



**Examining the experiences and decision-making processes of  
underrepresented students at a post-1992 university.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Higher education in the UK remains unequal in terms of access and outcomes (attainment and graduate employment) for underrepresented students. This PhD study created a student decision-making model to represent the journeys to and through university. The model encompasses students' holistic decision making, based upon their previous experiences and interpretation of higher education. This was based upon life-story interviews with current students alongside semi-structured interviews with internal and external staff members in various roles associated with widening participation. A Bourdieusian theoretical framework was implemented, which established that students faced an imbalance of power within the Institution and wider society. Structural barriers and institutionalised traditional policies and views were held about underrepresented students that impact upon student's ability to navigate habitus and to enact their own sense of independence. The student decision-making model also incorporated Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) work on young person's career decision-making and careership. Learning from the data gathered, the study concluded that underrepresented students are disadvantaged and disempowered at university due to the structures in place that restricts choice, autonomy and opportunities. Recommendations are provided to adapt policy and include the development of an evaluation framework to ensure access strategies ameliorate outcomes for all students within higher education.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
List of Tables.....	8
List of Figures .....	8
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1 Background .....	9
1.1.1 Widening participation to Higher Education in the UK.....	9
1.1.2 Who are underrepresented in HE?.....	12
1.1.3 Original contribution.....	13
1.2 The research.....	15
1.2.1 Research questions.....	15
1.2.2 Research approach .....	15
1.2.3 The researcher.....	16
1.3 Context – A Post-1992 university .....	18
1.3.1 About the setting.....	18
1.3.2 Policies and procedures: an overview .....	18
1.3.3 Underrepresented students and Post-1992 universities .....	21
1.4 Outline of thesis .....	22
2. The historical and policy context of widening participation to higher education .....	24
2.1 The historical background to ensuring fair access to higher education. ....	24
2.2 Current policy contexts.....	33
2.3 Implications of widening participation policy .....	39
2.4 Theoretical analysis of widening participation policy.....	42
2.5 Summary.....	46
3. Examining theoretical approaches to disadvantage and inequality .....	48
3.1 Introduction.....	48
3.2 Power and resulting disadvantage.....	49
3.3 Navigating fields and habitus.....	50
3.4 Reproduction of inequality.....	54
3.4.1 Economic capital .....	54
3.4.2 Social capital.....	55
3.4.3 Cultural capital.....	56
3.5 ‘Playing the game’ .....	59

3.6 Career decision-making .....	61
3.7 The student decision-making model .....	64
3.8 Summary.....	67
4. Widening participation: barriers to success and evaluating impact.....	70
4.1 Introduction.....	70
4.2 Establishing target groups and defining disadvantage in HE .....	70
4.3 Class .....	75
4.4 Disabled students .....	81
4.5 Mature students.....	85
4.6 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Students.....	89
4.7 Care leavers.....	93
4.8 Evaluating widening participation impact.....	96
4.9 Summary.....	99
5. The research journey.....	102
5.1 Introduction.....	102
5.2 The construction of knowledge .....	106
5.3 Navigating the research process .....	112
5.3.1 Pilot study .....	113
5.3.2 Systematic literature search.....	114
5.3.3 A turning point within the research (A personal reflection) .....	117
5.3.4 The research questions.....	119
5.4 A qualitative study.....	120
5.4.1 Semi-structured interviews.....	120
5.4.2 Life-story interviews .....	121
5.5 Sampling .....	122
5.5.1 The research participants .....	123
5.6 Data analysis process .....	125
5.7 Reflections on the research process .....	127
5.8 Trustworthiness and authenticity.....	129
5.9 Ethical considerations .....	131
5.10 Summary.....	133
6. Beliefs and values, autonomy and choice.....	136
6.1 Introduction.....	136
6.2 How beliefs and values influence the university decision .....	137
6.3 How individuals assert autonomy.....	143
6.5 Summary.....	152

7. Horizons for Action and the imbalance of power .....	154
7.1 Introduction.....	154
7.2 Horizons for Action .....	154
7.2.1 Commuting students.....	155
7.2.2 Reluctant commuting students.....	158
7.2.3 Relocated students.....	160
7.4 Summary.....	161
8. Transitions and turning points .....	163
8.1 Introduction.....	163
8.2 Turning points.....	164
8.2.1 Reactions to disappointing academic results.....	165
8.2.2 Dissatisfaction with the job market .....	167
8.2.3 Making change for selves and families .....	170
8.3 Transitions.....	175
8.3.1 Surviving .....	175
8.3.2 Thriving.....	178
8.3.3 Learning to play the game.....	178
8.4 Playing the university game.....	181
8.5 Summary.....	183
9. The Institutional impact upon decision-making .....	186
9.1 Introduction.....	186
9.2 Beliefs and values .....	187
9.3 Institutional habitus.....	194
9.4 Horizons for Action .....	197
9.5 Environment.....	200
9.6 Influence of policy and society.....	202
9.7 Transitions and turning points .....	203
9.8 Summary.....	206
10. Concluding remarks.....	209
10.1 Research overview .....	209
10.2 Research conclusions.....	210
10.2.1 The imbalance of power .....	211
10.2.2 The development of a student career-decision making model .....	212
10.2.3 Coping mechanisms of underrepresented students.....	213
10.2.4 The social impact measurement of access activity .....	214
10.3 Original contribution to knowledge .....	218

10.4 Policy recommendations.....	220
10.5 Research limitations and areas for further research.....	222
10.6 Summary.....	225
References.....	228
Appendix 1 – Who’s studying in HE? (HESA, 2018).....	259
Appendix 2 - Staff workshop discussion points.....	261
Appendix 3 – Pilot study participant demographic detail.....	262
Appendix 4 – Alumni interview schedule.....	266
Appendix 5 – Executive summary .....	268
Appendix 6 – Student consent form .....	272
Appendix 7 – Staff consent form.....	276
Appendix 8 – Life-story interview schedule .....	280
Appendix 9 – Example staff interview schedule.....	281
Appendix 10 – Recruitment poster.....	282
Appendix 11 – Example external staff interview schedule.....	283
Appendix 12 – Codebook.....	284
Appendix 13 – Example coding frequencies.....	286

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 - Attainment of good degrees by group (OfS, 2019a) .....	10
Table 2.1 - Fees and regulation by UK countries .....	38
Table 4.1 - Independent and state school comparison .....	77
Table 4.2 - Evaluating widening participation activities by stage .....	98
Table 5.1 - Methodology in widening participation research .....	115
Table 5.2 - The student participants .....	124
Table 5.3 - Internal staff participants .....	124
Table 5.4 - External staff participants .....	125
Table 10.1 - Evaluating the social impact of student success in HEIS .....	216
Table 10.2 - Policy recommendations .....	220

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 - Young people's decision-making process .....	61
Figure 3.2 - Student decision-making model .....	65
Figure 3.3 - Theoretical model .....	69
Figure 4.1 - Planning stages of evaluating participation .....	97
Figure 5.1 - A visual representation of the research journey .....	105
Figure 9.1 - The Institutional sub-section .....	186
Figure 10.1 - The student decision-making model .....	213



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 Widening participation to Higher Education in the UK

Widening participation has long been a political focus of government in the UK, beginning with the Robbins Report (1963) and followed by the Dearing Report (1997), whereby Higher Education (HE) was to be extended from its original purpose; to serve the needs of the upper classes (Neal, 1998) (see Chapter 2.1). Although widening participation policy has achieved a vast increase in the numbers of and demographic breadth of students, inequality still prevails. In five academic years (2013-2018) there have been few increases in the numbers of underrepresented students, such as mature students, disabled students, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, those from lower socio-economic groups or from low participation neighbourhoods (see Appendix 1). In the academic year 2017/18, 51% of HE entrants were from the top two professional occupation tiers, 76% were white, 41% were young entrants, 90% had no known disability and 80% were from higher participation neighbourhoods (HESA, 2018). These figures highlight how HE students are still largely made up of those with traditional <sup>1</sup> characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Universities were created with middle and upper class students in mind, see Chapter 2.1 for further discussion.

Not only are underrepresented students less likely to attend HE, they are also less likely to attain a 'good' (first or upper second class) degree, with attainment gaps of up to 21.8% (difference between white and black student attainment), see Table 1.1 below:

**Table 1.1 - Attainment of good degrees by group (OfS, 2019a)**

<b>2016-17</b>	<b>Percentage gaining 'good' degrees</b>
<b>Age</b>	
Young (under 21)	79%
Mature (over 21)	67%
<b>Disability</b>	
No disability reported	79.7%
In receipt of Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)	76.8%
Disabled but not in receipt of DSA	76.8%
<b>POLAR</b>	
Quintile 1	73%
Quintile 2	76%
Quintile 3	78%
Quintile 4	79%
Quintile 5	83%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
White	82.2%
Black	60.4%
Asian	71.7%
Mixed	82.2%

The rapid increase in and change to student populations has created challenges for universities; their original target population has widened and creating access and success for all means a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is no longer appropriate (Burke, 2012). The disparities in attainment are as demonstrated in Table 1.1.

Research and evaluation into widening participation initiatives have been inconsistent and unreliable; based upon crude data without theorisation of what constitutes success (Hayton and Stevenson, 2018). Current policy is described as improving Access and Participation, due to the change of ownership from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018. This has created a period of change in the midst of

this research, with the replacement of Access Agreements<sup>2</sup> with Access and Participation Plans. The overall aim of Access and Participation plans is to focus upon change and increased consideration for student success throughout the student lifecycle (OfS, 2018b). Whilst responsibility remains with individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to create change and success, a Government initiative, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) has been established to meet the target to increase young participation to HE, in particular for those from low participation neighbourhoods (OfS, 2017). Through NCOP universities work collaboratively with other institutions in targeted interventions, for young people in years 9 – 13 living in wards that have a low HE participation rate, but have a higher rate of young people achieving 5 A\*-C GCSEs (see Chapter 4.2).

Despite ultimate responsibility for fairness in access and participation lying with individual HEIs, there remains disparity in institutional approaches to widening participation. Due to the vast expansion of HE and the high financial outlay to students in tuition fees, a massification and marketisation of HE has been created. Within this, there are two types of university; the long-established and research-intensive Pre-1992 universities and the newer, teaching-focused Post-1992 universities. The two types have different widening participation approaches. Pre-1992 universities focus their outreach on the 'brightest' young people from underrepresented backgrounds and Post-1992 use outreach to increase their student numbers, but then need to focus upon retention and attainment (McCaig, 2015). The process undertaken by Pre-1992 universities in their selective outreach results in further inequality, as those individuals who have been unable to demonstrate their academic ability are overlooked (Rainford, 2017). Likewise, for Post-

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<sup>2</sup> Access Agreements outlined the HEIs commitment to widening participation in terms of activities provided and monetary outlay (OFFA, 2016).

1992 universities who achieve recruitment targets of underrepresented students, they have fewer financial resources from research, therefore limiting the experience for students (Boliver, 2015). Ingram and Waller (2015) argue that universities cannot be socially just and fully accessible, whilst both high fees are paid by students and a competitive HE market exists, as those who are underrepresented are at a disadvantage in terms of power and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This thesis will use a Bourdieusian framework to analyse data to understand the disadvantage experienced by underrepresented students (see Chapter 3 for a full discussion of the theoretical frameworks).

### 1.1.2 Who are underrepresented in HE?

Within this thesis, ‘underrepresented students’ is the preferred term to describe the target group as a whole. As argued by Hattam and Smyth (2014), the term ‘disadvantaged’ can be problematic, as with it emerges negative connotations about the experiences of poverty. Underrepresented students are currently considered as those from low participation neighbourhoods, such as the ones targeted by NCOP, those from low income or low socio-economic households, BAME students, mature students, disabled students and care-leavers (OfS, 2018a).

Low participation neighbourhoods are assessed using the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR4) method that analyses the number of young people who attend university by postcodes. Those who live in the lowest participation areas (Quintiles 1 and 2) are targeted by widening participation work (OfS, 2019b). This includes students who have a low household income or are from non-professional backgrounds (see Chapters 2.1 and 4.3 for further details).

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students are referred to by this acronym as it is commonly expressed in policy and research. However, this term can be problematic, as

it can label as 'other' or different (Okolosie, 2015). The term BAME has limitations, as it assumes homogeneity, it ignores individual identities and it excludes white minority groups (Equality Challenge Unit, 2019). However, using an intersectional approach, it is important to note how the experiences of BAME students can greatly vary in education and how BAME students can face further structural barriers in a society that privileges whiteness (Bhopal, 2018).

Disabled students are individuals who experience a physical or mental impairment (HM Government, 2010) and are often referred to in university data as students who receive Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), those who have a declared disability and/or no known disability. It is reported in this way as some students choose not to declare any disability to their universities, sometimes due to the stigma attached to having an impairment (Riddell and Weedon, 2014). Mature students are another substantial group in HE, as it includes all who are over the age of 21 years. As shown in Appendix 1, in 2017/18, mature students constitute 59% of new entrants to HE. Although there are high numbers of mature students accessing HE, their experiences are not equal to young entrants when on courses (see Chapter 4.5). Care-leavers are individuals who have been looked after for a minimum of 13 weeks between the ages of 14-16 years (Department for Education, 2015). In comparison to the benchmark figure of 42% of young people entering HE, 12% of care-leavers go on to university courses (Harrison, 2017). Many factors contribute to the lower participation rate for care-leavers, including lower entry qualifications as they do not meet university requirements (see Chapter 4.7 for further details).

### 1.1.3 Original contribution

This PhD thesis adopts a theoretical framework (see Chapter Three), to analyse the reproduction of inequality at university. Using a Bourdieusian lens, the previous experiences, habitus and forms of capital of underrepresented students are analysed to

understand how the barriers to HE and success are created before enrolment and enforced again once students enter university (Bourdieu, 1977; 1992, 1986 and Bourdieu and Passerson, 1997). Concepts of power and the resulting disempowerment of underrepresented students are also considered, as universities continue to benefit the ruling class (Bourdieu, 1992) and limit the social action available to students by restricting their choices and opportunities (Weber, 1978). To apply the theoretical framework to individual's experiences, the research was related to Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model and adapted to incorporate theories of inequality and power, resulting in the creation of a student career-decision making model (see Chapter 3.7). The student decision-making model is greatly advanced from Hodkinson's original model and this is incorporated within an evaluation framework to allow HEIs to identify the experiences of their students and explore how universities can be innovative and adapt to be truly inclusive for all students, rather than expecting underrepresented students to assimilate and 'play the game' of the traditional, middle-class students HE was originally designed for.

## **1.2 The research**

### **1.2.1 Research questions**

Considering the background to widening participation overall and the subsequent literature review, the overall aim of the research was to assess how the University supports success for underrepresented students and the experiences of underrepresented students themselves. The research questions developed are as follows:

1. How do underrepresented students experience barriers and opportunities at the University?
2. How do staff believe they support underrepresented students?
3. In which ways do students habitus change through their experiences at the University?
4. How do students make decisions and actions in relation to their experiences at the University?

### **1.2.2 Research approach**

The research was conducted at one Post-1992 university, referred to from now on as the University. The University is situated in the East Midlands of England. The University has a wide demographic of students and has made good progress in attracting underrepresented students. However, as is seen in similar institutions, an attainment gap is prevalent, in particular for BAME students.

Due to the multi-faceted nature of participation and success in HE, a critical realist approach was taken, to assess the structural factors that influenced the decisions made by students alongside the impact their own autonomy provided. Critical realism interprets reality through three levels; empirical, actual and causal (Bhaskar, 1978) (see

Chapter 5.2.2). This thesis examined the social impact of widening participation activity through three aspects: student decision-making, transitions and success. The research examined the empirical, the lived reality, by conducting ten life-story interviews with underrepresented students at one Post-1992 university. The actual is assessed through nine internal staff interviews and six external widening participation expert staff interviews. These are drawn together to establish the causal factors underpinning the experiences of underrepresented students and the barriers that they experience, in order to answer the research questions.

### 1.2.3 The researcher

Sheridan (2013) outlined the importance of researchers to acknowledge their own narrative to provide clarity surrounding their motivations for the research. Therefore, I shall reflect upon my own life-story and how it has led me to undertake this research. I grew up in a working-class family with a positive attitude towards education and its transformational qualities. None of my family members had attended university (I was the first) and it was always an unknown to us. The high school I attended discouraged me from attending university, and subsequently, I attended as a mature student at another Post-1992 in the East of England after completing an Access to HE diploma at an Adult learning provision institution. This is how my journey to researching widening participation began, I wanted to know why individuals such as myself are less likely to go to university and whether my experience was typical or not, and I have adapted this research area in different ways at each level of my HE journey. Whilst according to policy and academic research, I am considered an underrepresented, and perhaps a disadvantaged student, in many ways, I am not. I have had the emotional and financial support of my family and friends, and have used my own forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to aid my own success. I have experienced white privilege (Bhopal, 2018), therefore



unlike some of the participants in this study and in HE nationwide, my ethnicity has not presented barriers. This contributes to my personal rationale for conducting the study; as I wish to empower the participants, and other underrepresented students, to be heard in HE so that policy and practice can truly become inclusive.

From my own reflections of HE, I have found that being comfortable and accepted within your campus contributed to my success. I went to a Post-1992 small campus university, after visiting a Pre-1992 university that completely terrified me. I would never have fitted in at the latter university and thrived as I did at the Post-1992 HEI that I ultimately attended. Now, this highlights to me the entrenched disadvantage underrepresented students face. Although I have no regrets about my university choice, I do wonder, what if I had wanted to be a Doctor, a Lawyer or an Engineer? These professions would have been entirely cut-off to me as the middle-class population of students seeking to enter these professions intimidated me. This demonstrates my own habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) and Horizons for Action (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). A turning point for me was at age 20, I experienced poor mental health and unemployment. At this point, I decided to return to education as I had exhausted other options. Due to the first-class support I had during an Access to HE course and the university I chose, the transition to HE was relatively smooth for me. I learned how to 'play the game', as my college tutor had taught me the rules of the game. It wasn't until I embarked upon this PhD journey that the field and habitus conflicted for me. Even more so than before, I have tried to hide who I really am to fit into high-level academia. I have even really struggled writing this reflection as it does not feel 'posh' or 'fancy' enough to be included in a PhD thesis! In the concluding remarks (Chapter 9), I will further reflect upon this experience and what it has meant for my interpretations of the research within the concluding remarks and my journey as an academic researcher (Chapter 9.5).

## **1.3 Context – A Post-1992 university**

### **1.3.1 About the setting**

The research was conducted at a Post-1992 in the Midlands of England, referred to as The University. The University is considered a large institution, with over 10,000 students. The University gained university status in the 2000s, after previously functioning as a Further/Higher Education college. Post-1992 universities were created as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Polytechnic colleges chose to become universities with degree-awarding powers to create a more prestigious institution (Tomlinson, 2005). In total, 35 polytechnics were granted university status (Boliver, 2015). The University offers a range of degree courses (nearly 500 undergraduate courses) including foundation years for students with lower UCAS tariffs (Complete university guide, 2019). There are 72 postgraduate courses, in addition to PhD provision.

The University's brand is one of employability and entrepreneurship, promoting the return students can gain on their investment from their studies by gaining skills ready for employment. A focus on vocational courses was typical for universities transformed from polytechnics (Halsey, 2000). The University also incorporates its brand within the curriculum for all degree courses. Extracurricular activities based on social entrepreneurship are available for students who wish to widen their studies. For many Post-1992 universities, there is a focus upon the employability of graduates as widening participation was considered a process of increasing social mobility (Alexiadou, 2014).

### **1.3.2 Policies and procedures: an overview**

A brief overview of the policies that are outlined by the University is provided here. No reference or link is provided as the anonymity of the University is of paramount importance. Admission to the University is described as subject to "transparent and justifiable criteria". These are not elaborated upon within the admissions policy.

Proficiency in English is required to study at the University, and international students are required to pass a proficiency test. UK citizens who speak English as an additional language are not. The University states that this is not solely subject to formal qualifications as a prerequisite to entry, rather that students have the potential to complete their study. The decision for special admissions is made by senior admissions staff, programme leader and the Dean. Additional admissions tests may be asked of the candidate and they must have demonstrated strong academic capability in some capacity.

Students are awarded a degree once they have fully completed the pre-defined outcomes provided. Where they are not completed, an intermediate award may be granted if they have fully completed the outcomes for the intermediate award. The completion of outcomes results in credits and for an undergraduate degree, 120 credits at Level 6 and 100 credits at Level 5 are required. Strict registration periods are enforced, that cannot be paused or restarted. For undergraduate honours degrees, the minimum period is 2 years and the maximum period is 9 years. Study breaks are only permitted for one year. If a break of longer than a year is needed students are withdrawn from their course.

All modules are given a minimum of a 10 credit weighting (apart from in exceptional circumstances). This means that all student learning is assessed and contributes to progression each year. An aggregate of the modules taken is required to be at a grade of D- (41%) or above.

Students who have not engaged with the course (undefined by the University) in six weeks can be withdrawn from their study by the University. No further detail is provided in relation to this, so it is unknown how often this happens and what steps are used to support a student to engage with their course again.

Extensions to first attempt assessment deadlines of up to two weeks can be granted by the module leader. If a student does not pass the assessment, extensions are not

permitted. Extensions are granted subject to the module leader. The guidance dictates that valid difficulties that cannot be foreseen are to be granted an extension, but not for minor ailments, last-minute difficulties or the normal frustrations of everyday life. Examples of any scenario are not provided. Therefore, this could result in a variation of what constitutes a valid request for an extension. Where a two-week extension is not sufficient, students can apply for mitigating circumstances, where their assessment is deferred to the second attempt opportunity (resit period). Mitigating circumstances are granted for unforeseeable circumstances that are serious or acute. Applications are made to a central team in the University and can be submitted after the deadline for assessment. It is recommended that students who develop a long-term health problem or difficulty in submitting assessments take a study break. By accepting mitigating circumstances, students are not able to resit an assessment if they do not achieve a passing grade.

These policies demonstrate the rigidity of HE, that students fit into predetermined standards of HE. Whilst this may have been effective, for a growing population and increasing diversity of students, these policies are restrictive. Although the minimum period of study is two years, only students enrolled on fast track courses are able to complete in two years. For students who would be able and wish to complete their studies in two years, for example by taking summer classes, this is not available. For students who need to take a break in their studies, there is also a time period in which they need to complete or they face failing a course or taking an intermediate award. Giving each module a weighting places pressure upon students to pass at every stage, encouraging them to conform to a historical HE system and does not allow for deep learning gained through risk-taking. James and Brookfield (2014) argued that learning occurs through engagement and imagination rather than through assessments and

exams. Bourdieu and Passerson (1994) identified that tutors cannot truly assess learning in this way as assessments follow rules to mitigate risk and are a reproduction of lectures that does not represent the learning that has developed over time.

### 1.3.3 Underrepresented students and Post-1992 universities

Underrepresented students are more likely to study at Post-1992 universities (see Chapter 2.2). Rainford (2016) and McCaig (2015) posit that Post-1992 universities focus their recruitment on underrepresented students to fulfil their student numbers targets. Bravenboar (2012) stated that underrepresented students are less likely to attend Pre-1992 universities and BAME and mature students are two groups that are overrepresented in modern universities (DfBIS, 2016). Reay *et al.* (2009) discussed how underrepresented students can feel that their habitus (see Chapter 3.3) can conflict with elite institutions, as it does not meet their previous experiences of education and the population is largely different to themselves.

Read *et al.* (2010: 274) reveal the reason underrepresented students choose modern universities is that they feel a sense of belonging, relating to their habitus:

“By choosing an institution where there will be many other people of the same ‘non-traditional’ age, ethnicity or class, students actively seek to position themselves more centrally in the world of the academy. However, such challenges remain constrained by the ‘culture’ of the academy itself, and by the cultural constructions of higher education that are prevalent in the wider social sphere. Due to the lack of diversity of student intake in institutions socially constructed as ‘elite’, students who choose less ‘prestigious’ institutions in order to ‘belong’ are ultimately constrained by a set of discourses of the ‘authentic’ student and are thus, to a great extent, also complicit with such discourses”.

Reay *et al.* (2010) analysed interviews with working-class students studying at different universities. It was discussed how students chose universities based on their institutional habitus, for reasons such as being close to home and families, a feeling of acceptance and feeling comfortable with the style of learning delivery. These concepts were discussed by the student participants in this study, in particular in Chapters 6.2 and 7.2 where students

discuss their reasons for choosing the University and how it was influenced by a feeling of fitting in (as opposed to 'snobby' Oxford) or being near to their families and remaining in the town they grew up in. Therefore, the choice of research site, a Post-1992 university, is important as it can be considered in the decision-making process for students. Participants in this study reflected upon their choice of institution as underrepresented students to reveal why they felt more comfortable in a Post-1992 university, like many of their counterparts.

## **1.4 Outline of thesis**

Chapters Two, Three and Four are structured as a literature review, to establish what is already known about widening participation; its beginnings and the issues still to be overcome. Chapter Two critiques the historical and policy background of widening participation. Inequality was a reoccurring theme addressed by policy, therefore Chapter Three presents theories centred on inequality reproduction by adopting a Bourdieusian lens to view university decisions. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) conducted youth transitions research, with a particular focus on career decisions. Within Chapter Three, Hodkinson *et al.*'s (ibid) career decision-making model is applied to Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of the forms of capital and habitus and the student decision-making model is presented. The literature review is concluded in Chapter Four, with an in-depth analysis of the experiences of underrepresented students and the barriers that are presented. The theoretical framework created in Chapter 3.2 is applied to the literature throughout.

Chapter Five outlines the methods and methodology utilised to answer the research questions and also presents the pilot study data. The chapter concludes with the data analysis process and the themes to be discussed in the findings and discussion. The findings and discussion are presented in Chapters Six through Eight. Chapter Six identifies the ways in which student's beliefs and values influenced their university decisions; for

example, through familial attitudes to education. Chapter Seven moved to the next aspect of the student decision-making model, Horizons for Action. Evidence from the data collected is presented to argue that structural and geographical barriers exist for underrepresented students in their choice to attend university and their experience once they are there. Chapter Eight illustrates the final aspects of the student decision-making model, applying the interview data to turning points and transitions. Within their transitions to HE, students learnt to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986) and the consequences of this are discussed. To finish the findings and discussion, Chapter Eight presents the data and analysis from internal and external staff data. This is reviewed in the order of the layers of the Institutional portion of the student decision-making model and the input and outputs to it. The thesis is concluded in Chapter Nine with the evaluation framework, alongside recommendations for policy. The limitations of the research and the researcher's own reflections are also discussed.

## **2. THE HISTORICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

This chapter outlines the historical policy context of widening participation by providing detail about the evolution of Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Key policies such as the Robbins (1963) report and the Dearing (1997) report will be outlined and discussed in relation to widening access to HE. In addition, the first section will also contemplate the influence of the politics of the time. The second section will focus on the current HE environment in the UK, by providing a critique of the current policy environment in the sector. It is also important to note, however, that the majority of the focus of this chapter will be centred upon the English policy context, as the devolution of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments has led to a difference in HE policy for the countries. Finally, the implications for HE and widening participation policy will be discussed. The central aim of the chapter is to highlight how policy can still exclude members of the population and limit the ability of UK universities to compete in a global knowledge economy.

### **2.1 The historical background to ensuring fair access to higher education.**

The first universities emerged in the UK in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. These institutions were formed due to an interest in the staffing of the Church and State and who would hold the ability to fulfil these roles. HE ultimately expanded with the introduction of further HEIs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and inequality was instantly apparent; indeed, in 1825 there were approximately 11,000 students who were predominately male and originated from public schools (Kettley,



2007). Green (1990) discusses the early university environments that were based upon values instilled by the Anglian Church with a purpose to serve the upper classes and found a system that was incompatible for those who did not ascribe to these views or values. Neal (1998) discusses the medieval university model; created to suit the ruling classes and to benefit a capitalist society. Yet, Neal (ibid) also identifies a conflict between university learning to aid individuals into professions to aid capitalism and the pursuit of building knowledge for enriching lives culturally. In 1421, Parliament presented a bill to the King to amend the medicine profession degree only, this resulted in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, which evolved with time. Other than medical degree provision, another university did not establish in England until 1826, with the creation of University College London, and not outside of London until the creation of Durham in 1832. The Red Brick universities emerged in the early 1900s and the Civic Universities from 1926. In 1852, a report suggested that Oxford, one of the limited few universities at the time, did not support students from lower-income backgrounds (Warren, 2000).

The experience of universities for the poor is demonstrated in the novel *Jude the Obscure* (Hardy, 1896). The fictional novel was considered to be partly autobiographical and begins with a young, working-class boy's dreams to attend university. Christminster college, loosely based upon the Oxford colleges, was coveted by Jude and he taught himself the classics and saved in anticipation of attending to learn about literacy and religion. Unfortunately, these dreams are quashed by a college master who suggests university is not for him and he should stick to his working roots (ibid). Jude's longing for university, contrasted with that of Jude's step-son, Little Father Time's, is argued by Potolsky (2006) as demonstrating two opposing viewpoints of HE at this time. The first is of positivity, the belief that university is for the moral good; and the second is of university as a method for social control and discipline. Jones (2009) highlights parallels from Jude's

experience of entering HE with how it could be viewed in modern society. Widening participation practice is often directed towards primary school-aged children, and it is at this point in his life that Christminster first appeals to Jude. Jude would have fairer access to university, supported financially by the government through loans. However, it would be likely that his mentors too would steer him towards a trade, perhaps by way of a foundation degree (ibid).

In the period preceding the Second World War, concerns about university education arose in comparison to institutions abroad. It was felt that the HE system in the UK did not meet the needs of the nation (Silver, 1990). After the Second World War, during the beginnings of the Welfare State, educational reforms, such as the Education Act 1944 (enforced in 1947), created a tripartite system in secondary education. This introduced the 11-plus examination that determined the type of secondary school children would attend (Tomlinson, 2005). Although this should have allowed children of any background to attend schools best suited to their talents, there was still inequality with regards to the social classes in each school type i.e. middle and upper-class students dominating grammar schools. Bourdieu (1992:231) describes social class as *'sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and submitted to similar types of conditioning, have every chance of having similar practices and adopting similar stances'*. Saunders (1990) depicts a crude classification of social class, divided by manual/non-manual roles; the latter providing an individual with higher social class stratification. However, this highlights some difficulties, as occupations within these roles can be more complicated than this process describes. A highly skilled manual worker may hold more financial resource and a lifestyle similar to those from a non-manual occupation. Likewise, a routine clerical occupation may be low skilled and earn a lower salary. Therefore, this definition provides too limited detail with too many exceptions.

Current widening participation policy uses the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) structure to measure class. The NS-SEC is a complicated tool, which measures class in a calculated measure to take into account the complexities discussed deriving from the manual/non-manual model. In its simplest form, the NS-SEC uses seven classes, with the first being higher managerial and professional occupations and seven, being routine occupations. Levels four to seven are considered the working classes (Rose *et al.*, 2005). The NS-SEC provides a development from the manual/non-manual classifications, which can be aligned with Bourdieu (1992) and classifies individuals based upon further characteristics based upon their job roles, which would also assume they hold similar lifestyles.

Universities were still of limited number after the war, therefore students in grammar schools were not guaranteed a university place. However, HE was rarely an option for students in technical or secondary modern schools, as the curriculum delivered would not prepare students for university entrance exams (Stuart, 2012). In the Post-war period, research was not directed towards fair access to university, but within the education discipline, it was focused upon Functionalism and Social Class analysis. Functionalist research looked at how value consensus was replicated within education (Kettley, 2007). Functionalism was discussed by Durkheim (2014) who argued that a society needs a consensus of values in order to succeed. Contemporary research at the time focused on social class analysis and mostly determined how cultural differences between classes could act as a deterrent to HE. It was interpreted that the working classes were often oriented on the present rather than future goal setting. Whereas the middle-classes were identified to hold cultural values that conflict with the working classes and that could lead them to seek a university education (Kettley, 2007). In 1941, university access was questioned within the media, which called for a system that would enable students from

lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate in HE (Lowe, 2012). Lloyd (2012) also commented that aspirations began to rise throughout the war period and this led to increased demand in HE provision from young people that was recognised by the Government and led to a review of the HE provision.

The Robbins Report (1963) outlined a plan for an expanded HE sector; both in student numbers and in relation to increased opportunity. A clear theme was to allow HE to be accessible to all who had demonstrated their ability through attainment within education but yet also indicating that environmental factors could interfere with educational attainment. This aligns to the research of the time, that analysed social class and the divisions that occurred, as well as the work produced by Educability researchers; who identified the barriers to education for children from low income or working-class families (Kettley, 2007). Controversial research by Educability researcher Jensen (1969), assessed Intelligence Quotient (IQ) by social class and ethnicity. This suggested that attainment could be determined according to a person's genetics and that those from different groups will have a genetic disposition to ability. Despite this view now being outdated, Jensen (ibid) does provide recommendations with a level of credibility; suggesting that learning is an individual process and not all will learn from one style of teaching and that therefore a level of diversity is needed. According to Tomlinson (2005), the Robbins report rejected previous notions regarding the number of students with the ability to attend university, instead suggesting the talent pool was much larger than previously thought. Blackburn and Jarman (1993) suggest that student numbers had already begun to increase in the UK and the Robbins report served to clarify the intention to expand. The Robbins (1963) report can be criticised because it overlooks certain minority backgrounds, such as ethnicity, gender and disability and focused only on class (Kettley, 2007). Growth in the HE sector was certainly apparent in the years after, with a rise of

50% between 1963-68, growing to 150% by 1989 (Reay *et al.*, 2001). However, the resulting diversity as a result of the Robbins Report was not as expected (Greenbank, 2006). There was no evidence to suggest there was any increase in equality of participation by social class, only an increase in female students (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993). The rise in numbers could be considered a consequence of the Robbins Report, but factors such as the 'baby boom' that led to an increased number of 18-year-olds at this time was also a factor (ibid). However, it is important to note that the Robbins (1963) report did begin to promote fair access to HE for future policy-makers to consider and as such can be argued as a key policy milestone in widening participation.

The Conservative government from 1979 provided a shift in the narrative about HE and who should attend. The party promoted individual responsibility, taking care of one's own self-interest and promoted competition and enterprise. Within HE, this resulted in the nuance of consumer choice when selecting a degree, as it was suggested that this would be the fairest method of allocating resources. Coates and Adnett (2003) describe this as market-based reforms, in that it suits the needs of the market. This was deemed to fit the requirements of improving standards. Inequality was deemed natural by the government, and necessary for society and the economy (Greenbank, 2006). Within the period between 1981-85, several cuts in funding were made to HE and this resulted in a decrease in the numbers of students attending HE (Kettley, 2007). This demonstrates a contradiction in approach to the proposed policy of Robbins (1963). Indeed, competition and inequality can entrench disadvantage and the market narrative suggests that university education should only be for those who have 'inherited merit' (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007:139). Hence, competitive markets in HE can have the *de facto* effect of ensuring that participation in HE is reserved for those from families who traditionally

participate in HE, as they have the intellectual, social and financial capital required to support their applications.

The Dearing (1997) report emerged at a time of political change. It was commissioned by the Conservative government but was completed under a Labour leadership (Greenbank, 2006). The report itself promoted lifelong learning, aspired for an education system that was inclusive and dismissed ideas regarding the level of attainment prior to university. The report addressed inequality in social mobility. However, the report is based upon a deficit model of students from underrepresented backgrounds; it suggests that those from lower socio-economic groups do not attend due to low attainment, aspiration and their own inappropriate decision-making. This is problematic, as it should not be seen as a student's own flaw to have low aspirations or to have made poor decisions if they have not had the opportunity or support (familial or institutional) to make informed decisions. The Dearing (1997) report had, however, a strong vision for the 20 years ahead and the responsibility for widening access to be placed upon HEIs own agendas. The term widening participation was used for the first time within this report, and it is described as:

“The objective of reducing the disparities in participation in higher education between groups and ensuring that higher education is responsive to the aspirations and distinctive abilities of individuals” (Dearing, 1997:101).

The report also recommended that universities should not solely complete activity or policy to demonstrate a commitment to widening participation, but that these should be monitored and evaluated to ensure best practice. The Dearing report also indicated support for the consumer choice idea, as it suggested students should become responsible for paying for their tertiary education, but with the support of a student loan system.

New Labour emerged in 1997 in the midst of the Dearing report. New Labour sought to capitalise on the gains made within the previous conservative government, focusing on a third way, to also include a focus upon social mobility and justice (Dickens *et al.*, 2003). New Labour followed the individual choice narrative but believed that individuals could be supported to achieve social mobility if provided with enough information. New Labour policy-makers were not obliged to enact all of the Dearing Report recommendations, as it was initiated by the previous Conservative government. However, it endorsed the low aspiration and decision-making recommendations and created the Aimhigher Programme. Aimhigher was funded by the government and local offices were often based within universities. Aimhigher sought to provide entrenched aspiration to HE for young people, in particular, for those from underrepresented groups (Morrison, 2014). Data and local intelligence were used to target students from underrepresented groups, to increase their knowledge of HE and to inspire young people to attain and therefore attend a university (Moore *et al.*, 2012).

Foundation degrees were also introduced within this period. A foundation degree provides a pathway for those who have lower than standard entry qualifications and is more affordable for those who may be concerned by the price of a degree. It also provides a pathway to a Bachelor's degree, allowing students to join a cohort of their peers for the final year of degree study. However, New Labour's initiatives to increase access to HE did not necessarily equate to equitability of access. Ainley (2003) suggests there is a '*tertiary tripartism*', in which research universities hold the top-tier, teaching-focused HEIs reside within the middle-tier, and local institutions which boost the local economy and skills exist within the third-tier. New Labour provided a focus on choice and diversity, but Archer (2007) suggests that the choice was minimal, with underrepresented students experiencing a smaller range of choice and subsequently enrolling at the local institutions

on vocational based training. Schofield *et al.* (2013) posit that HE cannot be a true part of the free market due to the cap on tuition fees and student numbers. However, student number caps have since been revoked, and tuition fees are linked to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). New Labour also introduced tuition fees for HE, with students paying for their degrees at a rate of £1,000 per year payable up front, a policy that led to a decrease in underrepresented groups (Tomlinson, 2005). As a measure to prevent this, the fees could be means tested and waived if necessary (Burke, 2012).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded widening participation activity and initiatives in particular in areas with a low participation in HE rate. This included an Aimhigher programme, as discussed above, and funding for HEIs who recruit and retain students from low participation postcodes (Coates and Adnett, 2003). In a review of the literature evaluating Aimhigher, its activities, such as residential summer schools, in-school mentoring and conferences for underrepresented students were deemed a success, with applications from under-represented students increasing for up to 35% of HEIs (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). Reasons for school-based interventions included the foresight that inequality starts in schools and that this inequality would be reproduced in HE, therefore universities should not be solely responsible for widening access and interventions should begin earlier. HEFCE (2003) also produced a student lifecycle model, which MacFarlane (2019) argues is an effective method of promoting access and participation, as it considers the student holistically. HEFCE (2003) suggests ways that universities could alter their teaching, learning and assessment to accommodate learners from a diverse range of backgrounds, throughout these stages; for example, a prolonged period of induction for first-year students when they enrol on a course. This would be not only for students to adapt to their institution, but for their institution to understand the students' strengths and weaknesses, and to adjust practice to suit the cohort.



## 2.2 Current policy contexts

A Liberal Democrat and Conservative Coalition government formed in 2010, leading to a Conservative government in 2015, that has changed the focus of widening participation outlined by New Labour. However, as the government moves responsibility for fair access to university to individual institutions (DfBIS, 2016), it has also provided, perhaps intentionally, alternative pathways to professions for potential students. Apprenticeships as an alternative have seen an increase in student numbers, whilst school-leavers are considering moving straight to employers, as debt is a concern for potential university students, with university not always considered the best investment (Burke, 2012).

Widening access responsibility has been handed to the individual institutions, previously regulated by the Office for Fair Access, until its transition to the Office for Students. Previously, all HEIs who wish to charge the higher tuition fee rate, over £6,000, are required to annually submit an access agreement to OFFA. This should outline the measures the HEI will take to broaden access to their institution, providing milestones and the monetary outlay (OFFA, 2016). This has now been replaced by Access and Participation plans, which focus upon creating change as well as the previous aims of an Access Agreement (OfS, 2018b). Rainford (2017) suggested the practice of HEI responsibility for widening participation has resulted in an unequal approach to fair access, as each institution holds its own interpretation of widening participation, diversity and success. McCaig (2015) and Boliver (2015) have provided a more in-depth analysis of how access can differ by institution type. In the wider study, McCaig (2015) concludes that Pre-1992 institutions, those that are often considered elite and selective, focus their widening participation strategy upon finding the ablest underrepresented students to uphold their reputation. Bravenboar (2012) highlights that selective, Pre-1992 HEIs have made limited progress by increasing the levels of students from under-represented

backgrounds within the last ten years. Whereas Post-1992 institutions, often noted to recruit a diverse student population, face the challenges presented by higher tuition fees that may discourage their potential students, so, therefore, focus widening participation activity upon student experience and reaching recruitment targets. The content of Access Agreements was studied by Wardrop *et al.* (2016), who suggested that the culture of widening participation is not yet fully embedded by all HEIs, this is supported by McCaig (2015); Boliver (2015) and Rainford (2017) as these studies show that institutions can adapt widening participation policy to fulfil their own institutional needs.

In the recent Green Paper, the government addresses the need for widening participation activity to increase participation by certain groups and provides a strong focus on employability and work-ready graduates (DfBIS, 2015). This change suggests support for social mobility and justice, but only so that it serves the purpose of boosting the needs of government and business. It could be seen that more students in education can reduce the levels of young unemployed people, boosting the economy and increasing the number of individuals in high-income professions. The need for graduates to fill skilled roles is increasing and HE is suggested as the solution to this problem by building professional skills into the design of their curriculums. The Green Paper suggests that attending university is a consumer choice and student experience and satisfaction is paramount, the National Student Survey is mentioned as a variable to measure this outcome. A Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is introduced in the paper to increase the quality of teaching in HE and will provide further statistics for potential students to choose their institution. This is described as *“The TEF will increase students’ understanding of what they are getting for their money and improve the value they derive from their investment”* (DfBIS, 2015:12). These factors show that HE policy, and therefore the purpose of universities, is focused upon both students as consumers and fulfilling the

needs of employers; and therefore, the government, so still being aligned to a neo-liberal policy paradigm. This shows links to the previous discussion regarding the 1979-1997 Conservative government, where individual choice was fundamental and suggests that there is still a need for inequality in order to benefit the economy (Greenbank, 2006).

