bourdieu, 1990b).

While some scholars, such as Brooks and Wee (2008), have critiqued habitus for its perceived determinism and limited emphasis on student agency, Bourdieu (1977) suggests that agency is bound to the structures of the field. This perspective might be seen as limiting, but it does not rule out the possibility of active engagement and adaptation. The concept of agency, as explored by Bandura (2001), highlights the capacity for intentional influence over one's actions, suggesting that students can exert a degree of self-regulation and reflection in their adaptation. This raises the possibility that, while students' habitus may initially influence their experiences, they also have the potential to actively shape their decisions in and responses to the new academic environment, which is crucial for their successful transition (Klemenčič, 2015).

By examining habitus through Bourdieu's concept, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in how international foundation students negotiate their transition, blending their past educational dispositions with the demands of the UK HE system. This approach also allows for an exploration of how students might actively engage in reshaping their habitus, supporting their successful socialisation and integration into the academic field, as emphasised in the research on student agency and self-efficacy (Inouye et al., 2022).

3.3.2 Field

Bourdieu's concept of field refers to a structured social space with distinct rules, norms, and hierarchies, where various forms of capital are valued differently. Within the UK HE field, international foundation students encounter unique complexities, as this environment operates according to specific values and expectations, such as academic independence, critical thinking, and an often-implicit familiarity with Western educational practices. Bourdieu's notion of field also highlights the social positions occupied by institutions and individuals, and the power relationships between them (Jenkins, 2002, p.85). Students entering the UK educational field must navigate intersections of various fields, including government policies on student visas, institutional policies, and classroom practices. For example, the requirement for international students to maintain a certain attendance rate to comply with student visa conditions directly influences their engagement with the academic field. This external pressure can shape students' academic behaviours and attitudes, adding another layer of complexity as they attempt to balance institutional expectations with the demands of their studies.

International students entering this field also bring their own forms of capital, shaped by the educational and cultural systems of their home countries, which may or may not align with the capital valued in UK academia. For instance, while they may possess strong subject knowledge or linguistic capital in their native languages, they

may face challenges in adapting this knowledge to the expectations of UK HE. The broader field includes not only academic standards but also social interactions and networks that can affect students' sense of belonging and success. Additionally, policies established by UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI), such as the Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS), mandate that students meet a minimum number of contact hours each week. However, there are no government policies regulating the curriculum or delivery of IFPs, adding further variability in student experience. Analysing the UK education system as a field reveals potential barriers and opportunities that international foundation students face as they work to gain legitimacy, recognition, and success within this environment.

The relationship between different fields is not always straightforward, as fields do not exist in isolation but are interconnected, often overlapping in complex and sometimes contested ways (Grenfell and James, 2003. The field of IFP education, for example, does not simply exist within the broader HE field in a neatly subordinate position; rather, it interacts with and is shaped by it, in ways that are not always clear-cut. While IFPs are often designed to help students transition into undergraduate study, they do not merely replicate the norms and structures of HE. Instead, they function as a distinct space with their own pedagogical approaches, expectations, and institutional priorities, which may align with, diverge from, or even challenge those of HEIs. This "messiness" highlights how the relationship between these fields is dynamic rather than linear, with students needing to navigate the differences and tensions between them rather than simply progressing through a fixed pathway. For example, the university at the centre of this study requires students to achieve high grades (over 70%) in specific modules and independently complete the UCAS process as part of their transition to undergraduate study. In contrast, other institutions treat IFPs as an integrated part of their admissions pathway, automatically progressing students onto degree programmes if students achieve a pass mark of 40%. These inconsistencies highlight the relationship between IFPs and HEIs is neither seamless nor uniform, placing the burden on students to navigate differing institutional expectations rather than following a fixed or predictable pathway.

Like habitus, field is not static and is continually shaped and reshaped in each moment (Hilgers and Mangez, 2014). Grenfell (2004) explains the dynamic interdependence and ontological connection between field and habitus: a field is brought to life through the expression of the habitus of those within it, while an individual's habitus is shaped by the expressions within the field. In this sense, habitus and field can be seen as two sides of the same coin, and as Wacquant (1988) emphasises, neither can determine how individuals or groups behave.

3.3.3 Capital

Bourdieu introduced the concept of "capital" as a multidimensional framework, encompassing economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms. Each form of capital plays a critical role in determining an individual's position within society, influencing their opportunities and limitations. In this context, social and cultural capital are particularly significant, as they enable groups of people to develop and utilise resources, networks, and cultural practices that help define their identity, differentiate themselves from others, and compete within social fields. For international foundation students, this means they can convert social, cultural, and economic capital into qualifications, thereby gaining access to further forms of integrated capital, which in turn enhances their ability to compete both academically and professionally. As Wood (2014) notes, this conversion process allows students to secure competitive advantage, particularly when they return home (Tran, 2014). Robertson (2011) further argue that international students not only gain academic knowledge from their studies but also accumulate integrated capital, which enhances their mobility and future prospects.

Economic capital

In Bourdieusian terms, economic capital relates to the ownership of money or property. In relation to international students, the growing wealth and size of the middle classes and increasingly competitive HE in many countries such as China, India and Vietnam have resulted in increased international student mobility, with families and international companies using their economic capital to enable students to achieve foreign qualifications. These qualifications give students an advantage in the international labour market, thereby developing their social status and international mobility. International education is also recognised as a means of students achieving higher social status, giving them competitive advantage and increased employment opportunities (Tran, 2016).

Cultural capital

Bourdieu (1988) identified three types of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutional. Embodied cultural capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and mannerisms an individual develops over time, influenced by personal, familial, and social experiences. For international students, this can mean feeling and appearing different from local students while “buying membership” into a new culture through their foundation course. Objectified cultural capital is society-oriented and relates to material possessions; international foundation students may acquire certain items in the hope of fitting into their new cultural environment. Institutional cultural capital, the third type, refers to the formal recognition of educational achievements, which grants legitimacy to qualifications. For many international foundation students, obtaining a qualification from a UK university is highly desirable due to the global reputation of UK education and university rankings.

According to Beech (2019), international students often view UK education as superior to that in their home country, yet they still seek to attend what they perceive as the “best” universities. The concept of human capital, as viewed through a neoliberal lens, aligns with these motivations. The foundation year certificate is a form of human capital (Ucak, 2015) that enables students to transition onto undergraduate studies. In the late twentieth century, the value placed on human capital increased significantly due to globalisation, technological advances, and the rising demand for “knowledge” workers, showing that the wealth of nations increasingly depends on the quality of their human resources (Brown and Lauder, 2000).

Social capital

Social capital relates to students’ connections and how these connections are used. International students have connections and a network of relationships relating to their study programme, their university campus, their family and residential communities (Glass and Gesing, 2018). The make-up of these connections varies depending on the individuals within these identified communities, how interconnected these relationships are, the size and strength of the social interactions within these communities. Bai and Wang (2024) studied Chinese international students and identified the critical role of social capital and how these students must navigate unfamiliar culture when embarking on studying overseas. They identified international students predominately mobilised their social capital when confronted by academic writing challenges, seeking out their peers, or more senior students but ethnically similar, to support them (Bai and Wang, 2024). This creates its own problems with some teachers and students complaining about international students being reluctant to integrate with home students (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). However, Bai and Wang (2024, p.11) took a more positive view and concluded this behaviour was a “form of social and linguistic capital mobilisation rather than simply retreating to their comfort zone or being lazy.”

Social capital can also be understood as both a collective asset of a group and a product of social structures (Coleman, 1988). Putnam (2000) viewed social capital as a public rather than a private good, highlighting how it emerges through shared experiences, cultural norms, and common goals. Jensen and Jetten (2015) explored the role of bonding and bridging social capital in HE, defining bonding social capital as the relationships formed among peers and bridging social capital as the connections established between students and academics. Their research found that bonding social capital enhances students' sense of belonging, while bridging social capital supports their academic and professional identity development.

Academic capital

The term "academic capital" is a more recent development from Bourdieu's work on capital and refers to the forms of capital that can be gained, accumulated, and utilised within the academic field (Demeter, 2019). According to Bourdieu, all forms of capital may take on institutionalised, embodied, or objectified forms. Institutionalised academic capital includes formal qualifications and recognitions that hold value within academia such as degrees, diplomas, research grants, and fellowships. However, it also extends to the academic prestige associated with institutional affiliations, ranking systems, and access to professional networks that facilitate career progression. Embodied academic capital is more than just language proficiency or technical skills; it encompasses the ways students engage with academic knowledge, including their ability to think critically, approach learning autonomously, and adapt to disciplinary norms and epistemological traditions. It also reflects students' attitudes towards knowledge production, such as their confidence in contributing to academic discussions, their understanding of research conventions, and their ability to navigate disciplinary debates. Objectified academic capital consists of tangible academic resources, such as scholarly publications, research tools, and access to digital databases like Scopus. These materials, while external to the individual, are essential for academic engagement and knowledge production.

For international foundation students, academic capital represents the essential resources needed for success (Eddy, 2006), encompassing the knowledge, skills, and assets acquired through educational experiences, such as formal schooling, intellectual exploration, and extracurricular involvement. Given their diverse educational backgrounds, these students often face unique challenges in building academic capital, including adapting to unfamiliar pedagogy, understanding academic norms and practices, navigating cultural differences, and developing language proficiency. Eddy's (2006) research focuses on the academic capital that post-doctoral students require to secure employment, concluding that academic capital can be developed through activities like publishing, teaching, and networking. Eddy (2006) found that many students only recognise the importance of academic capital after completing their doctoral studies and entering the job market. Similarly, international foundation students often come to appreciate how their accumulated academic capital has facilitated their transition to undergraduate studies.

This aligns with the research conducted in this study, where students are asked to reflect on their foundation year and the academic capital they acquired, which supported their progression to undergraduate studies. By investigating the forms of academic capital students have accumulated, this research highlights how they actively negotiate the academic field, drawing on their prior knowledge while adapting to new academic demands. This focus on the role of academic capital in students' transitions is essential, as it highlights the strategies they use and the resources they access to navigate and succeed in their academic journey. By exploring these processes, this research contributes to the field of international foundation education by providing a deeper understanding of how students develop the capital needed for integration and success in UK HE. It also offers practical insights for educators and institutions aiming to better support students in building the necessary capital, ultimately enriching their academic experiences and future opportunities.

International students' capital

Bourdieu conceptualises capital as assets generated, utilised, and transformed through social interactions and institutions, yet Moore (2008, p.105) expands this view by describing capital as a dynamic force, a capacity or energy that drives development. This perspective is particularly relevant for international students who, throughout their foundation year, build capital that supports their transition to undergraduate studies. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) observed that different forms of capital and habitus are often in contention, with some types valued more highly in certain contexts. Reay (2004) also explored how cultural capital can carry economic implications, as students may or may not be able to leverage this capital to gain advantages within specific fields. International students often arrive in the UK with cultural capital from their home countries, yet this capital may not be fully recognised within UK HE. For foundation students in this study, success is generally measured by securing good grades during their foundation year, which enables them to progress to their chosen undergraduate programs. Wood (2014) argued for a holistic approach to researching social, economic, and cultural capital together, suggesting that international students accumulate an integrated form of capital through their experiences in international education.

Just as the nature of a field evolves over time, so too does the configuration of capital that is valued within it. Bourdieu (1990a) also notes that capital can lose its value when it becomes more widely accessible and commonly possessed. An example relevant to international foundation students would be the increasing value placed on English language proficiency as a form of capital within UK HE. Initially, being proficient in English could set international students apart, offering them a distinct advantage in academic and social integration. However, as English language skills become more common among international students globally, this form of capital may lose some of its competitive edge. As more students acquire high-level English proficiency, UK universities and employers may place additional emphasis on other forms of capital, such as critical thinking skills, familiarity with Western academic conventions, or specific qualifications, to differentiate between candidates.

This dynamic highlights how the capital valued in the educational field shifts over time, with international foundation students needing to continually build and adapt their skills to align with changing expectations.

Additional literature on international students' capital includes various other types of capital. For example, Bai and Wang (2024) researched Chinese students studying in Australia and identified four types of capital which international students need to acquire: navigational, linguistic, social and aspirational. Navigational capital includes the knowledge, skills and strategies that students have from their past education and their ability to navigate away from their habitus and develop their "imagined identities" (Darvin and Norton, 2015). Linguistic capital or language culture shock relates to the reading, writing, speaking, and listening strategies often mentioned in relation to international students, who are learning in their non-dominant language. However, international students are also able to utilise their native language capital to facilitate their understanding of academic material, written in English language, through using internet searches, online dictionaries and possibly translation software (Bai and Wang, 2024). Alternatively, they may use their social capital and work with their peers, to develop notes and model answers. Whilst this may assist them initially, it may also lead to longer-term feelings of isolation and increase their educational difficulties (Barron, 2007, p.6) due to the increased amount of time they are studying and missed opportunities to integrate with other students. This isolation can exacerbate educational challenges, as students may miss out on informal learning opportunities and social interactions that enhance their integration into the academic and cultural environment. Furthermore, the additional time invested in self-study and reliance on native language support can increase the academic burden, potentially leading to burnout and reduced opportunities for collaborative learning with their peers. Therefore, this research aims to identity opportunities to support international foundation students more which may negate some of these educational challenges, in terms of what they themselves could do and what the IFP could do to support their transition.

Many international students also have aspirational capital, in that they have aspirational dreams and hopes even when there is no evidence that these can be fulfilled (Yosso, 2005). Literature denotes that for students of a Chinese heritage, these are strongly influenced by their parents (Zhou, 2014). Bai and Wang (2024) concluded that this aspirational capital appeared to be an enabler with students proactively seeking out and developing other forms of capital to achieve their hopes and dreams. In the pilot study, undertaken with an IFP alumnus, she identified her aspirational capital and her desire to be part of a more Westernised HE system and achieve an undergraduate degree from a UK university.

Wood (2014) concluded students do not merely passively receive capital, more they are able to develop, improve and transform capital in different ways. Tran (2016) took this further by stating forms of capital operate differently and interact together identifying that if a mismatch is present between the habitus of the international student and their institution, students are likely to struggle to understand “the rules of the game”. Whilst this can be said of all students entering HE, international students may face additional challenges due to a change in pedagogy and language. A theory also identified by Berry (2005) when researching the factors that impact on international students’ acculturation experience within their new learning environment. These issues lead to the second and third research questions relating to whether students can be more actively engaged in the development of their own capital and what HE institutions can do to facilitate international foundation students’ development of academic capital.

This research explores the nuanced dynamics of capital as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1988) and its role in shaping the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of international foundation students as they transition to undergraduate study. Adopting a narrative approach, the study centres on students’ values and beliefs, particularly their perceptions and reflections on the factors that supported a successful transition, enabling them not just to adapt but to thrive. It also considers how international students actively contribute to the development of their own capital while examining

how IFPs can better support this process. These three core themes, Bourdieu's concepts of capital, international students' agency, and institutional support, directly structure the analysis and underpin the organisation of the findings and discussion chapters.

3.4 Bourdieu and HE

Bourdieu's theories have had a profound impact on the study of HE, particularly through his concepts of capital, habitus, and field. Bourdieu (1988) argued that education systems do not simply function as fair or equal institutions where individuals succeed based on their abilities or effort. Instead, they are sites where various forms of capital are exchanged, and power dynamics shape opportunities for success. These concepts help explain how HE can perpetuate social inequalities, as students from different backgrounds enter the system with varying levels and types of capital that influence their academic experiences and outcomes.

Research grounded in Bourdieu's theory of practice can provide insights and understanding that may not be as accessible through other approaches (Grenfell and James, 2003, p.2). For example, studies have used a Bourdieusian lens to explore how students from non-traditional backgrounds navigate UK HE (Reay et al., 2005; Bathmaker et al., 2013). These studies highlight how disparities in cultural and academic capital can influence student experiences, shaping their ability to access resources, develop confidence, and engage with institutional norms. Similarly, international students often encounter challenges when navigating unfamiliar educational fields, as their pre-existing habitus may not fully align with the expectations of UK HE (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017).

While there is limited research specifically on international foundation students' experiences, my reflections as an IFP educator suggest that students in these

programmes often experience a period of adjustment as they work to align their habitus with the expectations of undergraduate study. For instance, they may initially struggle with adapting to independent learning, critical engagement, and academic conventions but gradually accumulate new forms of capital, such as enhanced language proficiency and academic literacy, which facilitate their transition. This process aligns with Bourdieu's (1990a) theory of social practice, which emphasises the importance of understanding and internalising the "rules of the game" within a given field. These observations and questions inform the development of my empirical work, guiding my exploration of how international foundation students navigate the structural and cultural dimensions of UK HE. Understanding Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field provides critical insights into these complexities, helping IFPs design programmes that effectively support international foundation students' transition to undergraduate studies.

3.5 Summary of theoretical approach

This chapter explores Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus, field, and capital, applying them to the experiences of international foundation students in the UK. By examining how students' personal dispositions (habitus) intersect with the academic environment (field), the chapter highlights the challenges students face in navigating an unfamiliar educational context. The educational field, shaped by institutional norms, policies, and societal expectations, often differs from students' home countries, creating a complex environment in which students must adapt their practices and accumulate new forms of capital to succeed. The concept of capital, including social, cultural, economic, and academic, plays a central role in the students' ability to navigate this field and progress to undergraduate studies. Through the accumulation and conversion of different forms of capital, international foundation students develop the resources necessary for success in HE. The analysis of these processes offers valuable insights into how IFPs can better support international students in developing the capital needed to thrive academically and socially.

The next chapter will outline the methodology and principles guiding the research, detailing the approach and procedures used to conduct the investigation.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework and research methods employed in this study, beginning with the underlying philosophy guiding the research process. The methodology reflects a commitment to conducting research *with* international foundation students rather than *on* them, adopting a positive perspective that emphasises collaboration and values students' agency. This approach positions international students as the "experts" of their own experiences (Winn and Lindqvist, 2019), highlighting the importance of recognising their unique insights and experiences, and rebalances the power dynamic between researcher and participants. This inclusive approach is designed to enhance students' experiences, strengthen their sense of belonging, and contribute to a more meaningful educational research process and outcomes (Tranter, 2023).

In addition, this chapter presents the specific research methods conducted across two interconnected phases. In the first phase pairs of students engaged in conversations in a listening room without the researcher being present (Heron, 2020). Insights from this phase informed the subsequent research phase, a walking interview conducted with individual alumnus enabling a deeper exploration of the emerging themes of capital, particularly academic capital, identified during the listening room conversations. Both methods were piloted to ensure their effectiveness. These approaches were chosen for their potential to encourage reflective and authentic engagement, facilitating a deep, nuanced exploration of students’ experiences.

Following data collection, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to systematically identify themes and patterns within the complex data. The

analysis was viewed through a Bourdieusian lens to explore and interpret the students' experiences in depth. Applying Bourdieu's concepts, the analysis examined how capital, habitus, and field within international foundation students' foundation year experiences interrelate with their transitions into undergraduate study, offering insights into the socio-cultural dynamics shaping these transitions. Specifically, the study examined capital to identify the cultural, social, and academic resources that students recognised as supporting their transition to undergraduate studies. Habitus was explored to understand how students' ingrained dispositions, influenced by prior experiences, facilitated their adaption to their new academic environment. The field analysis focused on students' foundation year and the UK HE system, exploring how the "rules of the game" influenced their integration and shaped their adaptation.

In educational research, an inclusive approach is essential for authentically engaging with the voices of those involved in the educational process, including teachers, learners, educational leaders, and policymakers, to inform practice. This perspective aligns with critical and interpretivist traditions, which emphasise the importance of co-constructing knowledge with participants rather than imposing dominant, often Western, epistemologies (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008). When working with international foundation students, selecting an appropriate research strategy must be guided by the specific context of the study (Denscombe, 2010) to ensure meaningful and contextually relevant insights.

Conventional research methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups are rooted in Western colonial ways of acquiring knowledge (Gobo, 2011). For example, interviews are considered an "outright cultural product and not merely a research technique" (Silverman, 2015, p.89). Interviews are not universal, neutral or cultural-free; the interviewees need to understand the unwritten rules and sociological conditions of the process (Gobo, 2011). Students need to have the ability to express themselves freely, to be able to link thoughts and language, to understand the ritual of interviews and be confident to express their own views to someone who they may perceive as having a higher social standing than them (Tranter, 2023). By centring the voices of international foundation students, this research moves beyond conventional, often extractive methods toward approaches

that empower participants and reflect the complexities of their lived experiences (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013).

While a survey or questionnaire might have enabled the collection of data from a larger sample of IFP students, such tools risk reducing participants' experiences to predefined categories and may not adequately capture the depth, nuance, and contextual richness of their transitions. This study deliberately prioritised depth over breadth, aligning with its student-centred ethos and commitment to centring student voice. In doing so, it seeks to produce a more situated and reflexive account of international foundation students' lived experiences, rather than generalisable findings detached from context. Building on this approach, this research explores how international foundation students develop and value academic capital during their foundation year and how this supports their transition to undergraduate study in the UK. Using creative research approaches, the study engages international foundation alumni to examine the ways students actively shape their academic capital and the role of UK HEIs in facilitating this process. Specifically, the research investigates:

- What academic capital do international foundation students develop and value during their foundation year?

- How can international foundation students become more actively engaged in the development of their own academic capital?

- What can UK HEIs do to facilitate international foundation students' development of academic capital, to enable successful transition to undergraduate studies?

This study seeks to deepen understanding of international foundation students' experiences, recognising their diverse educational backgrounds before and during their foundation year in the UK. Rather than treating them as a homogenous group,

the research amplifies alumni voices, conducting research *with* rather than *on* them (Welikala and Atkin, 2014). This approach (see 4.6) fosters a mutually beneficial process (Cohen et al., 2018): alumni reflect on their academic journey, celebrating their achievements, while I, as the researcher, gain insights to inform and enhance international foundation provision at my institution and beyond. By prioritising inclusivity and authenticity, this research rebalances traditional power dynamics, embracing a "bottom-up" approach (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) that nurtures student agency (Van der Riet and Boettiger, 2009). Enhancing agency supports self-efficacy, encouraging students to take an active role in their education rather than conforming to a deficit-based narrative. Furthermore, mutual learning between researcher and participants strengthens students' sense of belonging and improves both their experiences and the research process itself (Tranter, 2023). Recognising international students as "experts" in their own experiences (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005) ensures that foundation provision is shaped by research-led, student-centred insights.

4.2 Ontological and epistemological framework for this research

Methodologically, this research operates within a constructivist paradigm that views knowledge as co-created through interaction. Its ontological stance recognises reality as socially constructed, shaped by the dynamic interplay of individual backgrounds, social structures, and institutional contexts (Ashwin, 2020).

Epistemologically, the study adopts a relational approach, recognising that knowledge emerges through engagement and dialogue with international foundation alumni (Cohen et al., 2018). The research is designed to bridge theory and practice by employing methods that directly engage with students' lived experiences. This perspective, enriched by my professional interactions with international foundation students, shapes an inquiry that celebrates their diverse journeys and responds to

real-world educational opportunities and challenges. Grounded in a relational and interpretative epistemology, this study positions international students as active contributors to their educational experiences rather than passive subjects of research. By highlighting their strengths and positive experiences while identifying examples of effective practice (Shuayb et al., 2009), the research design reinforces this perspective, challenging the deficit-oriented narratives that often dominate the literature (see Chapter 2).

Ontologically, this research is based on the understanding that reality is socially constructed, fluid, and deeply contextual (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field, this ontological stance recognises that international foundation students actively navigate, interpret, and influence their educational experiences. Rather than being passive recipients of structural forces, their transitions are shaped through ongoing interactions with broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Bourdieu's concept of habitus highlights how students' behaviours, dispositions, and expectations are influenced by their previous social environments, while their interactions within the academic field expose them to new cultural and institutional norms. For international foundation students, this means that their journey into HE is not only a process of personal adaptation but also one of navigating and negotiating the dominant norms, expectations, and values of the host country's education system.

Epistemologically, this research adopts a constructivist perspective, which assumes that knowledge is co-created through the interactions between researcher and participant. This perspective challenges the notion of objective, detached observation, arguing instead that understanding emerges through collaborative exploration. Knowledge is not "discovered" but rather "constructed" within the relational space between researcher and participant, with each bringing their own perspectives, insights, and interpretations to the process. In this study, the use of listening rooms and walking interviews exemplifies this co-creative process, as these methods invite students to reflect on and interpret their own experiences in a dialogic

way. By engaging students in an active role, this approach recognises them as knowledgeable agents rather than passive subjects, allowing their voices to shape the insights that emerge (Gale and Parker, 2014). This collaborative approach also aligns with the participatory nature of the study, as the shared exploration of students' transition journeys enables a richer, more nuanced understanding of their lived realities that might otherwise be missed in traditional, non-participatory research methods. The use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) supports this epistemological perspective, recognising that meaning is actively constructed through the research process rather than passively emerging from the data. While I, as the researcher, play a central role in identifying and interpreting themes, this process is shaped by the voices, insights, and lived experiences of the participants. Consequently, knowledge is not solely researcher-driven but co-constructed through dialogue and engagement, capturing the dynamic and evolving nature of international students' transitions to HE.

This research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, focusing on how international foundation students' actively construct meaning from their transition experiences rather than treating these experiences as fixed or universally generalisable. Recognising that each student's journey is shaped by their social, cultural, and educational interactions, this approach views reality as emerging through ongoing engagement with peers, educators, and the academic environment. Through these interactions, students negotiate their identities, adapt to new academic norms, and develop strategies to navigate HE, reinforcing the dynamic and context-dependent nature of their transitions. Bourdieu's concept of capital is central here, highlighting that students bring unique forms of cultural, social, and linguistic capital that may either align with or differ from the expectations of the UK academic field. Each student's transition experience, therefore, emerges as a unique product of their background interacting with the social structures of the host educational environment, illustrating the contextual and complex nature of adaptation. Informed by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field, this study examines how students navigate the norms of UK HE and develop academic capital in response to the demands they encounter. By positioning students as "experts" of their own

experiences (Sleeswijk Visser et al, 2005), this methodological approach not only seeks to reveal the nuances of their journey but also promotes a collaborative and empowered form of inquiry. This is achieved through methods such as listening rooms and walking interviews, which prioritise students' voices and foster active participation in the research process. A more detailed exploration of how these methods facilitate co-construction of knowledge is discussed in section 4.6 Creative and participatory-inspired research.

4.3 The research participants

The research focuses on international foundation students' experience, therefore there were two options in respect of who the participants could be: either current IFP students or IFP alumni. As the research focuses on students' transition from the IFP to undergraduate studies, as an ongoing process and not a point in time (Gale and Parker, 2014), I felt that alumni would be in the best position to reflect on their time as international foundation students. The alumni, as current undergraduate students are able to reflect on how their academic capital has developed and how they could have been more actively engaged in this, as well as what they thought the IFP could do to support foundation students more. Another dimension considered was the fact that I, as the researcher, have no academic involvement with undergraduate courses and therefore have no direct contact with the alumni. Therefore, this approach reduces the power imbalance, helping to ensure that students do not feel pressured to participate or worry that their contributions might affect their future studies.

Although alumni are not the direct beneficiaries of any enhancements to the foundation year provision that might result from this research, the reflective process itself offers them an opportunity for ongoing learning (Schön, 1987). Reflecting on their educational journeys can also support their personal and academic development, as studies have shown that such reflection aids self-development (Johnston and Watson, 2004), fosters learning from past experiences (Rich, 2010),

and builds resilience for future challenges (Hynes et al., 2010). Additionally, many international foundation alumni volunteer as mentors, supporting current students in their transition to undergraduate study. Therefore, these alumni are likely to value this reflective process as another avenue to contribute to the experiences of other international students following similar paths.

4.4 Recruitment of alumni

Many international foundation alumni are members of the international foundation society and participate in mentoring programmes for current foundation year students. These student bodies were contacted via email, and alumni invited to participate in both the listening rooms and the walking interviews, as part of the research (see Appendix I: Initial Contact message to IFP alumni and mentors). This approach ensured that participants had direct experience of the foundation year and could offer relevant insights into the successes of transitioning to undergraduate studies. At the same time, participation was shaped by practical considerations, as only those who responded to the invitation and were available at the time took part in the research (Cohen et al., 2018). As a result, the study included alumni who were both knowledgeable about the foundation year experience and willing to engage in reflective discussion, ensuring that the perspectives shared were grounded in lived experience.

A total of six students, representing three pairs of friends, participated in both the (paired) listening rooms activity and individual walking interviews. Participants were asked how they would like their ethnicity, educational background, gender, nationality, home country, and prior educational experiences before coming to the UK to be described, allowing them to exercise agency in presenting their identities authentically, while ensuring their anonymity and privacy were respected. While this demographic information provides context for their experiences, no specific conclusions are drawn regarding nationality, gender, or educational background. Rather than aiming for a representative sample of international foundation students,

the strength of this research lies in amplifying the students' voices and lived experiences. The study is not intended to generalise across the wider population but to provide in-depth, contextual insights into the transitions and experiences of those who chose to participate. This aligns with the study's constructivist and participatory approach, which values the richness of individual narratives over broad statistical representation (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Students' diverse social and cultural perspectives, summarised in Table 2, illustrate how different forms of capital, including prior education, cultural background, and personal aspirations, shape students' adaptation and academic identities within the broader field of UK HE. Through this approach, the research highlights student agency and voice, ensuring that participants are not merely research subjects but active contributors to the understanding of international foundation student transitions.

	Name	Brief biography of the student
Pair 1	Di	Di is a student from Russia currently in her first year of a management degree. Her education includes 12 years of formal schooling in Russia before undertaking the business management foundation course in the UK. Di chose her name based on the fact that this is the name her family call her, but it is not her first name, suggesting a strong link to home and family.
	Thirteen	Thirteen, a Taiwanese student is currently in his first year of a management degree. He completed 12 years of schooling in Taiwan before transitioning to the UK to pursue a foundation course in business management. Thirteen selected his pseudonym because it represented his lucky number, suggesting strong cultural beliefs.
Pair 2	Maya	Maya is from Nigeria and is currently in her first year of a law degree, after completing the law foundation course. She completed 12 years of schooling in Nigeria, before choosing to study in the UK. She chose her pseudonym based on her admiration for Maya Angelou, the civil rights activist.
	Adamma	Adamma is a Nigerian student and in her first year of a management degree. Her pre-university education involved 12 years of schooling in Nigeria, followed by the business management foundation course in the UK. Adamma struggled to choose her pseudonym but settled on a name she liked from her home country, suggesting a fondness for home.
Pair 3	Zahra	Zahra is from North Africa and is in her second year of a management degree in the UK. Like her peers, Zahra had 12 years of education in her home country before enrolling in the business management foundation course. Zahra chose a name to reflect her country, however she did not want to identify her country, as this could potentially identify her.
	Hla	Hla is from a Southeast Asian country and is currently in her second year of a management degree. Her educational background differs from many foundation students in that, after completing 12 years of schooling, she spent an additional year in HE in her home country before coming to the UK. For reasons of confidentiality, Hla chose not to disclose her home country, as doing so could potentially identify her.

Table 2: Student pairing and students' backgrounds

4.5 Participant profiles and research trust

This section outlines the diverse backgrounds of the participants involved in the study and explores the relational dynamics that influenced their engagement. It considers how shared histories, trust, and familiarity between the researcher and participants shaped both the decision to participate and the depth of dialogue within the research process.

The study aimed to capture a diverse range of perspectives from six international foundation alumni, representing five different nationalities. All participants identified as either male or female, with none classified as mature students at the start of their foundation year. Each had completed their schooling in their home country, without prior experience of international education or attendance at international schools. Additionally, all were navigating their studies in a second or third language, reflecting the linguistic diversity common among international students. The participants varied in their academic progression, with four in their first year of undergraduate study and two in their second year, indicating they had completed different foundational years. However, differences between foundation programme provision across these years were minimal. The students also came from two distinct course pathways, exposing them to varied modules, teachers and teaching styles, and assessment methods. This diversity enriched the study, bringing a wide range of academic perspectives while maintaining consistency in respect of students' IFP experience.

While the participants were diverse in terms of nationality and educational background, five of the six students were female. This does not fully reflect the typical gender distribution of the IFP, which generally maintains an approximately equal male-to-female ratio, though variations exist across courses. The two courses represented in this study, Law and Business Management, differ slightly in terms of gender distribution, with Law typically attracting more female students and Business Management maintaining a more balanced gender split. However, participation may

have been influenced by the existing rapport between the researcher and participants. As five of the six students had previously been taught by me, it is likely that familiarity and trust contributed to their willingness to engage in the research (Mercer, 2007). This highlights the importance of researcher–participant relationships in shaping engagement within qualitative studies.

