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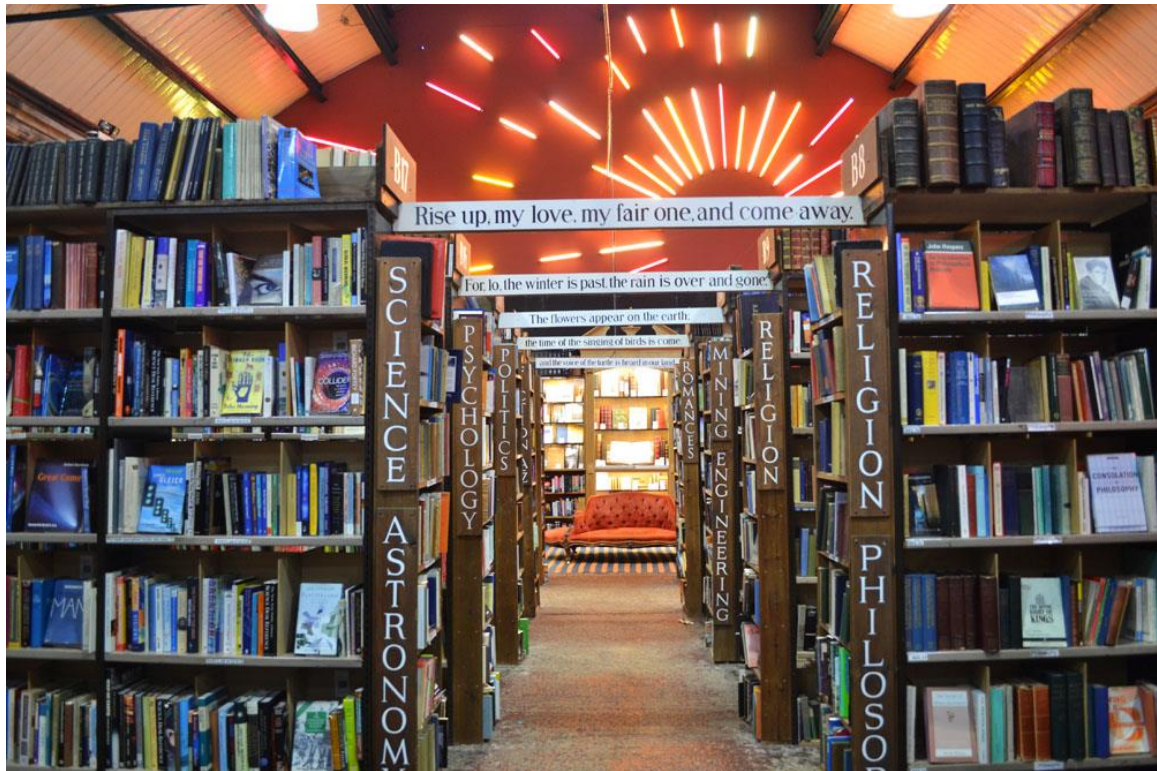
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# Social inequalities and the journey to postgraduate taught study

NARRATIVES AND NAVIGATIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN ENGLAND



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PhD Education

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where it states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signature:

[Rosa Marvell]

# Abstract

This research develops new understandings about the intersection between social inequalities and progression into postgraduate taught (PGT) education. Whilst undergraduate study has received substantial focus in the HE literature and from institutional praxis, M-level education has rarely attracted the same attention, despite its growing prominence in UK and international HE landscapes. Redressing this imbalance is a pressing endeavour, given the interconnected contexts of increasing massification, stratification and neoliberalisation, alongside the introduction of the Master's loan. To achieve this, the research analyses life story interviews and workshops with UK-domiciled Master's students in England, all of whom were part of the first generation in their family to attend university. Synthesising this data, the research explores the following important questions:

1. How do students navigate their trajectories into PGT study?
2. How do students' subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their PGT journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

Fieldwork involved biographical-narrative interviews with 41 Master's students at four universities in England, taking place in two co-located pairs of institutions, one in the North and one in the South. Each pair included one 'high-status' and one 'lower-status' university. Students came from a range of social science, natural science, arts and humanities disciplines and ranged in age from their early twenties up to their seventies. Following initial analysis of interview data, four workshops were held (one in each university) with nine interviewees. Data was subsequently analysed using a framework which connected feminist scholarship, poststructuralism and Bourdieusian theorisations including insights from researchers who work within, beyond and against Bourdieu's schemas. This theoretical assemblage facilitated a deep focus on relative and discursive power, multiple and nuanced lived experiences and the indefinite, ongoing and hybridised nature of the social realm.

The research makes a number of analytical and empirical contributions. Firstly, it argues that to better understanding HE trajectories, the framing of non-linear journeys is productive and powerful. Speaking against approaches which focus on student decision-making or silo transitions into separate stages, the motif of the journey recognises people's learning navigations as interconnected, personal, contextual and deeply embedded in the historical and socio-political conditions through which they unfurl. Secondly, the research highlights the importance of happenstance and serendipity, a critical third space between and connecting structure and agency. Although these 'small moments' are often hard to see and may fall outside of the current scope of HE support and practice, these can be some of the most significant turning points in people's lives. Finally, the research evidences how a number of familiar dynamics which we know shape patterns of undergraduate participation – such as students' capitals, geographical (im)mobility, prior educational experiences, finance, labour market precarity, 'fitting in' and identity constructions – extend to and remain salient for PGT study. However, they can sometimes become more obfuscated or take on new formations. This latter insight builds on the existing evidence base about undergraduate inequalities, posing significant questions for the academy going forward.

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# Glossary

<b>A-Level</b>	Subject-based Level 3 qualification conferred as part of the General Certificate of Education
<b>ASHE</b>	Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings
<b>BAME</b>	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
<b>BIS</b>	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, now called the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
<b>BLM</b>	Black Lives Matter, a social movement protesting against racially motivated violence and structural exclusions of Black people
<b>CAQDAS</b>	Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software
<b>C-REC</b>	Cross Schools Research Ethics Committee (at the University of Sussex)
<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FHEQ</b>	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate of Secondary Education, subject-based Level 2 qualifications commonly taken at the end of secondary schooling
<b>HE</b>	Higher education
<b>HEFCE</b>	The Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HEI</b>	Higher education institution, which is i) a university, ii) an institution conducted by a higher education corporation, or iii) an institution

eligible to receive support from HEFCE (all English HEIs aside from the University of Buckingham and the University of Law).

Not all HEIs can use the title ‘university’, which is regulated by law. Further Education colleges are not classified as HEIs.

<b>HESA</b>	Higher Education Statistics Agency
<b>MA</b>	Master of Arts
<b>Master’s loan</b>	State-backed loans provided by the UK Government to pay for postgraduate qualifications and associated costs, limited to Master’s degrees in England. This is capped at £10,609 for courses starting between 1 <sup>st</sup> August 2018 and 31 <sup>st</sup> July 2019, £10,906 for courses starting between 1 <sup>st</sup> August 2019 and 31 <sup>st</sup> July 2020 and £11,222 for courses starting on or after 1 <sup>st</sup> August 2020.
<b>MBA</b>	Master of Business Administration
<b>M-Level</b>	Teaching and qualifications at Level 7 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework
<b>MSc</b>	Master of Science
<b>NSS</b>	National Student Survey
<b>OFFA</b>	Office for Fair Access
<b>OfS</b>	Office for Students
<b>ONS</b>	Office for National Statistics
<b>PCDL</b>	Personal Career Development Loan, a bank loan frequently used to pay for PGT study before the introduction of the Master’s loan. The Government pays the interest while you study and for one month

after you leave your course. After this time, you start repaying the loan and interest.

<b>PGCE</b>	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
<b>PGR</b>	Postgraduate Research
<b>PGT</b>	Postgraduate Taught
<b>POLAR</b>	Participation of Local Areas indicator – groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in HE
<b>PSS</b>	Postgraduate Support Scheme, a two-year programme which preceded the Master's loan and provided targeted grant funding.
<b>REA</b>	Rapid Evidence Assessment
<b>RQF</b>	Regulated Qualifications Framework
<b>Russell Group</b>	An organisation consisting of the top twenty research-led higher education institutions in the UK
<b>STEM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
<b>TEF</b>	Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, previously the Teaching and Excellence Framework
<b>TUNDRA</b>	Tracking Underrepresentation by Area indicator – experimental area-based measure that uses tracking of state-funded mainstream school pupils in England to calculate young participation.
<b>UCAS</b>	The Universities and Colleges Admission System



**WP**

Widening participation

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# 1 Introduction

As the former head of the Office for Fair Access, Les Ebdon, has noted, *‘the doors of higher education are open to thousands of people who would have been shut out in the past. Many universities and colleges have made great progress in widening participation and improving fair access. But considerable challenges remain’* (HEPI 2017:3). This thesis looks about one of these challenges, one which has been significantly under-researched: the intersection between social inequalities and progression into postgraduate taught<sup>1</sup> (PGT) study. Despite increasing numbers of students entering Master’s level (M-level) programmes in the UK, PGT has not attracted the same scholarly and policy attention as undergraduate provision (Tobbell *et al.* 2010; Ho *et al.* 2012; Morgan 2014; Wakeling *et al.* 2017). This is surprising, given that Master’s programmes are increasingly being positioned as *‘the new basis for distinction under conditions of mass HE’* (Bathmaker *et al.* 2016:148). The relationship between M-level study and social justice is a road even less travelled, with deep interrogations of PGT (in)equalities few and far between. Public commentators have raised the alarm about this erasure. The erstwhile chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission Alan Milburn named postgraduate study a *‘time-bomb in terms of social mobility’* (Snowden and Halsall 2018:62) and the Sutton Trust called it the ‘new frontier’ in the battle for fair access (Lampl 2013). It is time to more decisively address this research lacuna.

To do so, the thesis shares narratives from 41 UK-domiciled PGT students, all of whom were part of the first generation in their family to attend university. These narratives recount the multifaceted ways people navigate their path towards Master’s programmes and negotiate inequalities along the route, elucidating important new contributions. Firstly, the research shows that M-level students are navigating complex, discursive and personal journeys towards PGT. These journeys are situated within particular socio-historical contexts, are frequently non-linear and are lived at the tensions of structure, agency and happenstance. This contribution presents an alternative way of understanding and theorising HE participation which resists reductive, siloed or abstract models championed in the neoliberal episteme. It also highlights the importance of serendipity as a crucial dynamic. Serendipity is rarely foregrounded in the dominant discourse’s

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<sup>1</sup> Qualifications that sit at Level 7 of the UK’s Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) including Master’s degrees and other postgraduate certificates and diplomas.

understanding of people's HE trajectories but it emerges in this research as one of the most significant influencers, a phenomenon which is both temporal and spatial. Furthermore, the research suggests that many of the dynamics that we know shape inequity at undergraduate level – for example a wide range of intersecting capitals, geographical mobility, selfhood constructions and 'fitting in' – extend to PGT study. However, these can take on new formulations and new obfuscations. This is a significant contribution which builds on the existing evidence base by showing that exclusions do not only become entrenched throughout school and undergraduate study but extend to PGT (Harrison 2018; Pemberton and Humphris 2018). Although many in the sector suspected this was the case, there has been limited evidence to date which articulates how this might be playing out in the lives of students (Wakeling and Laurison 2017). This research therefore plays an important role in articulating how such dynamics manifest in the lives of PGT students from the perspective of their lived experience.

### 1.1 WHY RESEARCH PGT STUDY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES?

With the UK and other international higher education (HE) sectors now being mass systems of tertiary education, undergraduate degrees are increasingly required for stable, well-paid work and are associated with a variety of other socio-economic outcomes (Roth 2019). Yet, with growing numbers of graduates, access to opportunities is increasingly unjust, competitive and precarious (Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Morgan 2014; Waller *et al.* 2014; d'Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Morgan 2015). In this context, PGT study has gradually become a more common phase of the student life cycle in the UK (UUK 2018) and internationally (OECD 2017). This was a growing trend from the 1990s, suggesting there was a reasonably quick spill-over from undergraduate massification to postgraduate expansion (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Zimdars 2007; Wakeling 2010; Kember *et al.* 2014; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). The UK trend was briefly disrupted following the 2008 recession, but regained traction following Phase 1 and 2 of the Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS, 2013-15)<sup>2</sup> which was replaced in 2016-17 with state-funded Master's loans. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in Table 1 shows these policy changes had an effect; UK PGT enrolment rose between 2014/15 and 2018/19 with the bulk of the increase comprising taught Master's programmes (HEFCE 2018; Adams *et al.* 2019; Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020). Although the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are

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<sup>2</sup> Grants provided to graduates in 2015 (who had paid higher tuition fees) who were part of an 'evidentially underrepresented group'.



as yet unknown, commenters have suggested that the situation could perhaps encourage even more M-level enrolments – for those able to afford it – as the alternatives for graduates, namely under- or unemployment, are undesirable (Hillman 2020). Furthermore, the increase is not only about students. Reductions in public funding and caps on undergraduate fees and UK-domiciled numbers mean institutions have turned to maximising PGT enrolment as a relatively under-regulated income generator (Nietzel 2018). So, the first points underscoring the importance of this research are the increasing volume of students transitioning to M-level study and the new policy context of the loans which have made programmes more accessible, both of which need to be interrogated with robust evidence.

*Table 1: UK PGT enrolment*

Level of PGT study	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
<b>Taught Master's</b>	299,110	293,915	313,920	334,310	354,445
<b>PGCE</b>	27,400	25,990	24,020	24,945	26,345
<b>Other PGT</b>	98,755	98,185	101,135	95,740	92,125
<b>Total PGT</b>	425,270	418,090	439,075	454,990	472,915
<b>Total UK-domiciled PGT</b>	269,070	268,135	290,545	298,540	302,065

*Source: (HESA 2020b; HESA 2020a)*

However, this is more complicated than it first appears. Although the most recent UK increase was initially informed by the introduction of the Master's loan, equating to greater numbers of UK-domiciled students, in later years non-EU students have comprised a larger part of the uplift (HESA 2020a; HESA 2020b). This suggests that the loan met a latent demand amongst UK-domiciled students, but barriers beyond financial resources may remain and thus should be investigated (Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020). There is a rich and expansive body of literature which

discusses historic and persistent socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation in undergraduate provision. This illustrates how, in many and complex ways, students' experiences and HE trajectories are shaped by social inequalities related not just to money but to a whole range of exclusionary structures (c.f. Burke 2000; Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Burke and Hayton 2011; Burke and McManus 2011; Crozier and Reay 2011; Francis and Mills 2012; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Boliver 2013). This previous research establishes that students are not afforded the same opportunities to go to university, access particular programmes and institutions, have a particular student experience or obtain the same outcomes post-graduation. Such deep attention to equity dynamics has not extended so far into the PGT space (Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). There is, however, a small body of literature – generally high-level statistical analysis alongside a few focussed disciplinary and institutional case studies – which has begun to highlight social inequalities in M-level study (Wakeling 2005; Tobbell *et al.* 2010; Wakeling 2010; Morgan 2014; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Whilst existing research make seminal contributions to our collective understanding, there remains work to be done to more fully articulate the precise nature of social inequalities affecting PGT participation and how these are experienced by students themselves. This points towards not only an empirical opportunity to contribute to knowledge but also scope for methodological originality through in-depth, sensitive narrative work focussed on students' lived experiences.

Moreover, the evidence reports a range of positive benefits to PGT study. This is somewhat complicated. Trajectories and outcomes are affected by dynamics such as discipline of study, the relative position of power we occupy and the social, cultural and financial resources we are able to draw on (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Harrison and Waller 2010; Crozier and Reay 2011; Skeggs 2011). Indeed, research for the Department for Education (DfE) has demonstrated that the earnings returns to a Master's degrees vary significantly depending on gender, discipline, prior study and institutional status (Britton *et al.* 2020) and postgraduates still experience unemployment and underemployment, particularly younger cohorts (DfE 2017). Thus, benefits are neither guaranteed nor equitably distributed. Nonetheless, having a constricted evidence base about PGT study means that our understanding of how different people access these opportunities is limited, further underscoring the importance of this research, particularly its focus on trajectories and life history perspectives. Accepting this complexity, possible outcomes can include:

- Higher lifetime wage premiums (Milburn 2012; Morgan 2014; d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Morgan 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling and Laurison 2017);
- Access to the professions (d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; McPherson *et al.* 2017; Wakeling *et al.* 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017);
- Access to highly-skilled, ‘prestigious’ work (Kember *et al.* 2014; d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015);
- Skills development and career progression (Ho *et al.* 2012; Kember *et al.* 2014; Morgan 2014; Banahene and Sykes 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Morgan 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017); and
- Development of social networks, transferrable skills, self-confidence and passion for learning (De Boer *et al.* 2010; Wakeling 2010; Ho *et al.* 2012; Kember *et al.* 2014; d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017).

Thus, this thesis provides a reflective account of PGT students’ trajectories into M-level study, with a particular focus on how they navigate their journey and the social inequalities they encounter along the way. This is contextualised by the massification, stratification and neoliberalisation of the sector and decades of investment in widening participation (WP), structural contexts which PGT has rarely been interrogated in relation to (Waller *et al.* 2014). Approaching HE inclusion from the rarely occupied vantage point of PGT facilitates a re-exploration of assumptions, practices, discourses and theorisations surrounding it.

## 1.2 BRINGING THE RESEARCHER INTO VIEW

Whilst the previous section has established the rationale in terms of the pressing policy context and gaps in the evidence base, this research is not merely a detached exploration of PGT trajectories, but something personally meaningful. Firstly, my background is in applied social research, particularly inclusion in work and post-compulsory education. More specifically, one of my very first projects as an applied social researcher was exploratory work looking at mature students’ participation in PGT for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), work which ultimately informed the introduction of the Master’s loan (Pollard *et al.* 2016). Applied research is a space and community I have much love for which supported my growth as a researcher. However, my experience in the sector during the 2010-15 Coalition government and the 2015 and 2017 Conservative governments highlighted a palpable absence of structural explanations for inequalities and a need for alternative voices and methodologies to challenge this

dominant discourse. Furthermore, I come from an assisted place background, under the Conservative Party's Assisted Places Scheme (1981-1997). The programme diverted state funding to free or subsidised places at fee-paying independent schools, based on pupils' results in the school's entrance exam and annual familial means-testing. The programme was linked to highly individualised benefits. Compared to state-educated peers, Assisted Place holders got higher GCSE and A-level results, more Oxbridge places with lower A-level results and earned more by their 30s (Power *et al.* 2013). Later in life – prior to the introduction of the loans – my family circumstances changed, meaning my parents were able to financially support me to complete a Master's degree. Realising how my journey and positionality has resourced me in particular ways throughout my life spurred continual interest in how educational advantage is created and maintained, as well as a reflexive sense of guilt that I was and continued to be offered privileges that others are denied. I wanted to channel this sentiment into work that had the potential to unsettle such inequitable dynamics.

### 1.3 THESIS VOCABULARY

The language chosen to discuss and theorise any phenomena is productive (Butler 1999) and selecting it is a complex and powered process (Rogaly and Taylor 2009). So, it is important to reflect on the terminology used throughout this thesis as it adopts a particular vocabulary. Firstly, it linguistically challenges deficit discourses which suggest that students occupying less powerful positions are somehow lesser, lacking or to blame for their circumstances (Waller 2006; Burke and McManus 2011; Crozier and Reay 2011; Webber 2014; Waller *et al.* 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). Secondly, it draws on conceptualisations that are active and processual rather than those which concretise experiences and leave little room for change or complexity (Crotty 1998; St. Pierre 2000). Such ideas are closely linked with the onto-epistemological positioning and methodological approach of the research, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

One linguistic assemblage coalesces around the idea of the journey. This idea emerges from HE literature which theorises the trajectories in a decisively personal, lived and active way. The journey brings forth ideas of complex pathways and is a discursive, multidirectional concept comprised of constrained decision-making, structural obstacles and a whole host of serendipitous and misfortunate events (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Reay 2001; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Lehmann 2014). In contrast to the notions of 'transitions' or 'choices' used by the dominant discourse, the journey

motif recognises the situated and longitudinal nature of people's trajectories and considers a range of transitions, turning points and life events in a subtle, ongoing and interconnected manner (Huchison 2011). Moreover, it is a concept which recognises non-linearity so can speak against more coercive neoliberal theorisations (Farrugia 2018). The overarching rubric of the journey brings with it a particular vocabulary that emerged from conversations between the literature and the data. In particular, the idea of the journey makes space to see how people are not simply making economic-rational 'choices' but instead are engaged in something far more active, complex and situated. Therefore, throughout this thesis, lived moments are framed and understood as navigations and negotiations, where participants drew on their (constrained) agency but were also faced with many structural barriers and events beyond their control. This is a broader framing than just 'decision-making'. It considers how participants made their way through or diverted away from critical moments in ways informed by their particular subjectivities and personal life experiences as well as how they were pulled along and influenced by other structures and tidal forces.

The other key area of terminology relates to speaking about social inequalities. This is a very challenging task which is discussed in more detail through the feminist Bourdieusian framework presented in Chapter 3. However, it is useful to briefly summarise a couple of fundamental points here. There is a very diverse vocabulary used to talk about inequality in HE. However, I find much of it uncomfortable as it labels students: 'working-class', 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged', 'poor', 'non-traditional' and 'atypical'. These constructions impose deficit discourses, inscribe disadvantage onto individuals and act as "*significant forms of inscription*" (Skeggs 2004a:5; Haggis 2006). Contrastingly, I recognise there are multiple intersecting ways that people are resourced and that these resources are in turn legitimated and denigrated by the dominant discourse (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Skeggs 2011; Webb *et al.* 2017). So, it was important to think from a different perspective that was more attuned to structure and (relative) power. As a result, the research discusses social inequalities and (dis)advantage as structural contexts which are navigated throughout the course of people's journeys rather than appellations appended to individuals. This recognises the slippery, sticky nature of social inequalities and appreciates that students are making their way through life from different positionalities, rather than being defined by lack or abundance. Moreover, the particular choice of language is deliberate. Firstly, this thesis is not specifically about social class but instead thinks about class as a tangent which intersects with other plains of inequality. Use of 'working-class' as the dominant framing would have limited

this endeavour. Secondly, alternative terminology is imbued with problematic assumptions. For example, ‘underprivileged’ suggests that privilege is a positive thing to be sought after or maintained. Similarly, ‘non-traditional’ and ‘atypical’ implicitly (re)construct the idea that there are traditional and typical students, which maintains the particular classed, raced, gendered and otherwise positioned image of the academy (Burke 2000). Many of these terms also construct simplistic binaries where people are positioned as either advantaged or disadvantaged, which belies much complexity. Alternatively, speaking about social inequalities and, to a lesser degree, plural (dis)advantages allows for a more multifarious and dynamic interrogation.

#### 1.4 INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND APPROACH

The research explores the following questions:

1. How do students navigate their trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study?
2. How do students’ subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their PGT journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

The first question focusses on understanding how students’ educational journey and life story emerges. The second question looks to unpick this in more detail, in particular understanding how different dynamics and positionalities inform students’ navigations towards M-level study including an explicit focus on social inequalities. This framing aligns with the overarching feminist stance of the research which seeks onto-epistemological richness and sensitivity, flexible and in-depth methodological approaches and a desire to impact social and political change in policy and practice (Francis and Mills 2012). All researchers’ positions shape their research, but there is strength in a critical feminist approach which – unlike others – acknowledges this influence in an open and transparent way (Gazeley 2008). A more detailed description of methodology and research design is presented in Chapter 4, but some key details are highlighted below.

Between October 2018 and February 2019, 41 interviews were conducted with UK-domiciled Master’s students enrolled on programmes at four English universities. Participants came from across a wide range of disciplines (including social sciences, arts/humanities and natural sciences) and there was a significant age range from students in their early twenties who had recently graduated from undergraduate programmes up to those in their seventies studying in retirement. Two geographical sites were chosen, one in the South of England and one in the North, in order to explore how geographical dynamics play out in PGT navigations (Milburn 2017; Donnelly and

Gamsu 2018; McCombie and Spreafico 2018). A co-located pair of institutions was selected within each site comprising one 'high-status' and one 'lower-status' institution to facilitate an interrogation of the segmentation of the UK HE sector at M-level (Reay *et al.* 2001; Boliver 2011). The study focussed on universities rather than other types of HE provider due to their dominance in the PGT landscape, particularly for taught Master's (Britton *et al.* 2020).

Participants were selected on the basis of three criteria. Firstly, they needed to be enrolled on a current Master's programme so they were under the same Master's loan conditions and had entered study from a similar labour market and economic context. Secondly, they were all UK-domiciled. Although internationalisation of Master's programmes is a prominent trend, the international student experience poses a different set of issues and cross-cutting cleavages (not least policy and labour market contexts and fee regimes) which were beyond the scope of this research (Morgan 2015). Thirdly, participants needed to be part of the first generation in their family to attend university. First-generation status is not a simple proxy for having experienced disadvantage or identifying as 'working-class', as it has sometimes been deployed in WP practice. Instead, first-generation status is a broad umbrella category that envelops many different life experiences, allowing space for a diverse range of life histories and experiences to be shared whilst still being able to drill down into the complex dynamics of social inequalities (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Hope 2014). This breadth is methodologically and theoretically useful, as it means a diverse range of PGT trajectories can be explored, as well as how a range of different capitals and life experiences may inform navigations, in line with the Bourdieusian theorisations used throughout the research (Bourdieu 1997; Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

During fieldwork, an unstructured, biographical-narrative, life-history approach to interviewing was used. This method is designed to be open, conversational and helps to facilitate both a longitudinal understanding as well as depth insight into critical moments, an approach which maps clearly onto the research's core interest in PGT journeys. These aims were further supported by the concurrent use of graphical timelines, where a range of themes, experiences, 'high' and 'low' moments and critical incidents could be mapped (Ashwin 2015). Interviews were complemented by four workshops based on emergent initial findings, allowing for an element of collective reflection and co-production of analysis (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Kvale 1996).

## 1.5 THESIS OUTLINE

Following this introduction which has summarised the context, rationale and approach of the research, this thesis comprises seven further chapters:

The second chapter presents the contextual background to the study, highlighting critical and historical perspectives on the evolution of the UK HE sector. This first outlines key policy developments and ensuing ideological shifts shaping the academy. Beginning with expansion, it traces the shift from a closed to a mass system of tertiary education. With this came the intensification and embedding of a deeply neoliberal ideology which has significant implications for navigations and experiences within and between universities. It then considers tensions between the diversification of the sector and its stratification. Lastly, it provides an account of the changing topography of WP in the UK, particularly the shift from social justice to a more individualised frame of social mobility.

The third chapter synthesises empirical and theoretical scholarship relevant to exploring social inequalities and PGT study, framed predominantly in poststructuralist and feminist terms. This begins with a theorisation of social inequalities themselves, particularly drawing on the nuanced work of class theorists and elaborating on this by thinking through a specific Bourdieusian framework and the feminist scholars who have worked within, beyond and against his notions of capitals, habitus, field and doxa. It next explores the notion of the HE journey, unpacking ideas of constrained decision-making and structurally inequitable navigations (which may or may not be experienced as agentic). Lastly, the chapter discusses key features of HE inclusions and exclusions from the empirical literature, covering deficit discourses, 'fitting in', the intersections between HE learning and identity and the influence of space and place.

The fourth chapter relays the methodological approach to the study, beginning with outlining the interpretivist, feminist and poststructuralist influences on its onto-epistemological positioning. Moving from epistemology to methodology, the chapter next details ethical considerations, unpacking various dimensions including how to enact feminist praxis in research, positionality and power, reflexivity and the approach to (and tensions with) institutional ethical governance. Research design is next elucidated, covering aspects of site and participant selection and recruitment. The rationale and approach to narrative then follows, outlining both its form as a



methodological pillar and its deployment in the research. Lastly, the chapter discusses the iterative approach to analysis, tracing from raw emergent notions to the writing process.

The fifth chapter is the first of three data analysis and discussion sections. It explores PGT trajectories through time, particularly highlighting the non-linearity and diversity of students' navigations. The chapter starts by considering how 'choices' are temporally constrained, shaping people's motivations, balancing of competing responsibilities and reflections on affordability. Next, the non-linearity of trajectories is explored in more depth, illustrating the huge variation in students' experiences and journeys. Lastly, it discusses the importance of 'in time' happenstance – a critical third space between and connecting structure and agency – which provides crucial turning points in trajectories.

The sixth chapter explores the dimensions relevant to journeying through and against space. It first highlights the notable 'stickiness' to place and emplaced happenstance when it comes to PGT transitions, emphasising the importance of commitments in place, spatial affordability, local opportunities and deeply-embedded and affective sensations of being 'at home'. The chapter then moves to specifically exploring the shifting placemaking of 'the university' that students engage with across the life course, in particular exploring the tensions and differences between how reputation and institutional habitus are perceived and how this informs students' constrained emplaced decision-making.

The seventh chapter offers the third and final data analysis and discussion account by considering the many, varied and shifting ways in which selfhood is negotiated across PGT trajectories. Firstly, the chapter discusses how 'learner identities' are formulated and change, particularly highlighting a shared sense of 'geekiness' amongst PGT students which does not negate sometimes significant disruptions and fractures with education earlier in life. Next, the chapter discusses worldviews and feelings as central selfhood dimensions which make trajectories highly personal, in particular affective constructions of confidence, independence and resistance alongside socio-political, moral and ethical beliefs. Lastly, the complexities of classed positionings are unpacked, illustrating its plasticity and intersectionality alongside the complex ways it shifts but remains meaningful and shapes experiences.

The eighth and final chapter summarises the conclusions of the research and the original contributions it has made. It begins by providing reflexive responses to the two overarching

research questions, discussing how participants journey towards M-level study at the intersections of structure, agency and happenstance and how dynamics of inequality extend throughout the life course up to PGT study. This offers significant contributions both in terms of the way we speak about people's educational experiences and the ways that inequalities might be playing out in this under-researched space. Within this discussion, implications for policy and practice are drawn out. These highlight important aspects including the need to tackle stratification and elitism within the sector, use different discourses which are more contextual, inclusive and nuanced, have more flexible praxis and delivery models, provide targeted investment in bursaries and alternative pathways to HE (including Further Education (FE)) and carefully consider the messaging provided to prospective PGT students. The chapter next considers implications for PGT at this critical time in our national and global history, reflecting on issues connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Methodological reflections are also offered, explaining how the design facilitated particular insights that may not have been available with a different approach. Next, the chapter outlines possible future research directions that would continue to develop our understanding of this critical yet under-researched area of HE practice. The chapter closes with a final reflection on some of the key contributions the research makes.

## 2 Troubling the context: Critical and historical perspectives

This chapter provides a contextual background against and within which to situate this research. It explores key dimensions of the UK HE landscape, particularly its transformation into a mass system of tertiary education characterised by increasing neoliberalism and stratification. Whilst this exposition focusses on the UK, some features will be familiar to those working in other national contexts. However, whilst dynamics may resonate across diverse country settings – HE is expanding in both the Global North and Global South – it is important to recall how international variation in HE policy and delivery may produce different circumstances and evolutions on the ground. The chapter also provides a summary of how WP has evolved over the past few decades in the UK, facilitating reflections on the interlocutions between policy, research and practice regarding equity in the academy.

### 2.1 MASSIFICATION AND STRATIFICATION

During the early to middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the UK, with a labour market dominated by agriculture and manufacturing, participation in HE was the pursuit of a minority of (wealthy, well-resourced, well-connected) people, overwhelmingly White men (Burke 2000; Skeggs 2004a). In this context, universities were conceived as *“centres of excellence catering for a privileged upper class”* (Ho *et al.* 2012:320). However, post-war deindustrialisation and its associated fiscal pressures began to change the sector, as education and skills policy centralised efforts on developing a ‘knowledge economy’ to boost GDP, wealth and productivity (Burke 2000; Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Boliver 2013). This structural change spurred an increasing need for graduates. Over the 1960s, numbers of students at university and in other forms of HE provision more than doubled (Perkin 1972). What followed were several distinctive, definite and rapid periods of HE expansion, particularly intensifying after the early 1990s (Boliver 2011). From just 24 universities in the 1950s, the 1992 Higher Education Act raised the number to 93 by granting polytechnics university status, and by February 2020 there were 115 universities registered with the Office for Students, alongside many other higher education institutions (HEIs) (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Boliver 2013; OfS 2020b). The most recent phase, from the mid-1990s, signified the ‘maturation’ of mass UK tertiary education (Brooks and Everett 2009; Browne 2010; Wakeling

2010; Boliver 2011). ‘Mass’ here refers to a (somewhat arbitrary) delineation where between 15 and 50 per cent of school leavers enrol in HE, compared to the prior ‘elite’ system where less than 15 per cent entered university (Trow 1970). The transition is also qualitatively significant as it relates to shifting educational expectations and norms at national, familial and individual levels (Altbach 1999).

However, massification did not make UK HE a level playing field (Archer 2007). In reality, stratification of the sector became more intense and solidified. Research infrastructure, resources, endowments and funding were more frequently diverted towards high-status institutions, solidifying their already dominant position (Williams 1997; Crozier *et al.* 2008). Simultaneously, teaching remained ideologically decoupled from the exalted field of research activity, signified in the description of erstwhile Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke when he referred to *“the great research universities, the outstanding teaching universities and those that make a dynamic, dramatic contribution to their regional and local economies”* (cited in Archer 2007:637). Such statements are imbued with an implicit hierarchy of status and perceived/imposed ‘value’. HEIs in the massified UK academy thus emerged as highly differentiated in terms of status, the system partitioned between ‘Old’ (pre-1992) and ‘New’ (post-1992) universities, *“the Russell Group and the rest”* (Boliver 2013:345; Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Leathwood and Connell 2003). Indeed, the ‘Russell Group’ – 24 of the UK’s most selective research-intensive universities – is frequently used as *“policy shorthand for selective, desirable [higher] education”* (Clark *et al.* 2015:3). Such classifications can manifest in HEIs own discourses, with older, high-status universities often emphasising their selectivity, whilst newer institutions accentuate an inclusive approach and employability (Graham 2013). Critically, these distinctions are *“interwoven with specific geographies of power”*, drawing on discourses of positioning and hierarchy (Archer 2007:640). There are also interconnections between institutional status and schooling, reflected in the differences between intakes to different institutions, with greater numbers of independent and grammar school-educated school leavers entering ‘high-status’ institutions compared to the more socioeconomically diverse cohorts following vocational pathways within former polytechnics (Boliver 2013; Boliver 2015a).

Disciplines (and qualifications) have similarly suffered from this segmentation of status. Historically established degrees such as law, medicine or economics are accorded higher status and thus are constructed and frequently understood as highly competitive and more valuable

(Walker and Zhu 2011; Luthra and Flashman 2017). Conversely, newer disciplines and qualifications have been hyperbolically dismissed as easily-attainable and easily-accessible ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees *“in media studies, kitchen cleanliness and the lyrics of Sir Mick Jagger”* (Murray 2003:86; Utley and Sanders 2002). This is reflective of deficit discourses – a motif explored in much more detail in the following chapter – wherein parts of the sector become *‘mired in narratives of failure and inferiority’* when they do not fit the dominant discourse’s neoliberal idea of ‘productive’ and ‘worthwhile’ HE (Fogarty *et al.* 2019:vi).

So, where does postgraduate taught (PGT) fit into this landscape? It, too, has not remained untouched by massification. The Bologna Process of 1999 rationalised the ‘second cycle’ of European tertiary education, establishing a clearer pathway through from undergraduate to M-level study (d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015). Similarly, increasing use of digital technologies has amplified provision of distance learning courses, opening up new opportunities for PGT programmes (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004). As discussed in the introduction, the resultant expansion of PGT is clearly evident in the UK (HESA 2020b; HESA 2020a). Moreover, sectoral stratification plays out significantly in this terrain too. Whilst Russell Group and other pre-1992 universities account for around half of undergraduate students, they make up 70 per cent of Master’s provision, illustrating a real dominance of the PGT provision landscape (Britton *et al.* 2020).

## 2.2 NEOLIBERALISATION

HE expansion was not an ideology-neutral phenomenon. Linked closely to particular policy directives, massification in the UK and internationally gained traction in the embrace of an ever-more rampant neoliberal doctrine (Clarke and Lunt 2014). In this research, this is understood as the increasing managerialism and commodification of HE, alongside narratives of ‘free choice’ and ‘personal accountability’ of individualised people (Archer 2007; Sellar and Storan 2013; Clark *et al.* 2015). This manifests across the academy as the blurring between state and commerce, with *“public resources such as the university... appropriated by capitalist market forces”* (Hayes and Jandrić 2014:206; Francis and Mills 2012). Accordingly, the sector is affronted by creeping consumerism, competitiveness and marketisation (Haggis 2002; Burke and Hayton 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Boliver *et al.* 2015; Waller *et al.* 2015). This has led, in some researchers’ view, to an emergent *“edubusiness”* industry (Luke, 2010 cited in Burke and Czerniawski 2011:295).

One clear example of this ideology in practice is the continual reformation of undergraduate student finance which has become an increasingly individualised and expensive pursuit. Perpetual changes to the funding landscape signify a gradual shifting of the financial burden from the public to private purse, alongside efforts to turn HE provision into a ‘marketplace’ where institutions ‘compete’ and students ‘vote’ with their wallets, all couched under the rubric of ‘choice’ (Archer 2007; Waller *et al.* 2015). Students are reclassified as consumers, or, as the Browne report put it, *“choice is in the hands of the student”* who *“should ‘pay more’ in order to ‘get more’”* although of course, not all are able to do so (Browne 2010:3, 4; Clark *et al.* 2015). In a context where hard labour market outcomes are valued above subject knowledge, educational engagement and affective and critical development, it has become ever-harder for students to resist their positioning as investors in an educational economy (Haggis 2006; Tett and Hamilton 2019). As a result, students are *“struggling and competing for scarce and highly desirable resources”* in differentiated and hierarchical fields within and across HEIs (Crozier *et al.* 2008:172). Individuals are tasked with assessing competitive and unpredictable economic conditions, investing their own money (and risk) to ensure their skills ‘meet the needs’ of the economy (Haggis 2002; Burke and Hayton 2011). In short, it closely mirrors neoliberal machinations of self-regulation and discipline (Walkerline 2003 cited in Burke and Hayton 2011). Increasing undergraduate debt, no grants for postgraduate study as only loans are available and the persistent pressure UK HEIs face to generate ‘economic prosperity’ means PGT is subject to the same neoliberal discourses (Leitch 2006; Waller *et al.* 2014; McPherson *et al.* 2017). Indeed, this is further cemented by the dominant discourse that PGT study is all about career benefits and hard labour market outcomes, obfuscating other meanings and values (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004).