The Green Paper was followed by a White Paper, that consolidated and confirmed the ambitions for HE after a consultation period. It begins by reiterating that university is essential to an economy based upon knowledge and therefore for society to function. The paper expresses the improvements made to HE, the increase of student numbers from a more diverse range of backgrounds, providing statistics to show that 40% of young people now attend university. Flaws are still identified in the HE system, suggesting that the degree process is out of date and there are still vast differences in the backgrounds of students. The DfBIS (2016) express their ambition for UK HE to compete in the global market and aims to do so by removing barriers to HE, whilst increasing quality in HE. Quality will not only be measured by entry requirements to undergraduate study but also through the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

The TEF is critiqued by Ashwin (2016) who argues that the criteria it seeks to measure, such as contact hours, does not provide an accurate reflection of teaching excellence; the impact of learning for students is not examined. However, this would be a difficult metric to measure. The White Paper also confirms exit routes for institutions, should they no longer be able to meet degree awarding power (DAP) criteria. The policy also outlines benefits for HEIs successfully completing the TEF. For institutions who achieve a *meeting expectations* rating, they can raise their fees to 50% of inflation, and those with *excellent* or *outstanding* ratings can rise to 100% of inflation. Fees will still be capped, but this could result in a mixture of fees for different institutions. The TEF will use three levels of descriptors: Gold, Silver and Bronze. The Guidance describes that Gold is 'consistently

outstanding', Silver as 'significantly and consistently exceeds baseline quality' and Bronze that provision is of 'satisfactory quality' (HEFCE, 2016:54-55). As discussed earlier, Pre-1992 institutions often are considered the elite universities and it could be expected for them to score highly on the TEF. These institutions already have a lower percentage of students considered to be classified as widening participation (Bravenboar, 2012). Conversely, Post-1992 universities attract more disadvantaged students and are attempting to combat the effects of rising tuition fees (McCaig, 2015). This could result in further inequality by institution types, as varying fees could impact on a student's decision-making process and exacerbate the power inequality within HEIs. However, Havergal (2016a) suggested the elite universities strong focus on research may leave them unprepared for the TEF and it may lead to a complete restructuring of the traditional league tables. Havergal (2016b) also asserts that universities can also opt out of the TEF. At the time of writing, only three of 20 Russell Group Universities had opted into the TEF, and it is expressed within the article that the financial gain from the TEF may not be worth the time taken to participate. Therefore, the assumption that elite universities may be at an advantage has been shown to be doubtful and the TEF could possibly provide a framework for promoting social justice.

The UK, to a certain extent, demonstrates a decentralised control of HE, allowing HEIs to have their own autonomy. Jungblut (2014) uses the Oxbridge institutions as an illustration of decentralisation, as they are not state influenced with regards to setting admissions criteria. This allows them to become exclusive environments. However, Ashwin *et al.* (2015) argues that the changes in HE policy, such as the raising of tuition fees, have highlighted the intention for a marketised HE landscape. This has led to HEIs conforming to attract consumers and reduces autonomy and criticality. The impact on students, as suggested by Ashwin *et al.* (ibid), is a reduced personal relationship with their university

and its staff and a lack of identify formation based upon traditional academic knowledge. It could be argued that this will further exacerbate problems in providing individual support to students who otherwise may struggle in the university habitus.

Widening participation and HE policy is further decentralised in the UK, as each constituent country has a differing stance due to the devolution of the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh governments. This has resulted in a differing fee schedule for each territory; currently, HE is free for Scottish students in Scotland, Northern Irish student fees are capped at £3,465 for those studying at home and the same figure applies for Welsh students studying in the UK (Riddell *et al.*, 2016). This has resulted in differing policies to widening participation. Wales has a similar governing body to England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) that requires institutions to submit Fee Plans, similar to Access Agreements (HEFCW, 2010). Scotland, a non-fee charging country, does not require Access Agreements and Northern Ireland has national responsibility, rather than individual institutional focus (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). However, policies with regards to practising widening participation activity are largely the same between the four countries, which Gallacher and Raffe (*ibid*) suggest demonstrates a similarity in the values of the UK states. This is summarised in Table 2.1 below.

**Table 2.1 - Fees and regulation by UK countries**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Fees</b>	<b>Access monitoring arrangements</b>	<b>Key WP Related Legislation</b>	<b>WP Strategies</b>
England	£9,000 (set to rise with inflation)	Access Agreements to OFFA (to be replaced by OfS)	Fulfilling our potential: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice (DfBIS, 2016).	National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (see Chapter 4.2) – Targeting wards in England with low participation rates but with prior achievement (HEFCE, 2016a).
Scotland	Free for home students	No Access Agreements	Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act – Measuring participation to go beyond the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Appropriate evidence to inform triennial reviews of access (Universities Scotland, 2013).	‘Inclusivity and measurement; Getting in; Staying in, and Getting on.’ (Universities Scotland, 2013:5)
Northern Ireland	£3,465 for home students	National Responsibility	Access to Success Strategy: Additional funding, including WP premiums and funding to HEIs to promote fair access (Department for the Economy, 2016)	Increasing HE and FE provision and foundation degrees. Participation from low-income background students and from lower SES groups is higher than the rest of the UK (Department for Employment and Learning, 2016).
Wales	£3,465 for study in the UK	Fee plans to HEFCW	Widening Access Strategy: Additional funding, including premium payments to HEIs to promote their own widening access strategies (HEFCW, 2016).	Rise to 22.4% of Welsh students in Welsh HEIs from the bottom quintiles of Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. Increase to 35.3% of students from UK low participation areas (HEFCW, 2014).

## **2.3 Implications of widening participation policy**

The implementation of policy in the UK to combat inequality and to produce a HE market that can compete in the global marketplace has implications for students, HEIs and wider society. In the diversification and massification of HE; the results of widening the HE environment; such as the increasing amount of institutions and the rise in student numbers, demonstrate that there has been a substantial reversal of participation by gender. Willetts (2013) reports that in 1962, there were 68,000 female students, rising to 253,000 by 1980. In HESA (2016b) data for 2014/15, 56.2% of students are identified as female at a number of around 1.2 million. Indeed, many universities now report that there are more males than females enrolled. It is argued that the university sector has experienced feminisation and that policies and the diversification of HE have benefited women more than men (Morgan, 2013). However, this is not to critique the triumph of increasing female participation in HE; David (2015) reports that female inclusion in HE has enhanced women's lives in a variety of ways, including economically and personally in addition to enriching universities with their voices and that this should therefore not be reversed. When considering that HE is seen to be of more benefit to women than men, this could result in fewer men choosing to participate in university. A study that researched male opinions of university, involving 39 participants in individual and small group interviews, concluded that university could conflict with notions of masculinity. It was felt by men that the perceived ideal student had more female characteristics than male. In addition, it is noted that the ideal university student was directed towards middle-class, white, Eurocentric student models (Burke, 2011). Yet, for the two men who provided the focus for the article, there was determination to succeed, which meant that they would have to attend university to achieve their aspirations, overshadowing the

exclusive practice and stereotypes. This can contradict a wider argument surrounding widening participation and creating activities to promote the benefits of HE, as it suggests that individual determination can outweigh barriers encountered. However, there is limited research that incorporated those who did not attend university to counteract this argument. In addition, it is to be considered that if determination could overcome barriers, then there would not be need for widening participation research, as there would be equality already in existence within HE.

There is criticism of the massification of HE and the promises made by government and institutions of graduate employability, student experience, satisfaction and higher earnings. Collini (2012) argues that the primary purpose of university study is to learn about the chosen subject and enjoy the romance of such an undertaking; pushing one's own intellectual ability, without considering the practicality or applying it to a profession. However, Blackburn and Jarman (1993) provide a compelling argument as to the reasons for the growing need or desire for a massified HE system. A debate is presented to discuss whether it is the change in the labour market that has resulted in the need for more degree educated employees, or whether an increase in the level of qualifications has led to a change in the labour market. It is concluded that it is a mix of both, alongside other social changes that explain the reasons for massification. The nature of work has changed, leading to a requirement for more of the workforce to have HE qualifications. However, not all professions require a traditional, academic degree, whilst social structures still influence this process, as ability for either study or employment is socially constructed to favour classes and genders. Therefore, inequality will continue to reproduce itself in the system even with this change in the labour market.

With regards to competition in the UK HE marketplace, there are many conflicting debates. Purcell *et al.* (2015) completed a qualitative analysis of 128 out of the 130



universities in the UK and the mission statements they have produced. In summary, there has been an increase in the number of universities providing mission statements, as the sector is now conducted in a more business-focused manner. A recommendation of this review is that universities should not compete in a vertical line, by way of league tables, but to ensure real consumer choice, competition should be horizontal. This would provide the student consumer with real choice in regard to their place of study, as each institution would have its own specialisms and would be unique in the market. This, in turn, would also suit the student's needs and could increase participation, progression and experience.

Strategies to implement policies regarding widening participation are wide-ranging and although well-intentioned, do not always create the intended outcomes. A study by Lawson *et al.* (2016) researched the use of learning analytics to establish student risk-identifiers to provide early support. Within this study, the moral and ethical positions of storing data in this manner were discussed. Yet its largest conclusion was the risk that staff members would use the data to inform their own judgements of students and their potential success. This too, is an exploitation of power, as students feel they are obliged to provide information. An analysis of the content of emails sent from the learning analytic tool also demonstrated negative connotations, which appeared to threaten students rather than motivate. Student data creates a conflict for HEIs, it is necessary to hold student data for universities to report upon widening participation activity to measure equality and participation. However, as evidenced by Lawson *et al.*'s (ibid) study, student data can be misused and it is the right of the individual as to whether they wish to disclose personal data.

Bowl and Hughes (2016) describe HE as a quasi-market; with the conflicting dual purpose of creating opportunities for social mobility and to also compete economically within the

HE marketplace. Similarly, to other studies (McCaig, 2015; Rainford, 2017) publicly available documents were analysed to establish how HEIs manage this quasi-market contention and HEI type was broken down to two groups; selective and recruiting universities. Three conjectures were outlined prior to the commencement of the study to use as a framework for analysis: first, that there would be a difference in response by selective and recruiting universities; second, that recruiting universities would provide more agreeing responses than selective who would provide resistance; and finally, that there would be different approaches to widening participation by university type. Overall, the study found these conjectures to be true but found limited results in assessing the market tensions without further details not available by adopting the research methods used (Bowl and Hughes, 2016). In terms of research into the success of widening participation within universities, this would mean that the context of the HEI type would need to be established to examine if it would meet these conjectures. For future research, if these conjectures prove to be evident, they would need to be challenged. In addition, evidence of a university being recruiting or selective would also need to be considered so as to assess whether this is an acceptable practice and if it was a help or a hindrance to promoting fair access.

## **2.4 Theoretical analysis of widening participation policy**

This PhD study precludes to a theme of psycho-social factors and how they may impact attainment, throughout the compulsory and tertiary levels of the education system. Furedi (2016) discusses the disadvantage experienced by first-generation HE students and the strategies in place to aid students in the transition to HE. It is contended that strategies of this kind suggest students hold an emotional deficit. Furedi (ibid) advocates the use of academic learning to increase confidence, rather than increasing and highlighting vulnerability. Policies to create an equal and diverse student population

within HE are flawed and based upon a discourse that suggests underrepresented students should try to fit in with the existing system, rather than institutions themselves changing to fit a multi-cultural consumer market (Burke and McManus, 2011). This is demonstrated in the recent White Paper (DfBIS, 2015), where it outlines the principles to allow for Robbins' (1963) vision, for all students with the ability to attend university, to become a reality. However, it shows that by allowing this, it may damage the quality of HE, therefore a stronger focus is advocated of maintaining and improving the quality of teaching.

Furthermore, in a study by Hoare and Johnston (2011), it was demonstrated that students considered from a widening participation background who held high A-level results, were more likely to achieve a first class result compared to those with similar A-level results from independent schools. Those who were admitted based upon contextual data, therefore with possibly lower A-level results than the university originally stipulates, often achieved the same outputs as students from a traditional university background. However, this is a case study based upon one university and further research is needed to clarify the effectiveness of contextual admissions. As noted by Burke and McManus (2011), HE is a multi-cultural market and a single admissions policy may not be appropriate for all. It is also argued that admissions processes should be based upon evidence from research, this is an insight investigated in this research project when considering the student lifecycle.

Freire (1993) conceptualises pedagogy as a process of 'banking'; teachers simply filling their pupils with facts and ideas, with the anticipated and most celebrated teacher being one who has filled their receptacles, students, with the most knowledge. This creates oppression within the classroom and within society as a result, as it provides a power imbalance. The resulting oppression leads to the dehumanisation of those without power

and education that continues to enforce oppression. Teachers, who hold power, would also deposit information and knowledge that the teacher had already gained from the general consensus of society's culture. The dominant culture is of the ruling classes in a society and is enforced upon the masses, whether or not is achievable for all members of society (Smidt, 2014).

Freire (1993:160) discusses 'Cultural Action'; a process within society to either sustain or challenge the existing culture. When the action is to sustain, it maintains the current control and therefore prevents members from understanding oppression. When challenges to the culture are accepted, it is only of those that do not threaten those of power, allowing the oppressed to feel heard and included, yet remaining in the position of being manipulated. The process of cultural action could also be interpreted as a psycho-social impact on university entry and attainment. Universities are often based upon an outdated model of the white middle-classes; this could be due to the students and staff who are most likely to attend and work in a university. For those who do not meet the white, middle-class culture, they may find themselves, consciously or not, oppressed and silenced by this system. This could be by not being able to understand the information being 'banked', as it is different from their norms and values. Furedi (2016) acknowledges the disadvantage that first-generation students hold as HE is a different habitus; whilst Burke and McManus (2011) suggest universities are built upon a discourse which demands students align with the institutional environment.

Ritzer (2008) describes HE as a dehumanising experience for students. The large lectures, small amounts of contact time and therefore lack of professional relationships with lecturers has led to the McDonaldization of university. This theory outlines globalisation in a similar manner to the fast food chain, McDonald's. All aspects within a society or institution are the same wherever you go, this increases customer expectation and

satisfaction, whilst also speeding up processes and streamlining costs. Therefore, within HE, universities have become massified and educate students in a factory-like manner. This has led to students being intrinsically motivated by grades, rather than the learning experience. If a degree is something to be bought, students will desire the highest possible grades for their money. Within the McDonalds metaphor (ibid), students will complain if their service is not fitting their needs, which would be satisfactory grades. Using the service metaphor goes against Freire's (1993) arguments that students are reciprocals for given knowledge, and it provides more insight that students can revolt against the oppressor for their own gain. Schroeder (2013) outlines that students also have an increased number of platforms in which to express their opinions, with the rise of social media sites and other internet services to inform institutions in a manner of ways, both helpful and abusive. Indeed, Bourdieu and Passerson (1997) argue that the very structure of university teaching and assessment suggests students are dehumanised and incapable. The manner in which lectures are often facilitated, with the lecturer a distance from the students at the front with an invisible, unapproachable wall between them, create inequality and low expectations. There is an unequal power dynamic, with the tutor as invisible, and this is enforced through unfamiliar language for students and the feedback and grading of assessments.

The continuing (unequal) power dynamics within HE have been discussed and evidence to their existence has been highlighted by theorists. To understand why they continue, Green (1990) reported that the reproduction of inequality is due to a lack of revolution, such as in the French HE sector that has allowed traditions to reproduce. Without the revolution, traditions and inequality have not been questioned and it continues in modern-day policy and politics. As Green (ibid) highlighted, the original universities in the UK were built to serve the church and upper classes. Although this has been questioned,

it appears HE can still be seen as existing for those who align to the values and beliefs in which it was built. In discussing culture and its assimilation or rejection, it is important to still reject the deficit model of underrepresented students. It is not the fault of students if they do not identify with the host culture and they are not to be considered lacking. Indeed, it may not be the culture at all that answers questions surrounding student success. The process of creating a university culture that is multi-cultural and inclusive is a difficult strategy to manage, but essential for inclusion.

Barnett (1990) discusses the sub-cultures that exist within the UK university system, one for the academics and one for the students. For students, Barnett (ibid) suggests that as the purpose of universities has evolved, so also has the outcomes for students. Rather than the traditional model of students who study using reading and writing, there are more courses that require students to meet specific skills. Perhaps then, the culture in a university is still meeting the academic skills, which could be a conflicting mix with the competencies. A change in learning and assessment for courses that are not a traditional academic course to be assessed by skill rather than essay or exam may be a solution to create a more inclusive culture.

## **2.5 Summary**

In summary, this chapter has provided detail into the evolution of HE in the UK, as it begins with two elite institutions growing into a large sector providing HE for the masses. Policy such as the Robbins (1963) and the Dearing (1997) report has demonstrated long-standing ambition to widen access to university for underrepresented students. However, as the UK introduces the White Paper (DfBIS, 2016) it demonstrates that there is still progress to be made. Academic debates highlight the issues within policy; that it suggests HE is a system that underrepresented students need to adapt to rather than HEIs adapting to a diverse range of students. The consequences of the marketisation of university is also a

current debate; it is discussed whether universities should bow to the consumer, students, and their needs and expectations, or whether the purpose should remain as originally intended, to widen the knowledge and minds of students who are academically inclined. From a theoretical perspective, an examination of the psycho-social influences and concepts of power within UK HE policy. The viewpoints and works of theorists such as Freire, Bourdieu and Ritzer have demonstrated an inequality of power in HE that can provide insight as to the structure of universities and the overarching policy frameworks both institutionally and nationally. Concepts relating to culture have been discussed that provide a conflicting discourse. Theory suggests that cultural domination is apparent in society and perhaps maintained within HE, but this also raises questions as to whether this is a deficit model of thinking about underrepresented students. Indeed, such thinking can be dangerous in a HE setting, particularly when institutions are seeking to widen participation, as this assumes that those who do not meet cultural norms are lacking to a certain degree. This is an area closely related to disadvantage and inequality, themes that are now explored in the next chapter.

### **3. EXAMINING THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DISADVANTAGE AND INEQUALITY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The practice of widening participation, fair access to HE and the existence of underrepresented HE groups provides evidence of disadvantage and inequality within the university sector. To provide a theoretical underpinning of the creation of disadvantage and inequality, this chapter outlines the works of Bourdieu (1986, 1992, 2013) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) to provide a lens to interpret how inequality occurs and reproduces. Inequality of power is created through cultural norms and is recreated through habitus and forms of capital. Actors need to be able to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986) of the ruling classes in order to succeed; however, this game is not always taught to those who do not hold similar habitus and capitals. By underpinning this thesis with a Bourdieusian framework, the research sought to provide a voice for those who have limited access to power and capitals, resulting in structural reform that can allow individuals to flourish and providing for fair(er) chances at success. The work of Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) will also be identified to support the understanding of fair access, as it provides an insight into how young people make decisions about their futures based upon barriers and enablers. The work of both Bourdieu and Hodkinson *et al.* were incorporated with the data collected from interviews, the student decision-making model was created to analyse the data and demonstrate the varied pathways to university for underrepresented students. The chapter will conclude with a theoretical lens that will be applied in Chapter Four, in a review of the barriers that underrepresented students experience with regard to Higher Education.



### 3.2 Power and resulting disadvantage

Symbolic power is a concept developed by Bourdieu (1992:167), and, similarly to Friere (1993), suggests a dominant culture is maintained, as it holds power used to benefit the ruling class. Bourdieu (1992) defined class as a group of individuals who hold similar characteristics, such as occupations, hobbies and social networks. In addition, those from the same class are likely to have been raised within similar sets of norms. Symbolic power arises from symbolic systems, these are systems created by the dominant class or by experts within specialist groups that operate autonomously with regards to participation and distribution. Bourdieu (ibid) also highlights that these symbolic systems are often apparent in places least expected and are hidden in plain sight to maintain their power. The dominance of culture ensures the division of labour, and therefore hierarchies are upheld. Hierarchies can be maintained in other theories outlined by Bourdieu, such as rites of institution. A rite of passage is a process undertaken by an individual, in that a person feels like they have made progress from one stage of life to the next, such as from a child to an adult. However, rites of institutions are more complex than this, as a rite of institution is an exclusionary process and cannot be undertaken by all individuals. Bourdieu (ibid) uses the example of gender, a boy can become a man and this is exclusionary as girls become women and are treated differently from males<sup>3</sup>. This maintains power and hierarchy, as individuals understand their own position in society by the rites of institution they experience. Bourdieu (ibid) also illustrates how rites of institution can create a feeling of power, as actors feel they have achieved something that others cannot.

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<sup>3</sup> This example is now outdated, considering the modern acknowledgement of gender fluidity.

Concepts of individual choice and structure are pertinent to the fair access of HE, as it illustrates there may be two forms of barriers to university study. Individuals may choose to not attend university as they do not wish to or have not achieved the required grades. However, it may be that the structures in place to support and encourage individuals to succeed in education are not providing the correct resources and thus limiting access. Widening participation strategies, therefore, need to account for both increasing choices for students and limiting structural barriers. Weber (1978) proposed that individuals seek success, but individuals are rational and make decisions based on what is plausible within structures to maximise value. For example, a young person may have the ambition to be a doctor; however, the person knows that they suffer from stress in exams. Therefore, they make a rational decision to not pursue that career, as, to qualify to be a doctor, exams are unavoidable. Weber (ibid) refers to this as 'social action', a decision based upon institutional barriers. By limiting social action, individuals are disempowered. Their power of choice is limited by barriers and therefore they are at a disadvantage to those who have more opportunities, resulting in more power. Institutions such as universities can limit social action; for example, the entry criteria or the institutional habitus of a HEI may lead rational individuals to decide that they cannot access university, because they do not think they can meet the grades or fit in within the institution. The imbalance of power experienced by underrepresented students in HE was one of the main themes resulting in this thesis. This is explored in more depth in Chapter 7.3.

### **3.3 Navigating fields and habitus**

Habitus is a term used by Bourdieu (1977) to describe how a person reacts to a situation based upon their own personalities and previous experiences. Habitus can manifest consciously, unconsciously or semi-consciously. For example, when making a decision, an individual may purposefully take into account their past decisions or the consequences of

these to reach a decision. Conversely, it is possible that the decision is made without consciously considering the past. Habitus is formed within structures, which Bourdieu (ibid) suggests are class structures. Therefore, a habitus is based upon a person's experience of being in a social class and their expectations would align with those who are grouped having experienced similar conditioning (Bourdieu, 1992a). Habitus can be defined in two conditions: class habitus and individual habitus. A class habitus is created by social groups who have experienced similar conditions and practices, which results in individuals enacting similar beliefs and values and creates harmonious living. Individual habitus is the actor's own perceptions and decisions. Practices and decisions are made by the actor, based upon their own interpretations of how they should act with regards to their class habitus. This is explained using the term *modus operandi*, which expresses how actors choose to make decisions based upon habit (Bourdieu, 1992b). As mentioned, habitus is created from a person's experiences and Bourdieu (1977) outlines that decisions are made in fields, which is the external setting that is to be navigated. Using an example of a working-class person, their influencing structure would be a working-class culture; whereby families are often in routine occupations, as defined by NS-SEC (Section 2.1) (Rose et al., 2005). Within a field of education, the education of the social groupings could affect the habitus of the person deciding to continue in post-compulsory education. The field of HE may feel conflicting to a person who has no prior experience within their structures because working-class students are often underrepresented in HE. With regard to retention of students in HE, institutional habitus and underrepresented students at universities were researched by Thomas (2002), who demonstrated that students from widening participation target groups may experience a conflict of institutional habitus whilst at university, which could result in non-continuation of studies. Thomas (ibid) recommended institutions to increase the sense of belonging at university for students, by creating inclusive teaching, learning, facilities and social activities. By

creating belonging, students could be less likely to terminate their studies earlier, as they feel more comfortable at their institution.

Bourdieu's theories of power can also be applied to HE policy and practice. For individuals who do not fit the white middle-class classification, Bourdieu provides insights and theory to validate these claims. Bourdieu (1992:221) writes about ethnicity and highlights that the conceived differences are social constructions and 'mental representations'. As previously outlined (Chapter 2.1), Bourdieu (ibid) defines social classes as groups who have been conditioned to create similar stances. Therefore, this too could apply to any student who did not identify with the dominant culture in a HE setting, as differentiation is based upon social constructions rather than natural facts. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) directly describe education as the method by which a dominant culture can be transmitted. For those who do not associate with the dominant culture, it is understood why underrepresented students choose not to participate, or attain at different levels than those who are considered traditional as they are socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged (see Chapter 3.4.1 to 3.4.3). This may be because students find it difficult to relate to the information being taught. Habitus, both individual and class, could be used to interpret the participation patterns of students within HE.

Bourdieu (1992a, 1992b, 1977) proposed that individuals can be, often subconsciously, influenced by their surroundings and their decisions can be based upon what is already familiar to them. For those who have a limited familial or personal experience of HE, they may find their decision to attend doubted because it is not seen as being for the class group that they were raised in. Habitus exists to replicate the dominant culture; in relation to HE, this may be that university is suited to those from traditional backgrounds and individuals consider what the *modus operandi* is, thus keeping to the traditional culture of HE. To practice meaningful widening participation activity, HEIs should look

beyond statistics and numbers of students entering and continuing within degree study. Indeed, the reasons as to why underrepresented students do not participate in the same way that traditional students do should be explored qualitatively. This thesis shall seek to investigate these issues and to establish whether students from underrepresented backgrounds are underrepresented because of a power imbalance and whether institutions need to reform to become environments where all can thrive, instead of those who have traditionally done so. The current research adopts qualitative rather than quantitative methods, so as to have a richer understanding of why and how decisions were made to come to university, as these are aspects that cannot be measured or understood from quantitative data.

Ingram (2018) conducted research that sought to understand how working-class young men navigate educational success. In doing so, Ingram (ibid) applied Bourdieu's concept of habitus, fields and capitals to explore how these concepts can contribute to the reproduction of educational outcomes. In particular, Ingram's work is focussed upon working-class boys who are successful within education (and hence considered, by some, as an anomaly) and how their habitus is impacted. Four types of habitus are identified: abandoned, reconfirmed, reconciled and destabilised. The young men experienced conflicts of fields, which were internalised or reconciled and resulted in either the dismissal of old fields, a balance between the two or a commitment to only the new fields. This application of habitus and fields illuminated the understanding of the disparity of educational outcomes by underrepresented groups. As the working-class young men needed to find a way to settle the conflicts of their habitus, it is understandable that many other underrepresented groups may choose (consciously or not) to not follow the academic pathway, as it is simply not what is expected or common for them. It further

highlights that education, in particular, HE, expects underrepresented students to adjust their own beliefs, values and habitus to assimilate to the university *modus operandi*.

### **3.4 Reproduction of inequality**

The social world is complex in nature and does not simply occur by chance, but is developed in layers and enforced by individual actors. For actors, their social world is built around the economy. Bourdieu (1986) suggests the economic lives for individuals are conducted with forms of capital, accumulated over time. The three forms of capital were theorised by Bourdieu whilst considering why an attainment gap in education existed within children of different classes. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, social class is defined as groups of individuals who hold similar resources and have experienced similar lifestyles and views (Bourdieu, 1992a). The resources available to each social class vary and are not limited to financial wealth. Whilst the data in this study did not directly align to forms of capital, it is important to frame and understand as the concepts overlap with habitus and the career decision-making model (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) (Section 3.5).

#### **3.4.1 Economic capital**

Economic capital is the access an individual has to financial wealth. This can be derived from employment or inherited through family lines. Economic capital allows individuals to buy the resources they need to survive and to thrive. Each individual will have access to different levels of economic capital. This can be interconnected to the access individuals have to other forms of capital, social and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986). Disparities in economic capital can result in disadvantage and inequality, as those without access to economic capital may have reduced capacity to purchase items essential to living. As a result, without basic essentials, such as suitable shelter and food, individuals may find it difficult to succeed in education and employment. Economic capital, therefore, can act

as a form of social control, as actors are encouraged to seek employment to purchase necessary and desired goods or services.

### 3.4.2 Social capital

Social capital can be gained through the networks of connections an individual has with other individuals. Social networks can provide support to an actor by way of material goods, support or services in kind. To hold social capital, you have the support and membership of individuals from social networks, therefore access to further resources, which are either not available to purchase for money or as favours (Bourdieu, 1986). Networks are developed through, but not limited to, education, employment and leisure activities. The larger the networks available then the larger amount of social capital is available to the person. Social capital can benefit an individual in many ways. For example, if a person was to attend university, they may create a network of friends, building their capital. This grouping may include solicitors, teachers and medical professionals. When the individual later encounters a problem, they could call upon the accumulated capital to access services, such as a solicitor to help with a house purchase or a teacher to tutor their child. This capital may come at a diminished economic cost and could help the individual reach socially constructed life goals. However, a person with a reduced social capital may have to buy these services with purely (undiscounted) financial means, or go without. By not achieving society's defined goals, individuals and families can become marginalised and/or inequality can be reproduced (Bourdieu, 1986).

Similar to economic purchases, social behaviours can be given opposite values. A person who consumes recreational drugs will be provided with a much lower social and cultural acceptance than one who chooses not to (Bourdieu, 2013). Therefore, by aspiring to create higher levels of capital for oneself, it could be interpreted as a form of social control. By having the highest amount of economic capital, which allows you to buy a top

of the range car and by refraining from drug use, you are being rewarded for your conformity through social acceptance. However, it is also worth noting the negative consequences of increased social capital, as it can aid individuals within organised crime circles. This can have a severe impact on society and its members. The use of social capital is therefore shown to be linked to the social and cultural norms of social networks.

Social capital is a resource available to individuals that provides opportunities in multiple forms throughout a lifetime. In terms of education, the social capital available to an individual can assist in multiple forms: a parent's friend who can help a child attain their English GCSE through tutoring at little or no cost; or family members who have graduated from university could also help with university choice and manage the student's expectations of HE. For those who have access to a different form of social capital, they may find they have a lower level of support when considering attending university. Without a social network to guide students to HE, individuals may experience confusion or lack of knowledge about the process of degree study. For those without social networks, they may experience disadvantage and current widening participation policy and admissions criteria may entrench the disadvantage by not considering difference.

### 3.4.3 Cultural capital

Cultural capital is accrued in three further forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied refers to a person's personality and characteristics and whether they fit the socially defined behaviour aligned to their social class. Objectified relates to material objects owned by the individual, such as taste in decor or choice in leisure. Institutionalised cultural capital can refer to qualifications gained. It is argued that an academic qualification provides the individual with a level of cultural capital, as they have proved they can adhere to values and norms. Cultural capital can be used to increase a person's life chances and experiences, as it can help the person find



employment because of their embodied and institutional cultural capital meets the expectation of an employer. In addition, if a person's cultural capital meets the expectations of their class, they can demand power and respect from other members of society (Bourdieu, 1986).

In a similar manner to economic and social capitals, there is a scale of culture socially embedded by norms. Cultural taste is developed through family and education and can be linked to social class. Cultural nobility is a definition of the socially perceived classifications of culture and the hierarchy of taste; being the tastes aligned to the classes, with some tastes considered of higher value than others. Individuals' decipher cultural works in different ways. Indeed, one may appreciate fine art as they have been taught to do so by their families or educators, but another may disregard it as they have not been shown how to understand it (Bourdieu, 1996). This can be applied to many cultural practices, whether they are embodied, objectified and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986). The hierarchy of the classes often coincides with the hierarchy of taste, with the upper classes perceived to be holding the highest tastes. By holding cultural nobility, this could provide an advantage by creating social networks with those who hold similar tastes and perhaps even enhancing economic capital as individuals invest in pieces of fine art. By creating advantage, this also creates disadvantage, as those who have not been raised in a family with cultural nobility or educated in a school that emphasises culture would not have the same opportunities to build cultural capital. Moreover, individuals may experience difficulty in making connections in social classes other than their own; therefore, hindering social mobility.

Cultural capital can be gained through obtaining a degree, as the qualification holds a measure of institutionalised cultural capital in itself. With underrepresented students accessing and succeeding in HE in a disproportionate number to traditional students, they

are at a disadvantage, both socially and in access to power. HEIs are traditionally rooted in a white, middle-class culture, which all students are expected to conform to (Burke and McManus, 2011). This form of cultural capital may feel alien to those who hold a differing habitus (see Chapter 3.3) to the dominant groups and in turn, this could limit progression and success if students do not feel like they belong.

Forms of capital can apply to success in education. As mentioned, Bourdieu (1986) developed this theoretical perspective when considering children's attainment in schools. The now disproven theory provided by Jensen (1969) that suggested intelligence is inherited in social classes, therefore argues that children are mostly born on a level playing field, yet those from the middle and upper classes exceed in school in comparison to their working-class peers. It can be argued that children of a higher social standing excel in school due to their social, economic and cultural capital. Their social networks, family members and adult friends, may have already succeeded in education and can provide support with homework, and their cultural capital may show that others have graduated from university, therefore making it an expectation or a norm for children to follow the same pathway (Thompson, 2010). However, it is important to remember that if individuals are considered working class, this does not make them unsuitable for HE; it merely highlights that they are navigating a habitus shaped for a different group of people and are, therefore, rendered at a disadvantage.

Lukes (2005) suggests that those who hold higher levels of capitals also hold a higher level of power and that this higher level of power provides a higher probability of achieving their goals, such as going to university. Therefore, it can also be noted that a lack of capital for the working-class should not be held as a deficit on their part, but a lack of power afforded to them within society. As discussed in Section 3.3, students from underrepresented backgrounds may be influenced by a different subconscious form of

habitus than their traditional student counterparts. This too could be interpreted for students who have decreased access to these forms of capitals. Underrepresented students may be at a disadvantage as their habitus, culture and access to resources are misaligned with the traditional university culture and student population. Therefore, effective widening participation practice should aim to empower individuals and provide opportunities for them, so as to even the playing field. For example, HEIs should provide opportunities for students to thrive, no matter their economic, social and cultural capitals, and for them to help build their own individual capitals. Students should not be at a disadvantage economically compared to their class colleagues and should be able to express their own social and cultural capital. By doing so, universities can become accessible environments that are able to reduce future inequality and social mobility.

### **3.5 'Playing the game'**

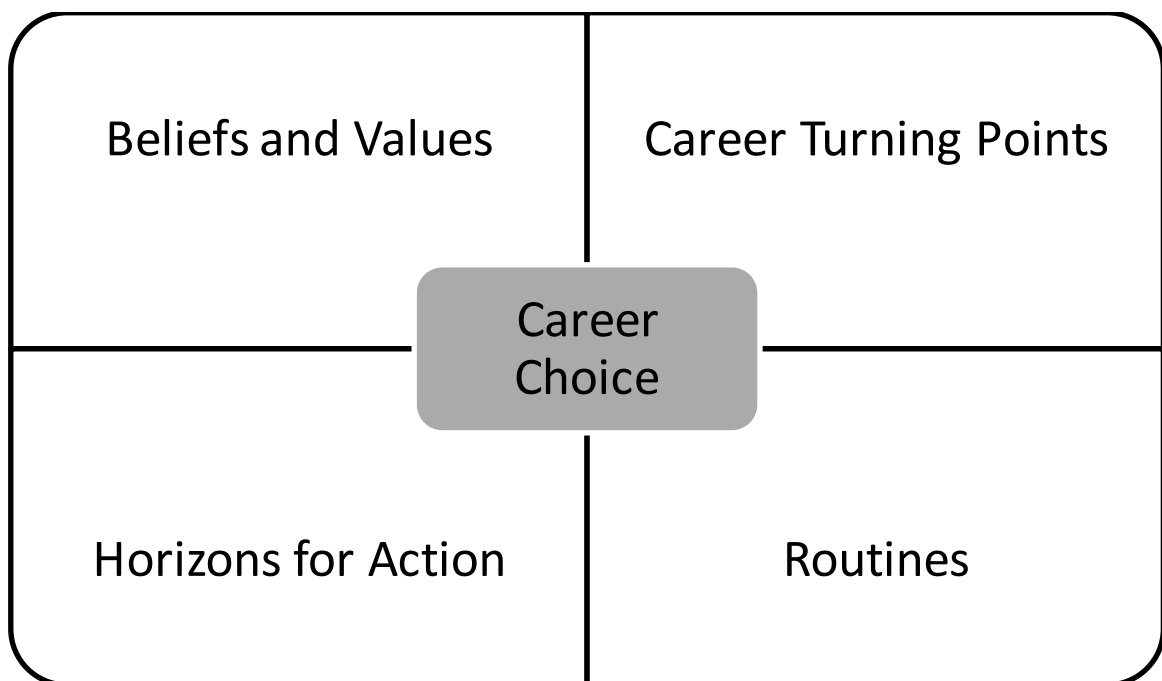
Whilst discussing forms of capital, Bourdieu (1986) uses an analogy of 'playing the game', in which individuals can use their economic, social and cultural capital to their advantage in order to succeed in education and future employment. The game is played by using a variety of resources, such as money that can buy clothes to enhance a person's appearance at interview and/or social connections that may help put them forward for interview places. However, if a person was without these forms of capital, they may find themselves disadvantaged when competing for university places or employment opportunities. Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) use Bourdieu's description of capitals to establish if they provide advantages and disadvantages for current undergraduate students. Evidence for the above example, that social networks can widen opportunities for employment, is provided, with a middle-class participant stating that family members had helped him prepare for interviews and provided work placements. This demonstrates how individuals can use different forms of capital to conform to normative behaviours

and align with institutional environments, thereby 'playing the game' and hence succeeding at university and subsequent employment. For underrepresented students, therefore, learning to play the game can be critical to success, especially given the inflexibility of the university's institutional environments. The ways in which the underrepresented students played and learnt the game is outlined in Chapter 8.3.3 and 8.4.

A difference in social capital provides an explanation for the differences in gaining internships, within Bathmaker *et al.*'s (2013) study. Indeed, from a total of 33 students within the sample, who had secured or completed an internship, only 10 were described as working-class. Economic capital could also help support with the costs in partaking in an internship, such as for travel costs; or for those with lower economic capital, perhaps they were required to partake in part-time employment to help financially support themselves. In the study, students of both middle- and working-class families acknowledged the benefits of building social capital to their future careers of networking and attending extra-curricular activities. However, it was also acknowledged that a lack of economic capital for the working-class students had restricted their participation in social capital building events. In addition, students can be time-restricted due to part-time employment to help support their financial needs whilst at university. Overall, Bathmaker *et al.* (ibid) demonstrate the prevalence of capitals in the UK HE setting, with students acknowledging that the forms of capital provide an advantage in HE and graduate employment. Bathmaker *et al.* (ibid) also provide evidence from their participants that disadvantages are apparent for working-class students and how they strive to create social capital for themselves whilst at university, in order to provide further opportunities for themselves.

### 3.6 Career decision-making

The decision for young people about whether to attend university or not can be related to concepts of youth transitions. In the contemporary university market, whereby HEIs appeal to students to study for a degree so as to go on to secure employment, university study could be seen as a time of transition from school to work. Transitions between school and work are not straightforward or singular and do not lead to linear career pathways once the transition from school to work is made. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) outline the layers of decision-making regarding careers for young people and how it is influenced by habitus and lifestyle, peer groups and evolving identity. This is demonstrated in Figure 3.1 below:



Adapted from Hodkinson *et al.* (1996)

**Figure 3.1 - Young people's decision-making process**

The model demonstrates the multi-faceted process of deciding upon a career for young people, which is influenced by not only internal motivations but also external factors.

Beginning with beliefs and values, these are internal motivations that could be linked to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and fields (see Chapter 3.3), as beliefs and values can be shaped upon the environment experienced by the individual. Therefore, it is possible that the careers of family members could influence the career expectations of the young person. Routines refer to the process of leaving school and becoming an adult and the circumstances that are available at that time can influence these decisions. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) discussed career turning-points by providing evidence from one young person whose employment of choice was terminated after unsuccessful exam completion, thus demonstrating that careers can be externally influenced by employers and can be beyond the young person's control. Horizons for Action "*incorporate externally located opportunities in the labour market*" (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996: 149) such as the availability of employers in the geographical area for the chosen profession. For example, if a young person wishes to become a physiotherapist, but there are no available employers in the locality, and relocation is not an option, this could restrict their opportunities. Horizons for Action operates in locum with the individual's habitus, as decisions are made using information learned in past experiences that form an interpretation of the present. For example, in Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) Alison chooses to work at stables for horses as it met her interpretations of what a working-class female would work as long as its convenient physical location. Whereby two young men, Clive and Sam, may have been suitable to work in childcare, but it was not interpreted by them as a suitable career for males. This was established within their Horizons for Action, based upon their middle-class and male habitus.

Ball *et al.* (1999) illustrated young peoples' *imagined futures* and these can be related to Horizons for Action. For some young people, their futures are clearly mapped, as they have support from families and schools, or have strong career ambitions from a young

age. However, some have vague *imagined futures*, as their ambitions may not be clear, or there may be barriers to accessing their futures. For example, their Horizons for Action may restrict opportunity due to location or not meeting university entry tariffs. A third group have no *imagined future*, as events in their lives take priority, such as caring for family members or personal illness. Ball *et al.*'s (ibid) research further highlighted the multi-faceted nature of making a decision about careers or going to university, demonstrating that decisions are not straight-forward and that social, cultural and economic capitals can impact upon the futures of young people.

Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986) can be applied to understand young people's Horizons for Action as their cultural, social and economic capital could provide or inhibit opportunities for young people to find work. For example, young people who live with a family who have a wide-scoping range of social capital may also have wider Horizons for Action, as they may have family friends that could provide a work experience placement for them. In addition, they may be able to travel further distances if they have sufficient economic capital within their family, as they may have access to their own car or can afford travel fares. Conversely, a young person with a limited supply of social and economic capital may have to negotiate work placements on their own without the support of previous social relationships. This demonstrates how capitals also feed into habitus and therefore Horizons for Action.