This relevance extends to creative, participatory-inspired approaches such as listening rooms, where students engage in dialogue with a peer rather than a researcher. By using a paired approach, listening rooms intentionally draw upon friendship dynamics to facilitate open, relaxed discussions (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). In this study, students volunteered to take part alongside a friend, meaning each pair already had an established relationship prior to participating. Research suggests that students may feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions in settings where familiarity and shared experiences provide a foundation for meaningful dialogue (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010). Similarly, my prior relationships with participants may have fostered a sense of researcher trustworthiness, further encouraging participation and openness in sharing their experiences. This highlights the relational nature of knowledge production, where trust, rapport, and social connections influence not only who participates but also the depth and quality of the insights they provide (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). Building on this foundation of meaningful engagement, the study does not seek to draw generalisable conclusions but instead aims to illuminate key themes and insights that capture the lived experiences of these students.

4.6 Creative and participatory-inspired research

Student partnerships within education can be defined as actively engaging learners in close collaboration and welcoming their views, with the aim of improving teaching and learning (Bovill et al, 2016). Greater student engagement can transform HE into a more democratic space, where students have more shared responsibility and

greater success and enjoyment (Cook-Sather and Luz, 2015). Involving learners in the design of educational research improves the quality of education by incorporating different stakeholders' perspectives and develops teachers' growth (Könings et al, 2021). The researcher benefits by understanding first-hand the needs and experiences of the international foundation students. It also provides valuable feedback as to how the teachers and the IFP can support students to develop their academic capital and successfully transition to their chosen undergraduate studies.

To effectively engage students in research, it is essential to create a shared sense of responsibility between teachers and students. This fosters a culture of empowerment and collaboration at institutional level (Könings et al., 2021). In this study, involving international foundation students as active contributors shifts the traditional research dynamic, aligning with the participatory-inspired ethos of the research. From a constructivist perspective, this approach treats students as co-creators of knowledge, emphasising their active role in shaping the research process (Vygotsky, 1987; Piaget, 1973). Recognising students as knowledgeable agents affirms the constructivist view that learning and knowledge construction are social and situated, formed through interactions within specific contexts (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the participatory nature of this study embodies collaborative meaning-making, where both researcher and participants engage in dynamic dialogue.

Several strategies can strengthen student engagement, with one key step being acknowledging and addressing the power differential between researcher and participant from the outset (Freeman et al., 2014). In my research, I actively worked to level this power dynamic by soliciting direct feedback from students on the research methods before fully implementing them. This approach allowed students to feel more comfortable sharing authentic experiences, knowing their voices were valued as integral contributions rather than simply data points. Recognising the expertise each party brings, students' lived experiences as international foundation students, along with the researcher's perspective as a practitioner aiming to improve the educational experience (Peters et al., 2019), were crucial in this process. By

incorporating students' feedback and making adjustments to the methods based on their input, I ensured the research was truly collaborative, reinforcing the shared responsibility between teacher and student in shaping the research outcome.

Building a trusting relationship is another critical element in fostering a collaborative research process. Trust enables students to gain insights into the educational aims from the teacher's perspective, while teachers gain a deeper understanding of students' unique journeys and challenges (Enright et al., 2017). Acknowledging and valuing students' contributions through feedback is essential in reinforcing this trust. In this study, this was incorporated through several mechanisms. For example, a pilot phase tested the research methods (listening rooms and walking interviews) with a small group of students. Feedback from this phase provided insights into the appropriateness of the research methods, how students experienced the process, and any concerns they had. For example, during the listening rooms pilot, students suggested that a timer, used in Heron's (2020) approach, was distracting and disrupted the flow of their conversations. As a result, the timer was not used in subsequent stages. Similarly, a student in the pilot walking interview noted that beginning the interview in the campus café, where they had spent time during their foundation year, felt comforting. This insight led to the decision that all subsequent interviews would begin in the café to help relax participants before starting. Further feedback from the pilot phase is detailed in section 4.10.

A key principle of this creative and participatory-inspired research is ensuring that students actively contribute to shaping the research process rather than being treated as passive subjects. To support this approach, I implemented several strategies aimed at enhancing both the validity of the data and the collaborative nature of the study. The research was carried out in two phases, approximately a week apart, which allowed time for ongoing reflection and refinement. This structure enabled me to engage with the listening room conversations prior to conducting the walking interviews, revisiting key themes that had emerged. It also gave students time to reflect on their initial discussions, encouraging deeper engagement with their

narratives. Reflection is a vital component of qualitative research, as it allows participants to revisit and build upon their experiences, leading to richer and more nuanced insights (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This iterative process aligns with the principles of co-constructed knowledge, where participants actively shape the research process (Lincoln, 1995).

To further support collaboration and data integrity, I shared the “cleaned” transcripts with students after each phase, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented. While cleaning transcripts, such as removing filler words or correcting grammar is common practice, it can raise concerns about potentially distorting participants' voices (Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Silverman, 2017). In this study, cleaning was minimal, primarily limited to removing names of teachers and students and making minor adjustments for clarity while preserving the integrity of participants’ responses. By reviewing and confirming the accuracy of their transcripts, students remained actively engaged in the research process, reinforcing both the trustworthiness of the data and the participatory ethos of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

These integrated steps not only demonstrate appreciation for the students’ involvement but also reinforce the study’s collaborative approach, highlighting the importance of their input in shaping the understanding of international foundation students' experiences. The iterative process of reflection, clarification and feedback strengthened students' sense of ownership and authenticity in their contributions (Zhao et al., 2024). Ideally, participatory-inspired research would be co-created, involving students in every step, from identifying research questions to data collection, analysis, and development of change plans (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). However, due to the time constraints of both the alumni participants (who are full-time undergraduate students) and me (as a part-time doctorate student while working full-time), the study was tailored accordingly (Zhao et al., 2024).

4.7 Ethical considerations

Educational research must strive to be inclusive of diverse communities (Perry, 2011), with researchers playing a role in actively engaging and empowering those who are often marginalised (Seale, 2013) or face epistemic injustice, where their knowledge and experiences are undervalued or dismissed (Fricker, 2007). This research sought to provide international students with an opportunity to critically reflect on and articulate their lived experiences of their foundation year, ensuring that their perspectives were integral to understanding and enhancing the programme.

While much academic research has traditionally been conducted from an external researcher's perspective, there is increasing recognition of the value of approaches that foreground participants' voices and experiences (Reason and Heron, 1986). In this study, self-reflection and dialogue were encouraged as part of the research process, allowing students to contribute meaningfully to shaping insights and potential improvements to IFP programmes. Rather than positioning students solely as subjects of research, this approach acknowledges their agency and expertise, reinforcing the principle that international students are "experts of their experience" (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005).

A key ethical consideration in this study was addressing the inherent power imbalance between the researcher and participants. To mitigate this, the research methods of listening rooms and walking interviews were purposefully chosen to create a more equal platform, recognising international students as "knowers" whose perspectives provide unique insights into navigating a new educational context. Additionally, involving alumni rather than current IFP students allowed participants to reflect more knowledgeably on their experiences and their transition between foundation and undergraduate studies. Since the researcher no longer teaches these students, the potential power dynamic was further minimised, fostering an environment where participants could openly and authentically share their views.

Careful consideration was also given to the logistics of each session to help students feel comfortable and open in reflecting on their foundation year experiences. The walking interviews, for instance, began in a familiar café on campus, as initial feedback showed that students associated this setting with positive memories and felt at ease there. The interviews took place around the campus where students had attended classes as foundation students, allowing them to revisit their former classrooms, to support memory recall and deepen reflection in qualitative research (Pink, 2015). Several students chose to sit in their "old" seats, which prompted vivid recollections of their lessons and interactions in those spaces, reinforcing the value of physical place in qualitative inquiry (Merrill and West, 2009). Similarly, setting up the listening rooms in familiar, comfortable environments supported students in engaging in genuine reflection and encouraged authentic recounting of their lived experiences.

To protect confidentiality, audio recordings were used for all discussions rather than video, reducing the potential discomfort associated with visual recording. Anonymisation techniques were carefully implemented, with listening room transcripts edited to remove identifying details. This approach aligns with best practices in ethical qualitative research, where ensuring anonymity fosters openness and trust among participants (Saunders et al., 2015). Additionally, students were actively engaged throughout the research process, reinforcing their agency and respect for their preferences. For instance, participants had the opportunity to review their transcriptions, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of their words and request adjustments, if necessary, a process known as member-checking, which enhances credibility in qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016). Each student was also invited to choose their own pseudonym and provide input on how they wished to be described. For example, one student opted to be identified by a number rather than a name, and two students requested that their country of origin not be specified to prevent potential identification. These practices aimed to empower participants, respecting their individual preferences and enhancing their engagement with the research

process. Central to this commitment was the upholding of ethical standards throughout the study.

Ethical approval ensured that the principles of minimising harm, protecting privacy, and respecting autonomy were met (Coe et al., 2017). Approval was granted by BCU, with the host university accepted this without requiring additional review. Copies of the agreed Participant Information Leaflet, consent forms, and invitation letter are included in Appendix II: Ethics Documents.

4.8 Research methods

Diverse qualitative research methods are essential for understanding international students' experiences (Trahar, 2009; Deuchar, 2022). To understand the nuances and complexities of the students' experiences of their foundation year and how academic capital is developed, methods such as diaries, journals, and case studies were considered. Whilst they may provide a greater depth of understanding of daily life, they are also open to misinterpretations by researchers and prone to diary keeping fatigue (Cao and Henderson, 2021). Additionally, since the participants in this study are alumni reflecting on their past experiences as foundation students, rather than current students documenting their ongoing journeys, diary methods were not appropriate. For international students, many of whom would be writing in a non-dominant language (English), diary writing could also act as a deterrent, students might be concerned about grammar and spelling, potentially leading them to censor their reflections or worry about being judged, rather than writing freely about their experiences.

This study employed a two-phase, interconnected approach. Phase 1 was the listening rooms, after which the conversations were briefly analysed prior to undertaking the individual walking interviews with the alumni (phase 2). The reasoning for having two interconnected phases was that the second phase enabled

a deeper understanding of the data gathered, as it allowed me to confirm my interpretation of key issues and directly ask participants about information discussed in the listening rooms, seeking clarification and further insight. The gap between Phase 1 and Phase 2 was approximately one week, providing me with time to plan the walking interview and allowing participants to reflect on their listening room conversation in case they had any additional insights they wished to share.

4.8.1 Phase 1 - Listening Rooms

The listening rooms method (Heron, 2020) facilitates data collection by creating an environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences, often drawing on existing friendships to encourage open dialogue. Friendship plays a crucial role in students' HE experiences, particularly in the transition of international foundation students (Jones et al., 2020). Peers provide confidence, especially when they share lived experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and happiness (Parkin and Heron, 2023). However, forming and maintaining friendships can also present challenges for international students, including cultural differences, language barriers, and difficulties integrating into pre-existing social groups (Bittencourt et al., 2021). Therefore, working with student pairs reflecting on their shared foundation year experience was likely to generate richer, more complex data while also benefiting students by reinforcing their sense of belonging.

Leeuw et al. (2012, p.182) suggest that friendships create "different forms of knowledge production, accountability, vulnerability and confrontation," all of which positively influence data collection. In the context of this study, these qualities play a crucial role. Knowledge production emerges as students build on one another's reflections, generating richer narratives than they might produce individually. Accountability is evident as participants encourage each other to recall details accurately and reflect critically on their experiences. Vulnerability allows students to share personal challenges and emotions more openly, while confrontation, though

not necessarily in a negative sense, enables them to challenge each other's recollections, offering alternative perspectives and a more multifaceted understanding of their foundation year.

Mutual learning also emerges as peers connect and share experiences, leading to a deeper, more meaningful qualitative understanding (Könings et al., 2021). While the absence of the researcher in listening rooms reduce the hierarchical power dynamic often present in traditional interviews, power dynamics still exist between friends. Social hierarchies, levels of confidence, and differing levels of English proficiency may influence how openly students express themselves. However, friendships also provide a sense of security, as friends encourage one another to speak openly, creating a space where international students feel more comfortable articulating their thoughts without the pressure of producing a "correct" response. This process fosters students' self-efficacy and agency by allowing them to reflect critically on their experiences in a supportive peer-led setting.

Recognising these benefits, I sought to use friendship as a research method, not in the traditional sense of a bond between researcher and participants (Brewis, 2014), but by creating a safe, trusted environment where student pairs could reflect on and share their experiences of being international foundation students (Heron, 2020, p.394). The listening rooms method incorporates the concept of friendship, by allowing participants to engage in a peer-supported dialogue, where the presence of a close friend serves to reduce any perceived barriers to open communication. Friends already share a rapport that promotes trust, comfort, and vulnerability, which are essential for honest and meaningful conversations about their experiences. In the listening rooms, participants are invited to bring a friend to a recorded conversation, with no researcher present to influence the interaction. This method draws on the idea that friendships provide a safe space for mutual support and understanding, encouraging participants to speak freely without the pressure of a formal research setting. The use of prompt cards in the conversation ensures that the discussion remains focused, while still enabling the natural flow of dialogue that

comes with the ease of friendship. Furthermore, by using audio rather than video recordings, the research reduces any potential discomfort or self-consciousness that might arise from being filmed, helping participants remain focused on the conversation and not on their appearance. This also enhances anonymity, as it is not necessary to distinguish between speakers, which fosters an environment where participants feel more at ease to share their authentic experiences.

The Application of Listening Rooms

To date, research on the use of Listening Rooms in HE remains limited (Heron, 2020). The method aims to provide space for students to authentically discuss their experiences, rather than simply responding to a researcher's questions. This aligns with broader efforts to meaningfully listen to and integrate student perspectives into educational practices (Campbell, 2011) and aims to empower participants to be their "authentic self" rather than feel pressure to provide the "right" answers (Tight, 2012). Creating a comfortable, interruption-free space is essential for meaningful conversation, allowing participants to engage more deeply than they might in the presence of a researcher (Parkin and Heron, 2022).

Parkin and Heron (2022) evaluated the Listening Rooms approach by asking participants to bring a friend of their choosing, without restrictions, recognising the importance of the friendship bond. In this study, that model was adapted to focus specifically on international foundation students. Participants were invited to bring a friend who had also completed the IFP. No further restrictions were placed on pairings, allowing for diversity across course and cohort. For example, one pair consisted of an alumnus from a business management course and another from a law course.

Parkin and Heron (2022, 2023) highlighted the potential of Listening Rooms to capture student and staff voices in HE. Drawing on Kline's (1999) notion of "listening organisations," they argued that the method fosters focused, balanced discussions free from researcher influence. Heron (2020, p.407) described Listening Rooms as offering "a meaningful window into the lives of students, as defined and explained by students." These conversations affirm foundation students' lived experiences and embody the principles of "democratic open-endedness" (Lamothe and Horowitz, 2006, p.174), co-created knowledge (Durose et al., 2012), and student expertise in navigating their own educational journeys. Parkin and Heron (2023) also found that participants experienced increased self-awareness and personal growth through the process.

These positive outcomes were similarly reflected in this study. One friendship pair asked to continue chatting after their recorded session, expressing how much they had enjoyed the experience. They reflected on the many skills they had developed since arriving in the UK, noting how the conversation helped them recognise their personal growth during the foundation year.

Limitations of the Listening Rooms Method

One limitation of this method is that students who wished to participate but were no longer in contact with an IFP friend would have been excluded from the study, a challenge also noted by Heron (2020). This approach may also have unintentionally excluded those students who had no close friendships during their IFP experience, thereby limiting participation to those who had formed at least one supportive peer relationship. Additionally, because the researcher is absent, there is no opportunity to clarify or rephrase questions in the moment, nor to ask participants to elaborate on unclear points. The researcher can only access the recorded conversation afterward.

However, in this study, the subsequent walking interview provided an opportunity to clarify any ambiguities, if necessary, though in practice, this was not required.

Another possible limitation is that the familiarity between participants may result in a less critical, more affirming conversation. Without an independent facilitator to prompt reflection or challenge assumptions, the dialogue may lean towards affirmation rather than critique (Fielding, 2004). This dynamic, while valuable for fostering openness and psychological safety, may also limit the emergence of more contentious or challenging perspectives. Researchers using this method should therefore remain mindful of the balance between comfort and criticality, and consider how subsequent methods, such as reflective interviews, might reintroduce opportunities for deeper analytical engagement.

4.8.2 Phase 2: Walking Interviews

Walking Interviews Method

Following preliminary analysis of the data collected in Phase 1, Phase 2 of the research was undertaken. During this phase, I conducted individual walking interviews with each student, ensuring that the conversations were informed by and responsive to the discussions held in the listening rooms. This sequential design enabled clarification of emerging themes and facilitated deeper exploration of students' perspectives, while maintaining continuity across both phases of data collection.

Walking interviews were chosen over traditional interviews to help balance or even reverse conventional power dynamics (Walker, 1985; Hughes and Smail, 2014). Unlike formal interviews, where participants sit opposite the researcher, walking side by side allows the interviewee to take the lead, fostering a more relaxed and natural

conversation. This approach is particularly beneficial for international students, who may be communicating in their non-dominant language and require time to organise their thoughts or find the right words. Traditional interviews often follow a question-and-answer format, placing participants under pressure to respond immediately. In contrast, walking interviews resemble more of a conversation, allowing for pauses, reflection, and a more flexible exchange thus creating a more inclusive space for those communicating in a non-dominant language (Evans and Jones, 2011). Kuntz and Presnall (2012, p.741) further develop this idea, describing walking interviews as "emerging relational ways of knowing," shifting from a rigid question and answer exchange to a more fluid and co-constructed dialogue.

Application of walking interviews

The physical act of walking encourages a natural wandering of thoughts (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012), allowing conversations to flow organically rather than being constrained by structured questioning. This method provides deeper qualitative insights compared to traditional, seated interviews (Kusenbach, 2003). Walking was also symbolically significant, representing the students' transitions, from their home country to their foundation year and onward to undergraduate study. This symbolism was reinforced by feedback from a student in the pilot walking interview, who noted that the experience prompted her to reflect on her personal and academic growth. She recalled initially feeling that, as an international student, she felt she had little of value to contribute. An outlook shaped by their prior educational experiences, where student opinions were not actively encouraged and were often perceived as less valid than those of home students.

To further support reflection on their foundation experience, the timing and location of the walking interviews were carefully selected. They took place on the foundation campus during the teaching day and within term time, aiming to recreate the

environment of their foundation year. There were no set routes; alumni were free to walk wherever they wished, reinforcing their autonomy in guiding the conversation. Each interview was planned to last approximately one hour, though participants were welcome to continue for longer. This flexibility was particularly important, as many international students come from teacher-centred, didactic educational systems where they may not have previously felt empowered to engage in open dialogue with educators or to see their perspectives as valuable.

Limitations of walking interviews

The limitations of walking interviews include several practical and logistical challenges. Adverse weather conditions can disrupt scheduling, and some participants may not be physically able to walk for extended periods, limiting their participation. Additionally, outdoor environments may introduce distractions such as noise, affecting the quality of conversations and recordings. The side-by-side nature of walking interviews restricts the ability to observe body language and facial expressions, which are important for providing context to participants' responses. The informal setting may also lead conversations to drift away from key research questions, limiting the depth of exploration on certain topics. Finally, while audio recordings are less intrusive, background noise can make transcription more difficult, and conducting interviews in public spaces raises concerns about confidentiality, especially if sensitive topics are discussed.

Since the walking interviews took place during lesson time, rather than during breaks or changeover periods, the campus was relatively quiet, ensuring that noise did not pose an issue. Although all the interviews began in the café, each student chose a different route around campus, walking and sitting in various classrooms as they reflected on their foundation year.

4.9 Pilot Study

I undertook a pilot study of a listening room and a walking interview to determine the suitability of these methods for my intended research questions and my participants.

4.9.1 Pilot listening room

After gaining ethics approval, I circulated an invite on the international foundation alumni society for a friendship pair who were willing to take part in a listening room pilot. A second-year alumnus contacted me and stated that her and her friend would like to take part. I met with the two students and explained the purpose of my research and that I was also interested in their views of the listening room method used. The alumni were happy to take part in the pilot, so the necessary arrangements were made. After briefing the students, they were given three cards with the following questions:

- What academic skills did you learn in your foundation year which helped you succeed in your undergraduate studies?

- What opportunities were there to learning these academic skills?

- What could your teachers or the IFP have done to support you better during your foundation year?

The students were given guidance to spend approximately ten minutes on each question, with the freedom to choose the order in which they addressed the topics. A timer, as suggested in Heron's (2020) study, was provided to keep track of time. The students' conversation was audio recorded, and the recording was revisited multiple

times and transcribed, prior to being analysed to determine the effectiveness of the prompt questions in eliciting relevant data. The conversation was also analysed through Bourdieu's theoretical lens of capital, habitus, and field, to explore how their reflections were shaped by and situated within their educational trajectories.

4.9.2 Pilot walking interview

I also undertook a pilot walking interview to assess the suitability of this method for my research questions and intended participants. An invitation was circulated via the International Foundation Alumni Society and one of the first students to contact me was a second-year undergraduate student who expressed strong interest in participating and reflecting on the method itself. After providing an overview of the research, the pilot walking interview took place during term time on the foundation campus, to recreate an environment familiar to the participant from her time as an international foundation student. The alumnus led the way around campus, visiting the café, an empty lecture theatre before sitting in an empty classroom to talk. As with the pilot listening rooms data, the interviews were analysed through the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, examining how the students' reflections were influenced by and positioned within their educational experiences.

4.9.3 Reflections on the pilot studies

My own reflections and that of the students who had taken part in the listening room and the walking interview are set out below:

Reflections on the pilot Listening Room

Both students spoke positively about the listening room experience, expressing how much they enjoyed reminiscing about their foundation year and appreciating the opportunity for reflection. They both acknowledged that they had not fully realised how much they had developed since arriving in the UK. They preferred this method over a traditional question-and-answer format, as it removed the pressure to respond immediately. They felt they had more time to think and engage in meaningful discussions rather than providing the first answer that came to mind. Additionally, they noted that the conversation flowed more naturally, allowing them to say more as they encouraged each other to speak. This was evident in the audio recordings, where they could be heard prompting each other with phrases such as "*Do you remember?",* "*Yes, I remember*…", and "*Yes, I know*," contributing to a richer and more in-depth discussion.

Heron (2020) initially introduced a 10-minute timer to guide students' discussions on each topic. However, feedback from the students indicated that they found the timer distracting, feeling that it disrupted the flow of conversation and made the discussion feel more rigid. As a result, they chose to abandon the timer during their sessions. Taking this feedback into account, I decided not to use a timer in the main study, instead trusting students to manage the pace of their own discussions. The format of the prompt cards was also adjusted in response to student feedback. While Heron (2020) used single words followed by statements or questions to guide the conversation, students felt this approach could lead to misinterpretation of the key topics or missed opportunities for deeper exploration. For example, when Heron (2020) used the word "Belonging" on the cue cards, followed by prompts such as, "What does belonging mean to you?" or "How have you felt about your sense of belonging during your time at university?", students felt the word alone was too vague and preferred more explicit guidance. Similarly, the word "Confidence" was used, followed by prompts like, "How has your confidence changed throughout your university journey?" and "What experiences have contributed to this change?" In the main study, I chose to use fully formed questions or phrases on the cue cards to

promote clearer communication and provide students with more space to engage meaningfully with each topic.

In addition, students stated they also appreciated that the cards were unnumbered, allowing them to decide the order in which to address topics. This flexible approach helped the conversation flow more naturally, with students often realising they had already covered key points as the discussion progressed. By allowing students to shape the structure and pace of the discussion, these adaptations supported their agency in the research process, giving them a greater sense of ownership and control over how their experiences were shared and interpreted.

One of the limitations identified by the students during the listening room pilot was the fact that the conversation took place in English, as both participants shared the same dominant language and would have normally spoken to each other in this language. Consideration was given to allowing the conversations to take place in the students' dominant language; however, this would have introduced additional complexity, including the use of translation software and the need for students to check the accuracy of translations. This process would not only have added extra work for the participants, but also for me as the researcher, in ensuring meaning was preserved across languages during analysis. Ultimately, this issue did not arise in the main study, where all student friendship pairs naturally conversed in English.

An initial thematic analysis of the pilot listening rooms was conducted using Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts of capital, habitus, and field to assess whether the prompts were effectively capturing the intended research themes and meeting the study’s aims. Various topics were discussed, including the differences between the foundation year and undergraduate studies, as well as the development of key academic literacy skills such as planning, writing, and referencing. Beyond academic competencies, the conversations provided insights into students’ acculturation journeys and their desire to “blend into UK life,” which they perceived as extending beyond academic integration. Bourdieu’s lens enabled a deeper interpretation of

these findings, particularly in understanding how students acquired cultural and linguistic capital essential for navigating their transition to undergraduate studies. Their reflections on adapting to UK life revealed shifts in their habitus as they negotiated their identities within a new socio-academic context. By situating their experiences within the foundation year as a distinct field, the analysis highlighted how the structures, practices, and expectations of this space shaped their skill development, behaviours, and dispositions, ultimately preparing them for success in HE.

Based on students' comments and recommendations, minor changes were made to the prompt questions. These minor changes are detailed in Table 3:

Original Question in Pilot study	**Amended question following student feedback**
What academic skills did you learn in your foundation year which helped you succeed in your undergraduate studies?	What did you learn in your foundation year which helped you to succeed in your undergraduate studies?
What opportunities were there to learn these academic skills?	Would you have liked more opportunities to learn skills to help you succeed in your undergraduate studies? What would this have involved?
What could your teachers or the IFP have done to support you better during your foundation year?	This remained unchanged: What could your teachers or the IFP done to support you better during your foundation year?

Table 3: Changes to listening room questions

Reflections on the pilot walking interview

The alumnus who participated in the pilot walking interview was also asked for feedback on the research method. She responded positively, stating that she appreciated the opportunity to reflect on how much she had developed academically and personally since arriving in the UK. She found the relaxed nature of the interview particularly beneficial, noting that being back on the foundation campus helped her reconnect with past experiences. Rather than feeling like a formal interview, the conversation unfolded naturally, giving her time to express herself without the pressure often associated with traditional interview settings. She also remarked that moving through familiar environments evoked specific memories and emotions, prompting reflections on her thoughts and feelings during the foundation year. This setting helped facilitate a richer exploration of her transition, offering insight into the accumulation of cultural and linguistic capital, the evolution of her habitus, and her navigation of the foundation programme as a distinct field.

Conducting the interview during a quieter period on campus further contributed to the quality of the conversation, minimising noise and disruptions and creating an environment conducive to meaningful dialogue. The absence of scripted questions allowed the alumnus to guide the discussion, fostering a more participatory approach where knowledge was co-constructed rather than extracted. This approach proved particularly effective, yielding rich data that captured her perspectives on both academic and personal development. Her reflections not only highlighted the programme's impact but also identified areas for potential enhancement, reinforcing the value of flexible and student-centred research methods in understanding the experiences of foundation students.

4.10 Research undertaken

Following the evaluation of the pilot studies, the listening room and walking interviews were formally organised by contacting the International Foundation Students' Alumni Society and inviting volunteers to participate. Three pairs of students expressed interest in taking part in the research. After meeting with each pair and discussing the study in further detail, they were each given a copy of the consent form and participant information leaflet to review, and arrangements made to meet at a later date. To aid students' reflection, a room on the campus where they had studied as a foundation student was deliberately chosen.

4.10.1 Procedure for the listening room

At the second meeting with each student pair, I explained the purpose of the research and the listening room method, ensuring they understood the process and had the opportunity to ask questions. As with Heron's (2020) study, the room was set up with six prompt cards, an audio recorder, and refreshments to create a relaxed, comfortable environment. The statements on the cards were designed to align with one or more of the research questions (see Table 4: Mapping of prompt cards onto research questions) and guided students in reflecting on their experiences as international foundation students and their transition to undergraduate study.

Questions written on prompt cards	**Related research questions**
What were the best things about your foundation year?	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
What did you learn in your foundation year which helped you to succeed in your undergraduate studies?	RQ1, RQ3
Would you have liked more opportunities to learn skills to help you succeed in your undergraduate studies? What would this have involved?	RQ2, RQ3
Imagine a perfect international foundation year – what would it be like? What would you be doing during this year? What skills would you develop?	RQ1, RQ3
What could your teachers or the IFP have done to supported you better during your foundation year?	RQ3
What have you found are the main differences between foundation and undergraduate studies? OR What have been the highlights of your educational journey here in the UK? OR Is there something else you would like to talk about in relation to your foundation studies / undergraduate studies?	RQ1. RQ2, RQ3

Table 4: Mapping of prompt cards onto research questions

Students were encouraged to decide the order in which they discussed the topics and to interpret each one in a way that was meaningful to them. The cards were purposely left unnumbered to avoid implying a fixed sequence, thereby encouraging a more organic, student-led discussion. In contrast to Heron's (2020) approach and in line with the principles of student engagement and agency (Bourdieu, 1988) one of the cards in my study included a choice of topics, allowing students to introduce their own theme if they wished. This option was explained in advance, giving them time to reflect on potential areas they might like to explore. Due to the fluid nature of the conversations, it was not always possible to determine whether the optional topics

had been used. On several occasions, one student would read a question aloud, and both would agree that they had already addressed it. Anticipating this, I had included reassurance in the pre-session briefing that it was acceptable for prompts to be covered indirectly or revisited in a different form.

Although I was not present in the room during the activity, I remained nearby should students have needed assistance. They were informed that they could contact me at any time or choose to leave if they wished. However, no students sought support, and all pairs engaged in conversation for approximately one hour. At the end of the session, the recording was stopped, and the students were debriefed.

4.10.2 Procedure for walking interviews

The listening room recordings were reviewed multiple times to ensure thorough familiarisation with the data, an essential step in qualitative research to develop a deep understanding of participants' narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This iterative process helped shape the focus of the subsequent walking interviews. Each international foundation alumnus was invited to participate in an individual walking interview with me, the researcher. The aim of this second phase was to validate and clarify insights from the listening rooms, while collecting more personalised and detailed perspectives, thereby reinforcing the creative, participatory-inspired and iterative nature of the research process (Nind, 2011).

The walking interviews were conducted on the foundation year campus to support alumni in recalling their experiences as foundation students. Revisiting familiar spaces has been shown to trigger detailed memories and reflections, making it a valuable technique in qualitative research (Anderson, 2004). While paired walking interviews were considered, individual sessions were ultimately chosen to provide a more focused exploration of each student’s unique experience. Conducting paired

interviews could have introduced logistical challenges, such as deciding where to walk, which might have diluted individual reflections and limited opportunities to explore potentially divergent experiences. Walking interviews allow participants to physically engage with their environment while sharing their experiences, which can foster richer, more situated accounts of their educational journeys (Kinney, 2017).

4.10.3 Transcription

The recordings from both the listening rooms and walking interviews were saved under participants' pseudonyms and transcribed with all identifying information removed to ensure anonymity, following best practices in qualitative research ethics (Widodo, 2014). Transcription is a critical step in the research process, as it transforms spoken narratives into written text, allowing for in-depth analysis while preserving the meaning and context of participants' experiences (McMullin, 2023). To transcribe the recordings, I used an automated transcription tool, which generated an initial text version of the recordings. However, as automated transcriptions often contain errors, I manually reviewed each transcript by listening to the recordings while simultaneously checking and editing the text. This process involved pausing, replaying, and correcting any inaccuracies to ensure that the transcripts provided an accurate reflection of the students' words. In cases where background noise occurred I carefully revised the text to retain meaning while removing extraneous material, ensuring the final transcripts were as faithful to the original conversations as possible (McMullin, 2023).

Once the transcripts were finalised, I shared them with the relevant participants, inviting them to review and suggest any edits, a practice known as member checking, which enhances the credibility of qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995). All participants confirmed that the transcripts accurately represented their conversations, with none opting to make changes. This process ensured participant

validation and ethical transparency while also allowing me to engage deeply with the data, fostering a richer understanding of the students' experiences.