Student awareness of increasing segmentation and neoliberalisation of academia can perpetuate and, indeed, strengthen the hierarchical stratification of the HE sector. For example, Clark *et al.* (2015) found that young people from working-class backgrounds on an outreach programme were attracted to institutions with high status and reputation, as they felt this mitigated the risk of investing their time and money in a degree. Similarly, Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) found that students were increasingly aware of the aggressive graduate employment landscape, which put significant pressures on their navigations. Both studies suggest that the marketisation of HE has a significant impact on constraining decision-making and trajectories of students and foisting a neoliberal ideology into these navigations. It further suggests that neoliberal policies have partially achieved their aims to *“reinforce the notion that the beneficiaries of higher education are mainly individuals*

*and are posing higher education as largely a private rather than a public good”, as a “private investment for future employment prospects” (Burke 2014:83).*

### 2.3 DIVERSITY, DISTINCTION, DIVISIONS

As the number of registered HEIs expanded, so too did the numbers of undergraduate students. This brought with it changes to the demography of the student body which pulled at the seams of the ‘traditional’ White, middle-class, male profile of HE students. Intakes became more ethnically diverse, and from the turn of this century, *“despite their less advantaged parental occupational profile”*, students of colour were applying and receiving offers at a greater proportion than the rest of the population (Reay *et al.* 2001) although they still remain less likely to receive offers from Russell Group institutions than comparatively qualified White applicants (Boliver 2015b). The gender gap reduced and (more recently) reversed, although gendered norms have remained (Morley 2011; UCAS 2016). Furthermore, and despite rising fees, people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have entered in greater numbers, in absolute terms, although there were brief dips in 1998 and 2006 in line with fee changes (Boliver 2011; Lehmann 2014; UUK 2016; Milburn 2017). To some degree, this suggests the UK HE landscape has radically changed (Haggis 2006). However, gradations in the system remain striking (Reay 1998a; Reay *et al.* 2001; Boliver 2013; Harrison and Waller 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). As Burke and Hayton (2011:9) note, *“diversification of HE has taken place in the context of deeply rooted historical inequalities and misrecognitions of institutions and social groups”*. Certain students continue to be underrepresented because there are still *“formidable”* socioeconomic and cultural barriers preventing equitable access across the sector (Lehmann 2014:2). Demonstrating this entrenchment, the divisions between who enters HE and who does not has persisted (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Boliver *et al.* 2015; Waller *et al.* 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017; Wakeling *et al.* 2017).

Social stratification of participation reflects that of the sector, although the trends are multiple and complex (Crozier *et al.* 2008). Post-1992 universities tend to have more diverse cohorts whilst students better able to access certain resources and connections have strategies and means to enter ‘high-status’ institutions and take *“traditional honours degrees”* which are assigned more value by the dominant discourse (Burke and McManus 2011:701; Boliver *et al.* 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). There are also significant socio-spatial disparities. People from remote rural, coastal and former industrial areas (especially in the Midlands) are less likely to progress to HE or access

professional work than those from other areas, even if there are HEIs nearby (Milburn 2017). Moreover, lower-status HEIs tend to attract more local cohorts of students who commute from or move within the local area, whilst undergraduate entrants to higher-status institutions often move far further for study (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). Given that an undergraduate degree is the most common entry route for PGT, the makeup of entrants matters, so these trends have significant implications for equitable PGT trajectories.

### 2.3.1 Equity and PGT

Prior research suggests that relatively few students tended to seriously consider progression during undergraduate study, with more deciding to apply after a gap in learning (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Ball 2016). However, little attention has been paid to how students think about the transition and how they are supported to navigate it, which Tobbell *et al.* (2010) argue is because institutions and policymakers assume applicants are graduates and thus ‘experts’ in HE. This view is reflected in the fact that one of the limited areas which has interrogated students’ views comes from the psychological and business studies literature where PGT study is positioned simply as a feature of career development (c.f. Hesketh and Knight 1999; Bowman 2005; Ho *et al.* 2012; Kember *et al.* 2014; Morgan 2014; Banahene and Sykes 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Morgan 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017).

There is some limited available research which evidences equality dimensions around who considers M-level study and is able to follow that pathway. Prior to the introduction of the Master’s loan, access to PGT study was generally fairly inequitable, particularly around entry to taught Master’s programmes (Wakeling 2005; Wakeling 2010; Morgan 2014; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). There are a number of complex dimensions to this. Higher first-degree attainment and undergraduate degrees from high-status HEIs are associated with PGT progression (De Boer *et al.* 2010; Wakeling 2010; d’Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). This has significant equity implications given trends of representation at highly selective universities and the significant classed and raced issues around attainment gaps (Zimdars 2007; Wakeling *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, there are disciplinary differences which play into participation dynamics. Access to vocational or more purportedly ‘academic’ undergraduate programmes have classed and socioeconomically differentiated patterns. As the latter more smoothly facilitate entry into M-level study, there has historically



been a continuity of inequities in undergraduate participation spilling over into who accesses Master's programmes (Wakeling 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Wakeling 2010; HEFCE 2013; d'Aguiar and Harrison 2015). Indeed, students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds were more likely to enter vocational programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) rather than taught Master's programmes (Wakeling 2005). This demonstrates what Wakeling and Laurison (2017:533) have observed: *"the Hydra-like qualities of social stratification in relation to education, whereby inequalities which seem to be dissipating in the long term can reappear in new ways"*. This has been described elsewhere as the theory of Maximum Maintained Inequality, where WP at one level – in this case undergraduate study – allows inequalities to 'pass up' to the next educational level (Boliver 2011).

Funding also poses structural issues to PGT equity. Before the Master's loan was introduced, PGT funding was virtually non-existent outside of registered professions and '1+3' doctoral programmes (McPherson *et al.* 2017; Wakeling *et al.* 2017; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Employer funding was hard to come by. 'Investable' people were typically senior or managerial employees within particular professional sectors, and the courses which employers were willing to fund aligned more closely with the needs of business or professional practice rather than the interests or aspirations of students themselves (Bowman 2005; Ho *et al.* 2012). As a result, most students were self-funded, using earnings, the Personal Career Development Loan<sup>3</sup> (PCDL), savings or family resources (Ho *et al.* 2012; Morgan 2014; Morgan 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017). As a result, in the pre-loan landscape, PGT was a financially policed and fiscally exclusive space (Zimdars 2007; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). From the 2016-17 academic year, the Master's loan for Master's study was introduced, beginning at £10,000 and gradually increasing to a maximum of £11,222 for students whose course starts on or after the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2020 (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Gov.Uk 2020). Repayments are at six per cent above the minimum income threshold income (£21,000 p.a.). Although this opens up provision for those that would not otherwise have been able to fund study, authors questioned how revolutionary the loans were at the point of their introduction. Critiques included how the loan does not cover the full costs of PGT study (or even simply the fees for some programmes), increases student debt, may dis-incentivise employers from supporting employees' development and might not keep up

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<sup>3</sup> A bank loan of up to £10,000 where the state pays off interest payments during study, to be paid back from graduation, regardless of earnings or employment status.

with fluctuations in fees (Boliver 2013; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017). In fact, taught Master's fees vary hugely. Whilst absolute averages are hard to identify, various sources speculate the mean sits somewhere between £6,800 and £11,000 (King 2018; UCAS 2019). This masks significant variation, with some high-status courses and institutions charging well over £20,000, up to £57,000 for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at one of the most selective institutions – far beyond the limit of the loan. A formal evaluation of the Master's loan for the Department of Education nonetheless suggested that it has had an uplifting effect on UK-domiciled enrolments (particularly at 'middle-tariff' institutions), a positive impact on the progression of students of colour and that students on the whole were progressing to PGT earlier than they would otherwise have done (Adams *et al.* 2019). There was also no evidence of other funding sources being 'crowded out', which is perhaps unsurprising as they were already very limited and hard-to-obtain. However, the evaluation did not find evidence of a particular impact on first-generation students enrolling at a greater result of the policy, and also identified a notable uptick in the price tag of loan-eligible programmes, as had been predicted. After 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018, state-backed loans for doctoral study were also introduced – up to £25,000 spread across a course. If a student already has a Master's loan they make a combined repayment.

## 2.4 WIDENING PARTICIPATION TO HE

WP emerged as a policy response to the equity challenges facing undergraduate HE, predominantly focussing on admissions but increasingly extending further throughout the student lifecycle (Boliver 2011; Burke and McManus 2011; Strike and Toyne 2015). The suite of programmes, interventions and policy developments aim to tackle differential opportunities which are offered by varied educational and socioeconomic contexts (Harrison and Hatt 2010). Whilst WP predominantly focusses on undergraduate provision, it is still an important field to consider in relation to PGT study. Firstly, it outlines the landscape through which many PGT students have journeyed, shaping the discourses and institutional cultures they have come into contact with. Secondly, it is important to have a clear understanding of prior approaches to tackling inequality in order to learn from them, build on them and endeavour not to replicate prior missteps. Initially, WP focussed on socioeconomic indicators, but now encompasses ethnicity, care leaver status, disability and a range of other measures. However, socioeconomic concerns have remained a priority, as *"the social class gap has proved difficult to close"* (Harrison and Hatt 2010:66). Students are 'flagged', based on information collected largely from applications, often using proxy measures

including postcode criteria such as POLAR which gloss over nuances and variation on the ground (Hammersley 2008; Harrison and McCaig 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). Other individual indicators such as Pupil Premium and first-generation status are also commonly articulated target areas. More detailed critical reflection on these metrics is presented in Section 3.1.3.

The historic bedrock for WP is generally said to be the 1963 Robbins Report which championed HE access for ‘all young persons qualified by ability and attainment’, although the wheels were already in motion to open up HE before this (Perkin 1972; Committee on HE 1963 cited in Hale 2006). Some decades later, the now-defunct Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), created in 1992, was tasked with increasing participation rates of students from ‘lower socio-economic groups’, another key milestone in the WP timeline (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). However, 1997 is often cited as WP’s landmark moment, following the election of New Labour and the publication of the Dearing Report, which attempted to foster a stronger bridge between HE and the ‘learning society’ (Reay 1998a; Burke and Hayton 2011; Harrison and Waller 2017). During this time, ‘social justice’ was centralised as a key tenet (Powell 2002). Throughout the decade following the 1997 election, WP became solidified in HEIs, with new roles created specifically for WP activity, concretised with a well-publicised goal of getting 50 per cent of school leavers into HE by 2010 (Hale 2006; Archer 2007; Burke and McManus 2011). ‘Fairness’ entered the lexicon during this period, heralded by the 2003 White Paper on HE, which also introduced the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the £650m flagship WP programme, AimHigher (Boliver 2013). AimHigher focussed on increasing applications from a variety of socio-economic and geo-demographic groups *“that were generally constructed by government as having a ‘poverty of aspirations’ that were preventing them from seeing education as a means of improving their lives”* (Harrison and Waller 2017:147). The ‘politics of aspiration’, as entrenched in policy, positioned students as ‘lacking’ and a problem to ‘fix’ in order to become ‘suitably qualified’ (Burke and Hayton 2011; Sellar and Storan 2013). In defining fair access, the White Paper echoed the Robbins Report, suggesting opportunity should be made available for students with the ‘potential to benefit’. It is critical to note that this phase of WP was shaped by a drive for ‘equality of opportunity’, not equality of outcome, ignoring that each opportunity is the outcome of – and influenced by – prior opportunities (Hale 2006).

Economic goals and WP were (further) interwoven after the publication of the 2006 Leitch review of ‘world class skills’, where WP was positioned as a key lever to answer the policy desires for ‘high

value-added industry', 'competitiveness' and 'economic growth' (Leitch 2006; Webber 2014). Thus, WP re-emerged as an explicit policy agenda *"often driven by economic and utilitarian concerns, such as key skills and employability, but also concerned with issues of inclusion"* (Burke and McManus 2011:700; Hale 2006). Commentators subsequently critiqued how ideas of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' have become intertwined with *"non-equitable consequences through the UK government's pursuit of a neoliberal agenda"* (Archer 2007:636). Despite the critiques, the dual influence of equality and economics persisted. Following the 2008 recession and 2010 general election, WP underwent another shift. AimHigher was cancelled early into the 2010-15 Coalition Government's public sector cuts (Burke and Hayton 2011; Waller *et al.* 2014). The policy discourse shifted to one that prioritised 'social mobility' (Giddens 2001) for a smaller number of the 'brightest and best' (Burke 2000; Burke and Hayton 2011; Waller *et al.* 2014; Webber 2014; Waller *et al.* 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). Linked to the increasing neoliberalisation of the academy, this reformulated WP to atomised, individualised responsibility for transcending one's circumstances (Burke and Hayton 2011; Sellar and Storan 2013). It was no longer an overarching state-driven agenda imbued with collective notions of social justice. Furthermore, institutions were tasked with plugging the gap left by the cancellation of programmes such as AimHigher (Clark *et al.* 2015). In this new paradigm, equity managers were required to make a 'business case' for WP, not just a 'social justice' case (Sellar and Storan 2013).

In this new landscape, the boundaries of WP became ever-more contested: either a force for collective betterment of equality or a neoliberal agenda to attract only bodies deemed 'worthy' and 'valuable' (Burke 2000; Burke and Hayton 2011; Waller *et al.* 2014). The way this played out was influenced by the stratification of the academy. Highly-selective, high-status institutions were granted leave to take often exclusionary approaches based on their 'prestige' and research being their *"legitimate/authentic domain"* (Archer 2007:641; Sellar and Storan 2013). Perhaps as a result, highly-selective universities have often focussed on attracting *"high-attaining young people who would otherwise choose lower status institutions"* – arguing they must maintain 'cohort quality' – whilst post-1992 universities have tended to recruit locally and focus on those who might not otherwise enter HE (Harrison and Waller 2017:144; Harrison and Hatt 2010). This means in some cases outreach and WP became blurred as high-status institutions orient themselves *"more firmly towards marketing recruitment strategies where concern for genuine social mobility is replaced by a narrow focus on a small group of students already predisposed towards university application"* (Clark *et al.* 2015:11). As Graham (2013) has noted, boundary contestation and

differences in interpretation has produced particular discourses. Although Russell Group institutions have more recently made greater efforts to foreground information about underrepresentation and introduce pathway programmes such as Foundation Years, and certain institutions have invested significant resources into substantial WP activity like summer schools and partnerships, this is often alongside rhetoric of ‘outstanding students’ and ‘excellence’. This particular formation of ‘excellence’ has been positioned by some as elitist as it *‘is inherently competitive and norm-referenced, designed to rank and pit individuals and organisations against one another by literally creating a rigidly defined ‘gold standard’*” (Bartram *et al.* 2018:1286; O’Leary *et al.* 2019). Thus, whilst all HEIs focus on admissions and WP in some form or another, the idea of individual merit and ‘fit’ perpetuates in some fields (Burke and McManus 2011). It is clear that, beyond questions about access to HE in general, *“concerns ... need to be supplemented by questions about access to the UK’s more prestigious universities in particular”* (Boliver 2013:345).

In terms of activity, large sums have been invested predominantly in three forms of ‘intervention’, mainly with young people with a lesser focus on adults (Harrison and Waller 2017). The first tranche of activities focusses on outreach to raise ‘aspirations’, applications and attainment, sometimes risking assuming a deficit in the individual (Hale 2006; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Burke and Hayton 2011; Harrison and Waller 2017). These interventions often have an affective dimension and seek to bring about subjective dispositions such as ‘motivation’ or ‘enthusiasm’ for HE, as well as more concretised outcomes around attainment (Sellar and Storan 2013). The second tranche of activities, which are less prevalent, consider changes to admissions systems, such as using contextual data or differential entry processes, thus aiming to tackle HE structures themselves. This is a newer approach and as yet not much is known about the different approaches taken and their effectiveness (Hale 2006; Harrison and Hatt 2010; Burke and McManus 2011; Boliver 2013; Webber 2014; Boliver *et al.* 2015). Some authors are cautious about the implementation, given previous concerns about potential (mis)use of admissions data such as personal statements (Harrison and Waller 2017). The third more recent addition to the suite of WP activity has shifted attention further along the student life cycle, including foci on retention, success and what happens post-graduation, although the weight of activity still coalesces around entry (Atherton *et al.* 2018). WP has yet to really meaningfully interlink with PGT in policy or research, adding urgency to this research. One exception was the temporary 2015-16 PSS which provided grants for PGT to applicants who matched one or more WP flags and met other eligibility criteria including domicile and year of graduation. The evaluation of the programme found that

*“all partners were satisfied that the scholarship awards had made a considerable difference to the successful applicants’ decision to progress to PGT study” and “helped students to make the most of their studies”* (Strike and Toyne 2015:25). However, the PSS was replaced with the Master’s loan, once again replacing equitable grants with student debt. Evaluation research suggests this has been a less effective WP measure when it comes to furthering social equality (Adams *et al.* 2019).

Evidence suggests that WP has contributed to HE diversity – across institutions, provision, courses and the student body – and helped to increase knowledge and challenge stereotypes (Burke and Hayton 2011; Strike and Toyne 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). Approaches such as Access education have been lauded for opening opportunities to traditionally excluded groups (Burke 2002b). So, WP has successfully democratised access on a general scale, and *“helped working class students to overcome that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel are rightly theirs”* (Crozier *et al.* 2008:172; Ball *et al.* 2002). However, inequalities persist. There has been a persistent lack of systemic progress amongst more selective HEIs, leading to internal differentiation within the sector (Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Waller *et al.* 2011; Boliver *et al.* 2015). Moreover, there has been a somewhat static class profile of students, leading some authors to question whether initiatives have in part solidified middle-class dominance rather than truly widened participation (Hale 2006; Reay *et al.* 2010; Burke and Hayton 2011; Webb *et al.* 2017). This is further complicated by the co-option of WP interventions, for example where *“schools may have their own agendas as to who might benefit from interactions”* (Harrison and Waller 2017:150).

As Reay (2001) has discussed, the ‘creeping assumption’ that WP means that everyone can become professionals does not take account of the systematic structural inequalities and complex hierarchies within society. The historic focus on careers advice and increasing aspirations has been delivered at the expense of more critical involvement in educational trajectories and recognition of the structural inequalities that potential entrants negotiate (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Burke and Hayton 2011). This focus on ‘quick wins’ and short-term funding has been named insufficient to help *“areas where deep-seated, multi-generational issues affect educational performance”* (Harrison and Hatt 2010:85; Wakeling *et al.* 2015). Accordingly, Burke (2002b), Waller *et al.* (2015) and Harrison and Hatt (2010), among others, have called for WP to be concerned with more than access. Their call to arms argues we should do more for wider society and those whose income levels and life changes do not offer the same opportunities as others and

seek to challenge global economic structures to legitimise a diverse range of values and perspectives, even if our influence is limited and progress will be slow.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

In tracing the key dynamics of the UK HE context – which forms the landscape in which PGT trajectories unfold – several key factors are revealed. In particular, the sector has become increasingly segmented and hierarchical. This manifests along a number of different lines, including geography, institutional status, discipline and qualification type. This produces a very uneven terrain; students and potential students are not equitably resourced to navigate the landscape with the same ease. This has led to a persistence and perhaps even a further embedding of inequalities, in spite of large-scale massification. Moreover, this stratification has evolved alongside and been co-constructed by a number of dominant narratives, including burgeoning neoliberalism and a shift from a more collective understanding of social justice to the more individualised and atomised notion of social mobility. The following chapter provides a review of relevant empirical and theoretical literature with a particular focus on social inequalities, trajectories and inclusions and exclusions in the academy, brought together through the key thread running through this thesis: the journey.

### 3 Literature Review

The following chapter provides an analytical and reflexive account of conceptual, theoretical and empirical lenses salient to this study. As Franklin (2012) notes, theorisation can take many forms, from the 'messy' to the 'elegant', from the prescriptive to the abstract, depending on the focus and ambitions of any research endeavour. As this research is focussed on the lived experience of journeys towards and into PGT study, it has drawn on scholarship which is attuned to the micro-level of life, where details and richness are prioritised over predictions and generalisations. Feminist and poststructuralist approaches thus emerged as particularly productive due to their focus on multiplicity, granularity and how meanings are discursively and subjectively produced (St. Pierre 2000; Jackson and Mazzei 2012). This also aligns with the broader onto-epistemological stance of the research discussed in the following chapter.

The chapter begins with a theoretical interrogation of two central concepts: social inequalities and the trajectory. Both proved slippery and hard to get hold of (Franklin 2012). Social inequalities are theorised and (de)constructed firstly through the class literature and then via a deeper exploration of Bourdieusian and feminist Bourdieusian thought. Discussion then moves to considering peoples' movements into, through, beyond and away from university by tracing the notion of the HE trajectory. The chapter lastly maps empirical literature on inclusions and exclusions in the academy, exploring deficit discourses, 'fitting in', the intersections between learning and identity and spatial dynamics. As PGT is not yet a fully established part of HE research, much of the insights are derived from the undergraduate literature, so discussion informs and relates to an understanding of M-level study but does not directly encompass it. This research thus occupies a productive position to extend this knowledge base by thinking about these dynamics from a new vantage point.

Tying these dynamics together both in this chapter and the research as a whole is the overarching notion of the journey. The concept conjures up ideas of travel through time and space and portrays life as a chain of encounters with different people, places, ideas and structures, some fortuitous, some disastrous. Thinking about journeying highlights how people are positioned in unequally powered landscapes, their social connections to others and how future steps are informed and resourced by prior experiences. This gives scope to push back at neoliberal understandings of HE experiences – focussed only on the individual, their 'agentic' decisions and



their ‘outcomes’ – and instead think about how people negotiate various forces of life which, like the tide, pull people along in their wake. Furthermore, it is a decidedly active framing which prioritises personal processes of navigating over making it to a ‘destination’. As Master’s degrees are not (yet) a normative phase of the student lifecycle and people enter PGT from all phases and times of life, it is important to adopt a rubric that can open up inquiry to connections, complexities and subjectivities in dynamic ways which do not ignore structure.

In constructing the literature review, a quasi-Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was first conducted in order to gain a broad yet comprehensive overview of the intersecting literatures prior to embarking on research design and data collection (Varker *et al.* 2015). As well as establishing key concepts and themes, this provided a foundation for methodological design – e.g. selection of fieldwork sites – and possible themes relevant to analysis (Bearman *et al.* 2012). Where gaps were identified and additional detail became necessary, purposive and targeted searches were carried out on a periodic basis over the course of the research, including identifying recent publications from key authors. A more detailed discussion of the processes is detailed in Section 10.1 in the Appendices.

### 3.1 SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN HE AS STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

As the under-researched intersection of (in)equality and PGT study was the catalyst for this research, exploring the precise contours of social inequalities was the first step of my doctoral journey. As discussed in the introduction, it became clear that familiar framings are often unwittingly euphemistic and labelling. Discursive constructions such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘poor’ or ‘atypical’ students delineate different deficit positionalities and attach them to the bodies of students (Skeggs 2004a; Butler 2015). Labelling in any form is a contested endeavour, involving competing forces of self-determination and domination (Rogaly and Taylor 2009). To resist classifying students and reproducing deficit models, the research instead adopted the rubric of ‘social inequalities’ *as structure and process*. This conceptualisation draws attention to how people navigate these forces rather than defining people *by* them, as well as highlighting the interplay between structure and agency.

To trace the features of this theorisation, this section first explores central principles from the literature on social class. It then moves into a discussion of Bourdieu and the feminists who work within, against and beyond his work to further articulate the manifestation and operation of social

inequalities. Lastly, the section speaks back to various quantitative approaches to defining and characterising social inequalities in HE that have typically been used in WP research and practice. This discusses how these measures have their place but fall short of fully capturing the complex dynamics of social inequalities as they are lived through.

It is particularly productive to draw on literature which demonstrates the labyrinthine ways in which different resources and sociocultural histories affect how people navigate HE and how this produces and emplaces particular subjectivities (c.f. Reay 1998a; Reay *et al.* 2001; Crozier and Reay 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Waller *et al.* 2014; Harrison *et al.* 2018; Ingram *et al.* 2018; Ward 2019). Such sensitive theorisations make space for myriad, intersecting and varied experiences on the ground to be heard in ways which challenge any reification. Moreover, this highlights the wide range of dynamics where inequality emerges, including income, identity, geography, (im)mobility, ways of becoming, dispositions and a wide range of resources. This far-reaching understanding aligns closely with the methodological decision to interview first-generation students as this is a diverse group of students with varied positionalities, meaning their narratives can speak back to many dimensions of inequality in different ways and help unsettle reified and binary understandings of people as only either advantaged or disadvantaged (see Section 4.3.4).

Situating this work within a classed but more specifically a Bourdieusian framework has a number of benefits. Firstly, it moves beyond a 'labelling' and 'boxing' approach by thinking in both more fluid and more structural ways (Davey 2012a). Secondly, although there are many ways to think about class and social inequalities, Bourdieu's almost ubiquitous prominence in the undergraduate literature allows this study to more easily enter into conversation with and extend that knowledge base (Reay *et al.* 2009; Lehmann 2012; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Webb *et al.* 2017; Archer *et al.* 2018; Leaney 2019). Thirdly, this research was conceived as being one which leans strongly into its applied nature; Bourdieusian thought lends itself particularly productively to research of this kind (Warwick *et al.* 2017). As Grenfell and James (1998) note, Bourdieu's contributions are not merely theoretical but have clearly articulated relationships to practice, both in terms of education and of research itself. Thus, using a framework inspired by his work continually reminds me this research is about people's lived lives and oriented towards addressing social inequality.

### 3.1.1 Classed beginnings

Research on class formation and distinction offers a rich starting point to theorising social inequalities. Classed marginalisation is one of the most persistent and severe forms of social inequity across UK education systems and thus has attracted nuanced attention from epistemological and empirical standpoints (Ball 2010; Gazeley 2018). Moreover, class is a meaningful discursive frame which people frequently draw upon to make sense of and narrate their experiences (Reay 1997; Tyler 2008; Walkerdine 2010; Rowell 2019). However, it is a slippery concept, far more complex than simplistic dominant notions of working-, middle- and upper-class groupings (Gorard 2012; Boliver *et al.* 2015). Deeper interrogations indicate that class is not merely an outcome of economic resources, but something far more layered, processual and dynamic, a significant contribution for thinking about how social inequalities operate (Gazeley and Dunne 2007)

Firstly, the literature indicates that class is not a fixed, unitary label but instead something that evolves as a process, allowing for '*multiple reformulations*' of identity and subjectivity (Reay 1998b; Skeggs 2004a; Rogaly and Taylor 2009). Not only is this important when thinking about people themselves, but also the structures they live within as institutional, economic and social forces are not monolith. Maguire (2006) refers to this as a form of 'plasticity', where who we were, who we are and who we might become shift over time and become embedded in social, material and affective ways. Her work illustrates how class has an 'ongoing' and ambivalent nature, at odds with commonly used bounded categories and simplistic notions of social mobility. This points towards a 'continuum' of class, how there are threads which run through the life course: the antithesis of a macro categorisation. Similarly, Walkerdine (2011) discusses how subject positions do not have temporal and spatial fixity but instead are processes of 'entangled affects' that are constantly in flux. Gazeley and Dunne (2007) also open class up as a distinctly relational and contextual process, with classed exclusions and inclusions forming and manifesting within environments and through interactions. This is an embodied experience, described as 'living class', which goes beyond simply the objective conditions of economic subjugation: '*deeply embodied, affectively lived and performed within specific practices*' (Walkerdine 2011:258; Reay 1998b; Skeggs 2004a; Maguire 2006). Thus, interrogation of social inequalities must explore how navigations and subjectivities – and the interactions between these two forces – evolve as process and are lived over the life course in order to reach a deeper understanding.

Secondly, the literature explains how power and friction are ever-present in constructions and evolutions of class. There are distinct conditions of subjugation, wherein certain bodies are devalued through narratives of distinction which produces material and symbolic inequalities (Bourdieu 1984; Leaney 2019). Skeggs (2004a:3) argues that this is '*part of a long discursive struggle*' where class is continually produced and hierarchised through ongoing conflict. As a result, people othered through classed narratives are forced to defend themselves against misrecognition and devaluation whilst not having equitable access to 'respectable', 'valued' resources which would more easily allow them to resist such denigration (Skeggs 2004b; Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This indicates that an interrogation of social inequalities must recognise such structures as inherently violent and violating, but also this work must look beyond the realm of the material to fully interrogate experiences.

Thirdly, much class research rejects thinking about inequalities in solely economic framings – a motif that will be explored in more detail below (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1997; Skeggs 2011; Leaney 2019). Contemporary contributions – from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives – have argued for multi-dimensional formations, where multiple axes of inequality collide to produce particular intersectional formations of (dis)advantage (Savage *et al.* 2013; Savage *et al.* 2015). For example, the Paired Peers Project found that in order to reach a more nuanced understanding it was necessary to combine 'objective' economic measures, geographic indicators, family and educational histories and self-identification (Bradley *et al.* 2013). Moreover, feminist class research highlights that class must be considered from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991) so that dynamics of race, gender, age, (dis)ability and other structural forces are not pushed aside (Burke 2002a; Burke 2012; Hill Collins 2015; Eddo-Lodge 2017; Phipps 2020). Whilst the beckoning call of a unitary distilled 'marker' of class might be seductive because it is easier to operationalise, the literature clearly cautions against this.

Thus, the class literature offers three important cornerstones from which to begin building a theorisation of social inequalities – lived process, power and struggle and intersectionality. With these foundations, discussion now moves to unpacking the Bourdieusian framing of this research – drawing on his ruminations on the nature of how class, privilege and inequality operate as social forces – to further develop the theorisation. This helps articulate more precisely how they operate at both structural and agentic levels.

### 3.1.2 Bourdieusian framings

In researching HE equity, Bourdieu's (1977; 1984; 1987; 1991; 1992; 1996; 1997) rich framework has been frequently deployed to understand social inequalities in ways which recognise complex interplays between structure and agency (Boyne 2002; Waller 2006; Kirk 2007; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Harrison and Waller 2010; Crozier and Reay 2011; Waller *et al.* 2011; Lehmann 2012; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Birani and Lehmann 2013; Webber 2014; Webb *et al.* 2017). His work particularly demonstrates how social classification is symbolic and political, played out in the context of struggle (Tyler 2008). Furthermore, he illustrates how patterns of domination and exclusion manifest in both social structures and the mundanity of everyday life (Reay 2004). Particularly useful to this study are his interrelated and overlapping ideas of capitals, habitus and field. Capitals are resources inscribed in objective or subjective structures. These combine with the habitus (one's set of dispositions, values, orientations and ways of comporting oneself, shaped by a social milieu, a person's 'socialised subjectivity') in different fields to produce dialectical positionalities (i.e. practice) (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu 1997; Reay 1997; McLeod 2005; Dahan-Kalev *et al.* 2012; Webb *et al.* 2017). This can be more succinctly depicted as:

$$[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice$$

(Bourdieu 1984:101)

According to Bourdieu, capitals may be cultural, social and economic and, by process of recognition and legitimation, can acquire symbolic forms and thus be deemed 'honourable' or 'prestigious' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1997). Capitals are unevenly distributed and (hereditarily) acquired, flowing from our past, present, collective and individual predilections (Bourdieu 1987; Skeggs 2004a). 'World-making' powers decide which resources 'have value' in the dominant discourse and shape access to 'elite' fields in their image (Adkins 2004; Tyler 2008). There is a 'stickiness' to capitals which mean that whilst new resources can be sought and obtained, disrupting established inequalities is incredibly challenging (Pemberton and Humphris 2018). When it comes to HE, valued capitals may include financial support from family, the 'right' educational qualifications, family or friends who can provide 'insider' advice, language proficiencies or styles and personal histories of engaging in 'worthwhile' extracurricular activities. All of these may be particularly salient for certain learners, such as first-generation students, who do not have intergenerationally inculcated resources to help them negotiate the HE field (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Birani and Lehmann 2013; Morgan 2014). Thus, thinking about capitals in relation

to social inequalities offers insight into how the transference of certain resources make it easier or harder to navigate challenges.

Capitals are ‘deposited’ within the body, co-constructive with embodied dispositions which constitute the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Reay 1997; Reay 2004). The habitus thus possesses a clear temporal link between past and present as well as a spatial dimension as the creation of these dispositions is emplaced (Reay *et al.* 2009; Holton 2018). It is not a *compulsion* towards certain dispositions but rather a *propensity* which can be altered by different opportunities or constraints (Lee 1997). It is thus neither completely agentic nor entirely structurally determined but more akin to an interplay between the two. This means the habitus is involved in a continual process of (re)codification and becoming, so is never ‘finished’. In terms of thinking about social inequalities in HE, thinking through habitus allows us to consider how our biographies produce particular dispositions that may open up or restrict envisaged horizons and future selves, shaping how smooth or ‘messy’ transitions may be (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Holton 2018). It also provides a framework to understand meaning-makings and experiences as students move through phases and spaces of their life and go through new experiences and interactions.

Capitals and habitus interplay within various fields, each of which is a ‘*socially structured place in which agents struggle, depending on the position they occupy in that space*’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:17). Fields are thus the structured and structuring contexts which shape, produce and predispose practice, although they are not totalitarian and retain some opportunities for creativity and autonomy (Moi 1991; McLeod 2005). Each field has its own codification which is more or less visible depending on positionality. For example, students are bestowed with different tools to decode or demythologise the ‘rules of the game’ of the HE field, allowing some to navigate the terrain with ease and others to encounter far more barriers (Ball and Vincent 1998; Haggis 2003; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008). Thinking about field allows for a reflection on both material and symbolic space, ensuring that an understanding of social inequalities is emplaced, not merely temporal (Farrugia 2018). Moreover, it provides a grounding to understanding some of the ‘plasticity’ of subjectivity, as action is conditioned based on positioning which will vary from field to field and change over time.

Bourdieu’s work with the concept of *doxa* is also important to include as it relates to and informs capitals, habitus and field. By *doxa*, Bourdieu refers to the taken-for-granted ‘truths’ which, unlike

discourse positioned as opinion, is taken to be self-evident: it ‘goes without saying’ (Bourdieu 1977; Grenfell and James 1998). Thus, doxa socially constructs ‘desirable’ norms, tastes and expectations and positions them as beyond question. It sets the limits on what possibilities are ‘allowed’ or can even be imagined within any given practice (Chopra 2003). However, although certain things may be positioned as part of the doxic established order, Bourdieu counters that this is a process of miscognition which erroneously positions certain things as incontestable facts when they should be understood as social constructions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This is crucial to think about with regards PGT trajectories, as we can begin to reconstruct understandings of ‘successful’ decision-making, student trajectories and post-graduation outcomes and destinations as actually values of the dominant discourse made normative by the doxic order (Davey 2012b). For example, Bourdieu himself articulates how neoliberalism has established itself as a doxa, drawing our attention to how this faux-naturalistic idea is an ideological rather than objective state of affairs (Bourdieu 1998). Thus, being attuned to doxa facilitates an understanding of how desirability and value is delineated throughout PGT trajectories and draws attention to norms and dominant discourses that should be critically interrogated and deconstructed.

Despite the importance of his ideas and their obvious relevance to this study, certain readings problematize Bourdieu’s work. Firstly, his formation of capitals works on a deficit model, a motif that will be further explored below. He states that capitals can be ‘*acquired, to a varying extent*’: a continuum of have-nots to have-a-lots where ‘have-nots’ are defined by lack, rather than recognising they possess alternative resources which are simply disregarded by the dominant discourse (Bourdieu 1997:48; Kingston 2001). This is further complicated when deficits are inscribed onto stable (‘working-class’) habitus (Reay 2004). This ‘ingrains’ bodies with static disadvantage, allowing the dominant discourse to argue the case for neoliberal intervention (Harrison and Waller 2017; Webb *et al.* 2017). Concrete examples are evident in historic WP and admissions processes. ‘Flagged’ undergraduate students have been cast as ‘able’ but ‘hampered’ by the ‘wrong’ qualifications, ‘poor’ aspirations, ‘low-quality’ family knowledge, ‘ineffective’ decisions and ‘lacklustre’ life histories, all of which ‘*do not conform to the competency profile of HE*’ (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008:494; Kingston 2001; Hale 2006; Webber 2014; Harrison and Waller 2017). This thinking atomises ‘failings’ in people, their families and their communities, whilst the structures, ideologies and processes that excluded them in the first place remain unchallenged. Secondly, Bourdieu often focusses on the ‘*top of the hierarchy*’ (Bourdieu 1991:168; Boyne 2002). Skeggs’ (2011) and Leaney (2019) critique that his analysis of how ‘valued subjects’

are created is carried out at the expense of fully attending to those occupying less powerful and devalued positions. It is important to think across a range of subjectivities in order to more fully reflect on how resources and dispositions marginalised by the dominant discourse can still be powerful and meaningful (Reay *et al.* 2001; Skeggs 2004a; Skeggs 2011) and open up demotic navigations under the shadows of power and exclusion (de Certeau 1988; Baumann 1999). Thirdly, Bourdieu's scepticism of radical change can mean the habitus is sometimes theorised as always conflicted in new fields (Reay 1997; Lehmann 2014; Sinclair 2017; Holton 2018). In the case of HE, this positions people from disadvantaged backgrounds as incongruent until their habitus adapts and experiencing a painful sense of dislocation if and when adaptation happens (Holton 2018).

These inferences do not preclude using Bourdieu's framework to understand social inequalities in HE (Adkins 2004). His work is valuable for understanding the acquisition, contestation and deployment of resources, shifting and situated identities and the intransigence and structure of power. However, it is enhanced when viewed through a feminist lens, as detailed below.

#### *3.1.2.1 Feminist readings within, against and beyond Bourdieu*

Many (postmodern and poststructuralist) feminist thinkers have taken up Bourdieu and advocated for new directions 'within and beyond' his theories (Moi 1991; Reay 1998a; Reay *et al.* 2001; Adkins 2004; Skeggs 2004a; Burke and Hayton 2011; Burke and McManus 2011; Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Webb *et al.* 2017). Their work particularly emphasises indeterminist, subjective and shifting formations of personhood and experience beyond elite subjectivities and deficit models, all of which aligns with the onto-epistemological, methodological and political orientations of this research (Richardson 2001; Adkins 2004; Skeggs 2004a; Reay 2005; Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

Feminist readings of habitus emphasise constrained agency and critical reflexivity in place of stasis and resistance to change (Reay 1997; Reay 2004; Webber 2014; Sinclair 2017). This recognises that '*participants have space and capacity to choose and act, albeit within the social and material settings and structures in which they operate*', opening up the opportunity for the habitus to be more pliable and dynamic, whilst not negating constraints to agency (Hoskins 2015:396; Lehmann 2014). Thus, a feminist poststructuralist understanding of habitus sees it as contextually performative, not deterministic (Leaney 2019). Using such an understanding makes space for myriad, intersecting and varied positions within HE, and moves away from the idea that reified



social groupings are fixed and stable (Bourdieu 1987; Stoller 2010; Burke and McManus 2011). It emphasises that identity formation is *“extraordinarily relational, with a chameleon-like flexibility, shifting in importance, value and effects from context to context or from field to field”* (Adkins 2004:6). This offers the *potential* for mutability and ambivalences in people’s selfhoods as they move into and through HE whilst not ignoring obstructions and tensions. This endeavour assists with the rejection of deficit discourses and ‘labelling’.