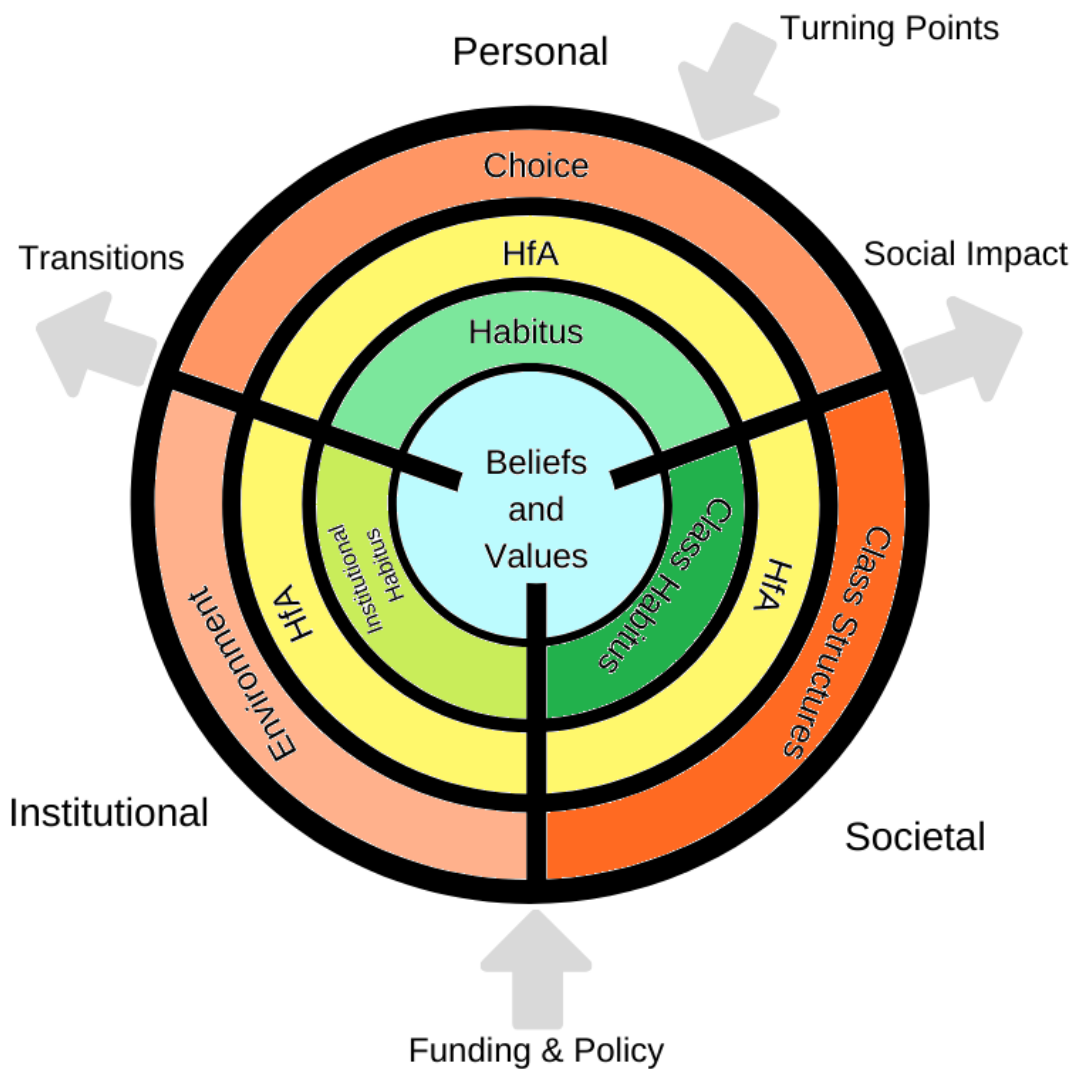
From Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) research, young people encounter Turning Points in their early and prolonged careers, this may be through promotions and climbing the ladder of their chosen career, in a linear career path, but also through forced turning points, such as redundancy. In addition, there are structural turning points, these are dictated by government policy and could include necessary qualifications being obtained to continue in a profession. The concepts developed here are important to a young person's

transition from school to HE as it demonstrates the other influences in young people's lives, such as family, peers (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1992a, 1992b). It also describes how pathways to careers are not always linear (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013), and individuals may not choose HE at age 18 years, but the opportunity may arise for them at a later date. This is why it is important to ensure university education is available to mature students, as their circumstances may not allow for tertiary study after compulsory education, but instead in later life.

### **3.7 The student decision-making model**

Based upon the theoretical concepts by Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1992) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) presented in this chapter and the data collected in this study, the career decision-making model has been adapted into a student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2 below). This model was created to aid the discussion surrounding the data collected in interviews with students and staff about student journeys to HE and the reasons why they chose the pathways they have. The model was created by a process of iteration; it began from the theoretical discussion in this chapter, further enhanced and expanded upon by applying the data and finally adapted using the career decision-making model by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996). The student decision-making model will be explained here and will be applied to the discussion in Chapters 6-9.





**Figure 3.2 – Student decision-making model<sup>4</sup>**

The model is an onion style, with a core leading to layers of impact surrounding it. The core is the central factor that affects all future layers. The onion is divided into three sections that depict the fields that decisions are made in; the personal, institutional (meaning school, college or university) and societal (the external). These also represent the micro, -meso and -macro. The arrows pointing into the circle are inputs, such as turning points. They are factors that are fed into the decision, located personally (turning

<sup>4</sup> HfA = Horizons for Action.

points) or created by institutions and society/government (funding & policy). Finally, the arrows that point outwards, are the outputs. The outputs are a culmination of all layers of the onion and the inputs to it, resulting in transitions and social impact.

Beginning from the centre of the onion style model, beliefs and values were found to be the most central part of the student's decision-making progress. Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) identify beliefs and values as an internal motivation that shapes identities and therefore decisions. Bourdieu and Passerson (1997) described habitus as a concept that is shaped by beliefs and values that later shapes decision making. The student participants in this study related their decisions with regards to the influence their families and peers had upon them (see Chapter 6.2), such as Hana (see pages 138-9) whose aunt had been to university and then shaped Hana's own and her family's expectation that she would go to university. Beliefs and values are at the centre due to the way in which students feel their families and peers are at the centre of their decisions.

The next layer includes habitus within the personal segment, class habitus in societal and institutional habitus in the institutional section. Habitus is demonstrated to be the second most influential segment as it incorporates beliefs and values to shape an individual's decision. For example, habitus applied to the students who were first in their family to attend university, as the decision to go to university was more of a risk because of the unknown factors. This conflicted with their class habitus and what was expected of them. The institutional habitus refers to the choice of university for the individuals, Hana mentioned that she did not wish to attend somewhere like Oxford as it would feel 'snobby'. Institutional habitus is distinguished by Reay *et al.* (2001) as the culture of the setting, often adapted to the class structure and culture of its physical setting. Reay *et al.* (ibid) also note that whilst a habitus can adapt, it is slower to progress within institutions. It is also intended to include the change in habitus for the participants, as they enter a

space unfamiliar to them and how they reacted to the change. For Lindsay, it was difficult to assimilate and perhaps she was experiencing a 'destabilised' habitus, but for James, he quickly managed the transition and 'reconciled' his habitus and felt able to move between fields (Ingram and Abrahams, 2016) (see Chapter 7.2). Horizons for Action again incorporates the layers before. Due to its close relation to habitus, this also sought to include physical factors rather than the interpreted. For example, Andreas and Lindsay were both limited in their physical location to attend university due to family and location bonds (see Chapter 7.2.1).

The final layer of the onion is based on enabling and constraining factors; the environment, class structures and choice. Institutionally, the environment, both physical and interpreted can be welcoming or discouraging. This is discussed by a University staff member, Laurel, wherein students can be disempowered as the environment is not inclusive physically in terms of toilet facilities and therefore it does not feel emotionally welcoming (see Chapter 7.3). With regards to the class structures, this refers to the general inequality felt in society wherein there are individuals who are disadvantaged by the social class hierarchy. In the individual section, the final layer is choice. This refers to the options and opportunities available to the person, and how the other layers of the onion influence it. For example, within the society section, social class can include household income. For those with lower household income, this may limit the choices available as it is not feasible to commute long distances or leave the family home.

### **3.8 Summary**

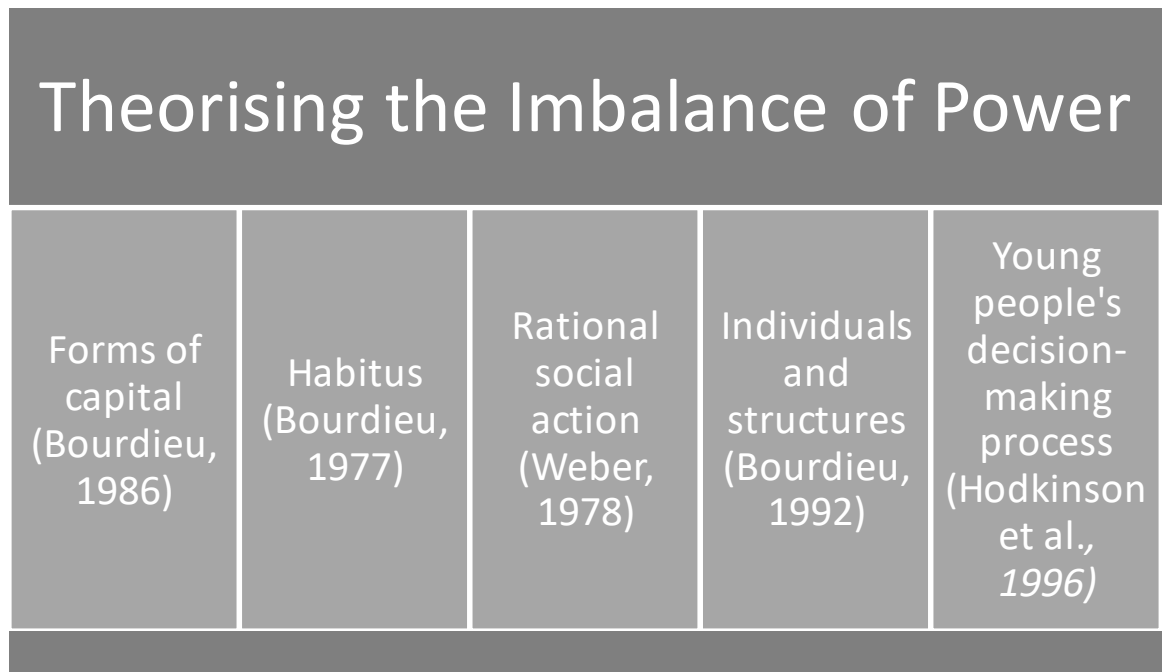
Symbolic power is created by a dominant class and is maintained to continue reproduction of power. Power is an invisible force, constructed through social and cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1992a). Institutions and personal motivations and decisions can reproduce inequality by enhancing the power of the dominant groups and restricting the power of

those who belong to other groups (Bourdieu, 1977). Structures can also inhibit and promote social action for individuals who make rational decisions (Weber, 1978), this can disempower those who have limited social action. Habitus exists within social classes, as both class habitus and individual habitus interlink and influence each other (Bourdieu, 1992b). Class habitus shapes the practice of social classes based upon social norms to maintain homogeneity. Individual habitus is the practice of actors, who shape their decisions based upon their experiences of living within class habitus. Thomas (2002) demonstrates that working-class students may experience a conflict of habitus when attending university, as those from groups who do not traditionally participate in HE may feel isolated and that they do not belong.

Youth transitions and the process of career decision-making is illustrated by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) within four layers, which interlink with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus (1992a, 1992b) and forms of capital (1986). Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) provide details of not only how internal factors can influence young people's decisions; but also how external factors, such as the influence of family members and the levels of opportunity within the young person's geographical area, can also shape futures. The social disadvantage for students would enhance the inequality within external factors to make a transition to HE. The work of Bourdieu and Hodkinson *et al.* has been amalgamated and has formed a student decision-making model (figure 3.2). This was also informed by the voices of participants of this study and demonstrates how the theoretical aspects are performed within the underrepresented students' lives. This model will be used in the discussion (Chapters 6-8) to demonstrate the influences upon students' decision-making process.

The following chapter seeks to examine the rich narratives of the experiences of underrepresented students and intends to establish if the theory demonstrating disadvantage and inequality impacts on the access and success in university for students

from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst providing evidence of the barriers students can face to HE, these will be embedded in the theoretical framework that has been established in this chapter, shown in Figure 3.2 below, to demonstrate that power imbalances reinforce inequality in HE.



**Figure 3.3 - Theoretical model**

By applying the above theoretical lens, this thesis will seek to understand the causal roots of disadvantage within HE. A Bourdieusian, Weber and Hodkinson *et al.* narrative will enrich the arguments presented that underrepresented students can be disadvantaged in terms of power, habitus and forms of capital and will begin to outline how the HE sector can structurally support choices made by individuals, so as to empower those who experience disadvantage and hence provide a fairer HE system.

## **4. WIDENING PARTICIPATION: BARRIERS TO SUCCESS AND EVALUATING IMPACT**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section of the literature review will discuss the practical element of fair access to Higher Education (HE). As Hinton-Smith (2016) highlights, the widening diversity in UK HE has promoted the need to adapt practices to create fair opportunities within HE. The concept of equality and fairness is discussed by McCowan (2016) who suggests in the context of HE, creating fairness and equality may involve differential treatment; such as making physical amendments for those with disabilities or removing cultural barriers, including admissions processes that account for prior disadvantage. This concept will be explored throughout this chapter as disadvantage experienced for widening participation target groups is discussed. Disadvantage will also be interpreted from theoretical frameworks by applying the works of Bourdieu (1986) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996), in relation to access to HE, as outlined in Section 3.6. Whilst the importance of widening participation is discussed due to the inequalities that persist (Greenbank, 2006; Burke, 2012; Archer, 2007; Harrison and Hatt, 2010) policy-makers have called for a stronger evidence-based approach. Therefore, the literature surrounding evaluating fair access strategies will also be discussed, in relation to decreasing the impact of disadvantage on access to HE.

### **4.2 Establishing target groups and defining disadvantage in HE**

Widening Participation as a term was first used in the Dearing Report (1997), outlined in Section 2.1, which aimed to reduce inequalities within demographic groups in HE. The report outlined improvements in participation for females, mature students, students

from socio-economic groups IV-V<sup>5</sup> and disabled students, but identified that there were still apparent disparities compared to traditional students. The Dearing report outlined a vision to allow fair access to HE for those with the ambition and ability and that HE would be responsive to their needs. Perhaps this is an indication that the original ambition for widening participation was to adapt the structural (Bourdieu, 1992) influences, in order to accommodate those from different habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and with different levels of capitals (Bourdieu, 1986); rather than simply encouraging individuals to adapt to the existing structure provided by HE.

During the Aimhigher strategy, also described in Section 2.1, the main targeted group were those from lower socio-economic status (SES) groups, in particular, individuals whose parents are classified as belonging to NS-SEC<sup>6</sup> 4-7 categories. However, it could be difficult to identify these students without collecting data from the students themselves about their parents' occupations. Therefore, postcodes were identified with areas of high deprivation, as well as rural and coastal areas, which were aligned with national statistics on each area so as to target outreach work (Harrison and Hatt, 2010). Since the demise of Aimhigher and the introduction of higher tuition fees, target groups have been expanded to not only include those from lower SES groups, but also Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups, part-time students, local community students, students with a disability and mature students (Roberts, 2011).

Nevertheless, by targeting under-participating groups of students, there are also apparent issues. Minter (2001:253) suggests that by strategising fair access, it focuses on a "single-loop of learning", and it does not tackle further issues that are entrenched in society and

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<sup>5</sup> Socio-economic groups IV-V have since been replaced by NS-SEC 4-7.

<sup>6</sup> NS-SEC measures social class in seven categories with the first being higher managerial and the seventh as routine occupations. Four to seven are considered working class.

create inequality. By using a “single-loop of learning” the problem is addressed at the source, being the HEIs, rather than tackling the wider issues, such as attainment at compulsory school level. This is evidenced by Machin *et al.* (2013) who highlight that achievement in schools across the UK varies greatly by socio-economic group. Students who receive Free School Meals (FSMs), which is a common measure of a lower socio-economic group, attain at a lower rate than their peers who do not receive FSMs. Therefore, the process of “single-loop of learning” allows inequality to continue unchallenged and will continue to recreate inequality rather than diminish it, as HEIs attempting to broaden access are not currently addressing some root causes. Whilst this may appear to be a useful strategy in alleviating a social problem, it could also be interpreted through a critique of neo-liberal policy, as a strategy for those with power in society (effective agency) to utilise institutions (structure) in order to shape beneficiaries (those without power) to become productive members of society.

Indeed, academic discourse has also arisen to critique the process of widening participation as a practice of neoliberalism, focused upon individual responsibility rather than the responsibility of institutions such as universities. Widening participation places a stronger focus on more individuals choosing to participate in HE, which in turn helps them to transition into employment (Mavelli, 2014), and in turn, benefits the knowledge economy as it effectively sells an increase of university degrees. This ensures an increased number of young people [who may be at risk of being Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)] becoming members of society who can contribute more to the economy (Meuleman *et al.*, 2015). By way of virtue, those who are encouraged to and therefore attend university are not considered NEET during their courses as they are in education, resulting in lower numbers of NEET young people. This latter point provides additional



motivation for the government to pursue such policies, as it allows them to claim successes in reducing youth unemployment.

The most current strategy to widen participation launched at the beginning of 2017; the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), built on the success of a two-year pilot project. The strategy is run by 29 consortia, created from groups of educational providers, charities and businesses, working in collaboration to support the most disadvantaged young people into HE. This project is specifically targeted towards young entrants, aged less than 21 years old, and who reside in England. Geographical wards have been identified based upon low participation rates in alignment with expected GCSE grades. In addition, the strategy also seeks to encourage an increase of BAME students and disadvantaged (the [somewhat problematic] term disadvantaged will be explored in more detail below) young men to HE (HEFCE, 2017). The NCOP strategy was created in response to meet the targets outlined in the 2015 Green Paper, *Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*, (DfBIS, 2015) (see Chapter 2.2). The NCOP strategy milestones could be interpreted as the most efficient way of meeting the Green Paper targets. By only targeting local wards that have a higher number of students with expected GCSE attainment in relation to the number of students who go on to participate in HE, it could be seen as a more effective strategy to encourage students with a history of achievement; therefore, holding a realistic chance of meeting university admissions tariffs. NCOP provides outreach activity within the local area that may influence young people's decisions to attend HE in their futures as it builds social capital with school children. Embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) proposes that individuals economically invest within their social networks (see Chapter 3.4.1); therefore, by providing young people early access to HE, they may become socially invested in the HEI

engaging with them. This could result in the individuals having an increased likelihood of attending the university and investing their money within it.

In a global study (Gibson *et al.*, 2016), students from universities in four different countries (Cyprus, New Zealand, USA and UK), participated in questionnaires and focus groups to discuss the dualistic discourse that exists between diverse and non-diverse students. Participants indicated that the diversity narrative was not simply binary; yet universities often seemed to define them in binary terms, demonstrating the mismatch between student and institutional narratives of diversity. Whilst the students appreciated diversity as a bureaucratic process, they also found it limiting and found themselves, therefore, labelled and 'othered'. However, part of the exclusion they felt could be aligned to the nature of learning in HE, as a consequence of large lecture groups and being unable to build relationships with lecturers due to this. It is surmised that perhaps the 'one-size-fits-all' approach for students in HE no longer provides for its consumers (Gibson *et al.*, 2016:27).

Disadvantaged students in HE can be an umbrella term for students who have no or limited familial history of university or compulsory education, or instead students from families with low parental incomes. Students who experience this are often underrepresented in HE, in particular in elite or high tariff entry universities (Jerrim and Vignoles, 2015). The term 'non-traditional student' can be defined by contrast to the definition of a traditional student; the young, white, middle class, male (Tight, 2012). Therefore, a non-traditional student would be an individual who does not fit into this category. However, as discussed in Chapter 1.1.2, underrepresented is a more appropriate term for target students for widening participation activity, as it does not describe them as what they are not. Since the increase of female students in HE, discussed in Section 2.3, targets for gender are less prevalent, except in the case of

disadvantaged young white men. It is highlighted that BAME groups, working class and mature students are considered non-traditional and that individuals may fall into two or more of these groups (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Those who are considered underrepresented students may hold a differing habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) to those from traditional, young white middle-class groups, as their families may not have participated in HE or university was not a focus in their compulsory education. From the perspective of Weber (1978), those who do not have familial experience of HE make rational decisions not to attend university, as they do not have the same levels of support to navigate such structures. Donovan and Erskine-Shaw (2019) highlighted the emotional labour that underrepresented students who do transition to HE experience, as they can feel their identities change, which leads them to feel isolated both at university and at home. Again, this demonstrates how structures exhibit social action for individuals (Weber, 1978), as they need to assimilate to succeed. This could be considered as 'playing the game', a concept by Bourdieu (1986) explored in Chapter 3.4.4 and applied to the life-stories of students in Chapter 8.4.

### **4.3 Class**

Working class young people were a target group of the Aimhigher initiative, established under New Labour. Class is defined in widening participation policy using the NS-SEC categories 4-7 (for definitions, see Section 2.1). Through discourse analysis, Morrison (2014) suggested that a narrative of 'Responsibilisation' was evident; by promoting the higher earning power of graduates and reducing the possibility of being marginalised by not attending HE. The analysis was based upon Aimhigher documents available to potential HE students and expresses the wider choices individuals may have if they attended university. From an industry perspective, Deloitte UK is an employer with a corporate social responsibility programme about societal responsibility and mobility. The

organisation has a five-year strategy, *One Million Futures*, which aims to assist one million young people into leadership positions. As part of *One Million Futures*, Deloitte UK reports on progress and has found that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are on average, paid 10% less than students from the most advantaged backgrounds (Deloitte UK, 2017). This shows flaws in attracting students to HE through the promise of higher future earnings, as it is disparate to their more affluent counterparts. Recommendations are also provided for business leaders, in addition to education providers and policy-makers, the first being acknowledging and challenging potential bias in the recruitment process and the second to provide more emphasis on aptitude testing, rather than educational attainment (ibid). These recommendations could be of benefit to graduates from underrepresented backgrounds, as they may be more likely to attend less prestigious universities (Bravenboar, 2012), as Reay *et al.* (2009) suggest that elite universities can conflict with a student's habitus, as discussed in Chapter 3.3. The less prestigious universities may be disregarded by employers, yet Deloitte (2017) is encouraging employers to search for potential graduates in a wider pool to increase equality.

In a mixed-methods study conducted by Dunne *et al.* (2014), comparisons were made regarding applications to university between independent and state schools. The quantitative data taken from the study shows the disadvantage between the two school types (see Table 4.1 below).

**Table 4.1 - Independent and state school comparison**

	<b>Independent School</b>	<b>State School</b>
<b>Both parents attended university</b>	46.3%	19%
<b>One parent attended university</b>	29.3%	23.9%
<b>Neither parents attended university</b>	24.3%	57.1%
<b>Applied to Oxbridge</b>	20.5%	7.4%
<b>Applied to Pre-1992</b>	69.1%	60.2%
<b>Applied to Post-1992</b>	7.8%	30.9%
<b>Students with 7 or more A*-B GCSE grades</b>	22.0%	10.4%

(Dunne *et al.*, 2014)

The data demonstrates that there are gaps between familial participation in HE, as well as gaps in the types of institutions applied for. The independent schools show more applications to Oxbridge and Pre-1992 HEIs than the state schools. The state schools also hold a much higher rate of applications to Post-1992 institutions. This latter finding links to ideas discussed in Section 2.2, whereby Pre-1992 HEIs are considered selective and Post-1992 HEIs are recruiting, suggesting that students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to attend a recruiting university (McCaig, 2015; Bowl and Hughes, 2016; Rainford, 2017). The concept that students from a less traditional background are less likely to attend elite universities, is evidenced when considering prior attainment within Dunne *et al.* (2014), as students from independent schools with seven or more A\* to B GCSE grades have more applications to Oxbridge than their state school peers. Overall, this study has shown that there can be disadvantage between school type and

participation in university, but as the study gathered qualitative data from school staff, rather than young people, it is not possible to understand the reasons as to why this occurs. This has highlighted the need for further qualitative data to provide answers as to why there are equality gaps in HE, either through participation or success during studies. Therefore, this PhD study will incorporate qualitative data from students to investigate how students could be better supported in HE.

State schooling and elite university choice are explored by Reay *et al.* (2009) in a case study of nine undergraduates at a considered elite HEI. The students all self-classified themselves as working-class and reported that they did not find their university choice as an option until later in their state Further Education (FE) studies. For three of them, the university became an option to them after attending a summer school programme and the other six were supported by staff in their FE setting. Reay *et al.* (ibid) discuss the impact on the undergraduates' habitus, defined in Section 3.3, as they have experienced a feeling of being out of place, as the field (i.e. the HEI), is different to their prior experiences. However, Reay *et al.* (ibid) suggest this has not been an entirely negative experience for the students but has actually widened their habitus. Although they felt unsettled in the beginning, they mostly built upon feelings of fulfilling their own goals.

Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) studied participation to HE in four countries, England, America, Canada and Australia, of which all have different university structures in relation to costs and funds for students, as well as university ownership (i.e. private or public). Within this study, it concluded that parental income and parental educational history was the largest predictor of whether a young person would attend university. Due to the differences in cost and funding initiatives (for example, in America, the tuition cost can vary vastly by HEI type with no guaranteed funding for students), it is summarised that cost is not the most significant barrier for students nor is it the fault of universities themselves. The cost

of HE, although in the UK is more supported than in the USA, is another structural barrier that inhibits social action (Weber, 1978), rational individuals may choose to avoid the cost as they need to begin earning after school or have a family attitude to avoiding debt. The choice to attend university is often influenced by educational disadvantage based upon parents' achievements. An example used by Jerrim and Vignoles (2015:915) suggests that parents without a history of educational attainment on low incomes may not have invested emotionally and financially, if at all, in their child's compulsory education, therefore limiting opportunities for the young person. In the young people's decision-making model (see Figure 3.1), Horizons for Action and Beliefs and Values are factors that can influence the decisions young people make about their futures (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Perhaps if as Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) suggest, those whose families who do not have a vested interest in education, experience a restricted Horizon for Action in relation to educational attainment. Therefore, this suggests that those without family members with experience of HE are at a disadvantage.

The evidence presented by Dunne *et al.* (2014) and Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) can be linked to support Bourdieu's (1986) theory of the forms of capital (see Section 3.4). Dunne *et al.* (2014) presented data that highlighted how students from state schools were more likely to attend local HEIs and students from independent schools had a higher application rate to elite universities. This could be argued as a reflection of economic, social and cultural capital. With regards to cultural capital, students from independent schools had a higher rate of parental attendance at university; this could become part of their cultural capital as university, perhaps elite universities, in particular, would become normalised and help the students understand how to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986) when applying to university. Social capital, if their parents had attended HE, may help students gain work experience or introductions to decision makers. Economic capital may be a factor as to

why independent school pupils choose to attend university locally, as they are concerned about the cost of travel or accommodation. Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) also support the concept of advantage if parents participated in HE and/or have higher income, arguing that these factors result in a higher likelihood of attending university. This too could be interpreted as a social and economic capital advantage for young people.

The rise in tuition fees in England and Wales, to in excess of £9,000, has provided debate as to whether this further hindered the already disadvantaged in HE and if it would act as a demotivating factor for young people who are deciding whether to attend university or not. During the initial years of the introduction of tuition fees, Miller (2010) provides a commentary, suggesting that governments worldwide face the pressure of enabling graduates to fulfil professional roles, yet also balancing deficit, and suggests that the UK followed the example set by other Western countries in introducing fees for students. In addition, the article briefly discusses the impact upon students, acknowledging that whether fees would discourage disadvantage students was a concern not yet understood. A counter policy initiative provided by Labour in their manifesto prior to the 2015 general election suggested lowering the cap in tuition to £6,000 and to rebrand the loan and repayment regime, instead renaming it as the 'graduate tax' (Ismail and Myles, 2016). A graduate tax would be repayable after graduation and would be income linked, in a similar manner to how student loans are currently repaid, but might still discourage those who are concerned with accruing debt (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2016). Indeed, notions of debt and attitudes towards it could also be argued as being related to students' habitus and possession of capitals (Hartas, 2016). This could be due to the cultural and social norms surrounding debt that exist within the student's habitus. Harrison *et al.* (2015) identified that students' attitudes towards debt were often linked to their parent's attitudes. Those from working-class groups were described as debt-resigned, perhaps because they had



accepted they needed loans to access HE, as their own economic capital could not pay for university.

‘Poverty of Aspirations’ is a term used by Archer *et al.* (2010:23), in describing the narratives often adopted in policy-making, suggesting that the underachievement of young people from working-class backgrounds is due to their culture, beliefs, values and norms. These are perhaps influenced by parental experiences of education and employment, which may have negative connotations. Poverty of Aspirations is demonstrated in the Green Paper; *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, as it suggests that it is a lack of aspirations that influences the low participation rate of young white disadvantaged males, as they “*believe that the best jobs do not necessarily go to those who have been to university*” (DfBIS, 2016:37). However, overall, aspiration was found not to be lacking in young people but instead shaped by habitus and cultural capital, as those with reduced access to cultural capital were found to be less likely to attend university (Hartas, 2016). Therefore, individual choice and structure (Bourdieu, 1992a) are pertinent, as choice represents the aspiration to go to university and structure represents the barriers to access. Essentially, young people can show aspiration to go to university, but structural barriers can inhibit these aspirations and prevent access.

#### **4.4 Disabled students**

The Equality Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010: online) outlines that a person is disabled if they experience physical or mental impairments, which “*has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*”. Disability theorists provide debate about the treatment and classification of disabled people in society and how this can impact upon disabled people’s life chances. Crow (1996) argues for a balance between the medical and social model of disability so that

impairment and disability can be understood together. Crow defines impairment as the way in which bodies function and move, whereas disability is the way in which those with an impairment are externally viewed and treated. Disability, therefore, is the discrimination of those with impairments, and it is this that is sought to be overcome so that the only impairment faced is symptoms, rather than barriers such as inability to access buildings, transport, education or employment.

HEIs had no legal responsibility with regards to equality of access for disabled students until the Special Educational Needs Act (HM Government, 2001), updated in the Equality Act (HM Government, 2010) was introduced into the Statute Book. The Acts set out that HEIs have an obligation to prevent discrimination, both in the admissions process and in the teaching process after enrolment, as well as being required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the physical environments as may be required by those with disabilities. This may indicate a structural reason as to why students with a disability have continued to be under-represented in HE, as individuals make rational decisions; therefore, the lack of physical accessibility may restrict social action (Weber, 1978). Considerations are made within individual HEIs Access Agreements to promote disabled students participation and success at university, as students who have disclosed a disability have a lower continuation rate (90.3%) than those without a disclosed disability (91.5%) (OFFA, 2017). In a topic briefing, OFFA makes suggestions of support that could be provided for disabled students to promote access and success (ibid). This includes support activities and how to evaluate them but does not address improving the physical spaces. Although disability is not limited to physical impairments, those who do have a physical impairment may require ramps or handrails to gain access to lectures and seminars. Yet, Access Agreements do not set out how to make university campuses fully accessible. It is

suggested that the clearest form of discrimination against disabled people, 'disablism', is the accessibility of physical spaces, which continues in new buildings (Johnstone, 2001).

The medical profession is regulated by the General Medical Council (GMC), which stipulates that potential doctors should be able to demonstrate a defined set of competencies, but this has recently been widened to include being able to instruct others to conduct these on a doctor's behalf. This allows for more inclusivity within the medical profession, for those who have the ability to become doctors, but who have impairments that may limit certain physical activity (Shrewsbury, 2015). Shrewsbury provides no figures to indicate if students with disabilities have increased since the introduction of the Special Educational Needs Act but does acknowledge that it is not known how many doctors experience a disability and statistics to measure this are dependent on student self-disclosure and individual HEI reporting.

An Australian study examined students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their family members regarding their experiences of HE. In the initial surveys, 63% of students identified that their educational needs were met, but only 42.9% of their family members agreed. In both demographics, just over one-quarter of students (27.3%) and just over one-third of family members (35.7%), felt that their social needs were met. Within focus groups, five themes emerged that provided an insight into the lived experiences of students, from their own and their families' perspectives. Some of the issues raised by students included not wanting to feel singled out because of their disability, yet needing extra support and understanding for anxiety, organisation, difficulty accessing support without proving diagnosis and the desire for help in the pre-transition period (Cai and Richdale, 2016). If disabled students' social needs are not met whilst at university, this could influence the accrued social capital built whilst at university. Social capital, as discussed in Section 3.2.1, can aid individuals in a number of ways (Bourdieu, 1986)

perhaps including gaining employment after graduation. There is evidence to suggest that disabled students have a slightly lower rate of entry into work or further study after graduation, with 2014/15 Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey data showing 88% of disabled students continuing into work or further study in comparison to 90% of students without a disclosed disability (HESA, 2016a).

An estimated 4 in 10 children with disabilities and their families experience poverty, this can be as a result of: parents being unable to work, work reduced hours for care, the cost of home adjustments to assist impairments, or the cost of travelling to hospital appointments (The Children's Society, 2012). This not only demonstrates the impact of economic capital but also suggests difficulties for families accessing and building social capital. Families may be unable to invest time and money in social activities and the suggestion that some parents may be unable to work due to caring responsibilities could reduce the range of social networks built. In an Australian context, Macaulay *et al.* (2016) suggest diminished access to economic capital could be a disadvantage for young people with disabilities, as fewer resources can be used or bought to support their learning. Bates and Davis (2004) argue that the discrimination faced by those with disabilities, in addition to their inadequate access to appropriate housing and economic capital, can negatively impact how they are viewed within their communities, further deepening isolation and so can make their social networks smaller. Therefore, the forms of capital presented by Bourdieu (1986) may be difficult to access for people with disabilities to aid them in 'playing the game' (ibid) of HE (see Chapter 3.4.4). As discussed by Cai and Richdale (2016) those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the UK often do not complete their studies, which could be linked to the typical cognitive functions of those with ASD, as they experience difficulty in reading abstract concepts, such as 'playing the game' (Bourdieu, 1986), required to succeed in HE. The concept of 'playing the game' would therefore be

considered as unfair practice for those with ASD by McCowan (2016), as it would be a barrier to access and success.

Habitus is built within social fields and the embedded norms and values fields hold (Bourdieu, 1977). Disability is often defined by society by impairments in what disabled bodies cannot do, rather than what they can do. As a result of being constructed as abnormal, disabled individual's habitus is shaped to reflect this (Edwards and Imrie, 2003). Disabled people will enter new fields perhaps expecting to be marginalised and disadvantaged, as their physical bodies may not meet the expectations of the majority of society. Agency for disabled people may be restricted, as structures of HE could be limiting; for example, those with impairments may have special amendments made upon their assessment methods, which disabled students do not wish to have changed on their behalf. Disabled students may be required to reside in a different hall of residence to their peers to accommodate their physical needs and this could result in isolation. Isolation would provide limited opportunity for social capital to be built, as mentioned in Chapter 3.4.2, as social capital is built within neighbourhoods (Putnam, 1995), and cultural capital could be restricted based upon issues of physical access. As previously identified, Access Agreements do not stipulate access to campus facilities (OFFA, 2017). Considering the literature presented and aligning it to the theoretical lens adopted, disabled students are at a disadvantage of equality and power, as they continue to be defined by their disability, whilst their social and cultural needs are not met and their agency and social action (Weber, 1978) is therefore restricted.

## **4.5 Mature students**

A mature student in HE is defined as a student aged over 21 years at enrolment (UCAS, 2017). In the academic year 2015/16, there were 821,595 undergraduate students aged over 21, equating to approximately 47% of the student population (HESA, 2017). Mature

students also often have additional caring responsibilities at home (Pearce, 2017). A report states that it is difficult to assess how many students are parents, as HEIs are not required to collect this information. The report also highlights that the majority of student parents are female, mature students who study part-time (NUS, 2009). However, numbers of part-time students have declined in recent years, so this may no longer be the case. HESA (2013) reported drops in student numbers in all areas following the increase in tuition fees; however, the sharpest decline was seen in part-time students (-15.1%). Callender and Little (2013) suggest that current part-time provision is framed in a similar way to full-time study, encouraging potential students to gain new skills in order to enter the employment market. However, the study found that the motivation for part-time study differs, as part-time students often have already begun employment and are seeking to improve upon their existing practices and fulfilment in their careers. Students detailed their choice to study part-time in Callender *et al.* (2006), stipulating that they found this mode the most convenient, based upon family and affordability reasons.

In a discussion about the implications of HE students who have children, specifically lone mothers, Hinton-Smith (2016) investigated if the cost of HE had an implication on lone mothers' studies. Although it does not explicitly state that the entire sample of 77 participants are classified as mature students, the participants quoted are all over the age of 21 years. Within the sample, 29 of the participants studied full-time and 25 studied part-time, although this cannot be considered as a representative sample, it does contradict the findings of a demographic study conducted by the NUS (2009). Respondents felt that society holds a negative view of lone mothers that they are dependent on welfare payments, so their achievements in education enable them to feel they are not conforming to stereotypes (Hinton-Smith, 2016). The research was conducted at a time before the fees rose to £9,000, so the data collected may be outdated

now, as the level of debt a student can accrue has risen. Despite many participants indicating that they found the financial support for study difficult for their families to live on, a theme emerged that the debt and risk were outweighed by the rewards of HE; increased knowledge and employability in addition to increased self-esteem, sense of achievement and increased perceptions of worth by others. Considering the different experiences mature students often have to young entrants, it should be expected that universities have adapted to include and support mature students, but Johnson (2018) argued that HEIs still treat mature students as separate until they learn to integrate. This again demonstrates the often inflexible institutional approach of HEIs in supporting/empowering underrepresented students and seeking to enable their success in HE.

Woodfield (2011) conducted research to investigate if mature students are disadvantaged in the graduate job market and highlighted that many similar research projects often do not separate by age group to establish employment outcomes. A specialised data set was commissioned from HESA derived from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) with added demographic details. The research looks only at the first employment of mature leavers, rather than taking a longitudinal approach. Respondents of the DLHE survey who indicated they were in full-time study, or otherwise not available for employment, were not included in the sample. The parameters also included part-time employment as contained in success measures, as it is unfair to assume part-time employment is a negative option; indeed, some may choose part-time work as a preference or whilst waiting for full-time employment. This is of particular importance to mature learners as they may choose part-time study due to family or other commitments. Overall, 75% of mature learners were in graduate-level employment post-graduation, compared to only 59% of young graduates (ibid).

The success of mature learners in the labour market is addressed by Morley (2001) who suggests that mature students may have an advantage due to their previous work experiences and employment prior to degree study; whereas younger students may have only experienced education. As discussed in Section 2.3, Collini (2012) argues that the purpose of university study is not solely based upon graduate employment, but rather the process of enjoying the subject studied and the process of learning. However, the success of university is often measured upon employment outcomes. The success of mature students in graduate employment aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, whereas mature students have had prior employment and may have lived independently in communities whereby they had the opportunity to build social capital. In experiencing independent living, mature students may also hold a different level of cultural capital, as they are able to foresee how to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986), drawing on the experiences of others in their social networks and their greater life experiences. The increased employability of mature students suggests that increased social capital benefits students in the graduate job market, which is the final stage of a whole student lifecycle approach (HEFCE, 2003). Networking can be created in HE through work and volunteering placements (Batistic and Tymon, 2017) and a focus on employability to support disadvantaged students with lesser access to capitals is a suggested practical response to stimulate capital growth (Tomlinson, 2017). Therefore, a structural solution to improving choice for students towards the end of their studies, would be to support their capital growth to reduce inequality in the graduate job market. The theoretical model (see Figure 3.6) developed for this thesis includes the forms of capital proposed by Bourdieu (1986). Capital building activities could occur at any stage of the student lifecycle, from introducing mentors to pre-university students, through to larger-scale events for undergraduates to meet potential employers. From the data collection (see Chapter 6.2 and 8.4), capitals did not emerge as a theme, nor as important to the student participants.



Perhaps this is due to their different levels of capital and how they have not considered how to use their capitals to aid their success?

#### **4.6 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Students**

Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) refers to individuals who identify with an ethnicity other than white, including those with a mixed ethnicity (Institute of Race Relations, 2017). Whilst the term BAME is useful from a demographic perspective to provide quantitative data to reduce discrimination, it is criticised as being too binary a term, as it labels individuals as white or not white (Okolosie, 2015). Historically, students from BAME backgrounds have persistently experienced poorer outcomes in HE to white students. This starts with admission and continues through to graduation and future employment. Curtis (2006) highlighted that thirteen years ago, there were more black Caribbean students at one post-1992 institution (1,575) than there were in all of the Russell Group institutions. The figures are not provided for the number of black Caribbean students for the whole of the Russell Group, but as an example, a London Russell Group university had only 15 black Caribbean students enrolled (ibid). In the academic year 2013/4, 70.8% of all white students in the UK gained a good degree, defined as an upper second (2:1) or above classification, compared to just 56.8% of BAME students (Universities UK, 2015). Addo (2017) suggests that it is a white middle-class culture that is used as a marker for intelligence and suitability for HE and that this hinders BAME performance in HE. This could explain why there are a disproportionately small amount of BAME students in HE, or those from other disadvantaged backgrounds, as accents, style of dress and different leisure activities may lead to unconscious bias from admissions tutors. The underrepresentation of BAME university students; in under participation and attainment may influence other BAME young people's social action (Weber, 1978). BAME young people are disempowered as the rational choice could be to not attend university

due to the structural barriers that exist that diminishes participation and enrolment. Whereas white students are empowered to make social action to attend university as the structures do not present barriers in the same way as they do for BAME students.

The attainment gap between male and female, white and BAME students, was researched in a study that selected six schools within a HEI, where the attainment gap was most predominant and questionnaires were sent to all students within these schools (Cotton *et al.*, 2016). Through analysis of Likert scales that asked students about the importance with which they viewed their university education, the level of influence their family had on their studies, time spent on study and feelings of anxiety about assessments, emerged as key factors for BAME students. BAME students also showed a higher influence from family members, and therefore a greater extrinsic motivation, than white students. The study suggests that it could be the pressure to study courses from outside the student's own interests that may result in the attainment gap. There was no evidence to suggest BAME students are any less committed to studying than white students, but there may be differences in student motivations. The study suggests that BAME students have higher family influences on their decision to attend university and which course to study, whereas white students have more influence on their chosen course and HEI (*ibid*).

Considering Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) model of young people's career decision-making, see Figure 3.1 in the previous chapter, external influences, such as family, are one of the four parts that can influence a young person's decision-making. Indeed, the beliefs and values of a student will be informed to a degree by those of their family and peers (*ibid*). However, despite this, the conclusion recommends the implementation of time-management classes, yet this seems to contradict the findings of the study. Time-management classes do not fit with the suggestion that familial influences can influence motivations and does not appear to address the associated disadvantages. A final point

from this study is that there is a lower level of confidence in English and engagement with social activities for BAME students. Social activities at this institution were seen to be most engaging for white, home students in the majority. However, this study includes international students and the findings for home BAME students alone were not included (Cotton *et al.*, 2016). This PhD study will focus solely on home students to provide evidence on the impact of widening participation activity so that the research can provide an explanation that goes beyond the language barriers international students may face. By collecting data solely from home students, this thesis can also ensure a level of cultural homogeneity in its sample and retain the core focus on domestic widening participation, embedded within the research aims.

Patterns of application to elite universities differ by ethnic group, as research of 50,000 HE applicants demonstrated that students from a Black Caribbean, other, mixed white and Black Caribbean and Pakistani students had a significantly lower application rate to elite universities (Shiner and Noden, 2015). It is argued in this thesis that the process of HE is influenced by social and cultural influences, and that therefore the gap between BAME applications is somewhat lessened for those from more privileged financial backgrounds, as those from selective compulsory schools have an increased probability of attending an elite HEI. Shiner and Noden's (2015) study indicates that social class may be a larger predictor of participation in HE rather than ethnicity, thus strengthening the implementation within this thesis of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capitals and how an individual's social, economic and cultural capital can aid aspiration and transition to HE.

The social capital of African American students and its perceived impact on aspiration were analysed in a study by Al-Fadhli and Kersen (2010). To measure the amount of social capital, in religious and family form, students were asked to rate how highly they valued concepts such as religion and family time (as the independent variables), whilst students

were also asked to rate their feelings towards study and aspirations (the dependent variables). The study concluded that the students who interacted and valued religion and family the most also had higher aspirations and commitment to education. However, as Knorrina and van Staveren (2007) suggest, social capital is not simple to measure, and this study perhaps cannot be considered as measuring social capital, but making correlations between emotional support from religion and families. With regards to cultural capital, a study that conducted focus groups with working-class students from a range of ethnicities, two Caribbean students commented that the language used within lectures was a 'culture shock' to them, as it was unfamiliar to how they had previously been taught in school and further education. It is the unfamiliarity of university culture for students from non-traditional backgrounds that discourage students from attending university but also increase their feelings of isolation once attending lectures (Read *et al.*, 2003:271) and hence lead to higher drop-out rates.