4.11 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was chosen to analyse the data from both the listening rooms and walking interviews. This method recognises the active role of the researcher in the analytical process, viewing them as an “insight-bringing, integral component of the analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.10). This perspective aligned with my positionality, particularly given my nine years of experience working with international foundation students. Reflexive thematic analysis occurs at the intersection of the data, the research context, and the researcher’s skills and subjectivity, making it well-suited to this study (Braun and Clarke, 2022). To support this analytical approach, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout both the pilot and main study. This journal documented my assumptions, expectations, choices, and actions during the research process (Finlay and Gough, 2003). Engaging in reflexive journaling allowed me to critically examine my role as a researcher and consider how my perspectives influenced the interpretation of data. Furthermore, this practice facilitated a more holistic view of the research, strengthening the connection between theoretical concepts and practical insights (Watt, 2007).

The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, as established by Braun and Clarke (2022), were followed. Although these phases are presented here in a linear sequence, the process of analysing the data and developing themes was not strictly linear. Instead, it involved iterative movement back and forth between phases to ensure the analysis was thorough and meaningful. Braun and Clarke (2022, p.36) describe reflexive thematic analysis as a “progressive but recursive process,” highlighting that the transition from the initial data set to a fully developed analysis is rarely straightforward. This iterative approach allowed for flexibility and reflexivity,

ensuring that each phase was revisited and refined as necessary before shifting focus to subsequent phases, while allowing for continual revisiting and refinement.

Additionally, the reflective orientation of this analytical approach supported the integration of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts throughout different stages of the analysis. It enabled an in-depth engagement with the data, revealing how participants navigated their transition to HE in relation to academic and cultural capital, habitus shift, and the field of the foundation year. For example, students frequently referenced developing academic literacy skills, a form of cultural capital, highlighting how they recognised and adapted to the academic expectations of UK HE. Similarly, discussions around struggling with classroom participation but later gaining confidence illustrated shifts in habitus as students became more familiar with the socio-academic environment. By embedding Bourdieu's lens into the reflexive thematic analysis, this research provided a detailed perspective on the dynamic interaction between individual agency and the structural forces shaping students' educational experiences.

4.11.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight the importance of immersing oneself in the data during the first phase of reflexive thematic analysis to gain a deeper understanding. To achieve this, I listened to the recordings of both the listening room and walking interviews multiple times. This process was followed by reading the transcriptions, making notes, commenting on the data, and reflecting on what the students were explicitly and implicitly communicating. After which I created a word cloud (see Figure 5 below) to gain an overview of the themes that were likely to be created from the data.

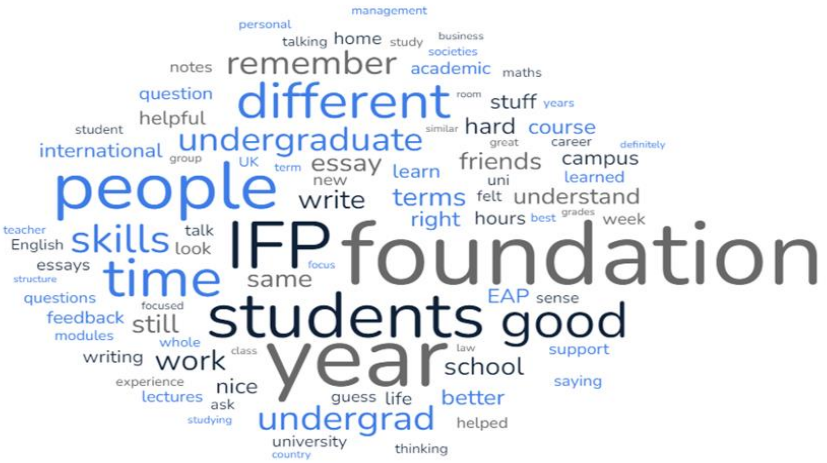

Figure 5: Word cloud of data from transcripts

As I immersed myself in the data, I began to reflect on how the students' experiences illustrated their positioning within various fields, including the academic field, the foundation year field, and broader social contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, I considered which forms of capital were being developed through their experiences. I also reflected on how their habitus, shaped by their prior backgrounds and experiences, influenced their engagement with and navigation of the norms and expectations of UK academic life. These initial insights played a crucial role in shaping how Bourdieu's theoretical lens would later be applied in the analysis, allowing for a deeper exploration of the interplay between individual agency and structural influences on their educational journeys.

4.11.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Having previously collaborated on a research project (Stickels et al., 2024) with colleagues who used NVivo, I had observed how the software could support systematic data management and theme development (Coe et al., 2017). Motivated by these observations, I undertook training in NVivo (version 12) to enhance my

skills. Once trained, I imported all the data from both the listening rooms and walking interviews into the software. Given that the walking interviews were designed to deepen, rather than broaden, the thematic exploration, I chose not to differentiate between data sources during coding. This decision allowed for a holistic and integrated analysis, enabling patterns and themes to emerge organically across the dataset.

Nvivo proved invaluable in managing this large volume of data, offering a more efficient means of coding and retrieving individual phrases compared to manual methods (Bonello and Meehan, 2019). The software allowed me to systematically organise, store, and assign phrases to multiple codes, which were generated inductively based on emerging patterns. Additionally, Nvivo's visualisation tools, such as coding matrices, facilitated the identification of overlaps and relationships between codes, enhancing the depth and clarity of the analysis. The ability to cross-reference phrases under multiple codes provided a more dynamic and interconnected understanding of the data, supporting a thorough and reflexive thematic analysis. For example, a student said:

> *"I would say foundation helped me to learn how to take notes. Because before coming to foundation the notes were given to you, you just copied from the teachers. The teacher will write out the notes on a whiteboard, and you just have to copy it."*

This quote was coded under "literacy skills" as the student was discussing how they had to learn to write their own notes. It was also coded under "differences in pedagogy" as the student was experiencing a different pedagogical approach, one where they were required to take their own notes rather than copying directly from their teacher.

Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that coding in reflexive thematic analysis should be exploratory and organic in its early stages, allowing space for the researcher's interpretations to evolve as familiarity with the data deepens. Coding is an inherently subjective process, involving the researcher in noticing patterns, contradictions, and points of interest across the dataset. I reviewed the data systematically, developing codes inductively and iteratively. A codebook was generated within NVivo to define each code, outlining both what the code encompassed and what it did not. As I was already familiar with the data, codes were refined as I moved through the transcripts, shaped by ongoing interpretation. Interpretation does not occur in a vacuum; it is deeply embedded in the context of the research and the positionality of the researcher (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2024). While inherently subjective, the coding process must remain transparent and defensible, grounded in thoughtful engagement with the data.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field also provided a theoretical lens for interpreting the data during this phase. I identified specific phrases that aligned with these concepts, using codes such as "adjusting to new culture," "language acquisition," "academic expectations," and "classroom dynamics." These codes captured students' reflections on their experiences, highlighting their ability or challenges in acquiring cultural and social capital. Particular focus was placed on how the foundation year represented a distinct field, separate from undergraduate studies, and how students' habitus evolved within this environment. This reflective coding process revealed the relationship between personal agency and structural influences, offering nuanced insights into their educational journeys.

An additional consideration was where on the spectrum of coding from semantic to latent, to generate the codes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I considered semantic coding, where I was using the participants' description rather than my description (latent), to be the most relevant for coding of this data, as the research was about engaging with and working with students to better understand their experiences of their foundation year. The coding was also constructionist, as although I was not quantifying the data, it was useful to acknowledge recurrence of the themes whilst

attributing meaning to what was said, and experiential, in terms of relating to the meaning of the words said by the participants.

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend keeping codes as discrete as possible, suggesting keeping as many as ninety codes in the working memory whilst going back and forth over the data to ensure consistency, refinement, modification and exhaustiveness of the coding (Cohen et al, 2018). I initially developed a total of 64 codes and through Nvivo I was able to define what each code meant as well as detect frequencies and patterns of the codes. Initial codes were grouped together, with the questions from the listening room used to guide the groupings. For example, one of the questions focused on the highlights of students' IFP experience, therefore "highlights" could be used as the initial code and below this the nodes (smaller codes) included "help" which had a descriptor including "students' ability to ask for help" and the "availability of help that was available for students."

4.11.3 Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Phase 3 is concerned with the macro level of connections, alliances and broader patterns within the data and codes. I could see that some of the codes overlapped, and areas of similarity were emerging, and I began to see the relationship between the themes and how they contributed to telling the story of international foundation students and their development of academic capital during their foundation year. For example, students were stating that they wanted more contact with undergraduates and more opportunities for social events which I grouped together under the heading of "social factors". They were also talking about having a sense of belonging to the IFP and university, which I grouped together as "belonging". As these two themes were similar, I grouped "social factors" with "belonging" under the heading of social capital, as both factors appeared to be closely linked.

To facilitate the development of themes, I wrote each of the 64 codes on a sticky note and then physically started to group and rearrange the notes into possible themes. Whilst it is possible to do this in Nvivo, I found the physical pieces of paper

and the engagement and thinking of the data whilst rearranging the codes, worked better for me and I was able to keep rearranging the codes until I was happy with the themes that were created (see Appendix III: Photo of Initial Theme Development). By doing this, I was able to see that some of the codes were very similar, so could be combined. I also draw an initial thematic map (see Appendix IV: Photo of Initial Mind Map of Connections), to start exploring the provisional themes, how these provisional themes might relate to each other, and I started to consider the overall story of the analysis and what it meant (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts played a critical role in shaping these themes, providing a lens to explore the dynamics of power, agency, and structure within the students' experiences. For instance, themes like "cultural adaptation" and "academic identity" illustrated students' development of their habitus in relation to the expectations and practices of the foundation year field. These themes also shed light on students' struggles to acquire various forms of capital, whether cultural, social, or linguistic, and how these dynamics influenced their integration and success within the academic environment. Through this thematic grouping, I was able to discern how students were situated within the power structures of the foundation year and how these structures either facilitated or hindered their development of the capital necessary for academic and social success. This process not only illuminated the challenges faced by the students but also provided a richer understanding of the systemic factors shaping their educational journeys, such as limited access to undergraduates.

4.11.4 Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

During phase 4, the potential themes were carefully reviewed to ensure the quality and integrity of the analysis. The first part of this phase involved ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the collated data extracts. This required checking that each theme had a clear central organising principle and defined boundaries, ensuring there was sufficient valuable data within each theme and that the theme

conveyed something meaningful. I revisited the data to confirm that each theme adequately captured important aspects of the participants' experiences, as they related to the research questions. To achieve this, I re-read the entire data set and double-checked that the data had been coded appropriately. It was crucial that each theme stood on its own merit, with data providing significant insights into the students' experiences (Byrne, 2022). It was also important to remember that themes are not passively derived from the data but are actively constructed by me, the researcher, through an interpretive process (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The themes and codes were further refined to ensure they accurately reflected the dynamics of students' experiences through a Bourdieusian lens. I critically assessed whether the themes adequately captured the students' academic journeys from their foundation year to undergraduate studies and interactions with peers, the IFP and the university. This assessment involved revisiting the literature to ensure that the themes aligned with theoretical constructs, such as Bourdieu's concept of capital, and comparing them with the data to ensure consistency and depth. I also considered how the themes reflected the processes of accumulating and exchanging various forms of capital, such as linguistic or cultural capital, and how these processes shaped their experiences. For example, I explored how students' acquisition of social capital, through peer interactions, friendships, and developing a sense of belonging might influence their academic engagement and success. I also reflected on the evolution of their habitus over the course of the foundation year, as they adapted to the academic and social expectations of UK HE. These shifts were evident in the data, as students described changes in their confidence, communication styles, and understanding of academic norms.

4.11.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The identified themes were then examined to ensure they "(a) do not try to do too much, as themes should ideally have a singular focus; (b) are related but do not

overlap, so they are not repetitive, although they may build on previous themes; and (c) directly address your research question" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.66). Following this, I reviewed the themes through a Bourdieusian lens, paying particular attention to how students acquire, negotiate, and transform their academic and social capital within the field of HE. This involved examining the ways in which their habitus interacted with the institutional structures and expectations they encountered. By considering the role of capital conversion, I explored how students perceived the different forms of capital were legitimised or devalued within the academic field, shaping students' transitions and sense of belonging. These reflections provided deeper insights into the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between students' dispositions and the institutional field.

By applying Bourdieu's theoretical concepts, I was able to further refine these themes, situating them within broader socio-cultural and academic structures**.** For example, themes such as "cultural adaptation" and "academic identity" were framed as part of students' negotiation of their habitus within the field of HE. These themes illustrated how students adjusted their dispositions to align with the norms of the UK academic environment, as well as instances where tensions arose between their pre-existing habitus and institutional expectations. For example, some students initially struggled with the expectation of independent learning, having come from educational backgrounds where rote memorisation and teacher-directed instruction were the norm. One student described feeling "lost" when asked to critically evaluate sources rather than simply summarising them, reflecting a mismatch between their prior academic experiences and the skills valued in UK HE. Over time, however, students described developing strategies to navigate these challenges, demonstrating shifts in their habitus as they adapted to new academic norms.

During phases 4 and 5, the themes underwent several iterations, with their grouping and naming evolving through reflection and time away from the data. To help organise and visualise these themes, I created a mind map, which allowed me to identify connections between different aspects of the data and refine how they were categorised. A visual representation of this process is provided in Appendix V: Mind

Map of interconnecting codes and themes. This process also facilitated comparison with my literature review, as I revisited key themes within existing scholarship and assessed their presence in my findings. While some themes, such as belonging, were strongly reflected in the data, others, like employability skills, were notably absent. This iterative and reflexive approach ensured that the thematic analysis remained grounded in the data while also being informed by wider academic discourse.

However, the process of coding was not always straightforward, as many data extracts could relate to multiple codes or themes. For example, several students described arriving in the UK and joining the IFP as their first experience in a multicultural environment. These reflections could be interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, the theme of belonging, or habitus shift, depending on the analytical focus. This overlap highlights the complexity of lived experiences and the importance of a flexible, reflective approach to analysis. For example:

> *“I feel like for foundation year, there is no native here. And we just feel everybody's a stranger here to this system, to this nation. We are all kind of similar.”*

Initially this appeared to relate to the code of “multiculturalism”, however upon reflection I considered it may also be related to the student’s sense of belonging in that they felt they belonged to IFP, as they were all international students. Another example is this quote:

> “*The teachers did a lot of hand holding, they give you a lot of resources and feedback and they prepare you a lot for undergrad, so that you're not just jumping right from high school to undergrad.”*

I coded this as “help” and then grouped it under the sub-theme of “safe spaces and support”, however it could equally have been coded under “transition” as the student

talked about moving from high school to undergraduate studies, and equally it could have been coded under “teachers”, as the student talked about how supportive their teachers were. Where there were these areas of ambiguity, I tried to go with the main theme of what I interpreted the student was saying, whilst still appreciating the complexity of the international foundation students’ transition from foundation studies to undergraduate. I reflected upon this in my reflexive journal:

> *“Whilst coding the quotes, it is sometimes difficult to assign the quotes to one code. The saying “it takes a village to raise a child” comes to mind, in that students benefit from multiple people, sharing their knowledge and skills to develop not just students’ academic skills, but also their soft skills, and familiarisation with English language and culture that isn’t written down in the curriculum or as any intended learning outcomes (the hidden curriculum).”*

4.11.6 Phase 6: Producing the report

Although this is identified as the final phase, the writing of the thematic analysis was ongoing and iterative rather than strictly linear. As Braun and Clarke (2022) note, thematic analysis should “provide a compelling story about your data based on your analysis” (p. 69), and this principle guided my approach. Throughout the analysis, I engaged in a continuous process of refinement, with themes and sub-themes evolving through repeated engagement with the data. This process was not without complexity, as many data extracts could potentially fit within multiple codes or themes. As new insights emerged, I revisited earlier stages of the analysis to ensure the themes remained grounded in the participants’ lived experiences. This recursive, reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022) demanded flexibility and openness to reinterpretation, allowing the analysis to deepen over time. Peer collaboration also played a key role; discussing early iterations of the themes with colleagues from the HE sector helped me consider alternative interpretations and strengthened the credibility of the developing analysis. As Finlay (2002) suggests, engaging reflexively

in this process helped me remain aware of my own influence as a researcher and supported a more thoughtful and trustworthy interpretation of the data.

To support consistency, clarity, and transparency, I maintained a working table to capture and refine sub-theme definitions as they developed. This table evolved alongside the analysis and was finalised after multiple rounds of reflection, ultimately forming the basis of the version presented in Appendix VI: Initial sub-theme development. This version represented an arrangement of four themes and ten sub-themes; each clearly defined to encapsulate their key characteristics and justify their inclusion. However, upon further reflection, supported by my research journal, two of these themes related specifically to contextual aspects of the IFP itself, such as the location of the campus and the perceived limitations of certain modules. These themes, while relevant to the specific context of my institution, were ultimately removed from the analysis because they did not resonate with the broader experiences of international foundation students across different institutions. Recognising this, the remaining eight sub-themes were reviewed and reimagined, resulting in three broader categories: belonging, identity and social integration; accumulating and converting capital; and navigating new fields. These restructured groupings, are shown in Table 5 and Figure 6, provide a more focused and conceptually coherent framework for presenting the findings, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

4.12 Reliability of the data

Ensuring the reliability, consistency, and meaningfulness of research data is essential for the integrity of qualitative research. In this study, the use of two complementary methods, listening rooms and walking interviews, greatly enhanced both the reliability and depth of the data collected. As Cohen et al. (2018) suggest, employing multiple methods to triangulate data strengthens the credibility of findings by offering varied perspectives on the same phenomenon. The listening rooms

provided a space for focused, semi-structured conversations, enabling students to reflect on and discuss their shared experiences in a supportive environment. These discussions encouraged the co-construction of meaning, revealing themes that may not have emerged in individual interviews alone. In contrast, the walking interviews created a more dynamic and informal context, where individual participants could express their thoughts while engaging with familiar academic spaces. This mobility fostered spontaneous reflections and reduced potential language barriers that might have arisen in a more formal interview setting. As Kusenbach (2003) notes, walking interviews allow participants to connect their personal experiences to the environment, resulting in richer, situated insights. Together, these two methods provided complementary perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of students' transitional experiences.

Additionally, the walking interviews allowed me, as the researcher, to clarify and confirm the data gathered during the listening rooms. This provided an opportunity to revisit specific aspects of the conversations and ensure that the data was both accurate and fully understood. The combination of these methods created a triangulated approach, facilitating validation and cross-checking of the data. For example, ideas expressed by students in the listening rooms were further explored or expanded upon in the walking interviews, offering a more nuanced and reliable perspective. This methodological combination reflected the multifaceted nature of students' lived experiences, leading to a more robust understanding of their academic journeys. By incorporating multiple methods, I mitigated the limitations of relying on a single approach, ensuring the findings remained grounded in authentic, meaningful experiences, as Cohen et al. (2018) recommend.

This triangulated approach aligns with the nature of reflexive thematic analysis, which, while subjective, is considered a strength in qualitative research. As Nadar (2014) argues, personal stories and narratives are vital data sources, offering deep insights that reflect the "soul" of the participants' experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis similarly values the researcher's interpretation of these stories,

acknowledging the subjective lens through which data is processed. This subjective yet systematic approach helps provide a richer understanding of participants' lived experiences while maintaining methodological rigor. As the sole researcher responsible for coding and developing the themes, I ensured consistency throughout the analysis process, which would likely yield similar results if repeated. My familiarity with the IFP further contributed to this consistency, as it reduced the need for participants to explain contextual information and helped create a more comfortable environment for sharing their experiences.

Although the data was deeply contextual and unique to each student's experience, the involvement of multiple participants allowed for the identification of shared experiences and perspectives. Comparing these varying experiences enabled a deeper understanding of the processes influencing students' academic journeys and helped to identify any outliers in the data (Bazeley, 2020). While participants may not fully agree on the conclusions reached, given the individual nature of their experiences, it was important to ensure that all perspectives were considered to present a representative study.

In line with this approach, Denzin (1989) stresses the importance of "thick description" in qualitative research, which goes beyond surface-level facts to include emotions and the social contexts that shape lived experiences. Producing rich descriptions of international foundation students' experiences required not only careful data recording but also the active involvement of students, as they are the "experts of their lived experiences" (Winn and Lindqvist, 2019). As Agar (1993) highlights, the personal involvement and in-depth responses typical of qualitative research help ensure high levels of reliability and validity. However, Silverman (2015) argues that researchers may not always occupy a sufficiently privileged position to fully interpret this data. To further validate the findings, I engaged with alumni after transcribing the collected data, ensuring the accuracy of interpretations. Their involvement was crucial in enhancing the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the analysis (Thomas, 2006). By researching with the students,

rather than on them, I ensured that the analysis and data remained rooted in authentic, meaningful insights reflective of their lived experiences.

4.13 Summary of methodology chapter

This methodology chapter outlines the two interconnected phases of the research process. The chosen research methods were both appropriate and inclusive (Denscombe, 2010), enabling international students to reflect on their educational journeys, from their home countries, through the IFP, and onto their undergraduate studies. The research involved six alumni who had completed their international foundation education one or two years prior to the study. In the first phase, a friendship pair of alumni participated in a listening room session, where prompt cards facilitated their reflections on their IFP experiences. My absence as the researcher allowed for a more authentic and detailed conversation, with participants naturally encouraging and validating one another. The data from this listening room session then guided the second phase, which consisted of individual walking interviews with each of the six participants. These interviews provided an opportunity to clarify and explore topics discussed in the listening rooms in greater depth. Both methods took place on the campus where the students had experienced their foundation year, helping to ground their reflective process.

The data collected from both methods were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), with Nvivo software used to manage and organise the data. Throughout the analysis, Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field provided a theoretical framework to interpret the students' experiences. This lens helped to identify how their academic and social capital evolved within the context of their foundation year and subsequent HE journey. The next chapter will present the analysis of these findings, framed through Bourdieu's theory, to explore the interplay between students' personal agency and the structural dynamics of the academic field.

Chapter 5: Data analysis and discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from listening rooms and walking interviews, using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to identify and interpret key themes. Reflexive thematic analysis, as discussed in the previous section, involves an iterative process of coding and theme development, with the researcher's reflexive engagement playing a central role in shaping the interpretation of the data. Within this chapter the constructed themes are contextualised within the existing literature (Chapter 2) and directly address the research questions outlined below:

RQ1: What academic capital do international foundation students develop and value during their foundation year?

RQ2: What are the current opportunities for international foundation students to be more actively engaged in the development of their academic capital?

RQ3: What can UK HE institutions do to support their development of academic capital to enable successful transition to undergraduate studies?

The analysis is further informed by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts (Chapter 3) specifically field, habitus, and capital, which provide a lens to explore the experiences of international foundation students. This chapter critically examines how these constructs manifest in students' transitions and explores how the knowledge, skills, and networks cultivated during the foundation year influence

students' confidence, sense of belonging, and ability to engage with undergraduate studies.

5.2 Generation of themes

The generation and refinement of themes were guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which emphasises an iterative, interpretive approach to coding, analysis, and reflection. Rather than a linear process, the analysis was dynamic, with themes evolving as I engaged more deeply with the data. Through multiple stages of coding and re-coding, patterns and insights gradually emerged and were synthesised into overarching themes that captured the complexity of international foundation students' transitions. This flexible, nuanced approach was supported by ongoing reflection, documented through my reflexive journal and Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field, and capital providing a critical lens through which to understand how international foundation students navigate and respond to new academic and sociocultural environments.

The data analysis resulted in three overarching themes that map students' transitions across the interconnected dimensions of habitus, field, and capital, as illustrated in Figure 6. This conceptual model views transition as an ongoing, relational process involving adaptation to new academic and sociocultural contexts (fields), the reshaping of dispositions (habitus), and the acquisition and transformation of valued resources (capital). At the centre of the model is the recognition that international foundation students are not merely shaped by the structural and cultural dimensions of HE but are also active agents in constructing their academic identities and pathways. The three overlapping thematic domains are:

1. **Belonging, Identity, and Social Integration** – capturing the affective, cultural, and social dimensions of transition, including students' sense of belonging, social factors and the support structures that facilitate integration.

This theme highlights how students' evolving sense of belonging is influenced by their interactions within academic and social fields, which, in turn, reshape their habitus and enable the accumulation of social and cultural capital. The arrow linking this thematic domain with the other two fields represents the interrelationship between belonging and students' ability to accumulate and convert different forms of capital, as well as their capacity to navigate new and unfamiliar fields.

2. **Accumulating and Converting Capital** – highlighting how students develop and transform academic, cultural, and social capital into resources that hold value within HE and beyond. The transformation of capital is not linear; it involves an ongoing negotiation within the academic and social fields, as represented by the arrows connecting capital accumulation with habitus and field. These links emphasise how students' evolving dispositions (habitus) interact with the resources they acquire, allowing them to navigate and exert agency within new fields, particularly as they engage with UK academic practices and expectations.

3. **Navigating New Fields** – focusing on students' adaptation to UK pedagogical practices, academic expectations, and wider cultural contexts. The relationship between habitus, field, and capital is pivotal here. The arrows indicate that students' prior dispositions (habitus) interact with the new academic field to shape their approaches to learning. Additionally, the acquisition and transformation of capital are essential in facilitating students' ability to adapt and succeed in the UK HE environment. This interplay highlights how students actively engage with, and sometimes challenge, the pedagogical expectations of their new academic field.

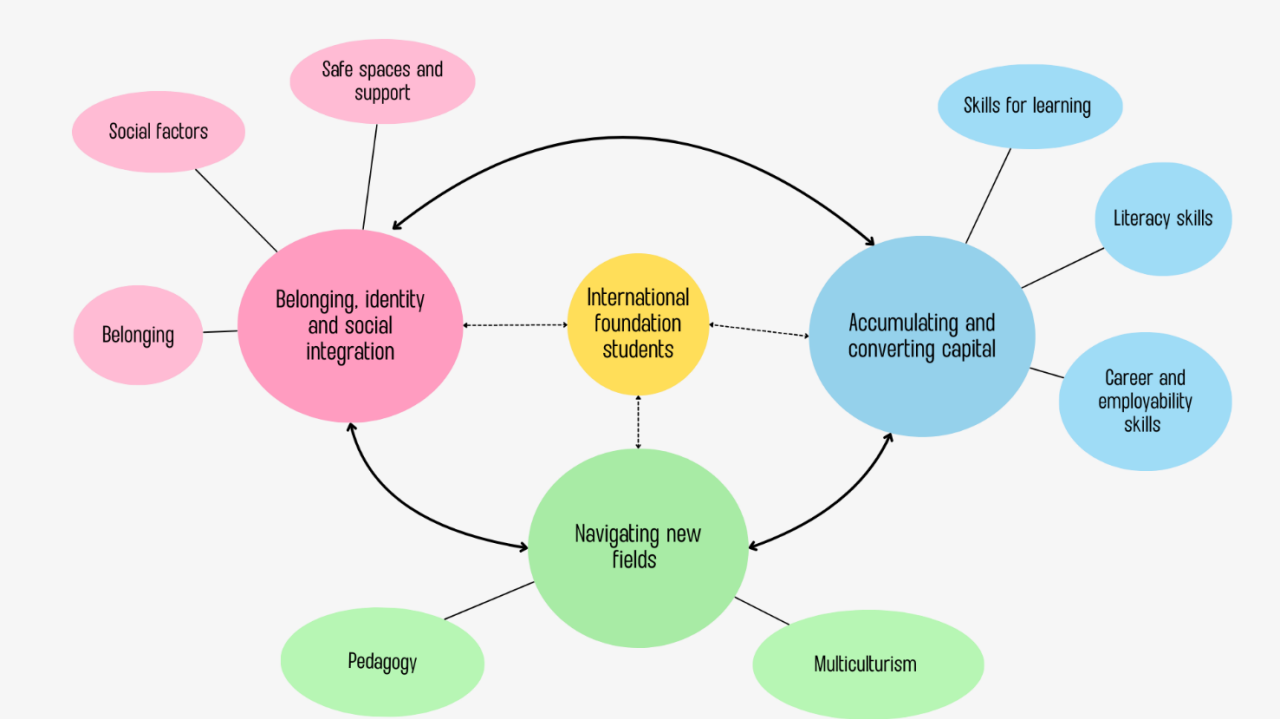

Figure 6: Data themes mapped through Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field (Author's own, created using Canva, 2025)

These themes and sub-themes are also summarised in tabular form in Table 5 below. While presented separately for clarity, the themes and sub-themes are interconnected and fluid, capturing the multidimensional and evolving nature of students' transition experiences.

Theme	Sub-theme	Characteristics	Research Question
Belonging, identity and social integration	Belonging	Students' sense of community and belonging to the IFP and university (or not).	RQ2
	Social factors	Opportunities for meaningful peer connections and a balanced academic–social experience.	RQ2
	Safe space and support	The formative nature of the IFP, with lots of support available and the ability for students to access help and support such as mentoring and buddies.	RQ1 / RQ2 / RQ3
Accumulating and converting capital	Literacy skills	A range of academic literacy skills including research skills, reading, writing, note taking, presentation skills, critical thinking and referencing.	RQ1 / RQ3
	Skills for learning	Skills such as self-study skills, stress management skills, knowledge of assessment types, awareness of mark schemes and how to use feedback.	RQ2
	Career and employability skills	Activities and skills to support employability and career enhancements.	RQ1/ RQ2/ RQ3
Navigating new fields	Pedagogy	The differences between international students' previous educational experiences and that experienced in the UK.	RQ1 / RQ3
	Multiculturalism and being in the UK	Being in the UK and part of an IFP.	RQ1 / RQ3

Table 5: Theme and sub-theme summary table

Each of these overarching themes is explored in more detail below, drawing on data excerpts and analytical insights to illustrate how international foundation students experience, interpret, and respond to the complex processes of transition within UK HE.

5.3 Belonging, identity and social integration

This overarching theme is explored through three interrelated sub-themes: Belonging*,* Social Factors*,* and Safe Space and Support*.* Together, these dimensions illuminate how international foundation students experience connection, negotiate their identities, and access the relational and emotional resources that underpin their integration into university life.

This theme is closely aligned with Bourdieu's concept of habitus which is shaped by students' past experiences and continuously restructured through their engagement with new educational contexts (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2004). For international foundation students, habitus is not fixed but in a dynamic state of forming and becoming as they navigate unfamiliar academic and cultural fields. As students begin to reshape their habitus, the development of a sense of belonging becomes central to this process. For international foundation students, developing a sense of belonging to the IFP, the wider university community, and the host country is fundamental to their transition (Thomas, 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Arthur, 2017). Access to safe and supportive spaces, opportunities for meaningful social interaction, and the formation of peer networks play a significant role in shaping students' evolving identities and fostering a sense of legitimacy and acceptance. These affective and relational dimensions are crucial not only for sustaining motivation and building confidence but also for cultivating the self-efficacy needed to thrive in HE (Thomas, 2012). Within this context, social capital emerges as a vital resource. Peer relationships and social participation support integration, enhance feelings of belonging, and contribute to academic success (Robertson et al., 2011; Jensen & Jetton, 2015). In addition, these networks facilitate cultural adaptation and professional development by exposing students to the norms and expectations of the host country (Bai & Wang, 2022).

Each of these sub-themes is examined in the following sections to highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of students' social and affective transitions.

5.3.1 Belonging

A sense of belonging is fundamental for all students, as it fosters engagement, enhances participation in community activities, and contributes to the development of social capital (Wellman et al., 2001). In the context of HE, Thomas (2012) argued that belonging extended beyond feeling connected to the university, encompassing identification with the department and the discipline. For international students, this experience is further complicated by the need to feel a sense of belonging to their host country (Arthur, 2017). In this study, all participants reported feelings of "not fully belonging", but these reflections were predominantly associated with the university as a whole rather than the IFP or their academic discipline. Adamma's statement exemplified this sentiment:

> *"You're kind of part of the university, but you're not really quite at the university, are you? … You are in your own little IFP bubble."*

In the first part of this excerpt, Adamma expressed uncertainty as to whether she felt a sense of belonging to the university or not, where she perceived herself as being on the periphery of the university rather than fully integrated into it. These reflections highlighted her sense of being physically and socially separated from the broader university community, encapsulating the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that international foundation students often navigate. Her subsequent reflection during the walking interview clarified that she felt a sense of belonging to the IFP community, but not to the wider university. This sentiment was echoed by other students who described feeling like outsiders, unable to fully participate in

university life (Seal & Parkes, 2019). Barriers to belonging included the remote location of the IFP campus and limited interaction with undergraduate students.

However, Adamma's perspective diverged from her peers in one notable respect. Whilst she recognised the challenges of the IFP's remoteness, she also appreciated the "*IFP bubble*," describing it as a safe space that shielded her from the overwhelming experience of being on the main university campus. This highlighted the individuality of international students' experiences and the importance of resisting homogenised narratives (Carroll, 2015). Adamma fondly referred to the "*IFP bubble*" emphasising the sense of safety and community she had experienced. This also highlighted the transitional role of IFPs, which create supportive environments as students prepare for undergraduate studies.