Moreover, feminist researchers who recognise the multiplicity of subjectivity have advocated for a less tightly bound relationship between habitus and field. McNay (1999) writes that a feminist understanding of field makes space for ‘potentially conflictual’ subject positions to exist, legitimating transformations, embodiments and performances of identity which seem at first to be ill-fitting in particular fields. She further argues that when we allow for ambiguities and dissonances, this means we can also consider how dispositions will not necessarily align with the ‘rules of the game’ embedded in objective structures but also not necessarily feel painfully conflicting. McLeod (2005) concurs, arguing against a relationship between field and habitus which is too seamless and congruent. Adkins (2002) is more muted, but still recognises how a more flexible theorisation of field is needed to account for ‘reworking’ and ‘reconfiguring’ of the habitus, particularly in late modernity. This opens up space to recognise decidedly different experiences in people’s engagement within HE and complex interplays between inequality, inclusion and the academy.

Skeggs and Loveday’s (2012) concept of ‘person-value’ further complements Bourdieu’s work. Their notion is based on his idea of capitals but goes *‘beyond an accrual-acquisition property model to include the excluded and their social values, action and affect’* (Skeggs and Loveday 2012:476). This proffers a framework to consider how previously ignored factors like loyalty, communitarianism or love may be important ‘tools’ in people’s lifeworld navigations. Skeggs’ (2004b; 2004a; 2011; 2012) wider scholarship further argues that (dis)advantage and class are processes of circulating beliefs and behaviours inscribed on the body which are valued differently, thereby producing inequality. Judgments are applied to labour, production, speech and imagery, *“an amalgam of features of a culture that are read onto bodies as personal dispositions – which themselves have been generated through systems of inscription in the first place”* (Skeggs 2004a:1). Her work illustrates that inequality is not simply a ‘lack’ of resources, but instead a process where certain dispositions and capitals are othered. Put more simply, we all have a

complex set of resources we can draw on, some of which are valued by the powerful and some which are not. Those which are not may be judged as ‘lesser’ in the dominant discourse, but this does not undermine their significant demotic meaning and value.

Reflecting across these insights from the educational and sociological literature concerning social inequalities, class and Bourdieusian theory, this research operationalises a model of social inequalities *as structure and process*. This recognises that people live in segmented and powered landscapes with differential access to politically, economically and socially authoritative tools and strategies. Far from being ‘lacking’ and ‘lesser’, marginalised groups are violently positioned as such by the dominant discourse which seeks to establish norms, exclusionary capital frameworks and discourses ‘of value’, allowing those in power to maintain their supremacy (Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Moreover, this theorisation recognises that social inequalities are powerful forces that are navigated, rather than labels which are applied to and define individuals and groups. Thus, subjectivity is viewed as fluid and slippery, with people occupying complex, changeable and hybrid positionalities which are produced and evolve temporally and spatially (Bourdieu 1987; de Certeau 1988; Harrison and Waller 2010; Boliver 2013).

### 3.1.3 Quantitative indicators of social inequalities: Their use and their limitations

In contrast to the particular qualitative operationalisation of social inequalities as structure and process adopted in this study, macro-level quantitative indicators have been more commonly used in national HE policy and WP activities. These measures certainly have their place in assessing broad trends of social inclusion, distilling complex ideas, designing policies and ‘*monitoring the meritocratic promises of social mobility through education*’ (Dunne and Gazeley 2008:454). Moreover, the broad range of individual, educational and geo-demographic indicators – including area- and school-level codes, first-generation status, pupil premium and eligibility for free school meals – offers a window into various dimensions that matter in people’s lives, such as labour, money, geography, family experiences and education (Boliver 2011; Boliver *et al.* 2015). This provides some methodological insight when thinking through which participants to speak to, a discussion picked up in greater detail in Section 4.3.4.

However, given the dominance of such metrics and flags in much policy and WP thinking, it is important to unpack them from a critical perspective. Over the past decade or so there has been increasing scrutiny of over the specificity, accuracy and meaningfulness of these measures

(Gazeley and Dunne 2007; Harrison and McCaig 2015). Particular choices and understandings are implicit in the categories adopted, and the way these are deployed has particular effects. In other words, macro measures can act as “*significant forms of inscription*” (Skeggs 2004a:5). As noted above, Rogaly and Taylor (2009) argue that labelling in any form operates at the tensions of self-determination and domination. The distilled nature of macro measures strips away significant complexity, removing the richness of lived experience, thus falling short of fully articulating the precise nature of social inequalities. As a result, there are disjunctions between markers and lived experience. For example, Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that some students ‘flagged’ as working-class did not necessarily have limited access to money or work punitive hours alongside study, both of which were assumed to be highly correlated with the ‘working-class’ flag. This is indicative of the ‘flattening’ nature of these markers, giving further credence that a qualitative understanding of social inequalities as structure and process can better tap into the multiplicity of lived experience and the diversity of positionalities. These ‘*efficacious meanderings*’ complement macro analysis by offering a lens to explore complexities obscured by different approaches (de Certeau 1988:xviii; Bourdieu 1987). The approach adopted in this study facilitates an exploration of how social inequalities shape different trajectories in relation to lived lives over time and in place, helping to further develop the evidence base around HE equity and WP as it moves into the PGT space.

## 3.2 HE TRAJECTORIES

As well as conceptualising social inequalities, this research needed to theorise peoples’ movements into, through and beyond HE. Framing this through the lens of ‘choice’ would fail to account for structural constraints; moments may or may not be experienced as freely agentic and some ‘choices’ are not possible in certain times and spaces. Thus, this study instead theorised HE trajectories and navigations as an ongoing journey. This is a discursive, multidirectional concept comprised of constrained decision-making and structural inequitable navigations lived at the tensions and interplays between structure, agency and happenstance (Reay 2001; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Lehmann 2014).

### 3.2.1 Contextual and constrained decision-making

In the dominant discourse, ideal undergraduate and postgraduate decision-making is depicted as ‘*strategic life planning*’, a highly neoliberal and economic-instrumental idea (Giddens 1991:85; De

Boer *et al.* 2010). This is evident in recent policies, for example from the OfS. The public body champions giving ‘impartial’ and ‘complete’ information about HE to produce ‘*positive employment and study outcomes*’ - notably putting work before education (OfS 2020a:2; OfS 2018). Moreover, this marketized thinking posits that individuals can approach education as any other product or service. Research from business and management studies distils the process of accessing postgraduate education to ‘*buying decisions*’, leaving little space to discuss power, structure, agency, context or lived experience (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004). Responsibility for action is thus atomised in the individual with success seen as ‘maximising effectiveness’ economically.

However, sociological and educational research suggests that the ‘*richness of students’ praxis*’ bears little resemblances to ‘rational’ consumerism (Bowman 2005:247; Hodgkinson and Sparkes 1997; Ball *et al.* 1999). This makes a clear case for more contextualised, structural understandings of impediments to progression: choices are not equally accessible to all. People navigate options under the doxic constraints of various social structures, institutions and circumstances (de Certeau 1988; Reay 1998a; Ball *et al.* 1999; Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Crozier and Reay 2011). Decision-making must thus be theorised as sometimes or even frequently constrained, as people approach it from particular subjectivities which are differentially powered across different social fields (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Resources, practices, dispositions, times, locations and personal histories all matter as they influence how easy or straightforward engagement in HE may be (Ball and Vincent 1998; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Haggis 2006; Harrison and Waller 2010; Burke and McManus 2011; Birani and Lehmann 2013; Morgan 2014; Waller *et al.* 2014; Wakeling *et al.* 2015).

There are many empirical examples of this segmentation. For example, historic research has illustrated how ‘hot knowledge’ – a form of cultural and social capital formed of ‘insider’ advice from social contacts – is incredibly powerful (Ball and Vincent 1998; Hesketh and Knight 1999). Despite several decades of WP investment, contemporary evidence suggests that young people are still most likely to turn to parents rather than other sources of information in a context where parents are not equally resourced with HE familiarity and practical advice (Gale and Parker 2015; Harrison and Waller 2018). As a result, children of families with long histories of HE involvement are more able to have quick access to information and ‘short-cuts’ to advice whilst first-generation

students are often structurally under-resourced in relation to this particular capital (Reay *et al.* 2009).

Education is a further example of how experiences and resources differentiate people's experiences, given the stratification of schools and universities. Different providers offer different opportunities for HE (and PGT) preparation, attainment, developing comfort with academic study and '*rich and intellectually challenging forms of pedagogy*', in turn limiting or extending opportunities (Francis and Mills 2012:580; Tett 2004; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Tyler 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Harrison and Waller 2010; Waller *et al.* 2015). Therefore, students who attend selective schools and high-status universities are afforded more resources and opportunities for 'valued' habitus and capital development which allows them to establish 'informed' expectations and experience potentially 'smoother', 'freer' or 'clearer' decision-making.

Furthermore, with changes to the student finance landscape, simply being at university entails different financial costs. Historic evidence suggested that debt deterred students from HE (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Tett 2004; Crozier and Reay 2011). More recent evidence suggests that whilst students now on the whole see this as less of a barrier, it remains a more significant challenge for students from less advantaged backgrounds for whom '*debt-averse attitudes seem more likely to deter planning for higher education*' (Callender and Mason 2017:20). Not only does this affect wholesale consideration of HE participation, but also which spaces and institutions appear (financially) accessible (Boliver 2013; Clark *et al.* 2015). This contributes an important understanding for constrained decision-making: views on student finance are subjective as well as material (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Adkins 2016; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Nonetheless, real costs are involved, especially for those with little to no safety buffer or higher financial outgoings (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Managing financial risk for undergraduate students can mean working during term-time (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008), making particular decisions about 'useful' or 'legitimate' study (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013) and choosing to study locally or limiting time spent at university (Reay *et al.* 2010; Boliver 2013; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018; Harrison *et al.* 2018). These factors illustrate how the structural nature of social inequalities constrain undergraduate decision-making and horizons of possibility. Moving into the PGT space is a qualitatively different scenario and thus these dynamics should not be assumed to extend

unchanged into another phase of life. However, it is important to seek out any continuities and divergences from this established undergraduate picture.

Moreover, as noted above, navigating education is not a siloed activity. Other circumstances – including work and family – constrain and facilitate decision-making. Blending work, caring and study – not to mention personal wellbeing and interests – is a tricky balancing act when all demand significant time, money and labour (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Haggis 2006; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Salamonson *et al.* 2018; Taylor *et al.* 2020). This is particularly important for PGT study. Postgraduate students are likely to have relatively more ‘complicated’ lives and established life-worlds than many undergraduate students, typically being older ‘returners’ to HE rather than progressing straight from a Bachelor’s programme (Wakeling 2010; HEFCE 2013; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling and Laurison 2017).

It is critical to recognise these structural dimensions to decision-making to avoid denigrating underrepresented students as less able, driven, prepared, aspirational or as having ‘*only the capability of making bad choices from bad culture*’ (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Haggis 2003; Skeggs 2004a:187; Reay *et al.* 2009; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Lehmann 2014). People have unequal access to spaces, experiences, risks and freedoms which produces varied topographies of legitimate and possible action.

### 3.2.2 Complex navigations: Theorising the HE journey

With constrained decision-making being established as one part of progression into, away from, through and beyond HE – a notion which pulls at the interplay between structure and agency – it is also important to consider how else peoples’ life stories take shape, leading to the idea of the journey. At the beginning of the maturation of mass UK tertiary education, the normative ‘ideal’ HE trajectory was constructed as unhampered and linear (Barnett 1996). Whilst a lot has changed over the subsequent decades in terms of cohort diversity and the sorts of routes people follow, the trope of the ‘ideal’ roadmap still pertains. For example, whilst Haas and Hadjar’s (2020:1103) review of the quantitative literature recognises the myriad routes that students may follow, they argue the idea of ‘institutionally ideal progression patterns’ persists:

*‘The ideal pathway in terms of a norm [...] is that of full-time students who directly transit from secondary school to HE and study for the regular study duration of 3 or 4 years’*

This trope is deeply embedded with ideas of ‘the modern’ and neoliberalism, including linearity, productivity and accelerated development and progress (Farrugia 2018). However, many students may have trajectories which are far from straightforward (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Ball *et al.* 1999; Reay *et al.* 2001). Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (2000) concept of the ‘learning career’ is a useful formulation illustrating how navigating opportunities is often complex and unpredictable. Their work highlights how educational trajectories are diverse, personal and deeply embedded in the realm of the social. Further, they argue that these pathways are indivisible from our personal meaning-makings which, in turn, are continually constructed and (re)moulded by the events, activities and relationships we engage in across the life course.

As HE trajectories are socially-embedded, they are shaped by situated agency – constrained decision-making – as well as unpredictable events and intersecting systems of power (Ball and Vincent 1998; Ball *et al.* 2002; Waller 2006; Tobbell *et al.* 2010). Whilst the normal ebb and flow of everyday life informs, facilitates and constrains action at various times, particular critical moments can be especially influential on personal biographies. These may emerge variously as incidents of serendipity, misfortune or happenstance. Such moments include big life events like bereavement or relationship breakdown (Waller 2006; Waller *et al.* 2011), time spent raising children or providing care (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Strike and Toyne 2015; Waller *et al.* 2015), the emergence of significant new priorities, worldviews and interests (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Tett 2004; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013) or simply ‘taking stock’ of life (Waller 2006). Any notion of a ‘typical’ student is therefore undermined by a wealth of research which reveals the diversity of journeys that unfold as people explore whether, what and how to study and at what level in the context of their wider lives. This is especially important for PGT study when students are likely to be older and have thus more life experiences shaping their journeys. Indeed, analysis of HESA data from Universities UK (2018) suggests that whilst mature entry to undergraduate study tailed off between 2007-08 and 2016-17, older entrants to postgraduate study remained relatively more stable – and PGT entrants were older on average – indicating the different point in life of the two cohorts.

In addition to extrinsic diversity, there is also a multiplicity of experiences within each person’s trajectory, as navigations are never static. Instead, they are imbued with a range of experiences and feelings, including ‘*aborted lift-offs*’ (Waller *et al.* 2011:521), ‘*determined ambition*’, ‘*clueless serendipity*’ (Reay *et al.* 2009:1108), and ‘*epiphanic insight*’ (Strike and Toyne 2015:122). Positive

transformational moments can thus emerge, associated with ideas of growth, agency and empowerment. At different times, so can feelings of pain, anxiety and trauma (Reay 2001; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Lehmann 2014). This is further complicated as these moments cannot be separated from the located, temporal and affective positions that people occupy. As a result, different people will respond differently to such moments, '*with different levels of attachment and/or marginalization at different times*' (Leathwood and Connell 2003:603; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Reay *et al.* 2009; Lehmann 2014).

Thus, the literature suggests that HE trajectories should be theorised as journeys in a way which speaks against an over-emphasis of agency and 'typification'. 'Plugging' social inequalities into a theorisation of trajectories makes a clear case for recognising the structural conditions that students operate within. Certain students' decision-making can be heavily restricted including (but not limited to) those who were part of the first generation in their family to attend HE (Reay *et al.* 2001; Thomas and Quinn 2007; O'Shea 2014). Moreover, whilst some parts of the journey may be clearer and more supported, other parts may feel more constrained, indefinite and unclear. As Tobbell *et al.* (2010) explain, progression to PGT study has not received anywhere near the same research attention as undergraduate transitions due to an implicit assumption that postgraduate candidates are already 'HE experts'. This dearth of inquiry leaves questions about how students think about and are supported through the transition, questions this research is poised to answer. Overall, the journey motif accounts for both the diversity *between* trajectories – seeing none as more worthy or successful than another – but also the diversity *within* trajectories, recognising them as processual and discursive navigations occurring within a situated context.

### 3.3 HE INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS

Lastly, it is important to reflect on the rich body of literature which considers further dimensions of equity and exclusions in HE. Primarily, this area of scholarship has tended to focus overwhelmingly on undergraduate study, so it is a valuable space from which this research can identify continuities and deviations when it comes to PGT study. Areas most salient to the research have been selected for discussion: deficit discourses, belonging, the learning-identity intersection and space and place.



### 3.3.1 Deficit discourses

Deficit discourses, as touched on above, are those which pathologise people, suggesting they – and their milieu – are lesser, lacking and to blame for their ‘peripheral’ societal position (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Hale 2006; Waller 2006; Harrison and Hatt 2010; Burke and McManus 2011; Crozier and Reay 2011; Webber 2014; Waller *et al.* 2015; Harrison and Waller 2017). Such inferences are observable in the media (Utley and Sanders 2002; Murray 2003; Waller *et al.* 2015), policy (Haggis 2006; Crozier and Reay 2011; Francis and Mills 2012) and HE strategies, especially around highly selective spaces. These discourses suggest that certain people do not access or succeed in the HE field because they lack academic ‘mastery’, desirable learning behaviours, ‘high-value’ qualifications or aspirations (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Burke 2000; Haggis 2006; Harrison and Hatt 2010; Burke and McManus 2011; Burke 2014; Harrison and Waller 2017). This is a highly neoliberal process, wherein both ‘shortcomings’ and responsibilities for ‘remedial’ action are imposed onto students in an individualised and stigmatising fashion.

Within some deficit discourses – notably more prevalent around highly selective institutions – traditionally under-represented students can be positioned as a risk to ‘rigour’ and ‘cohort quality’ (Burke 2000; Haggis 2003; Read *et al.* 2003; Harrison and Hatt 2010; Burke and McManus 2011; Crozier and Reay 2011; Webber 2014). This locates them as a problem to ‘fix’ (Haggis 2006; Hale 2006; Burke and McManus 2011). Such ideas rear their head even within the actions and words of those nominally committed to furthering inclusivity with the academy. For example, O’Shea *et al.* (2016:331) report that the way in which support for students is sometimes conceived can be *‘based on stereotypes and generalisations leading to lower teacher expectations, pedagogical disadvantage and alienation’*. Furthermore, their research suggests that students were being discursively constructed as disadvantaged, rather than as navigating disadvantage, in ways which echoed paternalistic and imperialist modes of intervention, leading to material and affective inequalities. Thus, deficit discourses operate as a form of misrecognition in ways which can be (re)productive of injustice (Lumb and Burke 2019).

Moreover, deficit discourses extend not just to *who* is deemed valuable and worthy, but also which forms of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ are valued (Burke 2000; Ball *et al.* 2002; Tett 2004; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Crozier and Reay 2011). Certain behaviours are prized including: ‘debate’, ‘independence’, ‘questioning’, ‘critical thinking’, and ‘deep learning’ (Haggis 2003; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Haggis 2006; Reay *et al.* 2009; Burke and McManus 2011;

Lehmann 2012; Webber 2014). Simultaneously, local community knowledges, affective experiences and collaborative approaches are dismissed as ‘disruptive’ or improper (Burke 2000; Haggis 2006; Francis and Mills 2012; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Universities identify, establish and embed these norms through admissions, teaching, assessments and implicit institutional codes of practice (Read *et al.* 2001; Read *et al.* 2003; Haggis 2006; Lehmann 2012). This is a processual discourse where incoming students are expected to align with and adapt to established institutional pedagogies and practices or be judged inferior for not doing so. This may be particularly troublesome for first-generation students who have less access to tangible and practical advice from parents and caregivers to help ‘smooth’ the transition and establish expectations (Gale and Parker 2015; Harrison and Waller 2018)

### 3.3.2 ‘Fitting in’

Universities are not simply transactionally designed to further labour market positioning – they are lived in. This experience is embodied, affective and distinctly social, meaning that a sense of belonging, ‘fitting in’, making friends and feeling connected all matter (Read *et al.* 2020). Feeling ‘ill-fitting’ can be a profound source of anxiety and discomfort (Reay *et al.* 2001; Skeggs 2004a; Ahmed 2012; Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Webber 2014).

Whilst anxieties about new transitions may be a relatively universal experience, the precise formulation of HE belonging does not play out evenly across different types of university. It is, once again, a structural – and stratified – feature of the academy (Read *et al.* 2003; Waller *et al.* 2011). High status institutions generally have relatively less heterogenous cohorts which establishes particular tropes of student identities and behaviours (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Lehmann 2012; Lehmann 2014). Due to the visible absence of diverse ways of being and becoming within these institutions, normative imaginaries are formed which are classed, raced, gendered and otherwise positioned (Burke and McManus 2011). This produces a reified fallacy of the ‘typical’ student in these spaces: White, middle-class, second- or third-generation HE experienced and familiar with established academic practice – or able to adopt it speedily. Simultaneously, alternative legitimate embodiments of subjectivity are undermined as underrepresented students are labelled as ‘non-traditional’, ‘atypical’ and ‘access’ (Haggis and Pouget 2002; Waller 2006; Burke 2008). Whilst wary of not positioning students as automatically uncomfortable if they feel they do not ‘fit the mould’, it is important to recognise the potential for such environments to feel unwelcoming and uncomfortable (Haggis 2006). This produces

particular effects. Some students may internalise inscribed beliefs: they cannot see themselves represented in (some parts of) the sector, ergo they should not be there (Reay 2001; Leathwood and Connell 2003). Others may fear negative reactions from different actors in different fields and thus adopt a range of protective strategies which may involve code-switching, hybridising the habitus or affectively withdrawing from connections and interactions (Tett 2004; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Lehmann 2014).

Other types of university – generally post-1992 institutions – are perceived as more inclusive (Burke 2000; Haggis 2006; Crozier and Reay 2011; Webber 2014). Moreover, these institutions – and other HE providers such as FE colleges – are often relatively more diverse (Read *et al.* 2003; Waller *et al.* 2011). Having legitimate concerns about belonging may lead students to be drawn to institutions where they feel they are more likely to be reflected, a trend which the literature suggests may be particularly experienced by students who are typically underrepresented in high status spaces (Bourdieu 1990 cited in Reay 2001; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Read *et al.* 2003; Waller 2006; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Lehmann 2012; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013). This is problematic for wider social equality, as having a distinct student profile associated with '*less prestigious and local institutions*' – which also tend to offer newer courses positioned as '*less desirable*' by the dominant discourse – may mean students from these institutions are '*squeezed out*' of the graduate labour market and have inequitable outcomes (Archer and Hutchings 2000:568; Belfield *et al.* 2018a).

### 3.3.3 HE learning and identity

Being deeply subjective, there is no unitary formation of learner identity (Heussi 2012). Positionality influences – but does not determine – the place that learning occupies in a person's identity construction (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bloomer and Hodgkinson 2000; Waller 2006; Harrison and Waller 2010; Reay *et al.* 2010; Birani and Lehmann 2013). As already discussed, the fluidity of subjectivity means that students variously feel connected or distanced from different parts of their selfhood at different times, which includes learning (Haggis 2002; Haggis 2003; Waller 2006; Reay *et al.* 2009; Lehmann 2012). Prior experiences, including negative experiences in compulsory schooling, can also shape whether and when a student wants to centralise HE when forming and reflecting on their identity (Haggis 2006).

Nonetheless, there are clear links between learning and the habitus (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu 1991). Emergent learner identities can be conflicted when they challenge 'anchoring' to previous spaces (e.g. caring, homemaking or earning) without a guarantee of acceptance in new fields (Bloomer and Hodgkinson 2000; Reay 2001; Waller *et al.* 2011). Such sensations can be exacerbated by the White, 'Western', masculinized model demanded by certain pedagogical practices which prioritise elitist ways of writing, speaking, debating and being (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Haggis 2006; Burke 2008). Moreover, students who are relatively less resourced in the HE field may side-line their own views or be unsure how to voice them, feeling as if they are '*scrambling in the dark*' (Read *et al.* 2001:388; Ball and Vincent 1998; Burke 2000; Haggis 2003; Read *et al.* 2003). This contrasts with other students who, for a variety of reasons including intergenerational resources and life histories, are '*like fish in water*' in HE and are able to play 'trump cards' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:127; Read *et al.* 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013).

Whilst universities expect students to conform to institutional practices, WP has historically focussed on access (Read *et al.* 2001; Read *et al.* 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Lehmann 2012). In more recent years, there has been a shift towards complementing this work with a focus on 'student success' and a lifecycle approach with a particular focus on attainment and outcomes, particularly influenced by the Milburn model of 'getting ready', 'getting in', 'staying in' and 'getting on' (Milburn 2012; Macfarlane 2019). However, as Macfarlane (2019) notes, despite somewhat of a shift, focus remains weighted towards access and first-year experiences, meaning often that '*students with little educational capital are thrown back on themselves to make sense of the rules*' over the course of their degrees (Crozier and Reay 2011:149; Tett 2004). In other words, in spaces where there is still less on-course support, the risk burden of adapting to new pedagogical expectations and institutional sociocultural practices is placed in the hands of students which can moderate the connections between learning and identity. As a result, some may internalise a fear of failure and difference (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Burke 2000) whilst others may uncover sudden and unanticipated 'culture shock' (Crozier and Reay 2011). This can have concrete equity implications in terms of attrition, as '*the drop-out rate for students from poorer backgrounds is higher than for those from relatively affluent backgrounds*' (Milburn 2012:5; UPP Foundation 2017). Students will not all be resourced to quickly and easily elide with established structure of provision and adopt or perform a normative learning identity in this context (Haggis 2002; Haggis 2003; Haggis 2006; Waller *et al.* 2011).

Disquiet from entering ‘uncomfortable’ space may be brief or longer lasting and require ‘protective’ practices (Burke 2000; Waller 2006; Reay *et al.* 2009; Waller *et al.* 2011; Lehmann 2012). Where there is an affective disjunction between HE learning and identity constructions due to social exclusions, some students may ‘*only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students*’ and thus have ‘*relatively fragile and unconfident*’ learner identities (Reay *et al.* 2010:114-5; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Haggis 2003; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Lehmann 2014). Alternatively, some may adopt ‘coping strategies’. Whilst at university, this may involve adapting (or hybridising) the habitus (Read *et al.* 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Lehmann 2014), withdrawing to avoid feeling ‘inferior’ (Burke 2000; Reay 2001; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013) or forcefully refusing to occupy ‘*a position of marginality in the academy*’ (Read *et al.* 2003:272; Read *et al.* 2001). However, some authors contend that dispositions located as part of a ‘working-class’ habitus can be a source of success, imbuing students with strategies, desires, ambitions and ‘*versatility*’ (Reay *et al.* 2009:1105; Burke 2000; Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Lehmann 2014).

Rejection or decentralisation of learning as a part of identity formation may be tacit (or explicit) resistance against this system which erases certain positionalities and lived experiences (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Burke 2000). Nonetheless, development of learner identity can be a powerful framework for self-confidence and a belief in one’s own legitimacy – although this is as-yet under-researched in relation to PGT learner identity, indicating a deficit of knowledge in this important area which needs to be redressed (Leathwood and Connell 2003). Thus, the evidence indicates a very varied and processual landscape of different formulations of identity and learning which are shaped by structural inequalities.

### 3.3.4 Space and place

Spatial dynamics have been touched on throughout this chapter (including the sense of belonging across different types of institution and how space shapes social inequalities and trajectories). However, it is important to reflect further on how spatiality shapes equity in HE. As Bourdieu notes, ‘*there is no space that does not express social hierarchies and distances*’ (Bourdieu 2018:106). Beginning with a broad lens, there are clear quantitative variations in geography. For example, a range of geographic markers used in WP – such as POLAR and TUNDRA – highlight variable levels of HE participation as do foci on inner cities and rural/coastal locations (Harrison and Hatt 2010; Harrison and Waller 2017; Milburn 2017). Not only does this relate to overall

participation, but there are also links to sectoral stratification. More selective universities often have fewer entrants from ‘low participation’ neighbourhoods, particularly in ‘*peripheral areas*’ – for example, parts of the North-East and East Midlands – as these locales have attracted less outreach than ‘*working-class schools and colleges in London, which often receive high levels of engagement*’ (Montacute and Cullinane 2018:5).

However, proxies – as discussed earlier – imperfectly reflect lived experiences; ‘low participation’ postcode areas treat individuals as if they all ‘*possess the modal characteristics of those living in their local area*’ (Boliver *et al.* 2015:314). When deployed as eligibility criteria, people and families who might benefit from support but fall out of the catchment are excluded, and those already relatively well-resourced within areas may benefit (Harrison and McCaig 2015). Nonetheless, postcode data provides a broad suggestion that where people live exerts inequitable influences on HE navigations. It also draws attention to significant regional disparities which manifest across the UK, including socio-economic, (post-)industrial, demographic and cultural contexts (Milburn 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018; McCombie and Spreafico 2018). These all resource people’s HE navigations in particular ways, producing significant diversity in educational and career journeys (Kintrea *et al.* 2011). However, this does not equate to the policy discourse that ‘disadvantaged’ places produce ‘low’ aspirations. As Kintrea *et al.* (2015) suggest, the issue is not about place producing poor imaginaries and restricting outcomes but instead the inequitable geographic distribution of opportunities.

Furthermore, there is significant geographical variation in where universities are located (UCAS 2017). The dominant discourse is imbedded with the expectation that people should move to opportunities, with the assumption that ‘*in the modern economy it is often those who are most mobile who are most likely to find success*’ (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018:2). Whilst this may not be so troublesome for students happy and able to relocate, the patchiness of provision presents far more of a barrier for people less able to access conditions of mobility (Massey 1994; Fincham *et al.* 2010; Taylor 2012). In some cases, moving may be constrained by emplaced responsibilities including work and caring (Salamonson *et al.* 2018; Taylor *et al.* 2020). This may particularly be the case for PGT students whose lives are often more tightly enmeshed in place than many undergraduate students (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Bowman 2005; Tobbell *et al.* 2010; Ho *et al.* 2012; Mellors-Bourne 2015). In other cases, constraints may be more affective, linked to symbolic sensations of feeling ‘in place’ as people ascribe important meanings and attachments to

their homeplaces (Gieryn 2000; hooks 2015). For example, entering HE itself can be jarring, particularly for entrants without prior familiarity of the sector, including first-generation students (Bathmaker *et al.* 2013). There are thus valid reasons for remaining close to home whilst engaging in an unfamiliar milieu (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Birani and Lehmann 2013; Lehmann 2014; Clark *et al.* 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015). Walkerdine (2010) has likened these connections to place and community as a 'skin' which is protective, connective and comforting; there may be profound anxiety when this 'skin' is ruptured. The importance of affective dimensions to place continues through HE experiences where even living arrangements – being with parents, in 'traditional' student accommodation or one's own home – can shape students' experiences of HE (Holton 2018).

This indicates that social space is highly important in HE trajectories, spanning the material, built environment, social distance/proximity and the symbolic and cognitive interplays that occur within physical space (Reed-Danahay 2017). Therefore, it is important to think about both the materiality and physicality of space – as linked to some deeply-embedded social inequalities – but also the symbolic and affective dimensions of placemaking and how locations are experienced and discursively constructed. These overlapping and co-constructive features influence how far and if people are able to move, opportunities and future navigations and so are a central dimension to consider.

### 3.4 REFLECTIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout this chapter, social inequalities and HE trajectories have been theorised, drawing on Bourdieusian, feminist and poststructuralist framings to articulate their precise contours. This has opened up a means of understanding these core ideas as both structural and processual, as well as highlighting their complex and multifaceted nature. Social inequalities have been theorised as a structured and structuring context that is navigated as well as a process that is continually being (re)made and never exists in stasis. HE trajectories have been understood as discursive navigations of a journey lived at the interplay of structure, agency and happenstance. Constrained decision-making is an important part of this phenomenon, but not the only part.

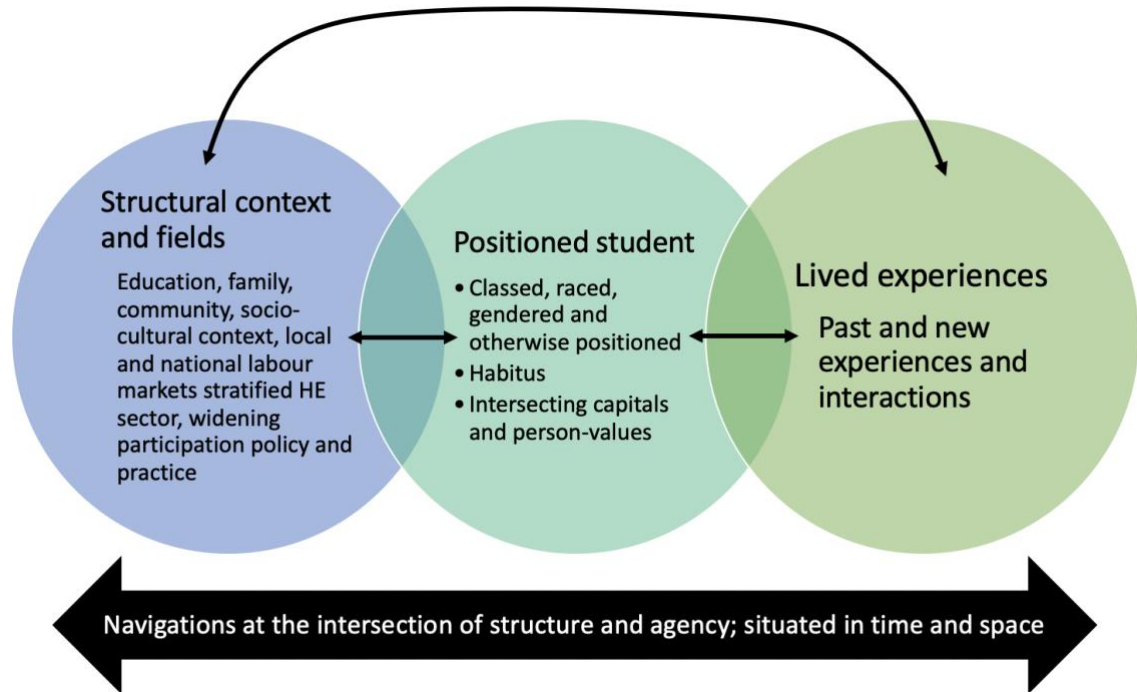
Furthermore, the chapter has highlighted important structural dynamics of HE inclusion, many of which substantiate and illustrate the significant stratification of the academy and how this segmentation shapes lived experiences. Deficit discourses have been shown not only be

marginalising but also productive of inequality and affective experiences. A sense of belonging was traced, revealing its central importance in shaping navigations, HE experiences and students' 'protective strategies'. Exploring the intersection of HE learning and identity highlighted significant diversity in selfhood formulations which are produced by particular narratives and structural contexts of the academy. Lastly, the literature has pointed towards the significant importance of place in shaping people's HE navigations in material and symbolic ways. These insights offer a powerful starting point, furnishing this research with a 'toolbox' of empirical and conceptual notions, supporting the analysis and interpretation of data as well as informing methodological design, as will be discussed in the following chapter (see Chapter 4). However, the literature predominantly relates to undergraduate education. This therefore acts as a background against which the continuities and divergences for PGT study can be explored. Thus, this must be deployed with caution to avoid inaccurately generalising insights from undergraduate to PGT education without careful reflection and adaptation.

Key formulations from the literature have been drawn together in an overarching conceptual framework of HE trajectories as a dynamic process (see Figure 1). This is conceived as a model in perpetual motion with the precise morphology and processes changing from moment to moment and across different spaces. The framework begins with and is framed by the structural context(s) and field(s) which students occupy at particular times and in particular spaces. This informs the positioning of students, including their habitus, how subjectivity is classed, raced, gendered and otherwise positioned and a range of capitals and person-values which students can draw on as resources. These forces shape lived experiences, comprising a range of past and new experiences and interactions which are interactive, with past experiences and interactions being (re)interpreted via new ones and vice versa. Moreover, each of these three dimensions informs the others in a continuum of interactivity and co-construction. This triptych of dynamics feeds into students' navigations across the life course which are lived at the intersections of structure and agency and variously situated in time and space.



Figure 1: Conceptualising HE journeys as a dynamic process



Drawing these ideas from the literature review together, two overarching research questions were devised. These draw both on core concepts from the literature as well as evidenced gaps in our current understanding about inequalities and access to PGT study:

1. How do students navigate their trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study?
2. How do students' subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their PGT journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

## 4 Methodology

Having outlined this study's contextual and conceptual framings in the preceding chapters, discussion now moves to methodology. The chapter begins by explaining the philosophical stance adopted: a subjective, interpretivist frame supported by feminist and poststructuralist positionings. Continuing with this thread, the chapter next unpacks the approach to ethics, embodying a distinctly feminist sensibility as a core tenet from data collection to analysis and writing. Following this, the chapter explains the rationale behind the research design and subsequently outlines the narrative method deployed during the research and how this was complemented by collaborative workshops. Lastly, the chapter discusses how data was analysed in preparation for the presentation and discussion of findings in the upcoming chapters. Running throughout the heart of this chapter is the assertion that PGT trajectories are complex navigations which are situated and highly personal, a position that framed all methodological decisions (Butler 1999; Skeggs 2004a; Butler 2011; Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

### 4.1 ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMING

As the previous chapter has established, HE trajectories and the students who navigate them are located temporally, socially and geographically. Experiences are thus subject to many interpretations, making a subjective research paradigm most appropriate (Kuhn 1962). Consequently, this study adopts an interpretivist philosophy, an umbrella that *'embraces both hermeneutical as well as post-structuralist approaches'* (Heinelt and Münch 2018:4). This resists attempts to seek and distil causal relationships, establish universal laws or drown out complicating 'noise', instead privileging diverse and situated human meaning-making, paying particular attention to language and interactions as arbiters of interpretation (Guba 1990; Crotty 1998; O'Gorman and MacIntosh 2014:65). This opens up inquiry to complex perspectives on a relatively under-researched topic, making space to explore variation and complexity rather than measure or predict (Merriam *et al.* 2001; O'Gorman and MacIntosh 2014). The rich, manifold versions of 'reality' and the partial understandings which are accessible through this paradigm are encapsulated by Delgado, inspiring the position of this work:

*'The same object... can be described in many ways. A rectangular red object on my living room floor may be a nuisance if I stub my toe on it in the dark, a doorstep if I use it for that purpose, further evidence of my*

*lackadaisical housekeeping to my visiting mother, a toy to my young daughter, or simply a brick left over from my patio restoration project. There is no single true, or all-encompassing description. [...] Often, we will not be able to ascertain the single best description or interpretation of what we have seen.'*

(Delgado 1989:2416)

#### 4.1.1 An epistemological 'toolbox': Feminist and poststructuralist sensibilities

As detailed in the literature review (see Chapter 3), the work of class theorists, Bourdieu and feminist HE researchers provide the theoretical foundations shaping the way this study understands its key concepts of social inequalities, PGT trajectories and exclusions/inclusions in the academy. It is critical that this works in harmony alongside overarching epistemological and methodological frameworks for the thesis to achieve overall coherence (Dunne *et al.* 2005). Moses and Knutsen (2007) use the metaphor of the toolbox and tools to describe this process; a plumber's will look different to an electrician's. This metaphor extends to research; the overall theoretical 'casing' of any research endeavour should align to the more precise theoretical framings used to explore key concepts (Franklin 2012). Many authors have attested to the productive relationship between Bourdieu, feminism and poststructuralism across the social sciences and humanities (Crawford and Kimmel 1999; McNay 1999; St. Pierre 2000; Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McLeod 2005). Indeed, whilst Derrida and Foucault may be more familiar exemplars of poststructuralism, Bourdieu himself can – arguably – be placed within this school of thought '*in the general sense of incorporating a structuralist starting point but moving beyond it*' in addition to centralising power and being suspicious of purely subject-centric approaches (Calhoun 2002:11). The overarching epistemological assemblage thus adopted integrates a feminist sensibility to ethics, experience and exclusion alongside the disruptions and deconstructions offered by poststructuralism, both linked by a core interest in power (Barrett 2005). This is the antithesis to models which seek absolute, 'objective' and generalisable data, detached from the personal and the political (Richardson 1990; Burke 2008). A poststructuralist-feminist frame hypothesises that social science driven by 'physics envy' is only one way to research, and moreover one that problematically obscures researcher influence and power from its audience (Daly 1973 cited in Lather 1992; St. Pierre 2000). No paradigm is more or less ideological than another, but there is strength in those which acknowledge how and why their stance exists in its current form (Gazeley 2008).