Institutional racism was the focus of a case study in one university. A list of ten components was used to establish if the university demonstrated institutional racism towards BAME staff and students. Although a definite answer is not provided by the author, each of the ten points has some indication of discriminative practice at the case study HEI. This includes incidents of racism, both overtly and covertly, differential outcomes for white and BAME students and a disparity in recruiting more white candidates than BAME for staff roles. It is suggested that, overall, universities do not consider themselves as institutionally racist, as HE is considered to be progressive and for societal good. However, it is also highlighted that, within the case study university, senior management is predominately white and equality and diversity policies were only introduced when it was a legal requirement to do so (Pilkington, 2013). The senior management being of a majority white demographic could indicate inadvertent

institutional racism, as the barriers for BAME students may not be apparent to the senior management as they may have not experienced racism personally (ibid). This too could be the same for any of the target groups of widening participation, if the senior management of a HEI predominately consists of white middle-class academics, it may be difficult for them to interpret the needs of those who do not fit the same backgrounds as the senior staff members. This is a reason as to why it is important to evaluate widening participation, as the voices of the beneficiaries need to be heard and understood to ensure that the practice best fits them. This thesis seeks to fill this gap and ensure that the 'voice' of disadvantaged students is heard. Moreover, it is the aim of this thesis to seek empowerment for individuals with limited access to capitals and those who may find HE an unfamiliar habitus by confronting entrenched power imbalances.

#### **4.7 Care leavers**

Children who have been provided for by the local government, in terms of accommodation and or care plans, are termed as Looked After Children (LAC) (HM Government, 2000). The Department for Education (2015) defines a care leaver as a person who has been looked after for a minimum of 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, including a period of 24 hours minimum after their 16th birthday. The time periods stated do not need to consist of continuous placement and can comprise of different time periods of care. Young people who leave care are more likely to experience diminished school attainment, with 17.5% of looked after children achieving A\*-C GCSE grades in English and Maths, in comparison to 58.8% of those who are not LAC (Department for Education, 2017). In addition, care leavers have an increased risk of being NEET; indeed, 38% of 19, 20 and 21-year-old care leavers were classified as NEET, compared to 14% of all 19 to 21 year-olds (Department for Education, 2016).

The Buttle UK Quality Mark was introduced in 2006, which was awarded to universities who provided evidence that they had considered the needs of care leavers. The Quality Mark provided a framework for HEIs to adhere to, such as ensuring Halls of Residence contracts were available for 52 weeks of the year. In 2011, when the Buttle UK Quality Mark was introduced, 6% of care leavers attended university (Buttle UK, 2017). However, as of the year ending March 2016, 6.68% of care leavers aged 19, 20 and 21 were studying in an HEI (Department for Education, 2016) indicating that there had been a small rise in care leavers accessing university. OFFA reports that care leavers hold the ambition and ability for HE, but there are many barriers, such as a lack of emotional and financial support and unsuitable university accommodation. For example, university accommodation often does not span the full year and young people leaving care have to permanently turn down accommodation from the local authority to attend university (Lock, 2015). Care leavers are frequently placed in supported housing, where they will have access to practical and emotional support from onsite staff members (Simon, 2008), which could make the decision to decline this form of housing to attend university difficult as the level of support could consequently decrease for the individual. These barriers may often be unintentionally overlooked by those creating support for students, as staff members with little experience of the care system or the young people that leave it, may not consider term-time accommodation as an issue.

A background of care is not necessarily a negative factor in participating in HE; a small scale study based at one HEI demonstrated that a group of care leavers found their experiences to be beneficial to university study, both academically, personally and emotionally, as they felt they were more resilient than their peers and could draw on their own life experiences to enrich their studies. This study also demonstrated good practice in widening participation activities; such as the financial help available from the university

benefitting them, as they could not contact parents for emergency funds. The participants in this study also disclosed that the help of a named staff member at their institutions provided support in times of need, such as assistance accessing emergency funds, support with health issues and emotional needs. The participants stressed that it was important to have a person to talk to at short notice, which was not restricted to lecture times. The study also uncovered that some participants attended social support groups for care leavers, which were enjoyed, but also criticised as they were not always at convenient times and not all care leavers wished for others to know about their care experiences (Cotton *et al.*, 2014). The latter point is pertinent to remember when researching care leavers experiences of HE, as it is a sensitive issue, in which not all care leavers will wish to be singled out or talk about their experiences. It is also noted that not all care leavers choose to disclose to their universities that they have previously been under the care of Local Authorities and a desire for privacy may be a reason for this. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to remember at all times during the current research process that targeting students by demographic group could offend some individuals. This was considered in the sampling process of this study, outlined in Chapter 5.5.

Considering the low participation rate for care leavers progressing to HE; it could be deemed that care leavers are a disadvantaged group. Bourdieu (1992, 1986, 2013) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) described a disadvantage for individuals based upon the reproduction of norms through the family. Care leavers may be therefore further disadvantaged as they may have limited, broken or no contact with family members. Moreover, care leavers may be isolated and their access to capitals might be from their own resources rather than built through a family. Horizons for Action, as outlined by Hodkinson *et al.* (ibid) would be solely based upon the individual's personal possessions, unless supported by foster families or the local authority. For example, this could mean

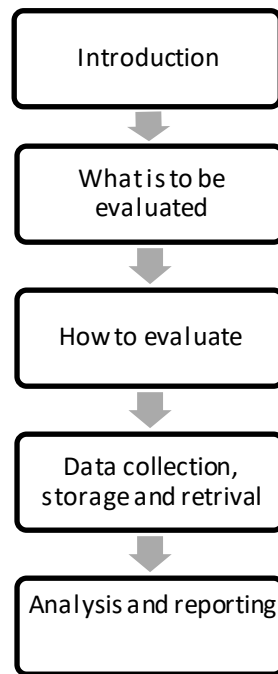
that an individual needed the use of a car to access interviews or employment, but that they might not be able to borrow a car from a family member. There is little literature that discusses care leavers' access to capitals (Barn, 2010). Due to the opportunist sampling strategy used (see Chapter 5.5), care leavers within the University could not be identified and no participant disclosed a care leaver status. The researcher attempted a snowballing strategy, as one participant lived with a student who had left care, but that student did not volunteer for the study.

## **4.8 Evaluating widening participation impact**

The use of evaluation and monitoring of widening participation activities has been deemed important by policy-makers, stemming from the Dearing (1997) report and is evident in all Access Agreements (OFFA, 2016). As described by Thomas (2000), widening participation should not be based upon the good intentions of staff members and academics, but based in research and evaluation from the voices of the stakeholders i.e. students. Research to evaluate the success of widening participation should not only provide quantitative monitoring data that would demonstrate application and enrolment data; but also rich narratives that can be accumulated from qualitative data, which may answer questions as to why some groups are less likely to participate or succeed in HE (Thomas, 2000; HEFCE, 2016c).

Raven (2015:249-250) provides an outline for the initial planning stages of evaluating widening participation activities, which outlines the stages shown below in Figure 4.1:





**Figure 4.1 - Planning stages of evaluating participation**

A review of the framework was undertaken, to gather feedback from practitioners and high level HE staff members. Overall, it was welcomed, due to the logical nature of the framework and ease of application. It was articulated that the majority of staff members targeted to undertake the evaluations would be widening participation practitioners, which provided benefits as it would help them communicate their evaluation plans to all interested stakeholders. However, it was also noted that there was a potential for bias if completed by practitioners as they may not hold extensive research experience. This can be outweighed by the thoroughness of the guidance and it is suggested that it would also improve institutional awareness of the process of widening participation activity and the potential impact that it makes.

Raven (2016b) has since elaborated on his work evaluating widening participation, by developing a second framework, which details guidance on how to evidence and gather data to demonstrate the impact of widening participation throughout the student lifecycle, shown below in Table 4.2:

**Table 4.2 - Evaluating widening participation activities by stage**

Stage	Targets	Interventions	Monitoring (and review)	Evaluation				
				Delivery	Immediate impact	Middle-term impact	Tracking	Longer-term impact
<b>Access</b>	<b>Primary</b> e.g. number of schools engaged	Talks in schools	Register of participants	Deliverer report	Deliverer report			
	<b>Secondary</b> e.g. number of targeted participants	Mentoring, university visits	Registers and consent forms	<i>Ditto</i> , learner questionnaire	<i>Ditto</i> , learner questionnaire	Learner survey, classroom observation		
	<b>Post 16</b> e.g. progression of participants	Shadowing, summer schools	<i>Ditto</i>				Outreach and admissions datasets	Life story interviews
<b>Success</b>	<b>Transition</b> e.g. new entrants	Peer Support	Register of attendees	Deliverer report, student questionnaire	Deliverer report, student questionnaire		Student records system with WP flag	
	<b>Continuation</b> e.g. dropout rates	Maths support, study workshops	<i>Ditto</i>			Online survey (spring term)	<i>Ditto</i>	
	<b>Completion</b> e.g. degree classification						<i>Ditto</i>	
<b>Progression</b>	<b>Further study</b> e.g. WP students onto PG programmes	Postgraduate options talks, careers guidance	Register of attendees	Deliverer Report	Deliverer Report		'Destination of Leavers'	Exit interviews
	<b>Employment</b> e.g. WP students gained graduate employment	Employability modules and work placements	<i>Ditto</i>	<i>Ditto</i>	<i>Ditto</i>	End of module questionnaire	<i>Ditto</i>	

(Adapted from Raven, 2016b:367)

This framework could inform how to complete the evaluation planning tool, as mentioned at the beginning of this section and also builds in ways in which to collect data for evaluation, from initial delivery through to the long-term impact. This framework assumes that various evaluation tools already exist, such as surveys at the end of programmes of study whilst in HE, accurate attendance monitoring and student data, which can mark widening participation characteristics. For some institutions, this would require authorisation from the senior leadership teams to ensure this data is collected centrally. From the data analysed and reported in this study, a social impact and evaluation framework is suggested in Chapter 9.2.4. This contributes to knowledge as it enhances Raven's (2016b) framework due to its theoretical base.

## **4.9 Summary**

Overall, the literature presented in this chapter and Chapter Three has suggested that HE can be a problematic field for underrepresented students to thrive within. McCowan (2016) suggests that to establish a widening participation agenda, fairness should be applied to make HE an inclusive environment, by removing cultural barriers. Bourdieu (1986) presents theory based upon forms of capital, whereby individuals have access to differing resources by way of economic, social and cultural capitals. The forms of capital are often typical to social class and those of higher social class groupings will typically hold more of the capitals than those lower in the hierarchy. Throughout this chapter, evidence has been discussed that may suggest students from underrepresented backgrounds may possess different levels of capital than a traditional student. Widening participation activity targets those from working-class and low-income backgrounds, mature students, students from BAME backgrounds, students with disabilities and care leavers. Barriers for these students are explained by HE providing a conflicting field to their habitus, as HE is based upon elite, middle-class origins (see Section 2.1 and 3.3).

Based upon the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1997) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) and the identification of economic, social and cultural barriers for HE students from underrepresented backgrounds, this chapter has identified gaps where the literature could be expanded. The literature presented has identified that it may be cultural or social differences that decrease the power afforded to widening participation students (Lukes, 2005), to allow them the same decision-making chances as traditional students. Foucault (1977) argues that power is acquired in a ubiquitous manner, as it is invisible and natural. However, power is gained through social and cultural norms according to Bourdieu (1977; 1992). By using a Bourdieusian lens, power can, therefore, be gained by anyone in the correct conditions and structures can aid an individual to accrue power by enhancing their agency and access to capitals. However, from Foucault's perspective, power imbalances are inevitable and therefore the process of widening participation may only reinforce power conflicts by ensuring that some groups are underrepresented and are not afforded the opportunities to thrive and succeed in the same manner that more powerful, traditional groups do.

Furthermore, literature based on the experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds has a tendency to either be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative studies show the reasons as to why there can be inequality in HE and provides rich data as to the lived experiences of students. Quantitative studies provide evidence for the gaps in HE, either by enrolment, attainment or employment after graduation. Research studies such as Dunne *et al.* (2014) provide a quantitative approach, as the evidence that students from non-HE participatory backgrounds are statistically less likely to attend HE. However, it does not provide qualitative data to explain why this may be. It would be this PhD study's original contribution to provide qualitative data based upon a theoretical framework to

understand the reasons why barriers occur and therefore how they can be amended to allow for fairness as argued by McCowan (2016).

The research will establish how students can build upon their existing agency, social and cultural capital and how universities can adapt to make this possible. Research that seeks to understand the macro-level experiences of underrepresented students, can provide the HEI sector with data on the impact of widening participation policy and how this impact is delivered. Furthermore, by embedding the research within a Bourdieusian framework centred upon habitus and access to capitals (Bourdieu, 1986), the research offered an original contribution to knowledge by theoretically demonstrating how social disadvantage limits underrepresented student's transitions from youth to adulthood (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Finally, by undertaking such a theoretical examination, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how widening participation policy and activity actually entrench existing power imbalances by embedding normative conceptions of agency and structure within the HEI sector (Bourdieu, 1992a; Foucault, 1966; Weber, 1978).

## 5. THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

### 5.1 Introduction

The methodology of this PhD thesis will be presented within this chapter in the form of a research journey. Qualitative research is often messy and non-linear (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012) and this chapter aims to describe the methodology and methods in a way that demonstrates the process and development of the study as well as the rationale and strengths of the final data collection tools. To begin, the ontological and epistemological paradigms are assessed for appropriateness to this study. Whilst qualitative research often takes a constructionist stance, critical realism provides a multi-level understanding of data. Although the study cannot assess the impact or provide a quantitative aspect to the conclusions, it does consider structural factors and seeks truth from three levels; empirical, actual and causal (Bhaskar, 1978).

The research process is then detailed in more depth. The research began with a mixed methods pilot study and a systematic literature search to inform the research design. However, similarly to the young people in Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) study, a turning point occurred when the introduction of new data protection legislation (EU, 2018)<sup>7</sup> made the University cautious about using student data for research (see Figure 5.1 for a visual representation of the journey). However, despite this change in direction, the research successfully collected qualitative data that was rich and meaningful. Life-story interviews were used to extract the narratives of attending university from ten underrepresented

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<sup>7</sup> The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) reformed the way in which personal data is to be collected and stored. Severe punishments are enforced upon any breaches of this regulation.

students. As concluded by Carrim (2016) life-story interviews help the participant and researcher to depict how their past experiences have shaped their decisions. Therefore, this is also complimentary in the application of student journeys to Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career-decision making model. To investigate the meso- and macro- levels of the participation of underrepresented students in HE, nine internal staff members and six external staff members participated in semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided further insights into the running of the HE sector in relation to underrepresented students and after analysis, the ways in which universities can act as institutional barriers to success for students.

Due to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the study recruited students in an opportunist fashion, using networks alongside digital and physical posters. The staff participants were recruited in a purposive manner, approaching a wide range of individuals to cover the range of roles within the University that are engaged with or impact upon widening participation (Chapter 5.5.1). Whilst the research became smaller and more focused, and could no longer provide causal evidence, it instead provides a rich and in-depth understanding of underrepresented students. By becoming more focussed, it provides empowerment to underrepresented students by allowing their stories to be heard (Chapter 5.4). The trustworthiness of the data (Chapter 5.7) is considered and it is argued that by using a qualitative approach, life-story and semi-structured interviews, the data collection was accessible as retelling stories is a format the majority of individuals are familiar with (Denzin, 1989). To ensure the safety of the participants and the researcher, the steps that were taken to ensure ethical research are shown (Chapter 5.8). This includes the regulations that were adhered to, the approval gained from the Research Ethics Committee and the process of informed consent. To finish the research journey, the data analysis process is described

(Chapter 5.9). The researcher conducted a thematic analysis using NVivo 12, coding transcripts of data to establish themes that are presented in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.





Figure 5.1 – A visual representation of the research journey

## 5.2 The construction of knowledge

Ontology and Epistemology are terms used to describe philosophical perspectives and are significant for researchers to outline their understanding of meaning and reality (Crotty, 1998). In addition, a researcher's ontological and epistemological standpoints shape the assumptions that they make and these assumptions affect the suitability of research methods in collecting data (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). This subsection will explore how knowledge is constructed and interpreted to make the researcher's position and assumptions clear. This allows the research to be interpreted with transparency by others; allowing them to understand how the original knowledge presented within this thesis is framed.

Ontology relates to the study of 'truth' and how the world can be experienced. Simplistically, it can be viewed as the dichotomy between whether an individual believes that there is objective knowledge, or whether they view the world as socially constructed and interpretable within multiple human realities (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002; Miller and Brewer, 2003). Ontology begins the debate on what is truth and what is real; people are essential in the meaning-making of truth (Crotty, 1998). As an example, if humans did not exist in the world; the planet and nature upon it would. However, without human interpretation, it would not be known why and how nature functions and remains. Knowledge is therefore constructed through observation and interpretation, and meaning is derived from human experience.

Beginning with ontological perspectives, objectivism perceives reality through measurable, tangible phenomenon, which will exist independently of human actors. The concepts within reality would have one interpretation as a result of analysis and would be understood in an objective manner (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Objectivist thinkers consider the world to act

independently from humans and that it would continue to function without individuals. Reality is seen to be merely scientific occurrences and not socially constructed by humans (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The benefits provided by an objectivist standpoint include less room for error or misinterpretation, as the guidelines for practising the philosophy suggest that only what can be scientifically measured and analysed is to be used. By adopting such a framework, truth would be easily gained and proved to be true. However, it can be argued that one truth for social phenomenon does not exist. For example, within widening participation practice, individuals are targeted based upon social groups and the experiences for individuals may differ between (and within) these groups.

It may not be possible to establish one truth as to why a disparity of access exists in HE as it could vary between and within groups. An example of this could be within BAME groups, as BAME individuals are often discussed as one group; however, there are differences within the group, which is not one homogenous whole. For example, the attainment gap varies between different ethnic groups (Richardson, 2010) (see Chapter 4.6). In addition, underrepresented groups are considered to be social constructions. For example, it has been argued that ethnicity and race are social definitions rather than biological, whereby they *“are forged by oppressive systems of race relations, justified by ideology, in which one group benefits from dominating other groups, and defines itself and others from this domination and the possession of selective and arbitrary physical characteristics”* (Krieger, 2001: 696). Therefore, when investigating social phenomena that include groups based on ethnicity and social class, it is necessary to acknowledge that the social does not only exist but contributes significantly to the way society functions. As Dancy (1985) highlights, researchers all hold their own life experiences that could lead to them interpreting phenomenon in different ways, even when using strict scientific methods. For example, two researchers conducting studies about access

and success in HE from different backgrounds using the same methods could still interpret the data in different ways. Considering the criticisms of the objectivist standpoint, it is rejected for this PhD thesis, as it would further disempower underrepresented students by disparaging their experience of social and structural barriers.

Constructionism provides the opposite viewpoint of objectivism. Constructionism proposes that there is no one truth available, that truths are multiples and are dependent upon context. In addition, an interpretivist approach analyses knowledge with the understanding that multiple truths exist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Constructionism and interpretivism suggest that the social world is entirely created by human actors and that it is created through perceptions and recreated by human interaction. As it is accepted that culture and society will influence human nature, the social world is therefore interpreted to hold multiple realities. Indeed, what may be true for one person could be entirely different for another (Denscombe, 2010). Constructionists consider what facts may be lost within a positivist approach, as causal questions are not asked and lived realities are not included due to their subjectivity (Guba, 1990). This research seeks to understand the perceived reality of students within a university setting and to delve into their own constructions of HE. Bourdieu defines power as socially constructed, through changing social and cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1977) rather than power being a natural phenomenon, as outlined by Foucault (1966). Furthermore, his concept of habitus, that is central to this thesis, also posits the socially constructed nature of individual experience.

Epistemology considers knowledge; how it is obtained, what its nature is and how individuals use it (Moser *et al.*, 1998). Porta and Keating (2008) elaborate further, outlining epistemology as a process that allows the researcher to gather appropriate evidence and provide

justification for their assertions. From an epistemological standpoint, positivism most closely aligns to objectivism and interpretivism to constructionism, but this is not an absolute rule. Positivism stems from the Enlightenment period (Von Wright, 1978), which as an era promoted and concentrated upon scientific approaches. However, Valle and King (1978) critiques objectivism and positivism by highlighting that to assume a scientific approach, presumes that social phenomenon must be measurable, observable and exist within a general consensus. If a positivist stance was adopted, only feasible and tangible aspects of the phenomenon of inequality of HE can be measured (Giorgi, 1970), rather than the enforced social constructions that inhibit underrepresented students. This could include qualitative data, which can provide causal and other illuminating data. Qualitative data would be discounted by positivists, as it investigates multiples without measurement; whereas, interpretivism allows the investigation of multiple truths and answers, similar to a constructionist ontology. Bryman (2012) suggests that the social world cannot simply be analysed in the same manner as the natural sciences, as humans are complicated beings. Lincoln (1990) developed a paradigm for the social sciences that aligns with an interpretivist framework, suggesting that qualitative data is the preferential data collection tool, with the human subject as the contextual focus. Due to the focus of this PhD thesis on empowering underrepresented students and raising their stories and narratives to diminish structural barriers, a positivist approach is entirely incompatible. As Denzin and Lincoln (2013: 19) powerfully state *“positivist... research reproduces only a certain kind of science, a science that silences too many voices”*.

Critical realism provides a connection between positivism/objectivism and interpretivism/constructionism. Critical realism begins with questions to be answered and hypotheses to be tested, in addition to using qualitative data to illustrate how the event is

experienced by individuals (Houston, 2014). Critical realism establishes the causal roots of reality (Bhaskar, 1978); in this instance, the causal roots of disadvantage within HE. This will result in changing the *modus operandi* (Bryman, 2012). Structural factors, such as the impact of institutions and the state, are considered by critical realists, rather than focusing solely on the decisions and actions made by individuals. Bhaskar (1978) argues that structures, referred to as mechanisms, exist and create causal factors to events. Therefore, within the context of HE, it would not be solely the choice of individuals to attend university, but also mechanisms, such as the HE sector or general education, which could contribute to the issue of under-participation. The ontological perspective of critical realism interprets reality through three levels, the first as empirical; in how reality is experienced. The second is the actual level that consists of reality that individuals do not experience first-hand, yet which still occurs. The final level is causal that dictates how the first two levels are experienced. Causal mechanisms create reality at the empirical and actual levels (Houston, 2014; Bhaskar, 1978).

Bhaskar (1997) elaborates on the actual level, in that reality does not need to be experienced in the first-hand to exist. To contradict that events are not real if they are not experienced by all hinders the discovery of causal factors of phenomenon. To translate to a widening participation context, if the reality of those from under-represented groups is not established and acknowledged, the reasons for a misbalance of participation will not be made clear. This could result in inequality being reproduced instead of addressed.

Behari-Leak (2017) utilised a critical realist approach in their study within HE, as it enabled the research to establish 'truth' from the three levels, empirical, actual and causal as described by Bhaskar (1978). By doing so, Behari-Leak (2017) were able to understand the experiences of new HE academics at the macro-, micro- and meso-levels. Critical realism as a

paradigm provides advantages for researching disparity in HE, as it provides a framework for a researcher who wishes to prove scientific social impact, yet also acknowledges that the lived experiences of individuals are valid and variable (Schilbrack, 2014). Adopting a critical realist perspective has three main benefits for researching HE. The first is a depth of data at the three levels; secondly, in enabling an ontological and epistemological standpoint that both consider 'truth' to be measurable, yet is also open to interpretation; and lastly, by incorporating these elements, the research can evidence the structural disadvantage that exists, which could ultimately enable change to empower students from underrepresented backgrounds to succeed in HE by valuing their contribution to HE and minimising barriers to success.

This study has evolved to focus upon the rich narratives and voices of underrepresented students (see Chapter 5.3.3 for details of the turning point in this study) by using a qualitative focus. Overall, the research takes a constructionist and interpretivist standpoint, acknowledging that truths are many and can be interpreted in many ways. However, critical realism provides a balance between constructionist and positivist viewpoints, allowing for truths that are empirical, actual and causal, whilst also considering the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Whilst this study will not be able to assert truly causal conclusions due to the scope of the data collection, it will consider the structural and individual factors within the decisions that students make. Therefore, a critical realist approach is taken for this thesis because it provides the benefits of both ends of the ontological and epistemological scale. These are that multiple truths can be acknowledged, whilst also providing measurable outcomes to evidence change within HE. Recommendations are made at the end of the study (Chapter 9.4) alongside a social impact measurement framework (Chapter 9.2.4) that direct future research to establish causal links in a mixed-methods approach.

### 5.3 Navigating the research process

Researching social phenomena is complex, and can be a messy and often non-linear process (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012), as has been the case for this study. This section will explain the research process and learning that has occurred during the journey of this PhD. The original ambition of the study was to be mixed methods; however, due to changes in the regulation of personal data, the study adapted and evolved (See Figure 5.1 for a visual representation). Ultimately, although conflict was experienced, it allowed the rich data that arose from the qualitative study to demonstrate its importance. This section will describe and rationalise the steps taken to create the research design. Although the plan changed, it felt important to be transparent about the process so that the reader can fully evaluate and understand the researcher's decision-making processes. Cook (2009:277) described a turning point in 'messy' research as a *"transformation in practice... it is the place where long-held views... are seen through other lenses"*. Therefore, by describing the turning point in the study, it shows how the researcher's thinking has been reframed and refocused, leading to the new knowledge created. The pilot study process will be included and discussed; however, the results from this data are no longer applicable to this study. Following the pilot study, the systematic literature search is presented. Similar to Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model, a turning point arose. This turning point is then discussed to show how the study has been shaped and it is argued that the turning point has allowed for a positive evolution in the research design. Finally, the research questions that were formed, as a result of the journey the research has undertaken, will be detailed and explored.



### 5.3.1 Pilot study

To help inform the research design, a small-scale pilot study was completed. The first stage of the pilot was to establish the University's long-term strategic goals around widening participation and how this would shape and be shaped by the research. This was achieved by facilitating a workshop with a small staff team, consisting of five people from the University, who provide services to all students. The discussion focused upon the existing and desired provision for students from under-represented backgrounds (see Appendix 2 for the discussion schedule).

Using UCAS admissions data, 200 graduates from the University who met widening participation target criteria were identified and asked to partake in a 30-minute telephone interview. Graduates were invited to the study, as they could reflect on their studies at the University and could discuss the positive and negative aspects of the support they received during their studies. Telephone interviews were necessary as some of the graduates were no longer local to the area. Novick (2008) highlighted that telephone interviews can also be beneficial for participants, as they can feel more relaxed within their own familiar surroundings. A total of 15 graduates were recruited to voluntarily participate in the study. The demographics of these participants are shown in Appendix 3. The interview schedule for the Alumni participants is also provided in Appendix 4.

The quantitative data was gathered from 10,157 former undergraduates (UG) of the University comprising five cohorts of Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data (data gathered for the period 2010/11-2014/15). These cohorts were matched with Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data supply tables, so as to ascertain widening

participation indicators. The data was analysed to establish the following key predictors: 'good' degree<sup>8</sup> attainment, progression and employment outcomes.

Due to the change in focus of the study due to data protection fears (Chapter 5.3.3), the findings, will not be included within the study as they do not align with the research focus. The executive findings are available in Appendix 5. However, overall the pilot study greatly enriched the research journey of the PhD study, as the interviews with graduates gave the researcher the idea of conducting life-story interviews in the main data gathering phase of the PhD. The graduate participants had left the university around a year previously and began their careers, therefore their experiences of university had left the forefront of their minds. Life-story interviews (see Chapter 5.4.3 and 5.7) take a chronological order, that increases recall as participants can retell their lives in a logical way (Raven, 2016a).

### 5.3.2 Systematic literature search

To establish the methods and methodology for this PhD thesis, a review of existing literature was completed. Widening participation as a term has existed since the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997), which has resulted in a plethora of research articles within the subject area. To establish the current research focus for widening participation, this review reveals the trends in regards to the methods utilised since 2012. The year 2012 was an important date for widening participation, as it is the year in which both the higher rate of tuition fees and a more stringent process for monitoring fair access within HE through Access Agreements were introduced. A search was conducted using the online database (British Education Index), of peer-reviewed journal articles that included one of the following phrases in the abstract:

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<sup>8</sup> A 'good' degree is considered a first or upper second class degree.

“widening participation”, “Access to Higher Education” or “underrepresented”. By using geography restrictors to include only UK research, provided too few journals to create an effective review, therefore there were no geographical restrictors used. For articles that contained the term “underrepresented” in the abstract, these were limited by subject to those that were appropriate, such as papers focused on Higher Education. This led to the identification of 213 relevant journal papers. During the process of the review, each journal was coded to describe their methodological choices: empirical or conceptual; and quantitative, qualitative or a mixed methods approach. Table 5.1 outlines the results.

**Table 5.1 - Methodology in widening participation research**

	<b>Total N (%)</b>	<b>Empirical Research</b>				<b>Conceptual Research N (%)</b>	<b>Other N (%)</b>
		<b>Qualitative N (%)</b>	<b>Quantitative N (%)</b>	<b>Mixed Methods N (%)</b>	<b>Unclear N (%)</b>		
Widening Participation	110 (100%)	40 (36.4%)	9 (8.2%)	18 (16.4%)	2 (1.8%)	27 (24.5%)	14 (12.7%)
Access to Higher Education	76 (100%)	17 (22.4%)	16 (21%)	12 (15.8%)	0 (0%)	7 (9.2%)	24 (31.7%)
Underrepresented	27 (100%)	10 (37%)	7 (26.9%)	4 (14.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (22.2%)

Overall, the review of the prior literature demonstrated that the majority of identified journals were empirical studies, with qualitative data collection occurring most frequently in each search. Those coded as unclear methods belonged to two articles where the full text was unavailable and the methods could not be ascertained from the abstract. For articles in the other column, these articles were editorials, literature or book reviews. This review demonstrates that qualitative data is most frequently used within the current widening participation literature, with mixed methods as a less common approach. This thesis had the original ambition to be a mixed-methods study; (process explained in Chapter 5.3.3) as a result of this systematic literature search. However, as this became no longer feasible, only qualitative methods were used. The literature search has demonstrated that a purely qualitative approach is feasible for research in widening participation and is commonly accepted. Furthermore, the researcher would assert that the depth, richness and quality of the data gathered have shown the qualitative approach adopted to be robust, valid and capable of informing the in-depth conclusions required to explain disadvantage within the HE ecosystem. The qualitative methods have also enabled the researcher to explore the relationships between both personal and institutional barriers to HE, and the juxtaposition between them.

Research that has taken a purely quantitative approach (Farmer, 2017; Rowbottom, 2017; Byrne and Cushing, 2015) can demonstrate impact and outcomes but lack a response from the individuals concerned as to how the outcomes were reached. Conversely, the opposite can be true for studies focusing upon qualitative data only (Farmer, 2017; Jackson, 2012; McMahon *et al.*, 2016), as whilst the experiences of individuals provide an important description of the barriers to HE and youth transitions, they are not supported by measurable statistical outcomes. Kettley (2007) predicts the future for widening participation research should be aimed towards evaluation of the *process* of

underrepresented students journey to HE, considering the social, cultural and economic influences, to demonstrate effectiveness and impact. This was achieved in this thesis, as the qualitative life-story interviews asked students to reflect on the influences to their journey. The conceptions of qualitative research can be political as academic disciplines can be resistant to qualitative methods and non-academics can describe it as soft science (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). The theoretical lens (Chapter 3.6) and the research questions (Chapter 5.3.4) discuss the experiences of underrepresented students, from a Bourdieusian (1977, 1986, 1992a, 1992b) perspective and by implementing Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1998) career decision-making model. Quantitative methods would not provide data that relates to these experiences or a student's habitus and decision-making, to the same depth and richness as qualitative methods offer.

### 5.3.3 A turning point within the research (A personal reflection)

Within Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1998) model of career decision-making lies the concept of turning points, instances that can occur in any aspect of an individual's life. Hodkinson *et al.* (1998: 142) suggested that turning points can be a '*mismatch between personal motivations and official structures*'. After the researcher had carried out the literature review, pilot study and systematic literature search, there arose an institutional barrier within the University that changed the course of the study. Following the completion of the pilot study, the study was originally designed to be mixed-methods, including life-story interviews, but also incorporating the measurement of underrepresented students General Self-Efficacy (GSE) (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 2010) and mental wellbeing (Taggart *et al.*, 2015) longitudinally (at the beginning of the Level 4 study academic year, and again at the end of that academic year). This was aligned to an intervention being piloted by the University. However, the intervention did not proceed due to software programming bugs in the University's systems; it simply did not function as anticipated

and was therefore later abandoned. As a second attempt at a mixed-methods study, the quantitative methods were still to be collected and analysed, with two groups, those who were considered underrepresented and those who were not. However, as the pilot study demonstrated, the University did not hold complete records of the markers that indicate if a student was underrepresented (such as POLAR or NS-SEC details). Therefore, the sampling would still have issues.

However, the research began collecting data at a time of uncertainty in Autumn 2017. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a European Union (EU) initiative that reformed the way in which personal data, such as demographic details, was to be collected, stored and how it was to be used, was implemented in May 2018 (EU, 2018). At the time the request for student data was made, the University had not confirmed its policy for the use of student data for research purposes and was therefore unable to provide it for the purpose of this research, for fear of contravening the regulation. This was an institutional barrier for my study and for the wider student population. At the time of finishing this thesis, GDPR has been active for a year and the approach taken by the University was overzealous. It also demonstrated that regulation and policy was prioritised over (underrepresented) student success and experience. A compromise was made and the call for participants was sent through a third party, an employability team, in which students had opted in to receive emails from, but this yielded a very low response rate. Despite multiple attempts, students were unresponsive to complete the survey and this meant that there was insufficient data with which to complete the quantitative element of the research. Other measures were used; I attended lectures, used traditional marketing such as physical and online posters, but a sample that could be representative of two student groups was unable to be reached.

Although a low response rate was experienced with the measurement scales, over the course of six months, ten students voluntarily participated in life-story interviews. All ten students were underrepresented in the criteria set by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (OFFA, 2016), the regulatory body at the time. The life-story interviews were honest, raw and rich narratives. As I transcribed and began the coding process (see Chapter 5.9), it emerged that this data was illuminating to the study at a deeper level than would have been possible with statistical data. The decision was then made to create a purely qualitative study and staff members within the University and externally were invited to also participate in the study to provide a spotlight on the experiences of underrepresented students from multiple levels. Whilst the setback was disappointing, the turning point has ultimately been positive for this study and created an original contribution to knowledge; this contribution is the application of a theoretical framework based upon Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1992), Weber (1978) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) that informs our understanding of underrepresented students' decision-making processes (Chapter 9.3). The following sections of this chapter will now present the methods used to collect and analyse the data.

#### 5.3.4 The research questions

The current academic literature surrounding widening participation was reviewed and analysed. This provided a theoretical lens (Chapter 3.6) for the researcher to interpret data to guide the research methods. This resulted in the following research questions being created:

1. How do underrepresented students experience barriers and opportunities at the University?
2. How do staff believe they support underrepresented students?

3. In which ways do students habitus change through their experiences at the University?
4. How do students make decisions and actions in relation to their experiences at the University?

The research questions outlined above are based on the literature reviewed in the previous three chapters. Through a theoretical lens based upon the works of Bourdieu (1977, 1992, 1986), Weber (1978) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) that focussed upon structural barriers that influence decision-making (Chapter 3.6), this thesis sought to understand the experiences of HE for underrepresented students at the University. This will be answered by exploring the staff perspectives to complement the student's stories. This research adopted a qualitative approach, student voices and experiences were heard within life-story interviews and staff perspectives and commitment to widening participation was explored in semi-structured interviews.

## **5.4 A qualitative study**

### **5.4.1 Semi-structured interviews**

The meso- and the macro-levels were analysed by collecting internal and external staff interview data. Nine internal staff members; including academics and the professional services, were provided with an information and consent sheet (Appendix 7) and voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 9 for the interview schedule). External staff members from other universities (six), including those who have published in the area of widening participation, academics and researchers along with policy-makers also participated in the research. Details of the staff participants are provided in Chapter 5.5.1. The external interviews were conducted at the participant's usual place of work with a personalised interview schedule (see Appendix 9 for an example).



#### 5.4.2 Life-story interviews

Life-story interviews are reported to provide increased depth of data, as it allows the participants to lead their own interview and provide information that is important to them. In addition, by using life markers, such as starting secondary school, interviewees are often able to recall more information and can reflect upon the choices that they made (Atkinson, 1998). Carrim (2016) conducted twelve life-story interviews with parents regarding their daughters' employment, to ascertain their views and how their prior experiences shaped their daughters' decision-making process. Carrim (*ibid.*) opted to use the life-story interview approach as it asks participants to consider how their history shapes their current decisions. Life-story interviews were appropriate for the PhD study, as using life-story interviews allowed the participants to reflect on their journey to HE as underrepresented individuals. Likewise, this study wanted to establish how underrepresented students made decisions. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) outlined motivations for young people's career decision-making, including Horizons for Action, which are often shaped by external influences such as family and peers. Therefore, the data collected from life-story interviews were analysed from a carer decision-making perspective, so as to align with the theoretical lens of this study.

Ten students participated in life-story interviews. The demographics of students are provided in Chapter 5.5.1. Participants were provided with an information and consent sheet (Appendix 5) and the questions were shaped around a general structure that follows a typical life pathway through compulsory education leading to their university experience (Appendix 7). Although the structure was followed in regards to the timeline, the interviews were mostly participant led; that is students told the researcher what was important about their journey at each stage. For example, Fiona's home and personal life had more influence on her journey to university and focused more on that. However, the

school system itself had more of a profound effect on James. This, therefore, allowed the researcher to ascertain how different factors affected the decisions of different individuals, as well as enabling an understanding of the interplay between personal (choices) and institutional (structural) factors in shaping life choices and career decision-making around access to Higher Education.

## **5.5 Sampling**

As discussed in Chapter 5.3.3, due to the aforementioned turning point in the study, the sampling method used was opportunist. Purposive sampling recruits participants through selective criteria to ensure they meet the grouping for the research being undertaken (Topp *et al.*, 2004) and would have been more appropriate to get a pure sample of student participants. However, due to data protection and ethical issues, opportunist sampling was the most appropriate method. At a time of data protection reform, it was unclear if it was both appropriate or possible to collate student data for the research that would allow identification of individuals from widening participation backgrounds, therefore it was not possible to create a purposive sample. There were also ethical concerns surrounding labelling, as by approaching underrepresented students, there was a risk that they would feel considered as 'other'? This raised concerns for the researcher as to whether this would lead to further disempowerment of the student? Therefore, students were recruited to the study from digital and physical posters (Appendix 10) and by using my own networks to have introductions made with students by their peers. Participants in the study were asked if they would invite friends and class colleagues to participate in the research so as to create a snowball sample; however, no volunteers came forward. This also aligns with the ethical considerations of voluntary participation, as students completely self-selected into the study.

Given the research focus on habitus and empowerment, this was important to the researcher so as to ensure participants were genuinely consenting and comfortable to share their (often deeply personal and private) stories. Staff participants followed a purposive sampling strategy; indeed, internal and external staff members were invited to participate in the study based upon their job roles and experience, so as to create a rounded view of the experience of underrepresented students in HE. Not all invitations were accepted, so, therefore, a true purposive sample was not obtained; however, it was important not to pressure potential participants as this would undermine the ethical approach to this research. Staff members may have been influenced in their decision to participate in the study by the institutional habitus. Perhaps those who had many critical viewpoints of the University or perhaps were concerned they would speak out of turn and create difficulties for themselves declined the invitation. Reay *et al.* (2001) defined institutional habitus as the culture of the organisation, so perhaps within the University the culture was not to discuss and reflect on practice in this way, therefore it felt uncomfortable for staff to do so. However, this is speculation, as without hearing their viewpoints it is impossible to ascertain truth.

### 5.5.1 The research participants

The tables below provide demographic details about the participants within the study. Table 5.2 shows the widening participation characteristics of student participants. The participants all volunteered to the study and there were no prerequisites to take part, other than that it was asked that all participants were home students. Due to the demography of the University's population, all participants met widening participation criteria, whilst six of the participants met more than one widening participation criteria. This sample did not recruit any care leavers. One participant offered to pass my details on to their flatmate who had left care, but I was not contacted by them.

**Table 5.2 - The student participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>FiF<sup>9</sup></b>	<b>POLAR4 Quintile</b>	<b>BAME</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Mature</b>	<b>Care Leaver</b>
<b>Andrew</b>	Y	Not disclosed	N	N	N	N
<b>Andreas</b>	Y	Not disclosed	N	N	Y	N
<b>Luke</b>	Y	4	Y	Y	Y	N
<b>Lindsay</b>	Y	3	N	N	N	N
<b>Chloe</b>	Y	3	N	N	N	N
<b>James</b>	Y	3	N	N	N	N
<b>Susan</b>	Y	3	N	N	Y	N
<b>Hana</b>	Y	3	Y	N	N	N
<b>Fiona</b>	N <sup>10</sup>	4	N	Y	Y	N
<b>George</b>	Y	1	N	N	N	N

The internal staff participants are listed in Table 5.4. A mix of lecturing and professional services staff were included in the sample. Their exact faculties and job roles are not provided to keep anonymity. Those in the professional services included head of departments and their staff who focused upon widening participation in different contexts, such as school outreach, teaching and learning and employability skills. A member of the student union also contributed to the study to advocate for the student population at the University.

**Table 5.3 Internal staff participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>Kacey</b>	Senior Lecturer
<b>Thomas</b>	Professional Services
<b>William</b>	Professional Services
<b>Rowena</b>	Professional Services
<b>Benjamin</b>	Professional Services
<b>Laurel</b>	Senior Lecturer
<b>Lisa</b>	Senior Lecturer
<b>Amy</b>	Professional Services
<b>Ricardo</b>	Student Union

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<sup>9</sup> First in family.

<sup>10</sup> Fiona is estranged from her mother, but Fiona believed her mother went to university.

Finally, the external staff participants are listed in Table 5.5. Their roles have been kept intentionally vague to ensure their confidentiality. These participants were based in various universities and organisations in England. Each participant was approached due to their prominence in widening participation research and policy, each having often presented at conferences and published in academic journals. For those who were researchers, many had also taught in HE or had prior experience as practitioners in the field of education. Their inputs helped inform the wider picture of HE beyond the research site.

**Table 5.4 External staff participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>Professor Josie</b>	Researcher
<b>Dr Neville</b>	Researcher
<b>Professor Craig</b>	Researcher
<b>Dr Jacob</b>	Researcher
<b>Dr Gordon</b>	Researcher
<b>Robert</b>	Policy-maker

## 5.6 Data analysis process

Once interviews were completed, the audio files were transcribed and analysed. The method of analysis used was thematic analysis; a systematic process that creates meaning and themes from the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The benefit of using a thematic analysis process was its flexibility; data that directly related to the original research questions were easily identified and coded and it allowed for emerging themes to be developed from the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The thematic analysis was conducted alongside critical realist principles; to establish the empirical, causal and actual alongside the micro-, meso- and macro levels. In a similar fashion to Fletcher (2017) demi-regularities (common behaviours, such as learning to play the game) were identified within the data; this established reality at an empirical level. The micro-, meso- and

macro-levels were identified by using the original research questions broken as codes that indicated if they were organisational or individual. Furthermore, theoretical codes were also included. The codes provided themes, which Braun and Clarke (2006:82) defined as *“something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”*. The physical process of the thematic analysis is discussed in more detail below.