The university represents a field where actors (students, staff, and academics) compete for cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, international foundation students, such as Adamma, often find themselves on the margins of this field, unable to fully engage due to their limited access to the "rules of the game" (Tran, 2016). These rules include the implicit cultural and social norms that govern interactions and participation in the university community. Adamma's comment about being "*kind of part of the university"* reflected her struggle to understand and navigate these norms. In addition, the physical remoteness of the IFP campus further exemplified how spatial arrangements within the field can act as structural barriers to students' inclusion. Without frequent access to the main campus, international foundation students have limited opportunities to interact with undergraduate peers and participate in broader university life, limiting their ability to accumulate the social and cultural capital valued within the field. This spatial and social disconnection reinforced feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, leaving students with fewer opportunities to form meaningful connections that foster belonging.

For students transitioning to HE, feelings of conforming and belonging are important factors in terms of a successful transition, with international students also needing to feel that they belong in their host country (Arthur, 2017; Hughes and Smail, 2014). Ecochard & Fotheringham (2017) also recognise the challenges international students face adjusting to living and studying abroad, stating that this required immense effort and aptitude. The challenges of being in the UK were consistently echoed across all participants in this study. One student remarked, "*just being in the UK can be quite intimidating*," highlighting the emotional toll of navigating a new cultural environment.

Despite these challenges, many students identified their foundation year as instrumental in building their confidence. The year served as a preparatory space where they could familiarise themselves with both the academic expectations of HE and the practicalities of living in the UK. Students described feeling more self-assured in their ability to navigate everyday tasks, such as finding their way around campus or using public transport. These experiences were pivotal in fostering a sense of belonging, as students moved from being "*strangers to the environment*" to feeling more integrated into their surroundings. This evolution highlighted the fluid and dynamic nature of habitus, as students adjusted to their new environment and deveeloped the confidence needed to engage more fully with the demands of HE.

5.3.2 Social factors

Many of the students when reflecting on their foundation year, talked about the lack of social integration, with the rest of the university and undergraduate students. Several students found the IFP overly academic and intense, suggesting the inclusion of more social activities to provide breaks from their studies. Adamma and Maya echoed this view in their listening room, and expressed a desire for:

> *"a greater balance between academic work and a social life."*

This comment highlighted a perceived discrepancy between Adamma and Maya's expectations of the foundation year and the reality they experienced, suggesting that the IFP did not provide the holistic educational experience they had anticipated. They found it overly focused on academic work, with limited space for social engagement. As international students, cultural and language barriers further complicated their ability to build relationships, limiting opportunities to develop social capital. Their reflections reveal a broader misalignment between students' needs and the programme's priorities, implicitly challenging an IFP structure that appears to prioritise academic preparation at the expense of wider developmental support.

Education plays a central role in the accumulation and transformation of cultural capital, as it provides access to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions valued within a given field (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the educational field encompasses not only academic knowledge but also the social and cultural dimensions that enrich individuals' capital. Bourdieu's concept of field is helpful here: the foundation year operates as a preparatory field where students are expected to acquire the capital necessary for success in the undergraduate field. Yet when programmes narrowly privilege academic attainment, they risk reinforcing a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968), where social development is marginalised. Adamma and Maya's call for greater social opportunities reflects a desire for an educational experience that supports both intellectual growth and integration into the social and cultural life of the university. Addressing these needs could help bridge the gap between the foundation and undergraduate fields, supporting a smoother transition and enhancing students' sense of belonging and agency.

Within the study, many students discussed the importance of friendships in shaping their experiences during the foundation year (Jones et al., 2018). These social bonds were not merely peripheral but play a central role in supporting emotional wellbeing, academic engagement, and cultural adjustment. However, international students

often face challenges in forming friendships due to cultural and linguistic differences (Bittencourt et al., 2021). This difficulty was reflected in Adamma's comment:

> *"Making new friends has been very difficult because I can't seem to bond, create a deep bond with anyone."*

While Adamma identified this challenge, she also mentioned forming a deep friendship with Maya, who was from the same country but on a different course. In contrast, Hla and Zahra had a more positive perspective on friendship. When discussing the best aspects of the IFP, they agreed:

> *"One thing that comes at the top of my mind is probably making friendships."*

Hla and Zahra, who were on the same course but from different countries, had developed a supportive friendship that provided emotional encouragement, practical help, and a sense of belonging, all of which are crucial for adapting to life in a new country and academic environment. For international students, building social capital is often hindered by their limited access to pre-existing networks and differences in cultural capital, such as language proficiency, shared cultural references, and an understanding of social norms. Adamma and Maya's friendship demonstrated the significance of shared cultural references and a mutual background in creating a sense of familiarity and trust, facilitating the formation of social capital. Conversely, Hla and Zahra's friendship illustrated how a shared current habitus, their mutual participation in the IFP also fosters meaningful connections. These examples highlighted the importance of creating spaces where students can establish new networks, whether through shared cultural backgrounds or shared experiences within the IFP field (Bell, 2016).

Friendships provide international students with more than emotional support; they are instrumental in developing social capital. Through shared resources, study groups, and information about university life, friendships help students navigate their new academic and cultural environments (Robertson et al., 2011). However, as newcomers to the UK and its education system, international students may encounter unfamiliar social codes, communication styles, and expectations of friendship. These differences can lead to misunderstandings or feelings of alienation, as students' habitus may not initially align with the norms of the UK or the HE field. For students like Adamma, this misalignment created feelings of exclusion, undermining her self-confidence, social interactions, and sense of belonging. Adapting to a new social environment requires a gradual reshaping of habitus, as students navigate internal tensions between maintaining their cultural identity and aligning with the social norms of the host country. The IFP, as a specific field within the broader context of HE, is a space where students strive for academic success, social acceptance, and future opportunities. Hla and Zahra's comment highlighted the pivotal role of friendships in supporting this transition, enabling students to negotiate the demands of the field more effectively.

This recognition of the value of peer relationships extended beyond the foundation cohort itself. Some students suggested that their transition would have been strengthened by more structured opportunities to connect with undergraduate students. For example, during the walking interview, Hla reflected on what she thought would have improved the IFP:

> *"[…] maybe we could have integrated more with the undergraduate students as we didn't really feel part of the university."*

Hla's comment reflected the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within HE and the potential barriers international foundation students may encounter. She expressed a

clear desire for greater integration and highlighted her perceived marginalisation within the wider university community. Hla was acutely aware of the limited interaction with undergraduate students, which she felt hindered her ability to develop social capital. Such integration, she suggested, would have provided a meaningful bridge into university life, facilitating both social connection and a better understanding of academic and cultural expectations. Without these links, Hla experienced a sense of disconnection that impacted her confidence and limited her engagement both socially and academically. Many students expressed a desire to build meaningful connections with undergraduate peers, recognising the value such relationships could offer in terms of collaboration and insider knowledge about academic and social life (Palmer et al., 2009). However, feelings of difference and perceived social distance often made these connections difficult to establish. The tension between the desire to integrate and the barriers to doing so emerged as a recurring theme. Di's experience exemplified this struggle, as she reflected on the challenges she faced in bonding with her flatmates:

> *"[…] you're living on the main campus and your flatmates are all first years. And you are foundation, […] you can't really bond with them because, you know, there are all these differences."*

While shared living arrangements with undergraduates could have provided valuable opportunities for establishing social connections and networks, which are critical for understanding academic conventions and receiving both academic and social support, Di felt unable to take advantage of these opportunities. Her reference to "*all these differences*" points to a perceived misalignment between her habitus and that of her undergraduate flatmates. For Di, these differences created barriers to social integration, leaving her unable to find common ground upon which to build meaningful relationships with her flatmates. This clash of habitus highlights the challenges faced by international foundation students, who bring distinct cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds into the university field. Di's experience exemplified how the HE field can marginalise students whose cultural capital

diverges from the dominant expectations, creating barriers to social integration and a sense of belonging.

Cultural capital plays a significant role in shaping social interactions within the university context. As Sheridan (2011) noted, international students often bring diverse forms of cultural capital, such as multilingual abilities, alternative educational experiences and distinct social norms. These forms of capital may not always align with or be valued by the conventions of UK HE. For instance, an international foundation student fluent in multiple languages may possess valuable linguistic skills, which are highly regarded in a global context. However, this form of capital may not directly translate into academic success in a UK university, where proficiency in academic English and familiarity with specific referencing systems, such as Harvard, are essential (Robertson et al., 2000). Without explicit recognition and support from HEIs, these differences can heighten feelings of exclusion or inadequacy, limiting students' ability to integrate fully into the HE field. Such lack of recognition can also contribute to a sense of alienation, as students like Di struggle to establish social status or build meaningful connections with peers who have different cultural and social references.

5.3.3 Safe spaces and support

Despite students considering the IFP to be stressful and overwhelming, all students also saw it as a safe space and a "formative year" before their undergraduate studies. For example, Maya and Adamma’s conversation about the best thing about the IFP:

> *“That's the best thing ever, just knowing that there's somebody there to listen to you and to encourage you. All the tutors were so kind and encouraging. Yeah, you know, that's [the] one thing I really liked. Yeah. And I miss it. I miss it so much.”*

Students’ appreciation of their tutors’ kindness and encouragement can be understood as a form of cultural capital, encompassing not only academic skills, but also emotional support, guidance, and the modelling of effective academic behaviours. These interactions supported students in navigating both academic and social fields, contributing to their overall development. Within the IFP context, the structure of support reflects Bourdieu’s concept of field, where the norms and expectations, which focus on personal growth, care and preparation for HE, differ in emphasis from those found in the typically more independent undergraduate environment. Being listened to and encouraged also helped students accumulate symbolic capital: the recognition, respect, and affirmation they received from tutors acted as a form of validation, enhancing their perceived legitimacy within the academic field. This symbolic capital strengthened their academic self-concept, which in turn influenced the development of their habitus by fostering confidence, positive attitudes toward learning, and a sense of belonging. These shifts shaped how students approached their studies, responded to challenges, and envisioned their place within HE.

The emotional attachment expressed by Maya and Adamma evidenced in the comment “*I miss it so much*” implied that the supportive environment of the foundation year became deeply internalised in their habitus. In Bourdieu’s terms, this attachment can be seen as the incorporation of educational structures characterised by support, encouragement, and guidance into students’ embodied dispositions. These dispositions may influence how students approach academic challenges in subsequent fields, particularly undergraduate study, where expectations and institutional cultures can differ markedly. While this support can undoubtedly foster confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging, it also raises important questions

about how students are prepared for the transition to more autonomous learning environments. The challenge is not that support necessarily creates dependency, but that students must also be equipped with the navigational capital and self-efficacy needed to succeed beyond the IFP. This dynamic highlights a subtle tension within the IFP: how to sustain a supportive environment that fosters confidence and belonging, while also enabling students to develop the independence and adaptability needed to succeed in the more autonomous field of undergraduate study (Jones, 2018).

When comparing the support structures of the foundation and the undergraduate field, there was a noticeable shift in students' habitus and their perceived levels of autonomy. Hla's remarked to Zahra in the listening room that her undergraduate tutors treated her:

> *"like an adult, not like a child or like a student anymore."*

Hla's choice of words about being treated as an "*adult*" demonstrated her awareness of her own development of capital. She considered she was now equipped with the knowledge, skills, education and other cultural acquisitions to feel "*like an adult*" and not in need of additional support. This awareness is also associated with gaining respect and recognition within the academic field, symbolising an increase in symbolic capital. Hla's habitus has shifted, and she now has new responsibilities and expectations. She has developed a more mature outlook on her education, taking greater responsibility for completing assignments, preparing for seminars, engaging in self-directed study, and holding herself accountable. She perceived this transition as moving up the educational hierarchy, marked by increased autonomy, more challenging academic work, and interactions with institutional structures and expectations more akin to those encountered by adults in wider society. This transition from child or student to adult also signified an important phase in self-

identity, with Hla now perceiving herself as being capable and responsible. In that sense the IFP had bridged the gap between child / student and a culture of dependency and the autonomy of adulthood and responsibility, shaping Hla's identity and social position.

Whilst all students acknowledged the great amount of help and support, they received during their foundation year, Di made an interesting comment, on her walking interview, about the accessibility of this help:

> *"One of the best things about foundation is that you have this great amount of help coming from everyone and you're not ashamed to ask for it."*

Di explained that prior to coming to the UK, she had experienced what she described as a "*strict"* educational experience, where she had been expected to study silently and alone in the classroom. Therefore, Di's previous classroom experience differed significantly from the behavioural expectations in UK HE. The "*great amount of help*" can be seen as a form of social capital, encompassing the support, encouragement, and resources that promote academic success. This contrasts with literature suggesting international students often feel less supported than home students (Wachala et al., 2013). It highlighted the supportive norms of the IFP, where students feel comfortable seeking help, unlike in their previous educational experiences. Di's confidence in accessing support suggested strong social capital, developed through positive interactions with tutors and peers, which enhanced academic self-efficacy and well-being, forming part of her habitus. Her statement about being "*not afraid to ask*" reflected how the foundation year fostered an environment where seeking help is normalised and encouraged. This supportive culture is essential for developing students' navigation capital, helping them engage with the HE field (Bell, 2016) where unfamiliar norms might otherwise feel intimidating, particularly for international students (Bai & Wang, 2022).

Returning to Hla and Zahra discussion about being treated as "*adults*" as undergraduate students, they also highlighted significant challenges, particularly the lack of undergraduate support. Both expressed feelings of isolation and that they had to navigate academic demands independently, which they perceived could hinder their progress. Although office hours were technically available, both students stated they hesitated to attend, fearing they would be disturbing their tutors (Stickels et al., 2024). This hesitation suggested a misalignment between the students' habitus, shaped by the nurturing and accessible support of the IFP, and the expectations of the undergraduate field, which demanded greater self-reliance and autonomy. Rather than a straightforward clash between two fields, these accounts may indicate the development of a "cleft habitus" (Bourdieu, 2000): a form of internalised dissonance that occurs when an individual's dispositions no longer align with the structures of the field they enter. This experience, also documented in research with first-generation and working-class students in elite institutions (Reay, 2004), highlighted the complex and often contradictory ways that transition unfolds, characterised by both continuity and disruption in how students understand their place within the university.

5.4 Accumulating and converting capital

This section introduces three sub-themes through which accumulating and converting capital are explored: Literacy Skills, Skills for Learning, and Career and Employability Skills. Each reflects the multidimensional nature of students' development as they build capacity, confidence, and capital for success within and beyond the foundation year.

International foundation students accumulate and convert various forms of capital as they transition into HE. This includes academic capital (e.g. research, referencing, and critical thinking skills), cultural capital (e.g. adapting to UK academic norms), and

social capital. While the previous section focused on the affective and relational aspects of social capital, such as belonging, identity, and peer support, this section explores how students also mobilise social networks strategically to support their academic and professional development. Importantly, students are not passive recipients of capital; rather, they actively develop, adapt, and transform it to align with the expectations of higher education (Wood, 2014). This process involves both the acquisition of new capital and the conversion of existing assets, such as communication skills or prior educational experiences into forms recognised and valued within the UK university context (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay et al., 2005). Yet, this is not a straightforward or equitable process, as the distribution and recognition of capital vary across educational fields (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

5.4.1 Literacy skills

To succeed in UK HE international students often need to adapt their learning strategies, shifting away from approaches like rote memorisation (Robertson et al., 2000) and towards methods that support independent learning and critical engagement. This shift is part of acquiring the academic capital necessary for full participation in undergraduate study. However, when students' habitus does not align with the institutional expectations of UK universities, they may struggle to navigate what Bourdieu called the "rules of the game" (Tran, 2016). In this study, participants consistently emphasised the value of developing academic literacy skills during the foundation year. Among these, research skills were frequently cited as particularly valuable. For example, Adamma described the opportunity to design and conduct her own primary research as one of the most meaningful aspects of her experience:

> *"We did this research where I had an opportunity to actually make my own questionnaire. I carried out my own primary research and conducted everything, designed a poster – those are some really, really good skills for me."*

Adamma's reflection revealed a strong sense of pride in the academic capital she had developed. By emphasising the "*really, really good skills*" she gained through the research process, she emphasised the value she placed on practical competencies that linked her foundation year to the demands of undergraduate study. Her comment also reflected a growing sense of agency, as she took ownership of her learning by actively designing and executing a research project, marking a significant shift in her habitus. This move from passive reception to active knowledge construction aligns with the expectations of UK HE, where independence and critical inquiry are highly valued (Entwistle, 2009). The IFP's provision of hands-on research opportunities was instrumental in fostering this transformation. Activities such as designing questionnaires, conducting primary research, and presenting findings in creative formats like academic posters enabled students to develop both academic and cultural capital. These experiences not only prepared students for the intellectual demands of undergraduate study but also for future professional contexts where such skills are increasingly sought after. Through this process, students became active contributors to knowledge production, building confidence and a deeper sense of academic belonging (Bell, 2016).

Alongside research competencies, students emphasised the importance of academic writing skills as fundamental to their academic success. Several participants reflected on the process of learning how to structure essays and adopt an academic tone. For Di, this learning involved understanding how to visualise the structure of an essay and identifying what content belonged in each section:

> *"IFP was great because you understand what the essay looks like. OK, so you can visualise it."*

Di's comment demonstrated her acquisition of academic and cultural capital, which reshaped her habitus to better align with the conventions of UK academic writing. Her new understanding represented a shift from prior educational experiences to one where she could engage more fully with the expectations of her new academic field. This growth in capital enhanced both her competence and confidence as she transitioned to undergraduate study. The development of critical thinking also emerged as a transformative element of students' academic journeys. Zahra's reflection also captured this shift:

> *"[I learnt] how to find the relevant information, how to analyse sources and be critical about your findings and critically consider different perspectives on the same question."*

For many students, including Zahra, critical thinking marked a significant transition in academic capital, as they moved from learning styles focused on reproducing knowledge to approaches grounded in analysis and critique. Her comment illustrated a growing capacity for critical engagement including interrogating sources, evaluating perspectives, and constructing informed arguments. This transition reflected not only the deepening of academic skills but also a reorientation of habitus in line with the expectations of UK HE. Zahra's development of reflexivity signalled an emerging ability to question assumptions and navigate complexity, which are key features of academic and cultural capital that support long-term success (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bourdieu, 1986). Maya's reflection further illustrated how the IFP supported the development of essential academic literacy skills, particularly in referencing:

> *"Just knowing that I already had an idea of referencing, even though I'm not perfect at referencing, the residual knowledge from foundation makes me feel more confident about writing essays."*

Her comment highlighted the significance of foundational knowledge in building academic confidence. Although she acknowledged her skills were still evolving, Maya expressed a sense of ownership over her learning, demonstrating agency. This growing confidence reflected a shift in habitus as she internalised academic norms and began to feel more at ease within the academic field.

Overall, the development of academic literacy, encompassing research, academic writing, critical thinking, and referencing was central to students' educational transformation during the foundation year. The IFP's explicit emphasis on critical thinking played a vital role in challenging persistent stereotypes that portray international students as lacking these skills (Robertson et al., 2000; Jones, 2017). Such deficit discourses often fail to consider the systemic and structural features of students' previous educational contexts, where emphasis may have been placed on rote memorisation or where academic conventions aligned with Anglo-Western norms were less prominent. This study found that the IFP's scaffolded support particularly through structured engagement with texts, discussion-based tasks and inquiry-led assignments which enabled students to develop and demonstrate critical thinking. These opportunities empowered students to question ideas, reflect on perspectives, and participate meaningfully in academic discourse, thereby positioning them as active agents within the academic field.

5.4.2 Skills for learning

This section explores the key skills that students identified as essential for their academic success. One of the primary challenges that international foundation students face is the gap between the university's assumptions about their preparedness and their own self-perceptions, which can undermine their confidence and sense of belonging within the academic field. Bai and Wang (2024) describe this

disconnect as a form of “culture shock,” involving both emotional and academic adjustments that can make navigating HE feel challenging. These tensions were echoed in the listening room conversation, where Di and Thirteen reflected on their evolving understanding of what success meant to them. Di shared:

> *“… to succeed and to differ from the average student, you need to do self-research. You have to read, and you need to learn by yourself […] you need to find the questions to ask the teacher, not the teacher ask you questions.”*

Di’s reflection illustrated her growing understanding of the role of cultural capital in academic success. Her desire to “*differ from the average student*” revealed an ambition to excel by adopting behaviours aligned with UK HE expectations, particularly self-directed learning and critical inquiry. Her emphasis on “*finding the questions to ask the teacher*” also indicated a shift towards independent thinking and intellectual curiosity, qualities that Bourdieu (1986) identified as forms of embodied cultural capital valued within the academic field. This proactive stance positioned Di as an active agent in her learning, demonstrating her ability to navigate and adapt to the field of HE. Rather than passively absorbing knowledge, she began to engage in the co-construction of meaning, reflecting a reconfiguration of the traditional student–teacher dynamic. As Bourdieu (1986) and Giroux (2011) argue, such engagement is essential for academic success in systems that reward critical thinking and autonomy. By aligning her habitus with the values and expectations of UK HE, Di not only accumulated academic capital but also developed a stronger academic identity and a greater sense of ownership over her educational journey. Her experience highlights the complexity of navigating these transitions and the transformative potential of cultural capital when recognised and strategically mobilised (Bell, 2016).

While Di demonstrated a capacity to navigate these academic expectations with increasing autonomy, others found the shift from the highly structured environment of

the IFP to the more independent undergraduate system challenging. Students frequently described initial confusion when faced with reduced contact hours and less direct guidance. What was first perceived as "*so much free time*" quickly revealed an implicit demand for self-directed study and time management. This transition from structured support to independent learning not only marked a developmental shift but also a cross-cultural one, where students had to reinterpret their roles and responsibilities in the academic field (Dentakos et al., 2017). For many, this was not simply a matter of learning new skills, but of adapting to unfamiliar educational norms and unspoken expectations, which could feel disorienting and even exclusionary. Di's confidence stood in contrast to the uncertainty expressed by others, highlighting the non-homogenised nature of international student experiences (Carroll, 2015) and the varied ways in which students mobilised capital to navigate academic transitions.

These differing trajectories became even more evident as students encountered another key aspect of UK HE: unfamiliar assessment formats. All students noted the stark contrast between the assessments in their home countries, often focused on memorisation and high-stakes exams and the more varied and interpretive assessments typical of undergraduate study. Hla, for instance, emphasised the importance of becoming familiar with these new forms of assessment, commenting on the value of formative opportunities on the IFP to develop academic literacy:

> *"It [IFP] was very helpful because I know the different forms of assessment, for example, it could be a video or essay, it could be a reflective piece. So, it's just understanding how uni works."*

Hla's reflection highlighted how the IFP contributed to developing students' academic capital by equipping them with the practical competencies necessary to manage diverse assessment types. This preparation plays a pivotal role in easing the

transition into undergraduate study, not only by building confidence but also by fostering familiarity with the conventions of UK HE. By making assessment processes more transparent, the IFP supports students in navigating academic tasks with greater assurance (Bai & Wang, 2022). Exposure to a range of assessment formats also encourages students to adopt new academic norms and practices, gradually embedding these into their habitus. In doing so, the IFP narrows the cultural and educational gap between students' prior learning experiences and the expectations of UK HE, helping to smooth what can otherwise be a disorienting transition (Burdett & Crossman, 2012).

In addition to gaining experience of a range of assessment formats, several students reflected on their initial uncertainty around how mark schemes could be used to support academic writing. For example, Thirteen shared:

> *"When our tutor says use the mark scheme in writing your essay, I was like, how could that possibly help? Like it's not going to tell me how to write the essay – that makes no sense."*

Thirteen's reaction reflected the influence of his prior educational habitus, where mark schemes may not have been part of the learning process. His initial scepticism "*how could that possibly help?*" illustrated the disjuncture many international foundation students experience when confronted with unfamiliar academic conventions. This comment also highlighted a broader transitional challenge: success in UK HE requires not only subject knowledge but also fluency in the academic practices and tools that are often taken for granted by institutions. In this context, the mark scheme functions as a form of cultural capital. Proficiency in interpreting and applying it enables students to decode institutional expectations and align their work accordingly (Sadler, 2005). However, for students whose previous educational systems did not prioritise such tools, these conventions may initially

appear opaque or irrelevant. Thirteen's eventual recognition of the mark scheme's value, following his use of it to evaluate sample work, indicated a gradual shift in his academic habitus. Yet his earlier confusion highlighted the extent of adaptation required, especially when such tools are not explicitly introduced or contextualised. This is echoed by Stickels et al. (2024), who note that mismatches between effort and outcome can lead to diminished confidence and motivation when students are unable to interpret the underlying assessment criteria. Turner (2006) similarly emphasises the role of modelling and explanation in helping international students acquire the critical academic literacy necessary to navigate HE. These findings highlight the complexities of developing academic capital within a new field, where the tacit norms underpinning assessment practices must be recognised, interpreted, and internalised over time.

Assessment feedback was another key theme, frequently discussed by students as an essential part of their academic development. During a listening room conversation, Adamma and Maya shared their experiences, with Adamma commenting:

> *"The feedback I used to get on my essays was very detailed and really helpful. With undergrad, it's not."*

Adamma's reflection highlighted the perceived disparity in the quality and specificity of feedback between foundation and undergraduate studies. The detailed feedback provided during the foundation year functioned as a form of cultural capital, equipping students with the academic skills and dispositions needed to navigate the expectations of HE. It not only enhanced their competence but also fostered a sense of belonging, offering a tangible means of understanding and engaging with academic norms. Such feedback can also be interpreted as symbolic capital, supporting students in internalising the rules of the academic field and aligning their

habitus with its expectations. In contrast, the perceived reduction in feedback at undergraduate level signalled a shift in the availability and type of cultural capital accessible to students. For those who had come to rely on detailed, scaffolded feedback, this shift could feel like a withdrawal of support, potentially undermining both confidence and academic identity. As Briggs et al. (2012) argue, feedback is crucial in scaffolding students' learning, enabling them to refine their skills and internalise academic conventions. The transition to undergraduate study, often marked by a decline in feedback quality and availability, can therefore disrupt students' engagement and progress. This highlights the importance of developing feedback literacy, the capacity to interpret, apply, and engage with feedback in meaningful ways, as students move into more independent academic contexts (Henderson et al., 2019; Haughney et al., 2020). Maya's reflection further reinforced this:

> *"When I started to apply my feedback, I saw a huge difference in my work and marks received. My tutor kept telling me to look back at my previous feedback, but I didn't initially realise how useful it was until I tried it and saw my marks increasing."*

As students develop the academic skills necessary to succeed in HE, their habitus also shapes how they interpret and respond to the pressures associated with academic performance. For some, the pursuit of excellence becomes more than a demonstration of competence, it is intertwined with the acquisition of symbolic capital and a desire to prove one's legitimacy within the academic field. Di's focus on exceeding the "*average*" student's performance exemplifies this dynamic, illustrating how habitus informs engagement with academic norms and expectations. While academic success may represent symbolic capital, this drive can also heighten stress, particularly when compounded by the challenges of cultural adjustment. This tension was echoed by Adamma, who described feeling overwhelmed by stress during her foundation year, and Zahra, who experienced such anxiety that she lied to

her parents about the release of her results due to fear of underperformance. When asked how the IFP year could be improved she stated:

> *"I would have wanted to develop some stress management skills. Foundation year students have a lot more academic stress compared to first years."*

Zahra's desire to develop stress management skills highlights an often under-recognised form of cultural capital: the capacity to manage one's emotional and psychological well-being within high-pressure academic contexts. This aligns with research emphasising the affective dimensions of habitus and the importance of emotional resilience in adapting to the demands of HE (Reay, 2004; Winstone & Hume, 2019). While the IFP provided academic and emotional support, Zahra's account highlights the emotional stress involved in these transitions and the unequal ways students access or internalise such support. Her reflection illustrated how stress management is shaped by prior experiences and forms of capital, revealing the complexity of adapting to the normative structures of HE (Winstone & Hume, 2019).

5.4.3 Career and employability skills

The final sub-theme under Accumulating and Converting Capital relates to career and employability skills, which, although not originally a focus of this study, emerged unexpectedly yet consistently across the listening rooms and walking interviews. Students' reflections revealed that preparing for future careers was a significant and recurring concern, highlighting the importance they placed on developing capital beyond academic success. Their narratives highlighted the significance of accumulating career-related forms of cultural and social capital within the IFP field. Many students described the challenges they faced when engaging with tasks such as writing CVs and cover letters, developing LinkedIn profiles and seeking out

internship opportunities. These activities are often taken for granted within HE, yet international foundation students experienced them as complex and unfamiliar, reflecting the implicit cultural knowledge and capital required to navigate such processes effectively. Their accounts often conveyed a sense of being unprepared for undergraduate studies and the competitive job market, especially in comparison to their home student peers. This disparity points to a broader inequity in access to the kinds of cultural capital that facilitate successful navigation of the professional field. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, those who possess the "right" forms of capital are better positioned to align their habitus with the expectations of the field. For international students, however, the opportunities to accumulate this capital were often less visible or accessible, leaving them at a structural disadvantage.

Maya, for example, described becoming aware of the significance of career preparation only after transitioning to undergraduate study:

> *"Coming to undergrad, I realised that there's so much emphasis on the career side of things. And people [home students] are really proactive. […] coming to undergrad, I didn't have a CV."*

Maya's reflection points to a critical disjuncture, not a gap in timing, but in prior exposure. While both international foundation and home students enter undergraduate study concurrently, home students may have already developed familiarity with the implicit norms and expectations of the UK's employability landscape. In contrast, some IFP students like Maya may arrive less equipped with the cultural capital required to navigate these expectations, highlighting a misalignment in preparation that reinforces existing structural inequalities. This late encounter with the implicit norms of career preparation reveals how institutional assumptions about student preparedness can obscure significant inequalities. Practices such as CV writing, networking, and using platforms like LinkedIn may be

assumed as prior knowledge, yet they represent forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that may not be equally distributed. As Maya's account illustrated, international students are often left to interpret and internalise these expectations alone, exposing a structural oversight within the IFP's design.

Maya later shared that she had wanted to apply for a position in a university society. However, she was surprised when the society responded by requesting her CV. The possession of a CV can be understood as a form of symbolic capital, highly valued within the UK HE field. Because she did not have a CV, Maya felt unable to apply for the position; she lacked the capital and the understanding of the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1990a; Tran, 2016) necessary to participate effectively. Although she could have written a CV, she did not do so, possibly due to an absence of academic capital to know how to construct one, or social capital to identify someone who could support her in doing so. The field of HE privileges particular forms of capital, such as fluency in employability practices, which are more readily available to those who have been socialised within that context (Bourdieu, 1986). The process of accumulation and conversion is therefore uneven: while home students can convert their pre-existing capital into further advantage, international students must work harder to acquire, translate, and legitimate their capital in ways that align with institutional expectations. In this sense, employability becomes not merely a practical hurdle but a symbolic space of exclusion, one in which international foundation students must bridge a gap in knowledge and access that is rarely acknowledged by institutional structures (Bathmaker, 2015; Marginson, 2014). Similarly, Zahra described feeling overwhelmed by the expectations surrounding career development:

> *"I didn't know where to start. Everyone around me already had LinkedIn profiles, already had experience. It made me feel behind."*

This sense of being "*behind*" reinforced Bourdieu's (1986) notion of misrecognition, where students internalise the idea that their lack of specific cultural or social capital is a personal deficit, rather than recognising it as a structural issue tied to differential access. In this way, the field of HE reproduces existing inequalities under the guise of meritocracy, where students are expected to compete without equitable access to the tools necessary for success (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Alongside these practical challenges, students also expressed a desire for more preliminary career guidance, such as support in understanding which degrees and professional pathways aligned with their interests and skills, ideally before progressing into undergraduate study. Many remarked that home students appeared to already possess this knowledge, which they attributed to earlier exposure and guidance. This reflects an unequal distribution of career-related cultural capital: while home students often enter HE with a tacit understanding of possible trajectories and how to pursue them, international foundation students are still learning to navigate the field. This disparity can produce a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), where international students internalise a sense of uncertainty or inadequacy, not because of a lack of potential, but due to limited access to prior careers information. During one listening room, Hla and Zahra articulated their ideal vision for the foundation year. Zahra shared:

> *"I would have liked the opportunity to focus on careers, […] just more information (to be) available and what career paths that we'll go into, what I should be expecting in terms of careers and basically talking about spring weeks, internships and all those career related things."*

This quote highlighted a broader desire for increased institutional support to access forms of cultural capital that are valued in the UK labour market. Zahra's words emphasise how career knowledge remains an elusive form of symbolic capital for many international foundation students. In Bourdieu's terms, Zahra and Hla are navigating a transition from the IFP field to that of undergraduate study without full access to the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hla echoed Zahra's

concerns and emphasised how she felt unprepared for the expectations she encountered:

> "…*you need to know how to build your career, how to build your networks … these start to matter a lot and they are going to have a lot to say in how you're going to become as a person and where and how far you go in your career. So, in terms of skills, maybe foundation could support a little bit more in terms of career skills because for me the harshest transition for me was learning about the career stuff."*

The *"learning of career stuff*" can be seen as a form of academic capital encompassing the cultural knowledge, skills and resources that are advantageous in terms of social interactions. Again, it highlighted the shift in the norms and expectations of undergraduate life, where students are expected to have knowledge of career related information, in comparison with their foundation studies, where there is little or no mention or emphasis on careers. Hla stated that she found this transition to be harsh, which suggested a lack of familiarity and confidence with the cultural and academic capital required to navigate the complexities of career planning and advancement. It also highlighted the importance of the IFP providing support and resources to help students successfully navigate this transition to a new social field, so that students are able to experience a smooth transition, and one where they feel confident to deal with, rather than one that they deem to be harsh. Hla's experience can be seen as a process of reconfiguration of her habitus through exposure to a new field with different norms and expectations. While she implied that career development is an individual responsibility, her narrative also hinted at the broader institutional structures that fail to scaffold this development. Hla's relative confidence may have been informed by her previous experience of HE in her home country, suggesting a more adaptable or hybridised habitus (Bai & Wang, 2022). Yet, even with this prior capital, the shift was challenging, reinforcing the idea that the capital valued in one field is not always transferrable or recognised in another.