#### 4.1.1.1 *Feminist framings*

At the very beginning of my doctoral journey I was deeply inspired by feminist writers such as Ahmed (2000; 2012; 2017) who speaks of hope, energy, questioning and loud acts of refusal and rebellion, and Burke (2002a; 2011; 2012; 2019), who explains how feminist work can guide us towards understanding multiple versions of lived experience and the complexities of inequalities, misrecognitions and exclusions. Although gender is not the primary focus of this study, feminist theory still offers rich insights due to the sensitive ways it approaches the complexities of social inequality (Lather 1992; Kolar *et al.* 2015). The particular formulations this doctoral thesis aligns closer to are third- and fourth-wave feminisms, building on the historical foundations concerned with representation and liberation but adding (re)orientations towards problematising (gendered) norms, intersectional solidarities and interlocking systems of power (Munro 2013; Phipps 2020).

In particular, I was drawn to how feminist research sees social, political, affective and somatic experiences as distinctly meaningful and important, all whilst reflecting on power, plurality and social justice (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). For this study, this offered a chance to look at PGT trajectories from a critical standpoint, interrogating how these journeys are experienced and (re)voiced from the perspective of students themselves (Lather 1992; St. Pierre 2000; Morley 2011; Philip and Bell 2017). This prioritises subjectivity and multidimensionality over simplifications, particularly when combined with poststructuralist influences (Crotty 1998). Moreover, the feminist emphasis on reflexivity – rigorous self-reflection – shaped the research process itself, recognising the complex power relationships and interactions which take place before, during and after entering the field, discussed further in Section 4.2 (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Attia and Edge 2017).

Drawing on feminist thinking also centralised the importance of intersectionality. Born from a productive space between legal studies and critical race theory, intersectionality is a term popularised by Black feminist scholars, most prominently Crenshaw (1991) and Hill Collins (2015), to discuss how the experience of women of colour – and particularly Black women – differed from White women and men of colour (Eddo-Lodge 2017). This is not simply a soft means of discussing identity and representation but is a political call to deeply interrogate structural and systemic issues of discrimination and inequality through a robust theoretical framework. Some argue that the theory should remain bounded as an advocacy tool for addressing the disenfranchisement of Black women (Yosso 2005). This is a view I recognise and respect, particularly in light of embedded

structural and institutional racism affecting people of colour and more specifically Black people in the UK and internationally. However, I also draw inspiration from others – including the queer Black writer and activist Audre Lorde (1984) – who find value in it as an analytical tool beyond gender and race to understand relationships between multiple additional systems of power including class, age, (dis)ability, sexuality and geography. As many researchers have demonstrated, using an expanded intersectional lens can offer very valuable insights on wider issues and complexities of structural inequality (Reay 1998a; Boyne 2002; Skeggs 2004a; Butler 2011). It is important to note that intersectionality highlights how pluralities intertwine and conflict, producing situated subjectivities – the ‘ands’ matter (Reay *et al.* 2001; Butler 2011; Hill Collins 2015). Use of this lens ensures that whilst the thesis draws heavily on class theory and Bourdieusian ideas to understand social inequalities, lived experience is not reified simply to economic, occupational or class terms alone. Instead, intersectionality offers a helpful and continual reminder, as Matsuda (1991:1189) challenges us, to ‘ask the other question’:

*‘The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call “ask the other question.” When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone.’*

For this study, this means questioning how trajectories may be influenced by multiple forms of oppression which may not immediately be obvious – particularly to a White, middle-class, straight-passing researcher – at first glance. Moreover, it challenges the idea that one shared oppression necessarily creates an overarching homogenous shared experience (Reay 1997). In particular, this inspired a continual sensitivity to multiple cross-cutting cleavages (Baumann 1999) and making space to acknowledge how gender, race, sexuality, geography, age, health and other factors intersected with socioeconomic dynamics in diverse ways in peoples’ trajectories.

#### *4.1.1.2 Poststructural positionings*

Poststructuralism is often recognised as a slippery and sometimes troublesome concept to get to grips with. It manifests throughout the literature as a “*rhizomatic hybrid*”, a constellation of anti-essentialist interrogations of the contingent nature of identities and experiences (St. Pierre

2000:477; Lather 1992; Adriansen 2012). However, despite the haze, several key principles have continually informed this research.

Firstly, within this framing, power is understood as neither top-down nor dualistic but instead discursive and situated, drawing on a Foucauldian conceptualisation (Butler 1988; Butler 1999; Butler 2015; Cannon *et al.* 2015). This encourages an interrogation of social inequalities in people's lived experience beyond simplistic dyads, refocusing attention to how power operates in circulatory and complex ways. This includes paying particular attention to erroneous and misleading binaries and simplistic groupings, recognising that such artifices are unstable, misleading and require the subjugation of one half in order to define the other (Cannon *et al.* 2015). For example, this encouraged suspicion of any construction of students as either unitarily disadvantaged or advantaged.

Moreover, poststructuralism allows for indefinite, ongoing and hybridised understandings of identity and experience, rather than looking for finite, definable and clearly delineated ways of being. This assists with avoiding overdetermination, reification and narrowly-defined, homogenising definitions (Alcoff 1988). To do so, poststructuralism encourages us to look to the 'in-between' spaces rather than endings and beginnings, looking to multiplicities, assemblages and complex semiotics. Such insights are drawn from various co-constructive fields – of reality, of representation and of subjectivity – simultaneously (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). This attests that there is no ready-made, tried-and-true way to be an M-level student or to journey to PGT study, but instead there are ever-evolving and changing iterations, meaning such things are always engaged in a continual process of becoming.

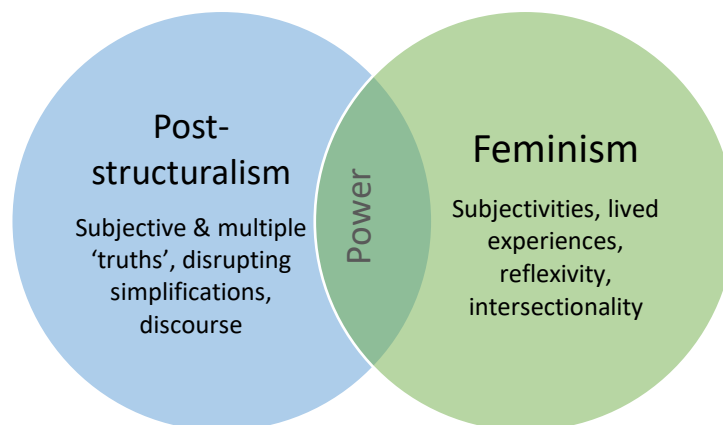
Poststructuralism also troubles epistemological assumptions, outlining how different knowledges are validated or discounted by the dominant discourse, influencing how and which "*knowers in the field*" acquire supremacy (Burke 2008:201; Davies and Banks 1992; Lather 1992; Barrett 2005). Multiple, situated sources of knowledge coalesce around every issue and different discourses construct competing realities (Yosso 2005). This emphasises the need to continually reflect on subaltern discourses and oppressions in elicited narratives of PGT trajectories as people "*can only use, manipulate, and divert*" authoritative power, not produce or impose it (de Certeau 1988:30; Spivak 1988; St. Pierre 2000). This suggests the most appropriate way to get at how PGT students understand themselves and their trajectories is to identify multiple experiences and explore the nuances which both differentiate them and make them similar. Furthermore,

focussing on non-deterministic (Haggis 2004) and demotic (Baumann 1996) perspectives provides a route to understand how meanings are acquired and (re)produced in a specific place and time (Barrett 2005). Thus, this framing argues that all experiences are mediated through systems of representation and power.

#### *4.1.1.3 A feminists-poststructuralist epistemological assemblage*

Drawing these reflections together produces an assemblage of important notions for this study, detailed in Figure 2. Both frames are linked by a deep and nuanced focus on power. Poststructural positionings offer a disruption of simplifications and unitary or ‘objective’ understanding of truths through a focus on discourse. Feminism draws attention to subjectivity and intersectional lived experiences in addition to a call to be continually reflexive, a motif which is further unpacked in Section 4.2.

*Figure 2: Epistemological assemblage*



## 4.2 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section considers two sides of ethics: the wider ethical implications of conducting feminist-oriented research and the more structured process of navigating institutional ethics governance. Beginning with this discussion before other methodological elements is crucial as the most important guiding principle for (feminist) research is the research ethic (Ackerly and True 2008).

#### 4.2.1 Feminist praxis?

From the outset, I hoped to embody a distinctly feminist sensibility throughout my research journey, touching everything from my written language to fieldwork interactions. However, it takes significant work to resist the epistemic and symbolic influence of historic research and mainstream feminism – White, middle-class, colonialist paradigms – which have spoken over and for marginalised voices, failing to democratise the research process or recognise power imbalances (Hinton-Smith *et al.* 2018; Hinton-Smith and Seal 2018; Phipps 2020). Against this backdrop, generating the right environment for ethical qualitative inquiry is no mean feat (Attia and Edge 2017). The literature offered several overarching principles, guiding my approach at every stage.

The first overarching ethical principle is Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) work on reflexivity and ethics. Their theorisation illustrates how institutional ethical governance, by its reified and prescriptive nature, cannot account for all the ethical thinking we undertake as researchers. So, they introduced the idea of 'ethics in practice', framing how researchers navigate fieldwork dilemmas and everyday issues 'in the moment'. This requires deeply embedded ethical competencies but also continual reflexivity and alertness so we may respond to each moment in the best interests of the people offering their time, insight and emotions to our research, swiftly thinking through different options and their possible impact.

The second overarching ethical principle is Kvale's (1996) metaphor of the researcher as 'traveller' or 'miner'. A miner-researcher sees knowledge as valuable metal to be unearthed from participants and 'purified' by analysis. Far more applicable to me was the traveller trope, where research is conceived as an intrinsically conversational process of 'wandering' where you are '*asking questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world*' (Kvale 1996:4). Critically, the traveller researcher endeavours to conduct research '**with rather than on**' study subjects (Riaño 2016:268, emphasis mine).

Taking these principles to heart shaped my methodological choices. As various authors have argued, life-story and narrative interviews help to create collaborative and empathetic interview spaces (Richardson 1990; Riessman 1990; Wengraf 2001; Andrews *et al.* 2008). In part, this is because their open and conversational nature and their focus on the storied life unsettles some of the researcher's control over the shape and scope of the interaction (Connelly and Clandinin 1990;



Adriansen 2012). Use of timelining further helps to create a sensitive research field, offering opportunities for creative and paralinguistic expressions as well as tactile distractions from moments of stress (Sheridan *et al.* 2011; Adriansen 2012; Kolar *et al.* 2015). Further detail about the narrative and timelining approach is discussed in Section 4.5.

However, simply adopting a narrative design does not inherently make research ethical. Narrative interviews can be particularly personal and intimate, opening up experiences which can be hard to voice and painful to remember (Squire 2008b; Guenette and Marshall 2009). This was born out in the number of traumatic life events that surfaced in my interviews, including experiences of rape, alcoholism, psychiatric confinement and the suicide of loved ones. Bearing in mind that such delicate moments can be shared by a narrator, interviewing must be actively cautious and sensitive to ensure that data collection is not prioritised over participants' wellbeing (Adriansen 2012; Kolar *et al.* 2015; Attia and Edge 2017). Efforts to obtain richness and thick description must not transgress into '*subtle forms of intrusion and surveillance*' (Haggis 2004:349) or '*unnecessarily painful*' research encounters (Guenette and Marshall 2009:86). This begins with the interview set up, where I emphasised I would be interested in everything participants thought was meaningful, but they did not have to share anything they would rather keep private and could also share anything 'off the record', including pausing recording (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). I aimed to continue this thread of care through my interactions in the field and hoped to create inclusive and non-threatening spaces in which to open up (Mellor *et al.* 2014). Drawing insight from Connelly and Clandinin (1990), I tried to become a friendly and empathic listener who, through somatic, linguistic and non-verbal cues, demonstrated I valued the time, input and emotions of each person I spoke to. Here, the 'traveller' metaphor came into action, allowing the interview to be conversational, not clinical. However, I was also wary of Kvale's (2006) warning to not slip into 'therapeutic' interviewing styles which can manipulate participants into divulging information they would rather not. This built on his earlier writing about interviewing as a 'moral enterprise' and the need to be alert to strain in the interview setting – a clear link with 'ethics in practice' – and divert, pause or end discussion as necessary (Kvale 1996). This does not mean wholesale avoidance of silence or tricky topics, but instead encouraged me to recognise each fieldwork interaction as an instance of power where participants should be prioritised, practicing '*double attention*' to what is being said and what the impact of saying might be (Wengraf 2001:194;

Berends 2011). Sensitive interviewing also included the preparation of signposting resources<sup>4</sup> - specifically those of host universities including mental health support services and student union contact details – which could be shared after each interview, although most people I spoke to were already well networked with clinicians and charities (Philip and Bell 2017).

Whilst this sensibility to ethics shaped my overall approach to all fieldwork, there are some differences between modes which are important to reflect on. Firstly, as explained in Section 4.5.1.2, a small number of interviews were conducted virtually to enhance inclusivity. Despite concerns about the impersonal nature of remote interviewing, research suggests that when ethical principles and sensitivity are applied, there are actually negligible differences in terms of openness, duration or data quality (Vogl 2013; Nandi and Platt 2017). This was reflected in my own data, and the use of pre-interview telephone conversations helped foster an additional level of comfort by the time it came to the interview itself. There are also ethical issues between individual and group interviews, where there are more significant differences. Group interactions – being collective and interpersonal - can produce spontaneous, affective, mutual evocations which would not emerge from individual interviews alone (Kvale 1996). My data reflected this, with certain conversations between participants during the workshops being some of the most personally impactful moments of fieldwork. However, group interviews can also be erratic, tangential – even chaotic – and louder, more powerful voices can dominate discussion (Kvale 1996; Bernard 2006; Fink 2009). Indeed, in one particular workshop there was a moment of tension when some distinctly contrasting views around free speech and HE were shared, which required careful facilitation to move the conversation on and maintain a collaborative air, a further moment of ‘ethics in practice’.

The practice of feminist ethics continued in the post-interview phases of research. The study conceived interviewee rights over their data in a relatively strong fashion, so participants were given the option of member-checking their transcripts, whilst recognising my ultimate interpretative responsibility (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Humphrey 2007; Squire 2008b). In the end, no participants requested a copy of their transcript. Participants were also sent a copy of their timeline, reflecting their ownership of their journey, an element discussed in more detail below in Section 4.5.1.2 (Adriansen 2012). My thinking then moved to the issue of representation, a

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<sup>4</sup> As these were institutional, they have not been shared in order to keep field sites anonymous

troubled cornerstone of feminist research (Elliott 2005; Waller *et al.* 2011). As Ackerly and True (2008:693) question, *'how can we study power and identify ways to mitigate its abuse in the real world when we, as researchers, also participate in the projection of power through knowledge'*. Conducting a researcher-led study, I occupied a powerful position to include, omit or infer information and choose how to present it (Burke 2000; Sorrell 2004; Pechurina 2014). Whilst sharing the stories of these participants was an important endeavour, I was and remain troubled about my authority to do so (Richardson 1990). Returning to my guiding ethical principles of travelling and 'in practice', I wanted my work to be credible to my primary audience. This, of course, includes HE researchers and WP practitioners but most importantly participants themselves and those who understand their own journeys as that of a first-generation student (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Verisimilitude – 'lifelikeness' or believability – is critical, as it can be significantly damaging if participants feel their words have been 'twisted' (Squire 2008b; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). To this end, I tried to centralise participants' views by actively checking my understanding and interpretation during interviews, being data-driven in my analysis and organising workshops with interviewees after I had conducted an initial phase of thematic analysis so I could solicit feedback on my ideas (Merriam *et al.* 2001). The workshops (discussed in more detail in Section 4.5.2) were an effective mechanism in this regard, as they indicated where my own biases had shaped particular ways of presenting the data, and this allowed me to reframe my discussion. For example, one participant drew my attention to the fact he did not resonate with the class-related findings, spurring me to ensure this complicating voice disrupted a more simplified narrative. Periodical opportunities to share emerging findings through doctoral 'Research in Progress' sessions also proved to be a useful way to assess verisimilitude. On multiple occasions, various students and members of faculty who were first-generation students themselves commented that they saw their lives reflected in my data and discussion, sharing their own small stories which echoed with the interviews.

Anonymity was another key aspect of representation which was particularly tricky as life-history and narrative work is intensely personal (Pechurina 2014). It is hard to tread the line between wanting to maintain the depth of insight offered and protect people's privacy. To this end, on occasion I omitted or abstracted specific data (at the expense of richness) (Squire 2008b). This included more obvious markers such as university names, places and job titles, but also particularly experiences of trauma and distress; I wanted to ensure that these could not be triangulated with other parts of data. Deciding how precisely to use the timelines after the

interviews also troubled me. As material artefacts, they hold a lot of power and emotion and simply by looking at them I am transported back to each interview setting. However, by encompassing peoples' entire lives and including personal, identifiable data, sharing any timeline in full could '*enable the reader to situate a life story in time and space whereby anonymity would be lost*' (Adriansen 2012:47). Instead, I decided to use them as a resource which I referred to throughout analysis and writing to remind me how each moment and small story linked to a bigger contextual picture and to recall non-verbal elements of fieldwork. Lastly was the issue of pseudonyms – something I anticipated would be straightforward yet provoked some interesting conversations. Firstly, participants had the option of selecting their own alias, and it was touching to hear the stories people offered behind their choices – a family member who they were helping to care for, a fictional character that they treasured or a loved one who they wanted to memorialise. Secondly, a small number of participants questioned whether they needed to have one at all, stating they were proud of their achievements and did not see the trouble with being identifiable, provoking deep discussions about the (mis)use of research and digital accessibility of doctoral theses. In these discussions, we discussed how although we felt we had a clear understanding of each other's meanings and intentions, there are always risks of data being read in perverse ways or extrapolated without necessary contextualisation, thus underscoring the need for anonymity.

#### 4.2.2 Power and positionality

As touched on above, feminist-oriented ethics poses particular questions of positionality and representation which are important to deeply unpack (Pechurina 2014; Phillips 2016; Philip and Bell 2017). Researchers cannot avoid bringing themselves and their beliefs to the field; they will consistently '*leave their social fingerprints on the problems and their favoured solutions to them*' (Lather 1992:92; Harding 1987 cited in Guba 1990; Crotty 1998; O'Gorman and MacIntosh 2014). Whilst one can never be fully reflexive, I tried to work openly with these 'social fingerprints', considering my position, biases and the research's historical and cultural context, to assist in interpretation of the findings (Squire 2008b).

Commentators often posit that insider-outsider positionalities affect research relationships (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Ganga and Scott 2006). In many ways, my middle-class-ness, my whiteness, 'posh' Southern accent and educational background made me an 'outsider' to exclusions from the academy. The literature suggests this has advantages. 'Outsiders' may find it easier to question the

unfamiliar or ask taboo questions due to their assumed ignorance (Mellor *et al.* 2014). Some have even suggested it provides ‘objectivity’ (Phillips 2016) but I disagree; researchers always carry their baggage with them whether they admit so or not (Richardson 2001). Contrastingly, ‘outsiders’ can encounter issues with access and openness by lacking pre-established common ground (Ganga and Scott 2006; Adriansen 2012). Moreover, in certain contexts participants can perceive outsider researchers as ‘privileged others’ (McClure 2007). This can produce vulnerabilities in the research space and manufacture socially desirable responses (Hinton-Smith 2009; Mellor *et al.* 2014; Pechurina 2014).

However, a closer look at the literature – being mindful of the poststructural suspicion of simplistic binaries – establishes that an insider-outsider dichotomy is erroneous. Our positions are never unitary or fixed (Merriam *et al.* 2001; Pechurina 2014; Phillips 2016). All researchers occupy multiple positions which open up and shut down different tangents, regardless of who we interview (McClure 2007; Mellor *et al.* 2014). Whilst I was an ‘outsider’ in some respects, I naturally shared other communalities (e.g. gender, queerness, study discipline) with my participants. Similarly, ‘insider’ status can be cross-cut by *‘a range of social fissures... that may otherwise have remained hidden’* (Ganga and Scott 2006:3). Furthermore, there are different layers of ‘insider-ness’. I am an insider in the HE sector generally, at a particular type of institution more specifically and in a specific discipline and academic stage even more exactly. However, none of this is the same as researching ‘at home’ (Wiederhold 2015). Therefore, thinking about insider-outsider-ness, even when ‘activating the hyphen’ to transcend any dualism, was not a fully sufficient way to consider positionality (Humphrey 2007; Riaño 2016). This spurred a need for a different sort of reflexivity, drawing me to Baxter and Eyles’ (1997) ‘disciplined subjectivity’. This meant continually acknowledging and reflecting on my positionality – including during supervisory discussions – as it intersected with fieldwork, analysis and writing (Ashwin 2015). Rather than perceiving my influence as a ‘contaminating’ force, I instead sought to understand the significance of my position, knowledge, feelings and values, and how these shaped the study (Attia and Edge 2017). All researchers’ positions shape their research, but there is strength in this type of feminist approach which – unlike others – acknowledges this influence (Gazeley 2008).

One part of deploying disciplined subjectivity was to consider how I understood myself and my research motivations. This study’s feminist orientation came from a particular focus, namely a desire for social change (Francis and Mills 2012). Working in applied social research (in

employment and post-16 education policy) during the 2010-15 Coalition government and under the 2015 and 2017 Conservative governments revealed to me a dominant ideology steeped in meritocracy and individual responsibility, which systematically minimised the influence of structural inequality (Littler 2018). This exposed a need for more research to challenge the trend, particularly around higher-level study. Furthermore, coming from an assisted place background under the Conservative Party's Assisted Places Scheme (1981-1997) has bestowed life-long privileges. Compared to state-educated peers, Assisted Place holders got higher GCSE and A-level results, more Oxbridge places with lower A-level results and earned more by their 30s (Power *et al.* 2013). Moreover, after my family circumstances changed, in my early 20s my parents were able to financially support me to complete a Master's several years prior to the introduction of the loan. This spurred a personal and continual interest (and level of guilt) in how educational transitions and experiences affect peoples' opportunities and exclusions. In line with the epistemological framing of this study, it was imperative that I did not '*place the blame elsewhere, outside [my] own daily activities but... examine [my] own complicity in the maintenance of social injustice*' (St. Pierre 2000:484). More simply, I was inexorably intertwined with the research, duplicitous in its context and felt responsible for interrogating opportunities for change.

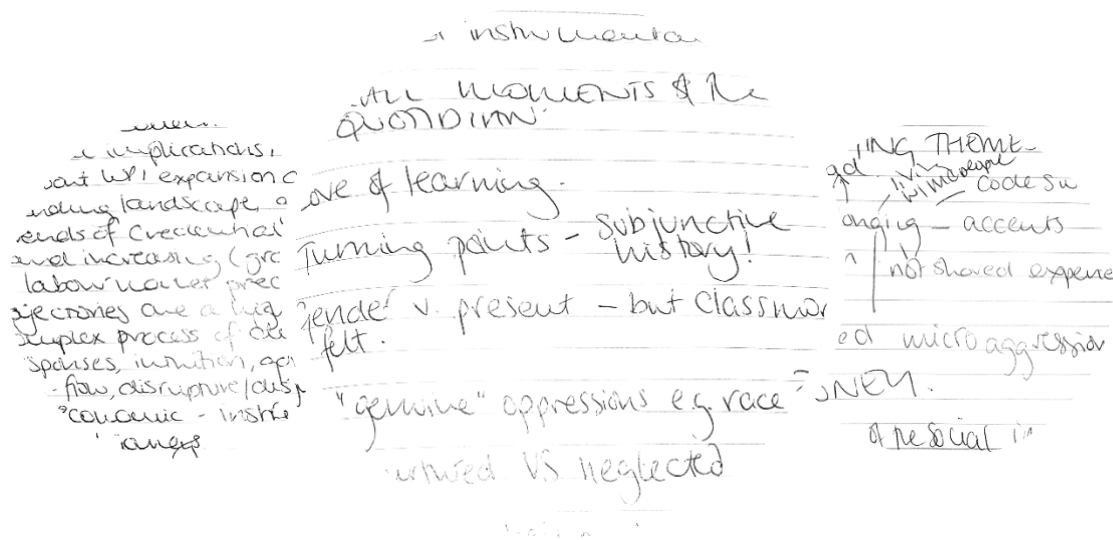
#### 4.2.2.1 *Reflective research journal*

To maintain a continual state of disciplined subjectivity, I kept a reflective diary, an important aspect of narrative inquiry. Journals are frequently used to capture paralinguistic aspects of fieldwork, such as the interview setting (Squire *et al.* 2008; Wiederhold 2015). However, they are also a receptacle for reflections on the research process and can become a confidant (Humphrey 2007). First in my journal was constructing my own 'educational river of life' (Ashwin 2015) to understand my own journey via my adopted research methods. This encouraged me to consider myself, my family background, educational institutions, views and beliefs, struggles, important people and many other factors. Constructing the pathway sparked memories of small encounters I had almost forgotten which were as (if not more) critical than big life events or the career planning I sometimes toyed with. For example, I realised that a chance conversation with a family friend who told me I would love anthropology and a strong sense of loneliness at work before I began by PhD were two of the most consequential parts of my story, as I told it that day, whereas several months of sofa-surfing after a relationship breakdown – which had felt unbearable at the time – faded into the background. As the timeline came together, I began to make connections, such as

how I was often swayed to make big decisions seemingly spontaneously, whether influenced by a friend, an acquaintance or a news article, but also became particularly aware of how advantages earlier in life had created a safety net which had allowed me to weather various challenges with relative ease later on.

Throughout fieldwork, analysis and writing, my journal was also a repository of notes, scrawls and freewriting which helped me shape amorphous ideas into more coherent interpretations (see Figure 3). This especially drew on Richardson's (1990; 1997; 2000) ideas of creative analytical practices which embody rigorous analysis alongside creative expression (Ellingson 2009).

Figure 3: Journal excerpts



#### 4.2.3 Institutional ethics

I obtained clearance from the University of Sussex's Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) (see confirmation in Section 1.1 in the Appendices). This provided a framework to manage risks and protect the basic rights and safeties of my research participants (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Squire 2008b). Alongside outlining the research design this provided the basis for certain ethical mechanics. The informed consent process was three-fold. Firstly, the recruitment protocol was opt-in only, so participants needed to contact me to be part of the study. Secondly, I had a short conversation with each participant over the phone before booking the interview. In this space, we could talk about what the process would involve and how I would use any information shared with me. This was also an opportunity to ask each other questions, lay the foundation to establish initial rapport and allowed me to feel confident that consent was fully informed and

freely given. After this conversation, people were emailed a copy of my information sheet, which was also replicated on my research website (see Sections 10.3 and 10.4 in the Appendices). Lastly, before the interview, participants had time to read through and sign an informed consent form (digitally for virtual interviews), which was GDPR 2018 compliant and based on a best practice template provided by the UK Data Service. In addition, C-REC clearance established processes for managing the research burden, lone working and data storage, access and usage.

It was also necessary to obtain approval from fieldwork sites. Each used a slightly different approach. In one case, I was required to submit a further application as an external researcher. This requested information on resource implications, how the research met the university's charitable aims and whether it met the Charity Commission's definition of public good research. Other institutions were happy to accept my own institution's clearance process, deeming it similar enough to their own approaches, sometimes in addition to having an internal point of contact to liaise on my behalf. Access was further complicated by the introduction of the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 which precluded use of global mailing lists, demanding multi-pronged support from institutional stakeholders.

#### 4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Following principles for good research, selection of research methods was guided by the philosophical stance of this study and its research questions (Baxter and Eyles 1997). As discussed in previous chapters, the research questions framing the study were:

1. How do students navigate their trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study?
2. How do students' subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their PGT journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

Reflecting on these questions and the various Bourdieusian, feminist and poststructuralist influences on this study ultimately led me to design a narrative study shaped by feminist principles. Feminist research is a broad and complex tradition. Over the last 15 years, there has been growing interest in integrating quantitative methods with feminist work, as researchers begin to challenge the notion that quantitative research must inherently involve overgeneralisation and obscure the role of the researcher (Undurraga 2010; Spierings 2012). However, I follow in the footprints of qualitative feminist research, inspired by principles of reflexivity, anti-positivism, affect and an orientation towards social change (Crawford and Kimmel



1999). A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate, given the study's interest in participants' multiple and situated perspectives and belief that these matter (Hinton-Smith 2009). I therefore decided to explore PGT trajectories of UK-domiciled first-generation students enrolled on taught Master's programmes at four English HEIs through the narratives of students themselves, supplemented by collaborative workshops. The following sections explain the rationale for this strategy and the major design decisions that were taken, outlining the precise thinking behind selection of fieldwork sites, programme, stage of study and participants

#### 4.3.1 Where should research be conducted?

The literature demonstrates there is clear geographical variation in patterns of entry to HE and student outcomes, reflecting the wider regional imbalance in England often simplistically termed the North-South divide (Milburn 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018; McCombie and Spreafico 2018). This bifurcation often crudely glosses over thriving Northern cities and poorer Southern coastal regions. Nevertheless, I wondered how location fits into PGT trajectories, as Master's-level students are often less geographically mobile than undergraduate entrants (Pollard *et al.* 2016). Introducing an element of geographical variation – whilst problematising the easy dichotomy of North versus South – offered a means to explore how geo-located context, situated resources and opportunities shape PGT trajectories.

Institutional type and status is as if not more important as local context, given the significant segmentation of the UK HE sector (Reay *et al.* 2001; Boliver 2011). The literature demonstrates there are clear differences between institutions regarding the socioeconomic profiles and life histories of their students and the approach and scope of their WP practice (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Burke and Hayton 2011; Harrison and Waller 2017). More specifically, research suggests that students with many valorised capitals are better placed to trade on these to enter more selective institutions, whilst students who do not have the same resources may orient towards local HEIs or institutions where they feel they 'belong' (Reay *et al.* 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Crozier *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, Russell Group and other pre-1992 universities account for 70 per cent of Master's degrees, a big shift from the 50-50 split at undergraduate study, further impressing the need to think about stratification (Britton *et al.* 2020).

To explore these dynamics, I sought two pairs of universities located in different geographical areas to provide variation without 'carving up' the data too much or requiring excessive

contextualisation. Each pair comprised one ‘high-status’, research-intensive university and one ‘lower-status’, locally-oriented university. Alternative HE providers (including FE colleges) were not part of the mix as their provision is distinct and universities make up the bulk of PGT provision. Rural areas without at least two nearby universities were excluded in favour of urban and semi-urban locations with good transport links and multiple providers; choosing an isolated location would have hampered efforts to investigate sectoral stratification. Accordingly, Cornwall and parts of the North West were excluded. London was also ineligible as its educational and labour market landscapes are anomalous to the rest of the UK. Due to their singular nature, the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge were also excluded. Finally, my own institution was excluded as its inclusion would have meant I was highly familiar with one site – having completed three degrees at the same university and lived in the city for a decade – whilst having a less intimate knowledge of others. Remaining eligible areas were compared to a UCAS map to produce a longlist of 14 pairs, seven in the North or Midlands and seven in the South (UCAS 2017).

Substantial profiling activity was carried out to create vignettes<sup>5</sup> of the 14 longlisted regions and pairings, a very lengthy process involving interrogation of multiple different secondary data sources and many complex conversations. Area profiling drew on mid-2017 population estimates from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), average earnings from the 2015 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2009-15 POLAR data, the 2011 National Census and June 2018 unemployment benefits data from the ONS. Historical and current labour market information was also consulted to generate a sense of local industrial settings. Institutional profiling drew on a range of 2016-17 data from HESA, including UK-domiciled and international undergraduate and PGT student numbers alongside proportions of state-school entrants, low-participation neighbourhood entrants and White UK-domiciled entrants. As HESA does not report on the distance students move or commute to study, Donnelly and Gamsu’s (2018) work on spatial inequalities was consulted to give an indication of how ‘local’ each HEI’s intake was. Institutional rankings from the Complete University Guide 2018 and the Guardian University League Table 2019 were also consulted to give a rough (and incredibly problematic) indication of perceived ‘status’ from the perspective of the dominant discourse. Lastly, institutional strategies, missions, values and WP policies were sourced to generate an understanding of how each institution characterised

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<sup>5</sup> Vignettes and profiles have not been included in Appendices to maintain anonymity of fieldwork sites.

and positioned themselves in the sector, including competing narratives of ‘excellence’, ‘employability’ and ‘inclusivity’. This information was reviewed to identify pairings where the profile of the two ‘high-status’ and two ‘lower-status’ institutions was roughly comparable, but where there was sufficient contrast within each pair. As a result, two preferred pairings were identified, with secondary and tertiary options also noted in case of difficulties in access. The final selected sites comprised two pairs of civic universities, one in the South of England and one in the North. Each pair comprised one Russell Group-affiliated university and one University Alliance-affiliated university. Both areas share an ex-industrial past, although their post-industrialisation economic response has been decidedly different. The purpose was to facilitate diversity amongst elicited narratives rather than generate a direct comparison. Table 1 details the site matrix, including the pseudonyms used for the four sites throughout the remainder of the thesis.

*Table 1: Site selection*

	High status	Lower status
Northern	Oldnorth	Newnorth
Southern	Oldsouth	Newsouth

#### 4.3.2 Which PGT programmes should be included?

PGT provision is incredibly diverse in terms of qualifications, content and delivery (Hesketh and Knight 1999; Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Zimdars 2007; Ho *et al.* 2012; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017). However, although there are a range of diplomas and certificates falling under this rubric – including the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – taught Master’s degrees (i.e. standalone 180-credit courses) are the largest component by far (HESA 2020b), are eligible for state-backed loans, have more significant study requirements and are associated with higher labour market returns (Wakeling 2005; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Moreover, other pathways such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) often have tax-free stipends attached, have historically attracted more socioeconomically diverse cohorts and offer clearer vocational entry routes, making them a different part of the landscape. Thus, Master’s programmes form the focus of this research. Throughout this study, the terms PGT,

Master's and M-level study refer to this specific part of provision. Thus, insights should not be uncritically transposed into other part of PGT provision without careful reflection and contextualisation. Moreover, as I researcher I was interested in how people end up in PGT study overall and disciplinary stratification is one part of this story (Utley and Sanders 2002; Murray 2003). Therefore, the study was open to all disciplines. This approach also had pragmatic benefits, as courses were not equally or comparably provided over the four sites. Furthermore, adding an additional layer of gatekeeping at Department level would have been too risky.

#### 4.3.3 Which point of the student journey should be the focus?

Historic PGT research suggests that relatively few students consider progression seriously during undergraduate study, with more deciding to apply after a gap in learning, although in the past few years PGT entrants have been getting younger (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Ball 2016; UUK 2018). Moreover, those who consider PGT at undergraduate level have historically occupied relatively more powerful positions and been able to access a wider range of capitals including finances (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015). This indicates that PGT-specific decision-making is less prevalent and less articulated at undergraduate level, particularly amongst the students who may be less resourced to negotiate various structural constraints. So, working with third year undergraduate students would have only produced a partial picture of the PGT trajectories landscape, relevant only to a minority of students and potentially limiting a fuller inquiry of diverse lived experiences and social inequalities. Focussing on current PGT students provides the opportunity to capture data about a range of journeys including immediate and prolonged transitions from undergraduate study, and direct entry from the labour market or FE. Initially, I planned to only interview current Master's students for comparability. However, this criterion was relaxed for Oldsouth where recruitment proved harder, and two students were interviewed who had just completed Master's study (in the previous cohort). Both had begun study after the introduction of the Master's loans, so their trajectories took place in a comparable provision landscape.

#### 4.3.4 Which students should participate?

Despite the many proxies for social inequality, none are fool-proof (see Section 3.1.3). Discerning which people would be most meaningful to interview was a complex endeavour. Indicators based on postcode data and parental occupation were ruled out for their questionable diagnostic value

(Harrison and Hatt 2010; Boliver *et al.* 2015; Harrison and McCaig 2015). Similarly, self-identification as working-class was also eliminated, firstly as some PGT students may feel prior HE involvement has shifted their positionality and secondly because the language of class is not one which everyone is comfortable with. An alternative was needed to tap into a diverse range of experiences in a way that still facilitates an interrogation of how social inequalities shape PGT trajectories. Whilst this ambition felt clear, the means to achieve this proved less so, requiring many nuanced conversations about the strengths and tensions in various possible approaches. Returning to the literature, first-generation status emerged as the most suitable alternative conduit to be able to speak to and about social inequalities in relation to PGT study. Research demonstrates that first-generation status is associated with:

- Less familiarity with HE (Reay *et al.* 2009; Birani and Lehmann 2013; Hope 2014);
- Less access to practical and tangible advice from parents and caregivers who tend to be the most trusted information sources (Gale and Parker 2015; Harrison and Waller 2018);
- Lower rates of participation and attainment (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Harrison and Waller 2010; Moore *et al.* 2013; Hope 2014);
- Higher attrition (Crozier *et al.* 2008);
- Constrained 'choices' (Ball *et al.* 2002; Harrison and Waller 2010; Hawkins 2017);
- A perceived lack of 'fit' in the academy (Hope 2014; Morgan 2014); and
- Lower PGT progression (Morgan 2014; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017).

Another methodological advantage is that first-generation status is a broad umbrella term that envelops many different life experiences, disrupting taken-for-granted understandings (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Hope 2014). In particular, it troubles any simplistic binary idea that people are either advantaged or disadvantaged. This is a theoretically salient point, as this allows the study to explore a diversity of lived experience and reveal the range and complexities of trajectories as they intersect with social inequalities in different ways. Furthermore, it has practical benefits, being more easily comprehensible and identifiable than social class which is a far more fluid, processual subjectivity and more opaque given its operation as continuum and process (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Reay *et al.* 2010).