Interviews were audio recorded and were subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts were uploaded into a project within NVivo 12<sup>11</sup> to be thematically coded. I had attended training courses with the Graduate School on the use of NVivo. The first was introductory and the software proved to be useful in coding large amounts of data. I attended the intermediate course twice; once for practice and learning, and the second time with my own data. This allowed me to work with a more experienced NVivo user to ensure my use of the programme was correct. Although NVivo was utilised, it is important to add that the data were analysed by the researcher, not the programme, as the software only assists the main analysis tool, the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). As suggested by Brod *et al.* (2009), two levels of codes were established, those that were directly related to the research questions (such as social capital or imbalance of power) and those that emerged during the analysis process (such as beliefs and values or possible turning point). The total number of codes identified were 45. These include 12 parent nodes.

Parent nodes were created to group together codes of the same theme. These were made up of those directly relating to the research questions, as well as emergent codes. An overview of the coding workbook is available in Appendix 10 and an example of coding

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<sup>11</sup> NVivo is a computer programme used to store and collate qualitative data to aid analysis.

frequency is presented in Appendix 11. The parent nodes were then grouped into three overarching themes, these being: the imbalance of power; the role of autonomy; and the student decision-making process. This process is described as classical content analysis (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011), wherein the researcher systematically codes the material to establish themes that created *a posteriori* understanding of the data. For example, the data collected helped illuminate the theoretical framework (Figure 3.6) and led to the creation of the student decision-making model (Figure 9.1). The themes are presented in the following discussion chapters, whereby decision-making is entwined throughout, based upon the structural and individual barriers and enablers that are presented in the study.

## **5.7 Reflections on the research process**

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this PhD study was one of non-representativeness. As will be discussed in Section 5.7, steps were taken to achieve reliable data, but it will not be representative of the whole of the UK due to the sample size and sampling frame. The data collected is from one Post-1992 university, and the barriers that exist for students and their experiences could vary greatly across different institutions. Another limitation of the study is its time constraints. Due to the nature of full-time PhD study, it was not possible to obtain data from students throughout their whole lifecycle (from pre-entry to employment post-study). Instead, the life-story interviews occurred at one time only and were not followed up at the end of studies. However, due to the change in data collection and based upon Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model, the students' experiences after university were not vital to this study.

The focus was upon their journey to university rather than their experiences afterwards. Students also volunteered at differing points of their studies, which provided a balanced

view of the decisions made by students and a wide range of experiences throughout the degree study process. Due to time and resources, this was a relatively small-scale study, focusing on qualitative data only. An additional university would have been beneficial as a comparator, in particular, a different HEI type, such as a Russell group institution; however, this was beyond the scope of this study. However, as critical realism (see Chapter 5.2) highlights, there can be multiple truths and what is true for one may not be true for another. Therefore, this study is illuminating within its own context and the framework presented in Chapter 9.2.4 allows for future research to expand this study. The overall limitations of the study are discussed in more depth in Chapter 9.5.

This research required a reflexive researcher for the collection of qualitative data. The actions and language used by the researcher during the interview process could have potentially influenced the information provided by the participant. The researcher's identity could have caused participants to provide data in relation to the position they interpreted the researcher to hold (McGinty, 2012). For example, student participants may be reluctant to share information with the researcher if they believed her to be in a position of power. In relation to Bauman's (2000) conceptualisation of "liquid identities", Thomson and Gunter (2011) suggests researchers should adapt liquid identities in qualitative data collection to best fit the situation to minimize the interviewer bias. In practice, I found this easier to emulate with student participants rather than staff. As I related personally to underrepresented students (see Chapter 1.2.3 for my own reflections), I found it a comfortable process and I did not interpret distress from the participants. Participants appeared calm and forthcoming in their answers and interactions with me.

Within the notes made after interviews, one of my comments after an external interview was *"I felt prepared enough, but I feel flat after the interview. Did we not bond?"*. I



carefully considered my practice within that interview, but it was also the first external one and it required substantial travel, so perhaps it was anxiety that made me feel unsure. The next interviews were much smoother, as I adapted to the process by amending the questions slightly after listening to the recording of that first external interview again. The process of designing and facilitating the life-story interviews was carefully considered, to not include the researcher's own experiences and emotions around fair access to HE to become conflated with the participants. This was achieved through remaining reflexive during the interviews and ensuring neutrality when listening to recordings after interviews, as well as keeping reflective notes after interviews that went particularly well or those that did not feel as comfortable and natural.

To reflect upon my own experiences in HE, I entered as a mature, white, female student from a working-class background and felt and experienced HE in a different way than my peers from different groups. For example, I enrolled with an ambition to learn whereas some students entered to fulfil defined career paths. By adopting a critical realist approach, where reality can be interpreted from many different perspectives depending on the observer, I seek change within the HE sector, to create a more inclusive and socially just environment, so that individuals who had similar experiences to me can also enjoy the benefits of HE. By acknowledging my own bias and experience, I maintained an adaptive and reflexive approach. This benefited my empathy with students within this study and was positive in building rapport with participants from underrepresented backgrounds (see Chapter 1.2.3).

## **5.8 Trustworthiness and authenticity**

Life-story and biographical methods are often used in educational research (Merrill and West, 2009). Riessman (1993:3) commended a narrative, storytelling approach as *"telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human experience"*, therefore making

the approach accessible to a wide range of potential participants. Elliott (2005) outlined that researchers should confront whether the qualitative data collected is accurate and valid. Elliott (*ibid*) also posited that small scale qualitative studies cannot always be representative of the whole group concerned. This study does not claim to be generalisable, but merely a spotlight or case study of one group of underrepresented students within a Post-1992 university. Concerns have been raised about the risk of trustworthiness in the respect of those who omit details about their lives that could be important in the data analysis for this study. However, Merrill and West (2009) highlighted that this is often in extreme cases relating to traumatic experiences within a person's life. Jaffe *et al.* (2015) examined participants' experiences of interviews about traumatic events. Their findings showed that the majority of participants did not feel traumatised and found the process beneficial. Jaffe *et al.* (*ibid*) suggested providing the participant with control, such as by highlighting their rights to withdraw, which helps to mitigate any potential traumatisation. The use of life-story interviews in this study is not to investigate trauma, but to focus on the participants' journey to education. However, as I did not know the stories participants were about to tell me, I stressed to participants before, during and after the interview that they did not need to talk about anything they did not want to, such as traumatic events, and they had a right to withdraw partially or entirely from the study. No participants withdrew from the study, nor demonstrated signs of distress. Two participants had areas that they did not want to discuss in detail; for example, Luke did not want to go into detail about the breakdown in the relationship with his child's mother and Fiona looked uncomfortable talking about her mother. Luke was clear and I did not push the subject, and as Fiona looked uncomfortable I also changed the subject. This did not affect the interviews, as the finer details of these experiences would not be relevant to the study. Therefore, within this study I believe that the risk of

missing details was counteracted in relation to ensuring that recalled trauma for participants was minimised.

Denzin (1989) warned about the interpretation of people's life-stories, in that the researcher should not deviate from the facts given from people's narratives. For example, where Luke did not wish to disclose the finer details of the breakdown in a relationship, the details surrounding this are not assumed by the researcher. This is mitigated by presenting the quotes within the discussion document, so as to rely only upon the data collected. This study has adopted a qualitative approach and heeded the advice and guidance of the prior literature to ensure that the stories of participants were truthfully reflected; whilst also being aware of the limitations, to gain trustworthy and valid conclusions.

## **5.9 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations within research are fundamental; within the field of widening participation, the process of ensuring fair access is based upon labelling individuals and it is not appropriate for individuals to experience any feeling of disadvantage or inadequacy. Participants of the study and students from widening participation backgrounds in general, were not viewed or treated as deficit or lesser students due to their circumstances throughout the study (Cotton *et al.*, 2016) as this PhD study sought to be empowering. Stevenson *et al.* (2010) argue that students can be blamed, sometimes in a subtle manner, for their non-participation in HE due to their abilities or culture. Moreover, the focus should be upon HEIs to create environments for all to thrive. Smit (2012) reports a deficit model has negative consequences for students, as it can perpetuate stereotypes of low expectations, alienation and a disregard restricting structural issues within HE. Therefore, this research has been cautious and reflective throughout the process of writing, data collection and analysis that students are not

reflected as in deficit in any way, in order to promote the empowerment of students from all backgrounds. As shown in the theoretical framework (Section 3.6), Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 1992) works suggest that students can be disadvantaged in education because of their access to the forms of capital and by their habitus. These are factors that are not controlled by the individual but can be barriers presented within universities and wider society.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) ethical guidelines for educational research were adhered to at all times throughout the duration of this research project. In recognition of BERA (ibid) and the University of Northampton's (2016) research ethics code and procedures; ethical approval in principle was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016, followed by full approval on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017. An ethical amendment was added and approved on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2018 for the addition of staff interviews after the research turning point (see Chapter 5.3.3). It was important that all participants to this study were recruited on a voluntary basis, having received no incentive to participate and no methods of deception were used. To ensure this, each participant was provided with an information sheet that outlines the study, its purpose and what would be expected from the participant (see Appendix 5 and 6). The information sheet clarified their complete anonymity, the security of the data provided and their right to withdraw from the study. This ensured the participants were able to provide their informed consent by understanding the research in full and by signing a consent form provided with the information sheet.

The research with students of the University was conducted in a professional manner, on the University campus (or at the participants' usual place of work in the case of external participants), as it provided a safe space and the most neutral ground for both researcher and participant. In relation to student participants, due to the researcher's experience of

several years in HE to students who may be in their first year, the campus cannot be considered entirely neutral; however, it does hold the lowest risk with regards to health and safety considerations as the premises are monitored and regulated by the University to ensure the buildings and environment are safe. The considerations of a potential power imbalance are discussed in Chapter 9.5. Face-to-face interactions with the participant were tape-recorded (with their permission) to be later transcribed. The participants were all over the age of 18. This was to ensure that each participant provided informed consent to take part in the research. Informed consent is achieved by providing information about the study, including its aims and dissemination plan, alongside the participant's rights, such as the right to withdraw, so that the participant can make a decision on whether they wish to participate (Bryman, 2012). Cohn and Larson (2007) argued that the informed consent process can be improved by ensuring the participant understood the document, therefore I spoke with each participant before commencing the interview to check if they had any questions or concerns before they started. I also reiterated their rights with regards to confidentiality and their right to withdraw.

## **5.10 Summary**

The non-linear research journey has been outlined within this chapter, to make the evolution of the design and conduct of the research approach as transparent as possible. The way in which that knowledge is constructed was firstly defined and discussed. Ontology and epistemology describe the philosophical paradigms that underpin the understandings of meaning and reality. Within the context of this study, the research is overall constructionist/interpretivist, as it is accepted that the social world has multiple truths which are constructed by humans and can be interpreted in multiple ways. Critical realism provides another understanding of how truth can be interpreted. Whilst this research, due to its solely qualitative nature, cannot provide one truth as it does not

provide measurable outcomes, it does blend some of the principles of critical realism, as it incorporates the structural factors that can influence the social world and it examines truth through three levels; empirical, actual and causal (Bhaskar, 1978). This multi-level understanding had benefits for this study as the life-story interviews examined the micro-level, whilst the semi-structured interviews with staff examined the meso- and macro-levels.

The research process was then discussed to demonstrate how it evolved. A visual representation of the research journey is provided in Figure 5.1 to help guide the reader. A pilot study was carried out early in the research process (that was mixed-methods in its approach), as a scoping exercise to guide the main PhD study. This was supplemented with a systematic literature search to ascertain any gaps in the existing literature. A mixed-methods study was planned; however, conflict was reached regarding the impending GDPR rules (EU, 2018). Through a personal reflection, the process that aligned the study to a purely qualitative study was described. As the life-story interviews with students had already begun and proved to be a rich source of narrative, it was decided to supplement these with semi-structured interviews with both internal and external staff, so as to build knowledge around the experiences of underrepresented students in HE and how they made decisions about going to university.

Due to the data protection legislation, the sample of student participants was opportunistic; using posters and the help of lecturers to convey the information for students to self-select if they wanted to participate. The recruitment of staff members was partially purposive, as a fair sample of the different roles in HE was covered, although not all invitations were accepted. NVivo 12 was used to supplement the researcher's analysis, allowing codes to be organised and easily recalled. The analysis established three overarching themes: the imbalance of power; the influence of autonomy; and the

career decision-making model. These themes are to be presented within the next three chapters in relation to the theoretical model provided in Chapter 3.6. Within the reflections of the research journey, alongside considering the trustworthiness of the data, the limitations and strengths of the study were discussed. Overall, the data collection went smoothly and the interactions between participant and researcher were generally comfortable and safe. These considerations were also made when ensuring the research was ethical, BERA (2011) and University of Northampton (2016) ethical guidelines were adhered to. Formal ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) on three occasions as the research design evolved the data collection progressed.

## 6. BELIEFS AND VALUES, AUTONOMY AND CHOICE

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin to outline the findings of the study from an individual student perspective. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996:145) proposed that people are more than their careers, stating that *“they are members of families, have friends, engage in leisure activities... all these different facets of a person’s existence inter-weave and impinge upon each other”* and it is through this social context that we shall begin the focus of our analysis. This is related back to the themes of empowerment to social action, and how these are shaped by personal experience, class and institutions (Weber, 1978). Therefore, the internal motivations of the participants and the staff members who work with them, along with interpretations of how this affects student’s Horizons for Action are examined in this chapter.

The data highlighted how Hodkinson *et al.*’s (1996) career decision-making model could be applied to the participant’s decisions to attend university. Data from the life story interviews supported this, and this chapter will focus on how beliefs and values of participants shaped their decisions to attend university. The data and Hodkinson *et al.*’s (ibid.) work informed the student decision-making model that was presented in Chapter 3.7. The findings in this chapter demonstrated that a student’s beliefs and values, which are shaped within families and peer groups, influenced their university experiences and is at the core of these decisions. This section explores the positive and negative aspects of students’ beliefs and values on university access and success and identifies how habitus and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) interact with beliefs and values. The application of the student decision-making model and its entwinement with Bourdieu’s theoretical approaches to the reproduction of inequality



shapes the original contribution to knowledge this study provides, as it further highlights how inequality is reproduced in HE and how change can be enacted.

This study sought to establish how personal choice and autonomy can impact upon success. Participants often used *Proactive, Preventative and Reactive Coping* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002) mechanisms and this study argues that the choices made by students are based upon many factors that are influenced by the surrounding layers in the decision-making model. For those who have limited autonomy, evidence demonstrates that it is a conflict of habitus that results in underrepresented students feeling unsettled and unable to confidently apply independence at their full potential. In addition, the data shows how the fields and structures of university limit and restrict opportunities for students, as policies are exclusive of those who do not fit the traditional student model.

## **6.2 How beliefs and values influence the university decision**

Beliefs and values are one of four corners identified by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996), as part of their young person's career decision-making model (see Chapter 3.7). Beliefs and values are held by the individual and are shaped by family and peers. The outcome of a person's beliefs and values is demonstrated in their internal motivations. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identify that individuals base their career decisions upon their life stories and how this shapes their identities. Hodkinson and Sparkes (*ibid*) relate this to Bourdieu's habitus, the concept that individuals' beliefs and prior experiences influence their actions and interpretations of tasks (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977). The findings from the life story interviews and subsequent staff interviews provide evidence to show the influence of the individual and their life stories to their navigation to and through HE. Beliefs and values are at the core of the

student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2) as it is the forefront of the decisions made by students.

During the life story interviews, to an extent, all participants discussed how their families shaped their decision to come to university. To demonstrate this, Hana's life story will be used as an example. Hana is a young entrant to university on a large course in the Business faculty. Hana enjoys university and makes the most of the opportunities available, demonstrating independence and confidence, but Hana felt pressured to go to university.

*Researcher: "What did your mum make of education? Was it important to your mum that you did well?"*

*Hana: "Yeah, especially because she didn't get to go to like college and university so she was like 'you and your sister is going to stay until the end'"*

*Researcher: "Was your mum encouraging when you were coming to university decisions then?"*

*Hana: "Yeah because I didn't want to go to university and then she was like you're going to university and I was like what if I wanted to go for an apprenticeship and she was like no you're going to university."*

*Researcher: "Not an option?"*

*Hana: "No it was definitely not an option and then I tried to tell my family and that just did not go down well"*

When asked what the biggest influence on her educational journey was,

*Hana: "I think probably not wanting to let my family down. I'm here because of them, otherwise, I'd be probably travelling the world and having fun. Not that university is not fun, but yeah."*

Hana's parental and family influence also caused her to study harder at school and university, as she admits:

*Hana: "when I was in class, I knew I was in there to learn. And I like, homework was ok, I always did my homework. I don't think I was like a teachers' pet actually, borderline. Like I got on really well with my teachers and my colleagues. "*

This demonstrates the social and cultural capital displayed by Hana and her family. Hana also describes how her Aunt went to university, succeeded and therefore gained graduate-level employment. The data suggests Hana's Aunt is demonstrating institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which in turn is respected by the wider family, as Hana describes; *"[my Aunt] went when she was like 27, but she's like living the example of like what you can get when you've been to university, she has like a really high paying job, a really nice car, a really nice house"*. Hana's Aunt's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) has become entwined with her families beliefs and values, resulting in pressure for Hana to do well in education. Hana describes her Aunt's university experience as a positive one that resulted in beneficial outcomes, this is an explanation that correlates with Bandura's (1977) four sources of efficacy expectations, in particular, vicarious experiences. Bandura outlines that individuals can build their own expectations based on the experience of another having completed the task or goal. Individuals *"persuade themselves that if others can do it, they should be able to achieve at least some improvement in performance"* (Bandura, 1977:197). For Hana, her families' expectations of her and her sister have been modelled upon her Aunt's degree and related successful outcomes. This results not only in Hana reluctantly attending university but also as a focus for her to achieve a good degree alongside additional experiences to boost her employability. For those with no family member with HE experience, they would be unable to draw efficacy from vicarious experience, therefore being unable to model their behaviour from other's attainment.

Family beliefs and values made a significant impact on Susan's journey. Susan is a returner to education. Susan was privately educated and did not enjoy school as the learning was strict and structured. Susan's options Post-16 were limited by her parents, in particular, her father's, views on gender-based career paths. Susan enjoyed sports at school, but her father

did not think it was an option for Susan to continue in education beyond compulsory schooling. Instead, Susan worked in various care sector based roles and raised her family. For Susan, perhaps it was the school culture or the beliefs and values of her parents, that influenced her views around education and learning:

*Susan: "it was something you had to do it wasn't until many years later I actually discovered I like learning. They taught me because I had to learn and that was how my head thought of learning. It was something you had to do so sit down get on with it do it and then you can go and do something fun which was sports for me because I love Sports and it wasn't until much later in my life when I was like actually I really like this. Why didn't I know or more like believe that I'm actually a bit of a nerd?"*

Susan's beliefs and values are shown here to be shaped by school and by her family. Her father was insistent that she needed to undertake a career that was suitable for her gender; that girls are raised to become mothers. Susan notes that she did not challenge this and happily started training to be a nurse after school but discontinued her training when she became pregnant. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1998) deduce that career decision making is pragmatic; as shown by Susan who had to adapt her choices to fulfil her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. The gender-driven career choice is a demonstration of the beliefs and values section of Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) influencing career decisions, as it is a, now outdated, belief that males and females have defined career paths. Since divorce and her children reaching adulthood, Susan returned to education. As a parent, Susan's beliefs and values were that university would be the best for her children, and they all subsequently attended. Susan started her degree shortly after her youngest started at university.

Whereas James, a young entrant, who grew up with siblings and his mother, found there was no pressure, either way, to go to university. Yet he knew he always had the support of his mother.

*James: "It was all my idea because my mum has always said to me, whatever you do, whatever makes you happy, and nobody in my family has been to uni so it was always the case of you don't have to go... So, it was a case of you can go down the university path, that's fine, but if you don't want to that's ok, we're not going to force you. That was quite nice because I know a lot of my friends were like, oh my parents, it's make or break if we don't go to uni."*

This demonstrates family influence, and how beliefs and values can be a subtle force. James and his family believed in education, but also believed that they would do well without it, as they clearly have a strong work ethic. This allowed James to make his own mind up about university, and when he arrived, he felt confident and could proactively build his own success. Coincidentally, James and Hana were colleagues in a Student Union society, based upon public health awareness and both engaged with other extracurricular services provided by the University regularly.

For Chloe, she found that her parents and family had little interest in education, possibly because they had not studied past Further Education, even to the extent that Chloe's mum had not realised that she had begun university until a few weeks later. Yet Chloe began to really thrive at university in her third year. This suggests there are different familial approaches that can influence young people but lead to a similar result when they have arrived at university. Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) found data that supports Chloe's family's viewpoint, that as her parents did not pursue education beyond compulsory schooling, for unknown reasons, they would then find it difficult to relate to Chloe's experience, as it is different to theirs. Therefore, by Chloe choosing to attend university, it conflicts with the family's beliefs and values, resulting in her parents finding it difficult to engage in her education. It is Chloe's own motivation to attend university, in her own words *"Well, it was definitely like my own decision [to come to university] because no one ever influenced me to go"* and describes her motivation as not being ready to enter the job market and wanting to

try new things and meet new people. In addition, Chloe admits *'I like the finer things in life'*, suggesting that perhaps the decision to go to university is financially motivated, and therefore gaining a degree will also help her to achieve financial stability. Perhaps Chloe has witnessed other peers or older adults attend university who succeed and she too is motivated by vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1977).

Luke is a returner to education. Luke had many turning points in his life (see Chapter 8.2.3) and has had a non-linear journey to HE. Luke's mother was a Jehovah's Witness, who believed HE was not appropriate for her family. Luke describes his faith as something he's always *"been in and out of"* but his family and religion have taught him to *"pray to God, cast your net, see whether or not he'll bless you with a job that you love, and whether you call that a blessing or a coincidence or whatever, but I love what I do now"*. The concept of religion is a literal interpretation of beliefs and values, and this is demonstrated in Luke's family expectations of him, but also his own views on how to live his life. In the period when Luke was finishing compulsory and Post-16 education, perhaps the impact of religion hindered his educational pathway, as he had an offer to study at a prestigious university on an art course. It was Luke's mum's influence, and their joint beliefs and values, that was a factor in not going to university at this point in his life. However, Luke identifies that maybe university was not right for him at that stage. The belief in God and his destiny supports Luke's idea that the pathway he has taken is right for him, and he has been correct in his current career choice.

Throughout the life story interviews, all of the students portrayed their aspirations to hold graduate-level jobs and to make changes in their own, their families' and their communities' lives. As highlighted by Archer, Hollingworth and Mendick (2010), a 'Poverty of Aspirations' is not apparent within underrepresented student's lives, as they all strive to benefit from HE.

‘Poverty of Aspirations’ is defined as a culture within working-class backgrounds that limits their sense of possible careers and education, due to the beliefs and values of their parents and their own inexperience of HE. The dataset gathered in this study shows that there is no poverty in the aspirations of these students (nine out of ten are first in family students). They have had a variety of influences and modes of support from their families, but all aspire to social mobility and use the resources available to them in order to achieve this. The evidence has been interpreted to show how student’s decisions to come to university are similar to the career decision-making model developed by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) and this section related evidence to beliefs and values. It has shown that a person’s beliefs and values could affect their aspirations, such as with Susan whose father believed in gendered career roles. But this is not to say that Susan did not hold those aspirations, they can just be limited by many factors, including familial beliefs and values.

### **6.3 How individuals assert autonomy**

Participants in this study demonstrate autonomy and the process of making choices in a variety of ways. This section will argue how students gain and implement independence in different ways, some in subtle, nuanced ways, and will provide the argument that choices are not always made independently, but to fit in a conflicting habitus and are restricted by structures. The outside layer of the model for individuals is choices and choices are made by taking into account the prior layers of the model. Choices can be made proactively and independently displaying resilience, but for less confident individuals, the choices available can be limited.

Andrew is currently undertaking a part-time PhD after completing both his undergraduate and master's degree at the University. To begin with, Andrew was proactive to get to university and then decided to solely focus on his degree, as it seemed like a large task.

*Andrew: "No at undergraduate I was so focused on the degree, occasionally I'd always offer if someone wanted me to do something, but I didn't I was nowhere near as conscientious to do all this extra stuff. I even refused to apply to do a rep thing in the second year of my undergrad, because I didn't want anything to distract me from doing this degree, because I was so determined"*

However, once Andrew started at post-graduate level study, Andrew found his confidence grew, as his interests grew around his academic studies. Andrew felt the need to push himself and use the skills and capital he had acquired to progress his studies.

*Andrew: "It's given me that platform to like attend conferences and get teaching experience and I'm a rep now, and I enjoy being a rep at PhD level because I think now I know what I'm doing more that I can afford to do other things, not just the PhD, and I think it's important to do that."*

Here, Andrew quite succinctly defines here that his confidence grew as he knew more about his surroundings, the physical university but also his habitus. Andrew was not as involved in the university during his undergraduate, as he was entirely focused on the subject and gaining a good degree. It was not until Andrew felt more secure that he could be more involved in additional responsibilities, thus empowering himself. Andrew explains the benefits of growing his university experiences:

*Andrew: "Because if you want a career in academia, it's extremely competitive and you have to accept two things, 1 you're gonna have to do a hell of a lot of voluntary work and put yourself in the position to get those voluntary things if you want some sort of option of money before you get your doctorate and [2] so you actually get known so you get offers for other things. If you want to come in and just sit there at your desk everyday, that's great, but don't expect to be told oh there's this research project if you want to get involved in, because no one knows who you are. And I thought that I want to get as involved as possible in as many things as I can. And it's worked"*



Andrew's interpretation of success in HE is to be personally known by the community around him, which develops his social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) (see Chapter 3.4.2) and allows him to push his own agenda and create success. Andrew discusses a career in academia, which would reward him with the career of his choice and a financially secure future. Andrew is mobilising social capital by becoming an active member at the University and also gaining membership into the social group. Bourdieu (ibid.) concludes that social capital can, therefore, provide Andrew with the support of the group, and this may include support in job applications. The end result will be the achievement of Andrew's goals, from an economic and cultural capital perspective. Tomlinson (2017) describes this process as the *forms of graduate capital*, that post-graduate students acquire skills and capitals to empower themselves for the transition to the job market. Therefore, Andrew uses all available opportunities to build this network during his doctorate, to enhance his future chances of success in academia.

However, for some of the participants, confidence is not something they had time to develop or they had to assert quickly, to learn how to survive at university. For Hana, she had to be confident and assertive as she moved primary schools five times, before starting a secondary school in which she remained at until after her GCSEs:

*Researcher: "I think you're probably better than you think you are. You're quite confident. Well, that's how you come across."*

*Hana: "Well that's because I've been to like ten different schools [laughs] you have to be confident."*

What Hana is demonstrating here, is that she felt she had to be confident and independent to ensure her own success, and this is both from a personal perspective in addition to educational success. Pragmatic rational decision making is enabled by Hana (also shown by James and Susan to follow), as these students are interacting within a field and are making

pragmatic rational decisions, in these cases, to be assertive and confident, to maintain their routine and transition to and through HE (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). By acting in this way, these students are showing their vulnerability in the habitus, it is not a clear pathway, nor is it one that is familiar to them. Therefore, by using the skills learnt throughout their lives, they are battling the uncertainty to reach their goals. In addition, through her beliefs and values (see Chapter 6.2), Hana has learnt that education is vital for success and it is her family's belief that one should push past adversity to achieve educational goals.

James explains what built autonomy for him, he had been told in his school days that he was not 'bright' enough to go to university, yet does not like it when people compliment him about it:

*Researcher: "Did you enjoy the college experience when you got there?"*

*James: "The lectures were really nice, again the main lecturer kept telling me that I wasn't bright enough to continue on. I really feel that this is like a thing with me, that people keep saying. But then my mum told me that she had a meeting with her and more or less she was telling me that she didn't think I was good enough to progress to push me. To me, it was either like I was going to flop because somebody else was telling me I was dumb, or I was going to like move up. And once my mum told me that, I more or less trajected [progressed] up."*

*Researcher: "Do you think if someone was saying you are good enough...?"*

*James: "I don't like being told that. I like if I'm not doing something right, I want someone to tell me but then if I'm doing something good, and I know I'm doing it good, then I don't need somebody to tell me that I'm doing good. Just if I'm screwing up, tell me. If I'm not screwing up then don't tell me, because I don't need to be told"*

James found that a negative learning experience from teachers and tutors who doubted his abilities was a key factor in gaining his own autonomy and pushing himself to achieve. This has led him to seek feedback to help him continue to improve. James continues to push himself at university, not just within his subject but by seeking additional challenges:

*James: "Yeah, my friends are like how do you cope doing all of this and like I'm very exhausted at the moment because I just want this year to end. But they are like how do you cope doing anything and I'm like with [The society], it's about 20 hours a week and that's fine, I don't see it as work so it just flies by and I do a few hours at night and then a few hours in the morning. And then if it's a donor recruitment day it's like literally 8 in the morning until about 9 at night. It's just I don't see it as work. Sports twice a week and that's like my release, that's my chill time. And then on top of work, work is to earn the money to go and do things. And then I do enjoy my degree. So, it all works sort of collectively together. And my lecturer said at the start of third year, if you end with a 2.1, play sport, volunteer and work you're more employable than someone who gets a first and doesn't do any of them. So, I was like why not."*

James' lecturer provides him with some advice on how to play the game of university. 'Playing the game' (See Chapter 3.4.4) is described by Bourdieu (1986) as the process individuals use to enable their social, cultural and economic capital to succeed within structures, such as universities. The concept of playing the game is examined further in Chapter 8.4. By involving himself in more than just his degree and also participating in sport, work and a Student Union society, James is ensuring success for his future, by choosing to spend his university time enhancing his skills, social and cultural capital and playing the game needed to succeed. This results in James needing to act independently and utilise the tools available to him to empower himself to succeed.

Susan shows how her past experiences and motivations have made her very dedicated to succeed and how she will demonstrate proactivity to get there:

*Susan "Yes, so we've kind of learned together but I have found that I am going to succeed. Don't ask me where this person [came from], I don't care, I am going to do it, I am going to do well, I am going to get A's [A Grades]"*

Susan also found that this is common among her peer group:

*Susan: "Yes very mixed group... we are all very driven because this is something, I mean I'm not the only person who, you know, is something that we all wanted to do but couldn't and suddenly you've been given this opportunity and we're all very motivated to do it. Which I think the lecturers quite appreciate because they haven't got teenagers going \*tut"*

*Researcher: "You're so focused, I can see that about you, you're such a committed student. "*

*Susan: "No... I suppose I appreciate the opportunity and having pushed my kids through it, I'm now doing it, it's so good."*

Similar to Hana and James, Susan is illustrating that proactivity is a necessity, not a choice.

Susan returned to education and expresses that this is an invaluable opportunity for herself and her family and one that she does not want to take for granted. For all three, they have experienced disadvantage in some form and can all articulate the transformational nature of HE, therefore their independence is a requirement for their success in HE. Reay *et al.* (2009) presented similar findings within their study, identifying that for those students who are underrepresented in HE and feel that university is unfamiliar to their habitus, the sense of fulfilling their career goals made them more dedicated, aided their own autonomy and increased their power to succeed.

Hana, James and Susan could be demonstrating *Preventive* or *Proactive coping* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002) mechanisms in achieving their goals. *Preventive* coping mechanisms helps the individual to process risk, such as failure, and create methods to counteract the risk and the stressful situations that can result from risk. *Proactive* coping does not prepare against risk but is a mechanism to build resilience and skill to achieve goals. Schwarzer and Taubert (ibid) propose that those who use *Proactive coping* have a goal that they work towards and build their skills and resilience, thereby demonstrating their independence, to achieve the goal. As Hana, James and Susan are dedicated to their degree outcomes and do not express stress while doing so, they are demonstrating *Proactive coping* and this, therefore,

demonstrates how they make choices to achieve their goals in an unfamiliar setting. Wilson-Strydom (2017) called for universities to be more in tune with students' lives outside of campus, and how their families and communities can influence their resilience. This approach could take into account the method of coping the student uses and the influences outside of university that could cause them to have a reduction in resilience. Students may also find university unsettling to their habitus, which could lead to a reduction in their ability to make proactive choices.

Autonomy is not simply a natural skill for underrepresented students to possess. Individuals succeed when they feel confident and safe, or when students are interpreting risk as demonstrated by Hana, James and Susan's use of *Proactive coping* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). For underrepresented students, their sense of confidence and the resulting choices may be restricted by the fields and structures they are situated within. It is a conflict of capital, meaning underrepresented students enter an environment that was originally constructed for individuals with different resources. Lindsay discusses how the support she's had from peer groups and teachers help her to be more confident in her work:

*Lindsay "With like uni work, friends are helping me with like confidence, you can do it. My friends at college, who I met at sixth form because I took an extra year to do my college course, they're now at uni so like you can do it as well. Things like that."*

At the time of the interview, Lindsay was in her first year of undergraduate study, the second term, and was still finding her way. Lindsay found that she did not always feel confident in knowing what she was doing, and friends helped her in this transition. Lindsay attempted to widen this group by joining a sports team, but found that the timing did not work for her:

*Lindsay: "I had a go at some of the sports, but then stopped because of the timings of the sessions, it was very late. You'd have to come here for 7 o'clock to pick up all the equipment, then you'd have to go to Moulton, start training at half 8 I think it was... then you'd finish training at half past 9, have to wait for the bus to arrive at 10 because there isn't one in between. Then you'd have to put the equipment away and by the time I got back it was like half 11, and I'd be up again early in the mornings and I was like no. No point."*

Yet, even though Lindsay benefits from peer groups, she still finds it hard to contribute in the university classroom:

*Lindsay: "Probably still not speaking up, I still just sit back and listen. Like listen to other people's ideas, so, I always feel like my idea can stay in my head, it's beneficial to me but not beneficial to anyone else."*

Lindsay goes on to say she would like to change that, but she is still building the confidence. Lindsay's university experience outlines how habitus can impact upon autonomy. It appears that Lindsay is finding university a conflict to her previous experiences of education and her family life. Family is the most important factor in Lindsay's life and she is very close to her parents and brother. Lindsay reports that the biggest influence on her attending university came from outside the family, with teachers assuring her of her abilities. Lindsay's family is supportive, but they do not have experience of HE themselves. Lindsay is, therefore, taking a different path to her family but wants to still feel connected to them. This again demonstrates why beliefs and values are at the core of the student decision-making model, as it influences each layer. In this instance, Lindsay's beliefs and values are impacting her choices. They have limited her choices in a positive way for Lindsay, as it is a way of helping her cope and feel safe at university.

Lindsay reveals in subtle ways that she is unsettled at university, she finds it difficult to speak in course sessions and feels more comfortable at home with her family. The change in structure, from Post-16 education to university has left Lindsay unsettled in the institutional habitus. Lindsay's Post-16 institutional habitus was supportive, small group, with teachers

who knew her well. At university, Lindsay feels as if she is one of many with no bonds made, as yet, with lecturing staff. This is detrimental to Lindsay's *modus operandi* (Bourdieu, 1992b), as she is no longer supported and encouraged by staff. This is not to say this will not develop for Lindsay, but at this transition point for her (the output from the student decision-making model), her habitus is in conflict. Lindsay is the first in her family to go to university, and she does so to make them proud, but she cannot learn the *modus operandi* from family members to help her feel secure at university. If Lindsay can be reassured within HE, and as her confidence grows, perhaps she will feel more empowered and demonstrate *proactive coping* methods (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). For those that are unsettled at the start of their degrees, universities should support the transition to enable students to be the confident, proactive and rational people they can be, so as to increase their chances of success. There has been an upward trend towards the discontinuation of studies since 2011-12 which could be a result of poor transitions to university. Discontinuation is standing at 7.6% of entrants leaving university in 2015-16. For most groups there is little gap in discontinuation; however, BAME students are more likely to discontinue their studies, as well as those who entered from a BTEC pathway (OfS, 2019a).

Fiona's choices were restricted within a field; she attended a Russell Group university and experienced disappointment;

*"[I] did first year there, got a 2.1, which wasn't too bad. Did second year there, mental health wasn't too great during second year and I came out with 2 thirds, and I thought, I don't think I'm alright with this, I don't wanna go to uni, spend loads of money, get in loads of debt and come out with a third. So, I thought I'll transfer to a different uni, because they wouldn't let me retake the year, transferred to a different uni, which was going to be [another Russell Group university] and then I'll retake the second year and then go from there.*

Fiona attended as a mature student and experiences a long-term mental health disability. Fiona experienced poor mental health in her second year of university and this led to her grades deteriorating. Fiona wanted to retake the year to boost her grade, but this choice was restricted by university policy and it was not permitted. Fiona has family experience of HE, she does not know if her estranged mother attended HE, but her father did. This may have provided Fiona with a better knowledge of university and encouraged her to attend Russell Group universities, as it was part of the *modus operandi* (Bourdieu, 1992b). However, despite the resources available to Fiona, she still experienced disadvantage based on her disability. After some time away from degree study, Fiona transferred to the University. Fiona demonstrates *Reactive Coping* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002), as she has experienced stress and disappointment in the past and she focuses on her goal, to gain her degree, rather than applying additional focus to extra-curricular activities or capital building. Therefore, Fiona's choices are self-limited as she is aware they have been previously restricted and she tentatively survives in HE.

## 6.5 Summary

The data gained from life-story interviews have provided a rich narrative of the journeys undertaken by students to and through university and provides evidence to support the student decision-making model (Figure 3.2). The interviews have provided a unique understanding of how Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model can be interpreted in underrepresented students' decision to attend university and why beliefs and values belong at the core of the student decision-making model. Students have both overtly and subtly identified how their beliefs and values, created within their families and peer



groups, have defined their understanding of HE. This has been analysed to understand how this creates habitus that can be brought into conflict when entering university.

Autonomy, confidence and resilience can also be a predictor for success in HE, as students are expected to learn independently. The sample of underrepresented students in this study has shown that their proactivity does help them to navigate university, and that it is a necessity for them to survive HE. Students used different methods of coping, *proactive, preventative and reactive* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002) based on their prior experiences and how their habitus is interpreted. However, for some students, they are unsettled in their habitus and are unable to demonstrate their autonomy to their full potential, until they feel confident in their new surroundings. Overall, this chapter has demonstrated through a Bourdieusian framework, based on Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model, that underrepresented students are disadvantaged in that their life-stories do not fit the traditional model of university. This is due to the beliefs and values established in their personal lives and the HE policies that entrench existing power imbalances by embedding normative conceptions of autonomy and structure.

## 7. HORIZONS FOR ACTION AND THE IMBALANCE OF POWER

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the data analysed in the previous chapter, to elaborate further on another layer of the student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2), Horizons for Action. The beliefs and values of students before they embark upon decision-making was shown to influence their decision, and this chapter distinguishes how structural factors beyond the student's control have been both enabling and restricting influences. Horizons for Action refers to the options available to the student; these can be dictated by the resources, geography and the habitus. Horizons for Action is explained by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996:149) as *'through the habitus, Horizons for Action are often based on interpretation of the present made in the light of past experiences, as young people and their parents try to make sense of current labour market opportunities through experiences of past situations that no longer apply'* (See Chapter 3.6). For the student participants who took part in a life-story interview, their Horizons for Action became apparent. The students made rational decisions when deciding to go to university, but these were shaped by external factors. This chapter outlines how the students' decision to commute to university or relocate was influenced by their Horizons for Action, but also their beliefs and values.

### 7.2 Horizons for Action

To set the scene, Craig revealed an analogy, during an external staff interview, of underrepresented students in their university decision-making process and the limitations that are encountered:

*Craig: "It's almost like if you can afford a Rolls-Royce, you would, wouldn't you? You wouldn't buy a Mini. It's like they're saying, "This one is a Rolls and that one is a Mini.*

*Haven't got much money? Well, go and get a Mini, but don't expect them to do the same thing."*

Craig articulated the limitations experienced by underrepresented students by relating it to buying a car. For those who could buy a Rolls Royce, they would do so, they would not buy a Mini. But for those who cannot buy the Rolls Royce, they would have to settle for a Mini. In terms of underrepresented students, their Horizons for Action can limit their choice, for example, they know which universities are globally ranked the best, but there are structural, emotional, and geographical barriers to applying and attending at these universities. This section will provide support to the Horizons for Action layer of the student decision-making model and identify where students have had a restricting or enabling horizon for action and the other layers of the model that interact, such as their beliefs and values, or habitus, in making this decision.

### 7.2.1 Commuting students

The student participants in this study made rational decisions, based upon their Horizons for Action. Similarly to the work of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), participants were pragmatic, and as shown in Chapter 6, influenced by the social sphere surrounding them. This section will explore how the structure influenced the students' decision-making. For all of the students involved in this study, it was the physical location of the University that attracted them to study there. However, the location was appealing in different forms. For Andreas, he needed the comfort of his home town and the social support network that accompanied it:

*Andreas: "This was the only university I picked, because I'm relational, but I thought also I feared going elsewhere, but there's like, I need people around me that I know. So, I stayed here and its Northampton and I love it anyway. And I got in. And that was that."*

For Andreas, he needed the comfort of his home town and locality to feel comfortable. As summarised by Ingram (2018), for working-class young men, their home town is a field in which their identities and habitus forms. Moving away would have further stripped Andreas' sense of control and belonging. Andreas was raised in a working-class family, experienced strained relationships with his family and admitted he sometimes felt school was an escape from home. Ingram (2018) posited four interpretations of habitus (see Chapter 3.3) for working-class boys, and Andreas demonstrates a *reconciled habitus*. Andreas adapted to the new field of university with relative ease but still holds on to the beliefs and values instilled by his family and his church. Likewise, to Andreas, Lindsay did not consider moving away from home. Lindsay was clear and concise that her decision was to commute as she lives here; "*I went to [another local institution] and here [for open days] ... I live locally so I wanted to commute*". Lindsay demonstrated a belonging to her home town and wanted to stay with her family and she did not even discuss considering universities further afield. Family support, in particular for Lindsay, is an additional support whilst at university and helps mitigate risk. As highlighted by Antonucci (2016), family support is not limited to financial support, but also enhances access to social and cultural capital. Lindsay was concerned about finances when she applied for university, as she knew her income from Student Finance England would be limited due to her household income. However, Lindsay did not identify that this was a reason for choosing to stay at home during study. Pokorny *et al.* (2017) proposed that students who decide to stay at home when attending university do so because of class inequality, and do so to avoid an alienating experience, i.e. living on campus, as they retain the feeling of belonging when they return home after a day at university.