This sense of disorientation and pressure was not unique to Hla. Other students, like Zahra, also reflected on the emotional weight of navigating unfamiliar career expectations and competing within a field that she perceived privileged pre-existing cultural and social capital. While Hla's account hinted at structural shortcomings in career preparation, Zahra's narrative related to the psychological toll of this misalignment, particularly when witnessing peers seamlessly pursuing prestigious internships and employment opportunities:

> *"You have to start thinking what kind of career you're looking into and because if you don't, you'll start seeing your friends getting offers into big firms and you're like: Where are my offers? Where am I going? I mean, I know that these small internships don't really identify your career, but you know that kind of pressure can really hurt a person as well."*

Zahra's reflection revealed the social comparisons that shaped her experience and intensified the pressure to keep pace with her home student peers. Her words reflected a habitus in transition, as she became increasingly aware of the expectations embedded within the UK HE field. The pressure she described stemmed not just from the competitive nature of employability, but from an emerging awareness of the institutional and cultural norms that her home peers seemed to navigate with greater ease. In this way, her experience illuminated how habitus is shaped by one's positioning in relation to others and to the field itself (Bourdieu, 1977), where particular trajectories and forms of achievement, such as securing prestigious internships are normalised and celebrated. Although Zahra initially dismissed the significance of internships, her subsequent remarks suggested an internalised belief that not securing one could disadvantage her. Her desire to gain career-related experience was shaped by her immersion in a field where such experiences are regarded as markers of cultural and academic capital (Tomlinson, 2008). At the same time, Zahra's sense of "*where are my offers? Where am I going?"* illustrated the affective dimensions of capital accumulation, highlighting how

the lack of access to internships or guidance around career preparation can generate uncertainty and undermine students' confidence and sense of belonging (Hughes and Smail, 2014).

Zahra's account also points to the differential access to institutional resources and opportunities that could support the accumulation and conversion of capital. Career services, CV workshops, mock interviews, and alumni networking events all enhance students' preparedness for the job market. Yet international foundation students, particularly those unfamiliar with the UK HE system, may not always know how to access or navigate these resources. These support structures represent institutionalised capital, yet they are unevenly distributed or unevenly visible to students from different educational and cultural backgrounds. For example, internships represent a critical opportunity where students can convert academic capital into symbolic and social capital. Beyond offering practical experience and networking opportunities (Margaryan et al., 2019), they play a role in shaping students' trajectories and reinforcing the norms of the field. While home students may be more familiar with how to seek and secure these roles, international students often encounter structural barriers, such as visa restrictions, limited networks, or lack of awareness, which inhibit their participation. While internships are not formally required in most undergraduate programmes, they are increasingly perceived as essential by students striving to demonstrate their capabilities in competitive labour markets (Jackson, 2016).

Given these challenges, some participants wanted to address the disparities they had encountered by actively supporting others. Their reflections conveyed a strong sense of responsibility to share the insights they had gained and to assist current IFP students in navigating the complex and often opaque field of employability. This willingness to guide others can be interpreted as an agentic response, wherein participants not only redistributed their own accumulated capital but also engaged in its conversion through acts of peer support and mentoring. Having recently navigated the transition themselves, the students believed they were well positioned

to communicate the importance of building employability-related resources, such as CVs and cover letters, in a manner that was both relatable and persuasive. Their intentions extended beyond offering technical advice; they sought to demystify the strategic role of internships and encourage students to be more proactive in managing their own capital formation. This sense of commitment was articulated powerfully during the listening room, when Thirteen and Di reflected on the potential for alumni-led mentoring:

> *"It would be really nice if we can help students in terms of preparing for careers, because we have a great alumni network. We are willing to help."*

This willingness to offer support also reflected a growing sense of ownership over their own capital. Rather than viewing their knowledge and experience as solely personal assets, Thirteen and Di sought to repurpose their capital in ways that could benefit others. This can be understood as a process of strategic capital conversion: using accumulated academic and cultural capital, shaped not only by institutional affiliation but also by lived experience and informal expertise, to empower peers navigating similar transitions (Broom, 2015; Tomlinson, 2008). Peer-led mentoring could act as a way of redistributing capital within the field, mitigating the structural inequities that often disadvantage international foundation students (Marginson, 2014). Through acts of mentoring, reflective dialogue, and peer-led guidance, participants are not only aiding others but also cultivating their own employability-related competencies. As Jackson (2016) argues such skills, particularly leadership, communication and the capacity to support others, are increasingly recognised as key forms of career capital in graduate labour markets. In this way, the participants were actively reconfiguring their trajectories: not as passive recipients of educational support, but as agentic contributors shaping both their own futures and those of others.

5.5 Navigating new fields

For international foundation students, progressing to undergraduate study in the UK involves more than acquiring academic knowledge, it requires navigating unfamiliar cultural and educational terrains shaped by implicit norms, values, and expectations (Bourdieu, 1984; Maton, 2005). Two key aspects of this transition emerged from the data: first, the challenge of adjusting to new pedagogical practices; and second, the need to adapt to diverse, multicultural learning environments.

5.5.1 Pedagogy

The literature on international students frequently highlights the expectation that students adapt to the pedagogical approaches dominant in the UK, which are typically characterised by a focus on independent learning, critical thinking, and interactive student–teacher engagement (Ploner, 2017). However, these practices, commonly associated with "Western" HE, are not universally experienced or understood in the same way by all international students. Students' prior pedagogical experience can differ significantly based on their home countries and educational backgrounds. For instance, students from educational systems with more teacher-centred, rote-learning approaches may find it challenging to navigate the UK's emphasis on independent study and active participation in discussions. This shift often requires international students to not only acquire new learning strategies but also to adapt their understanding of academic engagement and success. Research has highlighted that many international students report difficulties with inclusivity and the teaching methods employed in UK classrooms (Arkoudis et al., 2013), which can hinder their sense of belonging and integration. In the listening room, Hla reflected on her experience of this transition, discussing how she found the UK's educational approach more authentic and aligned with her aspirations compared to her previous academic experiences in her home country:

> *“In my country it was just facts and memorisation […] Here, I can see why I am learning these subjects and where I can actually apply this in my career, in my workplace. I'm starting to see that, and I think that's something that I really like, it’s one of the highlights about the education journey in the UK.”*

Hla’s comments revealed the contrast between the fact-based, rote memorisation pedagogies of her home country and the learner-centred, application-focused approaches in the UK. This shift marked a transformation in Hla’s habitus as she adapted to the academic norms and practices of the UK. Through this transition, she developed new forms of academic and cultural capital by engaging with critical thinking, problem-solving, and the practical application of knowledge. These competencies extended beyond academic success, fostering a sense of relevance and connection between her studies and her career aspirations. Hla’s recognition of the real-world applicability of her learning also highlighted the broader purpose of the UK’s competency-based approach to education, which aims to equip students with skills and knowledge directly aligned with professional practice. This alignment contributes to students’ sense of belonging within their discipline, as they begin to adopt the perspectives and practices of professionals in their chosen fields (Thomas, 2012). This sense of belonging not only supports their academic integration but also enhances their motivation and confidence, key factors in their successful transition to undergraduate studies (Jones et al, 2018; Stickels et al, 2024). Hla’s experience reinforced the importance of inclusive, learner-centred teaching within the IFP. It illustrated how this approach not only prepares students academically but also motivates them to see value in their education, enhancing their long-term confidence and integration into UK HE and professional landscapes. This process also fosters reflexivity, allowing students to adapt their habitus to meet the expectations of their new academic and social environment. In this way, the IFP serves as a vital transitional field, shaping students’ capacity to engage with the demands of globalised, competitive academic and professional environments.

This theme was echoed by other participants, who reflected on the range of pedagogical approaches they encountered upon arriving in the UK and how the IFP had equipped them with the skills necessary for success in undergraduate study. Within the listening room, Di and Thirteen reflected on the highlights of their foundation year:

> *"I would say teamwork and communication, for me, definitely were the best things I learnt because it really prepares you not only for undergraduate study, but for your future employment."*

Thirteen's reflections signified a transformation in his habitus as he adapted to the expectations of UK HE and broader professional environments. His development of teamwork and communication skills contrast with traditional, individualised pedagogical approaches in Taiwan. Skills such as understanding group dynamics, effective communication strategies, and the ability to collaborate towards shared goals represent valuable forms of social and cultural capital. These competencies not only enable students to navigate and succeed in diverse academic environments but also prepare them for the demands of globalised labour markets. In professional contexts, these skills are essential for fostering collaboration, problem-solving, and adaptability within multicultural and multidisciplinary teams. Thirteen's recognition of the dual applicability of these competencies illustrated his awareness of their significance in achieving his long-term career aspirations. By integrating teamwork and communication into its pedagogy, the IFP facilitates the students' accumulation of cultural capital that aligns with the expectations of HE and professional domains. The IFP creates a supportive environment where students can experiment with and refine these skills in low-stakes settings. This experiential learning fosters reflexivity, allowing students to adapt their behaviours and strategies based on their experiences and feedback. Through this process, students not only build confidence in their abilities but also develop a sense of agency, which enhances their readiness to navigate new fields in their study and professional pursuits.

Other participants also shared how they navigated these pedagogical shifts and reflected on the ways in which the IFP supported their academic development and transition to undergraduate study. Within the listening room, Di and Thirteen reflected on their experience of being in lectures for the first time:

> *"I try to write down the information that is not on the slides. So, you look at the slides very quickly, read them and then you listen to what the lecturer says and if there is some information that you like and you think is valuable, you write it down and maybe make a little note that this was discussed during the slides for example."*

Di shared her strategic approach of writing down information not included on the slides, which can be understood as a form of academic capital encompassing the cultural knowledge, skills, and resources that contribute to academic success. Bourdieu highlighted the significance of active participation in the learning process, where students engage with and seek out educational resources. Di exemplified this by actively listening to the lecturer while simultaneously reviewing the slides to identify and extract key insights, thereby enhancing her understanding and retention of course content. Through this process, she demonstrated agency in prioritising and synthesising information to build academic capital that aligned with her academic and professional aspirations. The addition of "*a little note*" also demonstrated her effort to leverage this academic capital, as she was actively seeking out additional information and insights to enhance her understanding. This ability to engage actively with the material beyond what is presented in lectures also demonstrated Di's effective navigation of the academic field.

Alongside lectures, students also highlighted the unfamiliar structure and expectations of seminars, marking a significant pedagogical shift. Many contrasted their previous, predominantly didactic learning experiences, characterised by

notetaking and teacher-led instruction, with the more interactive and dialogic nature of UK seminars. Di recalled being expected to copy material directly from the board, while Thirteen noted the limited space for questioning or discussion in his former education. Reflecting on the contrast, Thirteen explained:

> *"Seminars here [in the UK] are more about building an engagement between seminar tutor and the class, and between classmates with each other."*

Thirteen's reflection highlighted the unspoken rules of the academic field and his developing awareness of the social norms embedded within it. His ability to articulate and respond to these expectations signalled a shift in habitus, as he adapted his dispositions to align with the participatory ethos of UK HE. This shift also illustrated the accumulation of cultural and social capital learning how to speak, when to speak, and what counts as legitimate contribution in the seminar context. However, the ability to participate meaningfully in seminars was not uniformly experienced. Stickels et al. (2024) identified several barriers that international students encounter in seminar participation, such as insufficient time to formulate their ideas. Many students struggle to fully grasp culturally dependent key concepts and often perceive that they must only contribute valuable ideas, delivered in fluent, grammatically correct English. This can result in longer thinking processes and hesitation, causing students to miss the opportunity to contribute. Such delays can lead to frustration and may lead lecturers to perceive that students do not understand the topic or are unwilling to engage in the seminar. Such moments reveal the symbolic power embedded in pedagogical spaces, where implicit norms and expectations can marginalise those who have not been socialised into the dominant academic culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Students unfamiliar with these norms may find themselves positioned as lacking, not because of academic ability, but due to limited access to the forms of cultural capital that are recognised and rewarded in this context. The IFP thus functions not only as a bridge to academic content but as a space for pedagogical reorientation. Through repeated exposure to seminar-style learning, students begin to recognise and practise the forms of engagement valued

in UK HE, gradually adapting their dispositions in line with field expectations. Yet these adaptations are neither automatic nor evenly experienced. Students' ability to adjust was shaped by their prior educational backgrounds, linguistic confidence and access to various forms of capital. This variation emphasised the need to make academic expectations explicit and to offer sustained support beyond the foundation year.

5.5.2 Multiculturalism and being in the UK

Although participants in this study were not directly asked about their experiences within a multicultural environment or being in the UK, all students discussed this aspect of their foundation year, highlighting its significance in their transition and integration. For many, particularly those encountering such diversity for the first time, the multicultural environment of the IFP proved to be a transformative experience. For individuals in the study who had grown up and studied in mono-cultural contexts, the exposure to a plurality of cultures, perspectives, and ways of thinking prompted both reflexivity and adaptation. Bourdieu (1990) argues that when habitus encounters a field that diverges from the one it was originally shaped within, it can lead to disruption, but also transformation. In this context, the multicultural IFP environment acts as a site of transformation, where students' habitus are reshaped in response to the values and practices of UK HE. Through these interactions, they began to acquire symbolic capital in the form of intercultural competence and global mindset, attributes increasingly recognised and rewarded within both academic and global professional fields (Rizvi, 2009).

Furthermore, the IFP can be seen as a microcosm of the wider internationalised field of UK HE, where students are not only learning to engage with UK norms but are also negotiating their place within a hybrid academic culture shaped by global flows of people, ideas, and expectations (Maton, 2005). This process of negotiation deepens their capacity to thrive in culturally pluralistic spaces and contributes to their

broader sense of belonging and preparedness for undergraduate study. This transformative potential of the IFP was illustrated in the reflections of Thirteen and Di, whose personal narratives captured the ways in which negotiating a new multicultural field fostered both academic development and a reconfiguration of their habitus, with Thirteen reflecting:

> *"It [the IFP] helped me to get used to a multicultural environment because before this I was in Taiwan my whole life [...] wow, it really was a new environment to get used to."*

Thirteen's transition from a monocultural educational context in Taiwan to the multicultural IFP environment signified a notable reconfiguration of his habitus. This shift necessitated engaging with diverse cultural practices, languages, and perspectives, enabling the development of valuable intercultural competencies. By navigating and thriving in this multicultural setting, Thirteen not only facilitated his social integration and development of cultural capital during the foundation year but also strengthened his preparedness to succeed within the globalised undergraduate cohort he later joined. Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity helps illuminate how such environments reshape students' habitus. Reflexivity, in this context, refers to the students' capacity to critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions and adapt their dispositions in response to new social fields. The multicultural IFP environment served as a space where students were encouraged, often implicitly, to question previously held norms and values, and to respond to the demands of a more diverse academic and social context. Within the same conversation, Di commented:

> *"I feel I'm more inclusive than I was. That's what I've learned from IFP."*

Di's reflection illustrated a growing reflexive awareness, as she recognised changes in her attitudes and interactions with others. Her description of becoming "*more inclusive*" indicated an emerging openness to cultural diversity and a shift towards values of mutual respect and intercultural understanding, key norms within the field of UK HE. This reflexive adaptation marked a reconfiguration of habitus, as students like Di adjusted their dispositions in response to the cultural demands of a new field and acquired symbolic capital in the form of intercultural competence (Rizvi, 2009). However, these developments were neither incremental nor uniform across all students. Rather, the extent to which individuals adapted and benefited from the multicultural environment varied, shaped by their prior experiences, dispositions and access to capital. This highlights the non-homogenised nature of international student transitions and the diverse ways students navigate and negotiate new educational fields.

The multicultural IFP environment acted as a structured site of transition, where students could engage with differences, reflect on their own assumptions and practise navigating unfamiliar social dynamics. This process extended beyond individual adaptation; it fostered the collective development of cultural capital within the learning community (Summers & Volet, 2008; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). In doing so, the IFP supported students' ability to move across cultural and institutional boundaries, enhancing not only their readiness for UK HE but also their future global mobility (Leask, 2009; Banks & Banks, 2019; Tran, 2014; Robertson et al., 2011; Marginson, 2014). By creating opportunities for students to recalibrate their habitus and build new forms of capital, the IFP helped to mediate the complexities of entering a new academic field, one shaped by implicit norms, symbolic hierarchies, and evolving expectations. In this way, navigating multiculturalism was not peripheral but central to students' broader transitions into UK HE.

5.6 Key insights into international foundation students' transitions

A key aspect of international foundation students' experiences is their need to learn the implicit "rules of the game" in HE. As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, individuals navigate a field like players in a game, adjusting their strategies in response to both explicit and unspoken expectations. For international foundation students, this process involves not only adapting to academic practices but also understanding the social dynamics and cultural norms that shape the field of HE (Leask, 2009). The transition from the foundation year to undergraduate study often requires students to recalibrate their habitus, adapting their behaviours, communication styles and academic practices to align with the expectations of the broader academic and professional environment (Bourdieu, 1986). This shift can be particularly challenging for students from diverse cultural backgrounds, as they must navigate new norms of academic writing, communication, and even networking (Palmer et al., 2009). Recognising and internalising these rules enables students to navigate the transition more effectively, positioning themselves within the field, accumulating valuable forms of capital and securing their place in the competitive academic and professional landscape.

The notion of competition emerged as a recurring theme in the data, yet it was not directed at peers within the IFP. Instead, students viewed competition as something external, embedded in the broader field of HE. Within this larger field, they understood the need to navigate implicit and explicit rules to access valuable capital recognised by universities and employers. In contrast, the IFP was described as a protective, communal space. Adamma referred to it as a "*bubble*," while Thirteen observed that "*there is no native here … everybody's a stranger here to this system, to this nation.*" These reflections highlight how the IFP operated as a sub-field, a preparatory environment where students begin to accumulate cultural and academic capital without the immediate pressures of institutional competition. The shared international status of students fostered a sense of belonging and mutual support, encouraging collective learning over rivalry. This sense of solidarity helped students

to develop the dispositions, skills and understandings needed to engage more confidently with the expectations of UK HE. Rather than competing against each other, students cooperated to build the foundations from which they could later position themselves more strategically in the wider academic field.

The sense of competition was concerned with positioning themselves on an equal footing with home students. This reflected a form of capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986), as students recognised that the field of HE values specific forms of capital, particularly academic and cultural capital, that are often more readily available to those already socialised into the system (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Home students, whose habitus may already align with the norms and expectations of UK HE, often enter the field with a head start. Zahra's commented on this disparity:

> "…*and people say to me it's not what you know, it's who you know. I'm from a developing country I know no one*."

Her reflection highlighted how the absence of social capital, particularly in the form of networks and professional connections can compound the challenges of adapting to a new educational field. It also points to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) experienced by students who are implicitly reminded that their background places them at a disadvantage. The perception of needing to "*level the playing field*" signals students' awareness of these inequities and their efforts to accumulate the capital necessary to gain legitimacy and parity. This includes not only academic and cultural capital but also employability-related forms such as internships, networking, and CV development, all of which are increasingly vital in the competitive terrain of both academia and the graduate job market (Tomlinson, 2008). From this perspective, the IFP served as a space where students could begin this process of capital acquisition and conversion, positioning themselves more effectively for future success (Naidoo, 2004).

Although international students often felt disadvantaged compared to home students, this perception needs to be interpreted carefully. While Bourdieu's theory acknowledges that capital is relational and individuals assess their position relative to others (Turnbull et al., 2019), the assumption that home students uniformly possess stronger academic and career capital is not necessarily accurate. Factors such as variation in prior educational experiences, disparities in career guidance provision, and differences in personal circumstances, such as maturity or gap years, mean that the academic capital of home students is diverse. Moreover, as Carroll (2015) highlights, neither home nor international students form a homogeneous group; all students bring varied experiences, strengths, and needs to their educational journeys. Nevertheless, this complexity does not diminish the very real feelings of uncertainty, stress and low self-confidence reported by international students in this study. Building on insights from Jones et al. (2018), this study highlights that fostering environments where students' existing capital is recognised and new forms of capital can be developed is crucial for promoting agency, confidence and successful transitions into undergraduate study.

The next chapter addresses the research questions directly, presenting the original contribution to knowledge arising from this study and identifying implications for practice and future research. It sets out reflections for enhancing the delivery of the IFP, informed by the findings, with the aim of better supporting the diverse needs of international students and promoting a more inclusive and holistic educational experience.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and reflections

6.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the key findings of the study to offer a deeper understanding of international foundation students' transitions into UK HE. It examines how students navigate academic and sociocultural landscapes during their foundation year, and how institutional support shapes their readiness for undergraduate study. Based on these insights, the chapter also outlines reflections for practice, policy, and further research to better support international foundation students.

Adopting an abductive and interpretive approach, the analysis centres student voice while applying Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital to interpret their experiences. Rather than following a rigid structure based solely on the original research questions, themes emerged organically through iterative engagement with the data, shaped by both empirical insights and theoretical reflection. The resulting analysis highlights the complex and non-linear nature of student transitions, represented in the conceptual model (Figure 6) developed in Chapter 5. This model maps transitions across three interconnected thematic domains: Belonging, Identity, and Social Integration; Accumulating and Converting Capital; and Navigating New Fields. These domains highlight the relational and multifaceted character of student transitions, shaped by both institutional structures and individual agency.

The findings challenge any notion of international foundation students as passive recipients of education. Instead, they are shown to be active participants who engage with and reshape the academic and cultural expectations of UK HE. As they navigate unfamiliar institutional fields, students develop and transform various forms of capital academic, social, and cultural, enabling them to adapt, participate, and

ultimately succeed. The insights gained through the listening rooms and walking interviews shed light on the tensions and continuities between students' prior experiences and the new educational contexts they encounter. These findings highlight specific areas where IFPs and educators can more effectively tailor practices and policies to support student transitions.

6.2 Research Question 1: What academic capital do international foundation students develop and value during their foundation year?

In this study, academic capital is understood as more than formal knowledge or technical skill. It encompasses the values, dispositions, and competencies recognised and rewarded in UK HE. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1996) concept of cultural capital, academic capital is shaped by institutional and disciplinary fields and is closely interwoven with social, cultural, and symbolic capital. It includes not only explicit skills, such as critical thinking, academic writing, and research, but also a tacit understanding of the norms and expectations that underpin academic success in the UK. Findings from this study show that international foundation students actively engaged in developing and mobilising various forms of capital to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of UK HE. Through these efforts, they built academic confidence, adapted to institutional norms, and prepared for undergraduate study.

The development of academic capital emerged as a dynamic, iterative process. Students acquired foundational subject knowledge aligned with their future degree pathways, which enhanced their sense of academic identity and belonging (Thomas, 2012). They also engaged with core academic conventions such as referencing, critical analysis, and disciplinary writing. However, many students found these practices markedly different from those in their previous educational contexts, leading to an initial sense of disorientation. They described the effort involved in adjusting to new academic expectations and reshaping their dispositions to align with those of UK HE. Over time, however, students developed transferable academic

skills including effective notetaking, seminar participation, and navigating varied assessment formats which supported their confidence and preparedness for undergraduate study. Despite these gains, participants identified gaps in the support provided. Skills related to time management, stress management, and independent study were seen as essential but not always explicitly addressed within the current IFP curriculum. Students suggested that embedding such skills into the programme would enhance their academic resilience and readiness for undergraduate study.

The role of social capital in supporting academic development also emerged as a key theme. Relationships with peers, mentors, academic staff, and undergraduates in related fields provided both emotional reassurance and practical guidance. These social networks functioned as vital bridges to academic capital, offering access to institutional knowledge, shared strategies, and academic resources. In this way, social and academic capital were mutually reinforcing, enabling students to navigate the demands of UK HE with increasing confidence and capability.

The multicultural nature of the IFP cohort was widely recognised as a key strength. Students valued learning in a diverse and inclusive environment where everyone was navigating a new cultural and academic landscape. This shared experience fostered a sense of community and mutual learning, enhancing students' cultural capital and contributing to their sense of belonging (Tran, 2014). However, despite this internal cohesion, many students felt peripheral to the wider university and disconnected from their intended academic departments, limiting their integration into the broader institutional field (Thomas, 2012). To address this sense of disconnection, students highlighted the importance of creating more structured and intentional opportunities to bridge the gap between the IFP and the wider university community. As research suggests, a stronger sense of belonging is closely linked to successful transitions into undergraduate study (Hughes and Smail, 2014; Bell, 2016). To enhance their integration, participants suggested strategies such as peer mentoring schemes that connect foundation and undergraduate students, along with increased involvement in subject specific activities. In addition to these ideas, the

literature points to the value of co-creation activities, including participation in departmental events or contributions to student publications. These approaches can help to strengthen students' sense of agency, visibility and inclusion within their academic communities (Bovill, 2020).

Students consistently described the IFP as a supportive and developmental space. This reflects Briggs et al.'s (2012) model of phased induction, in which students gradually acquire the capital and habitus required to thrive in UK HE. They particularly appreciated the approachability and encouragement of staff, often contrasting this with the more hierarchical relationships they had encountered in previous educational contexts. However, many reported a marked decline in support at undergraduate level, echoing concerns raised in other studies (Dentakos et al., 2017). These findings highlight the importance of IFPs not only in delivering academic content but also equipping students with the confidence and agency to seek support independently in the next stage of their academic journey.

While employability is the primary motivator for students choosing to study in the UK (Soares and Mosquera, 2020), there are no educational policies mandating that employability skills be taught to international foundation students. All students within this study felt disadvantaged compared to their home peers, as they did not have a CV, LinkedIn profile, or a draft covering letter. Some noted that within the first few weeks of their undergraduate studies, they needed a CV to apply for positions in societies or to begin planning internships. Without these documents, they were unable to fully leverage their academic capital (Bai and Wang, 2024). Therefore, employability skills should be integrated into the international foundation year, with support from IFP alumni and mentors.

Beyond employability, international foundation students also face additional barriers in their transition to undergraduate studies, requiring more support than their peers (Bell, 2016). These challenges are compounded by the experience of adapting to a

new country and educational system. Unsurprisingly, students acknowledged that the IFP year could be overwhelming and stressful, yet they were highly appreciative of the "safe space" it provided. They valued the extensive access to support and advice, which helped them develop their academic capital while adjusting to new ways of learning and assessment. A key factor in supporting international foundation students' transition is positive intercultural interactions with both peers and teaching staff (Teo and Arkoudis, 2019). Participants spoke very positively about the supportive and approachable staff who had guided and motivated them throughout their foundation year. Many also highlighted friendships as one of the most meaningful aspects of their IFP experience, with most alumni maintaining strong connections with their former classmates. However, it is important to acknowledge potential bias in this finding, as the research methodology utilised friendship pairs within the listening rooms and therefore may have discouraged participation from students without IFP alumni friends.

In conclusion, international foundation students develop a diverse and valuable range of academic, social and cultural capital during their foundation year, all of which play a critical role in supporting their transition to undergraduate study. While IFPs provide a supportive environment for developing academic skills and fostering intercultural understanding, students also face challenges that can hinder their sense of belonging and full integration into the wider university community. To address these challenges, greater emphasis should be placed on building connections with undergraduate departments, enhancing access to employability training and ensuring that support mechanisms continue beyond the foundation year. By embedding structured opportunities for engagement, peer mentoring and skill development, the IFP can more effectively equip students with the confidence, capital, and agency needed to thrive in HE.

6.3 Research Question 2: How can international foundation students become more actively engaged in the development of their own academic capital?

The participants in this study recognised the importance of taking an active role in developing their own capital. As engaged members of the IFP alumni society, they were acutely aware of how alumni support could benefit current foundation students. Many had received mentoring themselves and spoke positively about its role in enhancing their academic capital, particularly in encouraging greater autonomy and fostering a more proactive approach to learning (Marginson, 2014). Such engagement was closely linked to a stronger sense of belonging (Dentakos et al., 2017), which, in turn, was seen as easing the transition into undergraduate study (Hughes and Smail, 2014).

Mentoring was not limited to academic guidance. Participants emphasised its value in building meaningful connections with undergraduates, something they had often found lacking during their foundation year. When mentors shared the same disciplinary background, this further reinforced students' sense of connection to their academic field. Acting as accessible role models, mentors were often perceived as more relatable than teaching staff, offering support with practical matters such as navigating support services or developing employability skills like CV writing. In doing so, they helped mentees take ownership of their development across academic, social and professional domains. The benefits of mentoring can be reciprocal. For mentors, the role supports their own personal and professional development, offering opportunities to cultivate leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. These transferable competencies not only enhance their CVs and expand professional networks but also foster confidence and a sense of fulfilment through guiding others on similar educational journeys (Morgan, 2015).

In addition to developing academic capital, students also need support in developing their social capital to navigate their transition to undergraduate studies more

effectively (Dentakos et al., 2017). Social capital plays a crucial role in helping students integrate into unfamiliar cultural and academic environments, as it allows them to form connections, access resources, and build networks (Bai and Wang, 2024). In this research, students expressed a desire for more social activities, highlighting the value of informal interactions in fostering a sense of connection with both peers and the broader university community. Involving current IFP students in organising such activities not only builds their confidence but also strengthens peer relationships through shared responsibility and collaboration (Palmer et al., 2009). These forms of social engagement play a vital role in enhancing students' sense of belonging, which is closely linked to both wellbeing and academic success (Arthur, 2017).

Students also highlighted the need for additional opportunities to develop essential learning skills, such as time management, stress management, and self-directed study strategies. A combination of peer-led sessions and input from academic support staff could help address these needs, with alumni mentors offering relatable, experience-based guidance to reinforce learning and build students' confidence. Encouraging students to reflect on their progress, set personal goals, and make informed choices about their learning not only fosters a stronger sense of agency but also facilitates the development of academic capital (Wood, 2014). From a Bourdieusian perspective, these practices support the reshaping of students' habitus as they become more attuned to the expectations of the UK HE field. By engaging actively in these processes, international foundation students can begin to align their dispositions with the demands of their new academic environment, enhancing both their confidence and capacity to succeed.

In conclusion, this study found that international foundation students benefit from actively engaging in the development of their academic and social capital. Mentoring emerged as a particularly valuable tool, helping students become more proactive in their learning while also fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Participants advocated for more structured opportunities to build connections, develop key

learning skills, and engage with their academic pathways. Empowering students to take ownership of their educational journey through initiatives such as student-led activities and targeted skill-building sessions will significantly enhance their readiness for undergraduate study and support a more confident, integrated transition into HE.

6.4 Research Question 3: What can UK HEIs do to facilitate international foundation students' development of academic capital, to enable successful transition to undergraduate studies?

As discussed above academic capital plays a vital role in international foundation students' transition to undergraduate studies. It encompasses subject knowledge, essential academic skills, confidence, and social networks that support student success. This research question explores how UK HEIs can enhance the IFP experience by recognising students' existing strengths, providing targeted skills development and fostering meaningful social integration. By addressing these areas, IFPs can better equip students for undergraduate study and future career pathways.