However, using first-generation status is not entirely unproblematic. Firstly, there are many familial constellations beyond the nuclear family and it is important to operationalise the criteria in a flexible way to account for this (Yosso 2005). For example, St. Vil *et al.* (2018) write that

extended family networks have been a source of strength for Black families facing structural oppressions, sharing caregiving, money, advice, sensitivity and understanding far beyond the boundaries of the family unit typically considered 'nuclear'. Reified ideas of a clearly-bounded 'family' glosses over the complex and dynamic caregiving relationships which are influential over a person's selfhood and life course and the different kinship networks that may have influenced them (Boddy 2019). As such, the study deployed an open framing of 'being part of the first generation in your family to attend university' rather than asking directly about parents or caregivers. Secondly, using first-generation status means differences between intergenerational HE backgrounds are absent, although this is tangential to the interests of this study. Thirdly, first-generation status is not the most discerning of indicators, as it can include people who have professional and/or affluent family networks that have not followed HE routes alongside others who are not so relatively powered. As such, it is important to emphasise that this study is not using first-generation status as a proxy for 'working class' or 'disadvantage'. Whilst I was and remain interested in intersecting inequalities, I wanted to do so in a way that avoided fixity and labelling, so first-generations status became a conduit (or means to an end) to think about relative power and journeys, rather than the definitive site of inquiry.

Furthermore, inquiry was limited to UK-domiciled students as the experiences and trajectories of international students are decidedly different and so deserving of dedicated focus in their own right (Morgan 2015). In practice, due to the increasing prevalence of transnational movements and complex life stories, this was operationalised in the commonly used term of permanently resident students, rather than nationality.

## 4.4 RECRUITMENT

### 4.4.1 Gatekeepers

The first stage of recruitment was to approach institutional gatekeepers as critical intermediaries (McAreavey and Das 2013). WP teams were the first port of call, given their investment in HE equity and embedded institutional networks. However, the process became more complicated, with discussions extending beyond WP managers and practitioners to ethics governors, admissions staff, internal communications and individual members of faculty. Relationships took time to foster; I needed to build up trust and rapport, explain the value of the research, its ethical approach and assure institutions it would not be a draw on their resources (McAreavey and Das


2013). 'High-status' institutions were notably harder to penetrate, although it was unclear whether the issue was processual, structural or because WP was less central to their overall ethos. Access was more than simply establishing protocols and responsibilities but also about creating a shared understanding (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). My central points of contact at each site occupied different roles but were all personally invested in WP and PGT access. Phone conversations – where laughter and frustrations about the research process and sectoral issues were shared – were the catalyst for lasting connections and proved more effective than email. Contacts often checked in during fieldwork, offering encouraging words and alternative approaches when recruitment slowed. Moreover, being able to name staff when approaching secondary gatekeepers (such as module convenors) added additional clout to my requests.

#### 4.4.2 Participants

In every university, physical posters were displayed in study and social spaces, a successful approach in similar research (Love 2018; Rowell 2019). In line with these studies, the poster emphasised the social justice heart of the research as this was found to be an effective messaging strategy, although may not resonate with some people. The poster provided basic information about the study, contact details, a QR code for the research website and tear-off strips with the website URL (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Poster

PGTJOURNEYS.WORDPRESS.COM



**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED**

**ARE YOU A UK STUDENT DOING A TAUGHT MASTER'S DEGREE?**

**WERE YOU PART OF THE FIRST GENERATION IN YOUR FAMILY TO GO TO UNIVERSITY?**

**I would love to speak to you!**

I am doing a PhD about people's educational journeys into Master's programmes, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Sharing your experiences will provide critical new insight about fair access to postgraduate study and offer suggestions for what might make access to Master's degrees fairer in future.

Participation is entirely voluntary and confidential. This study has received ethical approval from the University of Sussex.

**Interested?**  
To find out more about the study and register to take part, please visit [www.pgtjourneys.wordpress.com](http://www.pgtjourneys.wordpress.com).

**Influence research about fair access to Master's-level study**

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**One-to-one interview at a time and place that suits you, focussing on the things you think matter most**

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**Refreshments provided**


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**If you have any questions or would like an informal chat first, please get in touch**

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The website provided a comprehensive summary of the background to the study, data protection and consent measures and the nature of participation (see Section 10.5 in the Appendices). Contact details and a registration form were also provided, the latter collecting name, contact details, some basic demographic data (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity and discipline of study) and asked participants to confirm their eligibility for the study.

In addition to posters, various digital approaches were also used (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Recruitment channels*

	Oldnorth	Newnorth	Oldsouth	Newsouth
Posters	70	150	200	50
Institutional Facebook groups	No	Yes – single post to postgraduate group	Yes – single post to postgraduate group	Yes – single post added to new admissions group and pinned for four months
Institutional Twitter account	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Departmental contacts	Email sent to 112 contacts	No	No	No
Programme-level contacts	Yes (N = 11)	Yes (N = 8)	Yes (N = 11)	Yes (N = 9)

An open call was most appropriate, given the unknown population and nature of the research design and philosophical stance. Structured sampling is rarely used in subjective qualitative research of this nature which instead tends to seek ‘information rich’ cases (Harrison *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, narrative work does not fit well with a ‘species’ or ‘quota’ approach, as this usually

proves too reifying (Waller 2006). This aligns with the research design, particularly the decision to speak to first-generation students which is a more fluid and open category that looks at relative (intersecting) power rather than reified proxies. However, self-selection has implications. People with busy lives may feel unable to spare their time, whilst others may have research fatigue or be suspicious of the activity (Rönkä *et al.* 2014).

A sample of around 40 interviews was deemed an appropriate size to be able to represent a range of different life stories whilst not over-collecting and under-analysing data (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Andrews *et al.* 2008; Squire 2008b; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Forty-one students were eventually recruited and interviewed between October 2018 and February 2019. The sample was deployed flexibly, allowing for more or fewer than 10 students from each institution. In the end, there was over-recruitment from Oldnorth, perhaps due to greater engagement from module convenors and teaching staff. This did not occur at Oldsouth (despite contacting the same number of PGT programme and module convenors), perhaps one of the factors leading to under-recruitment there, although the full reasons never really became clear (see Table 3).

*Table 3: PGT Institution*

	N	%
Oldnorth	14	34
Newnorth	12	29
Oldsouth	6	15
Newsouth	9	22

Reflecting the sector trend where many taught Master's are located within social science disciplines, especially applied ones (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Britton *et al.* 2020), over two-thirds (68 per cent) of participants were enrolled on social science courses (see Table 4). This included politics, human resources, business, risk management, international relations, sociology and social research methods. One-fifth (20 per cent) were in arts and humanities disciplines (predominantly English, creative writing or history) and 12 per cent were in the natural sciences.

The latter was somewhat surprising, given the high proportion of Master's located in STEM disciplines.

*Table 4: Master's discipline*

	N	%
<b>Social sciences</b>	28	68
<b>Arts/humanities</b>	8	20
<b>Natural sciences</b>	5	12

Just over half of participants (56 per cent) were studying part time – almost all on two-year programmes – whilst 44 per cent were studying full-time (see Table 5).

*Table 5: Mode of PGT study*

	N	%
<b>Full-time</b>	18	44
<b>Part-time</b>	23	56

The majority of participants (71 per cent) were in employment alongside M-level study. Some had continued within their former job role – sometimes reducing hours – whereas others had found part-time and more flexible work to support them through study. For those that were not in work (29 per cent), this primarily consisted of people with full 1+3 PhD studentships, people who had retired and those with full-time caring responsibilities who were with a partner that could provide financial support.

*Table 6: Employment status during PGT study*

	N	%
<b>In work</b>	29	71

<b>Not in work</b>	12	29
--------------------	----	----

As I was interested in people's movements between different types of institutions, it was important to know about where they had previously studied. Primarily, interviewees had attended University Alliance (39 per cent) or Russell Group (27 per cent) institutions – the two membership groups account for 30 per cent of the UK's 160 universities. Only one interviewee had attended a Million+ affiliated institution, which represents a similar number of institutions as either University Alliance or the Russell Group. Five interviewees (12 per cent) had no prior HE qualifications (see Table 7).

*Table 7: Undergraduate HE provider affiliation*

	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>University Alliance</b>	16	39
<b>Russell Group</b>	11	27
<b>Non-aligned</b>	3	7
<b>1994 Group</b>	2	5
<b>Further Education college</b>	2	5
<b>Wallace Group</b>	1	2
<b>Million+</b>	1	2
<b>No prior HE experience</b>	5	12

*Note: Percentages +/- 100 due to rounding*

Reflecting the trend that many applicants tend to consider PGT after a gap in learning (Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Ball 2016), the majority of interviewees were aged between 25 and 34 (37 per cent). However, perhaps linked to the introduction of the Master's loan, a sizeable proportion (24 per cent) were aged between 18 and 24 (see Table 8).

Table 8: Age range

Age range	N	%
18-24	10	24
25-34	15	37
35-44	6	15
45-54	3	7
55-64	1	2
65+	2	5
Not reported	4	10

Previous studies have noted that (highly-educated, affluent) women are often most motivated to participate in social research (Lewis 2009; Rönkä *et al.* 2014). This was reflected in this research, as over two-thirds (68 per cent) of interviewees were female (see Table 9),

Table 9: Gender

Gender	N	%
Female	28	68
Male	13	32
Non-binary/other	0	0

The overwhelming majority of interviewees (85 per cent) who agreed to take part in the research were White (see Table 10). No students of colour were recruited from either Newsouth or Oldnorth.

Table 10: Ethnicity

Ethnicity	N	%
White	35	85
Students of colour	3	7
Not reported	3	7

## 4.5 DATA COLLECTION

The following section outlines the approach to data collection: biographical narrative interviews supplemented by collaborative workshops. It firstly outlines the methodological approach to narratives before discussing how they were deployed in the field, followed by a summary of the workshops' aim and process.

### 4.5.1 Narratives

#### 4.5.1.1 A methodological pillar

Narratives were deemed the most appropriate approach to explore PGT trajectories because people live 'storied' lives, using '*lifecourse imagery*' to make sense of their experiences (Kolar *et al.* 2015:28; Richardson 1990; Riessman 1993). Narratives are therefore not only a research method, but also a distinctly human phenomena (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Waller *et al.* 2011). Most simply, narratives are (re)told sequential events or experiences with a clear temporal dimension (Wengraf *et al.* 2002; Elliott 2005). This makes a clear link between the overarching motif of the journey running through this thesis, that voyage of complex decisions and evolving navigations that lead people from one part of life to another. Retelling is an active and communal act: the 'narrator' shares their social world and how they want to be perceived with their 'listener(s)' as they narrate through the elements they include and the way they present them (Elliott 2005; Ashwin 2015). This initial consideration attributes three key dynamics to narrative: time, meaningfulness and sociality (Elliott 2005; Delamont and Jones 2012).

However, narrative is an umbrella term which covers many formulations. 'Event' narratives are ones which are said to be able to be 'validated' or 'disproved' by secondary sources, whilst the

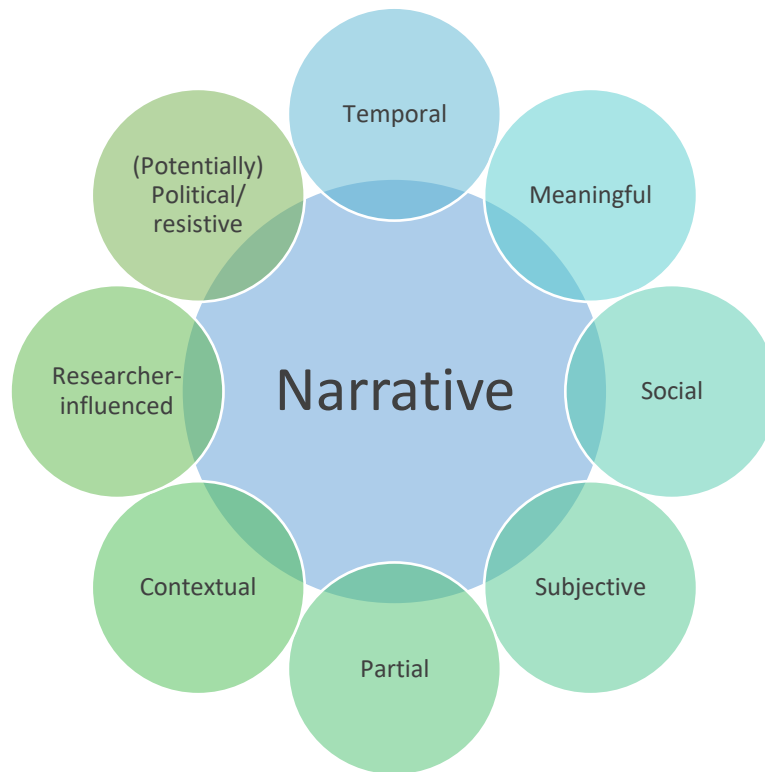
Labovian tradition is primarily interested in a specific set of syntactical structures (Wengraf *et al.* 2002; Labov 2006; Patterson 2008). Contrastingly, this study is interested in personal meaning-makings, their anchoring in particular subjectivities and contingencies in the teller and listener(s) lives (Patterson 2008; Waller *et al.* 2011). ‘Experience’ narratives best align with these aims, as these encompasses all meaningful stories that people produce and are more flexible about time and structure (Battersby 2006; Squire 2008a; Squire *et al.* 2008). Adopting this approach means both the ‘big’ autobiographical narrative and ‘small’ stories (anticipated, imaginary and indefinite tributaries) can be incorporated (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Squire 2008b). Elicited narratives in this study do not therefore represent monolithic objectifications of PGT trajectories, but instead offer windows into possible experiences and all the tributaries that feed into this (Elliott 2005; Delamont and Jones 2012). This contemplation adds three more elements to this study’s conceptualisation of narratives: subjectivity, partiality and contextualisation.

A further element, according to a poststructuralist-feminist paradigm, is the influence of the researcher-participant dyad (Phoenix 2008). Narratives are co-constituted by storyteller(s) and listener(s), in a particular moment and place (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Squire 2008b; Reay *et al.* 2009). Researcher reflexivity and the influence of the researcher on the produced narrative is therefore central (see also Section 4.2.1).

Lastly, narrating is a process where data collection is (re)focussed on what is meaningful for participants (Elliott 2005). Therefore, in contrast to more prescriptive interview techniques, narratives can be a (relatively) agentic space for those taking part in research (Squire *et al.* 2008). As this study’s focus was on storied content, rather than the difference between the storied and lived life, ‘tellers’ were central and had control over the conversation (Adriansen 2012). As such, narratives have the potential to be political or resistive ‘counter stories’ to the dominant discourse, introducing listeners to competing realities (Delgado 1989).

Drawing these ideas discussion together, the configuration of a narrative for this study is displayed in Figure 5. Crucially, whilst seven of the eight elements are somewhat more central, narratives do not inherently have to be political or resistive, but simply have the potential to be so.

Figure 5: Narrative configuration



#### 4.5.1.2 Deploying as method

First-order narrative interviews – stories people tell about themselves and their experiences – were the study’s primary data component (Elliott 2005). Individual interviews were the best way to elicit these, as they are more likely to deepen personal analysis by the ‘teller’, counteract social desirability and create ‘safer’ spaces for discussion (Riaño 2016). After briefly clarifying course details with participants, I used a single open-ended prompt, drawing inspiration from Wengraf’s (2001; 2004) Biographical-Narrative Interpretative Method:

*“I’d like you to talk me through your trajectory to your Master’s degree.*

*Start wherever you feel is most important and touch on any moments, thoughts, decisions, people, places or incidents you think matter to your story.*

*You can choose which moments you want to share, however big or small, and refer to any point in your life. I will try to not interrupt you until you feel you have said all you want to.*

*As you talk, we can map the things you talk about along the timeline to piece together your story.”*



Allowing participants to speak freely at length from this prompt established a narrative skeleton, after which interviews took a conversational turn, exploring each small story making up the overall arc. Alongside open questions responding to the initial narrative and colloquial exchanges, non-verbal cues and echo responses were deployed to help participants elaborate in greater detail (Wengraf *et al.* 2002; Elliott 2005; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). In case participants needed something more concrete to springboard from, a 'back-up' list of questions – derived from the literature – were drafted, although there was no cause to use them in fieldwork itself (Bernard 2006; Jackson and Mazzei 2012). The full discussion guide is presented in Section 1.1 in the Appendices. Piloting this prior to fieldwork showed the approach worked well, with feedback indicating it felt personal, sensitive and usefully reflective. However, despite my best efforts to trace interviewees' priorities and allow them to drive the conversation, participants may well have volunteered certain information over others. This study solicited data for a specific research purpose, which participants were aware of (Bagnoli 2009; Hinton-Smith 2009). Moreover, despite careful drafting, phrasing of questions can be perceived to suggest a preferred response (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Interviews were held in locations of participants' choosing to ensure they were comfortable and familiar in the setting. This involved a variety of cafés and bars – avoiding busier times such as lunch wherever possible and choosing private booths or corner tables – as well as occasionally using seminar rooms on campus where students were able and wanted to book these and one home visit. This was supplemented by virtual platforms – telephone, Facetime, Zoom and Skype – for eight participants who were unable to meet in person due to geography, travel costs, health reasons or caring responsibilities (Squire 2008b; Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Hinton-Smith 2016).

Graphic timelines were constructed alongside the conversations, based on Ashwin's (2015) 'educational river of life' where critical incidents, facilitators and obstacles are mapped out using pen and paper. Whilst initially the idea was for participants to draw these themselves and narrate their trajectory, piloting revealed this made interviews last between three and four hours. Given the multiple time pressures facing Master's students, this was an unacceptable request. The process was adapted. Instead, I did most of the mapping, with participants physically interacting with the material object in other ways in face-to-face interviews (e.g. pointing, tapping, tracing lines). Whilst timelines offered some structuring form, using them did not necessarily impose an 'artificial order' (Fraser 2004) or '*linear, coercive discourse*' (Delgado 1989:2415). Instead, they

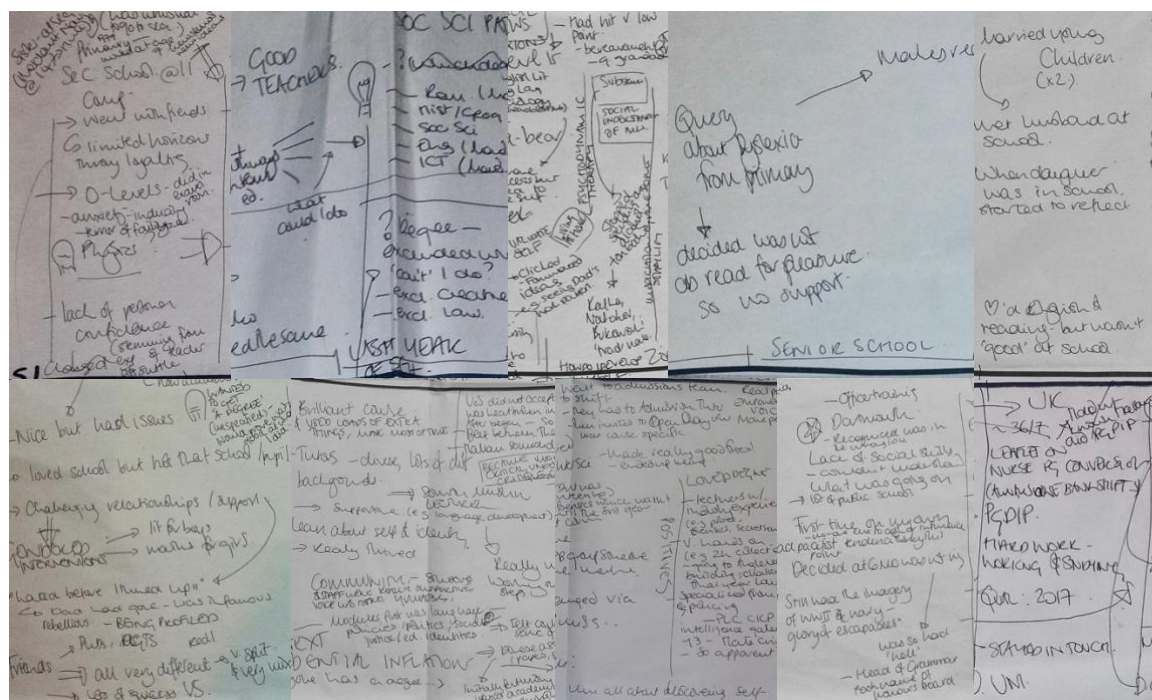
were a tool to visualise and (re)script the life course in all its complexity (Guenette and Marshall 2009; Adriansen 2012). As a physical prompt, they helped participants to map their journeys (Kolar *et al.* 2015), 'relive' past events and link them to recent happenings (Gloster *et al.* 2013) and tell 'big' and 'small' stories (Wengraf *et al.* 2002; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). As Sheridan *et al.* (2011) note in their discussion of this particular graphical elicitation approach:

*'The timeline provides a means to lay out... a comprehensive, multi-textual (re)presentation of [a participant's] life. It pulls together rich data, promotes narrative accounting, and allows both participants and researchers to focus in on specific aspects of the data to deepen and enrich storytelling. It is a particularly effective means of highlighting turning points and epiphanies in people's lives'*

(Sheridan *et al.* 2011:565)

Although whole timelines cannot be presented for anonymity reasons, Figure 6 displays a collage from a number of different journeys to give a sense of the material object. After each interview, timelines were photographed in high-definition and emailed to each participant along with a message of thanks. This appeared to be well received. Several printed it out to put up in their bedroom or office, whilst others forwarded it to family and loved ones and told me of their feelings of pride seeing their lives mapped out.

Figure 6: Timeline mosaic



Timelining ‘as process’ in the interview space was also valuable for the specific case of face-to-face interviews (Guenette and Marshall 2009; Sheridan *et al.* 2011). Various studies have found that replacing the potentially intimidating setting of direct eye contact with a collaborative physical activity – potentially sitting at a more oblique angle – helps to build rapport and makes it easier to talk about personal, sensitive things (Sheridan *et al.* 2011; Adriansen 2012; Kolar *et al.* 2015). Indeed, during fieldwork, the material ‘middle ground’ of the timeline connected the interview dyad, whilst sitting next to or perpendicular to each other introduced a useful level of informality. Participants frequently touched or gestured towards particular moments when adding more detail or creating ‘bridges’ between different experiences. Moreover, it felt a more ‘open’ approach to documentation. Both researcher and interviewee could see and access the timeline, which felt less surreptitious than research notes on private pieces of paper (Adriansen 2012). The same processes, by dint of mode, were not available for virtual interviews.

#### 4.5.2 Workshops

In late June and early July 2019 (between six and eight months after the initial interviews), four workshops were conducted. Lasting between two to two and half hours, each workshop took place on institutional campuses, three in a private seminar room and one in a café as booking a space was not possible. The workshops had several aims in mind:

1. Sense-checking emergent analysis with participants
2. Identifying dimensions that participants thought were most salient
3. Identifying actors or organisations to share key messages with; and
4. Considering desired actions in response to these messages.

All participants were invited, alongside a small number of eligible people who could not participate in the original interviews (although none of this latter group responded). Using the same eligibility criteria as the interviews meant the groups had the shared experiences necessary for successful group research (Bernard 2006). Due to the busy schedule of participants (many of whom were working on their final dissertation alongside work at this time), only nine participants were able to be part of discussions. This broke down to two participants each in Newsouth, Newnorth and Oldsouth and three in Oldnorth. As such, the conversations were quite close and intimate, with participants afforded more space and time (and potentially comfort although not necessarily) to share their stories with one another than might have been the case with a larger group. However,

it also meant that less than one-quarter of interviewees were able to feed back into the collaborative interview process.

During the workshops, participants heard a brief summary of my ideas about three overarching themes – which became my three analysis and discussion chapters – and received an A3 printout of selected anonymised quotes under sub-headings for each theme (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Exemplar workshop handout



Given the aims to solicit both feedback and recommendations, workshops were identified as the best group research approach. They are more interactive and less transmissive, with participants working together to learn, create, analyse and produce (Maxwell 1996; Wilcher *et al.* 1999; Silverman 2013). The workshops were guided by Riaño's (2016) principles for inclusive knowledge exchange: reciprocity, mutual learning, dialogic engagement, personal transformation and access to academic spaces. Firstly, they allowed participants to interrogate the analysis. This challenged me to check whether I had merely fitted data into preconceived ideas or was really data-driven and aligned my thinking with participants' lived experiences (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Crotty 1998; Sorrell 2004; Andrews *et al.* 2008; Phoenix 2008). Secondly, group discussions provided space for new interpersonally-produced interpretations which may not have been available in individual interviews (Hesketh and Knight 1999; Robinson 2012). Thirdly, the workshops were geared towards producing recommendations for future change based on the findings, from the perspective of the people that the issue affects (Kolar *et al.* 2015). Workshops thus became spaces where stories were re-narrated in response to the quotes, but second-order narratives (i.e. analytical and interpretive narratives) also were a core part of discussions.

#### 4.6 ANALYSIS

Given the systematic differences between research traditions, studies should not try to squeeze themselves into analytical criteria created for other paradigms; there are many ways for research to be meaningful and robust. Accordingly, this study rejects the positivist holy trinity of validity (understood in the more common usage of 'logically' assessing whether observations correspond with the 'objective' world), reliability and generalisability (Kvale 1996). Instead I favour a more appropriate schema: apparancy, verisimilitude and transferability (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Connelly and Clandinin 1990). This speaks directly against homogenising, reifying or smoothing data to produce universalities, whilst not going to the extremes of subjective relativism (Kvale 1996).

Approaching analysis, I was particularly inspired by the sensitive inquiry of Haggis (2004) and Richardson (1997; 2000). Haggis emphasises that whilst all analysis employs some level of reduction, it is important to resist over-simplification and non-rigorous assertions of causality. Instead, space should be made for messy dynamics, an endeavour that echoes with poststructuralist and feminist influences of this study. Recognising this, analysis sought 'deep' and 'transferable' interpretations, rather than 'objective' or 'generalisable' ones. Richardson, following

in a postmodern tradition, introduced me to the idea of crystallisation. She explains that rather than seeking rigid and fixed views about validity, we should use the metaphor of the crystal '*which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach*', leading to '*a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic*' (Richardson 2000:934). Crystallisation means working with data through multiple different qualitative means, encountering and making sense of it through multiple practices, revealing subtleties that would otherwise remain unseen (Ellingson 2009). To achieve this, an 'ad hoc' or 'stream' approach was used, combining a variety of abductive and narrative strategies (Fann 1970; Miles and Huberman 1994; Kvale 1996). This mirrors much narrative research which sequentially deploys a variety of inter- and intra-story analysis tactics in order to be enveloped in the richness of the data (Narendorf *et al.* 2015; May 2016; Davis and Cooper 2017). In short, the process of analysis was a step-wise exploration of my data, starting from the abstract and freeform and gradually moving towards a clearer picture of evocative narrative points, larger social trends and theorisations (Ellingson 2009).

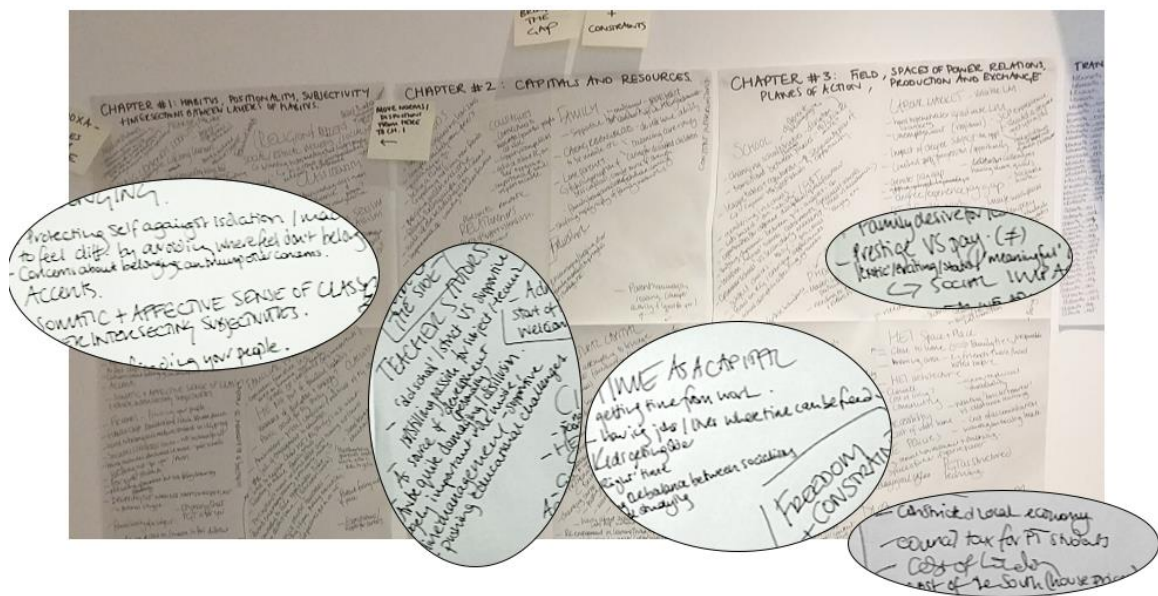
The first step was to transcribe interviews. Narrative analysis can require exhaustive transcription. Conversation or linguistic analysis looks at speech volume, pause lengths and intonation (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) whilst Labovian frameworks interrogate strict syntactical clauses (Patterson 2008). A focus on experience narratives in this study meant my interest was focussed on what stories were told, not their precise linguistics. This meant that records were transcribed verbatim but without some of the more precise annotation used in other schools of narrative work. The months-long process was nonetheless laborious. Transcripts were contextualised against the timelines and my journal, providing information on setting and affective aspects of interviews.

Narrative work often utilises induction akin to grounded theory to identify and condense themes, situating analysis wholly within primary data (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Strauss and Corbin 1990; O'Gorman and MacIntosh 2014). However, reflecting on the need to use multiple approaches for successful crystallisation, I found Peircean abduction more insightful as it comprises both inductive and deductive processes (Fann 1970; Kvale 1996). Abduction is simultaneously theory- and data-driven, leading to more robust conclusions and – as Richardson (2000) would argue – a richer suite of perspectives and ideas about the data. To implement this, Squire's iterative 'hermeneutic circle' approach was deployed (Squire 2008b). Deduction began with concepts from this study's



conceptual framework. I looked for confirmatory and contrary cases across multiple close transcript readings (Harrison *et al.* 2018). Simultaneously, new themes, induced from these successive readings, were added to an emergent coding framework as I attempted to produce a systematic and cohesive map of themes (Narendorf *et al.* 2015) (see Section 1.1 in the Appendices). Initially, this was conducted by hand on flipchart paper to pinpoint many possible ideas and look for tangents between them in a way that felt more creative (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Analysis by hand



I then moved from open coding to axial coding (i.e. breaking down of core themes) as well as looking for relationships between open codes (Narendorf *et al.* 2015; Davis and Cooper 2017). This felt a like working with a Rubik's Cube, where previous headings were converted into cross-cutting threads, and erstwhile anomalies suddenly emerged as prominent main ideas. Themes were then converted into a coding framework for Nvivo Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software and applied to transcripts (CAQDAS). The full codebook is presented in Section 1.1 in the Appendices.

Alongside this thematic analysis, narrative analysis was used to read 'down' the data and open up stories – both big and small – to understand the discursive lived experience of each overarching theme (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Phoenix 2008). Narrative analysis, unlike other qualitative methods, eschews truncated interview fragments of a few words or single sentence in



favour of longer stretches of storied data to better reflect lives in the ways they were narrated in the interview setting (Riessman 1990). This was enriched by introducing dilemmas, troubled subjectivities, emotions, worldviews, characters, events and sense-making in high-detail, making space for nuanced storylines to complicate and enhance the understanding of evidenced themes (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Phoenix 2008). The particular approach to narrative analysis feeds through into the way that data is presented in subsequent analysis and discussion chapters. The first and second of these chapters are introduced with lengthy excerpts to allow a window into the lives of students in a deeper and richer way without interjection or disruption from my voice. These serve slightly different purposes; the first three vignettes are positioned to open up analysis and discussion from a pluri-vocal student perspective, whilst the second integrates multiple important dynamics connecting material and symbolic space. In addition, throughout the thesis, sections are sometimes introduced or concluded with a direct quote without 'book-ending' these with extensive discussion. This is a deliberate choice to not to always prioritise my voice and instead allow the voices of participants to speak without my interpretation at times. Methodologically, these approaches are grounded within narrative schools of thought which seek to maintain some of the richness and storied-ness of the data and demand 'work' on the part of the reader (Riessman 1993; Czarniawska 2004; Andrews 2014). However, it is also a personal and political choice, reflecting the feminist sensibility of the research and a desire to unsettle my hegemony as a White, middle-class researcher whilst not ignoring the necessity of exegesis – critical textual interpretations – throughout the research as a whole. Whilst there are limitations on the extent to which it is possible to truly 'give voice' in any research endeavour (Ellsworth 1989), such an approach recognises there are a plurality of possible interpretations, so periodically 'stepping back' shines a spotlight on my participants' words rather than my own, offers small moments for alternative readings and invites readers to engage in a more deliberate and active way with the data from their own positionalities.

Writing was the final stage of analysis (Richardson 1990). This study conceptualised writing as a second-order form of narrative. Researchers morph autobiographical stories into biographical and cultural narratives, using informed translation (Richardson 1990; Merriam *et al.* 2001; Burke 2008). Indeed, it was through writing that certain themes took on new forms as the process of transforming them from the abstract to the written revealed new complexities and troubled some initial conceptualisations. This is a subjective process, as we approach our data from culture- and time-sensitive subjectivities (Battersby 2006; Squire *et al.* 2008). Epistemologically, there were

many possible interpretations of the data; this thesis offers just one written account (Waller 2006; Waller *et al.* 2011). Moreover, in line with crystallisation, the understandings presented can only ever be partial (Richardson 2000).

Furthermore, writing is imbued with power; there is a responsibility to go beyond the 'great stories' and allow unsure, fuzzy, unclear or partial voices to be heard (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Burke 2008; Waller *et al.* 2011). Whilst using 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) and rich extracts of narrative data (Riessman 1993) are often powerfully evocative tools, it is important to not be seduced to only these aspects. This encouraged me to look beyond the most articulate responses and 'beautiful' quotes to reflect the wider gamut of experiences shared with me. Furthermore, verbatim quotations were selected on the basis of being representative of broader themes within the data (rather than selecting those that fitted a narrative I wanted to produce). Where excerpts relate to a significant but anomalous finding, this is made explicit in the text throughout the following three chapters.

In addition to selection of quotations, language itself is powered. Writing became where I was frequently accosted and jarred by my own educational background. My (sometimes unconscious) use of French, Latin and obscure words in my early drafts – language which my friends often mock me about – made my writing inaccessible and elitist and required disciplined subjectivity and input from others, including supervisors, to strip back.

#### 4.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have mapped the development of this study from its philosophical moorings to the research design itself, shedding light on the thinking which preceded every element. This included crucial design features such as which participants might be best positioned to speak back to the complex areas of interest in the research, how to reach them and how best to work with the data so touchingly shared with me. Choices were the fruit of long, complex conversations with supervisors, colleagues and loved ones. I frequently discovered that nothing was ever as straightforward as I initially anticipated. Based on these conversations and the literature, narrative felt the most appropriate means to understand how different people tread different pathways towards PGT education; a choice of methods which clearly links to the philosophy of the study itself. Furthermore, feminist sensibilities have been traced throughout, particularly paying attention to sensitivity and power. This builds on the theorisations from the previous chapter,

complementing them by situating those ideas within a broader feminist and poststructuralist framework, thereby creating strong links between the way key cornerstones are theorised and the methodological approaches used. In the following three chapters, the primary data is presented, analysed and discussed. This is organised into three themes: trajectories through time, trajectories emplaced and navigating identity in PGT trajectories.

## 5 PGT trajectories through time

*'You don't just sign up for three years on this one straight path that gets you from A to B, but you sort of meander around it a little bit and maybe end up here or there...'*

Georgina, Oldnorth

Previous chapters have laid the foundations which frame the primary research from this doctoral study. The background context highlighted key features of the UK HE landscape, including massification, stratification and neoliberalisation. Next, the literature review theorised social inequalities and HE trajectories and discussed inclusions/exclusions in the academy, located within Bourdieusian and feminist thought, with cross-cutting themes including time, space, belonging and identity. Lastly the methodology chapter outlined not only the feminist poststructuralist framing of this study, but also the research design, narrative approach and ethical sensibility.

This first of three analysis and discussion chapters considers how PGT trajectories unfold within, around and against time, which feeds into and makes connections with space in the following chapter. Separating time and space is, of course, a somewhat arbitrary artifice as the two are interrelated and inform each other. However, to construct a coherent narrative and meaningfully present the data, they are tendered here as separate chapters. Key discussion points are organised between the chapters and sub-themes in the way that speaks most truthfully to the data and communicates people's experiences in the most pertinent way. However, this does not suggest that ideas presented in this and the following chapter are only emblematic of time or space (both of which, of course, are co-constructive with identity, explored in the third analysis and discussion chapter).

The chapter first considers the constraints and pressures that PGT students face which shape their constrained decision-making, illustrating how timings are shaped by a wide range of resources and socially structured fields. The chapter then opens up discussion to the diversity of lived journeys to M-Level study, revealing tensions, murkiness and anxieties and in particular the temporal non-linearity which characterise trajectories which exists against the doxa that unhampered trajectories are 'better'. Lastly, the chapter highlights serendipitous, unwelcome and contextual turning points which are highly influential, underscoring the importance of the third space between and linking structure and agency – happenstance. Through all these navigations, it seems to quite often be the case that participants experience their PGT progression as requiring more

‘effortful’ steps than their undergraduate transitions, in part because there is a less clear pathway established which they can look to as a ‘roadmap’ and because of the multiple competing structures that students are navigating later in life. Time was *the* dominant framing students deployed when sharing their life histories with me (Campbell 2013; Bunn *et al.* 2019). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the primacy given to time in the modern episteme, making us all temporally-aware narrators, but may be a product of using narratives and timelines in the research, thus drawing attention to time itself (Farrugia 2018).

The time-defined normative myth of the ‘desirable’ (linear, unhampered, productive) student trajectory abounds in public imagination and policy discourses, where students ‘*open the throttle*’, gaining ‘*more and more confidence, and acquiring more and more conceptual resource and veridical leverage*’ (Barnett 1996:81-2; Haas and Hadjar 2020). This normative temporal architecture is often-fetishized, built on the fallacies of ‘free choice’, ‘unhampered progress’ and the ubiquitous dominance of neoliberal chronology (Vázquez 2009; Farrugia 2018). However, this fails to reflect students’ lived experience of their diverse journeys and complex navigations under the strictures of structural power (Ball and Vincent 1998; Ball *et al.* 2002; Waller 2006; Tobbell *et al.* 2010). To unsettle this doxic discourse, the chapter applies Bourdieusian understandings of social inequalities and the overarching feminist poststructuralist epistemological framework to the concepts of trajectories and time. This includes unpacking the meaning-makings of time through the triumvirate of the more common, ‘measurable’ past-present-future model of chronological time, *aeonic* time (cyclical, open or unbounded time) and *kairological* time (moments of opportunity, full of potential) (White 1987; Honkanen 2007). In doing so, the chapter argues we should recognise there is a cacophony of different routes towards PGT study (Reay 2001; Reay *et al.* 2009; Reay *et al.* 2010; Waller *et al.* 2011; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Lehmann 2014; O’Shea 2014; O’Shea and Stone 2014).