Donnelly and Evans (2016) suggest that universities could make progress in widening participation in their local areas, as they provide opportunities for those who feel moving

away is financially and emotionally impractical. Andreas and Lindsay's stories both identified how beliefs and values (see Chapter 6.2) interact and influence their Horizons for Action and overall decision-making. For Andreas, it was an individual from his church that encouraged him to go to university, and he wanted to stay with his faith group, and Lindsay wanted to be close to family. Therefore, both students experienced enabling Horizons for Action; empowered by those close to them, but perhaps also restricted, as their choice was limited to the university campus closest to them. As identified by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996), as well as the Horizons for Action of these two students, their habitus also influenced their decision. Habitus can influence an individual's decision, consciously or subconsciously, to aid transition (Bourdieu, 1977), and for these students, their habitus guided them to stay locally. This demonstrates all four layers of the student decision-making model (Figure 3.2) in relation to two students' lives and how each layer impacts the next, but with beliefs and values at the core.

Susan's decision to attend university was also rational and pragmatic. Susan was offered a financially sponsored foundation degree, through her employer at a local hospital. Prior to this, Susan did not think university would be an option for her.

*Susan: "Mine was because I'd never thought [I could go to university], although I wanted to, it was the money. You know I'm working all the hours God sends to put these kids through [university] and there was just no way that I could leave to go to university, it's just not going to happen, it's never gonna happen for me. Which is a shame, I'd love to do it but it's never going to happen for me."*

Susan had previously experienced a restricted Horizon for Action, as she needed to support her children financially and emotionally. However, later Susan took the opportunity to study at the University through an employer-sponsored degree, this coincided with the time where her children had all left home or were at university themselves. Therefore, Susan had no

choice in the location of her degree. However, despite the locus of control being restricted for Susan, the chance to study debt-free was an enabling moment for Susan's Horizons for Action. As identified above, Susan's main concern about going to university was the finance and the offer from the hospital removed this and enabled Susan to study to fulfil her goal of becoming a nurse. For Susan, there was only one option for her opportunity to become a nurse, and due to this, habitus for Susan became less important. This will be discussed further in describing her turning points and transition in Chapter 8. In O' Shea and Stone's (2014) all-female study, they identified mature female returners as experiencing a 'heroic journey', as their research revealed positives in the transition into higher education for women. The female participants had restricted Horizons for Action as young women but felt joy and accomplishment in reaching their goals. Likewise, Susan had barriers to education but felt grateful and motivated to undertake HE once the opportunity was provided. The opportunity provided by her employers to go to university to gain a nursing degree has been empowering for Susan. This has led Susan to be assertive and confident as she has more control over her social action (Weber, 1978).

### 7.2.2 Reluctant commuting students

Andrew and Chloe also both decided to stay in their home areas and attend the institution local to them. However, in contrast to Andreas and Lindsay, they considered moving further afield. Andrew and Chloe both chose to stay in education, as they did not feel comfortable or ready to leave education to enter the job market. Andrew and Chloe both made rational decisions that they were not prepared to enter the job market, and this demonstrates both enabling and restricting Horizons for Action, as it enabled them to go to university, but restricted them because they did not have the right opportunity or enough confidence for

them to start a career. For the choice of university decision, both Andrew and Chloe wanted to move away but did not.

*Andrew: "the funny thing was, I decided that I wasn't going to go to [the University], because I didn't even want to look at [the University], because I didn't care if it was a good course or not, I wanted to leave home and I wanted to get some life experience... [However, the University offered] no group size bigger than 25, no large group lectures, 2-hour seminar lectures... And I was really annoyed because I remember saying to my parents that I've really decided I didn't want to go to [the University], I've already put these other places down, and now I've been there and I really like it. You know, and it would be so much cheaper, and that's just a bonus."*

*Chloe: "So I originally was going to take a gap year, I was like I'm not 100% sure of what I want to do, do I want to get myself in all this debt if it's going to be something that I don't want to do. And then I thought about it a lot... But not doing exams was a really big influence for me. I was like if I go to uni and get put on an exam course, I'm not going to do well. It's just something that I've never been able to do. So, when I found the education studies and saw that it was all coursework based I was like that's literally exactly what I need."*

Chloe made a late decision to attend university and contacted the University after the term had officially started to see if they would uphold her unconditional offer. Chloe was asked if she had contacted her original first choice university to see if she could attend late, but she did not because she would have needed to find accommodation at short notice. However, the University was only a 30-minute commute from her family home. Andrew acknowledged that he did not want to stay at home, but felt more comfortable at the local University. Both Andrew and Chloe's *imagined future* is "vague, relatively unstable and beset with uncertainties" (Ball *et al.*, 1999: 210). Ball *et al.* (ibid) suggested that those who had vague ambition often inherited the sense of vague motivation from their parents. Andrew and Chloe both identified that their parents did not have set goals for them. As their *imagined futures* are vague, their Horizons for Action is neither enabling nor restrictive, but habitus made more of an impact. Andrew and Chloe were both first in family to HE, and the field of university was unfamiliar to them. As Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) explain; there are infinite possibilities for

career and life pathways, but Horizons for Action limits those to what is possible for the individual. For Andrew and Chloe, their habitus informed them of what is probable when going to university and this resulted in the fourth layer of the student decision-making model, they choose what university they could 'survive' in (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977: 161) and what is pragmatic (Bourdieu, 1992a). This is supported by Read *et al.* (2003) who posits that non-traditional students chose Post-1992 institutions due to their more diverse student population so that they do not feel 'other'. However, it is also acknowledged that students should feel belonging at any university, and Post-1992 institutions still replicate inequality, as they are based upon the traditional, exclusive model of HE.

### 7.2.3 Relocated students

Hana and James both relocated to go to university. Both of Hana and James's decisions were influenced by course choice, but also a physical location of where they would feel most comfortable. Hana and James considered the locations that they felt they would belong in:

*Hana: "I ended up coming to [The University] because I didn't want to be in Oxford. There might be like really snobby rich people."*

*James: "[A central England University] was really close to home so my mum was like, ooh, go for it. And I was like, the university ranking for that university is, I don't know like 200 or something. And then [a south coast university], my mum was like, not at all, [it is too far away]. And then sort of like a few days before you have to accept, I got offered Human Bioscience [at the University instead of Paramedic science] and then I remembered back in school, when I wanted to study human biomedical science, why not."*

Likewise, to Andreas and Lindsay, their beliefs and values interact with Horizons for Action to establish their pathways. Hana explained that her decision was based on the physical environment and where she felt she would be most comfortable and this was likely influenced by her habitus. This shows a social class difference, as Hana interpreted Oxford to be populated by a middle and upper-class population whom she would have struggled to relate



too. Following on from discussions in Chapter 1.3.3, underrepresented students commonly find themselves more comfortable in a Post-1992 as they find it more familiar (Read *et al.*, 2003). However, Donnelly and Evans (2016) assert that it is important to consider young people's decision-making as wider than purely class-based and to acknowledge how institutional habitus impacted decision-making. Both Hana and James consider the institutional habitus, and it could be argued their decision was based upon class habitus, as that is what conflicts with the institutional habitus (as shown in the student decision-making model), thereby deeming certain universities or locations unsuitable. Therefore, this contradicts Donnelly and Evans (*ibid*). As discussed in Chapter 6.2, Hana did not originally want to go to university, but she was pressured to by her family. For James, the beliefs and values of his family restricted his Horizons for Action, as he did not consider moving too far away. As Hana and James both encountered limited choice in their university decision, habitus again is shown to be more important, as it empowered them to feel confident in their physical and social study location. This again demonstrates the interaction between layers in the student decision-making model.

## **7.4 Summary**

Horizons for Action have been shown in this chapter to have an enabling and restricting force upon the students' university decision-making process. The students made rational decisions that were based upon the structures that enabled or restricted them. Horizons for Action were shown to have the greatest impact upon selecting which institution to attend, in this instance, the University represented in this study. The students found their choices sometimes restricting, as they chose not to leave home or to relocate. This was based also upon their beliefs and values, as they did not want to be far from family and friends, or did

not want to attend a university that conflicted with their habitus or uncomfortable with the university institutional habitus. For those with restricted choice due to their Horizons for Action, an environment that suited their habitus was more important. This enabled them to feel power over their decisions and demonstrated an element of choice. Horizons for action has been argued to be a vital part of the student decision-making model, interacting with the other layers in tandem.

## 8. TRANSITIONS AND TURNING POINTS

### 8.1 Introduction

To complete the analysis of applying the student decision-making model (Chapter 3.7) to widening participation and underrepresented students, this chapter outlines how turning points and routines influenced the participants' university decision-making choices. Turning points are moments in the individual's lives in which they have to reflect and reconsider (Strauss, 1962); due to self-initiated, structural or forced influences (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Within the student decision-making model, turning points are an input that affects decision making and results in the output of transition. In this study, all the participants experienced a turning point, such as failure of A-Levels, illness or dissatisfaction with the job market; although the turning points were not as clearly defined as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) suggest, as many were categorised as two or three types of turning point. For example, for those who failed their A-Levels, it is not certain whether this would be self-initiated or structural, due to the disadvantage underrepresented students face at all levels of education. Overall, turning points are shown to be vital in the decision-making process, but are an element that cannot be manufactured or supported by education professionals, as the individual needed them to be personal and natural to make their own rational decisions.

Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) described the period in-between turning points as routines; the everyday experiences of the individuals. In the context of this study, they are referred to as transitions, as the underrepresented student's transition from their old selves; habitus, forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and forms of coping mechanisms (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002) towards their careership goals. The data analysis revealed three types of transition, whereby the students either survived, thrived or learnt to play the game of university. The participants

either found the transition to university simple, perhaps due to their own high levels of confidence and autonomy, or found it difficult to assimilate and preferred to sit back and observe until they felt more confident. Participants also demonstrated how they learnt what university study is and how it differs from Post-16 education, therefore they were learning to play the game of university.

Bourdieu (1986) predicted that individuals play the game to succeed (in this case at university) by mobilising their social, cultural and economic capital to emulate the dominant group. For traditional students, they learnt how to succeed at university through their familial experiences and cultural norms. However, the participants in this study are, for the majority, first in family to HE and therefore at a disadvantage in terms of class habitus. Hana began to learn how to play the game by analysing her assessment feedback, and Chloe and James were taught the rules by their tutors. However, those who do not understand how the game needs to be played are at a disadvantage and thus disempowered.

## **8.2 Turning points**

Within Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) and Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) development of the career decision-making model, turning points are one of the four elements. For young people, turning points emerge within their everyday lives, leading them to reconsider their choices or confirm their *imagined futures* (Ball *et al.*, 1999). Within the student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2), turning points are an input that affects decisions and can change the direction a student is heading. The participants in this study each experienced turning points that caused them to reflect and make rational decisions. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) described turning points in careership in three types, structural, self-initiated or forced. However, in

this study, these three categories do not make a cohesive whole, as it is difficult to ascertain the type of turning point, as there were multiple factors in the turning point events.

### 8.2.1 Reactions to disappointing academic results

For two participants, their attitude to education changed once they had experienced disappointing grades. For this cohort of learners, this occurred during A-Level, specifically AS-Level results, after their first year in sixth form.

*Andreas: "So that was in second term they told me, Mr [teacher] came in, he said, [Andreas] can you wait behind, during class, ok, you are not being allowed to go back into psychology, because you haven't done the work... to carry on in sixth form, you need to be doing three subjects and I was like shit. So, what I've told them is that you're going to do double economics so you can stay in sixth form. So, he actually kept me in sixth form. And even though I did double economics, I came out with an E \*laughs\*. Just did not fucking care.... It shows you... the difference between school and uni, how they teach there and how they teach here. But also, maybe your brains are older and you're able to understand what they're asking more."*

For Andreas and Andrew, the shock of failing AS-Level exams, despite both admitting that they had not enjoyed nor applied effort in the subjects, caused them to reflect upon their choices and futures. This turning point for Andreas was not the one that caused him to set on the careership pathway to university, it was when he was made redundant from a carpentry apprenticeship and a Pastor recommended he tried university study. Andreas' experiences demonstrated that individuals can have multiple turning points that are of different categories. For example, when Andreas failed his AS-Levels, this would be classified by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) as a self-initiated turning point, as it was Andreas' own lack of interest in the subjects that led him to fail; as well as structural, as Andreas was not supported in making the correct subject choices for A-Level. However, when Andreas lost his carpentry apprenticeship, this is likely a forced turning point. Andreas described this as being 'laid off', so it is unclear the true reason for the termination of employment, but it is clear that

this caused Andreas to “take stock, to re-evaluate, revise, resee and rejudge” (Strauss, 1962: 71) his future careership and make a rational decision.

Referring back to the student decision-making model (Figure 3.2), Andreas, like the other participants, demonstrated how all four layers and the turning point input interact to influence his pragmatic decision-making. It was not solely these turning points that enabled Andreas to make the university decision, his beliefs and values (Chapter 6.2), his Christian faith and trust in religious role models, his Horizons for Action (Chapter 7.2), his need to stay local, to maintain a church relationship and his transitions (an output of the model) between each turning point, led Andreas onto the careership pathway, and this is true for all of the learners. The decision was not purely structural, nor was it entirely the individual’s responsibility, instead, they were more of a middle ground, a combination of many facets the young person interacted with.

Andrew experienced fewer turning points, his experience of failure at A-Level was clearly an emotional time that would continue to influence his choices for many years.

*Andrew: “So when I got my results in summer 2009 at the end of year 12, I was just horrified that I got two ungraded, I didn’t know what I was going to do, and I was absolutely just lost. And it was the worst day, I thought I’m going to leave, what am I going to do, I’ve got no grades, I hadn’t even prepared for the thought I wasn’t going to be there. You know, I was totally in a dream world because I should have realised I hadn’t put enough work in and what I was going to do. And I was really lucky, I think I just broke down and the head of sixth form was really understanding and she said, oh we’ll let you come back but you’ll have to do it again, reapply to AS and she really picked my subjects for me... And I did come out with three A-Levels, I completely turned it around I started putting loads of work in, I started learning what UCAS was and I really had this overhanging thought process of, I really want to go to university, I started going to open days and I started doing A-Level work with the thought in mind of let’s not do something stupid and attention seeking, because I don’t really want to do it, let’s actually put some work in.”*

Andrew held an *imagined future* that was vague (Ball *et al.*, 1999:210) before enrolling at the University (see Chapter 7.2.2), as he knew he was not ready to enter the job market after

school, but did not have a set ambition. For Andrew, it was the failure of his A-Levels that created a turning point in his attitudes to education. Andrew had the support of a teacher to change his A-Level subjects and found what he was passionate about. This created certainty for Andrew in his *imagined future*, he decided that he did really want to go to university and eventually this led him to decide upon a career in academia. Andrew's turning point supports suggestions about how his habitus adapted to allow him to survive in HE, as he chose a local university to help him feel comfortable in this substantial change to his careership (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977) (see Chapter 7.2.2). Although the failure of his A-Levels was a negative experience in Andrew's life, this provided a turning point for him to pursue his chosen careership and had only positive experiences subsequently.

### 8.2.2 Dissatisfaction with the job market

Chloe and Lindsay both experimented in the workplace before making the decision to go to university. Both young women concluded that their options were limited and not the experience they wanted for their lives when entering the job market without a degree:

*Chloe: "So I originally was going to take a gap year, I was like I'm not 100% sure of what I want to do, do I want to get myself in all this debt if it's going to be something that I don't want to do. And then I thought about it a lot, changed from sociology to, I looked a lot at Northampton's course overviews and stuff. But not doing exams was a really big influence for me. I was like if I go to uni and get put on an exam course, I'm not going to do well. It's just something that I've never been able to do. So, when I found the education studies and saw that it was all coursework based I was like that's literally exactly what I need... I was going to take a gap year and I got about three weeks into my gap year of working full time and I was like no, I want to go to uni."*

*Lindsay: "So I started an apprenticeship at a nursery at Level 2, which is lower than I already had. And I liked it, but it was just the morale and the attitude from like the parents and the other workers, like, you feel like you're not qualified, you're not qualified to do their job but you're doing their job. But you're like the skivvy that does all the mopping and the and I was like no. So, I left there I think it was the Friday and started at the college on the Monday... I always thought I wanted to be in the baby room or the preschool, and I just realised, yes I do but there's more out there for me. I could do better."*

The way in which the job market is arranged for those without degree-level qualifications demonstrates that this is a structural turning point (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) for Chloe and Lindsay. Both Chloe and Lindsay are first in family to university, and their parents began in working-class occupations but had risen to managerial roles in their chosen professions. Originally, Chloe and Lindsay had self-excluded themselves from HE, in part due to their beliefs and values, but structurally due to the reproduction of inequality created by society. Bourdieu (1992) theorised that habitus can be defined as class habitus (see Chapter 3.3), wherein actors make decisions based upon the beliefs and values gained from the family and social groups wherein they were raised. Class habitus creates a peaceful environment for individuals and creates *modus operandi*. For Chloe and Lindsay, they had chosen to go straight into the workplace due to their class habitus and reproduced the class system that they had been born into. However, upon experiencing their options, both decided that they believed they could do better and experienced a turning point to change their careership pathway. Chloe also experienced a later turning point whilst at university.

*Chloe: "My strengths [are] that when I put my head to something I'm really determined and that I can do it, but my weakness is that for half my time at uni my strength or my mindset wasn't in the right place. So, for my first year and a half, two years I was so focused on lacrosse like I want to get better, I want to be good, I want to do this that and the other, but actually you know, this is more important now and I've sort of focused towards that."*



For Chloe, the transition to university was not easy. Chloe surrounded herself in the social activities of university, friendship groups and sporting pursuits, and neglected her academic studies. To aid Chloe's transition to university, she invested and built her social capital. Bourdieu (1986) deduced that the creation of social capital supports the individual in the short- to long-term and that social capital can provide subjective feelings of inclusion. Therefore, Chloe built her social network to create a more settled habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) before she could concentrate fully upon study. This demonstrated that Chloe felt disempowered when she entered HE, as she entered a field that was unfamiliar. Chloe then later came to realise the importance of obtaining a 'good degree' for her subsequent employment. However, the benefits Chloe experienced from her peers and sports leadership had enabled her to be more confident in her ability to approach lecturers for assistance. In addition, Chloe held a leadership position within her sports team and this helped her build further skills for graduate employment. As Chloe initially built her social capital to feel settled in HE, she was then later able to mobilise the acquired capital to advantage her studies. Bourdieu (1986) distinguished this process as implementing symbolic power. As Chloe became settled at university, she became more empowered, in that she can use her previous social connections to benefit her study. As discussed in Chapter 4.5, capitals could be encouraged and built with the support of universities, such as by creating networking events or providing mentors, as this may aid underrepresented students in obtaining a settled habitus and would continue to support them after graduation.

Chloe's experiences highlighted the importance of turning points (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) to aid individuals in the accomplishment of goals. Giddens (1991) coined the term fateful moments, that are comparable to turning points. In using the term fate, Giddens argues that fateful moments occur due to fate, but also due to a

combination of the individual's prior experiences that have led them to the fateful moment. To elaborate, a person's prior experiences would lead them to possible outcomes. For example, in taking exams, the outcomes would be limited to high achievement, pass or fail. The outcomes would be more probable depending on the studying and teaching conducted prior to the exam. Thomson *et al.* (2002) conducted research with young people and concluded that the structural aspects could enhance the probability of positive outcomes, such as increasing the likelihood of passing an exam with good teaching. However, when a young person experiences a fateful moment, such as failing an exam, their own sense of identity will influence how they interpret the fateful moment. Weber (1978) argues that individuals make rational decisions, but these are framed in context to structures that can enable or restrict the options available to individuals. In the context of this study, for those who experienced turning points, the participants used, often a negative experience, into a chance to readjust their educational trajectory. This would have been influenced by their beliefs and values and Horizons for Action and what felt possible to them. For individuals who had failed their exams and had a familial disengagement in education, they may have decided to leave education and enter the job market.

### 8.2.3 Making change for selves and families

The final type of turning point identified by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) are forced turning points. Susan and Luke both demonstrated that their change in careership was forced turning points to support themselves and their children. Susan had to return to work after a divorce and needed employment that would financially support her children as well as provide flexible work hours for childcare.

*Susan: "I got divorced and suddenly I had to earn money, so it was very different it was sort of like ok right so now I'm the dad and the mum... Then I once the children had got to sort of 14/15 I started working at Northampton General as a healthcare assistant and then I got all them through university, and I think because they'd seen me going to, not coming to uni, but I'd done my A-Level, they knew that education, education is what will get you through life you can do anything with your education. So, they all went to uni... I'd never thought, although I wanted to, it was the money. You know I'm working all the hours God sends to put these kids through and there was just no way that I could leave to go to university, it's just not going to happen, it's never gonna happen for me. Which is a shame, I'd love to do it but it's never going to happen for me... The hospital approached me and said that health education England are actually paying for it... [The hospital] started this nursing associate role and so they started paying for me to come to uni for two years to do that and then I can do an extra year to do my nursing."*

Susan's careership pathway demonstrated that class habitus did influence her children in their own careership journey. As Susan progressed educationally and professionally, this widened her children's perception of what is possible for them. In Susan's early life, her family had strong beliefs and values about the careers possible for women (see Chapter 6.2), but Susan amended that narrative for her own children, therefore creating new possibilities for their careership. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, women now exceed men within HE enrolments, and one key achievement in widening participation policy is the advancement of women's careers. Women accessing university has provided them with opportunities, independence and respect. The large increase of female participation in HE has been a great step forward for gender equality and feminism. Moreau and Kerner (2015) examined the motivations for student parents whilst at university, and found that their motives were often unrecognised by HE policy, as student parents desired to make their own children proud and be role models for them. Participants in the study equated being a 'good' student with being a 'good' parent and this resulted in additional pressure and guilt upon the students. However, it also provided the students with a feeling of purpose that was no longer limited to being a parent. Whilst embarking on her journey to being a registered nurse, Susan had another turning point that relates to Moreau and Kerner's (2015) study, as Susan discovered more about her own

identity:

*Susan: "it wasn't until many years later I actually discovered I like learning. They taught me because I had to learn and that was how my head thought of learning. It was something you had to do so sit down get on with it do it and then you can go and do something fun which was sports for me because I love Sports and it wasn't until much later in my life when I was like actually I really like this. Why didn't I know or more like believe that I'm actually a bit of a nerd?"*

Susan's subsequent turning point led her to an epiphany that contradicted her family's beliefs and values. In turn, this influenced her own children to go to university. By acting upon the turning points that arose in her life, Susan had reframed her family's class habitus (Bourdieu, 1992b), as her positive experiences in furthering her careership and enrolling in a university, become part of the beliefs and values of her children. If her children's career decision-making model (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) was mapped out, it would show that their beliefs and values would provide a positive view on attending HE, unlike Susan's own restricting Horizons for Action.

Luke is a mature student who returned to education after experiencing low paid employment.

Luke had the opportunity to go to university after Post-16 education:

*Luke: "I got six university offers, set to go to university. And I got an unconditional at Falmouth for illustration, which is like prestigious. So, I was all set to go. And I didn't... I ended up having an argument with the teacher."*

As discussed in Chapter 6.2, Luke's mother's beliefs and values also restricted his Horizons for Action. After the arrival of his son, Luke had a forced (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) turning point. It was forced as he had the responsibility to care for his son, but also because his living conditions were poor:

*Luke: "I went on to have a son... So, from 2011, I found myself needing a place to live, as we were living together, the council gave us a house me and his mum. And that's when I got kicked out and I was... living in a shit hole since 2011. Really poor living on a teaching assistants wage. Meanwhile, my progression at work was going really well... So that was going really well, but I wasn't really getting paid for it, living in a horrible place... So, I've come here [university], escaping sort of relative poverty. It was horrible the place I was living in... I think poverty has been a massive influence, like I really enjoy my job, but because the prices of everything is going up, I'd have happily have stayed a teaching assistant... But, because I've had to become passionate about being able to afford to eat, and live in a nice space, that's been a really powerful indicator to say, right, you've got to better yourself. And in the nature of the job that I do, you have to be qualified."*

Due to the birth of his son, the turning point is forced, as the events were external to Luke (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Luke's Horizons for Action would have been restricting (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) as he was not able to relocate due to his son and access to financial support to do so. With these aspects considered, Luke demonstrates a strong sense of autonomy, and similarly to Hana (See Chapter 6.3), Luke did so to help him survive in HE and to achieve his long term goals. Luke made a pragmatic and rational decision to return to education. As demonstrated in Chapter 6.3, for individuals who are uncomfortable in their habitus, autonomy becomes a vital tool to navigate the field of independent learning at university. This is further demonstrated in Reay *et al.*'s (2009) study of mature students, who are dedicated to achieving their goals. For Luke, he was committed to attaining a good degree and graduate employment, as his turning point was forced and he had other dependents.

Finally, Fiona had a forced turning point when she left employment after a breakdown in her mental health:

*Fiona: "when I came back to Northampton at 19 I was working at the train station and in the nightclub. I did that for about six months and then I had a bit of a mental breakdown. Because I'm bipolar... I was diagnosed about that time actually. Left my job, both jobs actually and then just kind of had a break from everything... Then I found my way into working at the theatre, they were looking for a follow spot operator for the pantomime... I did that for the Christmas season and turns out I was quite good at it... I had got a job working in the West End and did that for six months and then came back to Northampton and we were going to take the show on tour, and I was meant to be touring with it. But then it was going to Bristol, but I knew a lot of people in Bristol that were on heroin and I had a bit of a brain crash and contacted someone to pick up a load of heroin and was like this is probably not a good idea. So, I had to cancel the tour last minute and I thought maybe this industry isn't the best for me because I started assessing it and the hours were insane there were like either 13 hour days six days a week or like four hour days six days a week. And for somebody with bipolar, you need stability and routine... So, I had to pull out last minute, which was pretty much the end of me working in theatre because reputation had died but that was ok. So, I thought what am I going to do next? Little break, think I went to mental health crisis house for a bit after that... And then kind of assessed what I wanted to do and then applied for the Access course and thought I think I'll go to uni."*

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) described forced turning points as either comfortable or traumatic. Whilst the experience of having a breakdown of her mental health was traumatic, Fiona had used the opportunity to learn about herself and this made Fiona more focused upon achieving her goals.

Overall, this study correlated with Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model and evidences the student decision-making model (Figure 3.2) in that turning points exist and truly influenced the learners in their careership pathways; however, the distinction of the types of turning point are not as clear cut as suggested. For example, Andrew and Andreas failed their AS-Levels and decided to make a change. To define this purely as self-initiated is problematic, perhaps Andrew and Andreas disengaged with their A-Levels due to their imbalance of power. As demonstrated by Ingram (2018), working-class boys need to adapt their identities and habitus to succeed in education and are therefore structurally disadvantaged. The data collected has evidenced that turning points can be a fundamental aspect in choosing HE for underrepresented students, as they turn away from class habitus

(Bourdieu, 1992b) towards the pursuit of a careership that has not been traditionally occupied by their families.

## 8.3 Transitions

Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) described three types of routine: confirmatory, contradictory and socialising in establishing careership. These three types relate to the original career choice and whether the young individual transitioned to secure the career identity or whether they declined it, either from their own experience or by the influence of others. Hodkinson *et al.* (ibid) used the term routine; however, in this study and within the student decision-making model, the term transition is used rather than routine, as after enrolment underrepresented students transition to their new identities. The transition is an output of the student decision-model as it is a result of the interactions between the layers of the model. After analysis, three groups of transition: surviving, thriving, and game learners, were established. For all learners, this process was not routine, but a transition, where they have adapted to new surroundings or learnt how to interact in unfamiliar fields.

### 8.3.1 Surviving

Some of the student participants found the transition to university overwhelming and slowly began to assimilate; this aided their transition as they could go at their own pace. Lindsay was critical of her own performance and knew she wanted to improve:

*Researcher: How have you found like the academic side of university?*

*Lindsay: Yeah it's alright...*

*Researcher: Doing ok in like essays and stuff?*

*Lindsay: Yeah, got middle ground at the moment, but...*

*Researcher: I think, if you're middle in the first year, it gives you more room for improvement. How do you find the lecturers?*

*Lindsay: Some of them are really, passionate about their subjects, but some of them you walk out their lesson and you're like I have no idea. Like how this is going to stay in my head and how I'm actually going to answer the assignment....*

*Researcher: What do you think your strengths and weaknesses are?*

*Lindsay: Probably still not speaking up, I still just sit back and listen. Like listen to other people's ideas, so, I always feel like my idea can stay in my head, it's beneficial to me but not beneficial to anyone else.*

As discussed in Chapter 7.2.1, Lindsay decided to stay at home and commute to the University, due to her unsettled habitus surrounding enrolling at the University. By taking her transition at her own pace, Lindsay had scoped the field and is adapting her habitus as she moves along. As a first in family student, HE is unusual to Lindsay and she is learning about her surroundings. Lindsay had used her social capital to help her build habitus (Bourdieu, 1986), by asking friends and family friends about university and using her peer group to support her studies, rather than reaching out to University staff. Likewise, as discussed in Chapter 4.5 and earlier in this chapter, the university could promote and enhance students' capitals by providing networking events and mentors to aid the transition period to university for underrepresented students.



Chloe began with a survivor mindset, but learned to thrive as she continued through university:

*Chloe: So, I sort of didn't help myself at all in first and second year. I obviously passed, got maybe on average Cs, and then it got to third year and I was like, OK, I need to sort myself out. And just started working really, really hard... if I don't get a 2.1 that's such a waste of my, not a waste of my time, but it feels like a waste of my time, do you know what I mean? Like no one looks for a 2.2 or barely looks for a 2.2. So, there's been a lot of sleepless nights about it, I'm really anxious when it comes to stuff like that, like with the exams and I remember like in my first lecture back, I asked if I could speak to my lecturer because one of his assignments is worth our whole module. And I was like look, I need an A on this, like I don't know what I'm going to do. I meet with my lecturers like every week nearly, I'm always emailing them.*

*Researcher: Do you find that helps?*

*Chloe: Yeah definitely. I'm definitely a person that, I don't have much confidence in what I'm doing, so having other people, like put me on the right lines, just to start with, because then I can go off and do it.*

Like Lindsay, Chloe started slowly in her transition to university, and she also utilised social capital to build her confidence in the new field of HE. Chloe spoke to peers about studies rather than lecturers. Chloe joined a student union sports team in her first year and the team had built her social capital and her skills in leading the team. In term-time, this helped Chloe in building relationships with lecturers and in turn she used the social capital gained from them to succeed. Chloe joined the sports team as a leisure pursuit, but as she learned the game of university, she reflected and established that the capitals gained through sports were of benefit to her studies (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013). This is discussed in Chapter 8.4.1 to demonstrate how Chloe had learnt to play the game of university. Doing so, allowed Chloe to move away from just surviving and move towards thriving at university. Chloe also experienced a turning point during her studies (see Chapter 8.2.2) that resulted in her becoming more focussed on her degree. Chloe discussed the reason this had made a change

on her, because she felt pressure to obtain a good degree, due to the external forces to obtain postgraduate study or graduate-level employment.

### 8.3.2 Thriving

For Luke, university was an easy, comfortable transition and he settled in quickly:

*Researcher: How are you finding the academic side of university?*

*Luke: A breeze, absolutely doddle... I find it invigorating sitting there losing myself in academic literature, I've got a real thirst for knowledge, and like I've done really well, in like my first assignment. Yeah, I've got an A... Yeah hopefully [I will get a first], yeah. One of the things I worry is whether I can keep it up. I might not have the stamina of a young mind. So, I might go all out and then... but we'll see.*

As evidenced in Chapter 8.2.3, Luke entered HE in a forced turning point, due to needing to find a careership that not only suited his own needs but his young son's too. The criteria for this was to be happy and fulfilled in Luke's profession, but to also earn enough money to take himself and his son out of poverty. Due to this, Luke utilised his own autonomy, as he felt that there was no alternative for him other than success. Luke demonstrated a *proactive* coping mechanism (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002), as Luke had a set goal, or *imagined future* (Ball *et al.*, 1999) and was proactive in order to achieve his goals.

### 8.3.3 Learning to play the game

Within this study, some students used *proactive* coping mechanisms (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002) in order to achieve goals. In being proactive, they have adapted to begin to learn the rules of the game of HE. They learn as they transition to university, as they are first in their family and have limited prior experience of university study. Susan talked about the challenges that arose when she first began HE study:

*Susan: "I mean there have been challenges... The course is completely new, so not everyone knew what they were doing to start with... so we've kind of learned together but I have found that I am going to succeed... I am going to do it, I am going to do well, I am going to get A [grades]... At the beginning, I spent quite a lot of time with academic Librarians and study people going urrrghhh... It's the way of thinking, you know, I'm perfectly capable, the brain was there it's just writing it down in a way that sounded proper... I think sometimes [the lecturers] probably don't realise, I mean I'm not the only one who English is not their first language, there's quite a few of us, you know and I don't think they realise quite how much of a challenge it is sometimes. You know, we're sort of like having the exam and suddenly you're writing two essays in a time restraint. And yes, I can write essays, academic people have taught me to write essays, lovely people. But you suddenly get that time restraint where you're not spending sort of you know, when I'm writing an essay it takes me a month, all the research you have to do and suddenly you're doing it in two hours and I forget how to speak English. I get to the end of the essay and realise half of it is written in a foreign language. [Laughs] Nooo! You start to sort of like panic."*

Susan experienced a different form of cultural capital when she arrived at university. Academic practices were different from her norms. Through *proactive* coping (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002), Susan mobilised social capital, through peers and the university support services to help her fit into academia. This provided further evidence about the structures that create barriers for underrepresented students at university, as Susan revealed the difficulties she had experienced through speaking English as a second language. Whilst Susan learnt to change her approach, universities have not integrated inclusive policies, therefore restricting power for underrepresented students and increasing power for traditional students (Bourdieu, 1977). Whilst the University's policy for admissions is to test English proficiency for international students (see Chapter 1.3.2), Susan is a citizen of the UK, so her needs as an English as a second language speaker may have been missed. Regardless, even if Susan was eligible for support, if she was unaware of it, it is not a successful support package. Weber (1978) interpreted social action made by individuals as rational behaviour designed to maximise value for the individual, and this is demonstrated here by Susan. Susan made a rational decision to attend university at a time that best suited her, but she is limited in her social action by the barriers presented structurally by the university's policies. In this

example, the structural barriers are that Susan is not supported with English, as it is an additional language. This results in the reproduction of inequality as the dominant groups or traditional students do not face the same barriers.

Hana was on a larger undergraduate course than most of the participants and found that she did not get much one-to-one support from tutors. Instead, Hana sought help from the wider University systems:

*Hana: They've been helping me with my workshops and finding different streams to basically get my message out there and they're just really helpful in terms of like advice if you have a question they have quite good networks as well.*

Hana also found that she had to adapt the way she worked to 'play the game' of HE.

*Hana: "[University work] was a jump but I was kind of heading in that direction with the way I was structuring my work in college I was kind of doing that. The only thing, the first thing that struck me that a reference list and a bibliography isn't the same thing, I was like whoops."*

*Researcher: "Did you learn that quite quickly then?"*

*Hana: "Yeah, because my lecturer said a reference list and bibliography isn't the same thing so I was like, ok, noted.... I'm learning how academics want me to write my work."*

Hana described the disadvantage she had experienced joining university as an underrepresented student. For those who have familial experience of HE, they will have some prior knowledge and expectations of how to succeed at university (Reay, 2018). Underrepresented students often have to learn and adapt; for example, Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) critiqued university structures and explained that underrepresented students often focused upon achieving a good degree, rather than accumulating capitals. By widening their activities and experiences whilst at university, students also gain contacts and skills that would further aid their academic studies and subsequent graduate employment outcomes. This further demonstrates the disadvantage of power, as the structural disadvantages limit

power and opportunities for students. The students who are learning to play the game tried to keep up with their traditional student counterparts in order to experience the benefits HE provides. Bourdieu (1986) theorised that playing the game is essential in succeeding in education and employment, as it emulates the dominant classes' behaviours. However, for some underrepresented students, they are not aware that the game even exists.

## 8.4 Playing the university game

Bourdieu (1986) theorised that to succeed in education, students needed to know how to play the game. For those with a familial history of succeeding in education, the dominant groups had access to social, economic and cultural capital that aided their success. This is passed down through social norms. For those at a disadvantage in society, the rules of the game are unclear, or they are unaware there is a game to be played. The student participants in this study all learned the rules of the game from the University once they had arrived, mostly from their own personal tutors and lecturers. Hana summarised quite simply what the game means to her:

*Hana: "My first year I really struggled in the respect that I would write a piece of paper and it would be incorrect if I had like a sentence in there that wasn't said by someone else. And I was like, what if I just know this, no, you have to find someone that said it. That's what I struggled with and because I'm a very creative person, having to just find something that someone else has said and pretend that I was the, that like they said it and it was none of my ideas was one of the first things I struggled with. But now I'm getting used to it... I'm learning how academics want me to write my work."*

Hana enrolled on a large course, so one-to-one time with lecturers is rare, and Hana learnt on her own, through analysing feedback, the rules of creating high-achieving assessments. As Hana had a *proactive coping* mechanism (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002), she interpreted the subtle clues presented to her in feedback on her assessments to be able to learn to play the game. In Chapter 6.3, it was evidenced that Hana demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy

and proactivity to enable her to navigate an unsecured transition (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) as it conflicted with her habitus. As Hana had to learn to be confident from a young age due to several school relocations, she had learned to depend on herself to achieve her goals. However, for other underrepresented individuals, this is harder to achieve. An example here would be of Lindsay, who finds the transition intimidating (see Chapter 8.3.1) and finds it more comfortable to sit aside and observe until she finds her own way. Both young women, therefore, demonstrated their attitude to compete in HE, Hana was a fighter and wanted to be the best, whereas Lindsay was more passive and did what she was able to succeed. Reay (2015) asserted that education in the UK is competitive; created so that only a few can succeed. This competition prohibits equality for all. The way that students have to play a game to succeed further highlights the inequality between groups in HE.

For Chloe and James, they both had staff members who taught them the rules of the game:

*Chloe: "I'm quite lucky because one of my lecturers... my PAT... he's my module leader of two modules and he's my dissertation tutor. So, I like speak to him a lot, like pretty much every day... He has my number because we FaceTimed over summer and stuff... Yeah so if I feel like I'm worried about something... I wouldn't feel bad if I emailed and then, if I like show them my work and I'll feel so much better after because they'll be like. Like I play it up in my head a lot and I'm just like oh my god because I know I have to work so much harder to get a 2.1 because I haven't put myself in like the best position. I always worry and over think things, but actually, it's ok, you're fine."*

*James: "And my lecturer said at the start of third year, if you end with a 2.1, play sport, volunteer and work you're more employable than someone who gets a first and doesn't do any of them. So, I was like why not... I feel that the university this year I've had the full experience of being in sport, being part of a volunteering group, on top of my degree and working... So I feel like I've had this year, and the fact that I've got involved myself, I've had the support that has really helped, but I say to students that aren't really part of a volunteering group or a sports group might not necessarily, well I know, they don't get the support they need because the university ties most of their support networks into the student union and volunteering and sports that work with the student union so they spot people and help people."*

Chloe considered herself 'lucky' to have the support of her tutor, as she had other lecturers who were unwilling to support her. Chloe learnt to play the game by taking advantage of the one tutor who helped her at regular intervals. This tutor, in turn, had also taught Chloe that the mobilisation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) provided her with advantages in her studies. Likewise, James had a tutor who explained the rules of the game, that social, cultural and economic capital can be acquired that provided assistance to James in reaching his goals. James understood this and would then recommend to other students how social networks are essential in gaining the appropriate level of support in HE.

## **8.5 Summary**

Turning points are demonstrated to be a vital experience for the underrepresented students who participated in this study. Each had experienced an event, such as poverty, failure of exams or health issues that caused them to re-evaluate their position (Strauss, 1962). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) distinguished turning points as self-initiated, forced or structural. Whilst participants had experienced forced or structural turning points, a self-initiated model proved to not fit. Two males failed their A-Levels, which could have been construed as self-initiated; however, considering the structural disadvantage working-class males experience in education, the debate arose as to whether this is structural or self-initiated. Turning points were shown to be essential to aid a student's decision to come to university; however, this is one aspect a university or other educational professions cannot manufacture for students, as they need to be personal and natural.

Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) defined the everyday period that young people experience that shapes their later decision-making as 'routines'; however, for this study, the word transition was more appropriate, as the students' transitioned from their class habitus and fields into

the new field of HE. From the analysis, the students were categorised into three broad categories: surviving, thriving and learning to play the game. Their prior habitus, forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) before university, and their coping mechanisms (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002), shaped how they experienced entering HE. The transitions demonstrated that the students needed to learn how to play the game (Bourdieu, 1986) of university study in order to thrive, as the rules were not provided to them through prior norms and beliefs.

Students in this study learnt the rules of the game mostly through personal tutors and lecturers. Hana was a confident and resilient individual due to her prior educational experiences and managed to read the subtle clues provided in her assessment feedback. Chloe and James were directly taught the rules by lecturers. However, many students do not learn the rules of the university game and rely on their own interpretations of HE.

Finally, to relate to the theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter 3.6, this chapter has outlined the evidence that supports and the student decision-making model with turning points as inputs that affect the layers of the model and the transition is the output of the facets in action. Turning points, referred to as fateful moments by Giddens (1991), are the result of limited probable outcomes. The way in which individuals interpret and act upon them is according to the facets in the career-decision making model but also related to their own rational decision-making or social action, which can be limited by the barriers presented by structural forces (Weber, 1978). The students' forms of capital, in particular, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are evidenced to be influential in the outcomes of turning points, as Chloe discussed how her acquired social capital whilst at university allowed her to reform her pathway to provide focus on gaining a good degree. The transitions to HE are also interpreted

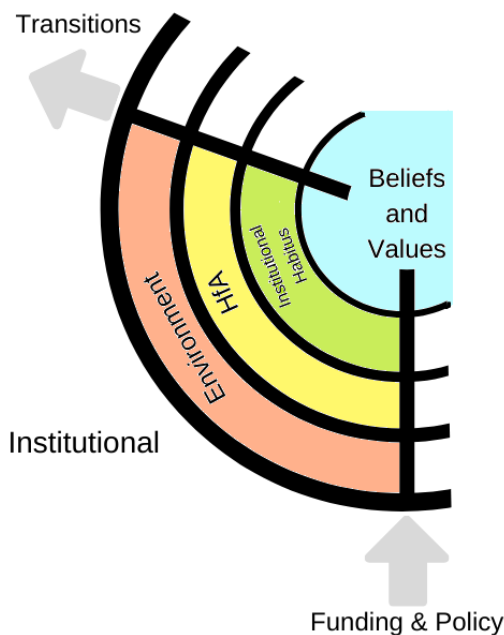


theoretically, as structures continue to limit social action (Weber, 1978) and result in a restriction of choices or an unsettled habitus.

## 9. THE INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT UPON DECISION-MAKING

### 9.1 Introduction

Nine staff members of the University and six external staff members with expertise in widening participation participated in semi-structured interviews for this study. The purpose of including staff members was to provide additional layers to the analysis. It made available data to demonstrate the meso- and macro levels of the University. This contributed to the Institutional section of the Student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2 for the full model and Figure 9.1 below for the Institutional section).