One of the key insights from this study was students' recognition of the rich multicultural environment within their IFP and how it enhanced their cultural awareness over the course of the year. As many of these students aspire to careers in international contexts, this intercultural competence represents a valuable form of cultural capital (Wood, 2014). However, this strength is often overlooked by both marketing teams and academic staff. UK HEIs should therefore do more to acknowledge and promote the value of this capital, helping students to recognise it as a distinctive asset that can support their academic success and future employability.

Students in this study highlighted the importance of early development of employability-related skills, including CV writing and building a LinkedIn profile. All of them felt at a disadvantage compared to their home peers when entering undergraduate study, particularly in relation to career preparation and navigating the

UK employment landscape. Embedding these skills into the IFP curriculum would better support students' transitions and enable them to more confidently mobilise their cultural and social capital when applying for society roles, internships, and employment opportunities. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these employability skills represent valuable forms of capital that help students navigate and gain recognition within both academic and professional fields. Involving alumni in career-focused events could further enhance this support by providing current students with relatable role models and practical insights, while also offering alumni opportunities to consolidate and expand their own social capital through mentoring and networking.

Pedagogically, IFPs must consider how their teaching practices support students' learning. Good pedagogy is a partnership between students and staff (Healey et al., 2014). While students need to develop lecture comprehension and engagement skills, lecturers must also adopt strategies that enhance student understanding. Research suggests that international students benefit from interactive lectures, structured pauses for reflection, group discussions, and online forums, all of which encourage engagement and transform learning into an active, participatory experience (Stickels et al., 2024). Students also benefit from becoming familiar with the different types of assessments they are likely to encounter at undergraduate level. IFPs should offer a supportive environment where students can explore a variety of assessment formats with clear and constructive guidance. Such exposure helps to level the playing field with home students, who may arrive with more extensive assessment experience (Stickels et al., 2024). By embedding diverse assessment approaches and clarifying academic expectations, IFPs can build students' confidence and strengthen their academic preparedness.

As detailed above, students also highlighted the need for greater support in developing essential learning skills, including time management, stress management, and self-directed study. Since international students are more likely to report feelings of isolation and academic pressure (Dentakos et al., 2017), IFPs

should actively support students in building resilience and self-care strategies. This support can be provided through targeted workshops delivered by educational practitioners specialised in student wellbeing and learning development, with alumni mentors reinforcing the practical benefits of these skills. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these workshops and mentoring activities contribute to the accumulation and transformation of cultural capital, equipping students with the dispositions and strategies needed to navigate academic fields successfully.

Social connections are also critical to academic success and a sense of belonging (Arthur, 2017; Bai & Wang, 2024). Students in this study expressed a clear desire for more structured opportunities to build these connections, particularly through social events and interactions beyond the classroom. IFPs need to take an active role in fostering meaningful social integration by facilitating mentoring programmes, cultural exchange events and structured interactions between foundation and undergraduate students. These initiatives should be student-led, enabling current IFP students to build their confidence and social capital while ensuring activities remain relevant to their interests. Encouraging and training mentors to actively support social engagement would benefit both mentors and mentees, reinforcing a supportive and inclusive learning community. Increased collaboration with destination undergraduate departments could further ease the transition process. Opportunities such as guest lectures, departmental visits or joint projects would allow students to develop a stronger affinity with their intended subject areas and academic fields (Thomas, 2012).

In conclusion, supporting international foundation students in their transition to undergraduate study requires a holistic approach that recognises the diverse forms of capital they bring and need to develop. UK HEIs must value and build on students' existing capital while providing structured opportunities to develop academic capital through inclusive pedagogy, early career-related skill development, and meaningful social integration. By addressing these interconnected areas, IFPs can foster an environment where students feel confident, supported, and empowered to succeed in the next stage of their HE journey.

6.5 Reflections

This section begins by acknowledging the idiographic, contextual, and limited nature of the study, recognising that the findings are situated within a particular institutional and programme environment. As a practitioner-researcher adopting a participatory-inspired and interpretive approach, I recognise that the insights generated reflect the specific experiences of the students and the field in which the research was conducted. Rather than offering universally applicable recommendations, these reflections aim to share situated understandings that may resonate with, and inform practice within, similar contexts. The term *reflections* is therefore used deliberately to emphasise the interpretive and exploratory character of these outcomes, grounded in both the voices of participants and my professional practice.

Reflection 1: The inclusion of employability skills within the international foundation year

International foundation students should be introduced to university career support services at the very start of their foundation year, allowing them early opportunities to explore potential career pathways, particularly as several participants in this study expressed uncertainty about their future aspirations. This early introduction should be reinforced through a series of structured workshops delivered across the year by experienced careers professionals. These sessions should focus on building essential employability skills, including CV writing, crafting covering letters, and developing LinkedIn profiles. Involving IFP alumni in these workshops, either as co-facilitators or guest speakers could further enhance their relevance by showcasing real-life experiences and emphasising the importance of proactive career preparation.

In addition to structured workshops, alumni mentoring can deepen students' understanding of how employability skills translate into both employment

opportunities and engagement in extracurricular activities such as student societies and internships. This mentoring supports current students in developing their capital with greater agency (Marginson, 2014), while providing alumni with a chance to enhance their own professional skills. These mentor-mentee connections also facilitate meaningful cross-cohort relationships that contribute to students' sense of belonging and preparation for undergraduate study (Bell, 2016).

Reflection 2: Embed learning support skills within the IFP curriculum

Research highlights that international students are more likely to experience feelings of depression, isolation, and concerns about academic performance (Dentakos et al., 2017). These issues were echoed by participants in this study, who expressed a clear need for more support in areas such as time management and stress management. It is therefore recommended that such learning support skills be explicitly embedded into the foundation year curriculum, not as isolated interventions, but through a sustained and developmental approach.

Integrating these skills as a core part of academic learning would empower students to take greater agency over both their studies and wellbeing, equipping them with practical tools to manage the demands of HE. Framing these areas as essential to academic success also signals their long-term relevance, encouraging students to become more autonomous and self-regulated learners. Ongoing opportunities for practice, reflection and feedback would further reinforce their importance, helping students to build the confidence and resilience needed to succeed in undergraduate study and beyond.

Reflection 3: Enhance mentoring support by involving IFP alumni

Encouraging international foundation students to take an active role in their academic and personal development is central to the accumulation of academic capital (Marginson, 2014). One effective way to support this is through structured mentoring schemes involving IFP alumni (Coertjens et al., 2017). Alumni mentors, having navigated similar transitions, are well-positioned to offer relatable, experience-based guidance that can demystify undergraduate study and foster a stronger sense of belonging among current students.

Providing training and recognition for alumni mentors would also contribute to the development of their own academic and social capital, while enhancing their CVs and employability prospects. For mentoring schemes to be successful, the IFP should actively promote participation, supporting both the recruitment of mentors and the engagement of mentees. Allocating time, dedicated space and modest funding, such as for refreshments during mentoring events, would further facilitate meaningful interaction and encourage sustained involvement.

Reflection 4: Acknowledgement, recognition, and promotion of the multicultural nature of the IFP

For many international foundation students, the IFP represents their first experience of studying outside their home country, and for most, it is also the first time they engage with peers from diverse nationalities. Participants in this study not only recognised but also enjoyed the value of transitioning from a monocultural educational environment to a multicultural one, appreciating the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and learn from a range of cultural experiences. However, there is currently limited recognition and limited opportunity to fully capitalise on this

multicultural experience, which hinders students' potential to develop a deeper understanding of other cultures and nationalities.

To address this gap, the multicultural nature of the IFP should be more intentionally foregrounded as a distinctive strength of the programme. Rather than being viewed as incidental, intercultural learning should be embedded across the curriculum and celebrated through initiatives such as cultural exchange projects, peer-led events and global workshops. These activities provide valuable opportunities for students to build social capital through meaningful cross-cultural interactions, while also enhancing their intercultural competence, an increasingly sought-after skill in the global job market. Framing these experiences as integral to students' academic and professional development can help students recognise their value and capitalise on them in future contexts. Making this cultural capital visible and valued within the programme also promotes student agency and a stronger sense of belonging, reinforcing the transformative potential of a truly international foundation experience.

Reflection 5: Supporting Pedagogical and Assessment Transitions

International foundation students often come from educational systems with distinct pedagogical approaches and assessment methods (Stickels et al., 2024). A critical role of the IFP is to help students understand and adapt to the pedagogical and assessment practices they will encounter in their undergraduate studies in the UK. To achieve this, the IFP should be viewed as a supportive environment where students can develop familiarity with and practice diverse assessment formats in preparation for their degree programs.

A key reflection is to introduce IFP students to a variety of assessment types that are relevant to their future degree studies. This will enable students to build both their academic capital and their confidence in handling assessments such as critical

reflections, academic presentations and written assignments. Importantly, these opportunities should not only be used to teach students how to perform well in these formats but also enable students to revise and improve their work and offering resources to help them independently develop critical thinking and reflective practices. Ensuring that students are well-prepared for the assessment methods they will encounter in their undergraduate studies will enhance their academic confidence and smooth the transition to their chosen degree program.

Reflection 6: Embedding Academic Literacy Skills Across the IFP Year

To successfully transition into undergraduate study, international foundation students must understand the “rules of the game” (Tran, 2016). To facilitate this, it is crucial that there is alignment between the academic literacy skills students bring to the IFP and those they will need to succeed in a UK HEI. Essential skills such as teamwork, note-taking, presentation skills, critical thinking, and academic writing should be embedded throughout the entire academic year, enabling students to progressively build confidence and competence in these areas. This ongoing development allows students to apply these skills effectively when they transition to undergraduate study.

To further support this process, students should be provided with regular opportunities to practice, refine, and apply these academic skills in a supportive and collaborative environment. These opportunities should take the form of formative assessments, peer-reviewed presentations or group projects, all of which allow students to actively engage in their learning and receive constructive feedback. Additionally, students should be empowered to take ownership of their academic development, with clear guidance on how to independently improve these skills. Providing access to resources such as workshops, academic support sessions and tutorials would help students feel more confident in navigating their academic journey. This approach would not only support their academic success but also

promote a sense of agency in managing their own learning, ensuring they are well-prepared for the demands of undergraduate study.

Reflection 7: Enhancing Engagement with Undergraduate Students and Academic Departments

It is beneficial for international foundation students to develop a strong sense of belonging during their IFP year, one that connects them not only to the IFP itself but also to the wider university community and their intended degree pathway (Thomas, 2012). This sense of belonging plays a crucial role in facilitating a successful transition to undergraduate study (Hughes and Smail, 2014), while also supporting students in navigating new cultural and academic environments (Bai and Wang, 2024).

To foster this, IFPs should actively collaborate with undergraduate departments to create structured opportunities for students to engage with undergraduates and academic staff from their future disciplines. These interactions could include subject-specific workshops, peer mentoring schemes, joint academic activities or student-led events. By creating these connections, IFPs can not only enhance students' sense of academic belonging but also support the development of confidence, motivation and academic identity, which are key factors in enabling students to navigate their transition with greater agency and resilience.

Reflection 8: Student support and feedback

Students in this study expressed a need for greater academic support but often felt hesitant to approach tutors during office hours, a finding also noted by Stickels et al. (2024), who observed that such spaces can be perceived as intimidating or

unwelcoming. To address this, it is recommended that office hours be rebranded as student support sessions, with tutors encouraged to adopt more approachable formats. For example, meeting students in informal settings, such as campus cafés or open-access classrooms, may help reduce barriers and foster more inclusive, relational forms of support.

In addition, the provision of high-quality, timely and personalised feedback is essential. However, feedback alone is insufficient if students lack the confidence or the knowledge to interpret and act on it. Supporting students to engage meaningfully with feedback can strengthen their academic capital by building the reflective and metacognitive skills necessary for success in UK HE. IFPs have a critical role to play in scaffolding this process, ensuring students not only receive effective feedback, but also understand how to use it, where to seek clarification and how to access further academic resources when needed (Bell et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2018). This active engagement with feedback contributes to a greater sense of agency, enabling students to navigate the field of HE more confidently and effectively.

6.6 Limitations of this research

This small-scale study involved six alumni from a Russell Group University IFP, all of whom were first or second year undergraduates. The reflections shared by these students pertain only to two (Business management and Law) of the ten pathway courses currently offered, which inevitability limits the generalisability of the findings. This limited representation could be attributed to my role as a lecturer on one of these courses, which likely influenced students' willingness to participate in the research.

Additionally, five out of the six participants identified as female, resulting in a gender imbalance that may have influenced the findings. Gender plays a role in how

students accumulate and mobilise various forms of capital and navigate educational fields (Bourdieu, 1986). The predominance of female participants may reflect specific configurations of cultural, social and academic capital, as well as distinct gendered habitus, which shape their engagement with the IFP and their transition to undergraduate study. For example, female students may draw on different social networks or experience differing cultural expectations that affect their academic trajectories. The absence of male voices limits the extent to which this study can explore how gender mediates the experiences of international foundation students. Future research should address this imbalance to offer a more nuanced understanding of how gendered capital and habitus influence transitions into UK HE.

In addition to gender, all participants in this study had completed their prior schooling in their home countries, which is typical for many international foundation students. However, some students have been educated in countries different from their own prior to joining the IFP, introducing additional layers of educational and cultural diversity. These varied experiences can significantly shape how students transition into UK HE, as prior educational systems and pedagogies influence their approaches to learning, assessment, and academic engagement. For instance, students from more rigid, exam-focused systems may find the UK's emphasis on critical thinking, independent research, and coursework-based assessment challenging, whereas those from student-centred environments might adapt more readily. From a Bourdieusian perspective, such differences reflect variations in students' habitus and accumulated cultural capital, which in turn shape how they navigate the academic field.

Ethnicity and cultural background further influence students' experiences, shaping their interactions with peers, lecturers and the broader academic community. Students from different regions may have unequal access to support networks, educational resources and institutional familiarity, all of which affect the development of academic and social capital. These intersecting factors highlight the diverse and non-homogeneous nature of international foundation students (Carroll, 2015), whose

varied educational and cultural backgrounds lead to different pathways of engagement, adaptation and transition within the IFP and into undergraduate study. Furthermore, as participants were self-selecting, it is possible that those who volunteered were more confident or comfortable discussing their experiences, potentially excluding students who are more reserved or less confident, and whose perspectives may differ.

Furthermore, while two qualitative methods, listening rooms and walking interviews, were employed to capture in-depth reflections on students' foundation year experiences, the structure of the listening room activity may have introduced potential biases. Participants were invited to take part with a peer of their choosing who had also studied on the IFP, although there was no restriction that the peer had to be from the same course or cohort. This self-selection may have excluded alumni who were no longer in contact with IFP peers, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives represented (Heron, 2020). Nonetheless, this approach also offered clear strengths. Being in a familiar, peer-supported environment encouraged a more relaxed and open atmosphere, allowing for authentic reflections. Participants themselves highlighted the value of the listening room space, noting how it boosted their self-confidence and helped them recognise their academic and personal development during their foundation year.

6.7 Personal reflections

An initial concern I had was that not all students would be comfortable taking part in both the listening rooms and the walking interview activities. However, this concern was unfounded. Following each of the listening rooms, there was a gap of approximately one week, which proved beneficial for several reasons. It allowed me to conduct an initial brief analysis of the listening room data prior to the walking interviews. This enabled a deeper understanding of the students' educational journeys, allowing for focused discussions and clarification where needed during the

walking interviews. Additionally, my ability to recall and reference parts of the listening room conversation during the walking interview helped to build greater rapport with each student. The students were often surprised that I had listened to and could recall parts of their conversations, which made them feel valued and heard. Furthermore, the time between the listening room and the walking interview allowed the students to reflect on their listening room conversations and their broader IFP experience, contributing to a deeper and more detailed sharing of qualitative data during the walking interview.

The two different data collection methods complemented each other effectively, allowing for the gathering and analysis of substantial qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), using a Bourdieusian lens enabled me to deeply engage with the data, generating rich and detailed insights while being mindful of my own influence, skills and positionality in the research process. The reflexive thematic analysis was a complex, iterative process, which led to the identification of eight interconnected themes, further grouped into three overarching themes. Given the complexity and interrelated nature of these themes, multiple ways of presenting the data were possible, so the themes should be viewed holistically rather than as separate categories.

If I were to repeat this research, I would aim to involve a larger and more diverse group of students, with a broader range of backgrounds and experiences. Expanding the sample would provide an opportunity to explore how multiple factors, such as gender, ethnicity, prior educational experience, language proficiency and cultural background, intersect to shape students' transition to HE. Understanding how these diverse elements interact would provide a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and opportunities that international foundation students encounter. It would also help to emphasise that international students are not a homogeneous group. Rather, they are a diverse cohort with unique experiences, strengths and challenges, all of which contribute to their distinct paths to academic success. This approach would avoid generalising their experiences and ensure that the complexity

of their transitions is better understood and supported. For example, students with different linguistic backgrounds or varying levels of English proficiency may experience the transition to UK HE in unique ways. Similarly, those with prior international educational experiences or those from particular cultural contexts may bring different forms of academic and social capital to their university experience, impacting their academic engagement and confidence. Future research could explore how these diverse factors contribute to students' adaptation to the UK system, and how they navigate the academic, social, and emotional demands of HE.

6.8 Impact and Original Contribution of This Research

The relationship between educational research and practice is a subject of ongoing debate. Some scholars highlight that educational research often draws on practical experience and contextual understanding, positioning it as inherently connected to teaching practice (Carr, 2006; Winch et al., 2015). Others argue that its chief aim is to develop theoretical knowledge rather than directly inform classroom practice (Hammersley, 2008). This study seeks to bridge these perspectives by offering both theoretical insights and practical reflections. It addresses a notable gap in the literature concerning the experiences of international foundation students in the UK and provides actionable guidance for enhancing support within IFPs. These reflections offer targeted strategies for improving academic, social and emotional support, developing academic literacy and career skills, and strengthening institutional practices to better facilitate international students’ transitions to undergraduate study.

Wellington (2012) states that an original contribution in doctoral research can take various forms, such as generating new knowledge, applying novel methods, synthesising existing theories or presenting research innovatively. This research contributes original insights by offering a deep understanding of international foundation students' experiences and transitions to undergraduate study. It highlights

the development of academic and social capital, focusing on what students themselves perceive as valuable. By addressing expressed needs (Noddings, 2005), it supports student-informed approaches to IFP design, fostering more effective transitions.

In addition to its conceptual contributions, this study offers methodological innovation using both listening rooms and walking interviews, two qualitative methods that, while individually established, are rarely used together in research with international students. The use of listening rooms allowed participants to engage in peer-led dialogue, eliciting shared and contrasting experiences, while walking interviews enabled more spontaneous, reflective, and place-based accounts of student life. Together, these methods provided rich, multi-layered insights into students' lived experiences and demonstrated the potential of creative and participatory-inspired approaches in educational research. This thesis contributes not only to the limited literature on international foundation students, but also to broader methodological discussions about how best to centre student voice in educational research.

Wellington (2012) also highlights the importance of exploring new implications for policymakers and practitioners as a valuable form of original contribution. This research contributes to that dialogue by demonstrating how student-informed approaches can strengthen the design and delivery of IFPs. By centring the lived experiences of international foundation students, IFPs can move beyond inferred assumptions about student needs and instead develop curricula that are responsive, research-informed and better aligned with students' transition experiences. In the UK, the absence of standardised policies or legislation governing IFP curricula offers both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, this flexibility allows IFPs, both within HEI and private providers, to tailor programmes to meet specific institutional goals or student cohorts. On the other hand, it can lead to inconsistent student experiences across the sector, particularly when curricula are shaped more by the needs of receiving departments or commercial priorities than by meaningful engagement with students themselves. A research-informed approach that involves

students as “experts” in their own experiences (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005), alongside staff with pedagogical and disciplinary expertise, offers a way forward. Co-constructing curricula in this way ensures that IFPs, regardless of provider type, equip students with the academic and skill-based competencies required for successful undergraduate progression (Bell, 2016). In addition, such collaboration fosters student agency, enabling learners to actively shape their educational journey and supporting more effective transitions to HE.

A key impact of this research has been the actionable outcomes derived from student-informed insights. The findings have been shared with my institution, which has led to a number of reflections being implemented. For instance, recent enhancements include a stronger emphasis on employability and career-related skills, increased social activities, mentoring opportunities, and initiatives to foster connections between international foundation students, undergraduate peers and receiving departments. These measures aim to align service provision more closely with students’ identified needs, ensuring their academic and personal development is supported effectively.

The study advances methodological contributions using inclusive and creative research practices, such as listening rooms and walking interviews. These non-traditional methods facilitated deep engagement with participants, allowing them to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. Participants reported that these approaches offered a valuable space for self-reflection, enabling them to recognise their personal and academic development since arriving in the UK. In Bourdieusian terms, this process of reflection can be seen as a form of reflexive engagement with one’s habitus, making visible the shifts in dispositions, practices and perceptions shaped by their evolving position in the field of UK HE. These moments of recognition may also be understood as the accumulation of symbolic capital, as participants articulated a growing sense of legitimacy and confidence within the academic field. Such methods challenge conventional research paradigms, offering

a model for generating rich qualitative data while simultaneously benefiting both researchers and participants.

The innovative methodologies employed in this study have been shared with other academics through presentations, such as at the “Doctoral Education: Voices and Stories” Conference, 2024 (University of Education – VNU Hanoi), a Teaching Showcase at the University of Warwick (2025), The International Education Studies Association (TIESA) Conference 2025 and at C-Space Conference 2025, Birmingham City University. The research has also been disseminated through published works see Appendix VII: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2023) How can we best research WITH international students? and Appendix VIII: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2025a) Amplifying voices: A case for using listening rooms in educational research. These publications and presentations aim to encourage the broader adoption of diverse, creative research methods, fostering deeper engagement and inclusivity in educational research. Notably, a colleague at the University of Warwick has expressed an intention to use listening rooms in her own research, signalling growing interest in the method’s potential within the research community.

Another significant contribution of this research is the emphasis on employability skills within IFPs. In addition to improving the integration of employability skills within my own HEI, I have authored a paper on this topic, which highlights the critical role of such skills in preparing students for academic success and future professional contexts, see Appendix IX: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2025b) The need to include career guidance and employability skills within IFPs. By raising awareness of this issue, this research has the potential to influence other IFPs to integrate employability into their curricula. Embedding employability skills into IFPs ensures that students gain valuable competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving and adaptability skills that are highly sought after by employers worldwide. These attributes not only contribute to students' professional readiness but also develops their confidence and ability to engage effectively within academic

and workplace environments. Fostering these skills can further enhance the reputation and attractiveness of IFPs as pathways to success, potentially drawing a more diverse and ambitious cohort of students. Sharing these insights with other IFP providers could encourage the adoption of similar strategies, ensuring a wider impact across the sector. Ultimately, this emphasis on employability demonstrates how IFPs can act as transformative spaces, preparing students not just for university but for lifelong success. By embedding employability skills into their design, IFPs can position themselves as critical contributors to students' academic and professional journeys, benefiting both individuals and the broader educational context.

This study also contributes conceptually by offering a more nuanced understanding of transition within the context of international foundation education. Rather than viewing transition as a linear process of movement from one educational stage to another, the research positions it as an ongoing, multidimensional and relational process shaped by students' habitus, capital and the fields they navigate. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, transition is reconceptualised as a dynamic negotiation of identities, practices and positions within new academic, social and cultural contexts. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented interpretations that focus primarily on gaps or adjustment difficulties, instead emphasising students' agency and capacity to accumulate and convert forms of capital. In doing so, the study extends existing transition theories, such as that defined by Gale & Parker (2014), by highlighting the structural and institutional dimensions that influence how international foundation students experience and enact their transitions into UK HE.

The development of academic capital and the facilitation of successful transitions for international foundation students should be regarded as an ongoing, iterative process of reflection, improvement and adaptation. This research lays the groundwork for such a process, advocating for a shift away from a scattergun approach of supporting students' transitions (Brooman and Darwent, 2014) to one that is research-led and student-informed (Coertjens, 2017). By incorporating student voices into programme design and fostering collaboration between students and

staff, IFPs can better meet the evolving needs of their students. This creates a stronger foundation for both academic and professional success, ensuring that IFPs remain relevant and impactful in supporting international foundation students' transitions to HE.

6.9 Recommendations for further research

To ensure continuous improvements and responsiveness to the evolving landscape of HE, future research should further explore the experiences of international foundation students. Given the limited research in this area, there is a clear need for deeper investigation into their academic journeys, transitions and long-term outcomes. Embedding a culture of continuous research and evaluation will ensure that IFPs remain dynamic and student-centred. Collaboration between students, researchers, educators and policymakers will be crucial in shaping evidence-based improvements that support international foundation students effectively. Through ongoing research, IFPs can refine their approaches, enhance student experiences and create more inclusive and supportive pathways into HE.

I recommend that research tracking international foundation students beyond their foundation year would offer valuable insights into the lasting impact of IFPs on their academic and professional trajectories. Such longitudinal studies could help identify which aspects of current support mechanisms are most effective and where further development is needed. Importantly, centring student voices in this research would deepen understanding of how different initiatives are experienced over time and whether they meaningfully support progression, integration and career aspirations. Such insights would enable IFP providers to refine their practices in ways that are evidence-based, responsive and aligned with students’ evolving needs across their HE journey and beyond.

In addition, conducting cross-institutional research, both within the UK and internationally, would enable the identification of best practices and inform policy development. Comparative studies could highlight variations in programme design, student support services and overall student experiences, leading to more effective and inclusive practices. Facilitating platforms for the sharing of these best practices, through collaborative networks, conferences and practitioner-led forums, would support continuous improvement and foster a more cohesive approach to enhancing IFPs across varied institutional contexts.

Future research should aim to include a broader and more diverse range of international foundation students from different countries, cultural backgrounds and educational systems. By increasing the sample size and ensuring a more representative demographic, future studies can provide deeper insights into the varied experiences of international students. This includes examining how intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity and prior education shape students' transitions, influencing the kinds of opportunities they can access and the structural barriers they navigate within different educational contexts. Research that accounts for these intersections would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of international foundation students. Expanding the diversity of participants will also ensure that findings better reflect the global nature of IFPs, leading to more targeted and inclusive improvements in programme design and student support.

Within this study, students expressed a desire for more opportunities to develop transferable competencies such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving and digital literacy, as well as practical skills including CV writing, creating LinkedIn profiles and understanding internship opportunities. This suggests a potential gap between current provision and what students perceive as valuable for their future academic and professional development. While these findings are based on a single institutional context, they highlight important areas for further investigation across the sector. Future research could explore how such skills might be more meaningfully

embedded within the foundation year curriculum. A clearer understanding of how students develop these competencies, during this transitional period, could enhance both their academic success and long-term career prospects. Embedding employability more explicitly would also signal institutional recognition of students' broader developmental needs, aligning with a more holistic and future-focused approach to international student support.

This study advocates for shifting away from a deficit perspective that focuses on international students' challenges. Future research should actively promote a strengths-based approach, recognising and valuing the resilience, agency, and contributions of international foundation students. By reframing the discourse, research can support a more positive and empowering narrative that influences both institutional practice and policy.

6.10 Summary

This chapter has addressed the research questions established at the start of this study using inclusive and creative methods. It explored international foundation students' development of academic and social capital during their foundation year, how they can be more actively engaged in building their academic capital and how IFPs can best support their successful transition to undergraduate studies in the UK. Drawing on the insights of alumni as "experts of their lived experience" (Winn and Lindqvist, 2019), and my own expertise of over nine years in teaching international foundation students, a range of reflections have been proposed to enhance IFP provision.

The research findings highlight the importance of student-informed approaches to improve the development of academic and social capital, foster a sense of

belonging, support academic success and facilitate smooth transitions to undergraduate studies. Although the study acknowledges its limitations, it opens the door for further research to deepen our understanding of international foundation students' experiences and to inform future educational practices that better support their transitions into UK HE. Ultimately, by recognising and responding to their strengths, aspirations, and resilience, we can create conditions in which international foundation students do not simply survive but truly thrive.

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Appendix I: Initial Contact message to IFP alumni and mentors

Hi Alumni (and IFP Mentor),

I hope you are well and enjoying your undergraduate studies. I would like to invite you, as an IFP alumni to participate in some research I am currently undertaking for my Doctorate in Education (EdD). I'm researching how we can best support IFP students to successfully transition to their undergraduate studies here at Warwick, so I want to hear from you about your time on the IFP and your ideas on how it can be improved.

What do you have to do? I'd like you to volunteer to take part in a listening room activity with a friend – basically talk about the IFP with your friend. The conversation will be audio recorded (max 1 hour) and then I'd like you to come for a walk and a chat with me on another day (max 1 hour). All responses will be anonymised.

Why? Because I, like you, want to support international students as much as possible to succeed at university.

When? We can arrange a day/time to suit both of us.

What's in it for you? Sorry – I can't pay you but hopefully you will enjoy chatting about the IFP and remembering all the good times! Plus, you'll have the opportunity to reflect on how far you have come since the IFP, and you'll be helping to improve things for future IFP students.

OK, so you are interested … what next? Please contact me and I can send you some more information to read or we can chat about it. No obligation – you can change your mind at any time.

Thank you for reading this and I hope to hear from you!

Best wishes Anna

Anna.tranter@warwick.ac.uk or chat with me on Teams

Appendix II: Ethics Documents

Participant Information Leaflet

Study Title: Understanding international foundation students transition into higher education

Investigator(s): Anna Tranter

Introduction

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who is organising and funding the study?

Anna Tranter is organising and conducting this research. The research has received no funding.

What is the study about?

The research will focus on the narratives of international foundation students at the University of Warwick, with a view to gaining in-depth qualitative data of their experience of developing embodied academic capital during their foundation year. The narratives will focus on answering the following research questions:

- How do international foundation students develop academic capital during their foundation year?

- How can international students be active / involved in the development of their academic capital?

• What do international foundation students think UK Higher Education Institutions can do to support them to develop their academic capital, to enable them to successfully transition to undergraduate studies?

The project involves two parts:

1. Listening Rooms where two alumni will talk together about their experiences on the Warwick International Foundation Programme.

2. Individual walking interview with one alumni who is an international foundation students. The aim of research is to walk around campus and discuss the foundation year, focusing on how the student felt about the course, where there any defining moments and reflecting on how the year could be improved.

What would taking part involve?

Students are invited to participate in the following activities:

- A listening room conversation between two alumni. The conversation will take place at a mutually convenient time and will be conducted on campus. The conversation will last for approx. 1 hour.

- A walking interview to discuss the international foundation year. The walk will take place at a mutually convenient time and will be conducted in public areas of campus to which the participant will access to. The walk will take approx. 1 hour.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and choosing not to take part will not affect you or your student grades in any way. You can also choose to withdraw your participation without giving a reason by contacting Anna Tranter.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

There are no direct benefits to the student who take part in this study.

What are the possible disadvantages, side effects or risks, of taking part in this study?

There are no disadvantages to taking part in this study.

All data will be anonymous. Data collected will be kept on a password protected computer. Your participation or non-participation will not affect your academic grades in any way. There will be no communication with your undergraduate course staff.

Expenses and payments

There are no expenses or payments for taking part in this research.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?

The conversation during the listening room and the walking interview will be recorded. The researcher will be the only people who have access to this interview recording.

The data will be used to inform the researcher's further academic studies. It may be processed to inform and develop teaching / support material on the Warwick International Foundation Programme.

All data will be stored in compliance with the University polices. All data will be kept for the standard data retention period of 10 years.

As we are not collecting personal data, there is no risk that any personal data will be shared or transferred to anyone outside of the University or the EEA.

If you have any questions please contact Anna Tranter or HEL_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk.

What will happen to the data collected about me?

As a publicly-funded organisation, Birmingham City University have to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information from people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, such as this, we will use your data in the ways needed to conduct and analyse the research study.

We will be using information from you in order to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. We are committed to protecting the rights of individuals in line with data protection legislation.

No identifiable data will be collected from you as part of this study.

Data Sharing

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. Birmingham City University has in place policies and procedures to keep your data safe.

This data may also be used for future research, including impact activities following review and approval by an independent Research Ethics Committee and subject to your consent at the outset of this research project.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on being part of the study?

Participation is entirely voluntary, and a decision to withdraw participation from the study without giving a reason, would not affect participants in any way. If participants decide to withdraw, they can choose not to take part in the walking interview or terminate the interview at any time. If they choose to terminate the interview, all data collected will be destroyed.