As this is the first moment where the stories shared with me are presented, I begin with three vignettes so the first encounter with the data is through the lives of some of these students. These three examples were selected as they are emblematic of the huge diversity in journeys to PGT, both temporally and experientially. Moreover, they collectively touch on many key factors which shape the topography of trajectories through time – educational experiences, positionality, social networks, resources and intersections between labour and learning – linking clearly to the study’s conceptual framework (see Section 3.4). Choosing where to start a story is a situated and

contested endeavour: there are competing claims to the 'beginning' of a tale. However, understanding who these students are and why they were drawn to Master's programmes is a useful launchpad. By unpicking why and how students think about M-level study, it is possible to see how these 'choices' are constrained both 'in' time (in terms of the neoliberal episteme) and 'by' time (as a materiality).

### **James, Newsouth**

*'I had a chat with [my line manager], and I said, "Look, I want to look at academic stuff, and I'm thinking about doing a diploma in business continuity", and he sat me down, we had a chat, and he said, "Well, if you're willing to spent nine months and that amount of money on a diploma, you should consider doing a Master's degree", and I said, "Yes, that's fine, but I left school at 18 with not even A-Levels, I had four GCSEs, two since then, but I can't enter that route", and he said, "That's rubbish, you've got 20 years' experience, what you need to learn is how to write things in an academic way, how to research and think about things critically".*

James always wanted to work in public service and do 'something positive' for people. However, he found compulsory education hard and university seemed 'alien' in his teens. By Sixth Form, he felt he chose the wrong subjects for the wrong reasons and did not attend his exams, instead moving straight into work. Several years on, settled into a career in the public sector, he felt a growing sense of a 'gap' in his education and worried this would hamper his perceived legitimacy in his new role. Along with encouragement and practical support from colleagues, this proved to be the catalyst to re-engage in education, firstly with a few GCSEs and, over the decades, various professional qualifications with work-based and FE providers. Ultimately, this led James to enter directly into PGT study in later life.

### **Sandy, Oldsouth**

*'[Sixth Form was] very much [...] "When you go to uni", not "If you go to uni". And people that weren't sure, really were kind of... almost... "Why are you not going to uni? Why would you do that? You're weird". So, yeah, it just became the norm. But I think if I hadn't gone to my secondary school, it definitely wouldn't have been something that I'd really have thought about or thought was normal.'*

At school, Sandy and her peers were expected to progress unencumbered through A-Levels to university and were encouraged to focus on 'high status' courses at research-intensive universities. She attributes this to attending a more 'academic' school, outside of her housing estate, on the insistence of her Mum. As one of a small number of students of colour, she 'hated' the whiteness of the school compared to her local high school. Nonetheless, she recognised the seminal influence that this particular positioning within the educational field had had on the rest of her life. Moving into a Master's programme directly after graduating, Sandy's future appeared to be clearly laid out. However, a few weeks in, she discovered the course was not the high-level programme it was marketed as and instead was a conversion course for people with no prior experience, covering topics she felt were taking her back to first principles rather than developing her knowledge. She dropped out. Paying back her Master's loan within the year, with interest, she then discovered she was not allowed to apply for a new loan, so a scholarship was the only way she could re-access PGT. After some stressful months, she was offered a funded MSc as part of a PhD studentship, which she began the following year.



### **Laura, Oldnorth**

*'I got unwell pretty much every month, like, I was on antibiotics... Erm... So, that made it harder, and that made me annoyed when I ended up having to drop out [...] I didn't manage it very well. I had jobs and lost jobs because I missed days and stuff like that [...] At one point I was getting really disheartened, because I was like, "I'm never going to be able to do this"'*

At age 14, Laura had to leave mainstream schooling when her ill health meant full-time study became unmanageable and too impactful on her life. For a number of years, she moved between different FE providers across three cities, trying to obtain enough qualifications to access A-levels and, later, university. Finding provision that was flexible enough for her health was a challenge, and flare-ups in her wellbeing meant she had to leave several courses without completing them. After seven separate moves between institutions and cities, Laura completed an Access course and began undergraduate study at Oldnorth. As the end of her first degree neared, she began to think about next steps that would work for her. For Laura, part-time PGT study linked to a vocational pathway offered an opportunity to enter a flexible, internationally mobile sector where she could work independently, pausing during times of illness, and live abroad with her partner.

## 5.1 TEMPORALLY-CONSTRAINED ‘CHOICES’

The following section details the temporal strictures placed upon participants complex decision-making processes and wider navigations which produce discursive and intricate journeys towards PGT study. In particular, this highlights the fallacy of assuming people have truly agentic choice in relation to their trajectories and instead that temporality can shape why people consider M-level study, how much time they have for study and when in life they are able to afford it.

### 5.1.1 Choosing PGT in neoliberal times at different times of life

One of glaringly few bodies of PGT research is the literature about motivations, much of which is located within psychology and business studies. Successive studies have concluded that PGT study is all about career development, perhaps because of where students are in their journeys – older, in work and with financial responsibilities (c.f. Hesketh and Knight 1999; Bowman 2005; Ho *et al.* 2012; Kember *et al.* 2014; Morgan 2014; Banahene and Sykes 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Morgan 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017). Although motivations are seldom purely financial, work-related reasons do dominate, connected to skills, promotion, performance or networking. Such economic-instrumental ideas are perhaps an unsurprising reflection of our current context: credential inflation, neoliberalism, austerity and graduate precarity (Roth 2019). Moreover, Master’s students may well have been bombarded with messages linking work and employability to HE, experienced the burden and risk of student finance and struggled to find graduate employment. Despite this structural context, research shows that peoples’ passion for learning as a vehicle for self-fulfilment and a space to grow still pertains in the PGT space (Bowman 2005; De Boer *et al.* 2010; Ho *et al.* 2012; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2015). However, it is critical not to delegitimise ‘instrumental’ motivations as less valid than the ‘loftier’ desire of education for education’s sake (Haggis 2006). As discussed in the literature review (see Section 3.1), experiences and outcomes are influenced by the capitals and positionality of each student – and these vary across the life course (Reay *et al.* 2001; Hale 2006; Burke and Hayton 2011; Milburn 2017). Thus, people have unequal access to opportunities and resources at different times, as well as qualitatively different orientations to learning in ‘*response to the underlying insecurity*’ (Leathwood and Connell 2003:611).

Although this study follows in a tradition which speaks against reification, it was useful to softly quantify the various motivations offered by interviewees to obtain a holistic sense of how PGT was

positioned. As Table 11 indicates, this study broadly echoed the literature, with a whole host of (predominantly work-related) reasons offered. Several reasons were suggested by each person, illustrating that people were not thinking in unitary transactional ways but instead in a more multifaceted fashion. Notably, increased earnings were rarely mentioned – and even then, as an aside. Moreover, interviewees did not see Master’s degrees as a panacea for labour market vulnerabilities. Instead, programmes were typically framed as vehicles to make the less possible more possible in a vulnerable economic landscape.

*Table 11: Motivations for engaging in PGT study*

Motivation for PGT study	Frequency	%
<b>Doctoral study</b>	18	44
<b>Career change</b>	11	27
<b>Passion for learning</b>	7	17
<b>Increasing/updating skills</b>	7	17
<b>Learn new skills</b>	6	15
<b>Validate existing credentials</b>	5	12
<b>Build self-esteem and self-belief</b>	5	12
<b>Professional requirement</b>	5	12
<b>Credential inflation</b>	4	10
<b>Promotion at work</b>	4	10
<b>Generally enhance employability</b>	4	10

<b>Provide a structure to life</b>	3	7
<b>Obtain 'any' qualification</b>	3	7
<b>Increase earnings</b>	2	5
<b>Enhance potential for international mobility</b>	2	5
<b>Family/peer norms</b>	2	5
<b>Networking and professional connections</b>	2	5
<b>Give you time to pause</b>	1	2

*Note: %s +/- 100 due to multiple response. Mean of 2.22 responses given per respondent.*

Unpicking reasons for engaging in PGT revealed differential orientations at different times of life, with pressures most evident on younger students. This illustrated how the social inequalities that interviewees were navigating were highly age-segmented, as were the capitals they were able to access. Retired participants, all of whom had expansive professional careers, spoke about wanting the structure of a formal qualification, but had no interest in (or need for) labour market outcomes (and had the money to self-fund). Those in established careers (who entered work prior to HE massification) were often in senior roles. For them, PGT was a vehicle to 'validate' existing expertise and, once again, they were less likely to be responding to economic precarity. Thus, whilst credentialism and struggles for value were still part of these narratives, the need was not quite so menacing. It was younger participants (under 35) who were more likely to speak about how credential inflation meant '*the jobs aren't there that they used to be*' leaving them '*stuck in a rut*' of low-paying and/or precarious work with little chance of tangible progression. In the current epoch, undergraduate degrees – even with first-class honours – were no longer seen as 'enough' to penetrate the graduate labour market, especially for sought-after 'socially-just' work in academia, research, NGOs or the civil service, spurring them towards PGT study. However, whilst factors such as being more easily able to afford rent and having a little more disposable income did feature in some careers-based discussions, wanting to become a 'high-earner' was notably

absent. Seemingly, this was not a desired outcome for participants by this stage in their life; no direct or causal links were made between PGT and high salaries.

Whilst work-related discussion was prevalent, a desire to move into doctoral research was the most common reasons given by participants (alongside other motivations, with PGT positioned as the steppingstone). This suggests that many participants were not necessarily positioning PGT study as an end in and of itself or just an add-on to undergraduate study, but also one point along a longer journey, an ‘intermezzo’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Like conversations about work, desires about doctoral study were also age segmented. Older participants were more likely to speak of it as a loose possibility, whilst younger students were either already on 1+3 pathways or seriously entertaining the idea. There were, however, anomalies. Tessie – who had begun PGT study in retirement – spoke of a real interest and passion in continuing along an educational ‘adventure’ and thought of doctoral study as one potentially exciting route. Moreover, certain interviewees explained they had turned to Master’s after being turned down for places or funding for previous postgraduate research (PGR) applications:

*‘Obviously, the entire reason I’m doing the MA now is to get the PhD opportunity, really. As much as like the course is very practical [...] the objective is to put you into [...] industry, and I completely understand that [...] the objective [for me] is to do a PhD and to pursue that, because that’s what I want to do’*

Steel, Newnorth

However, not all motivations correlated with time of life. Affective orientations were voiced by many participants, such as adoring a subject or wanting to (re)gain a particular sense of self. Instead of age, what tied these views together was a complex prior relationship with education, maybe even disillusionment or quite serious disruptions. Alix wanted to prove to herself that she was capable of accessing ‘a real bricks and mortar university’ after not having done so earlier in life and emphasised this was purely for her own fulfilment (although subtext within this narration points towards the cultural capital afforded of ‘real’ universities). Eliza shared similar views:

*‘I wanted to carry on my academic education because I’d had such a poor start at the beginning, and I realised that I was actually quite good at it, and when I... when I loved it’*

Eliza, Newnorth

### 5.1.2 Making time for PGT study

The literature frequently discusses students' careful balancing of work, caring and study. Each of these parts of life demand substantial emotional labour and place significant temporal and material constraints on when and how people are able to study (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Reay *et al.* 2010; Salamonson *et al.* 2018; Taylor *et al.* 2020). For students who are also workers and carers (not to mention autonomous people with their own interests and passions) achieving equilibrium is a challenge as HE is structured for a 'typified' student who assumed to be 'burden-free', flexible, mobile and affluent (Tett 2004). HE's neoliberal hegemony thus assumes study to be possible all the time (and temporally prioritised), forcing students to take on the responsibility for managing it, producing entirely legitimate instrumental responses (Haggis 2006).

This lack of thought about students who need to work or have other pulls on their time is a perennial issue in undergraduate study. This study suggests this continued in a more limited fashion when it came to PGT transitions as course convenors and institutions were more aware that students would have other commitments. However, issues still arose. Interviewees explained that some models (particularly longer block release or weekly-spread contact hours) immediately ruled out certain courses. Similarly, short-notice time-tabling made lives difficult. No matter the model of provision, most interviewees working whilst studying were involved in complex temporal negotiations, including compressing or dropping hours, using annual and unpaid leave, informal agreements with line managers, negotiating shift scheduling, switching to bank or supply work, altering start times on particular days and even changing jobs. However, not all were able to access support so were left to fit study in wherever they could, a factor shaped by positionality, power and resources:

*'There are people in my [workplace] who've done MBAs... And the [workplace] has paid for them to do that because they're senior management, and, er... and they're given the time to do the studying. But because I'm not at that level, they wouldn't support me with money or time off to do the course'*

James, Newsouth

PGT study was rarely the first time that interviewees encountered this tricky balancing act – not least as most had generally worked throughout undergraduate study, perhaps reflective of the fact that participants' families and caregivers did not have the financial resources to support them

through HE earlier in life. During her Bachelor's, Bella took journal articles to work in the (elusive) hope of a spare moment to read and Marianne was 'really grumpy' from sleep deprivation because of her multiple commitments. Those who had attended Russell Group or other 'high status' institutions were particularly likely to feel they were one of staggeringly few undergraduates faced with this conundrum and thus found the experience an isolating one. Christine shared her frustrations but also positioned her experience as a demotic capital, highlighting a shared theme that maturity and coping skills were valuable resource to navigate PGT trajectories:

*'I really got annoyed with people that would get money off their parents and then just blow it, go and shop, or go out all the time, which I did, but I had to go to work and make sure I was ready to go to work. I needed the money, I couldn't just call in sick or sack my job off, I needed it to put myself through uni. I think the people that I knew who did that as well, there was a theme that we came from backgrounds where uni wasn't a 'thing'. The kids that had their parents pay for them, their parents had been to uni. I remember there was this girl who was saying that it was weird how I was so poor and yet could afford to uni. She said, "Poor people don't go to uni", and I was like, "I'm not poor, I've put myself through uni, at the end of three years I'm going to know how to look after myself and you're not"'*

Christine, Newnorth

Caregiving and studying proved to be more challenging for participants. Tessie and Emma spoke to the particular gendering of this unresolvable tension, reflective of labour shifts for women in the Global North (Acker 2004; Phipps 2020) now faced with the dual bind of expectations to be both 'good mothers' and 'successful career women':

*'Two of my children were in school [when I was studying and on placements], but... then... My younger one was in nursery as well, so sometimes it meant dropping him off at nursery, then going and doing a full day somewhere, then picking him up on the way back. It was hard [...] my younger one, at the time, wasn't sleeping, was taking a long time to fall asleep, and then by the time he'd fallen asleep it was 10 o'clock, then I'd have to start doing work... Yeah, quite exhausting'*

Emma, Newnorth

Whilst participants, due to their prior experiences, were often highly imaginative and tactical in the ways they worked with and against time – often using resources devalued by the dominant discourse, akin to Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) person-values – this did not mean these negotiations were not fraught. Indeed, for some, they were insurmountable. Around the time of the workshops, Eliza told me her employer refused to change her non-working day so she could

attend seminars, leading her to drop out. A number of institutional email addresses bounced my workshop invitation, suggesting others had also left – suggesting some important equalities concerns – although there was no way to follow this up to explore what might have happened. No standard data is regularly collected and reported on the non-completion of PGT students, unlike the volume of information about attrition and undergraduate study. However, prior research has suggested that mature PGT students are more likely to drop out before enrolment than on-course. When the latter does happen, this is often due to clashes with work, courses or institutions not meeting expectations and changes in personal circumstances (Pollard *et al.* 2016).

### 5.1.3 The temporality of affording PGT study

In the neoliberal academy, money significantly constrains when, how much and even if people are able to engage in HE, particularly for PGT where many students combine learning with work and/or caring, and have complicated lives (HEFCE 2013). The links between time and money in PGT trajectories are critical – access to finance impacts decisions about working hours, paid childcare and other factors which may either facilitate or limit time for study – or prevent it entirely. This further influences which time(s) of life study becomes more possible in.

The Master's loan is a new policy measure in this landscape. Although most interviewees used it to fund their study, awareness was not pervasive. Older participants (both retired and in established careers) were often unfamiliar with it until our conversation and there was much confusion between state-backed and bank loans. For those that took it up, perhaps as they tended to be younger, it was generally the only way to pay at this point in their lives. This mirrors the Master's loan evaluation findings which indicated it had a temporal impact, allowing people without independent funds to engage in M-level study earlier than would otherwise have been the case (Adams *et al.* 2019). Despite the loans, some participants still suggested that the 'right' time of life to study – given the dearth of non-repayable grants – is often later in life when earnings might be higher. Alumni discounts were generally deemed insufficient make or break a decision in this context. Maryam spoke of internal turmoil as her faith generally prohibits loans which accrue interest but explained as she was younger and had not had time to accumulate savings (and could not draw on family resources), she was left with no other choice. She explained the loans felt 'heavy' and produced '*a real internal conflict*' and prolonged stress yet there were no other options for this time in her life. The affective burden of student debt was so severe for other younger participants that they felt only able to access PGT at this time because they were offered



funded places; these are few-and-far-between, highly competitive and sometimes have rigid eligibility criteria. Rosie explained that she was able to access a WP scholarship because of ‘my background’ and explained her transition entirely hinged on this offer. Similarly, Beth’s aversion to loans were enough to dissuade her away from them completely and she was only able to continue in education having received 1+3 doctoral funding:

*‘I hate borrowing money. I’ve seen what it’s done to my family and that’s what’s put me off. I don’t want to borrow money that’s not mine. I could have, but... no. I’ve seen my mum get into debt and I don’t want that to happen to me, because we never had that much money, and I know what happens’*

Beth, Oldsouth

There were a variety of other ways of securing funds for PGT study. These have always been fairly limited but seem to be increasingly hard to access as time goes on, potentially limiting opportunities for young PGT applicants or those without personal or familial financial capital to spare who may feel reluctant to take on more student debt. This seemed to particularly be the case for employer funding as few participants were able to secure direct contributions from work, with participants suggested that in the current neoliberal epoch, organisations only seemed willing to pay for senior managers to undertake MBAs.

## 5.2 LIVING BEYOND LINEARITY

Some people move seamlessly from school to college to undergraduate education and onwards to work deemed ‘professional’ and ‘productive’ by the dominant discourse. However, not all do, unsettling the neoliberal doxa that there is a singly desirable track towards an imagined ‘end point’ (Farrugia 2018). People come to PGT from all phases of life, for a whole host of reasons and envisage innumerable futures after it. Each part of life may be compressed or extended in a plethora of different durations, expansive for some, and full of hurry and haste for others (Campbell 2013). Despite this diversity, when reflecting on the temporal architecture of their trajectory, interviewees were aware of a normative ‘right’ chronology (Haas and Hadjar 2020) and how this was different to their own lived journey:

*‘People don’t explain their life story like that [makes straight line with hand], do they? They go like that [moves hand erratically]’*

Terry, Oldnorth

### 5.2.1 Diverse journeys and the 'right' time to study

Interviewees invoked the language of typified trajectories, often as one of the first things said to me during recruitment, questioning whether I would even want to speak to them because their story was 'a bit odd'. They attributed various labels to linear, unhindered journeys, including 'conventional', 'natural', 'stereotypical', 'normal' and 'traditional'. Temporally, this is embedded with two ideals: a precise ordering of activities as well as a 'right' time of life to study (Bloomer and Hodgkinson 2000). Moreover, a naturalistic, doxic ontology is applied, devoid of power, agency, structure, context or other influences. A mythical student was discursively constructed then compared to interviewees' own navigations. Beneath the surface, unspoken, is the complex web of capitals and life histories which facilitate these sorts of journeys within a structurally inequitable landscape.

This normativity is increasingly hard to escape around undergraduate study. CP knew he wanted to enter the armed forces from a young age, but still explored university in sixth form, *'because everyone else at school was doing it'*, yet he was *'just going through the motions'* to fit in with his peers. Georgina emigrated in her late teens and returned a few years later. She began to look into university courses at this point *'because quite a lot of my friends were students'*, but remembers this was done *'half-heartedly'*, and the idea was shelved for several years once she realised she no longer met the residency criteria for student finance. Both speak towards coercive expectations and which trajectories and formations of habitus and capitals are valued in the dominant discourse.

Normative expectations differed for PGT study; several interviewees spoke of having to battle expectations from family that they would enter the 'real' world, not continue studying, in part driven by the fact that PGT was a less familiar and established phase of education within their networks. Christine returned to her hometown after her Bachelor's degree, but found that graduate-level work in her chosen sector was hard to come by. She encountered resistance from her parents when she broached the subject of PGT, as they saw this as 'another' (unnecessary) degree:

*'I told my parents that I wanted to do my Master's, and my mum was like, "Why? You've got a degree, why do you need another one?", and I was like, "It's not another degree, but it's a Master's". And my Dad was like, "What do you need that for?", and I said, "Because it helps you. I've got a very broad [undergraduate] degree [...] and now I've got a more niche degree"'*

Christine, Newnorth

For other students, pressures were focussed on starting a family, again pointing towards habitus tensions. Maham explained this initially made her question whether PGT study was right at this point in her life:

*'There was also this other thing that kept me from doing a Master's [...] from my culture, it was... I don't know. There were a lot of expectations from me, maybe having a baby. I know... that was also something that I had to struggle with and convince other people that I really want to do this Master's, I really want to self-actualise myself'*

Maham, Newnorth

Bringing their own lives into conversation with linearity and normativity revealed how entrenched neoliberal deficit discourses were, illustrating the disenfranchising effect of dominant narratives. Interviewees consistently described their trajectories as *'messed up'*, *'turbulent'*, *'odd'*, *'different'*, *'unique'* and smattered with *'blips'* or *'set-backs'*. Regret was a frequent refrain. For example, Timothy had had a successful career in business but followed his passion via a Master's degree in retirement. He relayed how he was *'really, really loving'* this new course, lamenting that his secondary modern education denied him this route earlier in life which might have been possible through another path. This reflects a life-course, longitudinal dimension to Timothy's understanding of his journey: how his prior experiences had resourced him in particular ways, given the historic stratification of English compulsory education into secondary modern, technical and grammar schools. With the advent of educational neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards, compulsory education has become increasingly fragmented, leading to an increasing diversity of possible pathways (Ball 2012). As a result of his path, Timothy bemoaned the 'lost' time: *'What a wasted life! I could have been getting on with this for years'*.

The idea of a 'right' order to life provoked reflection on the 'right' time to study. Youthfulness was ascribed by a number of interviewees. Homer did not want to move straight into undergraduate study after college but after a brief period in work felt it was better to *'go for the degree whilst I'm still sort of youngish and can get away with [...] not having to worry about bills and stuff like that'*. Similarly, Erin spoke about setting a goal of completing her Master's before the age of 30. Elaine instead spoke to the sociality of studying-whilst-young, after finding a *'big gap'* socially between her and other students when she began undergraduate study as a mature student. Others spoke against swift progression into HE – both undergraduate and PGT – arguing the 'right' time to study

is personal and situated in the wider context of people's lives. For example, Ethel recounted a long period of poor mental health prior to moving in with a partner but noted how greater emotional and financial support at home meant she was now able to realise her long-held dream of postgraduate education. Alternatively, Christine and Anna attributed the 'right' time to study to a fuzzy, hard-to-lock-down sense of 'readiness' which a gap in study facilitated (Waller *et al.* 2011). Others advocated waiting until schedules allowed more freedom and time, illustrating how 'free time' can operate as a capital resourcing PGT entry. For example, Freya and Joyce had both previously been in stressful jobs, working long hours. Both championed the need to pause, take stock and recover before embarking on PGT study.

For some, the 'right time' meant also thinking about loved ones – whether it was also the 'right' time for them. Eva returned to the UK after a number of years working abroad and wanted to support her children after the transnational move and a relationship breakdown. Direct access into PGT study (based on her prior work experience and vocational learning) allowed her to fulfil a desire to enter HE, yet still be present in the home. Tessie completed her undergraduate study in the 1960s, and then worked internationally as a journalist. It was during retirement, when her husband began needing more personal care, that she took up PGT study as a new way of 'adventuring':

*'It is a convenient way of life because my husband is, you know, no longer working, he worked until his mid-80s, but still, he likes to have me around, and studying is totally geared to being around [...] The point is of course, I can sit in my room at home, in front of my computer, and I can just summon up all this stuff, everything I need. And my husband knows I'm there, and it's brilliant. You know, my adventures have to be intellectual rather than physical or exploring some new place or work or something, which I can't really do at the moment because I'm constrained'*

Tessie, Oldsouth

### 5.2.2 The 'simmering anxiety' of uncharted waters

Along with discussing the chronological architecture of trajectories, narrations also revealed moments where time became open and fluid (akin to *aeonic* time) where clear pathways were no longer mapped out and time became unbounded (Honkanen 2007). Interviewees highlighted how being part of the first generation to attend university meant they were forging a new path which diverted from established familial praxis and formations of habitus. Sextant-less navigations – expeditions into the unknown without instruments to guide the way – made PGT study a

particularly opaque field, with its codification hidden for many first-generation students. This was a highly unsettling part of lifeworld way-finding, a refrain echoed in other moments such as moving to a new country or changing jobs. During the Newnorth workshop, Maham shared a childhood story to explain her feelings:

*'I'm reminded of a game I used to play with my sisters... When you know when you're going, you already know what the aim is, but if you don't know what the aim is, it's a bit like walking through fog, you don't know what's happening. Not knowing [...] what's behind that fog is really frightening, but if you see the road and you know your path, basically, you know that this is a straight path, "I'm going to walk on this", it's fine. If I don't know if that road's going to end at the end, if the fog is there, I feel like that's really scary, and also knowing that you've got that baggage you have to pull behind you... Whereas if it was just me, with my backpack, just going on a road, it would be just a normal journey [...] do I have to walk or do I have to crawl? Can I run? All this stuff'*

Maham, Newnorth

This rich imagery powerfully evokes how many interviewees felt about unclear next steps when they had little recourse to support. Without the capitals of privileged 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) about pathways beyond undergraduate education and familial person-values (Skeggs and Loveday 2012) which were not valued by the dominant discourse, participants often spoke of nervousness in forging their own path.

Occasionally this feeling of the unknown was a productive space where new opportunities could arise. However, the embodied experience more often proved to be disconcerting. For example, from secondary school onwards, Steel was set on going to university and doggedly pursued his dream. Retelling exhaustion at the end of his degree programme, he recounted the sensation of moving from a fixed chronology into an open, unstructured moment:

*'The day I got my degree [...] I just stared at the screen. My mind normally goes at five thousand miles an hour and it was the quietest... I was like looking at it like this... and it was quiet for like the first time in 10 years, my brain was just completely placid. And then I was like, "This is like better than anything else, this is like euphoria, ecstasy", and then there was like this feeling like, "This is probably the best you're ever going to get", then I was depressed for like the next five months, like, "Well... This is me... What do I do now?"'*

Steel, Newnorth

Timothy encountered a similar affective disjunction during his (first) retirement where he suddenly moved from a high-octane job to a slow pace of life. He questioned what he was doing, feeling lost and unsure:

*'I retired, I took my pension, all the rest of it, and I was at home... and... I had not prepared for retirement. You hear people saying, "You should prepare for retirement, think about what you're going to do" and all the rest of it. I just fell off the edge of a cliff. I was at home and I was getting myself into a little bit of an emotional state, I really wasn't... "What am I doing? Why am I here?", all the rest of it'*

Timothy, Newsouth

Erin described these moments as periods of *'simmering anxiety'*, where there is little clarity about where to go, leading to fear of failure and the future. In such moments, participants were wont to self-discipline and self-critique, internalising 'blame' for not fitting a normative script, illustrating the pervasive impact of deficit discourses and the individualising ethos of neoliberalism. For Malia and Christopher, this revolved around leaving a prior undergraduate course when it turned out not to be right for them:

*'I did sort of feel like a failure. Like, "Look at me, I thought I was bright at clever getting ABB at A-Level" to then dropping out from university. I did feel like a bit of a fool [laughs quietly]. I did feel that my parents... they were definitely disappointed. [...] they were like, "It was inevitable you'd do this" [...] I remember my Dad was on the phone to my Mum, "Oh, he's always doomed to fail at university"'*

Christopher, Oldnorth

For others, fear of failure coalesced around moving into postgraduate study, with some worrying they were 'undeserving' of places, illustrating their struggles for value (Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Orchid enrolled on an arts-based Master's in retirement after a lifetime of working in engineering and worried he would be seen as *'some self-indulgent old git'* who should not be on the programme. Both Roger and Marianne spoke of their imposter syndrome when applying for doctoral study, with Marianne explaining unsuccessful prior bids left her *'depressed and demoralised'* and feeling *'I'd done nothing for all these years, it's for nothing'*. Contrastingly, Rebecca, who had completed her Bachelor's degree as a mature student, spoke of guilt for taking a break to travel after graduation:

*'You start to think, "Should I have taken that time off to go travelling?". I was seeing people I'd been to uni with in quite good jobs, and everything like that [...] We'd all done our degrees with the employer we'd started with [...]*

*actually got the offer of two more years, which they all had done as well, they'd all taken it and I was like, "Nah, I want to go travelling". But then I was like, "Maybe I shouldn't have done it..."*

Rebecca, Newnorth

### 5.3 A THIRD SPACE: HAPPENSTANCE

*'There's never been a life plan of getting from the start to the finish, with a goal of getting there with some determination. Life has just happened, and I've always reacted to it'*

Eliza, Newnorth

In HE trajectories, moments of happenstance can make and break. These junctures are a form of *kairological* time – the time of opportunities and events – which emerged as moments between structure and agency where action can bring about change, *'passing instants when an opening appears'* (White 1987:13; Honkanen 2007). The literature gives various titles to such moments: *'aborted lift-offs'* (Waller *et al.* 2011:521), *'clueless serendipity'* (Reay *et al.* 2009:1108) and *'epiphanic insight'* (Strike and Toyne 2015:122). Different catalysts create these temporal occurrences: life events like bereavement or relationship breakdown (Waller 2006; Waller *et al.* 2011), child-raising or caregiving (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Strike and Toyne 2015; Waller *et al.* 2015), emergent desires for self-fulfilment, respect and 'good' work (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Tett 2004; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013), reactions to new and profound experiences, like community activism (Tett 2004) or simply 'taking stock' of life (Waller 2006). Indeed, these moments were often the most powerful and transformative in participants' narrations, emerging in particular key fields (particularly education) and resourcing future navigations in particular ways.

#### 5.3.1 'Guides on the side'

Interviewees consistently cited relationships as sources of serendipity, from teachers at school to university tutors, line managers to colleagues, loved ones to (ex-)partners, all those important people that O'Shea (2018) calls 'guides on the side'. Within the dominant discourse, first-generation students are positioned as unmoored, lacking external council (implying deficit) and 'desirable' social and cultural capital. It is true that those without familial histories of HE participation may not have privileged 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) or an intergenerationally-bestowed understanding of the 'rules of the game' (Haggis 2003; Leathwood and Connell 2003; Crozier *et al.* 2008). However, this simplistic conceptualisation obfuscates the

fact that a huge range of people can act as enfranchising ‘guides on the side’, not just parents with degrees (O’Shea *et al.* 2016; O’Shea 2018). Intervention from different key people in our lives – whether it be practical, financial, affective, political – can all be turning points for PGT trajectories. For examples, Maryam felt the most important turning point in her life was meeting a lecturer at Newnorth who, like her, was a Black Muslim hijabi woman. She remembers her lecturer, who first spoke to her about M-level study, as someone who represented her and made her feel heard:

*‘Third year, I was doing my dissertation and I had a lecturer [...] and she was [from the same background] as well [...] It was only when I saw her I clicked, it clicked in my head, “Maybe there’s a space for me, to actually do this kind of thing”. That’s why representation matters so much, because I could not see myself pursuing a career in academia whatsoever, and it... I don’t know what I would have done, honestly, if I hadn’t seen her. Because she changed my mind about education and further study, she completely changed it. It was like a turning point in my whole life’*

Maryam, Newnorth

Being in the ‘right place at the right time’ to meet people who change the course of our trajectory is momentous. However these moments are often explained (away) as fortuitous but predominantly ‘accidental’ turns of events (Regan and Graham 2018). It is important to critique such a neutral, naturalist assumption by reflecting on power. Access to conditions of serendipity depend on positionality and context, which also influences how we respond to those conditions. There is a key structural dimension to this which means that ‘advantageous’ positioning in certain fields and repositories of certain capitals mean particular people are more or less able to have certain conversations or experiences. Nevertheless, paying attention to these moments does some important deconstructive work in unsettling the myth of the linear, agentic and planned trajectory, whilst not chalking everything up to structure. Moreover, it challenges neoliberal pulls towards individuality by recognising the intrinsically collective dimension of trajectories.

Stories of school and college championed educators. It was surprisingly ubiquitous that almost everyone cited *‘that one magic teacher’* who ‘pushed’, ‘encouraged’, ‘empowered’ and ‘incentivised’ them, bestowing practical and affective resources to draw on throughout later phases of life to remain in or return to study (Skeggs and Loveday 2012; O’Shea 2014). Various stories were relayed: being given Dickens to read in Year 6, a form tutor researching local universities, a glowing personal reference and lessons which oozed with passion. A number, like Timothy and Laura, even got in touch with former teachers years later to share how much these moments mattered. Moreover, participants often felt these teachers had fought for them in the



face of adversity. For Homer, this was in a context of strained relationships with other staff at school:

*'My English GCSE teacher told me, "I thought you could do a higher tier paper for English literature", and I think it was maybe something as simple as that that made me think, "Maybe I do have this". Because throughout my whole secondary school life – my mother never told me this until I actually finished school – about how they told my mum that I won't become anything [...] There were some people who I guess had faith, which made me think that I could be something'*

Homer, Newsouth

Alternatively, Tessie's teacher pushed back against patriarchal norms which guided Tessie towards HE and a professional career, less normative for her female peers in the 1960s:

*'[Our principal] was encouraging the girls to reach further, higher than they had perhaps thought, beyond the possibilities that their parents had thought for them. [...] She believed in educating girls to support themselves, and not just to become somebody's wife, and that was enormously valuable'*

Tessie, Oldsouth

Not everyone had the luxury of these relationships and the resources they offered throughout the life course. Perhaps due to unconscious bias – which is classed, gendered, raced and otherwise positioned – teachers and others are likely to single out some students for attention and encouragement over others (Modood 2003; Millard *et al.* 2018). Joyce was 'shocked' that no-one at school ever spoke about university with her and could not understand why she was filtered out of those conversations. Similarly, Olive initially decided not to go to university after college, and later struggled to understand why no-one had questioned her despite there being '*no reason to doubt me going to university*' based on her grades. Moreover, she explained that some actions were indicative of indifference, but others were directly confrontational and distressing:

*'Originally, I wanted to do law, but I basically got told I was too stupid to do law at my A-Level selection thing [...] it felt like the end of the world. [...] [My teacher] told me, like, not to do law, because they said, "You just don't have the academic background to do it", and I was like, "Great, OK", but she didn't really give me anything else to focus on, if that makes sense, and then I got really upset and she couldn't understand why I was upset, and I was like, "You've just told a 16 old girl that she's can't achieve".'*

Olive, Oldnorth

Relationships with tutors and lecturers at university were also lauded, particularly regarding PGT progression. These were the moments that began to illuminate PGT possibilities, as Maham and Luna explained:

*[My lecturer] said, "The Master's is really hard", and I said, "Well I don't think I'll be able to do it", and she said... she had that confidence in me, she just looked at me and said, "I know you are able to do it, I know you are. It's up to you if you want to do it, but I know you're able to do it", and I felt that was so inspiring [...] those words are so powerful, they have so much meaning, then I didn't listen to anyone, I just thought, "I want to do it".*

Maham, Newnorth

*'[My tutor] is one of the best tutors that I've ever had. He is just... I mean, on a personal level, he's so, so, lovely, but he's so inspirational, everything that he teaches. I think that just sparked the interest and passion for what I'd learned that year... and I don't know, he must have just said something in one of those seminars, and just like... Yeah, this is where I'm going to go. And yeah, the epiphany moment was just like, [...] "Oh my god, it's Master's"*

Luna, Oldsouth

However, many felt that Master's programmes were obscured in mystery and rarely (if ever) spoken about directly and deliberately in a systematic way throughout undergraduate study. A mythology emerged in this perceived vacuum; some students felt that only a 'chosen few' were 'let in on the secret' and equipped with privileged knowledge about M-level study through personal relationships with faculty. This raises questions about who gets to find out about PGT earlier in their trajectory and how more comprehensive information-sharing may help de-shroud the process.

Guides on the side did not only exist in educational fields. Workplace interactions were crucial for those with no university experience or a long gap since engaging in formal education. For James, Louise, Alix and Malia, one-to-one conversations with a manager made them think about HE for the first time, and their colleague's belief in them was vital. Rosie explained how working alongside someone who she identified with opened up a pathway into academia:

*'[My colleague] was doing a PhD [...] like, I ended up talking to her for a while and she was from a similar sort of background, socioeconomically, and I hadn't really met other people that were doing PhDs [...] that had come from my kind of background, so... It was one of those things of actually seeing someone else do it that actually made it feel, kind of, more possible'*

Rosie, Oldnorth

Lastly, and for some most importantly, was the impact of friends, family and loved ones. Several people, such as Maham and Orchid explained that their partner directly encouraged them towards PGT study. Amy recounted how her partner's advice and guidance about statistical analysis during her degree ultimately led her to a more technical Master's and Beatrix was jealous that her partner was studying so returned for her MA. Roger and Christopher both explained how they did not directly enter HE after compulsory education but were dating someone who was at university which exposed them to the new possibilities. Relatedly, Frank explained this influenced not whether to study, but where to go:

*'One of the key factors in choosing Oldsouth was a bit embarrassing... a girl I used to fancy was going to Oldsouth... she's actually one of my best friends now, so it all turned out really well... but actually, what's so wrong about following someone that you know will be there for you, provide support for you, look after you?'*

Frank, Oldsouth

Family was equally important. Jonathan recalled a conversation with his Dad after perpetually getting into trouble at school which gave him a 'kick up the arse' to re-engage in education, whilst Homer elaborated on the central role his mother played in his life:

*Homer: I've always involved her. Every major life decision I've had. So, she brought me up on her own. I don't have a father figure, and I've got four other siblings [...] I have immense respect for her for that, I have unconditional love for her, I'm not ashamed to admit that.*

*Rosa (interviewer): She sounds so strong and powerful.*

*Homer: She's a trooper. And I feel a little bit guilty because she's told me before, I stopped her career [...] she fell pregnant with me, and then she fell pregnant with my brother, and then she fell pregnant... So, she basically became a carer [...] she's the type of person that will put everybody else first before herself [...] I think she's the spine of our family.*

Homer, Newsouth

Lastly, several interviewees praised the impact of friends. Laura and Tessie explained that conversations with friends led them to develop particular interests which they followed through their work and study whilst Louise and Elaine explained their friends were the ones who opened up the possibility of HE full stop:

*'I hadn't remotely considered coming to a bricks and mortar university until I was sat with a friend having coffee and she said she was doing it and I kind of thought, "Ohh.... Oh! Maybe I can do that!"'*

### 5.3.2 Moments of misfortune

Sometimes ‘darker’ moments of happenstance – poor mental health, trauma and relationship breakdown – diverted journeys. A number of authors have argued that traumatic events can provoke engagement in education or, at least, diversion from previously-mapped futures (Parr 2000; Woodfield 2007). For example, Burke (2012:63) writes powerfully about her navigations as a survivor of domestic abuse, recalling the ‘*sense of purpose*’ and ‘*urgency*’ with which she was ‘*redefining a legitimate subjecthood*’, setting her on a pathway away from professional ballet dancing and, ultimately, to a senior post within academia. Stories recounted to me were, at times, deeply distressing and unjust, yet many – in hindsight – had been powerfully transformative. However, the conversations and subsequent analysis constituted ‘*ethically important moments*’, and I wrestled for some time with how to speak with these stories and represent them in way that was neither sensationalist nor victimising (Guillemin and Gillam 2004:262). As seminal turning points in people’s lives, shared freely with me, they must be present. However, the experiences are deeply personal, sensitive and clearly identifiable in most cases. I have chosen to abstract the data to high level and to not attribute experiences to individuals in order to better maintain anonymity, even although this involves omitting richness (Squire 2008b).