**Figure 9.1 – The Institutional sub-section**

The Institutional section was informed by the staff data collected. The interviews and subsequent analysis provided a similar pattern to the student data. Beliefs and Values are at the core of students' decision-making, and internal staff provided evidence from their own experiences and research. Institutional habitus follows in the next layer, staff data

described the culture of the University, the way it is beginning to change and further improvements to be made. Horizons for Action is discussed by staff, both in the ways students' Horizons for Action can be restrained or enabled by external and internal factors. The final layer is the environment, which can be physical or literal, staff members discuss the large and small features of HE in general that can welcome or isolate students, in particular, those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Finally, the chapter looks at the inputs and outputs to the model. The overlap with society, in general, is debated alongside the overall disadvantage underrepresented students experience in the UK. Funding and policy have been presented as an input and staff members examine the influences they have on students. The output, transitions, lies between the Institutional and the Individual, it is the experiences of HE that results in how students transition and adapt to university life. Turning points are also applied to transitions as they mark a change in students' lives and how they reach decisions.

## 9.2 Beliefs and values

In parallel to the student life-story interviews (see Chapter 6.2), internal staff members discussed student's internal motivations, and how family and peers can influence their overall beliefs and values, which can operate in tandem to their university study. A member of the professional services discussed the experience of students who are the first in their family to attend university:

*Rowena: "First in family, nobody else has ever been, it's not something that they think they should or it was never in their agenda. And that can be just nobody else in the family has ever been to university or it could also be family backgrounds that also say what do you want to go to university for, what is the value of you going to university"*

This position alludes to how beliefs and values can impact on an individual's decision to go to university, as it can suggest how Horizons for Action can be influential (see Chapter 7.2). The historical pathways of an individual's family could provide a guide for the person

in making their own pathways. Habitus (See Chapter 3.3) also describes how individuals can choose pathways according to their surroundings, often originating in families (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, for first in family students, HE may be a choice that is unfamiliar to their habitus. Reay (2018) argues that for those who are first in family, their habitus would feel insecure and unfamiliar during their transition to university and result in low confidence, as it is a risk to attempt HE without prior familial experience. Bourdieu also discusses how conditioning occurs within social class (Bourdieu, 1992a); therefore, for those individuals from working-class backgrounds, who are under-represented in HE, their habitus can reduce their ability to conduct future planning (Reay, 2018), as their experiences have created a sense of limits. This provided further evidence to show that underrepresented students do not hold a poverty of aspiration (Archer *et al.*, 2010), but their decisions are rational, shaped upon the structures, beliefs and the values that surround them. This also connects to Horizons for Action, in which individuals interpret the structures around them and assess where their efforts would be effectively directed. One staff member considers a student's life holistically, taking into account their beliefs and values to engage with those students to help them to thrive:

*Amy: "They also get the chance to explore what matters to them, and this is why I think it's really important, because if you're working with students that are [widening participation], without being too generalised, they're from communities that are maybe more deprived than others, so we really want them to take that social innovation and feel passionate and feel like they can make a change back to their own communities so that they're actually having a positive impact there, and that's one of the things we try to do"*

Therefore, this could be interpreted as the university seeking to create social change, and it does this by making the students themselves catalysts for change. By adapting this model, student's own beliefs and values are supported and celebrated, thus providing an inclusive environment.

Teaching staff arguably have on average the most contact time with students. When students were asked about the support at the university, individual tutors were named or mentioned, in contrast to the support services, who were rarely referred to unless the student was asked directly. For the lecturing staff, some found that a student's background may lead them to be less confident in engaging with staff, peers or within their own course. For example, attending taught sessions, support from a personal tutor or accessing learning materials online.

*Kacey: "Sometimes students lack confidence or don't feel able to ask for help, and I think that is a real issue, especially around our students that typically come from what might be classed as a disadvantaged background, that they see asking for help as a sign of failure, rather than something that's constructed and actually, you know, really promoted. So, it is trying to encourage students to ask for help when they need it, and that's ok"*

This demonstrates how students use their beliefs and values not only for their own decision-making within the proposed model (see Figure 3.2) but for how they conduct themselves whilst at university. Students who are underrepresented can have issues when approaching staff or asking for help. As discussed in Chapter 4.3, undergraduates from underrepresented groups are shown to feel uncomfortable and unsettled in their habitus as it is unfamiliar to them and their families (Reay *et al.*, 2009). This is shown by Kacey's example, but also by Rowena:

*Rowena: "A number of assessment and academic integrity and misconduct panels that I've sat on, and I don't sit on a lot. But the number of BAME students who come in and we say did you speak to your PAT? No. We don't do that in our culture. And you're like well, what can we do. What at that point do you expect us to do? We have this huge raft of stuff that's there to assist you, you could have got this, this, this or this that would have stopped you being here it would have done this, this and this. And you didn't engage. So, if we could answer that question, so if we can say how do we help you overcome that cultural thing which is ingrained from birth probably. That either says you don't ask for help or you keep it within your racial demographic or whatever."*

Whilst this is an example from one staff member and is not a common thread within the interviews, this could also be evidence of the imbalance of power in HE. McCowan (2016) discusses equity in HE, in the form of equality of the treatment of students or allowing for

the equality of outcome. If there was to be a cultural difference for students in accessing support from the University, policies and support should aim to ensure that equity is achievable through making adjustments. Rowena demonstrates an institutionalised position of inequality and an imbalance of power for underrepresented students in HE. This supports the argument made by Bhopal (2018:92), who concludes that universities *“require students to adopt particular ways of being and doing – those which conform to middle-class practices that define success in higher education”* and further highlights that this can negatively impact BAME students, who therefore do not feel that they can adapt to the ‘white middle-class’ environment. This is problematic, as universities should be inclusive of all and it should be the institutions themselves who create change to accommodate all individuals. Weber (1978) deduced that individuals are rational beings who seek to create success for themselves. However, success is created within structures, such as universities, which provide resources for success, and if these are limited it can negatively impact the level of success achieved by individuals. In the ways described by Rowena, the structure is limiting those from underrepresented backgrounds, as it is expecting students to act in a way that is accepted by the structure and silencing the voices of those who find it a conflicting habitus. This limits student’s ability to engage in ‘social action’ (Weber, 1978) that will produce positive outcomes for them, and so limits their Horizons for Action (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and therefore ability to transition to the university environment. In this instance the institution therefore acts as a limiter for social mobility and reproduces class inequalities.

Staff members discuss the debate regarding the barriers presented by structure or the choices made by students and how this can be managed; whether decision-making can be created or supported for students at the university by limiting structural barriers. Amy acknowledges that there can be barriers to engagement from students, but that positive

choices can only originate from the individual:

*Amy: "That's a really tough one, I think that comes before university life and that's part of family. I talk about this all the time with my colleagues because we've both got kids and we're like, there's something around families protecting their children so much that they never really get to think for themselves so I don't know. Unless there's some sort of expectation management that is done... I guess the only way you're going to have an impact is if people fail things because they don't do it. I don't really know if that happens... It's got to come from an internal, and it's part of that figuring out what those barriers are to that individual, but again if you're not, if there isn't, other than making something like personal development that they have to do before they came, that kind of stretched out their commitments themselves maybe? It starts so much sooner than university life that drive and ambition. I don't think you can create it; we can do everything that we do already around engagement but I think a lot of it has to come from peers as well. So maybe doing more alumni stuff, like really getting those stories from people that maybe didn't engage right at the very beginning, but then just have to go out via email or social media because if those people aren't coming to uni."*

Kacey talks about how some students do not engage with support or ask for help and their (the University's) approach to tackling that:

*Kacey: "So it is trying to encourage students to ask for help when they need it, and that's ok. So, we've been trying to kind of spread that message within the course, whether that's asking for help or applying for mitigating circumstances, is ok... I think in terms of promoting their own agency, it is important that they feel that sense of ownership of their studies, but also not blaming other people if they don't achieve and being able to reflect on, not what went wrong but what didn't go to plan... But I think the other key thing in terms of agency is also acknowledging the structure, and I think a lot of students see failure as their own failure and their own personal fault. But for a lot of students they do have very complicated, very complicated lives and lots and lots of pressures and so I think it's also important to acknowledge the wider issues within their lives... So it's important to kind of see that as a package, but I think definitely acknowledging those wider factors and trying to find appropriate strategies, but trying to encourage and empower students to take responsibility for their own choices and having the confidence to make those choices as well rather than seeing staff as the guiding force, that they have that sense of ownership of what they're doing."*

Similar to Amy, Kacey acknowledges that students can face disadvantage that could hinder them from making positive choices, but also emphasises that attainment and success needs to be an internal motivation of the student. For Rowena, the emphasis is entirely upon the student:

*Rowena: "But also balancing that against individual student responsibility, because then ok we've put everything that we can in place, these opportunities exist for you, the support structures are in place, if you don't take them, there's not a lot we can do, you're not buying, it is the gym membership analogy isn't it, you're not buying a fit body, you're buying access to a gym that will enable you if you put in the work. To improve your fitness and your physique and your health. But you know, you don't just pay for the gym and then it's going to happen if you don't go and it's the same."*

Amy, Kacey and Rowena consider the choices students make are made in isolation rather than in tandem and in connection with to fields and structures. Whilst the staff members also discuss how they can support confidence-building, in particular, Kacey, who acknowledged that structure contributes to decision-making, they cannot identify that structures restrict available choices to students, nor how structures can be challenged and adapted to allow all students to thrive.

As shown by student interview data and the experiences of other staff members, students can be unsettled by university as it is unfamiliar to their habitus. This also provides a deficit view of the students attending the university. Staff members in this way demonstrate that students should 'fit in' to the traditional model of universities, *"rather than the interrogation of how these structures came to be, and the inequalities that are engendered and reproduced by and within them"* (Gebrial, 2018:31). The way in which the University staff are disregarding the structure's disempowerment of underrepresented students provides evidence to support Bourdieu's (1977) concept that structures restrict opportunities for disempowered individuals to ensure that the class and power hierarchy endures.

The data illuminated the imbalance of power for BAME students in particular. Josie, an external academic, discussed findings from her own research that proposed BAME students can feel othered and therefore disempowered:



*Josie: "Looking at the different academic help-seeking strategies of students from different ethnic backgrounds and the white students were the students who were using the academic resources of the university and obviously there was a particular connection to class as well, but none the less, they felt much more entitled and much more able to go and knock on academics doors, access all of the things that sense of entitlement is really strong and that's because they haven't experienced any form of othering, whereas the students from BAME backgrounds, in general, had felt that they'd been treated in ways that had really othered them, that had been quite racist, that were really problematic. And so were much more unwilling, for all those very valid reasons, to put themselves forward to actually run the risk of any form of rejection and so didn't, but that didn't mean that they didn't do anything, so they were very resourceful in terms of other places they got academic support from but there was a limit of what was available to them, so once they'd reached the limit of what was available from friends, family, peers, they wouldn't necessarily then go on to the next step which is to access other forms of academic support, whereas white students would."*

The term 'other' is described by (Read *et al.*, 2003) as a feeling of being different and unable to fit in as normal. This process has resulted from findings in Josie's research, to self-exclude themselves from support. This contradicts Rowena's position (Chapter 6.2), as she identified that BAME students should adhere to university policy, but did not acknowledge that there is an imbalance of power. Yosso (2005) critiqued the education institution for not valuing the cultural capital of BAME, in particular, African American students. Yosso (*ibid*) argued that Black students use their cultural capital to survive in white spaces and rejects the notion that BAME students are deficit, as it should be the responsibility of the institution to reflect, adapt and become inclusive. From a Bourdieusian (1992b) perspective of power, power is held by dominant groups to reproduce their status in society. Within an educational context, students are required to understand the 'code' of academia (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1994), and if this is dictated by the dominant class, this disempowered those who are underrepresented. As reported by internal and external staff members, this is reinforced by a majority dominant class staff base, a limited curriculum and policies that do not take into account the differences in students cultural and social capital. The data collected from internal and external staff demonstrated that a shift in the culture, or institutional habitus is emerging,

but as commented by Reay *et al.* (2001), change progresses slowly. However, this section has also shown how the current institutional habitus can restrict opportunities and choices for students as they may need to adapt their own habitus to assimilate to the institution (see Chapter 7.2). For those who do not become settled and confident within the institution, they may feel isolated and find it difficult to engage within the University.

### 9.3 Institutional habitus

Reay *et al.* (2001) described institutional habitus as the culture of the setting, this often is moulded by the local class structure. It was also noted that the habitus of an institution is capable of change, but it is a slower moving process. Staff discuss the culture and habitus of the institution, how it has begun to change to be more inclusive of a diverse body of students (and staff) but that there are significant improvements to be made. William and Ricardo identified some of the disadvantages underrepresented students face, which are based upon outdated policies that do not reflect the current student population:

*William “If we assess every module twice, and It’s all about writing 5,000 words, that could disadvantage someone who’s more kinetic or works better in a creative way then writing... with regards to re-sits, it’s a problem... you can submit and then you get a resit if you fail, if you get mitigating circumstances here on your first you don’t get a second chance [if you fail] ... So... if you get a mitigating circumstances because you’re having trouble, you just have one chance, because mitigating circumstances is classed as your first submission. And that’s because we wrote the policy years ago and it’s just not kept pace with the student body perhaps...”*

*Ricardo: “[The University needs to consider] is the reading accessible, is how we ask you to become a volunteer accessible? Because a lot of these processes are, ok they’re fine but they’re very old school, that’s what worked for universities in the nineties and eighties because that’s what it was but students are very different now, especially our students.”*

William explained that due to policies not being amended, there are some disadvantages for all students, not limited to those who are underrepresented. Such as the extension and mitigating circumstances policy (see Chapter 1.3.2). The QAA (2018) outlines that

student assessment should be inclusive and allow students to demonstrate their ability; however, the provision of resits are left at the HEI's discretion, providing the policy is transparent (QAA, 2008). William further elaborated that the University did not hold enough evidence to inform policy:

*"So, there are lots of issues, that get thrown up, I mean I sit in meeting after meeting and we talk about these things endlessly, but the problem is we don't have any evidence of any of this stuff, it's gut feeling, it's people's pet cause that they're fighting. So that move that we're doing to get that evidence base I think is key."*

However, William further elaborated on the issues surrounding creating inclusive environments for students, as there is not is an embedded approach to WP at the University: *"Even on the inclusive student experience group, it's people who have an interest and are passionate about wanting to do stuff, but I wouldn't say it's part of the culture. At all."* At the University, there is no centralised team or staff base who are responsible for widening participation activity. Whilst there is a team that works with outreach, responsibility lays with faculties to promote access and participation. William described himself as an *"Interested amateur"*, yet has extensive obligations in ensuring the equality and diversity responsibilities of the University are met.

In contrast to Rowena (see Chapter 9.2) who described how students should adapt to the University, Ricardo takes an innovative approach to changing the institution rather than changing the student:

*Ricardo: "In universities, there's been a rapid change in demographics of students... firstly you got to be looking at having open and honest conversation about what suits their learning and looking at actually what do they expect from higher education how can we support them and finding a middle ground between; this is the way we've always done it, this is the way they want to do it, so actually what is most beneficial of both and that's, it'll be somewhere in the middle."*

Ricardo demonstrates a fluid approach to supporting students and acknowledged that change is needed to truly create an inclusive university. This is imperative, as BAME students attained 14% fewer good degrees than white students (Universities UK, 2015)

(see Chapter 4.2). Richardson (2010) reported that only half of the attainment gap can be explained by difference of prior attainment. Therefore, this shows that it is attributed to unfair policy and practices within HE. Ricardo reflected on practice within universities and how change could be implemented to create inclusion and therefore increased success for underrepresented groups, a point that is reinforced by the experiences of Neville, an external academic:

*Ricardo: "Another big part of it is role models, and it's a difficult one because obviously, widening participation didn't happen 25/30 years ago, you haven't got [diversity] in those positions, but we do need to be pushing to have a more diversified staff across the organisation.... Also look at reading lists, how can we make really small changes that, OK you might think that's not massive, but how can we just think, ok we've used this type of individual or this demographic of individual for the last three lectures as our reading material, is there not an academic from a diverse background that I could use to supplement that reading to give them something that actually it's not just this one group of people that have done this, there have been others that are more typically like me that do it."*

*Neville: "I think the main issue there is around ethnicity and I think that's coming up to the fore. I think absolutely rightly so... I think there is if you like, an overemphasis on ethnicity without understanding the social dimensions of what comprises ethnicity... I think the danger is that we go down it's about ethnicity whereas actually, it's about the broader elements of what happens within those ethnic communities that we, again as the white minority, may not understand as well as we perhaps think we do. I think there is also then something about the nature of the curriculum as well... Why Is My Curriculum White?... It's a social movement. It started in London I think but it's about questioning the nature of the curriculum that we teach. If you're going into lectures and every single theorist and person... Is white, a dead white man usually... What must that feel like? Again, putting yourself in that situation, it doesn't feel like a welcoming environment."*

Whilst Ricardo's thoughts and suggestions are commendable, it still demonstrated the inequality that currently exists in HE and the imbalance of power between the HEI and the underrepresented student. HE is the powerful force in this instance, as it sets its milestones that can be difficult for underrepresented students to reach or there are structures that limit students' opportunities to succeed.

By using limited resources in teaching and learning, this practice demonstrates a deficit view of BAME students and scholars. Further to Gebrial's (2018) and Bhopal's (2018) work regarding the colonial nature of HE, Yosso (2005) posits that there is a wealth of cultural

capital held by BAME students that are not included in HE, as curriculums are based upon mostly white authors and theorists and further entrenches institutional biases and racism by excluding a diverse learning base. For BAME students entering HE, a field built for and inhabited mostly by white middle-class students, a conflict of habitus could occur (Bourdieu, 1986). This may limit their social action (Weber, 1978) as they feel disempowered and out of place. The disempowerment would be further felt when the taught curriculum focuses upon white theorists.

Further evidence regarding the barriers for BAME students, Laurel, a senior lecturer, talked about barriers she has previously witnessed:

*Laurel: "I do think one of the issues with BAME students and especially because we're really pushed now towards targets for attainment, that... their academic English is more of an issue for them and more of a barrier for some of them anyway because academic English is white English. So, for working-class students, it's middle-class English and for any students who aren't white, it's white English. And you've got to work harder and harder to be able to translate yourself, to do what you think is, or what somebody else thinks are appropriate academic English. And I think that's a real issue, and I don't think there's a lot of discussion about that, because I don't think people want to admit to it."*

Laurel alluded to the traditional model of universities, as being created for the benefit of the white middle class (Burke, 2011). This is further evidence of additional barriers for non-traditional students and the imbalance of power. Laurel admitted there was little debate about 'fitting in' to the traditional structure of universities; however, from a theoretical power perspective, Bourdieu (1992) would argue that it is to achieve reproduction of inequality and keep hierarchical structures intact.

## **9.4 Horizons for Action**

Horizons for Action provided by the University can be enabling or restrictive. This section will identify the staff perspective of restricting or enabling Horizons for Action and the other facets that interact, such as their beliefs and values, or habitus, in making this

decision. Thomas, who works at the university in outreach and access, discussed how the Horizons for Action impacts students' pre-entry to HE:

*Thomas: "But the other thing is [underrepresented students]... are less likely to go to university because of the 'I didn't go to university, I got a job message' from their parents but also that sort of encapsulates the economic situation for those kids as well, they haven't got the money to take a loan out or maybe they're more debt adverse, I don't know really. They might have to look after the family"*

Thomas depicted typical views of the students and young people he works with, that many feel that university is not for them due to their family having traditionally entered the job market immediately after compulsory education ends. This could be interpreted as a restricted horizon for action that interacted with beliefs and values. If a family's beliefs and values dictated that individuals go to work after compulsory education, then it resulted in individuals being limited in their Horizons for Action, as they did not want to go against their family's wishes. However, it may be that families would be supportive of their young people going to university, but that rather the young person may interpret it as a restricting horizon for action. Overall, there are clearly many facets of the decision for potential HE students and they can overlap and enable or restrict each other.

An external academic, Neville, talked about how beliefs and values can be restrictive upon Horizons for Action:

*Neville: "There is a really interesting group of largely working-class young people who want to go to university but don't expect to go because they don't expect to be supported, they don't expect to have the money, the expectation of the community or their family is out of alignment"*

As this group of young people do not expect the support of family, nor the structural advantages of financial security during study, their Horizons for Action are therefore restricted. Neville also talked about how universities do not understand Horizons for Action and can therefore also be restrictive:

*Neville: "If [universities are] going into a working-class community and saying, 'Yes, if you come to university you can be a doctor or an engineer,' or whatever it*

*is and they're going, 'Well I'd love to do that but there are no jobs for those people here. I can't leave here because I'm caring for my parents,'"*

This illustrates that outreach and recruitment teams can be ignorant of the lives and experiences of underrepresented students. Neville's experiences and thoughts support the Horizons for Action section of Hodgkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model, as young people from working-class or deprived communities do not have access to those highly educated careers within their own communities. By moving away to access graduate careers, this could conflict with their beliefs and values as they would have to leave their families behind. From Weber's (1978) theoretical perspective, outreach teams and universities are continuing to limit social action for underrepresented young people, as they are not addressing or helping the young people overcome the structural barriers. In this way, disadvantage is reproduced, as the young people disengage from the messages provided from outreach teams as they cannot identify or relate to them. Overall, the restrictions apparent in Horizons for Action show that there are structural barriers that still exist for non-traditional students and many of the structural inequalities are created and reproduced by universities themselves.

Laurel debated the overall purpose of HE and how it is structurally unfair to underrepresented students:

*Laurel: "Where I think some of them perceive it as a barrier because they think, I'm not good at writing, therefore I'm not going to be able to do this. And I think some of them pick a subject where there's more hands-on practical work because they're not confident. But I think that's partly because they have a perception of what academic writing is which is not necessarily what academic writing has to be. And I'm sure you know what those things are, it's boring, it's convoluted, it's deliberately obscure, it's all of those things."*

Laurel also discussed how underrepresented students, in particular, BAME students or those who speak English as an additional language (such as Susan, see Section 8.3.3) are disadvantaged as they need to "translate" themselves into academic English. As shown in Chapter 1.3.2, international students are required to pass an English test as a condition

for entry, but those who are UK residents who speak English as a second language, are not required. For those who learn to translate themselves, they are learning to play the game. For BAME students, when adjustments for entry requirements are made, there is still a disparity in attainment. Richardson (2018) suggested that teaching and university policy must, therefore, be a causal factor in the disparity, such as that identified by Laurel. In the above excerpt, Laurel analysed the decisions made by students before entering HE and their knowledge of how to play the game. In choosing a practical academic subject, and interpreted their Horizons for Action, students attempted to self-exclude from traditional, formal academia to mitigate the risk of not being able to succeed. Students may find that traditional academic subjects may conflict with their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) or their beliefs and values (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996), as they cannot envision themselves succeeding or fitting in due to their prior experiences.

## 9.5 Environment

The final layer of the student decision-making model is the environment. This refers to the physical location and facilities on campus. The University can either create spaces that are inclusive and welcoming or a campus that is physically hard to access or has subtle micro-aggressions that can be unwelcoming. Josie, an external academic, contributed to the evidence that universities have not changed to fit the wider, more diverse, student body.

Laurel also discussed how at a fundamental level, universities can be unwelcoming.

*Josie: "I think universities have not diversified at all in relation to the diversification of the student body, so we operate around a particular calendar which is not necessarily fitting for our students, obviously there's got to be some form of structure, if you take part-time learners as a case in point for that, their student experience is woefully inadequate compared to full-time students, if you look at students who are taught in the evenings and the weekends, they don't get the same experience, the cafés are shut, the facilities are often shut, that can be really problematic, so if we are going to be a flexible provider that meets multiple needs, then we need to have flexible provision and meet those needs"*



*Laurel: "And I think you know, LGBTQ+ issues that are actually related to mental health and student experience, some of it's about you know the whole toilet thing, which the students here campaigned for, but it's partly about language as well, and again about that atmosphere and tone and starting off a welcome speech by saying ladies and gentleman, to me that's not good enough in 2018. And it's putting people off"*

This demonstrates the power held by institutions that can make underrepresented students feel disempowered and unwelcome from their interactions with universities. Josie evidenced that universities operate on a business model, that their priority is to maintain capital at the expense of the experience of students. Laurel explained the discrimination still faced by students who are not typical of the dominant groups, their experiences are not considered in the physical university, but also in the way in which they are greeted. Kuhn (1962) conjectured that paradigms are established not upon evidence, but from the language used by the dominant groups. Within this example, the dominant language is based upon binary gender understandings, and the normative paradigm is built around that. This further highlighted the power held by institutions to exclude groups, Laurel's example shows how it is exclusive to LGBTQ+ groups, but this could also be applied to any of the underrepresented groups in HE.

Subtle and nuanced examples of how the physical university can be unwelcoming were identified by Laurel. For students with a disability, in particular, a mental health issue, there are not enough resources to support them in HE, but in addition, these resources are not available to be outsourced in the local community:

*Laurel: "And we've always, every year, got more and more students declaring a mental health issue. And we know they're not really getting the support that they need. And that's not necessarily the fault of the resources that are in place, it's just there isn't enough resources... in the local community and the NHS and then all of those things, so it's not that it's an isolated problem."*

By not supporting students with mental health issues, this could lead to students feeling unwelcome and isolated. However, on a positive note, a student participant with a mental health disability, Fiona, identified that the support in the University had been a positive

experience for her, as Fiona had access to someone to talk to if she needed it, without a long wait. However, this is not to say this is a global experience for students, in particular, those who had not disclosed a disability to the University or for those who develop conditions during their study.

## 9.6 Influence of policy and society

The student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2) features inputs to create a full picture. An input to the Institutional portion of the model is “Funding and Policy” and this section discusses how external influences to the University influences its operations and support to underrepresented students. Overall, the data has shown that there are structural barriers to the success of underrepresented students both at the University and nationally. This PhD study recommends that the University change its policies and structure to become more inclusive for underrepresented students to help address the imbalances of power. However, it is not to say that it is solely the fault of HEIs, as explained by Josie below, there are greater powers that restrict success for minority groups that lie beyond HE:

*Josie: “WP work is not always connected with that part of government that can actually make those changes, so you’ve got things happening in education that cannot be resolved by educational policy change itself, whether that’s institutional or a more national level it’s really down to things like better benefits systems, for example, better schools, and schools could be better funded and so sometimes you can feel like your researching and you’re able to present all of this evidence that really shows structural disadvantage but actually can’t really influence the bodies that can do something about it”*

Indeed, an imbalance of power does not begin at university level, instead being experienced throughout life. From a Bourdieusian (1977) perspective, power exists to benefit the dominant classes to reproduce their power and resulting disadvantage. This is created by social and cultural norms, therefore suggesting a change could be made. Universities could be a contributing factor to understanding the imbalance of power for their students and begin to make a change. However, as the evidence shown in this study

demonstrated, the power stripped from underrepresented students is social and cultural; their beliefs and values are not upheld and respected and there is an expectation for non-traditional students to fit into traditional, middle-class concepts of HE. Bourdieu (1986) described this as learning to 'play the game' in order to succeed for those who do not belong to the dominant classes (see Chapter 8.4).

## 9.7 Transitions and turning points

An output of the Student decision-making model is transitions, and this section provides evidence from staff as to how transitions occur for students. This also incorporates turning points. Mallman (2017) asserted that universities have a responsibility to bridge the expectations of students and institutions, resulting in the adjustment to be more inclusive of underrepresented students. Universities are able to modify practice and pedagogy for all students without needing to alter the fundamental aspects of academic scholarship (Devlin and O'Shea, 2011). This section will examine the staff attitudes in creating an inclusive environment and allowing students to learn how to play the game. Kacey, Lisa and William explained how students they have interacted with do not know the rules of the game:

*Kacey: "I often think of university as like learning the rules. And I think a lot of students don't understand what is required. Some students catch on to that really quickly and really easily, and then other students do the same thing every single time. So, one of the classic examples is engagement with literature. Some students will read really widely, cite that in their work and demonstrate a really strong understanding and engagement with the literature and then other students will time after time just write their own personal opinion. And that's really difficult in terms of trying to get them to understand the value of literature and the importance of reading. And a lot of students they don't like reading, or they find it really hard, or difficult or boring, so I think that there are different views and attitudes in terms of the role and importance of reading and why doesn't my personal opinion matter, why do I need to get this information."*

*William: "So I don't necessarily think we spell out what the rules of the game are to people, well enough. And I think we just make some big assumptions that they're going to be able to adapt. Yeah, a lot of the students I see through my department, you've got to bear in mind they've been through secondary school, sixth form college, where they've been coached into how to pass an exam. And suddenly they've come here and they've got an exponential amount of freedom and they don't know what the rules are."*

*Lisa: "So it's this idea of university, they do see it like college, but I know this year, with all the new kind of new personal tutor system, and there's a lot more work to be done in welcome week about understanding the nature of higher education and university, attendance, engagement, all of those things, so it would be interesting to see if that makes a difference, because we kind of do it, but not in a formal sense, so I think doing it in welcome week would be quite good."*

These staff members acknowledged that there are rules to learn in university and that these rules are not necessarily taught to students when they arrive. All students are required to learn the difference in learning style at degree level in comparison to Post-16 education, and this is focused upon becoming an independent learner. Recommendations made by Whittaker (2008) proposed that transition to HE should be longitudinal, develop a sense of belonging and outline expectations for staff and students. Hassel and Ridout (2017) called for interventions to help manage expectations for students and staff before they enrol at university, so as to begin the transition period earlier. The recommendations by Whittaker (2008) and Hassel and Ridout (2017) support the concept of playing the game, as there is a need to outline the rules for students when or before they begin their course. Kantanis (2000) highlighted that university tutors often teach as they were taught and that life for students, particularly for young entrants, would be vastly different from their experiences of HE. Therefore, if tutors felt they had to learn the game for themselves, they could be inclined to allow their students to follow the same pathway.

An external staff member, Robert, who works in centralised HE policy reported that a whole institution approach to widening participation is beneficial to aid the transition to HE:

*Robert: "Every single staff member, right from somebody who is working in the café up to the vice-chancellor, has some consistency across their job description. And that they are responsible for meeting the aims and objectives, which include access and participation type objectives. So, part of your job, you're going to be measured, your performance is about making the culture of the organisation an open and ethical type of organisation, that's driving social mobility and fair access across the student lifecycle. They've had real success with that, because then you start to get buy-in. It's almost you're being forced to do it but then you've also bought into that approach... [A HEI] had a real issue with attainment gaps between different ethnic groups, and I think they halved their attainment gap between black and white students in about three years, and it's carrying on going down. Because they've identified an issue and came up with an innovative way to do it... That's essentially what it is. It's about the goals for widening participation being in line with the overall strategic goals of the organisation, and that its people, and its culture, and its structure, and its processes are working towards those goals. I don't think you can really do one without the other. You can try forcing people to do things, or you can just say, "Oh, we're going to have a culture of inclusivity," but actually you need to police it... If you just do the policing stuff, without the persuasion and getting people on-board, then you will get push back. The most successful examples have been where you do the two in combination."*

Robert has a wide experience with HEIs in all forms and participates in reviewing Access and Participation plans, therefore has a broad knowledge of widening participation activities and outcomes. Roberto proposed that the whole institution needs to be dedicated to the integration and success of underrepresented students. In doing so, this creates an inclusive culture that evaluates and adapts practice, rather than forcing underrepresented students to fit into traditional roles. With regards to helping students learn to play the game, a united front from the institution could challenge the traditional role of the university and lead to adaptive teaching and learning practices to create inclusion. This would allow lecturers to reflect upon their teaching and no longer teach as they were taught (Kantanis, 2000). By changing the institutional approach, instead of changing the student, structural barriers would be reduced for students. This would provide an increase of independence and confidence for students themselves, to make rational decisions (Weber, 1978) and to aid them to assimilate the new field and acquire a settled habitus (Bourdieu, 1986).

One staff member did not believe that the rules of the game should be explained to all students to support their transition:

*Rowena: "I think this notion that everybody has this, that it's my right to go to university or you know well, anybody can go so you know you've got to accept me in is dangerous. I think it presupposes or there's a lot of presupposition that I've bought my degree, you know, and that's it. I've paid the money so where's my qualification without recognising that you do actually have to do some work towards it, and not some work but quite a lot of work. Over a sustained period of time. But going back to what I was saying earlier, sometimes the best conversation you can have with somebody is maybe this isn't for you. And maybe this isn't for you right now, maybe you need to go away and work for a bit, see what you really want and then come back and do it. And some of the disadvantages are this notion of everybody can come and let's just open it up and it is not always good, it falsely, or can falsely create sort of, a false sense of hope."*

Rowena's opinions demonstrated the power held by institutions and the individuals within them in withholding the rules of the game, therefore limiting success for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Whilst the intention of Rowena's statement was to argue that students cannot receive a degree without studying for it, it demonstrated a deficit view of students; in particular, those who are underrepresented. Higher education is a right for all members of society and not a privilege, and the power imbalance restricts access and success. The institutionalised view that there are some members of society that should not be able to access HE, provides further evidence that the imbalance of power at university disempowers students and that knowledge of the game and access to social, cultural and economic capitals do provide markers for success.

## 9.8 Summary

This chapter has reported on the findings and discussion arising from semi-structured interviews with staff from the University and those with specialist knowledge of widening participation external to the University. The data collected from staff helped build the picture around the student and composed the meso- and macro-levels that impact their decision-making. The staff data aided the creation of the Institutional section of the student decision-making model (see Figure 3.2). This followed the four layers, beginning

with beliefs and values at the core. Staff noted the impact of beliefs and values on student decision-making, arguing that the students' beliefs and values not only influenced their decision to go to university, but also their choices once they are enrolled. For example, students may not ask for additional help or support as they feel out of their depth, or that it was not something they were comfortable doing because their families would not.

The institutional habitus of the University, and HE in general was debated within the staff members, with some seeing change was needed to create more inclusive environments and curriculums. The policy within the University was also questioned, as it was created by those who had an interest, but not necessarily a specialism, in supporting underrepresented students. Therefore, the culture became well-meaning rather than effective. Horizons for Action within HE was reported to be restrictive for students. This was related to the previous two layers of the student decision-making model because the beliefs and values of underrepresented students do not always cooperate with the institutional habitus. This resulted in the reduction of opportunities and restriction of choice for students. The final layer, environment, could also be unwelcoming to students, as it does not meet the needs of a diverse student population. In particular, it was shown that universities, in part due to their older campuses, only express gender in a binary form (only male and female toilets) and the facilities do not cater for students who are part-time or who require the campus out of office hours.

The chapter finishes by looking at the inputs and outputs to the Institutional section of the student decision-making model. To the right of Institutional is Societal and staff members comment how the macro-level; policy, funding and wider disadvantage also limits choice for students as the disadvantage in prior education and the employment market restricts their opportunities. Between the Institutional and Individual section, the output is transition. Staff members drew on their experiences to demonstrate the

transition process for students and the way in which students needed to play the game to learn how to succeed. It was noted this is particularly true for underrepresented students who had limited experience of HE before commencing study.



## **10. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

### **10.1 Research overview**

This chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis, synthesising the findings and arguments made in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. The findings were interpreted according to the literature presented in Chapters Two, Three (which included a theoretical framework) and Four and aim to answer the research questions presented in Chapter Five. This chapter provides an overall summary of the literature, aims and the findings. It also outlines the original contribution to knowledge this thesis has created and how this can be interpreted for policy and further research recommendations.

This research has examined HE in the UK, with a particular focus upon the experiences of underrepresented students and their journeys to and through university study. All HEIs continue to have an obligation to ensure their own institutions are fair to access, in terms of participation and success, for all groups of students. HE providers are required to submit Access and Participation Plans to the Office for Students that outline their monetary outlay and the activities that contribute to their widening participation effort. However, widening access to universities and increasing fees, has created a quasi-market where universities use different approaches to recruit students according to their institution type (selective or recruiting) to serve their own goals (Rainford, 2017; McCaig *et al.*, 2016).

When the experiences of underrepresented students were examined within the literature, it became apparent that HE can be a problematic field for some students to thrive in and that HEIs need to fundamentally adapt their policies to provide an inclusive environment for all (McCowan, 2016). Due to the structural and cultural barriers that exist for underrepresented students, this thesis incorporated a Bourdieusian framework.

Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1992) and Bourdieu and Passerson (1977) theorised the reproduction of inequality based upon forms of capital: social, cultural and economic (Chapter 3.4), habitus (Chapter 3.3), and the process of playing the game to fit in and succeed at university (Chapter 3.4.4). Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) created a career decision-making model, incorporating four aspects that influence young people's choices in regards to their: careers, beliefs and values, Horizons for Action, turning points and routines. By combining Hodkinson's career-decision making model with a Bourdieusian framework, the thesis analysed the experience of current students at one HEI in relation to how they made their decisions about coming to university and their experiences at university. This demonstrated the inequality of success for underrepresented groups, in particular the imbalance of power they experienced at university.

The research itself was in qualitative form, with ten life-story interviews being conducted with underrepresented home students currently studying at the University, supplemented with nine internal staff interviews and six external expert staff interviews. This allowed for a picture of the micro (the student), meso (the institution) and the macro (the national context) to be analysed.

## **10.2 Research conclusions**

The overarching research aim of this study was to assess how the University supports success for underrepresented students. The research study had four research questions, shown below.

1. How do underrepresented students experience barriers and opportunities at the University?
2. How do staff believe they support underrepresented students?
3. In which ways do students habitus change through their experiences at the University?
4. How do students make decisions and actions in relation to their experiences at the University?

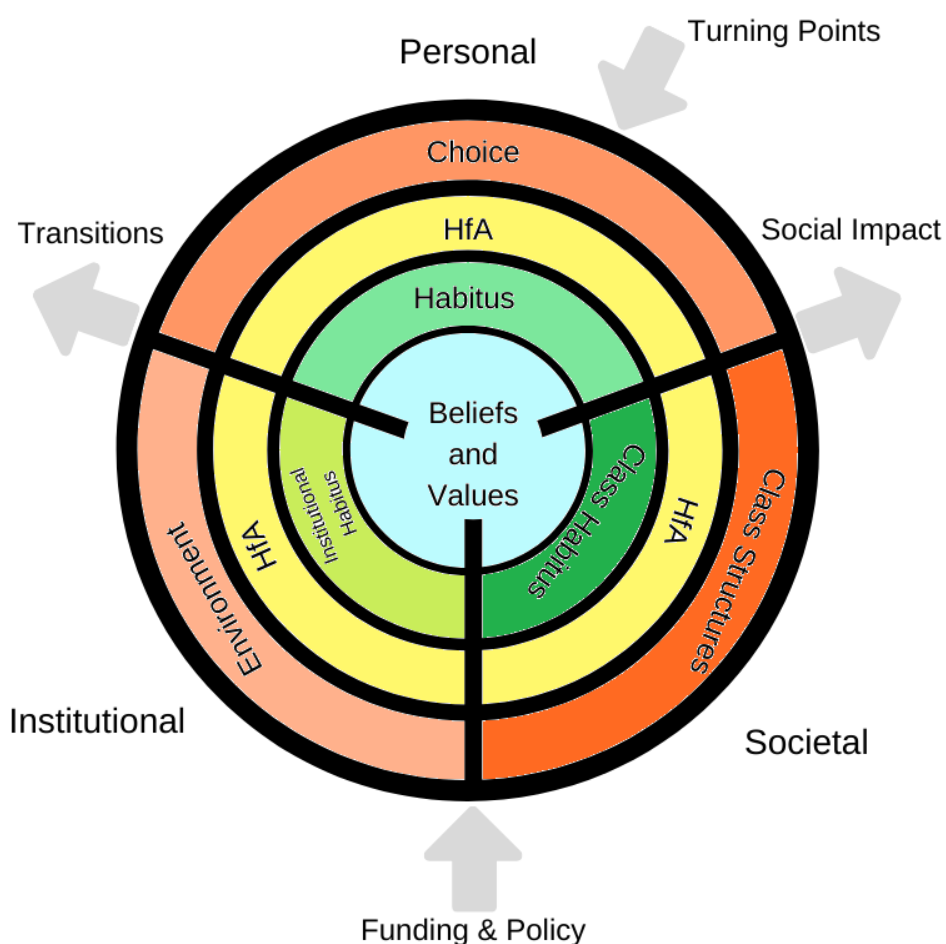
### 10.2.1 The imbalance of power

Evidence from this research ascertained that underrepresented students are disempowered at university. One staff member from the University regarded underrepresented students as 'other' (Gibson *et al.*, 2016) and not as worthy of HE as traditional students. Policies can also lead to inequality for underrepresented students, as they are ignorant to minority groups differing social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). At the University where the study was conducted, there is an increasing number of activities to ameliorate participation and success for all groups, albeit these activities are certainly not institutionalised and not all staff members hold the same views in relation to underrepresented students as 'other'. Stevenson *et al.* (2010) posited that the disconnect between university policy leads to a shift of responsibility onto the students, who are already at a disadvantage, to succeed. At the University, there is a central schools' engagement team, whose aim is to encourage local students to attend university; however, they are limited in staff and financial resource. Responsibility for student success is held within faculties, resulting in heterogeneous support across faculties. In addition, responsibility for the strategic leadership of access, in particular creating Access and Participation plans, is held by a self-confessed '*interested amateur*'. Without an institutionalised strategic plan for widening participation, this leads underrepresented

students to be further disempowered. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, universities were built for a traditional student; the white middle-class male, in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. (Kettley, 2007; Green, 1990). Despite the massification of HE, universities still mostly ascribe to the original typology of benefiting the ruling class to access elite professions. It is still expected those from other backgrounds to fit into the social and cultural norms of elitist HE. This research calls for HEIs to become flexible and innovative to accommodate a wider range of students if they are to create change and provide a fair environment for all to thrive.

#### 10.2.2 The development of a student career-decision making model

Using Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) and Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theoretical perspective of careership, this research applied data to their existing model. The life-story interviews allowed the researcher to reflect upon the participant's experiences and relate it to the four aspects of Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model. This research created a student decision-making model (see Figure 10.1 below) which has been applied to the findings throughout. It has demonstrated that the beliefs and values of the individual are pertinent to all decisions made and are subsequently influenced by habitus (individual, institutional and class), Horizons for Action, choices made by the individual that can be shaped by structures and the environment. The accumulation of these factors results in the output of transition. The student decision-making model allows researchers and professionals a more thorough and holistic view of how students make decisions. In particular for underrepresented students, the model can help staff and researchers empathise and understand how decisions are made.



**Figure 10.1 – The student decision-making model**

### 10.2.3 Coping mechanisms of underrepresented students

Autonomy is linked to the application of power an individual makes in their actions, but it cannot be evaluated without considering the structural barriers that may exist (Bourdieu, 1977). Autonomy and proactivity are essential for any university study within the current parameters, as study is independently led. The participants demonstrated their own independence in differing ways within this research. Students reacted to the change in fields when entering university by using *proactive, preventative and reactive* coping mechanisms (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). All bar one of the student participants were first in their family to come to university, therefore entering HE was a conflict to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) as they had limited experience of university life prior to

enrolling. Participants coped with this in different ways. For those who found the transition to university very unsettling, they demonstrated little proactivity, using a *preventative* coping mechanism but displaying resilience in continuing their studies. For those who had set goals, and clear *imagined futures* (Ball *et al.*, 1999), they needed to use their autonomy in order to achieve their goals and used it as a coping mechanism to keep themselves focused.