If participants choose to withdraw after completion of the walking interview, then it will not be possible to withdraw their data.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results may be used as part of the researcher's Doctorate in Education and may influence future delivery of the Warwick International Foundation Programme delivery.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by Birmingham City University Research Ethics Committee.

Who should I contact if I want further information?

Anna Tranter

Email: anna.tranter@warwick.ac.uk

Who should I contact if I wish to make a complaint?

Any complaint about the way you have been dealt with during the study or any possible harm you might have suffered will be addressed. Please address your complaint to:

HEL_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this Participant Information Leaflet

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Understanding international foundation students transition into higher education

Name of Researcher(s): Anna Tranter

Please initial all boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (*version 1, 05/03/23*) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my *education, or legal rights* being affected. ☐

3. I understand that data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from Birmingham City University and The University of Warwick, from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data. ☐

4. I understand that the listening rooms and walking interview will be audio recorded. Only Anna Tranter, the researcher, will have access to this recording. ☐

5. I am happy for my data to be used in future research. ☐

6. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature

Mrs Anna Tranter
Warwick International Foundation Studies
University of Warwick
New Education Building
Coventry
CV4 7AL

Date

Dear Alumni,

Research for my Doctorate in Education

I hope you are well. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in some educational research I am undertaking as part of my Doctorate in Education at Birmingham City University.

The research is aimed at studying the transition of international foundation students at Warwick International Foundation Programme onto their undergraduate studies (at the University of Warwick).

If you are willing to take part, the research will involve two separate parts. It is hoped that you would be willing to undertake both parts.

Part 1: Listening Rooms

You and a friend will be invited to chat about your time as an international foundation student and your transition to undergraduate studies. You will have some prompt cards to help focus your conversation. Your conversation will be audio recorded and will last for approximately 1 hour.

Part 2: Walking Interview (undertaken at a later date)

This will consist of the two of us, walking together, around the University campus, at a mutually convenient time. Whilst we do this, I would like to ask you about your time

as a foundation student. I envisage the walking interview will take no more than one hour. I will be audio recording the interview.

The taking part in the listening rooms and walking interview is entirely voluntary. You will receive no monetary or educational reward for it and will be free to stop either of the research processes at any time or withdraw from the study. All data collected will be stored anonymously.

I have attached a copy of the Participant Information Leaflet for more information and a copy of the consent form, which you be required to complete, should you decide to participate.

Please feel free to contact me if I can provide any further information or you have any questions about the research or the taking part. My email address is annatranter@warwick.ac.uk.

If you are interested in taking part or would like to learn more about the research then please contact me to discuss this further.

Yours faithfully,

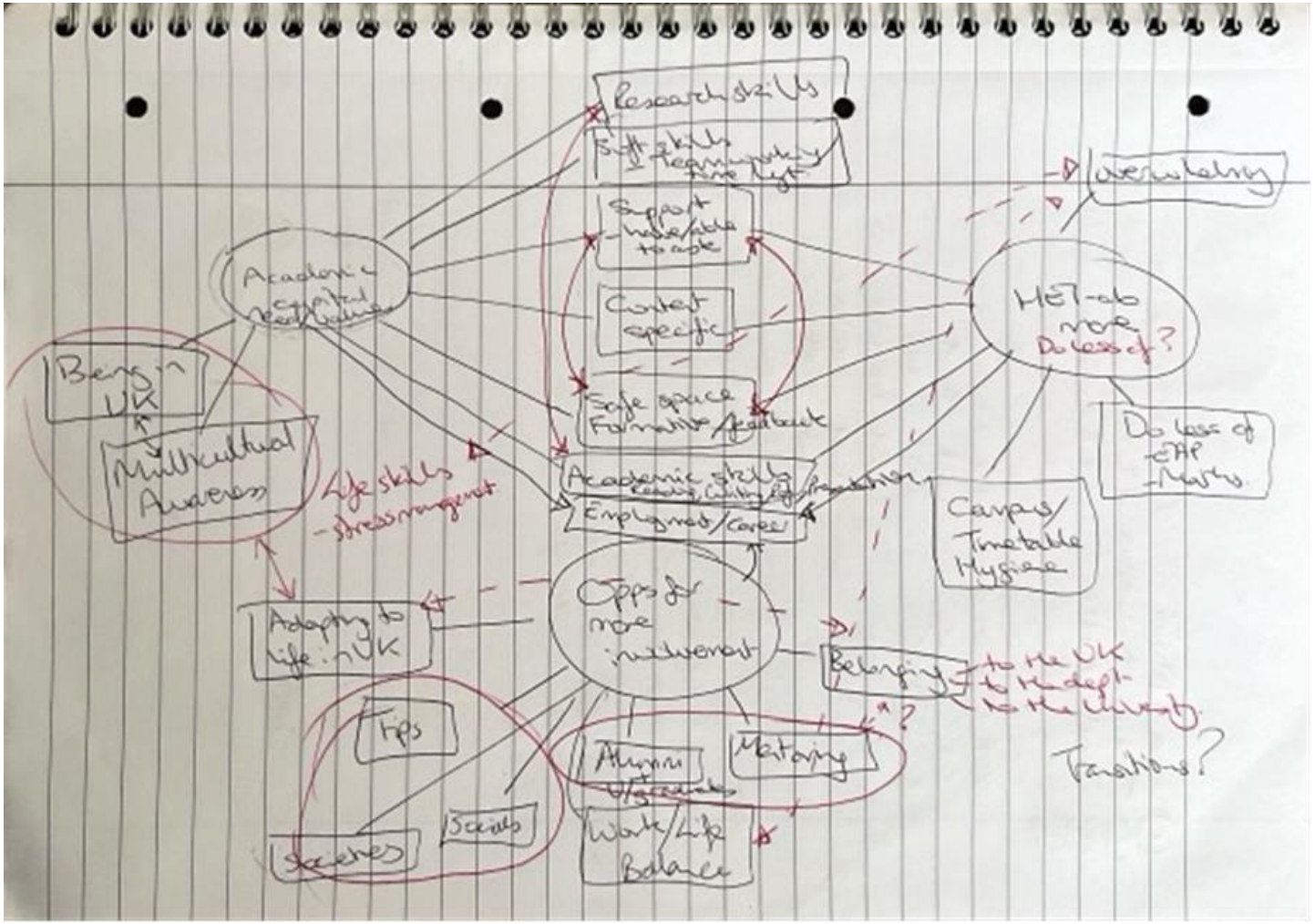
Anna Tranter

Course Director

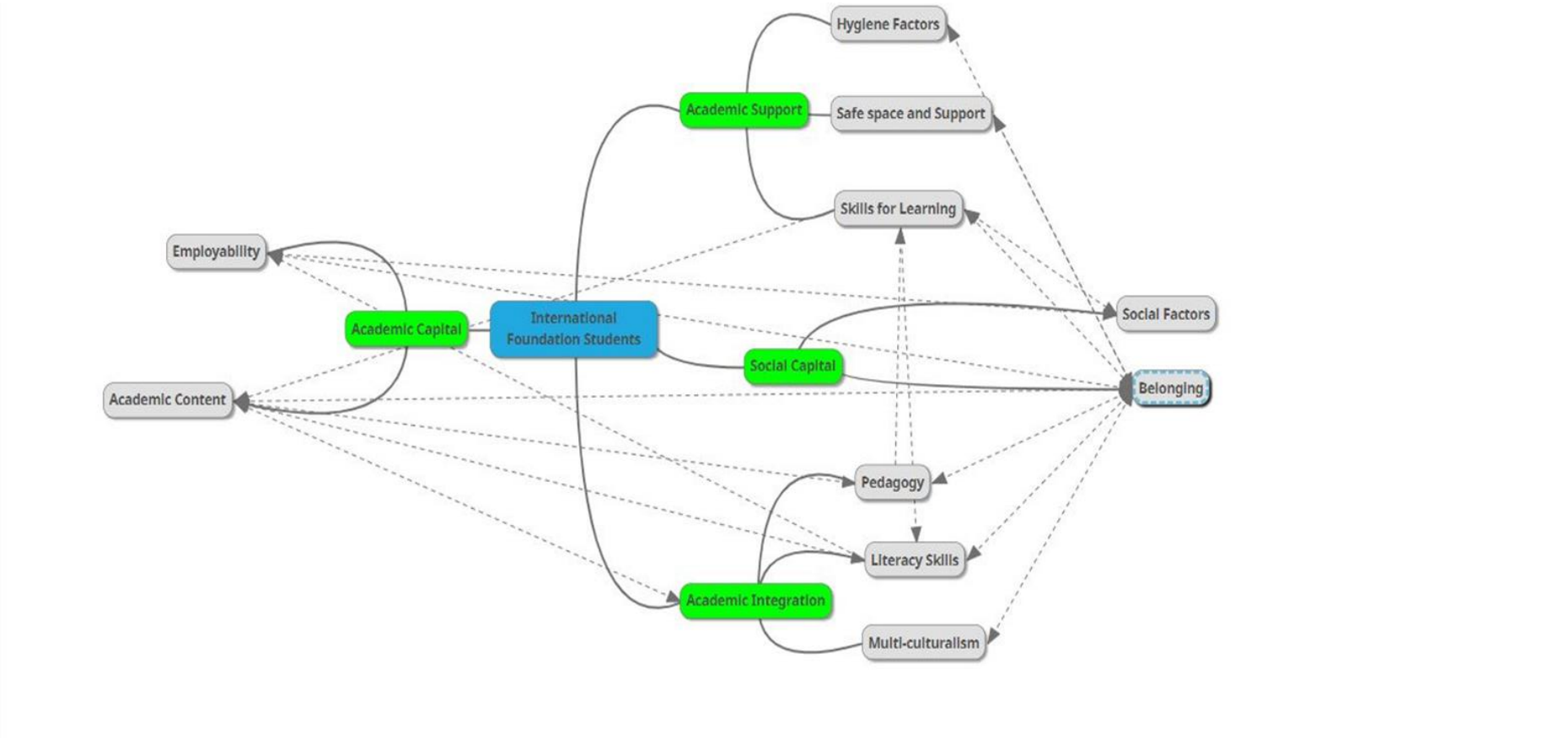
Warwick International Foundation Studies

Appendix III: Photo of Initial Theme Development

Appendix IV: Photo of Initial Mind Map of Connections



Appendix V: Mind Map of interconnecting codes and themes



Appendix VI: Initial sub-theme development

Theme (Column 1)	Sub-theme (Column 2)	Codes (Column 3)	Characteristics (Column 4)	Research Question (Column 4)
Academic Capital	Career / employability skills	• Employability/Career	Activities and skills to support employability and career enhancements.	RQ1 / RQ2 / RQ3
	Academic content	• EAP more • EAP less • Data analysis/ technology • AI • Maths useful • Maths not useful • Repetition	Academic content which students wanted more or less of during the IFP.	RQ1/ RQ3
Social capital	Social factors	• Social activities • Contact with undergraduates • Mentoring	More contact with undergraduates and opportunities for social events.	RQ2
	Belonging	• Being part of the university • Not being part of the university • Differences • Teachers/lecturers • Optionality	A sense of community and belonging to the IFP and university (or not).	RQ2

Academic Support	Safe space and support	• Supportive • Feedback • Mark Scheme • Help	The formative nature of the IFP, with lots of support available and the ability of students to access help and support such as mentoring and buddies.	RQ1 / RQ2 / RQ3
	Skills for learning	• Self-study skills • Stress Management • Time Management	Skills such as time management, self-study skills and stress management to support students during their studies.	RQ2
	Hygiene factors	• Campus • Timetables • Study space	These are factors that students stated were causing dissatisfaction with the IFP and included the poor campus facilities and timetable issues	RQ3
Academic Integration	Multiculturalism and being in the UK	• Multicultural experience • Awareness of transition • Being in UK	Being in the UK and part of an IFP.	RQ1 / RQ3
	Pedagogy	• Teamwork • Different assessments • Difference studying • Seminars • Lectures	The differences between international students' previous educational experiences and that experienced in the UK.	RQ1 / RQ3
	Literacy skills	• Note taking • Reading • Reviewing skills • Essay structure/writing • Critical thinking • Referencing • Academic writing • Research	A range of academic literacy skills including research skills, reading, writing, note taking, presentation skills, critical thinking and referencing.	RQ1 / RQ3

Appendix VII: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2023) **How can we best research WITH international students?**

WELCOME

Matthew Tolley
Chair of the InForm Editorial Board

Welcome to the 22nd issue of InForm. This year there have been some changes to the InForm editorial board. I have taken over from Noor Mat Nayan as the Chair for the year. Our board also grew, with Daniel Devane, Cathy Faulkner, Gemma Peacock and Brian Turner joining Liz Wilding, Anthony Manning and Nina-Anne Lawrence.

From the editorial board...

Issue 22 of InForm continues from the 2022 InForm Conference 'Enhancing Inclusivity in International Foundation Programmes', which was hosted by the University of Reading on 30 July. Bruce Howell's keynote address explored the complexities of ensuring inclusivity in a UK-based IFP delivered outside the UK. Many of the presenters from the conference have successfully written articles for this issue, once again showing the opportunities the conference provides for publication. The papers that have been chosen describe various aspects of enhancing inclusivity for our IFP students, including critical thinking, module design and accessibility.

Our first paper, written by Anna Tranter, puts forward the case for rethinking student involvement in research. Rather than treating students as subjects of the research, Anna discusses the impact of student-staff partnership and other creative research methods in order to shift the current power imbalance. Anna features again in our second article with colleague Amy Stickels and two students: Daniel E Marquez and Hongrui Ouyang. This student and staff co-written article demonstrates how students can be involved in and contribute to research. We welcome more student-staff partnerships in the coming issues. The next two articles present action research focusing on maximising student engagement and interaction. Cathy Faulkner and Fiona Hartley look at reasons why students may intentionally choose not to actively engage in discussions. This is followed by Catriona Johnson, who focuses on student engagement with peer review, drawing on Carless and Boud's (2018) features of student literacy. Anne Stazicker and Nancy Woods then discuss the value of using controversial topics to enhance critical thinking – medical marijuana with medical students, in this case. Article six sees Dr Helena Reis Batalha present findings and reflections on a discrimination in science seminar. Clare Stephens and Graham Van Wyk provide an account of how they redesigned and decolonised an inherited Tourism and Hospitality module, with a focus on sustainability and inclusivity. Jill Haldane then compares a typical English for Academic Purposes model with Academic Language and Literacies, and describes the effects of the University of Edinburgh's Academic Vocabulary in Literacy course. Finally, Daniel Devane introduces the use and impact of an Accessibility Reporting Form which enables students to anonymously report any accessibility issues without worries of perceived stigmas.

The InForm Exchange section starts with Alan Kean, who builds on Michael Groves' article from Issue 19 about machine translation. Alan argues the case for more open discussion around how it can enhance student learning. Next, Nabila Shariff Al-Baiti touches on a similar theme as Clare and Graham: students as culturally aware citizens. Nabila describes a workshop series and how it enhanced students' EDI knowledge and practices. The penultimate article by Emma Hamilton shows measures for supporting dyslexic students in their learning rather than just providing Reasonable Adjustment Plans. The final article, written by Brian Turner, is a reflection on his transition from teaching so-called international students to home students and the necessity of rapport building.

We hope you will enjoy reading the selection of articles in this issue and we thank the authors for contributing and sharing their work with InForm.

Additionally, we are happy to announce that this year's InForm Conference will be hosted by the University of Bristol on 3 June 2023. The theme of the conference is 'The changing nature and expectations of students in a changing world: transforming and being transformed'. The conference will be hybrid allowing face-to-face sessions as well as online participation for those who cannot attend in person. We invite you to register either as a presenter or participant. For more information, please see the enclosed advert inside the front cover.

To submit an article for the next InForm issue, please email **inform@reading.ac.uk**

How can we best research WITH International Students?

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This article questions how we can decolonise our research methods and use more creative methods to enhance inclusivity and empowerment, and work 'with' our international foundation students rather than conducting research "on" our international foundation students.

Introduction

The purpose of educational research should be about engaging with the voices of teachers and learners to inform educational practice. Therefore, when we plan research with international foundation students, it is important to consider how best we engage with them, bearing in mind that conventional research methods such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, are established on Western colonial ways of acquiring knowledge (Gobo, 2011). For example, interviews are considered an "outright cultural product and not merely a research technique" (Silverman, 2000, p.89). Interviews are not universal, neutral or cultural-free; the interviewees need to understand the unwritten rules and sociological conditions of the process (Gobo, 2011). Students need to have the ability to express themselves freely, to be able to link thoughts and language, to understand the rituals of interviews and be confident to express their own views to someone who they may perceive as having a higher social standing than them.

One of the provocations of researching with international foundation students is one of challenging the deficit model. They are often seen as not having the cultural capital or the linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2010) to fully engage. Therefore, we need to ensure we are utilising research methods that are inclusive and appropriate for our students.

Decolonisation of research methods

We need to pursue the decolonisation of research methods in a reflexive manner and ensure we effectively engage with and 'hear' the voices of our students. It is also important not fall into the trap of 'tokenistic decolonisation', which "may even reaffirm colonial structures due to not taking radical action" (Moosavi, 2020, p.349). A suggestion from Kara (2020) is that we should first decolonise ourselves as researchers and each of us is able to "identify and understand our own ontological and epistemological positions" (Kara, 2020, p.59). By doing so, our own positionality and approach to research may change, but surely this is a good thing, as our research will be more inclusive and more ethical. Maybe the researcher should be the one who is discomforted by the methodology rather than the participants?

The issue of power imbalance

Power imbalance is a recurring theme within educational research and pertinent when working with international students, who may have experienced didactic teacher centre education. Participatory research may be a possible solution, as it sets out to empower and improve outcomes for the benefit of the community. The community of international foundation students can be involved in every step of the research process, from research design through to data analysis and beyond. The advantage of this approach is that it may support students to work together better as a community, which will potentially mitigate some of the isolation fears identified by international students. It may also enhance students' assertiveness, self-efficacy, and negotiations skills. However, this poses questions as to whether international foundation students are a community and are we doing them a disservice by grouping them together as one community? Students from the same country may well have had a very different educational journey before they reach us.

Co-production of research goes one step further giving students equal power within the research, enabling researchers and students to learn from each other. International students

are 'experts of their experience', so to engage them in the co-creation of research will not only improve the student experience and strengthen their sense of belonging but will improve the educational research process and outcomes.

Creative research methods

We should consider using more creative research methods, which involve participants engaging in a range of ethnographical encounters, where they can be observed and heard, to analyse both the verbal and non-verbal responses to the situation. Such methods are a great way to conduct intraviews rather than interviews, using a conversational approach rather than questions and answers. "While the interview is based on the assumption that it takes two to tell the truth, the intraview hinges for its effect on the power of introspection" Walker (1985, p.149).

Walking intraviews have been shown to reverse this conventional power dynamic between the researchee and the researcher (Hughes et al, 2014, p.11), and as such helps to decolonise the interview process. The act of walking encouraging the wandering of thoughts (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012) and enables students, who may be speaking in a second language, to have more time to formulate what they want to say. All of which are likely to create richer qualitative data.

Listening rooms as a method, where students are given prompt cards and their conversations are recorded, within a safe and trusted space, is another example of an inclusive research method. The absence of the researcher enables students to openly share their experiences without interruptions and without adverse power dynamics, going someway to negate students' sense of having to say the 'correct' thing. Heron (2020, p.407) concluded "the method provides us with a meaningful window into the lives of students, as defined and explained by students". The conversation legitimises the everyday life of the students, with students co-creating the knowledge.

Creative methods have the potential to be more inclusive and more ethical. However, we must exercise caution, creative methods may be appealing in themselves, but it is essential that the methodological context of the research question is addressed, and a suitable methodology is chosen, which not only addresses the research question but meets the needs of our international students. We need to listen to their defining moments during their time here in the UK, and by doing so, try to understand what we need to improve and how. We need to slow down the gathering of inclusive data, to truly involve our students and not just to bolt on a 'tick box' to claim we have carried out culturally integrated research.

Final thoughts

International foundation students are a valuable part of our community. We need to ensure that educational research is fully inclusive and continue to deliver a student experience suitable for everyone, whilst hopefully inspiring the next generation of researchers. We need to embrace more creative, participatory, and co-produced research methods, even though creative research methods are not always recognised as valid forms of knowledge creation by Euro-Western audiences (Kara, 2020).

We need to challenge potential ethical barriers surrounding our research and the inclusion of our international foundation students and deficit model thinking that may be portrayed. Creative research methods are not prescriptive, there is not a one size fits all, they should be iterative and dynamic. As teachers of international foundation students, we are the ones best placed to embrace any number of participatory research methodologies and experiment, to enable the voices of our students to be heard, for them to own their own data and for the research to be mutually beneficial.

We need to be prepared to share the outcome of our research with our students, in a way that is inclusive. The research process and the results of the research should impact positively on their student experience, remembering that if our research has been undertaken inclusively and ethically, this is more important that than the outcome of the research itself.

The POP toolkit does not aim to be prescriptive, but aims to open the door to ESD competencies and pedagogy and tease out purposeful contributions to creating a sustainable future over a broad range of teaching and learning contexts. ESD pedagogy in many ways is just good pedagogy, but it has the added orientation of pedagogy to do good; pedagogy with purpose.

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Co-created Gamification

– A student and teacher co-written article

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Gamification is an increasingly popular pedagogy. Gamification was enhanced by empowering international students to take on the challenge of co-creating their own quizzes. In the true spirit of co-creation, this article has been written by both students and teachers working together on the Warwick International Foundation Program (IFP), to explore introducing co-created gamification into the classroom.

Introduction

Gamification is defined as "use of game design elements within non-game contexts" (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke, 2011, p.1). The use of gamification focuses on students being motivated, engaged and having fun, meaning that learning is more meaningful and effective (deMarcos et al, 2017). However, others see gamification as a distraction which ignores learners' pedagogical needs, with competition causing students additional stress (Rabah et al, 2018).

Traditionally gamification is used to encourage interaction with teaching materials. On an IFP it has the added benefit of enabling interactions between students to develop their self-efficacy in preparation for undergraduate study. However, we felt that we could enhance this further through co-creation, with "students becoming more active participants in the learning process, constructing understanding and resources with academic staff" (Bovill and Felten, 2016, p.197). We designed a simple intervention combining the positive benefits of gamification on student engagement, with the independence and confidence building from student co-creating.

This research explores what happened when students were empowered and challenged to co-create their own gamification within the IFP classroom, enabling education to become 'done with' and not 'done to' students. Having co-presented the research with students at a conference, we co-wrote this article as a partnership approach, to build and share power (Wegener and Tanggaard, 2013).

The Intervention

On the Warwick IFP, during 2021–22, students experienced blended learning with one pre-recorded lecture and three one-hour small group seminars per module each week. Within the first seminar of the week students wrote quiz questions and answers, of their choice based on the pre-recorded lecture. For example, following a lecture on motivation theories, students then wrote questions ranging from multi choice questions on identifying key words to true or false questions about application of motivation theory.

The teacher collated the questions, making minor amendments where necessary and then uploaded them to a Kahoot! quiz. In the final seminar of the week, students played Kahoot! against each other, enabling them to review their learning.

Kahoot! was chosen for its gamified elements, as it is bright, easy to access and uses leader boards. The system also allows students to play using their own name or use a pseudonym if they prefer anonymity.

Evaluation

Two of our student co-creators identified the following themes, which are triangulated with teacher evaluation sought via a questionnaire (response rate: 79%) and a focus group of nine students.

Appendix VIII: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2025a) Amplifying voices: A case for using listening rooms in educational research

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Amplifying voices: A case for using listening rooms in educational research

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Abstract

Listening rooms, as a qualitative research method, offer a distinctive approach to capturing authentic experiences, fostering agency, and promoting empowerment. This article advocates for the adoption of listening rooms in higher education research as a means of co-constructing knowledge and amplifying student and staff voices. Grounded in participatory methodologies and critical pedagogy, it examines the theoretical foundations and pedagogical justifications for using listening rooms, while also highlighting their practical applications and benefits. Although this method presents significant advantages, such as amplifying participant voices and generating rich qualitative data, it also comes with challenges, including time and logistical constraints. Drawing on evidence from practice, the article demonstrates how listening rooms have been successfully implemented in higher education to provide deeper insights into the experiences of international foundation students as they progress from their foundation year to undergraduate study. This research contributes to understanding student transitions, wellbeing and engagement, offering valuable perspectives on how institutions can better support these students. In conclusion, the article calls on educators and researchers to embrace listening rooms as a powerful tool for enhancing student and staff engagement, promoting authentic and meaningful dialogue in education.

Key Words
Listening rooms, participatory methods, international foundation

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Introduction

The importance of capturing authentic student voices in educational research has never been more critical. For too long, research in education has been dominated by top-down, researcher-driven methods that often overlook the lived experiences of students, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalised groups. This highlights the need for more inclusive, participatory approaches to research methods that centre students as active contributors rather than passive subjects. One such approach with the potential to transform how we engage with and understand students' or staff experiences is the use of listening rooms.

Heron (2020) first used listening rooms as a research method to explore student experiences through more relational and participant-led approaches. Listening rooms is a research method designed to create a safe space where participants, often friends or peers with shared experiences, engage in reflective, authentic conversations about their educational experiences. Unlike traditional interviews or focus groups, listening rooms foster natural, informal dialogue, allowing participants to express themselves freely and on their own terms. This method challenges conventional researcher-participant power dynamics by placing control in the hands of participants, fostering a more equitable and participatory research environment. As a result, listening rooms facilitate a deeper, more authentic understanding of participants' experiences, one shaped by their own voices rather than filtered through researcher interpretations.

The article begins by introducing what listening rooms are, outlining their purpose and how they differ from traditional qualitative research methods. It then explores the theoretical foundations and pedagogical justification, situating them within participatory methodologies and critical pedagogy. Drawing on a recent research project that examined international foundation students' experiences during their foundation year and their transition into higher education, the article demonstrates how listening rooms successfully captured the lived experiences of students, offering a platform for their voices to be heard in ways that traditional methods may not. By fostering an environment of trust and open dialogue, listening rooms encouraged students to share personal insights, challenges, and aspirations, resulting in richer, more nuanced data.

The article also details the practical aspects of using listening rooms, including student recruitment, creating the right environment, conducting the sessions, and collecting and analysing data. It provides a step-by-step guide for researchers interested in adopting this approach, offering insights into how to implement the method effectively while maintaining ethical integrity and ensuring a positive, supportive environment for participants.

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Building on the success of this study, the article critically examines the benefits of using listening rooms in educational research, such as fostering deeper engagement, supporting authentic self-expression, and generating richer qualitative data. Alongside these benefits, the article also addresses the challenges and limitations, including the time-intensive nature of the method, as well as ethical and confidentiality concerns. In conclusion, the article calls for an increased use of listening rooms in higher education research, advocating for their role in shaping more inclusive, student and staff centred educational practices. By integrating both theoretical insights and practical guidance, it provides a comprehensive resource for educators and researchers aiming to enhance student and staff engagement through listening rooms.

What are listening rooms?

Listening rooms are a qualitative research method that creates a safe and open space for participants, typically peers with shared experiences, to engage in reflective and authentic conversations about their educational journeys. In contrast to traditional interviews or focus groups, listening rooms remove the researcher from the discussion, allowing participants to speak freely without external influence. This method fosters participants' agency, encourages deeper self-reflection, and generates richer, more nuanced data. One of the key strengths of listening rooms is their ability to create an inclusive space, which is particularly valuable in education. Diverse student populations often have varying needs and perspectives, and listening rooms offer a platform for these students, whether from different cultural backgrounds, those with disabilities, or students from low socio-economic backgrounds, to share their lived experiences in full. This inclusive approach is vital for producing research that accurately reflects the diversity within the educational system and enables the development of more equitable participant-led solutions.

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A crucial element of listening rooms is the role of friendships, especially those built on shared lived experiences. These relationships are essential for fostering students' sense of belonging and overall well-being (Parkin and Heron, 2023). Within academic environments, students inherit resources and opportunities through social interactions, which significantly strengthen their academic and personal development (Bensimon, 2007; Scanlon *et al*., 2007). The listening rooms approach (Heron, 2020) capitalises on the importance of these peer relationships by students working in friendship pairs. This arrangement promotes open, uninhibited discussions, leading to deeper insights. As Leeuw *et al*. (2012-182) note, friendships create 'different forms of knowledge production, accountability, vulnerability, and confrontation', all of which enhance the quality of data collected. Friends naturally support and encourage one another in speaking honestly, reducing social pressures and making it easier for students to articulate their thoughts without fear of judgment.

Theoretical foundations and pedagogical justification

The use of listening rooms in educational research is rooted in participatory research traditions and pedagogical frameworks that prioritise student agency and voice. Theoretical perspectives such as social constructivism and democratic pedagogy provide a strong foundation for this method, highlighting its potential to foster meaningful dialogue, collaborative knowledge production, and student empowerment. Listening rooms align closely with social constructivist approaches to learning, which emphasise that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is shaped through dialogue, with shared discussions fostering deeper understanding. The listening room method builds on this by encouraging participants to engage in reflective conversations with peers, allowing them to explore their academic and personal growth collectively. Furthermore, the participatory nature of listening rooms resonates with the principles of democratic pedagogy. Freire (2020) advocates for education that extends beyond knowledge transmission, instead fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and active engagement. Listening rooms embody this philosophy by creating a space where participants control the direction of discussions, reducing hierarchical researcher-participant dynamics and encouraging authentic self-expression (Heron, 2020). By enabling participants to articulate their experiences on their own terms, this method supports an educational research model that values participants' voices as essential sources of insight.

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Listening rooms also challenge traditional research methods that position participants as passive subjects responding to pre-determined questions. Instead, they prioritise participants' agency, allowing them to steer discussions in ways that capture the full complexity of their experiences. This results in richer data and a greater sense of ownership among participants (Heron, 2020). Additionally, the method supports student-centred learning approaches in higher education. Biggs (2003) describes student-centred learning as promoting active engagement, critical thinking, and reflective practice, skills that listening rooms inherently develop. By facilitating open conversations in a supportive environment, listening rooms also help students build confidence and recognise their own growth, making them a powerful tool for both research and educational practice.

Exploring international foundation students' transitions: A participatory approach

This research explored the transitional experiences of international students enrolled on an International Foundation Programme (IFP) in the UK, a one-year, pre-degree course designed to prepare students for entry into undergraduate study by developing their academic skills, English language proficiency, and cultural awareness. Recognising that foundation year transitions are often underexplored in the literature, this study sought to capture the nuanced challenges and forms of adaptation experienced by students, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, and the development of a sense of belonging (Smith and Lee, 2021). To gain deeper insight into the factors shaping these academic journeys, two interconnected participatory methods were employed: listening rooms (Parkin and Heron, 2023) with student pairs, followed by individual walking intraviews. The listening rooms facilitated collaborative meaning-making in a peer-led setting, allowing participants to reflect freely on their shared experiences. The subsequent individual walking intraviews (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012), a method that blends inward reflection with dialogic exchange to prioritise co-constructed meaning, enabled deeper, spatially grounded exploration of personal narratives, while also providing a space to clarify points raised in the listening rooms and to check the researcher's understanding of participants' experiences. Together, this dual-phased approach provided a rich, layered understanding of the students' transitions, capturing both collective and individual perspectives.

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Traditional research methods often structure students' narratives through predetermined questions, limiting their ability to express their experiences on their own terms. In contrast, listening rooms disrupt this dynamic by creating a space where participants take the lead, voice their concerns, and shape the conversation based on their unique experiences (Freire, 1970). This participatory approach ensures that all voices are heard, particularly those that might otherwise be overlooked or underrepresented. By centring students' own perceptions of what is valuable, the research offers original insights into the development of academic and social capital during this transition. Grounded in a student-informed approach (Noddings, 2005), the study contributes to the design of international foundation programmes by addressing the expressed needs of students and fostering more effective transitions.

Ethical considerations and recruitment

Before conducting the study, ethical approval was obtained to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines, including securing informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and addressing potential risks. This approval reinforced the commitment to participant well-being and upheld the integrity of the research process. Following ethic approval, participants were recruited and invited to take part in friendship pairs of their own choosing. Pre-existing relationships were integral to the listening room method, fostering openness, trust, and co-construction of experiences (Leeuw *et al*., 2012). Allowing students to select their own pairs ensured a comfortable environment where they could engage in meaningful dialogue without the constraints of researcher-assigned groupings.