Experiences of poor mental health were common amongst interviewees<sup>6</sup> and positioned as very isolating experiences which prevented people from engaging in education as the structures were too demanding or exclusionary. Such occurrences were often described as intensely private and had been shared with very few people in any great detail, including loved ones. Men in particular explained that earlier in life they did not have the discursive resources and societal acceptance to help them to expose such vulnerabilities, and it remains unclear whether this gendered inequality has receded or persisted. Well-funded, accessible mental health support and open societal attitudes were thus framed as absolutely critical in peoples’ journeys, allowing them to work with, rather than against, their mental health. Moreover, some of these experiences were linked to historic experiences of ‘mega trauma’ (Parr 2000) with long-lasting, ongoing effects, including rape, sexual assault, stalking, threats of violence at work, sexually predatory teachers, suicidal ideation, suicide of loved ones, bereavement and family histories of alcoholism and schizophrenia.

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to Section 4.2 for a discussion about my responsibilities as a researcher and processes to ensure discussions did not cause further harm.

These moments of trauma concentrated time both materially and experientially – these moments remained present in ‘the now’, as well as being temporally exteriorised.

Whilst trauma could perceivably tie these experiences together in one sense, in another they are distinctly disparate; it is uneasy agglomeration. However, all had an undeniable effect, manifesting as obvious pivots in trajectories. Some propelled turbo-charged shifts to move away from pain at speed, with HE being one means to do so. Others developed new-found interests in certain subjects – social sciences generally and particularly sociology, psychology and anthropology – as a means to interrogate and reclaim their experiences in new and powerful ways. However, not all were able to embrace ‘*hope and possibility*’ in the wake of trauma (Burke 2012:115). Some journeys were hard-fought and shaped by financial necessity, brought about by conditions of austerity, receding primary healthcare and cuts to the welfare state, with people forced into work rather than recovery, much like the ‘careerists by necessity’ spoken of by Crompton and Harris (1999).

Relationship breakdowns were also significant disjunctions. This proved ambivalent. Divorce could be ‘*transformative and recuperative*’ when it came to trajectories (Burke and McManus 2011:704). Although the rending of relationships was deeply painful, most participants who brought up the topic ultimately positioned it as a positive turning point. Several called it the single most important pivot in their trajectory, with one interviewee explaining that ‘*you know you get BC and AD? Well, I’ve got before and after divorce!*’. People spoke of suddenly being faced an expansive, *aeonic* future which they had not anticipated and the *kairological* opportunity to navigate a whole new pathway that previously had not been part of their thinking and to engage in self-development. Nevertheless, it is important not to trivialise the impact of relationships ending, including the financial burden that lone parents faced (sometimes spurring their engagement in HE as a means of accessing better-paid work) and the affective agony of interacting with previous partner(s) (Hinton-Smith 2016).

### 5.3.3 Unexpected diversions

Alongside serendipitous ‘guides on the side’ and misfortunate events, there were various unexpected diversions which altered trajectories from previously-planned futures, particularly around qualifications and subtle shifting of interests over time. Several interviewees discussed assessment in compulsory schooling and FE as moments of happenstance, underscoring the

importance of qualifications as an objectified form of cultural capital. For some, results day was a joyous and unexpected surprise. A sense of validation was engendered in a tangible and perennial way and could 'speed up' or 'smooth' the temporality of trajectories. For example, Louise was predicted Cs and Ds at GCSE, and was shocked by her results:

*'It wasn't until I got my GCSE results and they were OK [laughing] that I thought [university] might actually be an option, otherwise I was just kind of thinking I was going to be working in a shop or, you know... Erm... possibly being a nurse, or... Certainly not going on to doing anything in higher education'*

Louise, Oldnorth

Others had the opposite experience, receiving lower-than-expected grades. Some attributed this to disrupted schooling – high staff turnover, changing schools or the onset of poor health – which had a knock-on effect on attainment. This could be deeply unsettling and disruptive as Luna remembered when recalling her AS results:

*'When my results came back in August, I'd got... what did I get... I got an A in history, a B in English language then I got... I got like E in chemistry and a U... No, I got a D in chemistry and an E in maths. Erm... So, like... I was like, "Oh, god, what have I done?". It was the first time I questioned whether I was going to university or not'*

Luna, Oldsouth

In addition, many people linked unexpected diversions to a sudden realisation that their interests had changed through exposure to different settings, people and topics. This could be powerful and transformative, indicating how education may be tied up with wider journeys of becoming and self-discovery (Burke 2008; O'Shea and Stone 2014). The sensation was addictive, embodied and affective: Olive fell 'in love' with her discipline, whilst Roger felt something 'click' in him when he found the 'right' research interests. Beatrix missed this sensation after graduating, the feeling intensifying until she could no longer ignore it:

*'We actually went to stay in [a resort], where I used to stay in as a kid. [...] So, there was like... all these women on the dance floor, like little kids, young girls, older women, older-older women. [...] I was looking at them and I was thinking, "How weird, you lot don't even know each other but you're all standing there dancing to the same songs, like you've got not one worry in the whole world right now, like...". I just thought about all their different lives and all the different stuff that's brought them to that point where they're not worried about a thing, just dancing the night away and not caring about what anybody thinks. When I was there, thinking that, I was like, "What on earth am I doing with my life?". Because I thought, why am I staring at these*

*strangers that are dancing, thinking like this. I just thought, “No, I’m obviously not done with the learning about people stuff, I need to get back and do it”*

Beatrix, Newsouth

Sometimes this realisation came a little later due to lack of access to ‘hot knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent 1998) about HE degrees and associated future careers earlier in life (Reay *et al.* 2001). Sandy was one of several interviewees who left a HE qualification – in her case a Master’s degree – after realising it was not delivering the content she wanted or was expecting. Similarly, Beth dropped out of her first undergraduate degree because the disability support she was promised was not on offer. Discussing this with both Beth and Sandy during the Oldsouth workshop, we reflected that being reliant on promotional materials and generic careers advice makes it really hard to know what to anticipate, particularly for first-generation students who may be less able to access alternative privileged narratives to read ‘between the lines’. Leading to perhaps a more ‘protracted’ journey than might otherwise be the case, on-course realisations could ultimately lead to a positive place, as Teddy explained:

*‘I remember even before I started my [first undergraduate] course I was looking at, like, if I could change, but I’d already had the offer and accepted, so I was like, “I’ll just do it”, and... Yeah. It was wrong for me. But I think in a strange way, I’ve re-routed to my original interests [...] I think that’s why I’m able to succeed now, because I’ve got passion for the subject’*

Teddy, Oldnorth

A similar dynamic also occurred with careers, where people discovered their job role no longer held their interest. Frequently involving high-pressured jobs in the public sector such as teaching, nursing or the armed forces, the realities became clear only after exposure. Timothy described the moment he realised the armed forces was wrong for him, despite working towards it for years, suddenly realising his pacifist beliefs and unwillingness to engaged in armed conflict.

## 5.4 REFLECTIONS

This chapter has explored the ways in which trajectories are shaped by, within and against time. In particular, the chapter shows that the myth of the ‘linear’ trajectory is precisely that: a myth born of the machinations of the modern and neoliberal episteme (Farrugia 2018). PGT study is actually a very broad church. People come into it from any phase in life and prior circumstances. However, the doxic dominance of the ‘ideal’ normative trajectory and limited visibility of other roadmaps

through life mean that participants were involved in highly effortful steps to make their way into M-level study, often navigating complex nexuses of social inequalities.

Recognising the diversity, discursiveness and non-linearity of trajectories is critical to a better understanding of progression through HE. Moreover, these journeys are shaped by the positionality and resources of students as they interact in different fields (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu 1997; Skeggs 2011). Structural constraints do not simply disappear as we move through life or engage with undergraduate HE provision and have a significant influence on PGT students who may well have relatively more 'complicated' lives than undergraduate students. Lastly, alongside (constrained) agency and structure, the importance of the 'third space' of happenstance is evidently clear. Sometimes sitting outside the arenas of life typically targeted by HE practice, these moments may well be the most important.

Whilst the dominance of time as a framing in a neoliberal context is well-established, it is also important to see how this interrelates with the concept of space. The following chapter thus makes this link, moving into a discussion of how PGT trajectories interact with place and (im)mobilities.



## 6 PGT trajectories emplaced

The previous chapter explored PGT trajectories through the lens of time, highlighting diverse routes into M-Level study, the complexity of those pathways and the interplays between structure and agency which temporally shape people's non-linear journeyings. This next chapter explores how PGT trajectories are shaped within and across place. Although modern understandings of life privilege time, experiences are 'emplaced', making an interrogation of spatial dynamics and their relationship with time important (Gieryn 2000; Farrugia 2018). As outlined in the previous chapter, a time-space division is somewhat artificial, as both inform each other, but the distinction has been used here for structuring and narrative purposes. Throughout the chapter, links are drawn between these concurrent ideas to illustrate these complex relationships. The chapter first considers the constraints of physical space and (im)mobilities. It then moves to discussing how the HE provider – *the* crucial site for PGT study – is constructed by students themselves through discursive processes of symbolic placemaking and how these play into trajectories and journey-making.

Other than Simmel ([1903] 2012), place was often marginalised in sociological thought until the topological turn in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century (Simmel and Wolff 2012). The work of Marxist, feminist and postcolonial thinkers spurred a powerful theoretical shift. Their contributions established that space is not a 'simple object' but instead is inequitably structured, dynamic and relational (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Massey *et al.* 2009). As Bourdieu (2018:106) notes, *'there is no space that does not express social hierarchies and distances in a more or less distorted fashion'*. 'Valued' capitals and certain performances of habitus are intrinsically linked to space itself, affecting people's emplaced position and interactions. The chapter draws on this powered understanding of space to explore how social inequalities are placed and how certain time-spaces can become 'sticky', shaping (im)mobilities. Moreover, rather than space being an inert, objective phenomenon, it is invested with meanings and values (Gieryn 2000; Farrugia 2018). As Walkerdine (2010) notes, these affective dimensions are what creates the 'skin' of communities, producing different and specific places that can be loving, transformative, disruptive or de-territorialising. The chapter thus also considers the abstract and symbolic features of social space – space as we know it, not just as we inhabit it (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). With this

theoretical framing, the chapter speaks back to the (hyper-)mobility narrative which fails to fully critique the doxic assumption that *'in the modern economy it is often those who are most mobile who are most likely to find success'*, and challenges the suggestion that the possibility (and desire) to relocate is evenly distributed (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018:2; Fincham *et al.* 2010). Not every social subject can mobilise; deterritorialization is more accessible (and normative) for affluent, powerful actors (Massey 1994; Fincham *et al.* 2010; Taylor 2012).

Before diving into the chapter in detail, we open with a passage from Terry at Oldnorth. This was selected as it is emblematic of many of the key dimensions of place-based negotiation and reflection, illustrating how interviewees were engaged in some very complex spatial navigations. His narration touches on physical space and distance, but also how this is subjectively experienced in relation to and shaped by social inequalities and relationships. Terry also touches on the affective dimensions of social space – ones which feel 'alien' and others imbued with familiarity and security. These themes will be picked up throughout the chapter.

### Terry's 'Goldilocks zone'

Terry: *As you've heard, there were a lot of people from [near my hometown] that go to Oldnorth, have you heard that?*

Rosa (interviewer): *Yeah.*

Terry: *It really is true, and there's a reason for it. Do you understand the reason? You might know, I'm just wondering what your reason is.*

Rosa: *I don't know...*

Terry: *So, I think I've basically solved the puzzle.*

Rosa: *Go on!*

Terry: *So, I basically say it's the 'goldilocks zone'; it's not too hot or too cold, but more specifically, it's nothing too near or too far from home. [...] I wanted to be close enough to my Mum as well [after a traumatic family event] [...]*

*I didn't want to move too far away from home, but also, I didn't have the confidence to want to move far away from home. So, I wanted to move to do something different beyond what [my hometown] was offering me, but I didn't want to move to an alien world, where, you know, I couldn't return to home if I needed to. So... And also, I'm wondering part of the reason I mention [my hometown] is that... the sort of class composition of the area. The way you experience space if you're poorer rather than richer, space is bigger rather than smaller. So, on the basis of your financial income as well. Because I'm from a poorer economic background, Oldnorth's further away from me, economically, than it is to someone of a richer background as well.*

Rosa: *You realise that's a verbatim quote going straight in the thesis?!*

Terry: *That's David Harvey, my weird poor-person's version of Harvey. Have you read any Harvey? It's my poor man's twist on that. [...]*

*The only other factor that came in [...] I had a close friend [...] and he studied at Oldnorth, so I was like, "It's near, I've been to visit him, seems alright, it would be nice to have my friend [...] in the same city as me as well".*

Rosa: *Yeah.*

Terry: *So, that was enough reasons that seemed good enough.*

## 6.1 (IM)MOBILITIES WITHIN AND ACROSS PHYSICAL SPACE

Mobility is positioned in neoliberal doxic thought as one way of ‘bettering’ life chances (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). However, this neoliberal rhetoric recognises neither material constraints nor ‘pragmatically rational’ or affective ‘choices’ which shape trajectories (Hodkinson et al 1996 cited in Ball *et al.* 1999; Reay *et al.* 2001; Taylor 2012).

Furthermore, it ignores how space itself is classed, gendered, raced and otherwise positioned, and thus navigated (Taylor 2012; hooks 2015). Challenging this discourse, this section considers how physical space interacts with subjectivities and social inequalities in PGT trajectories, producing varying levels of movement in participants’ journeys and emplacing people in particular ways.

Table 12 provides an overview of interviewees’ HE enrolments and spatial movements in simplified terms. For undergraduate entry, there was a reasonably even split between people that stayed locally and those who moved (although this was often not far). Comparing undergraduate and PGT locations also showed roughly similar levels of moving and staying. However, as the previous chapter detailed (see Section 5.2), PGT trajectories are complex and non-linear, with varied gaps between study. So, it was important to think about where participants were living just before their Master’s. Participants were far more likely to stay where they were at this point. Moreover, those that moved were younger and had mechanisms and capitals to support them (e.g. financial support from partners or parents; relatively high levels of grant funding). This points towards different degrees of geographical manoeuvrability across the life course and according to different positionalities. Movements may be more accessible/desirable earlier in life but gradually become increasingly complicated because of emplaced ties to work and family, especially without resources to breach structural barriers. This seems symptomatic of a real shift in life priorities between undergraduate and PGT transitions, as students had started putting down roots when it came to M-level study. Indeed, UK Government data suggests the two big ‘mobility peaks’ are at the ages of 18-19 (aligning with the modal age of undergraduate entry) and 22 (where graduates are more likely to move for further study, work, return home or move in with a partner) (Government Office for Science 2016). Lastly, there was also a reasonably even split between those that were completing PGT study in the same place that they had grown up and those that were studying in a different place. Of those that stayed, some had remained in the same location throughout whilst others had returned after time living elsewhere, either nationally or

internationally. Amongst those living and studying in a different location, many had only moved reasonably short distances, sometimes from the next city over.

*Table 12: Spatial movements throughout PGT trajectories*

	Home prior to UG study and UG location		PGT university and UG university		PGT location and UG location		Home prior to PGT study and PGT location		Home growing up and PGT location	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Same</b>	19	46	17	41	20	49	32	78	18	44
<b>Different</b>	18	44	20	49	17	41	9	22	23	56
<b>Not applicable</b>	4	10	4	10	4	10	0	0	0	0

*Note: Four participants recorded as N/A in first three columns as they had no prior HE experience.*

This table is only a starting point to being to think about the spatial dynamics of people's journeys towards PGT study. In actuality, it masks some significant complexities both in terms of the materiality of space but also the affective dimensions of place. For example, the very idea of 'home' is not a stable and objective place but instead something that may move or evolve over the life course, including into a more symbolic form. Moreover, structural constraints do not play out in the same way within each person's trajectory, so there is a need to dig down with greater granularity to explore how moves and non-moves are lived. The following section unpacks some dynamics of this more complex picture, illustrating how a focus on narratives and people's personal, discursive journeys can provide far more detail than 'headline' numbers.

#### 6.1.1 Commitments 'in place'

The necessities of work, caring responsibilities and managing a home make demands on our time and – even with increased automation and digitisation – are still generally embedded 'in place' (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Salamonson *et al.* 2018; Taylor *et al.* 2020). Students who are engaged in complex balancing acts alongside their education – often those with less financial support from elsewhere – are constrained with where they study or how often or far they can

commute (Tett 2004; Reay *et al.* 2010). Such constraints are particularly relevant for M-level study where students are likely to have established lifeworlds, making relocation tricky (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004; Bowman 2005; Tobbell *et al.* 2010; Ho *et al.* 2012; Mellors-Bourne 2015). This pulls directly against the dominant neoliberal understanding of students as agentic ‘choosers’ who strategically make decisions to maximise economic-instrumental gain. In the Newnorth workshop, Anna summed up the constraints at play:

*‘When you come to choose your Master’s, you are a bit more constrained. More of your life is settled, you know where you want to be based, you’ve got family, friends and stuff like that that you can’t just pick up and move, so I think that really constrains your choices to a certain extent’*

Anna, Newnorth

As a result, most interviewees only considered PGT courses within a commutable radius. This is significant as people from different backgrounds and with access to different resources and capitals may live in different geographical spaces, shaping which universities are nearby and thus feeding into life chances in an ongoing loop. Moreover, several participants felt that programme content was reasonably similar between co-located institutions, so location often trumped institutional factors. Instead, geographically-located time savings were paramount. As Rebecca explained, with so many first-generation Master’s students facing competing pulls on their time, even the granularity of which building classes were in – ideally closest to public transport links – could make a difference. The links between space and time were evident, with students sometimes making very conscious decisions to balance multiple pressures to fit study into the wide nexus of life. For example, Freya linked different university spaces (‘high demanding’ and the unsaid ‘less demanding’ institutions) and the relative time each of these places would require of her, but also how travelling further afield for study would take too long when she was also working full-time alongside her course:

*‘I was quite strategic not to apply to very high demanding universities, because I needed the time to be able to work*

*[...]*

*‘I could not comprehend the idea of spending hours just travelling from A to B. It takes me 6 minutes on the tram to get to work’*

Freya, Newnorth

Caring responsibilities also had to be considered as well as work commitments. Many students expressed a sense of responsibility to stay local to fulfil these, even when they themselves were not the primary carer. Teddy explained how his PGT entry was partly born of sudden geographical statis. He originally planned to move to London after his Bachelor's for graduate opportunities. However, his father became critically ill, requiring full-time care. He began '*reconsidering, like, everything*' and was unwilling to leave his mother in a sole-carer role, yet worried about how becoming 'stuck' was affecting his life, leading him to consider M-level study at Oldnorth only a short train ride away. This gendered narrative of caring was fairly anomalous. The 'typical' inequitable gendered division of caregiving (Kruijswijk *et al.* 2015) was more evident in the data; women were far more likely to speak about how looking after loved ones – particularly children – had 'tied' them to place.

Being close to family and loved ones was also a reason for staying put and these emplaced, affective orientations were centrally important to participants (Walkerdine 2010; Hochschild 2012). This was particularly important when it came to PGT transitions as by this stage of life, bonds were often long-established and treasured sources of support. Maintaining and nurturing connections was frequently prioritised over 'better' – neoliberal economic-instrumental – outcomes that might be obtained from attending an institution further way. In doing so, interviewees invoked a sense of 'fairness' and care, with various narratives highlighting the importance of acting with others in mind, akin to the person-values discussed by Skeggs and Loveday (2012). For example, Maryam described herself as a perpetual '*homebody*' who lived with her family throughout undergraduate education and remained there during her Master's. She explained her family commitments and responsibilities within their shared home meant a huge amount to her and that she would not countenance moving (yet) because of them. Roger echoed this sentiment, once again emphasising the collective emotions so central to physical 'stickiness':

*'I'm with my girlfriend three years at this point, very happy, long-term renting, we've been living together for ages, we've got a cat, er... it's not really fair on her, and [...] the cat to uproot them, just on a whim, because this is something I want to do. So, it was a case of... "Where can I do one close by?"'*

Roger, Newnorth

Rending of those connections and commitments for PGT study could be painful, illustrating how changing location was not consistently positive. Throughout her narration, Beth explained the

pivotal role that her hometown and her aunt (who she lived with) played in her life. However, craving doctoral study but needing the funding to do so, she had a fruitless search for several years trying to secure a studentship closer to home. When she was offered a 1+3 course – including an MSc – a long distance away, the decision to move was not taken lightly:

*‘It’s a petulant thing to say, because it’s a Russell Group and I should be quite grateful, but it’s literally the arse-end of the country, and I didn’t want to move that far from my friends and family, but this is the only place that would have me’*

Beth, Oldsouth

### 6.1.2 Spatial affordability

Students who are not independently wealthy and whose networks are unable to support them financially are likely to face economic challenges when negotiating different spaces and may have legitimate concerns about expenditure or accrual of debt (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Hinton-Smith 2016). Therefore, fees, rent, travel and wider living costs – all of which pose a spatial dimension – are important considerations which affect PGT mobilities.

#### 6.1.2.1 PGT fees and bursaries

With changes to student finance, simply being at university entails considerable costs (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Tett 2004; Crozier and Reay 2011). Whilst higher fees may not consistently dissuade students from entering university, it will influence which geographies are more accessible materially and affectively (Boliver 2013; Clark *et al.* 2015). This is particularly exacerbated in the PGT context where fees both have a higher per annum price tag and vary significantly more than undergraduate study. The Master’s loan, therefore, was welcome – if not essential – for many interviewees, particularly younger interviewees.<sup>7</sup> However, the loan cap meant that, the Master’s loan made PGT fees affordable but was not enough to finance the significant costs of moving to a different locale, especially in light of interviewee’s other financial outgoings.

Furthermore, fee levels coupled with the loan cap led some participants to be demonstrably ‘priced out’ of certain spaces, particularly ‘high-status’ universities in central London which interviewees felt were only accessible for the independently wealthy. Both Sandy and Olive

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<sup>7</sup> Older participants were far less likely to know about it at all and there was some confusion with prior mechanisms such as the personal career development loan (PCDL)



discussed their intense frustration that there was no way to access certain courses which really excited them:

*'I looked at [London-based Russell Group university], I think it was like £18,000 [for a Master's course]. I really wanted to do it, they have like a gender department there, and that's what I had my heart set on doing. Um, but like, there was just absolutely no way that I could afford the fees and to live in London'*

Olive, Oldnorth

Looking beyond publicly funded universities in the UK, the picture became even more troublesome. Private providers were unaffordable due to higher fees, restrictive payment structures and in one case, the cost of simply submitting an application. Similarly, studying internationally – especially in the United States – was out of reach. Christine traced how she was initially *'hell-bent'* on going to North America and then intensely disappointed when the realities of costs became clear. This points towards the structural dynamics of PGT transitions, where students work through options according to how they are resourced and positioned, which only makes certain spaces available.

Bursaries and grants were one way that interviewees circumnavigated (in)affordability of place and a rare factor that allowed participants to move. A few interviewees received one-off Master's scholarships whilst several others received 1+3 PhD studentships which included a funded Master's. This subgroup of participants explained that they would have found it very hard to enter postgraduate study without such support, particularly as many were negotiating multiple interrelated social inequalities including limited financial support and 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998). Notably, interviewees in receipt of this financial support tended to be younger and less rooted via other commitments, although it is unclear whether they were more likely to explore these options, had certain education opportunities earlier in life or were better-networked into HE knowledges and landscapes.

However, bursary provision is patchy, and sometimes inaccessible even when eligibility criteria have apparently been met. This indicates not only does happenstance interrelate with time (see Section 5.3) but also space. Olive and Christopher both highlighted how Russell Group members offered higher levels and greater numbers of bursaries, leading Christopher to choose Oldnorth over a 1994 Group institution after being offered double the amount. Considered in the light of the segmentation of the sector and the socioeconomic policing of entry to 'high status'

institutions, this unevenness in PGT support is troubling but does slightly unsettle the accusations these institutions have ‘thinner’ commitments to WP (Boliver 2013).

#### 6.1.2.2 *Wider living and study costs*

HE students negotiating intersecting social inequalities may be particularly constrained by wider living costs whilst studying (Wakeling *et al.* 2015; Ingram *et al.* 2018). This includes but is not limited to accommodation, travel, subsistence and additional study resources (Hesketh and Knight 1999; Harrison *et al.* 2018). Coupled with geographic variation, some students may be operating in ‘*very limited spaces of choice*’ (Reay *et al.* 2001:861). As a result, students who do not have access to certain resources may be more likely to stay close to home or orient towards certain places to manage spiralling costs (Boliver 2013; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018).

Financial geographies shaped people’s trajectories over the life course, influencing where to live, how to live and which careers to pursue, interpolating with PGT study. For example, Alix’s partner got a job in the South-East but they could not afford to move close by, with Alix left looking after their two young children alone whilst her partner lodged near work during the week. Later on, moving a few hours further south – the closest they could afford – her partner faced a gruelling daily commute and Alix continued to manage the household and childcaring and PGT was an impossibility. Alix’s narrative of this ‘*very difficult time*’ that she ‘*wouldn’t wish on anybody*’ indicates how time (of life) and space coincide to produce particular circumstances; these in turn are influenced by the uneven distribution of opportunities and the differently-positioned resources of different people.

Echoing the discussion about financially-impenetrable ‘high-status’ London universities, the geographic-economic segmentation of England so present in Alix’s story was a hot topic during fieldwork. Opportunities emplaced within London –internships, research jobs or graduate programmes – felt ‘fenced off’. This was a particular point of the workshops at Newnorth and Oldnorth, with interviewees explaining that these spatial constraints limited the ‘possible selves’ and futures they were able to envisage because they were not able to access certain spaces (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). In relation to PGT specifically, this lent a ‘stickiness’ to place. Indeed, during the Newnorth workshop, Maham and Anna both talked about how economic polarisation ‘kept’ them north for their Master’s, with opportunities further south a tantalising spectre, especially mentioning London as inaccessible. Maham was ‘*really bothered*’ by the

situation where economic disparities produced hierarchical landscapes of ‘choice’ (Reay *et al.* 2001). Importantly, discussion was not isolated to northern sites, with students at Oldsouth and Newsouth also venting at the imprisonment of opportunities within the economically exclusive borders of London. This points towards an unsettling of the North-South binary, with instead specific (expensive) areas of London and the South East positioned as particularly problematic.

However, it is important to note that some of the located cost concerns around undergraduate entry did not extend to PGT progression. In particular, this related to train travel – as many interviewees were travelling between ‘university’ and ‘home’ earlier in life but not at this juncture – and student accommodation, neither of which were applicable to the relatively more ‘settled’ and ‘rooted’ moment of PGT study.

### 6.1.3 Local opportunities

With the constraints and structural dynamics shaping geographical (im)mobility around PGT progression, semblances of ‘choice’ and the topography of trajectories are embedded in the world of the local (Ball and Vincent 1998). With this in mind, HE provision and work opportunities are particularly salient.

HE landscapes within England are patchy. Large urban conurbations may offer multiple choices on one’s doorstep, with other options close by, connected by well-resourced transport links.

Elsewhere, the story may be less rosy, leading to an unevenness that may be thought of as a form of geographical and cultural injustice (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Francis and Mills 2012). Although the research design of this study limits inquiry of ‘cold spots’ and rural areas – where there may be significant and distinctive challenges around PGT engagement – the inclusion of a few participants on distance learning courses provides some limited insight. For Joyce, living in a rural area with no nearby institutions, online learning was the only means of engaging in HE. She shared the view of others that this option was a real life-line, opening up previously out-of-reach opportunities by transcending the constraints of space-time (Marsden 1996). Joyce herself had prior experience to resource her, having completed her undergraduate degree with the Open University, allowing her to formulate strategies for remote, self-directed education. Discovering that other universities were now diversifying their offer allowed her to capitalise on her prior experience whilst pursuing a more appealing course:

*'I had a look round, and I looked at Open University, but... I wasn't quite taken with, with the, er, the books and the modules and stuff that leads up to a Master's, then I found Oldnorth and I thought, "Ooh! You know, I don't have to go there, it's a distance course, online, brilliant". And I thought, "Yes!"'*

Joyce, Oldnorth

However, whilst students like Joyce are technologically adept, have experience with distance learning and can access the resources they need to make the process work, going digital is not a panacea (Mayes *et al.* 2015). It is only a partial response which may disadvantage certain groups who are unfamiliar with the expectations and differential institutional habitus afforded through remote delivery. For example, Tessie felt the format would completely transform her pedagogical experience, particularly for a discussion-heavy PGT course. Whilst she was able to drive to Oldsouth from a nearby town, others who share her views but do not have a neighbouring provider may find themselves significantly constrained:

*'I wanted that camaraderie and that personal contact and that learning environment. I knew that if I was at home with no contact, with only bulletin boards with inane comments from other students and my own inane comments [...] I knew I wouldn't do it, I knew I'd become disenchanted'*

Tessie, Oldsouth

Labour market opportunities also intersect with PGT trajectories in complex ways, from spurring progression or re-engagement in M-level study, to supporting study itself by providing an income (Clark *et al.* 2015). However, the 2008 recession led to (graduate) labour markets being volatile, congested and competitive (d'Aguiar and Harrison 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Burke *et al.* 2019). Indeed, participants commented on how the recession had '*decimated*' many town centres for a decade, leaving limited opportunities dominated by precarious, low-paid work in the service sector:

*'[My hometown] has a very poorly performing economy, very bad employment prospects, and what ones do exist are like, zero-hour contracts, minimum wage. [...] Call centre work. The call centre is like the factory that employs everyone, even post-A-Level, unfortunately'*

Terry, Oldnorth

In the current epoch, a degree is no assurance of a graduate job or premium on earnings (Burke and Hayton 2011; Lessard-Phillips *et al.* 2018). Clearly illustrating the fallacy of the narrative that degrees lead to better employment outcomes (Collins 1979; Roth 2019), many participants

struggled with work in their local area after graduating from undergraduate study, particularly those whose family could not financially support them or broker links with advantageously-placed social connections. Younger interviewees were particularly vulnerable, frequently entering ‘*rubbish*’ work in recruitment, ‘*crappy bar jobs*’ and retail after their Bachelor’s. Others struggled to secure any paid work, blaming the recession, reduced vacancies and intense competition. Many younger participants’ narratives revealed resentment about the mismatch between reality and expectations, where the dominant discourse about the effect of an undergraduate degree appeared to be a myth for many students and one which scripted the ‘blame’ onto students themselves:

*‘It was really hard working in [the supermarket], you’ve got a degree from a Russell Group [university], but you’re on the tills serving people you used to go to school with, or teachers, and they’re accountants or working in the city now and you feel you have to justify it to them’*

Frank, Oldsouth

Where participants felt ‘stuck’ in place, frustrations were sometimes intensified by the lack of (appealing) job opportunities in the local area and disappointment that undergraduate education had not provided the boost that was anticipated – an experience that informed interest in PGT study. For example, Rory wanted to enter the creative industries and had tried to set up his own initiatives but felt hampered as his undergraduate provider had not brokered connections with local employers, community contacts or regional funders who could help him. Needing money and unable – and unwilling – to relocate, he reluctantly started working in an ‘*awful*’ job in marketing and sales. After a few years he reached breaking point, feeling that ‘*this can’t be my life, I need to take action*’, leading him to a Master’s degree to try and rekindle a creative career. Stories such as Rory’s beg questions of what happens post-PGT study given the positioning of M-level study as a means to mitigate structural labour inequalities, namely whether there a risk of a double disappointment. Whilst there has historically been a positive benefit to PGT in terms of earnings and accessing the professions, increasing numbers of M-level students may push exclusions to new spaces and phases, with ‘*hydra-like*’ qualities that, unless tackled or at least discussed, may lead to false hope (Wakeling and Laurison 2017:553). Indeed, Olive’s interactions with the Oldnorth careers service had revealed how emplaced inequalities may still produce inequitable outcomes after completing her Master’s, again questioning the narratives students are told about the economic-instrumental effect of HE and how this interacts with structural and emplaced divisions:

*'I went to a careers talk a few weeks ago and it was about think tanks and stuff, and I was just going because I thought it might be helpful, and her only advice was, "Get an internship in London", and I'm like, "What if you don't live in London?". Do you know what I mean? There's not really... that's the only advice I could find that people give, especially career people, and, like, I can't afford to do that.'*

Olive, Oldnorth

#### 6.1.4 No place like home

Simply (re)entering the HE arena can provoke discomfort, particularly for students who cannot capitalise on intergenerational familiarity with the sector (Bathmaker *et al.* 2013). There are, therefore, valid reasons for staying close to home whilst being launched into an unfamiliar milieu (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Clark *et al.* 2015). This is often inequitably segmented, with several studies noting that students who do not have family histories of moving for university study report strong (emotional) ties to home and community (Birani and Lehmann 2013; Lehmann 2014; Wakeling *et al.* 2015).

The literature generally comments on this in relation to undergraduate entry which was reflected in participants' narratives. Many interviewees spoke about '*intense pressure*' of working out how near or far away from 'home' felt comfortable for their first forays into HE. For these people, university was daunting enough without the added strain of moving to an 'alien' space and putting a huge distance between themselves and loved ones. Moreover, this was not a one-time decision. Some made the decision to change undergraduate courses, moving to a more appealing environment. For example, Jonathan's first choice of university was '*really nice on the open day*' but he found himself isolated in a '*small country town*', missing out on experiences his friends in other places were having. He explained how the decision was shaped by the comfort on offer from moving to be with his partner and close friend:

*'It was a really big decision to, sort of, make, so I actually knew that I could stay in someone's house if I was in [town]... Well, my girlfriend's actually. [...] that was a very big factor, and I had another very good friend as well, he was in my group of boys, and he was also raising [the idea of moving to the town]. They were both quite strong pulls. When it came to it, I needed to go somewhere where I knew something about it, so it wasn't a complete stab in the dark. I left my back up unis, so I was just left with places where people I knew actually were and could vouch for'*

Jonathan, Oldsouth

However, wanting familiarity in an undergraduate transition was not ubiquitous; many others longed to be far away from their prior roots, wanting independence or to escape dangers and traumas – the latter making a strong statement that not everybody feels comfortable or is safe ‘at home’. Indeed, some participants replicated the dominant narrative of the intrepid, excited student embarking on their first adult ‘adventure’. Thus, participants’ undergraduate transitions did not always follow the deficit discourse of moving from comfort to discomfort, critiquing the assumption that first-generation students will always experience habitus disruption in their move into HE and supporting feminist constructions of field which argue for it to be less theoretically tightly-bound with habitus (McNay 1999; Reay 2004; McLeod 2005). Actually, many felt it was a cornucopia of new friends, cultures, experiences, nightlife, social life, physical landscapes and horizons:

*‘I started with this pure excitement to be honest, I was so excited to get out of [my hometown], to get there and make new friends and start... I mean, I had great friends at home, but I couldn’t wait to meet more people in generally. And... I couldn’t wait to be a bit more grown-up, to be honest, I think I’ve always had that desire to be a grown-up. I couldn’t wait’*

Luna, Oldsouth

However, feelings of home and familiarity around PGT transitions became notably different, with the reasoning and experience diverging, as Georgina explained:

*‘I found it much easier to grasp as a concept, going back to study, literally round the corner to where my old Department is [...] I know how the library works, I know how all the rules and regulations work if you need an extension or where to find exam dates, all of that stuff, and that was a familiarity that I value probably more than, “Oh, it’s where I live”’*

Georgina, Oldnorth

Contrasting to narratives of undergraduate entry, students referred to the ease and familiarity that staying put offered – more muted and quiet reflections than the big, real fears and excitements that presented earlier in life. However, whilst quiet, these feelings were not undervalued by participants, given the intensity of Master’s programmes and wider life responsibilities. PGT enrolment is a very different life course transition point – not positioned as quite as seismic, novel or associated with ‘coming of age’ (Stone 2011). Nonetheless, the emplaced resources offered locally – connections to family and friends, understanding of routines and rhythms of life – were positioned as important capitals to navigate PGT study at this complex

phase of life (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). As such, most interviewees explained that being ‘at home’ was particularly important for M-level study.

Moreover, quite a number of interviewees put this in the context of prior phases of life, where not-at-home-ness led them to feel dislocated from place, miserable and lonely. In particular, transnational migration and previously moving away for undergraduate study and finding it distressing were experiences which informed participants’ decisions to stay closer to loved ones for PGT study. For example, Malia explained that her initial foray into undergraduate study had been driven by wanting to ‘*be in the best*’ institution, but the experience of isolation and non-belonging was deeply unpleasant, leading her to drop out in her first year, as the quote below illustrates. Her initial exposure to HE led her to decide that institutional status and normative expectations of mobility were far less important than familiarity and comfort, which for her meant staying close to home when she directly enrolled on a Master’s several years later.

*‘I didn’t enjoy being down there [for undergraduate study]. Erm... I was in a flat with, like... Five other girls and we’re all from different walks of life, [...] Have a... What’s it called... A silver spoon growing up, whatever that phrase is, they were really posh, and it was just... Them kind of attributes. They all just, kind of, clubbed together, and I thought, “I can’t do this. It’s not worth it” [...] I knew it wasn’t right because I wasn’t really eating. I wasn’t sleeping very well. I was incredibly upset, and I’m not a big emotional person, so I just knew there was something I had to do. I came back one weekend, before I left, and I just felt so... Relieved and like there was a weight off my shoulders, and I just knew I had to [leave]’*

Malia, Newnorth

Feeling ‘in place’ and the familiarity and comfort this engenders can entrench a powerful sense of belonging which is often sought as we begin to settle our lives (Bourdieu 1996). Despite globalisation and increased (trans)national movements, the idea of home is still a meaningful and intimate category which shapes how we navigate through space (Massey *et al.* 2009; Taylor 2012; hooks 2015). However, as Ahmed (2012) argues, inhabiting a space *can* lead to an embodied feeling of ‘at-home-ness’, but does not mean that physical presence is enough to engender this. Moreover, in the context of HE, different student positionalities will facilitate easier or more troubled processes of homemaking in academic spaces.