However, this research demonstrated that there are structural barriers that limit opportunities and choices for underrepresented students. Such as universities and staff members adhering to the rigidity of a ‘traditional’ model of how HE is structured and policies that were not designed with a diverse range of students in mind. This lack of inclusivity in university policies and institutional environments is a critical factor in the higher drop-out rates and reduced attainment experienced by underrepresented students in HE. Recognition of the institutional barriers that exist at individual HEIs (and their institutional autonomy to be able to mitigate these away from government policy) is absolutely crucial if the experiences of underrepresented students in HE is to improve.

#### 10.2.4 The social impact measurement of access activity

The collection and analysis of the qualitative data in this thesis have further enhanced the knowledge of the outcomes needed for measuring social impact and success for students, by understanding their transitions and the types of inequality that exist. Further to this, the preconditions to measure outcomes and outputs has been enriched and are shown in Table 10.1 below. GECES<sup>12</sup> (Clifford, Hehenberger and Fantini, 2014:29) defines outputs

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<sup>12</sup> This relates to the European Commission’s (EC’s) ‘Groupe d’Experts de la Commission sur l’Entrepreneuriat Social’ (GECES)’ standard for social impact measurement, which outlines best practice approaches to measuring social impact. The GECES report can be found online at <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0c0b5d38-4ac8-43d1-a7af-32f7b6fcf1cc>

as *“tangible products from the activity”*, outcomes as *“changes, benefits, learnings, effects resulting from the activity”* and impact as *“attributions of an organisation’s activities to broader and longer-term outcomes”*.

**Table 10.1: Evaluating the social impact of student success in HEIS**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Impacts</b>
<b>Institutional Approach</b>	<i>Inclusive Policy</i>	Policies reviewed and amended	Flexible and adaptable HE provider	Reduced disciplinary actions and increased assessment submissions and attainment.
	<i>Inclusive Teaching and Learning</i>	Staff trained and teaching and learning amended	Increased good degrees	Increased graduate employment statistics. Increased staff with Higher Education Academy recognition
<b>Student Independence</b>	<i>Resilience</i>	N.O. Discontinuations	General Self-Efficacy Scales <sup>13</sup>	Reduced discontinuations
	<i>Well-being</i>	N.O. Good degrees	Warwick/Edinburgh Wellbeing scale <sup>14</sup>	Increased good degrees
	<i>Belonging</i>	N.O. Improved scale scores	Flourishing scale <sup>15</sup>	Increased completions
<b>Forms of Student Capital</b>	<i>Social</i>	Targeted social events	Increased participation	Increased completion and
	<i>Cultural</i>	Targeted cultural events	Increased participation	Reduced discontinuations
	<i>Economic</i>	N.O. Bursaries awarded	Logistic Regression analysis <sup>16</sup>	Increased good degrees

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<sup>13</sup> Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995)

<sup>14</sup> Taggart, Stewart-Brown and Parkinson (2015)

<sup>15</sup> Diener *et al.* (2010)

<sup>16</sup> McCaig *et al.* (2016)



<b>Student Decision Making</b>	<i>Turning Points</i>	N.O. Underrepresented students enrolling at university	Life-story interviews	Increased student body understanding
	<i>Transitions</i>	Personalising teaching, individualised learning and support	Retention and progression statistics	Improved retention and progression within courses
	<i>Beliefs and Values</i>	N.O. Diverse students entering HE	Equality and diversity statistics	Improved recruitment to the HEI, improved student experience for all students
	<i>Horizons for Action</i>	N.O. Students with higher entry qualifications	Life-story interviews	Reduced barriers for underrepresented students

### 10.3 Original contribution to knowledge

For the University used as the research site, this research is the first conducted to fully assess how access work can be evaluated and has provided a framework that the University can utilise in the future. This will allow the University to identify any misplaced access efforts and focus upon those that create the most inequality. This research has utilised life-story interviews to provide a holistic view of underrepresented student transitions. Raven (2016a: 287) highlighted that life-story interviews provide '*a detailed and complete assessment*' and this has been applied to the experiences of underrepresented students and applied through theoretical frameworks. In addition to the life-story interviews, data were collected from semi-structured interviews to supplement the students to illuminate how staff believed they supported students. This provided a multi-level analysis of the experiences of underrepresented students in a Post-1992 university. The most significant original contribution to knowledge is the application of students' decisions to come to university to Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model, and the creation from this of the student decision-making model. This has provided an in-depth analysis of the factors that students take into account when deciding to attend university and in doing so has highlighted structural barriers. The benefit of conducting life-story interviews is that students do not have to directly acknowledge the barriers that exist, but these emerge when incorporating the theoretical framework. The incorporation of staff interviews allowed these structures to become apparent and also inform the layers of the Institutional portion of the model.

Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career-decision making model has been greatly advanced by incorporating a theoretical framework (see Figure 3.2) based upon a Bourdieusian approach. The participants in this study provided evidence from their own experiences of going to

university and this highlighted the deeper factors that influenced their decision. Habitus and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) interlink with their beliefs and values and Horizons for Action. Participants confirmed that their class habitus led to a confliction when entering HE after the data was analysed. For example, Chloe and Lindsay entered employment after their Post-16 education, as it was the pathway which their families took. When they decided to attend university, and in particular for Lindsay, she found that she needed time to readjust before she could assert her autonomy, therefore using *preventative coping* (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). Choices and opportunities have been shown to be restricted for students in this study due to the limitations for social action (Weber, 1978) placed upon them by the structure of HE and society. Overall, this study has presented an updated version of the decision-making model, that incorporates the original facets presented by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) and enhances these for the HE setting using theories of power and the reproduction of inequality.

## 10.4 Policy recommendations

Based upon the evidence analysed in this research and the conclusions drawn, in Table 10.2 below, recommendations for policy are outlined:

**Table 10.2 – Policy recommendations**

<b>Policy Recommendation</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. Universities should be flexible in their structure to adapt to a diverse student body.	This research has evidenced that HEIs operate on an aged model of providing HE, based on supporting traditional students. An approach by all universities should be undertaken to adapt their policies, teaching and learning to suit their student body. For example, policies that do not conflict with cultural differences and curriculums that are diverse. Post-1992 universities could be at the forefront of change, to adapt their teaching, learning and extracurricular activities to meet the needs of their existing diverse student body.
a) The University to make policies clearer and increase objectivity.	Policies (including admission and assessment extensions) to provide clearer guidelines as to how candidates are selected and acceptable special admissions examples. With regards to the extension policies, the circumstances that constitute valid difficulties for students should be clarified, so as to ensure consistency across programmes.
b) The University to review policies to allow greater flexibility of study.	It is stated in the regulations the minimum and maximum registration periods, but in reality, students are not able to customise their own learning to shorten or extend their study. For example, modules could run in the summer to allow students to shorten their study period or catch-up on failed study.
c) The University to reconsider mitigating circumstances policy	As it stands, students who defer their assessments due to mitigating circumstances are not able to resit if they do not achieve a bare pass. This is discriminatory for students who do incur serious difficulties in their studies as it could result in repeating a year of study.

2. Universities to conduct regular research and evaluation.	Universities need to understand their student population, and this would be achieved through regular research and evaluation, aligned through the social impact framework as identified in Table 10.1. This will demonstrate where universities are meeting their student needs and where resources are being misplaced. The research should also incorporate staff opinions of teaching a diverse population to address any prejudices and promote an institutionalised view that all students have the right to thrive at university. This would also further identify structural barriers for underrepresented students created by the institution.
a) The University to conduct yearly research based upon the evaluation framework.	Regular research has begun at the University to assess the social impact of widening participation activity. By continuing to invest resources to evaluation, this could improve the experiences and outcomes of underrepresented students.
3. Based on research and evaluation, consider the student body needs.	Based on the research, the needs of the students should be addressed. For example, this research has shown that underrepresented students are disempowered by the structures at play. Therefore, HEIs need to facilitate underrepresented students' transition to university, by teaching them the rules of the game. This should continue throughout the student lifecycle.
a) The University to reflect upon research and consider changes to be made.	This thesis has demonstrated policies, such as assessment policy, that disadvantages students as well as raises questions about the appropriateness of the curriculum, in particular for BAME students. A working group, consisting of a truly diverse group of staff and students, should be established to revise curriculums and extracurricular activity to be more inclusive.
4. Universities to report in Access and Participation plans how they increase the diversity as an institutionalised approach	Universities should also report on their own diversity in Access and Participation plans, in terms of the diversity of their staff population and a wider curriculum. This will demonstrate their institutional commitment to widening participation.

a) The University to show a commitment as a whole institution approach to create an environment of inclusivity.	The working group as mentioned in recommendation 3a should move forward the whole institution approach to improving diversity and inclusivity. This could be achieved by providing training for staff to better understand the diverse student population to eliminate any possible unconscious bias.
5. Policy and legislation to hold universities accountable	The current legal position is that the Office for Students can enforce sanctions on universities for not cooperating with access and participation plans. However, it is rarely enforced for universities that have not made reasonable adjustments and efforts to increase participation and success for underrepresented students. Before such sanctions are made, HEIs that are failing should be supported by the Office for Students to make substantial improvements.
6. Policy to encourage innovation and change, rather than restricting it.	Current metrics of university success, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), pressurise universities to succeed to maintain funding and league table positions. This restricts their ability and inclination to innovative practice, as they focus upon meeting the metrics enforced by government.

## 10.5 Research limitations and areas for further research

This research has provided an original contribution to knowledge in its application of life-story and staff interviews to the theoretical framework and the creation of the student decision-making model. However, the research also has its limitations. First, the study was conducted in one Post-1992 university, and only provides an insight into the experiences of students and the structures that influenced them in this singular context. However, by reproducing the study to further HEIs, including Pre-1992 and Russell Group institutions, it would demonstrate

whether the student decision-making model is transferrable and generalisable. In addition, it may be that the structures in other institutions do not provide the same barriers or initiatives to promote access and success. This further research would continue to build upon the policy recommendations and evaluation frameworks outlined in this chapter.

This study was unable to target students directly to participate in the study based upon their demographics, due to data protection issues. It would be useful to conduct the study in a targeted manner, to reach a range of participants. This researcher called for volunteers, and the participants self-selected. Perhaps students who found university a completely alienating experience may have been unlikely to volunteer. If targeted invitations to participate were created, a wider sample could be achieved. For this study, targeted invitations were unable to be sent to students, due to the change in data protection regulation. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU, 2018) was introduced at the time data was collected and the University was hesitant to release student data for research purposes as the Institution's policy with regards to using student details for research had not yet been ascertained in reflection of GDPR. University data did not hold all demographic details for students that would identify those who were considered to be underrepresented, therefore establishing the statistical base of evidence surrounding student success would be flawed, should access had been granted.

Finally, the researcher's own position in regards to conducting the research is reflected upon. Temple and Young (2004) discussed the epistemological position of researchers as translators and the impact this had on the analysis of data. Temple and Young (ibid) refer to translators in the literal sense, from one language to another; however, in this project, I have acted as a translator in a metaphorical sense, due to my own experiences of education as an

underrepresented student. In my own transition to HE, I acknowledged that the way in which I now conduct myself, having gained a wider vocabulary and knowledge of academia, suggests I have transformed into a person that may not be as easily recognised as an underrepresented student. I noticed that many of the student participants saw me as an expert, as many asked questions about how to conduct research, asked for advice for their dissertations or for further information about HE pathways (for example, asking questions such as 'what is a PhD?'). Along this journey, I made sure to tell participants about my own background in an attempt to make them feel comfortable in telling their stories, as they may be able to relate to me. Whilst there is some unavoidable bias in my own position in relation to the participant's experiences, this has also provided a deeper insight into the process of the transition to HE.

My own journey to PhD study was relatively smooth, and I adapted well to a different habitus, in part due to the institution I chose; however, my transition through PhD study has been difficult. I can identify with each participant's journey, as I have experienced the highs and lows of feeling unsettled and concerned as to whether I made the right choice. Since beginning the PhD, I have always felt that I have been playing a role; being someone who I am not, in order to fit in. For me, this has become disempowering, as I battled with imposter syndrome (Chapman, 2017) and a subsequent mental health issue. It took me a long time to feel part of the researcher community and to feel worthy to be here. I just felt completely isolated at some points of this study. The experience of feeling disempowered significantly reduced my ability to be proactive and to learn independently. Perhaps this has influenced Chapter 7.3, as I felt powerless and could relate on a deeper level to those who could be at risk of feeling the same and an understanding of why some students find it difficult to engage with university. Fortunately, through support from colleagues, friends, family and the NHS,



I have managed the majority of my insecurities to take back control of my studies and complete this thesis. Perhaps I too learned how to play the game of PhD and assimilated to the unspoken rules.

Although I already had similarities with the participants in the study demographically, the PhD journey I have experienced has aligned me to be an 'insider' within the research at a deeper level, as I can understand the structural flaws I have experienced first-hand. As Berger (2015) described the process of the researcher undergoing similar experiences to the participants, this has had consequences in my own ability to theorise inequality within HE. One of the disadvantages of 'insider' research is that my own experiences could be projected into the analysis (Berger, *ibid*). However, I believe this has been, in the most part, avoided due to my own reflexivity and the data analysis being conducted in relation to a theoretical framework.

## **10.6 Summary**

This research began with the aim to investigate how one university supported and provided opportunities for underrepresented students. The literature review addressed the historical and policy perspectives of HE and its massification. A theoretical framework was established, based upon the works of Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1992) and Hodkinson *et al.* (1996), to establish if an imbalance of power existed and how success for underrepresented students could be promoted.

The findings of the study formed a student decision-making model, based upon the life-story interviews conducted with ten student participants and the knowledge of internal staff members and external experts. Through these interviews, it was demonstrated that the imbalances of power that underrepresented students experienced, such as universities still operating to suit traditional students' needs, inhibiting academic performance and retention.

An evaluation framework was created to aid universities to self-assess their impact on underrepresented students and allow them to reflect upon their practice.

The research made an original contribution to knowledge in developing the student decision-making model and evaluation framework. Policy-makers are called upon, in particular, university decision-makers, to evaluate and reflect upon their practices. A student decision-making model was formed, based upon the works of Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) that was further illuminated with theories surrounding the reproduction of inequality and power. A student's beliefs and values, Horizons for Action, turning points and routines (adapted to transitions) are entwined with habitus and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that underrepresented students struggle within HE's traditional forms of delivery. This limits their social action (Weber, 1978), as they compete in an institutional structure not built for a diverse student body. The student decision-making model elaborates upon Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) original work to highlight the impact institutions and structures have upon the individual's decision to attend university.

The researcher herself had an insider insight into the journey of underrepresented students, having travelled a similar journey. The participants in this study were, in the majority, enjoying university life and were experiencing success; however, there is evidence in this study to supplement their narratives to evidence why inequality of success is experienced by underrepresented students. Indeed, this inequality is embedded in societal and class disadvantage, institutional inflexibility to accommodate a diverse student body, and policy, funding and evaluation models that discourage innovation and genuine reflection on performance and best practice. Much needs to change before the HEI sector can be considered truly diverse and reflective of society. The current system is designed to assuage

middle-class fears centred on social mobility, whilst allowing underrepresented students to fundamentally change their lives in order to thrive and succeed at university. In a hopefully progressive world, in which universities are often considered a significant contributor to said progression, this is not acceptable and only entrenches the social inequality that exists in society today. A call is made to universities to reconsider their purpose and to reflect upon how they can ameliorate disadvantage, rather than reproduce it.

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## APPENDIX 1 – WHO’S STUDYING IN HE? (HESA, 2018)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
<b>Age group</b>					
20 and under	38%	40%	41%	41%	41%
21-24	27%	27%	27%	27%	28%
25-29	12%	11%	11%	11%	11%
30 and over	23%	22%	21%	20%	20%
<b>Disability status</b>					
Known disability	10%	11%	11%	12%	13%
No known disability	90%	89%	89%	88%	87%
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
White	80%	79%	78%	77%	76%
Black	6%	7%	7%	7%	7%
Asian	9%	10%	10%	10%	11%
Mixed	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%
<b>State school marker</b>					
Privately funded school	10%	10%	9%	9%	9%
State funded school or college	90%	90%	91%	91%	91%
<b>Socio-economic classification</b>					
Higher managerial & professional occupations	23%	23%	24%	24%	25%
Lower managerial & professional occupations	29%	29%	28%	27%	26%
Intermediate occupations	13%	13%	14%	14%	15%
Small employers & own account workers	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%
Lower supervisory & technical occupations	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Semi-routine occupations	15%	15%	15%	14%	14%
Routine occupations	7%	7%	7%	7%	8%

Never worked & long-term unemployed	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Parental education</b>					
Yes	50%	50%	49%	49%	50%
No	41%	43%	43%	44%	44%
Don't know	9%	8%	7%	7%	7%
<b>Low participation neighbourhood marker</b>					
Low participation neighbourhood (POLAR4)	11%	12%	12%	12%	13%
Other neighbourhood (POLAR4)	89%	88%	88%	88%	88%

## APPENDIX 2 - STAFF WORKSHOP DISCUSSION POINTS

For each stage of the Lifecycle Model you should identify:

- What does the University already do for your student?
- What else could the University do to support this stage?

### Pre-entry

- Outreach activity – age groups, types of activity
- What has the most impact?
- What activity for what outcome?
- Could you further the University's programme of outreach?

### Transition to HE

- Welcome packs
- Induction week
- Academic and personal skills before enrolling

### First Year Experience

- Reduce dropout rates
- Increase student satisfaction
- Increase HE skills
- Increase social experience

### Progression

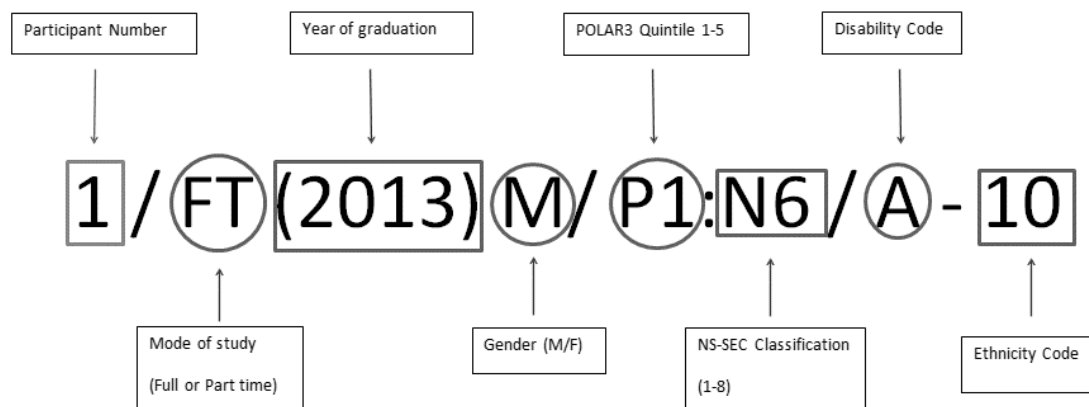
- Progression to each year stage
- Achieving "good" grades ready for classification grade
- Achieving a rich experience away from study, i.e. work experience

### Post Study Progression

- Increase PG study progression rates
- Increase employment after study rates DHLE
- Increase graduate level employment

## APPENDIX 3 – PILOT STUDY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL

Participant codes were created to identify the student demographics, whilst still upholding their anonymity for data analysis and discussion of themes. This is described in the below figure.



The full breakdown of participant demographics is detailed in the table below.

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Grad. Yr.</b>	<b>Polar 3 Q</b>	<b>NS-SEC</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>WP Markers</b>
<b>1/FT(2013)M/ P1:N6/A-10</b>	History	2013	1	6	2	19	A	10	2
<b>2/FT(2013)F/P 1:N7/A-10</b>	Sport Studies/Health Studies	2013	1	7	1	18	A	10	2
<b>3/FT(2015)F/P 1:N6/N-22</b>	Mental Health Nursing	2015	1	6	1	24	N	22	4
<b>4/FT(2011)F/P 1:N6/A-40</b>	Social Work	2011	1	6	1	18	A	40	3
<b>5/FT(2012)M/ P1:N6/A-10</b>	Computing (Computer Network Engineering)	2012	1	6	2	18	A	10	2
<b>6/FT(2014)F/P 1:N6/N-10</b>	Adult Nursing	2014	1	6	1	42	A	10	3
<b>7/FT(2013)F/P 1:N6/N-21</b>	Fashion	2013	1	6	1	19	N	21	3
<b>8/FT(2009)F/P 1:N7/N-10</b>	Law/Economics	2009	1	7	1	19	N	10	2
<b>9/FT(2013)F/P 1:N6/A-33</b>	Primary Education leading to QTS (General Primary)	2013	1	6	1	18	A	33	3
<b>10/FT(2011)F/ P1:N7/G-10</b>	History	2011	1	7	1	18	G	10	3
<b>11/FT(2011)M/ P1:N6/A-10</b>	Sport Development	2011	1	6	2	18	A	10	2
<b>12/FT(2012)F/ P1:N7/A-10</b>	Creative Writing/Drama	2012	1	7	1	21	A	10	3
<b>13/FT(2015)F/ P1:N6/A-22</b>	Accounting and Finance	2015	1	6	1	28	A	22	4
<b>14/FT(2012)M/ P1:N5/A-10</b>	Human Geography/Management	2012	1	5	2	18	A	10	2
<b>15/FT(2013)F/ P1:N6/A-99</b>	Occupational Therapy	2013	1	6	1	35	A	99	3

The tables below provide a description for the student demographic codes:

<b>National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)</b>	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
1	Higher managerial and professional occupations
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations
3	Intermediate occupations (clerical, sales, service)
4	Small employers and own account workers
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6	Semi-routine occupations
7	Routine occupations
8	Never worked or long-term unemployed

<b>Gender</b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
1	Female
2	Male

<b>Disability</b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
A	No known disability
G	A long-standing illness or health condition
N	Not known



Ethnicity	
Code	Descriptor
10	White
21	Black or Black British – Caribbean
22	Black or Black British – African
33	Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
40	Other (including mixed)
99	Not known

The final column, WP markers, indicates how many of the protected characteristics each participant is known to be considered. For example, one participant is marked as being classified as four of the protected characteristics; from POLAR quintile 1 or 2, from NS-SEC category 4-7 and a mature student.

## APPENDIX 4 – ALUMNI INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: M/F Interviewer:  
SQ/FH/Other \_\_\_\_\_

Year of Graduation: \_\_\_\_\_ FT/PT Course:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current role: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation (+Location if possible): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Can I just check that you understand the consent form and are happy to take part in this research? (check form signed)
2. How were you supported whilst you were a student? i.e. How did the University support you to overcome any challenges that you may have faced:
  - a. Before arriving at University (Prompt: why did you choose the University, tell me about your first year at University and what support services/ resources you accessed? Did you feel welcome?)
  - b. After arriving/ during studies (Prompt: What job opportunities did you have? What additional funding/ financial support did the University offer you?)
    - i. Do you think the University has the right balance between 'embedded' activities that reach large numbers of students and tailored activities that target small groups of students? Please explain.
    - ii. Did you have a Personal Academic Tutor (PAT)? Tell me about how you made use of him/her.
  - c. After graduation
3. Which activity or support service made the greatest impact on your University experience? (prompt: what were the outcomes personally/professionally for you?)
4. What else *could* the University have done differently to support a diverse range of students or yourself? (prompt: to reduce dropout rates; increase student satisfaction; increase HE skills; increase social experiences; enable students to progress to each year stage; to achieve "good" grades ready for classification grade; to achieve a rich experience away from study, i.e. work experience; increase Post Graduate study progression rates; increase employment after study rates; increase graduate level employment)

5. What would you consider would have been the best times and key transition points to evaluate impact of various University activities on you personally when you were a student so that you could have derived the optimal benefit from them? (prompt: Were there any times you felt you needed more support from the University than others? Did the University encourage you towards activities too early or too late?)
6. In your opinion, what can/should the University be doing to attract and support part-time students?
7. What can/should the University be doing to attract and support students who may be considered non-traditional or who come from an underrepresented group, to attend University?
8. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you about the change process that the University brought about in your studies-professional experiences in life that you would like to tell me, which you think might help us evaluate the impact of those activities? (Prompt: other than academic learning, what did the UNIVERSITY teach you to assist in your studies and later professional life?)
9. Do you have any questions about this research/process that I can answer?

Thank you for your time and help with this research.

## APPENDIX 5 – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is undertaken by the XXX on behalf of the XXX to understand how Office for Fair Access (OFFA) funded initiatives impact upon its beneficiaries. This report forms the first six months of a doctoral study.

The XXX has long been committed to raising the aspirations of groups and individuals in society and since 2015, this commitment has been aligned with the XXX Transforming Lives + Inspiring Change strategy. However, despite progress, there is evidence to suggest there is a need to promote fair access to groups considered under-represented in Higher Education (HE). The XXX is committed to a 'Whole Life Cycle Model' approach which aims to provide student success at all levels of HE study.

Fair access and widening participation to HE are evident themes in recent and historical government policy; such as the Robbins (1963) report and the Green and White papers. These provide a focus on promoting fair access for students who are considered to be under-represented in HE. It is argued that widening participation policy and practice is a vehicle for social mobility and the current labour market has demanded an increase in skilled workers.

Students from widening participation backgrounds should not be considered deficient; they do not traditionally participate in HE as the universities are not always suiting their needs. Therefore, assumptions about students should be carefully considered to avoid a deficit model.

Bourdieu's theories regarding issues of inequality, power and language can be applied to widening participation practice and policy. HE can be interpreted as a rite of institution and those who choose not to participate could be experiencing a sense of limits, wherein students assume their status according to their environment. Individuals also have resources of three kinds; economic, social and cultural capitals which could help or hinder individuals accessing university and could also be developed during study.

It is an individual's human capital which can aid them in HE and this could be evidenced by non-continuation rates for students from the lowest Socio-Economic Status (SES) groups. For example, 89.5% of students from the lowest POLAR3 continue after the year of entry, whereas 92% of students from other neighbourhoods. There has been a decline in part-time students since the rise in tuition fees. Part-time study is framed upon full-time study and does not always appeal to or meet the needs of part-time populations.

A Theory of Change model is the chosen method of evaluation for this study as it can be utilised to understand how an organisation envisions and actions upon a problem. This report will focus upon the initial stages of a Theory of Change; establishing a long term goal and creating a Pathway of Change. This research seeks to understand how the OFFA projects/activities impact upon its beneficiaries and will outline a Pathway of Change diagram to outline the current and desired provision to meet the long term goal. It is essential to make assumptions explicit regarding the long term goal for the UN and its commitment to promote fair access. This research will collate data from a staff focus

group, interviews with alumni and quantitative data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey.

The key themes derived from the alumni interviews include institutional attitudes and responsibility; community outreach; specific services; promoting agency; academic staff support; local institution; and financial implications. The findings from the Staff Focus Group could be classified into the following themes; Institutional Attitudes and Responsibility, Community Outreach, Specific Services

The quantitative data arises from 10,157 former undergraduates (UG) of the UN comprising of five cohorts of DLHE data; 2010/11-2014/15. These cohorts were matched with HESA data supply tables to ascertain widening participation indicators. The data was analysed to establish the following key predictors (A 'good' degree is defined as the number of honours degrees awarded a First or Upper Second divided by the number of degrees awarded. This includes 'pass' degrees but excludes fails. The internal benchmarks for 'good' degrees based on UN Institutional Targets set in the Annual Review Handbook (July 2015) are 65-75%):

- The odds of an older at start BME UG to obtain a good degree are 1.13 times higher than a younger at start UG.
- The odds of a part-time BME UG to obtain a good degree are 5.43 times higher than a full-time BME UG.
- The odds of an older at start BME UG to become employed are 2.78 times higher than a younger at start BME UG.
- The odds of a BME mature UG to obtain a good degree are 0.41 times lower than a White mature UG, i.e. 0.41 obtain a good degree for every one non-BME mature UG student who does
- The odds of an older at start mature UG to become employed are 2.24 times higher than a younger at start mature UG.
- The odds of UG with a disclosed disability that studied part-time to obtain a good degree are 3.90 times higher than those of undergraduates with a disclosed disability that studied full-time.
- The odds of an older at UG with a disclosed disability to become employed are 2.05 times higher than those of a younger at start UG with disclosed disability.
- Among all White working class male students, 60.9% received a good degree
- Among all part-time students that graduated, 16.6% received a good degree.
- Among all students from the bottom 20% of IMD, 47.7% received a good degree.

From the evidence collected for this evaluation, with regard to the research questions, it is possible to conclude that:

- The milestones set in the 2014/15 Access Agreement have not all been met. However, it has been difficult to access comparable data as it is based upon leaver data rather than admissions.
- From the alumni interviews, it appears that it is the support of Academic members of staff and PATs that has had the greatest positive impact on students from underrepresented backgrounds.

- It has not been possible to ascertain the possibility of investigating multiple indicators of disadvantage due to the inaccessibility of student data for widening participation indicators.
- The use of national datasets was utilised to measure against BAME students and students with a disclosed disability as a pilot. This reveals the XXX does not meet the national standards of employment post study. The national data has shown to be useful to create milestones and reveal issues which need to be resolved by the UN. These are detailed on pages 41-42 of this report.
- For the graduates who participated in the study, it has shown they found enough support embedded in their studies as well as tailored activities should they need it. However, drawing on the quantitative data and themes from the qualitative data, it suggests there are students who do not access enough support during their studies. Therefore, this suggests the XXX needs to seek innovative methods of engaging students in support activities.
- The best times and key transition points to evaluate the impact of activities provided a varied response, however, it was highlighted that regular evaluation interventions could be beneficial to identify any specific issues to be resolved.
- The XXX could attract and support part-time students in different ways, the alumni felt it could benefit from a higher level of marketing and should account for the reasons why students may choose part-time.

With regard to developing a Theory of Change, the data gathered suggests that staff members all have one common goal; to create a fair university in which all students, regardless of background, and have the same opportunities to succeed at every stage of the whole student lifecycle. A pathway of change has been created to fulfil the overall goal and is demonstrated as follows:



The theory of change model is explained in further detail in section 7.2, pages 44-47 of this report.

However, despite the robustness of the evaluation, the study was not without its limitations. With regards to the Alumni interview sample, whilst small in comparison to the overall alumni population, the data gathered from the 15 participants provides a detailed and rich data set which provides an insight into what the XXX student experience is for students who are considered to be underrepresented in HE. This sample may have only attracted those who felt they had a positive experience of the XXX. An incentive to participate was offered, of a £10 Amazon voucher in follow up emails asking graduates to participate. This incentive was beneficial in encouraging graduates from diverse backgrounds to participate in the study. The quantitative data collection also proved to be problematic, with difficulty accessing data and data which provided widening participation indicators. Therefore, there is a need to ensure this is captured from each student at the UN.

This research aimed to understand the experiences of the XXX for students from underrepresented groups and the assumptions made by the XXX about fair access. In doing so, it has provided a range of qualitative and quantitative data. The data has proved conflicting; were the interviews with alumni and focus group with the staff has unveiled a plethora of support throughout university study and beyond into employment, the quantitative data has revealed that the outcomes are not consistent between groups.

The recommendations of this report are to uphold the Pathway of Change that has been created based upon all aspects of this research. The XXX has been commissioned, as part of a doctoral study, to continue to evaluate the fair access provision at the XXX, and will follow the recommendations embedded in the Pathway of Change.

## APPENDIX 6 – STUDENT CONSENT FORM

### What is the purpose of the research?

This research project seeks to understand the impact projects, initiated at the University, make on the students they are designed for. Some groups of students are under-represented in Higher Education in the UK, and many initiatives are focused upon reducing this gap. This research wants to find out what projects are the most effective at ensuring there is a fair and equal opportunity for all students at the University. This research contributes to a PhD study and the findings will be published in the final thesis. Findings from this study will also be provided to the XXX, to provide evidence as to how they create fair access opportunities for students. This will also contribute to the University's obligation to report their evaluation of access activities to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The information you provide will never be linked to your personal details in publication and the process will be confidential. The purpose of this is to ensure the University creates an inclusive environment for all students and the most effective methods are used. The findings may also be used for subsequent academic publications, for example, journal articles. You will be asked at the interview if you would like to read the transcript from the interview if you decide to participate. If you would like to be informed about the findings from this study, please contact Frances directly. Upon completion, the final PhD thesis will be available in the University of Northampton library and online at [www.ethos.bl.uk](http://www.ethos.bl.uk).

### Who are the researchers?

The research team consists of myself, Frances Hudson and my supervisory team. I am a PhD student at this University and I enrolled in June 2016. My supervisors, Professor Richard Hazenberg and Dr Meanu Bajwa-Patel, email addresses below, are supporting me on this research project.

### What does the study involve?

I will ask you to participate in life-story interviews, as this would provide the research with details about your decision-making processes and experience of education. The consent form will also ask for your permission for Frances to view the records the University holds for you, to ascertain demographic details and your academic achievements. Your personal details will never be discussed with anyone else and will not be directly linked to you in the study. The final study will be completely anonymous. To participate in this study will be your own decision and completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The information you provided will be removed from the study and destroyed.

### What are the risks?

There are no risks involved, as everything you say will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and all individual data anonymised. **Involvement or non-involvement in**



**this study has no impact whatsoever on any current or future engagements with the University.** In the unlikely event you require further support regarding the research after your participation, you can contact Frances on the details shown below.

#### **What will happen to my information?**

The information given will be stored in a password protected file. Your contributions will be identified by your student number, but your student number will not be included in any disseminated reports or publications. The identity of each participant (you) will remain anonymous throughout the research process and in the final thesis or any subsequent reports or publications. When I write any report of the study, it will not be possible to identify you or anyone else who participated in the study. I may use your student number to check details the University holds for you and to check the grades you have achieved in this academic year, but your student number will not be used in the final research publication if you provide your consent. Academic achievements will be used to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the University's access activities. In the unlikely situation where harmful practices are mentioned, I would be obliged to inform the appropriate agencies.

**PhD Research:** Transforming Lives, Inspiring Change: Investigating the social impact of university access strategies and approaches.

This PhD study aims to investigate which interventions at university have the most social impact for students. The information collected by this survey will be reported in the final PhD thesis as named above. The findings may also be used for subsequent academic publications, for example, journal articles.

All the research data will be confidential and stored securely. The survey asks for your student number to enable the researcher to check demographic data about yourself, but it will be removed before publication. The information collected will be presented in a final PhD thesis, but all results will be anonymised and no individual staff, students or employers will be identifiable.

In taking part in this research it is important for you to realise that any answers you give are done so in the strictest confidence and that any information provided by you will be anonymous and will not identify you. If at any time you feel uncomfortable participating in an interview, or have any questions, you can contact the researcher, Frances Hudson. You do not have to complete the interview if you do not wish to do so. You have a right to stop the interview at any time or to not answer any questions you do not want to.

If, following completion of the interview, you wish to withdraw your participation in the research project, or have any questions after completing the interview, please contact Frances below at any time. Your contributions will be removed from the study and the data will be destroyed.

If you are happy to take part in this research and proceed with the survey or interview, then please complete the section below.

☐ I consent for the researcher to access records the University holds for me.

☐ I have read and understood the information and consent sheet and consent to take part in the study.

Name: .....

Signature: ..... Date .....

Thank you for taking the time to support this research.

If you have any queries following your contribution today, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the research team:

For any queries or electronic copies of this document, please contact:

Miss Frances Hudson [frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk)

Professor Richard Hazenberg [richard.hazenberg@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:richard.hazenberg@northampton.ac.uk)

Dr Meanu Bajwa-Patel [meanu.bajwa-patel@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:meanu.bajwa-patel@northampton.ac.uk)

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The research team consists of myself, Frances Hudson and my supervisory team. I am a PhD student at the University of Northampton and I enrolled in June 2016. My supervisors, Professor Richard Hazenberg and Dr Meanu Bajwa-Patel, email addresses below, are supporting me on this research project.

### What does the study involve?

I will ask you to participate in an interview, as this would inform the research about practical experiences of widening participation, good practice and how it is embedded. Your personal details will never be discussed with anyone else and will not be directly linked to you in the study. The final study will be completely anonymous. To participate in this study will be your own decision and completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The information you provided will be removed from the study and destroyed.

### What are the risks?

There are no risks involved, as everything you say will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and all individual data anonymised. **Involvement or non-involvement in this study has no impact whatsoever on any current or future engagements with the**

**University.** In the unlikely event you require further support regarding the research after your participation, you can contact Frances on the details shown below.

**What will happen to my information?**

The information given will be stored in a password protected file. The identity of each participant (you) will remain anonymous throughout the research process and in the final thesis or any subsequent reports or publications. When I write any report of the study, it will not be possible to identify you or anyone else who participated in the study. In the unlikely situation where harmful practices are mentioned, I would be obliged to inform the appropriate agencies.

**PhD Research:** Transforming Lives, Inspiring Change: Investigating the social impact of university access strategies and approaches.

This PhD study aims to investigate which interventions at university have the most social impact for students. The information collected by this survey will be reported in the final PhD thesis as named above. The findings may also be used for subsequent academic publications, for example, journal articles.

All the research data will be confidential and stored securely. The information collected will be presented in a final PhD thesis, but all results will be anonymised and no individual staff, students or employers will be identifiable.

In taking part in this research it is important for you to realise that any answers you give are done so in the strictest confidence and that any information provided by you will be anonymous and will not identify you. If at any time, before, after or during an interview, or have any questions, you can contact the researcher, Frances Hudson. You do not have to complete the interview if you do not wish to do so. You have a right to stop the interview at any time or to not answer any questions you do not want to.

If, following completion of the interview, you wish to withdraw your participation in the research project, or have any questions after completing the interview, please contact Frances below at any time. Your contributions will be removed from the study and the data will be destroyed.

If you are happy to take part in this research and proceed with the survey or interview, then please complete the section below.

☐ I have read and understood the information and consent sheet and consent to take part in the study.

Name: ..... Signature: ..... Date .....

Thank you for taking the time to support this research.

If you have any queries following your contribution today, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the research team:

Miss Frances Hudson [frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk)

Professor Richard Hazenberg [richard.hazenberg@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:richard.hazenberg@northampton.ac.uk)

Dr Meanu Bajwa-Patel [meanu.bajwa-patel@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:meanu.bajwa-patel@northampton.ac.uk)

## **APPENDIX 8 – LIFE-STORY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

The life-story interview is semi-structured and is intended to be participant led. The following are suggestions for conversation and prompts for discussion.

1. Could you tell me about your family before you were born? Who did you grow up with? What were your parent/s/carers occupations?
2. What was your experience of primary/lower school? What did you want to be when you grew up while you were at primary school? Did you enjoy school?
3. What was your experience of secondary/high school? Had your ambitions changed? Did your attitude towards education change? Did you achieve what you hoped? How did your family/friends respond to your school engagement/attainment?
4. What were your options post-16 (after GCSE)? What did you choose and why?
5. What was your experience of post-16 education? Had your ambitions changed? Did your attitude towards education change? Did you achieve what you hoped? How did your family/friends respond to your school engagement/attainment?
6. When did you decide to go to university? Why did you decide to go? Did you have any doubts about university? Why did you choose this university?
7. How has your experience of university been so far? What have you enjoyed or disliked? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
8. Overall, what or who has been the biggest influence on your educational journey?
9. What are your hopes and plans for after you graduate university?
10. Would you like a copy of the transcript of this interview to review?



## **APPENDIX 9 – EXAMPLE STAFF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. What is widening participation to you?
2. What do you see as the purpose of WP?
3. What do you see as the general advantages and disadvantages of WP?
4. What does effective WP look like to you?
5. What do you see as your role in WP at the University?
6. How is WP embedded in your area?
7. What is the University's good practice in WP for you?
8. What WP practices could be improved in your area?
9. What do you think WP evaluation should accomplish? (Do you have any suggestions on how WP should be evaluated?)

## APPENDIX 10 – RECRUITMENT POSTER



**LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Could you contribute to a study about university?

My PhD project is about the success of home students from underrepresented backgrounds.

The research consists of a 'Life Story' interview, that will take up to one hour.

It's important to have real students in my study, so that I can understand what it is like to be a student at this university.

**Benefits of participating:**

- Experience of the research process, especially useful to prepare for your dissertation.
- A chance to get your voice heard.
- Reflection about your journey to university can help you focus on your future and make positive changes.
- Completely anonymous, will have no impact on your studies.
- Takes no longer than an hour.

If you are interested, contact  
Frances Hudson  
[frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:frances.hudson@northampton.ac.uk)

## **APPENDIX 11 – EXAMPLE EXTERNAL STAFF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

This list is not exclusive; it is meant as a guideline for a semi-structured interview which will be adapted for staff members' dependent on role/expertise.

1. Could you explain your background of WP? (How did you get to work/research WP)
2. What is your area of expertise in WP?
3. What are the flaws of WP?
4. What are the benefits of WP?
5. Where do universities need to improve with regards to WP?
6. In your experience, what do students need in order to thrive at university?
7. Could you describe any best practice in WP that you know of?
8. What qualities make the most effective WP intervention? IE what are their aims, what are their goals...
9. What is an ideal evaluation? What does it achieve? Can evaluation just be qualitative or quantitative? Should it be both?

## APPENDIX 12 – CODEBOOK

Name	Description
1a Imbalance of Power	This node highlights where an imbalance of power may have existed for underrepresented students. Examples include; HE concerns, negative learning experiences and unfair policies.
Sub-nodes:	Differing behaviour in education, HE concerns, HE strength, Lack of connection with teacher, Negative learning experience, Positive Learning experience, Power struggle.
1b University enables success	This node collected data where the University supported underrepresented students, such as professional services and creating a supportive learning environment.
Sub-nodes:	Barrier to study, Supportive learning environment, University support flaws
2a Creating evaluation framework	Ideas from internal and external staff members regarding effective evaluation methods.
2b Cultural Capital	Discussions about the implementation of cultural capital.
2b Economic Capital	Discussions about the implementation of economic capital.
2b Personal Autonomy creating success	Ways in which students implemented proactivity to create success. Examples include career goals, reasons for HE and reflection on past events.
Sub-nodes:	Career goal, Personal issues, Reasons for HE, Reflection on past events, Soft skills, Own demonstration of independence.
2b Social Capital	Discussions about the implementation of economic capital.
Sub-nodes:	Joining in, Negative family experience, Negative peer experience, Not fitting in, Positive family support, Positive friend influence, First in family, Strong parental influence.
3 Access strategies and services	Mentions of supporting underrepresented students and promoting access and participation.
Sub-nodes:	Bond with teacher, Intimidating learning experience, Environment comments.

4 Young people's decision-making model    Events that can be applied to Hodkinson *et al.*'s (1996) career decision-making model.

Sub-nodes:

Beliefs and values, Horizons for Action, Negative turning point, Positive transformational learning experience, Possible turning point.

Key quotes

Powerful extracts of data.

Playing the game

Ways in which students learn the rules of the game and implement to their benefit. Also, ways in which students have not yet identified a game to be played

Who should go to uni?

Emergent code, staff perspectives on whether university is right for all.

## APPENDIX 13 – EXAMPLE CODING FREQUENCIES