For this study, which focused on students' experiences of their international foundation year, it was essential that participants had undergone this shared experience. However, no restrictions were placed on when they had completed the foundation year or the specific course they studied. The commonality of experience allowed friends to support and challenge each other's perspectives, leading to deeper reflection and a more nuanced exploration of their transitions. This dynamic not only enriched the quality of data collected but also reinforced students' sense of agency in shaping and articulating their experiences.

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To uphold ethical research practices and ensure that participants were fully informed and comfortable with the process, an initial briefing session was arranged. This session introduced participants to the research aims, explained the listening room methodology, and provided an opportunity for the students to ask questions. By fostering clarity and trust, this step helped participants make an informed decision about their involvement and ensured they felt at ease with the format.

Creating the right environment

The physical setting played a crucial role in the success of the listening rooms. A quiet and distraction-free space was chosen to create a relaxed atmosphere where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves openly. For this study, a room previously used by the students during their foundation year was selected, helping to evoke memories and deepen their reflections on their academic journeys. To further enhance participant comfort, audio recording was used instead of video. This approach minimised self-consciousness, reduced obtrusiveness, and ensured anonymity by eliminating the need to distinguish between speakers. Ethical transparency was maintained by clearly informing participants about how recordings would be stored and used, reinforcing trust and safeguarding their contributions.

Conducting the listening rooms

An initial pilot study was conducted to identify any logistical or practical challenges in using listening rooms as a research method. Gathering feedback from the pilot study participants helped refine the structure, improve prompt design, and ensure the method remained inclusive and effective. For example, Heron (2020) used single-word prompts in the listening rooms; however, pilot study participants in this research provided feedback that they preferred open-ended questions or phrases. They expressed a desire for clarity in their discussions and raised concerns about potentially misinterpreting isolated words or overlooking key areas of conversation. In response, the final study design incorporated prompt cards with open-ended questions, striking a balance between structure and flexibility. These prompts encouraged reflection on topics such as support systems, challenges, and moments of transition. The language was designed to be accessible and inclusive, ensuring that participants could engage in meaningful discussion without feeling pressured to provide a ‘correct’ response. For example, in this study one of the prompts was: *What did you learn in your foundation year which helped you to succeed in your undergraduate studies?*

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To maximise participant agency, the prompt cards were not numbered, allowing students flexibility in determining the order of topics themselves. This approach fostered a natural flow of conversation and enabled the organic capture of lived experiences (Parkin and Heron, 2022). While Heron (2020) recommended using six prompts with a timer set for ten minutes per topic, the pilot study participants found the timer distracting and opted not to use it. Consequently, the main study did not include a timer. Instead, students were briefed that the listening room session should last approximately one hour, with the freedom to discuss topics in any order and participants could revisit themes as needed without concern for repetition. Minimising rules and restrictions was essential to preserving the authenticity and natural flow of the conversation. Additionally, one prompt card functioned as a 'wild card', offering multiple prompts or the option to introduce a topic of their own choice. This feature was designed to enhance student agency, encourage creativity, and support co-construction of research data.

While students expressed appreciation for this flexibility, in practice, it was challenging to determine whether they had introduced new topics, as the conversation flowed naturally. Once participants were comfortable and ready, they received a final briefing before the audio recording began, and the researcher exited the room to facilitate open dialogue. To protect confidentiality, only audio recordings were used rather than video, reducing any potential discomfort associated with visual recording. Additionally, students were assured that the listening room recordings would be transcribed in a way that did not attribute specific statements to individuals, ensuring anonymity. This approach not only maintained confidentiality but also reinforced the study's ethical commitment, allowing participants to contribute fully and openly, knowing their perspectives were valued and safeguarded.

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Whilst the listening room conversations the researcher remained nearby in case any questions arose, this was not needed in practice. At the end of the discussion, the recording was stopped, followed by a debriefing session where participants could reflect on their experiences and raise any concerns. All students expressed that they had enjoyed the listening room experience, highlighting their appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their educational journeys. One pair even requested to remain in the room to continue discussing their experiences, expressing that the conversation had helped them realise how much they had progressed since their time as foundation students.

Collecting and analysing data

After conducting the listening room sessions, the next step involved transcribing and cleaning the data to remove any identifiable information. The data consisted of narrative accounts capturing students' experiences in their own words, with verbatim transcription preserving the nuances of conversation. While listening rooms can be used independently to gather information, in this study they formed the first phase of data collection. The listening room transcriptions were carefully reviewed to inform the second phase: individual walking intraviews conducted with students and the researcher. These intraviews allowed for deeper exploration, enabling participants to expand on their experiences and insights while providing the researcher with opportunities to clarify and develop key points.

Careful consideration was given to the logistics of each session to ensure students felt comfortable and open when reflecting on their foundation year experiences. The walking intraviews, for instance, began in a familiar café on campus, as initial feedback from the pilot study indicated that students associated this setting with positive memories and felt at ease there. The intraviews took place around the campus where students had attended classes as foundation students, allowing them to revisit their former classrooms. This aspect of the research design proved particularly meaningful; several students chose to sit in their 'old' seats, which prompted vivid recollections of their lessons and interactions in those spaces. Establishing these sessions in familiar, comfortable environments supported students in engaging in genuine reflection and encouraged authentic recounting of their lived experiences.

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Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was employed to identify patterns and recurring themes across the dataset. Several key themes were identified, including challenges with academic writing, navigating cultural differences, and building supportive peer networks. These themes were then linked to theoretical concepts such as habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1986), alongside approaches that emphasise student agency and participation in learning.

Co-constructing knowledge

Knowledge is not simply 'discovered' but co-constructed within the relational space between researcher and participant, with each bringing their own perspectives, insights, and interpretations. In this study, the use of listening rooms and walking intraviews exemplified this co-creative process, inviting students to reflect on and interpret their own experiences in a dialogic way. By positioning students as knowledgeable agents rather than passive subjects, this approach ensured that their voices actively shaped the insights that emerged. These collaborative methods aligned with the participatory ethos of the study, as the shared exploration of students' transition journeys enabled a richer, more nuanced understanding of their lived realities which might otherwise be overlooked in traditional, non-participatory research methods.

To ensure the themes identified through the analysis accurately reflected students' lived experiences, participants were actively involved throughout the research process. They were invited to check transcripts, review the themes, and provide feedback, strengthening the validity of the findings. Engaging students in this process not only grounded interpretations in their perspectives, reducing the potential for researcher bias (Heron, 2020), but also fostered a sense of agency and respect for their preferences. This participatory approach ensured that the research authentically represented students' voices rather than becoming a detached academic exercise. Taking this a step further, participants can also be invited to contribute directly to the construction of meaning from the data through round table analysis (Parkin and Heron, 2022), reinforcing their role as active collaborators in the research process.

Findings and implications

Overall, the students expressed overwhelmingly positive reflections on their foundation year experience, frequently highlighting how it had prepared them for undergraduate study. Many stated that they would have struggled with their degree programmes without this preparatory year. The students identified key areas where they had gained valuable knowledge and skills that facilitated their transition to higher education, while also recognising gaps where additional support could have been beneficial. Furthermore, they emphasised opportunities to foster greater student agency and encourage more active involvement in personal and academic development. Their insights led to practical suggestions for enhancing the International Foundation Programme to better support future cohorts of international foundation students.

A key finding highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse prior experiences of international students. It is critical for International Foundation Programme educators and policymakers to avoid assumptions about students' existing skills and instead ensure that the programme equips them with the necessary tools for academic success (Deuchar, 2022). Skills such as academic literacy, collaboration, and cultural adaptability need to be explicitly taught, with structured opportunities for students to practise and refine these competencies. Peer-to-peer learning and mentorship from alumni (Coertjens *et al*., 2017) can further enhance this process, fostering a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where students support one another's academic development. The findings demonstrate that students derive significant benefits from the International Foundation Programme, including increased confidence, enhanced academic and social capital, and a stronger sense of belonging to their programme, university, and discipline. These outcomes highlight the International Foundation Programme's role in preparing students for the challenges of undergraduate study and facilitating their integration into the academic and social fabric of higher education.

The listening room method itself proved to be highly effective, enabling students to engage in reflective discussions, articulate their personal growth, and develop a deeper awareness of their learning journeys. For the researcher, this approach provided richer, more nuanced data than traditional interviews, as students directed the conversation in ways that surfaced insights that might otherwise have been overlooked. This not only enriched the findings but also reinforced the value of student-centred, participatory research methods.

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Benefits of using listening rooms in educational research

Listening rooms offer a powerful method for collecting data in educational research, particularly when seeking to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of students and/or staff. By providing an inclusive, reflective, and participatory approach, listening rooms deepen our understanding of individuals' experiences and help inform more responsive and effective educational practices. While this section focuses on research with students, the method is equally effective when applied to both students and staff, allowing for a rich exploration of diverse perspectives within educational settings (Parkin and Heron, 2022).

Amplifying student voices

One of the primary benefits of listening rooms is their ability to amplify student voices, particularly in educational contexts where students are often treated as passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Listening rooms empower students by providing them with a safe, non-judgmental space to share their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. This approach allows students to articulate their challenges, needs, and aspirations, fostering a deeper understanding of how power dynamics, habitus, and capital shape educational experiences (Bourdieu, 1993).

The participatory nature of listening rooms challenges traditional top-down research models. Rather than imposing predetermined frameworks, listening rooms create space for students to co-construct knowledge and contribute to the direction of the research. This shift from a passive to an active role in the research process enhances students' sense of agency and autonomy, enabling them to shape their learning environments in a meaningful way. To illustrate the collaborative nature of the listening room method, Figure 1 presents an excerpt from a listening room conversation between Adamma and Maya. This example demonstrates how meaning is co-constructed through dialogic interaction, as participants build on each other's reflections rather than following a traditional question-and-answer format. While the interaction is loosely structured around a prompt card, the conversation quickly evolves into a fluid, mutual exchange rather than a rigid interviewer–respondent format. Both participants actively contribute and build on each other's reflections, collaboratively shaping the narrative. For example, Maya's initial comment about tutor support invites a response from Adamma, who validates and extends this idea by highlighting the shared experience of navigating a new environment. Rather than simply answering a question, each speaker reflects on the other's contribution, affirming shared experiences and elaborating on key themes such as belonging, cultural diversity, and social connection. Their laughter and mutual affirmation further illustrate the comfort and trust fostered in this peer-led space, hallmarks of the listening-room approach. The dynamic and layered nature of this exchange exemplifies how meaning is co-produced in a way that centres participant voice, supports collaborative sense-making, and deepens insight into the international foundation experience (Parkin and Heron, 2023).

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Adamma - So what were the best things about your International Foundation Programme (IFP) year? (this was one of the prompt cards)
Maya - *I really enjoyed the fact that, we had a lot of support from tutors. We definitely had a lot of opportunities to talk to someone if we needed some of help …*
Adamma - *And for me, I'd say the same thing as well, just knowing that you weren't alone and everyone else on the IFP was going through a similar thing - this was their first time in a new country doing the IFP. So we're all in it together …*
Maya - And yeah, another thing was meeting people and experiencing different cultures. That was very exciting for me.
Adamma - *Yeah. That was something I'm really glad I got to do on the IFP course. Undergrad is quite different. You don't get to meet as many diverse people from many more countries. It was nice all international students being a one.*
Maya - *Yeah. A little IFP bubble!* [they both laugh]

Figure 1: An excerpt from the listening room conversation

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Promoting reflective practice

Listening rooms also promote reflective practice, encouraging students to engage in open dialogue about their academic journeys, personal growth, and challenges. Reflective practice is a key component of deeper learning, fostering critical self-awareness and a better understanding of one's experiences (Schön, 1983). Through reflective conversations, students gain the opportunity to identify areas of improvement, acknowledge their strengths, and recognise the progress they have made in their academic lives. In addition to benefiting students' personal growth, reflective dialogue offers valuable feedback for educators, providing insights into how students perceive their educational experiences and highlighting areas for potential improvement in teaching and support strategies.

Facilitating inclusivity and diversity

Listening rooms offer an inclusive platform for diverse voices, ensuring that all participants, regardless of their background or identity, have the opportunity to contribute. This approach enables participants to share their experiences in ways that feel authentic to them, rather than conforming to rigid research frameworks. The use of listening rooms supports the principles of inclusive pedagogy, which seeks to recognise and validate diverse student experiences and promote a sense of belonging. By providing students with a space to articulate their experiences, reflect on their academic and personal growth, and navigate their evolving sense of self, listening rooms foster a more holistic understanding of students' experiences. By fostering inclusivity, listening rooms create spaces where students can share their individual experiences while also appreciating the collective diversity of their peers. This not only strengthens students' sense of connection to their learning environments but also helps educators gain a more detailed understanding of how students engage with their academic journeys. In turn, this ensures that students' voices remain central in shaping educational practices that genuinely support their development.

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Enhancing data richness and depth

Listening rooms generate rich, qualitative data that provides a more nuanced understanding of student experiences compared to traditional surveys or questionnaires. Unlike structured methods that limit responses to predefined options, listening rooms allow for open-ended, narrative accounts that capture the emotional and psychological aspects of students' educational lives (Parkin and Heron, 2022). This qualitative data adds depth to quantitative findings, offering a fuller picture of the student experience. For instance, listening room conversations can reveal the challenges students face beyond academic expectations, such as the social and emotional aspects of adjusting to new educational environments.

Strengthening researcher-participant relationships

Listening rooms foster a collaborative, relational approach to research, positioning the researcher as a facilitator of dialogue. By remaining absent from the discussions, the researcher creates space for participants to engage in open, peer-led conversations, reducing the influence of researcher presence and allowing for more authentic, self-directed dialogue. This absence signals trust in the participants' ability to shape the discussion, reinforcing their agency in the research process. This approach helps build trust and rapport, making it more likely that participants will share their authentic thoughts and experiences. According to Heron (2020), building trust is essential for creating a safe environment where participants feel comfortable expressing themselves. Additionally, by inviting participants to review and amend transcripts, as well as contribute to data analysis, the research process becomes more participatory. Students are given the opportunity to clarify meanings, ensure accuracy, and influence the interpretation of their narratives, shifting power away from traditional researcherled analysis and towards a more co-constructed understanding of their experiences. This collaborative relationship is crucial for gathering meaningful data, as it ensures that participants' voices are heard in an environment of mutual respect. Clear communication and transparency throughout the process help participants feel more at ease, fostering richer and more valuable insights. By centring participants in the research process, listening rooms not only amplify student voices but also challenge hierarchical research dynamics, positioning students as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects of study.

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Supporting educational change and improvement

The insights gained through listening rooms can drive positive change within educational institutions. By collecting in-depth feedback from students, researchers can identify gaps in support services, teaching practices, and institutional policies that may be affecting student success. Listening rooms provide a safe space for students to voice their concerns, helping to inform institutional decision-making and contribute to more inclusive, responsive learning environments.

The participatory nature of listening rooms ensures that students are not passive recipients of educational changes but active contributors to the process. This aligns with the growing emphasis on student-centred pedagogy, which values students as co-creators of knowledge and active participants in their learning (Freire, 1970). Listening rooms, therefore, offer a means of engaging students in the ongoing development of educational practices, ensuring that changes are grounded in the lived experiences of those they aim to support.

Challenges and limitations of listening rooms

While listening rooms offer numerous benefits in educational research, they are not without challenges and limitations. Understanding these potential issues is crucial for researchers aiming to implement this method effectively. Below are some of the key challenges when using listening rooms in educational research.

Cultural sensitivity and communication barriers

Ensuring cultural sensitivity and addressing potential communication barriers may pose a challenge. Participants may come from diverse cultural backgrounds with varying communication norms, expressions, and expectations (Liu et al., 2021). What might be an acceptable form of expression in one culture could be perceived differently in another. This can lead to discomfort in expressing emotions, particularly for those from cultures where public image is highly valued (Heron, 2020). Language barriers may also hinder effective communication, making it difficult for participants to articulate their experiences fully, or for researchers to interpret responses accurately.

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Researchers must create an environment where participants feel comfortable expressing themselves while managing the risks of miscommunication, especially in multilingual contexts. However, in practice, the challenge of communication barriers should be mitigated by the fact that participants in listening rooms are friends who share a common experience. Familiarity with one another allows for more natural, fluid discussions, as participants feel less pressure to explain background details and can use shared references and informal language. Friends also help support and encourage one another, building on each other's experiences and fostering a collaborative conversational dynamic. This peer-led interaction not only enhances the depth of the discussion but also helps participants feel more at ease, leading to richer and more authentic insights.

Within the pilot study, two friends reflected that they would have normally conversed in their shared language, which was not English. Given the additional complexity and time commitment that transcription and participant-checking in another language would require, it was decided that discussions would be conducted in English. However, during the research, this did not emerge as an issue, as the shared nature of their experiences created a common ground that transcended linguistic and cultural differences, allowing students to engage meaningfully in discussions.

Ethical considerations and confidentiality

Ethical concerns are paramount in using listening rooms, particularly regarding confidentiality and privacy when discussing sensitive or personal topics. Researchers must clearly explain how data will be anonymised and how participants' identities will be protected. Despite these assurances, participants may still feel apprehensive about sharing personal experiences due to concerns about potential repercussions or breaches of confidentiality (Freire, 1970). The open and dialogic nature of listening rooms may also lead to emotionally charged disclosures that require sensitive handling. Researchers must be prepared to manage such situations with care, ensuring that participants receive appropriate support and are directed to relevant resources, particularly if discussions touch on sensitive topics such as discrimination or isolation.

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In this study, some references to specific students and teachers needed to be redacted from the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. However, this did not alter the meaning of the conversations and instead indicated that students were speaking freely, without the pressure of providing 'correct' responses. The presence of the researcher nearby during listening rooms provided a form of mitigation, offering students the opportunity to seek assistance if needed. Additionally, the debriefing session at the end of each listening room served as a space for participants to reflect on the experience and for the researcher to address any concerns. In practice, students reported that they quickly forgot they were being recorded. Many expressed that they enjoyed reminiscing about their shared experiences and found the process valuable, as it helped them recognise their personal growth and development since arriving as foundation students in the UK.

Logistical and practical constraints

The practical implementation of listening rooms can also present challenges. Organising and facilitating these sessions requires careful planning, particularly when dealing with multiple participants and conflicting schedules. Finding a suitable time for everyone can be difficult, especially if participants have busy or unpredictable timetables. The physical environment in which the sessions take place also needs to be conducive to open dialogue, comfortable, free from distractions, and ideally set up to facilitate group discussions. Listening rooms are inherently time-consuming for both researchers and participants. Sufficient time must be allocated to ensure that sessions are conducted in a relaxed manner, allowing for thorough briefings and debriefings. Researchers need to account for the time required to facilitate discussions, transcribe and analyse data, and provide follow-up support where necessary. This can be particularly challenging for those working within limited resources or tight timeframes, and the time commitment may also pose a barrier for participants. However, despite these challenges, the insights gained from listening rooms make them a valuable tool in educational research, particularly for exploring nuanced student experiences within the educational system.

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A common concern for researchers using listening rooms is the possibility that participants may discuss topics beyond the intended focus of the study. Unlike structured interviews, where the researcher can steer the conversation, listening rooms rely on participants to guide the discussion organically. This requires a shift in the researcher's role, from controlling the dialogue to trusting participants to remain engaged with the research themes. While there is a risk of deviation, this autonomy is also a strength of the method, as it allows for the emergence of unexpected but valuable insights. Establishing a foundation of mutual trust is essential; participants must feel confident that their contributions are valued, while the researcher must trust that participants will explore relevant issues in a meaningful way. This trust-based relationship fosters a more authentic and participant-led research process, ultimately enriching the depth and quality of the data collected.

Data analysis and interpretation

The data analysis process in listening rooms can be complex due to the richness and depth of the qualitative data collected. These discussions generate a wealth of personal stories, reflections, and emotional expressions that require careful, context sensitive analysis (Parkin and Heron, 2022). Given the subjective nature of this data, researchers must remain mindful of their own biases during analysis. The open-ended nature of listening-room dialogues also makes it challenging to structure the analysis process. Unlike structured interviews or surveys, the fluid and dynamic nature of listening room data necessitates a flexible, reflexive approach. Researchers must consider not only individual responses but also the interplay between participants and the subtleties within their interactions (Schön, 1983). While this flexibility is a strength of the listening room method, it can also lead to data overload. Participants often share a wide range of thoughts, emotions, and reflections, making the analysis process complex and potentially overwhelming. Researchers must employ systematic strategies to manage this complexity, ensuring that the depth and richness of participants' experiences are retained without becoming unmanageable.

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Conclusion and recommendations

This study highlights the value of listening rooms as a participatory research method that centres students' voices, fostering deeper insights into their experiences and transitions within higher education. By creating a collaborative and reflective space, listening rooms enable students to share their perspectives in an environment of trust, agency, and mutual understanding. The findings demonstrate that international foundation students highly value the sense of community, academic support, and structured guidance provided during their foundation year. Moreover, the process of engaging students in reviewing transcripts and contributing to data analysis enhances the credibility of the findings and reinforces the participatory ethos of the research.

Despite these benefits, listening rooms also present challenges. The method is time intensive, requiring careful planning to ensure sessions are conducted in a relaxed and ethical manner. Managing confidentiality, addressing cultural sensitivities, and navigating communication barriers necessitate thoughtful mitigation strategies. However, the presence of friends in listening rooms can facilitate communication, as shared experiences create a sense of familiarity, encourage participation, and foster natural dialogue. The open-ended nature of the discussions, while generating rich data, also complicates analysis. Researchers must adopt reflexive, systematic approaches to avoid being overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of qualitative data.

To maximise the effectiveness of listening rooms in educational research, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Embed ethical safeguards – Ensure that participants fully understand confidentiality measures and provide opportunities for them to review and amend transcripts to maintain accuracy and agency over their contributions.

2. Leverage peer dynamics – Facilitating discussions among friends or peers who share experiences is a vital component of listening rooms, as it strengthens communication, fosters mutual support, and deepens the quality of conversations.

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3. Adopt a reflexive approach to analysis – Develop systematic yet flexible strategies to manage the complexity of qualitative data, considering both individual responses and the interactions between participants.

4. Allocate sufficient time and resources – Recognise the time-intensive nature of listening rooms and plan accordingly to allow for thorough facilitation, transcription, analysis, and participant debriefing.

5. Foster mutual trust - Researchers should foster mutual trust, ensuring participants feel valued and empowered to guide discussions, leading to richer and more authentic data.

6. Expand the application of listening rooms – Given their value in capturing nuanced student experiences, listening rooms should be considered beyond foundation programmes, extending to other educational settings, including staff development and student support initiatives.

By implementing these recommendations, listening rooms can serve as an inclusive and powerful research tool, amplifying students and staff voices and informing more responsive educational practices.

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Appendix IX: Copy of published article: Tranter, A. (2025b) The need to include career guidance and employability skills within International Foundation Programmes

The solution lies in early intervention in students' careers, i.e. at foundation levels, so that they develop a mindset which self-motivates them to sustain career-training during their studies. Students can then exploit the luxury of time to study, socialise, develop and build knowledge and experience which will support them in future career choices. In the case of foundation students, these activities could be fun and engaging such as aptitude training, educational outings to companies, and awareness-raising about the world of work.

A distinction should perhaps be drawn between pre-job research skills, and the hard and soft knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. The former would include job market analytical skills, interview practice and building a CV which evidences commercial and voluntary experience. How should the development of this type of expertise sit with respect to the curriculum? It is possible that many activities could (and should) fall outside formal study time. Alternatively, could more careers training be explicitly embedded as an assessed curricula component? Could some hybrid arrangement be formulated which requires the collaboration of both academic and professional services departments?

Some may argue against my seemingly commercialised approach. But careers training is, in my view, a constituent part of progressive education. Academic and professional knowledge and skills are complementary and deeply entwined to provide life and workplace success. Including a sustained element of careers training over time as a compulsory but flexible part of students' lives, would promote a mindset conducive to full engagement where it would support their development into adults, primed and equipped to enter the world of work.

It is clear that a close alliance between professional services, academic departments, students' unions, IT and other departments will be key to the successful rollout of meaningful and longitudinal careers training. Lecturers may require the support of professional services in understanding current requirements in the workplace so as to integrate them into curriculums. Professional services need to perhaps better understand academic requirements, constraints and objectives. Some institutions provide centralised schemes to allow students to accrue points towards 'employability' awards. My experience of such schemes is that, unfortunately, student uptake is low. While survey results made some recommendations to promote engagement, the key to combating this issue is to develop a change in the mind-set of students over time so that they are motivated to engage in sustained and structured career preparation.

If we do not intervene early we will not be supporting our students to make their best preparation for a successful life and career. In a political and economic post-Brexit climate where there will be greater reliance on international student fee income, and where students have so much to gain in terms of personal development, exposure to the workplace and guidance in career planning, it is more than ever incumbent on educators to play a leading role.

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The need to include career guidance and employability skills within international foundation programmes

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International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) are pivotal in fostering international students' academic and career success by enhancing their engagement with transition processes. This study investigates IFP alumni perceptions, uncovering a lack of career guidance and employability support as barriers to effective engagement. Alumni reported feeling less prepared than their home peers, highlighting the need for tailored, culturally competent career resources. Recommendations include embedding further career development into IFP curricula, promoting mentorship and peer networks, and facilitating early engagement with employability initiatives. By addressing these gaps where applicable, IFPs can empower students to actively participate in their educational journeys and prepare for professional success.

Introduction

Whilst employability is often the main incentive for international students studying abroad (Soares & Mosquera, 2020), employability skill policies in the UK remain focused on home students (Fakunle, 2021). The exclusion of international students hinders their development of academic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1988), reinforcing their status as "others" within higher education. This contributes to students experiencing a sense of not belonging and risks disengagement from academic and social communities (Thomas, 2012).

In the UK, high-quality careers guidance is deemed essential for supporting students to reach their full potential: with statutory guidance implemented in 2023 to ensure that all home students receive comprehensive careers advice before entering higher education (Department for Education, 2023). However, international students enter higher education from diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of guidance and support shaped by the educational systems and resources available in their home countries.

Once students enter higher education, they all have access to careers advice and opportunities to develop employment skills. However, international students often face unique barriers in engaging with these resources, which can include cultural and linguistic differences, unfamiliarity with UK employment practices, and navigating visa restrictions. Yet, despite their willingness, international students frequently encounter challenges in accessing opportunities for paid and unpaid work experience. These challenges are largely unexperienced by their home student peers, who benefit from enhanced cultural capital and a deeper understanding of career expectations in a UK context.

Research

A recent in-depth study was conducted, utilising listening rooms (Parkin and Heron, 2023) and walking intraviews to collect rich, detailed qualitative data on their experiences. It involved six IFP alumni, who had completed their foundation year in 2022/3 or 2021/22, and were purposefully selected to reflect diversity in terms of their home countries, ages, and progression degree programmes, offering a

range of perspectives. While the small sample size limits generalisability, the diversity of the participants provides valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of international foundation students.

The research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of their foundation year, focusing on what they valued most and what had had the most impact on them. This was intended to inform programme improvements and support smoother transitions for future foundation students into undergraduate studies. Although the alumni were not specifically asked about career or employability skills, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) revealed that all participants highlighted this as a missing aspect of their foundation year. They perceived that the limited availability of integrated employability knowledge and skills had negatively impacted them, leaving them feeling less prepared and inferior to their home peers. This finding highlights the importance of fostering greater engagement with career-related skills to enhance international students' confidence and readiness for the demands of higher education.

Generic careers guidance

When reflecting on what was missing from their foundation year, some alumni expressed that they felt unprepared for undergraduate studies and the world of work:

"I would have liked the opportunity to focus on careers, (…) just more information available and what career paths that we'll go into…"

Alumni perceived pressure to have a career plan once they began their undergraduate programme and wanted more time during their foundation year to consider their career options. In a discussion about what would make an ideal foundation year, students suggested more information on career paths, internships, and other career-related opportunities. They wanted not just career advice but also guidance on employability skills, such as understanding the role of internships and how to explore these opportunities.

The alumni considered this lack of knowledge hindered their ability to compete with their home peers, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and less likely to engage with career opportunities or apply for positions. The IFP could play a pivotal role in addressing this by providing students with the tools and guidance needed to explore potential career options, thereby supporting them in realigning their capital portfolio (Lin, 2014). This approach could help to increase their confidence to make informed decisions, actively engage with career planning, and better navigate both their career paths and the job market.

Specific careers guidance and skills development

Alumni also expressed a desire for more specific career guidance and skill development during their foundation year, such as how to write a CV and covering letter, and how to develop a LinkedIn profile. They stated there was a significant focus on careers once they were an undergraduate and perceived home students were notably more prepared, engaged and at an advantage, compared to international foundation students. One student recounted during their undergraduate welcome week:

"I didn't have a CV (…) and so many things are happening, (…) you're applying for memberships to societies and certain positions like freshers' reps, and they're asking you for your CV and this is the second week!"

This alumna had wanted to apply for a position in a society but did not have a CV. They felt unable to apply for any roles, hence missed out on opportunities to engage and gain valuable skills and experience. Another alumna discussed the pressure and competitiveness they felt when trying to secure an internship, early in their undergraduate journey:

"You have to start thinking what kind of career you're looking into and because if you don't, you'll start seeing your friends getting offers into big firms and you're like: Where are my offers? Where am I going?"

These reflections highlight the need for early access to career development resources that enhance students' academic and cultural capital, such as CV writing, interview practice, awareness of internships and networking opportunities. These resources are crucial for enabling international students to understand industry expectations and develop and align their skills with market demands, and actively engage with career development opportunities. By fostering this engagement, students are better equipped to build the confidence and knowledge necessary to navigate potential career paths and integrate more effectively into professional networks.

Comparison with home peers

A recurrent theme from all of the alumni was the perception that they were at a disadvantage compared with their home peers, citing a lack of preparedness and limited access to relevant resources. They reported feeling stressed by the competitive nature of undergraduate studies. These findings highlight the need for foundation programmes to better equip students with the skills and knowledge required to compete on an equal footing with home students, whilst fostering a more inclusive environment that values diverse forms of capital. For IFP students, the independent and autonomous approach often expected in UK higher education may act as a barrier to accessing career support services. This highlights the importance of integrating career-related resources into foundation programmes in a scaffolded and culturally competent way, acknowledging that students are not a homogenous group and require tailored approaches. By addressing these gaps, IFPs can help students build the confidence and self-efficacy needed to navigate the unfamiliar challenges of their future studies and careers.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings highlight the importance of IFPs providing comprehensive support and resources to help students navigate the transition from foundation to undergraduate studies. By enhancing their confidence and reducing the perceived challenges of adapting to new academic and social expectations, IFPs can foster more inclusive and engaging environments. The following integrated and practical steps are recommended to achieve this, leveraging existing services and promoting collaboration within higher education institutions to ensure students can actively engage with opportunities beyond the programme.

Career development and support can be delivered through various mechanisms, such as embedding employability-focused content into core or skills-based modules, offering standalone workshops facilitated by careers teams, and signposting students to university services. Building partnerships between and with career consultants, international advisors, and external organisations can provide tailored support for IFP students. Additionally, involving alumni as mentors for current IFP students offers a valuable peer-to-peer support model. Alumni can share their experiences, enhancing career preparedness for current students while further developing their own skills. Similarly, engaging home undergraduate students as mentors can foster meaningful connections, enhance social integration, and positively influence students' academic performance (Arthur, 2017) and sense of belonging (Hughes and Smail, 2014).

With the above in mind, IFPs should work to ensure they:

1. **Integrate Career Development into the Programme**
   Career and employability skills should be embedded into the curriculum through workshops, alumni panels, and guest speakers to prepare students for the job market.
2. **Enhance Access to Career Resources and Support**
   Dedicated pathway career advisors and tailored workshops addressing visa regulations and employability strategies can help students navigate career paths effectively.
3. **Facilitate Early Career Exploration**
   Early exposure to career fairs, reflective goal-setting, and partnerships with local organisations can provide students with real-world insights and experience.
4. **Provide Mentorship and Peer Support**
   Mentorship programmes connecting IFP students with alumni or home undergraduates can foster collaboration, career insights, and social integration.
5. **Foster a Supportive and Inclusive Environment**
   Empowering students through feedback mechanisms, student-led initiatives, and inclusive practices enhances belonging and career preparedness.
6. **Address Inequities and Barriers**
   Tailored guidance on visa regulations and equitable access to career resources ensures all students are equipped for success.

By adopting these strategies, IFPs can create a supportive and equitable environment where international students thrive academically and professionally, preparing them for global careers while fostering inclusion and equality throughout their educational journey.

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