This affective sensation was hard for interviewees to unpack, although references were made to familiarity, safety, comfort, support, ‘homely-ness’ or simply a ‘pleasant’, ‘nice’ feeling. Moreover, this wasn’t stable and straightforward as the construction of ‘home-feel’ was a subjective process



of negotiation – indicating that home is often affective rather than environmental (hooks 2015). A number of participants explained that this was active, variously requiring emotional and embodied engagements with space and feelings (Ahmed 2012). For example, during the Oldnorth workshop, Erin challenged my initial interpretation that home always meant staying somewhere familiar, explaining that *‘when you live away, you can either feel homesickness [...] or you can just build your own home there. I just learnt to build my own home. [...] My connection isn’t physical, it’s something I carry with me’*. Similarly, Maham also traced the process by which spaces become homes and the importance of familiarity, safety and connections to others:

*‘I do feel like safety and familiarity of spaces and places is something really important to me, and I think in the beginning you feel a bit unsure, because any new space you go into... You think you’re not used to it anymore, “I feel a bit sad or lonely”, or, “I haven’t made any new friends yet”, but I feel that familiarity leads to safety. You feel it’s a place of refuge or a place to be, to just be, and even like a place of hope, or almost like a second home, or a place that you feel really part of a community’.*

Maham, Newnorth

These feelings were also explicitly relational. As Maham’s quote illustrates, being near family and close friends who were invaluable sources of support and love inspired sensations of home. Many interviewees explained how these relationships were something they cherished and sought out, and this had a clear effect on the geographical topography of their PGT trajectories.

However, as well as drawing on emotional and relational vocabularies to construct homespaces, participants also explicitly drew on the language of class, especially when describing where they had grown up. Sometimes this was explicit, with many calling their hometowns and streets *‘working-class’*. Other times it was somewhat more subtle, using – sometimes pejorative – euphemisms common in the dominant discourse such as council estates, inner-city areas, the (historical) domination of industry and manufacturing, *‘rough’* schools, gangs, a prevalent *‘strong work ethic’* or places where *‘if you walk on the wrong side of the street you get shit for it’* (Tyler 2008). However, these narratives also showed the granularity of social geographies and the difference a few streets could make, illustrating participants’ sensitive observation of the unevenness of opportunities. Very much pushing back against the homogenisation of postcode-level measures and sweeping regional generalisations, this instead revealed a lot of complexity, variation and boundary crossings within even quite constricted spaces (Harrison and McCaig 2015). For example, Sandy explained how disparities of class and money were evident to her on a

daily basis growing up, attuning her to these dynamics as she moved through life. On the insistence of her mother, Sandy travelled a couple of miles for school each day, rather than attending the local secondary comprehensive on her estate. The differences she unpicks and interrogates between these two spaces is illustrative of the highly nuanced and perceptive way that participants thought about the constructions of places and homes:

*‘Where I was there was gangs and there were people that carried knives and... like, were poor, kind of thing. Where I went to school, they weren’t really rich or anything, they were just, they had a car, they probably got a car for their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, they probably went on holiday twice a year, standard kind of... you know, UK person. But they would like, try and, they’d form their own gangs, and I was like, “Why would you want to be in a gang?”’*

Sandy, Oldsouth

## 6.2 CONSTRUCTING THE UNIVERSITY

*‘We talk about institutions as if that’s a real entity somehow, and it’s kind of not, is it? We have a collection of buildings and a collection of people who work in them [...] but in terms of power, there’s not ‘A University’*

Georgina, Oldnorth

As Georgina’s quote infers, ‘the university’ has many complex quirks and components: architecture, bodies, activities, meanings, values. Perhaps unsurprisingly (given the focus of the study) universities were the biggest topic of discussion in students’ narratives. Moreover, given how much the dynamics of the academy shape PGT trajectories, thinking about how the university is constructed as both material and symbolic place is a critical endeavour. Reputation and institutional habitus – the latter linked to a sense of belonging – were particularly salient. Significantly, the data points to the importance of structural factors, bolstering Webber’s argument that *‘the problem [with social inequalities in HE] fundamentally lies with the institution, not the student’* (Webber 2014:103). Moreover, the data suggests that whilst the way people think – about reputation, for example – might change over time as students become more knowledgeable about the sector. However, the way they feel about and within particular spaces is more stable. This produces a disjunction for some participants who may feel unwelcome in certain spaces but are reflective about wider structural factors and institutional capital, spurring them to engage in complex negotiations.

### 6.2.1 Reputation

The 'cult of the good university' abounds in public life, (re)producing social closure and distinction, perpetuated by prevailing academic cultures and leading to a clearly inequitable HE field (Reay 1997; Burke and Hayton 2011; Clark *et al.* 2015). However, the dominant discourse rarely critiques the segmented nature of the sector, illustrating how stratification is accepted as doxa (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Reay *et al.* 2010; Wakeling and Laurison 2017; Archer *et al.* 2018). Indeed, in the public domain, little is done to unsettle an assumption that the 'best' institutions take the 'best' students (Waller *et al.* 2014). Students respond in various ways, ranging from buying into the rhetoric (or at least its social power) to maintaining a '*critically reflexive, questioning stance*' (Reay *et al.* 2009:1114).

In many ways, discussion about reputation is intensely neoliberal, linking with the individualisation, managerialism and consumerism pervading the sector (Haggis 2003; Haggis 2006; Burke 2014). Many students clearly constructed the university as a neoliberal site through their narratives of careers, job prospects, life opportunities or 'CV quality', erring towards a conceptualisation of private rather than public good (Filippakou and Williams 2015). There was a consensus amongst participants that employers *de facto* reward students who attend high-status universities or complete 'pure' academic programmes. An inability to disrupt these structural forces led some to feel coerced to play by the rules of the game yet feel troubled in their negotiations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For example, whilst exposure to labour market vulnerabilities led some to position PGT as a tool to navigate insecurities (see Section 5.1.1) students did not necessarily buy into the idea that university produces workers (Heller 2016). In part, this ambivalence is born of being 'burnt' by broken promises of HE returns before but seeing no other option available. Nevertheless, tactically navigating between HE spaces is a legitimate response to the precarities of capitalism and widespread social inequality, not a 'pollution' of liberal education values (Haggis 2006; Waller 2006; Clark *et al.* 2015). Moreover, by the point of PGT transitions, interviewees were more aware of the unevenness of HE funding and how relative spending power privileges high-status spaces. Anna discussed how some universities were better able to purchase expensive lab equipment which made them seductive in one sense, yet these were not the places she wanted to be in more broadly, explaining that '*I just like being at old polys*'. This illustrates the complex ways that the dominant neoliberal episteme interacts with time, space and trajectories.

However, the data also reveals that understandings of emplaced reputation have a hugely subjective and affective component, driven by insider gossip, personal experience and social and public discourses. They were also wound up with notions of privilege, inequality and meritocracy (Littler 2018). Illustrating this, when discussing the reputation attached to universities in the Oldsouth workshop, Beth and Sandy likened the discourse to *'the playground' or 'a football match'*, dripping in tribalism and animosity which seemed to be *'one-sided... always directed towards the non-Russell Group university'*. They felt troubled by other Oldsouth students' taunts about a local post-1992 institution which was *'almost a bit of a culture, you get on the bus and chant'*. Beth and Sandy not only thought this pointed to the *'snobbery' 'associated with whether you go to a "University Of"'* but specifically located this tension within co-located, emplaced university dyads.

Time-space coincided in the evolution of participants' understandings of emplaced university reputation. Interviewees' views changed as a result of occupying institutions over a period of time; this experience unpicked some of the doxa that located status was objective and deserved. Thus, what began as hazy and vague notions of 'good' universities being *'the Russell Group' or 'big old Georgian buildings'* – ideas which participants acknowledged they would have been hard-pushed to unpack before they were ensconced in the academy – became more complex after participants were located within HE. When it came to PGT study, notions became even more nuanced, more critical and more emphatic. Tracing trajectories illustrates how navigations at this point were clearly resourced by undergraduate experiences and a greater familiarity with the sector. Furthermore, this pointed towards diversity in views and tangled movements around status and space which were imbued with complex and situated understandings.

For some, a belief in institutional hierarchies became more deeply embedded and lucid. Or, perhaps more accurately, some participants felt they had a clearer understanding that a certain form of esteem and institutionalised cultural capital is attached to high-status HE spaces in the dominant discourse, which produces particular advantages. This played out in people's PGT trajectories as either wanting to 'maintain' a particular positioning – *'I wouldn't have gone then to a non-Russell Group uni to do a Master's, because... it's not a step below... but...'* – or wanting to 'trade up'. For example, Rory completed his undergraduate degree at Newnorth and originally wanted to stay *'because I thought it would be a bit more familiar'* – illustrating how a sense of comfort and home attached to place can still matter for PGT decision-making. However, his

desired course was new to Newnorth, so he worried about being a *'guinea pig'*. Furthermore, the alumni discount was more than halved, making it less of a sticking point. With Rory now less sure, a friend from undergraduate study recommended a course at Oldnorth to him. Her trusted advice about the course and cohort was a powerful catalyst, insider advice he had not been able to access before (Davey 2012a). In fact, earlier in life he had *'excluded all ideas of going to Russell Group unis'* after being placed in lower sets in school and failing some core subjects, reading these experiences as messages that high-status spaces were not for him. When thinking about PGT study, this made him feel *'scared because I didn't know if I was good enough to go'*. This indicates that the affective dimensions of place-based enclosure and exclusion may not be erased by undergraduate exposure. However, his views about how society places more value on high-status university spaces had solidified over his degree through mixing with students at both Newnorth and Oldnorth and experiences in the labour market. Coupled with the encouragement of his friend, Rory felt *'ready'* for the chance to *'get a Master's from a more respectable uni'*. This language of respectability is bound up with class and has a distinctive othering power (Wuthnow 2017), inferring that different HE spaces either lack respect, are not respected or do not deserve to be. It also points towards the respectability that Rory believed would be conferred to him through occupying a particular space, in contrast to the judging comments and asides he received during undergraduate study when telling people that he attended Newnorth. However, Rory's navigations were not straightforwardly accepted by those around him. He recalls getting *'loads of gip about going for it, about having fallen off my high horse'*, indicating that moving around institutional hierarchies is not a simple process, even when such movements reproduce *'socially-desirable'* trajectories.

In contrast to stories such as Rory's, other students' exposure to the sector entrenched a deep suspicion of sectoral stratification and they bemoaned having *'wrongly... bought into that sort of mythology about Russell Group universities being better'*. Like Rory, Steel attended Newnorth for undergraduate study, had friends at both Newnorth and Oldnorth and began exploring HE with the same enculturated belief that Oldnorth was the *'better'* institution. However, Steel stayed at Newnorth for PGT study. In part, his narrative reveals the *'stickiness'* of loyalty to a particular university born of emplaced bonds formed during undergraduate study, with him explaining that *'I'd never go to Oldnorth, because obviously I went to Newnorth and after you've done a Newnorth degree or vice versa, it's basically like selling yourself to the devil, it's very not done'*. This inter-institutional rivalry is partly due to reputation, but also linked to space and proximity. Steel

explained that if he was to move to a high-status institution in a different city *'no-one would bat an eyelid, it's your choice'*, but by moving within a co-located pair and especially moving from a 'lower-status' to a 'high-status' university, *'you've intentionally given people the middle finger'*. His trajectory also revealed a change to seeing reputation as unfounded rhetoric. Interactions with students on the same undergraduate programme at Oldnorth had shaped his views, naming them *'completely different'*, *'rich'* and *'snobby'* which he felt created *'a completely different atmosphere'* and institutional habitus. Having absorbed narratives earlier in life which suggested that institutional status is correlated with 'cohort quality' (Burke 2000; Read *et al.* 2003), Steel's damning indictment of these students was a core factor in undermining his belief in reputation:

*'I've talked to some of the people considered equal to me at Uni Of, and I just bash my head against the table, you're considered the 'superior' uni, the 'academically superior' uni, and I could just... [rolls eyes]'*

Steel, Newnorth

## 6.2.2 Institutional habitus

As Burke (2000:272) explains, UK education is *'historically androcentric and Eurocentric; a colonialist and patriarchal domain heavily regulated through class privilege'*. This indicates that HE is enculturated in ways which institutionalise social inequalities across the sector (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). However, this is not uniform. High-status universities have notably exclusionary instrumental and expressive orders (Reay 1998a; Reay 2001; Boliver 2013) which may not be so evident within more locally-oriented institutions (Burke 2012). Moreover, these exclusions manifest in agendas – including modes of debate, workloads, language, assessment, timings, spaces – which students are expected to adopt and adapt to regardless of context or circumstances (Read *et al.* 2001; Haggis 2003; Haggis 2006; Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Crozier and Reay 2011; Lehmann 2012).

Narratives reflected the crude bifurcation of the UK HE sector and the euphemisms so often applied to these stratified spaces. For the most part, participants described high-status institutions as *'posh'*, *'elite'*, *'rich'*, *'snobby'*, *'impersonal'* and *'quite "Rupert" [...] polo shirts'*, where students like themselves 'struggled' or had to 'adjust' their behaviour. This was a surprisingly consistent picture, even amongst participants who bought into the logic of institutional status and/or had attended highly selective universities. In contrast, students described inclusive HE spaces – often although not always cited as post-1992 universities – as *'down-to-earth'*, *'inviting'*, *'friendly'*,

*‘really chatty’, ‘warm’ and ‘passionate’, where ‘nothing was too much trouble’.* What was even more striking than the coherence of views across the sample was the persistence of these ideas across the life course of each participant. In other words, once impressions were formed, they rarely receded or reversed, emphasising the importance of understanding where these notions come from in the first place.

Being at university itself certainly forged particular experiential interpretations of institutional habitus that participants carried with them. For some, it can provide a real sense of difference and disjunction, whilst others may fall in love with a place, *‘that weird feeling of feeling reassured. Like, “Ahh, you’re my people”’.* However, it was particularly interesting to observe how seminal initial impressions were. These could be very early on in people’s trajectories. For example, Homer harked back to a week-long WP programme residential trip at one of the most selective UK universities during secondary school. The exposure shaped his long-lasting opinions of the sector. Whilst he enjoyed the time, the embodied exclusions stuck with him most, ranging from a general sense of *‘it just wasn’t my culture’* to taster seminars where lecturers *‘were talking to us like we were third year undergraduate students [...] “You should know this already” [...] it was off-putting’.* Homer carried this understanding with him throughout his trajectory – a sense that there are certain universities that are *‘full of rich people’* where he did not belong because *‘I don’t come from a well-off background’.* Such sentiments echo views of other students who were part of AimHigher (see Sections 2.4 and 7.3.2) and still harboured resentment for the labelling and stigmatisation they felt the experience embodied. This suggests that exposure to high-status HE spaces – including through WP programmes – can unwittingly and unconsciously solidify rather than shift perceptions of division and difference. Whilst other studies have discussed this in terms of immediate impressions, this research suggests these feelings may be longer lasting (Gazeley 2018; Gazeley and Hinton-Smith 2018). Other promotional ‘showcases’ could have similar effects, such as Christine’s experience at an open day. She riled against the open championing of the ‘elite’ nature of the institution, feeling this undermined the appearance of inclusion elsewhere being promoted. Walking across campus with the slogan-emblazoned banners flanking her, she wanted to leave straight away. Her Mum encouraged her to stay for a welcome lecture. This further compounded Christine’s suspicions which then continued through her journey, systematically orienting her towards less high-status institutions:

*‘I just did not fit in; I did not like it [...] these people sitting next to me, their accents were so posh, and they had their Mum and their Dad with them, and*

*I just had my Mum with me, not because my Dad didn't care but he just said, "I don't know anything about it, you guys carry on". There was my Mum with her [...] accent and me with my [...] accent, and I just thought, "I don't fit in here, I don't like it"*

Christine, Newnorth

The reason these early perceptions are so important for this research is that they inform and resource how people navigate their trajectory when it comes to PGT study. This does not mean that a negative affect will always divert people away from certain spaces. Instead, it means people will be enmeshed at the nexus of balancing competing discourses, including 'reputation' and 'belonging', indicating an uneasy disjunction between inhabiting a space and feeling comfortable (Ahmed 2012). On the face of it, it may seem like the exclusions we know so much about at undergraduate study lessen at PGT, with few interviewees making blanket statements about wholesale avoidance of institutions where they did not feel they would 'fit' (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Ingram *et al.* 2018). However, unpicking the narratives in detail indicates that concerns are still present, but are butting up against other structural and affective issues, making them more obfuscated. Thus, exclusions born of institutional habitus may be operating in very subtle and personal ways. For example, Olive had originally attended a 'middle-ranking' university where she anticipated 'everyone would be like me'. She was shocked to discover how many of her peers were privately educated and found it hard to manage being in the kind of 'stupidly middle-class' environment she previously thought was the preserve of Oxbridge. Embarrassment about the differences between her own positioning and that of her peers was a defining feature of her first year, which she says she spent 'denying that that's what was going on and trying to play catch-up'. Based on this experience, when applying for her Master's at Oldnorth, she anticipate these divisions were 'going to be more prevalent in a Russell Group university' compared to her former university. Complicating these fears, Oldnorth was one of the few institutions offering a Master's in her desired specialism, and one of even fewer in an affordable location. Moreover, Olive explained that 'I just loved the city. It's also a really good university, I think the [...] department's like number one or two in the country or something, and like the course fees I think are like [...] the minimum it can be'. This is emblematic of the really tangled navigations which PGT students are engaged in, trying to balance competing demands of belonging, status, discipline and affordability all within a neoliberal and thus highly individualised structure.

Beth, too, narrated how early ideas of different university spaces informed subsequent navigations of place in their PGT transition(s) and revealed some interesting fluidity. Beth



originally completed her undergraduate degree at a post-1992 university in her hometown and a few years later (but a few years before coming to Oldsouth), she enrolled on her first Master's at a Russell Group university also co-located in her hometown. Having no familial experience of HE and no prior knowledge that there were different types of university which might have different habitus, Beth's understanding of sectoral stratification emerged during her undergraduate experience. This introduced her to the idea that *'there's this horrible hierarchy' where 'up the road were smart people and we're [post-1992 students] like the normal people'*. However, the divisions seemed perverse to Beth, so during undergraduate study she did not believe that others' HE experiences would differ that much from her own: teaching-focussed, caring, locally oriented and with diverse classrooms. Moving to a Russell Group university for her first Master's shattered this image. Whilst she initially thought it would be *'nice, because obviously I've gone up a level'* – institutionally and academically – she *'really wished I hadn't done that just because of the name'*. Over this year, for the first time in HE, Beth was faced with *'a lot of, like, class-related issues'* and *'a weird implicit atmosphere where you don't feel welcome'*. She was particularly shocked that she was the only person she met – among staff and students – who grew up locally and shared her accent:

*'Nobody else was working class, everybody had money. There was nobody representing me as an academic at all, and it was the case that I found it more problematic being a working-class person at [Russell Group university] than being a woman in science, even though there were literally like two women in the department. I found it more jarring and more uncomfortable that there was nobody there, representing me, as a working-class person in my own hometown, in a university in my hometown.'*

Beth, Oldsouth

This made her wary about high-status spaces going forward, not only because of a sense of ill-fitting-ness, but also as her experience had taught her that *'it's a problem with Russell Groups especially, if you tell them that you can't do something, they think that you're just joking'*. Having to travel away from her support network and familiar homespaces further exacerbated her disquiet. Thus, whilst happy to receive a fully funded offer from Oldsouth – her *'last resort'* for a pathway into doctoral study – Beth was reticent about entering another high-status space where she would feel isolated and unsupported. This fear was borne out in the first few months at Oldsouth which she felt *'is very much similar [to previous PGT institution] [...] There is one academic I can name who represents me as a woman and as a working-class person [...] A couple of people on my course, maybe, as well, but very few. It makes you feel othered'*. Beth's narrative is

another example of how the fears and exclusions born of elitist institutional habitus continue to play out in the PGT space. Again, her trajectory shows this features differently to undergraduate transitions, being based on personal lived experience of HE itself, but also because PGT study is more bound up in less generous student finance landscapes and more limited landscapes of choice (Reay *et al.* 2001).

Whilst classed dispositions and financial privilege certainly dominated most discussions of institutional habitus and how this shapes PGT journeying, it was not the only factor that related to how people navigated through space (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2015). Maham and Maryam at Newnorth explained how their early explorations of the UK HE landscape revealed it to be ‘*a White space*’ which they, as women of colour, were often positioned outside. For Maryam, this required some complex, situated decision-making to navigate the very real and present dangers manifesting in certain geographies. For example, at one university open day, she explained that she had been subjected to Islamophobic abuse, immediately showing her how unsafe an environment this would be for her. The intersectional positionality that she occupied – in the context of a neoliberal landscape that shifts the burden onto individual students – required her to consider multiple intersecting factors and reflect on which spaces may be safer (Ahmed 2012):

*‘Because of my intersectionality, I’m Muslim, I’m a woman, I’m Black, I have to made decisions... I have to be very cautious where I go, with the rise of Islamophobia, racism, stuff like that. I always have to [...] pick universities which were very multicultural and diverse and stuff’*

Maryam, Newnorth

### 6.3 REFLECTIONS

This chapter has explored the ways that PGT trajectories are emplaced, tracing how journeys are navigated through material and symbolic space. In particular, the data suggests that this is a very ‘sticky’ part of participants’ lives, with relocation an impossibility for many due to limited economic capital (Bourdieu 1997). Furthermore, a complex web of relationships and commitments – for participants who were socially networked or connected to place through work – took on a more rooted-in-place quality. This does not negate persistent issues with loneliness and isolation and their association with mental health problems in the contemporary episteme, nor the fact that many students may be geographically coerced post-graduation rather than choosing where they live (Griffin 2010). Such insights directly challenge the hyper-mobility narrative of dominant neoliberal discourses, which suggest that ‘deserving’ and ‘desirable’ graduates are those able to

easily and willingly move substantial distances to pursue the 'best' educational actions and outcomes (Fincham *et al.* 2010; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). Moreover, considering space illustrates how much this is bound up with time, and the ways this relationship manifests is particularly facilitated by the life-history narrative method adopted by the research. Furthermore, the chapter also interrogated how universities are constructed as places with clear affective dimensions (Walkerdine 2010). Significantly, these emotional constructions illustrate that whilst perceptions of reputation change over time based on increased familiarity, the way that participants felt about and within certain spaces rarely switched and, in many cases, become more pronounced. This holds significant implications for outreach and WP earlier in life as initial exposure may entrench distancing and unhelpful understandings (Gazeley 2018). Moreover, the indication that views about institutional habitus persist over time begs questions of undergraduate provision and how this lived experience produces long-lasting understandings of the academy. Finishing the chapter on the notion of institutional habitus establishes a complex and multifactorial relationship between how students perceive themselves over their PGT trajectories and questions of identity, the topic explored in the following chapter.

## 7 Navigating identity in PGT trajectories

Having explored PGT trajectories in relation to time and space in the antecedent chapters, discussion now moves to exploring how identity is navigated along these journeys. The chapter begins with exploring the evolution and navigation of learner identities – representing how participants often located the ‘start’ of their journeying towards PGT in compulsory education. It next considers how situated worldviews evolve and feed into selfhood formations and PGT negotiations. The chapter closes with a consideration of interviewees’ (intersectional) classed identities, exploring how interviewees construct their identities and navigate tensions. This particularly highlights how most students felt themselves to be in *‘that weird area’* where *‘you’re not working class but you’re not middle-class, you’re in this non-space’*.

Understanding how identity is navigated is a critical part of understanding PGT journeys, as HE trajectories are *‘embedded within identity constructions around what it means to be a student and who might pursue various routes’* (Clark *et al.* 2015:3). This chapter unpicks how identity forms within and against the ‘game’ of the HE sector which, more than any other educational field, is said to engender middle-classness (or at least a proximate performance) and ways of being a student in a regulatory fashion (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Boyne 2002; Hayes and Jandrić 2014). Middle-classness here is theorised as a fuzzily-bounded concept which comprises economic positioning alongside cultural and linguistic practices and perspectives valued by the dominant discourse and typically positioned within middle-class habitus (Bourdieu 1984; Reay *et al.* 2009; Burke and Hayton 2011; Crozier and Reay 2011). Class is thus not considered as monolithic or labelling, but instead a fluid, processual structure comprising of material conditions, embodied lived experiences and subjectivities, producing particular means of navigating social inequalities (Maguire 2006). As Skeggs (2004a) explains:

*“Class formation is dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic. To ignore this is to work uncritically with the categories produced through this struggle, which always (because it is struggle) exist in the interests of power”*

(Skeggs 2004a:5).

The chapter challenges the dominant myth of HE middle-class enculturation (Reay *et al.* 2010), as well as the fallacy that PGT students are all ‘HE experts’ with perennially unproblematic relationships to learning who need no support eliding with postgraduate practices and structures

(Tobbell *et al.* 2010). By interrogating these processes, the chapter reveals that people do not have the same access to representational strategies to create valued selves in the neoliberal project (Skeggs 2004a; Archer 2007; Tyler 2008; Skeggs 2011; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Maguire (2006) explains that the working-class teachers in her research – now a predominantly postgraduate profession in the UK – had not ‘become’ middle-class by dint of their education or career but instead crossed backwards and forwards between placings and maintained connections to class origins as ‘footsteps in their past’. This is relevant here as participants moved through different contexts where they positioned themselves and are positioned by others: an unstable and interactive practice (Burke 2008). Identity processes are incredibly complex, never stable and always contested, conflicting, (re)produced and (re)performed (St. Pierre 2000; Webb *et al.* 2017). In line with the poststructural framing of this research, the navigations explored in this chapter are thus understood not as ways of ‘being’ but as processes of ‘becoming’.

## 7.1 LEARNER IDENTITIES

This section explores the diversity of learning careers and learner identity, paying attention to how participants navigate different experiences. Notably, many had complex relationships with education. Any trajectory can generate moments of passion, frustration, rejection and re-discovery. Critically, this indicates that it is not just the ‘perennially academic’ that move towards PGT study.

Learner identity is a multifarious, situated subjectivity with no singular expression. It must thus be considered in conjunction with the richness and complexity of each student’s multiple contexts which influence how connected or alienated students feel about their learning at various times (Haggis 2002; Haggis 2003; Heussi 2012). In different ways, positionality and life experiences influence the place that learning occupies in each person’s identity and trajectory (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Waller 2006; Harrison and Waller 2010; Reay *et al.* 2010; Birani and Lehmann 2013). Critically, this means that instrumentalist orientations should not be written off as ‘polluting’ liberal models of education (Leathwood and Connell 2003; Haggis 2004; Clark *et al.* 2015). Rejection or decentralisation of learning in identity may be tacit (or explicit) resistance to the erasure of demotic styles, practices and knowledges in favour of dominant epistemologies and pedagogies (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Burke 2000). Nonetheless, development of learner identity according to personal priorities can spur belief in one’s own legitimacy and power (Leathwood and Connell 2003).

### 7.1.1 'Geeks', 'nerds' and 'thinkers'

It is important to (re)state that having navigated multiple social inequalities and challenges in one's life does not automatically preclude education being central to identity constructions. As Reay (2010) argues, many of her working-class participants found HE was a welcome space to embrace their love of learning. This idea was reflected systematically across most participants who proudly described themselves as *'swotty'*, *'geeky'*, *'nerdy'* or a *'thinker'*, even if they experienced periods where they felt more distant from learning. Moreover, this was sometimes positioned as a personal formation of selfhood which diverged from familial habitus, for example where Malia suggested her family were *'more crafty with their hands, whereas I'm more brain-led'*.

Several interviewees reported a deep-seated comfort in educational environments and ability to 'lose' themselves in academic work, making M-Level study an appealing option. This undermines the historic logic of some areas of WP practice which have undertaken blanket approaches to groups such as first-generation students, assuming they must all feel disengaged from academic progression (Harrison and Hatt 2010). As Anna explained, 'nerdiness' may be a particular feature of a PGT learner identity, akin to a badge of honour in ways which were not prevalent in prior phases of education:

*'To come back to university, you do have to be a geek, you do have to want to do it. [...] you wouldn't do it unless you liked learning... there's a different attitude when you're in your Master's, it's almost more OK to be really geeky'*

Anna, Newnorth

Participants for whom learning was a more consistent, centralised dimension of identity construction often linked this to positive childhood educational experiences. In fact, some even began their interview – unprompted – by explaining how they *'absolutely loved'* school from a young age, suggesting how important this was to their understanding themselves in relation to PGT study. When probed further, the similarity of responses was striking. Interviewees consistently cited support from parents, particularly mothers who were often sole or primary caregivers. The importance of mothers in supporting early educational engagement was not to be underestimated, although discourses often drew on dominant gendered social constructions of mothering as inherently altruistic and nurturing (Klett-Davies 2007). Nonetheless, several students praised the 'head start' their mothers gave them, making education feel joyous rather than a chore. Interestingly, Roger and Rebecca felt this resulted from their backgrounds and the social

inequalities they had navigated, not in spite of it, positioning the experience as a key part of their (working-)classed learner identity. This highlights the complexity of intersecting capitals, conveying how stereotypically 'middle-class' values interrelate with constricted finances, belying any simplistic appellation of (dis)advantage (Burke 2002a; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Roger explained that, unable to pay for expensive activities and groups, reading was an affordable pastime to bond with his mother and foster a love of books. Similarly, Rebecca recounted how her local library was a critical resource growing up, but also how her mother prioritised limited money on reading:

*'There wasn't any money, but we always went to the library. Instead of Easter eggs, we had to get books instead. My Mum was like, "You'll get Easter eggs from everybody, you're going to get something from us, you're going to get something useful". [...] I read voraciously as a child. I still do.'*

Rebecca, Newnorth

Many participants felt parents and caregivers encouraged education as a means for their children to access opportunities they had not been able to – *'our ticket to escape from hell'*. Whilst parents and guardians might not have been able to provide detailed guidance about the machinations of university, this did not negate championing higher-level study:

*'My Mum and Dad have always, well, my Mum especially has always been really clear, she's been like, "I don't want you to be in our position when you're older". [...] So, she was always saying, like, say... whether they'd actually done the research or not I don't know, but, like, it was just their assumption that if I got the highest level of education that I could, from the best place that I could, then I had the best chance of getting a good job, that would then obviously allow me to support myself comfortably.'*

Luna, Oldsouth

This is a powerful challenge to the discourse which suggests that parents or guardians who have not been to university lack aspirations or the ability to support learning effectively (Reay 1998b). However, the landscape is complicated. Not all caregivers positioned education positively or encouraged learning as a core facet of identity and interviewees had very different home lives, resources and experiences over the life course, leading to moments of educational disillusionment.

### 7.1.2 Navigating educational disillusionment

Even amongst those who felt learning had been a reasonably stable facet of their identity, there were still moments of turbulence and disassociation from education. As all interviewees had

successfully entered PGT study, it is important to observe that periods of tension with study did not negate progression. As Tobbell *et al.* (2010) note, not every Master's student can be assumed to be an 'HE expert'.

#### 7.1.2.1 *Catalysts of disruption*

Moments of disillusionment can influence how and if participants positioned learning in their identity formations (O'Shea 2014). A number of interviewees described '*dips*' where they felt disengaged or unmotivated which could appear at any point in trajectories. For some, this aligned with periods of poor mental health that made it hard to '*give a damn*' about education. This was often gendered. Several men highlighted societal attitudes just a few years ago made it hard to access help. For example, Teddy described his teenage years as '*going through the motions*', feeling apathetic and removed from learning. This peaked at university, where he dropped out of his first undergraduate degree and struggled with feeling like '*a failure*'. Returning home, he later enrolled on a Bachelor's programme at his local FE college. Small group teaching, supportive staff and proximity to family and friends provided a fresh new start to reenvision learning as a part of his selfhood. His experience illustrates how study can become decentralised from identity during difficult times and how structural and contextual changes can offer opportunities for reformulation.

A lack of confidence and comfort in educational spaces could undermine participants' understanding of themselves as learners who could progress to PGT. There was not necessarily a simple pathway of achieving 'good grades' and seeing oneself as a potential Master's student, as Terry suggested:

*'I'd come into university... I was still the same person [...] in a lot of ways. It wasn't just this ugly duckling to this swan, sort of thing. I feel I was an ugly duckling for a long time through university, in terms of who I wanted to be'*

Terry, Oldnorth

A troubled relationship with study and precarious positioning within educational fields sometimes had roots in compulsory education which imprinted across trajectories. Some linked this to a single moment with a single educator. For example, Eliza described a lesson where her teacher '*humiliated*' her and '*from that point onwards, I hated education, I loathed it. I'd gone from a very nurturing environment to hell and high water*'. Transforming from someone who had previously been invested in learning, Eliza felt a sharp division and did not consider becoming 'a learner'



again until much later in adulthood. Similarly, Amy recalled when a teacher *'made fun of me for 20 minutes about how I was crying'*, pushing her to move to a larger FE college and change subjects, ultimately altering the trajectory and destinations she had previously planned out for her life. These responses – in their distinct ways aimed at self-protection – reveal how rending learning (or a particular formulation of it) from identity may emerge as a coping strategy in the face of violence. Moreover, they make a clear link between disjunctions in learner identity and the emergence of non-linear trajectories.

Wider structures could also be the genesis of disruption. In particular, students explained how streaming and setting – separating students by perceived 'ability' – punctured emergent learner identities by bifurcating cohorts into *'clever people and not so clever people'*. Rosie spoke about this extensively as a phenomenon which established certain tropes she had to continually resist in order to progress to PGT study. She explained that students labelled 'gifted' were positioned as the 'real' learners that *'definitely had a future'* and so *'got picked out specifically'* to answer questions in class or receive support with applications to Oxbridge or other Russell Group universities. As a result, she felt that *'the rest of us'* – from *'poor'* backgrounds – were *'just taught the curriculum'* and made to feel that they were not 'special':

*'If someone's raising their hand, it's always the gifted kids that get picked, or if someone has a question it's always the gifted kid that's prioritised, stuff like that, whereas the rest of us were kind of left to fall by the wayside a little bit'*

Rosie, Oldnorth

Lastly, a lack of familial support could also engender disillusion. A few participants felt their parents *'weren't interested'* or *'didn't see the point'* in education – generally HE and especially postgraduate education – having moved straight from school into work or having negative educational experiences themselves. As Rosie explained, this meant that progression to HE at all, let alone PGT study, was an alien concept in familial discussions.

#### *7.1.2.2 New possibilities*

Many participants spoke of moments where the relationship between learning and identity became unsettled but, as students who had successfully entered PGT study, their trajectories also offered insight into how these challenges were negotiated, moments which again emphasise the importance of happenstance. Some, including Homer and Rory, named assignments the catalyst (see also Section 5.3.3). Rory explained how a *'terrible'* result in his first year of undergraduate

study shifted him from being someone who was carrying on with ‘college behaviours’ to someone who ‘*knuckled down and started trying to do a bit better*’. He characterises his third year as a really transformative, serendipitous moment where learning became central to his selfhood; following this change, he received his first first-class grades and was ‘*absolutely buzzing*’. Others had a more subtle and drawn-out experience of something being ‘missing’ and a realisation that this gap and longing was linked to study. Louise, Teddy and Emma all spoke of imperceptible moments where something ‘*shifted*’. In this newly discovered opening, learning could be (re)positioned more centrally in identity constructions, propelling people towards PGT study:

*‘[When I wasn’t at university] I missed learning, I want to learn, I always want to learn new things, I’m always really interested in things. And I just quite like the processes of doing a project, like, researching something, finding out more about it, putting an assignment together. I quite enjoy that, it’s quite fun. I don’t know... I did miss that’*

Emma, Newnorth

Others found that different means of educational delivery shifted their self-concepts, particularly greater autonomy, equity and sociality. Moving from the rigidities of compulsory schooling into FE and HE – described as more open – often helped to (re)kindle new meanings around what being a learner might entail. This underscores the importance of diverse practices and approaches in order to support students along their trajectories. Emma and Beth both struggled to see themselves as learners earlier in life but discovered alternative pedagogies and less rigid curricula to be transformative. The freedom and flexibility offered by FE and HE felt dramatically different, opening up new possible identity formations. Similarly, Homer explained how school ‘*made me hate education*’ but college ‘*changed my mind completely*’ because ‘*they just treat you like you’re a human*’. He explained how having ‘*never set foot in a library before*’ he started to use free time to work on assignments and do additional work:

*‘I just feel like I turned a leaf. It was really, really nice actually. That’s when my love of [education] started to come into it really’*

Homer, Newsouth

Participants’ social networks could also provoke a re-interrogation of identity and the place of learning within it. Sometimes this could emerge from a seemingly negative place. For example, Christopher spoke about dropping out of his first degree and overhearing his Dad on the phone saying Christopher was ‘*always doomed to fail at university*’. He describes this as a ‘*turning point*’ – another moment of happenstance, yet more painful – where he decided ‘*I’m going to smash it*’,

(re)centring study and HE in his trajectory as a rebuttal to the extrinsic denial of his learner identity. Similarly, Jess recounted her experience of working abroad in an office where she was one of very few employees without a degree, having *'not been bothered'* about education after her A-levels. Whilst her co-workers were unaware of her background, she would overhear them talking about other colleagues – *'You know, "She's not educated, she doesn't know anything", and I would sit there thinking... "I've not got a degree"'*. This initially distanced Jess even further from claiming a place for learning in her selfhood. Securing a PGT place at Newsouth on returning to the UK, she worried about 'keeping up'. However, she found she was *'holding her own'*, realising that *'even though I haven't been at uni or academic learning, I have been learning for years in various ways'* through professional development. In this way, a painful experience was reconstructed as a pivotal turning point in her self-formulation as an HE student and a recognition of the importance of FE and work-based learning as alternative routes to PGT study. These more negative experiences were isolated, with mutual encouragement being a more common motif:

*'This is another big factor in my development, being part of a friend group where we all were kind of... competitive, but it was all in a playful sort of way. We all academically did quite well, but we all tried to compete with each other, in a way that was... I feel was integral to our friendship and doing well, as well [...] A lot of the friends I had then I'm still best of friends with now [...] I was very fortunate to have that [...] that was actually a really important factor in the subsequent trajectory as well'*

Terry, Oldnorth

As Terry's quote indicates, having a social network – particularly friend groups – that were playful, nurturing and academically challenging in equal measures was a push to create and maintain a place for learning in identity formations. This appeared particularly gendered, with Terry, Rory and Roger all speaking about how important their university friends were in supporting them to (re)engage with learning and establish a newly emergent sense of self within learning, being a *'proper worker'* that *'tried a lot harder'*. This serves to underscore the complex forces at play in (re)constructing a learner identity, particularly happenstance and serendipity, wider societal structures and social networks.

## 7.2 FEELINGS AND WORLDVIEWS

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000), Waller (2006) and Lehmann (2012; 2014) all suggest that particular worldviews – whether they be desires for material goals, comfort, security, rebellion, autonomy or social justice – give purpose and meaning to our lives and selves. As such, the

literature indicates that our feelings are critical forces which are co-constructive of our identities and trajectories. Moreover, there are ongoing co-constructions between such affective realms and habitus development, with emotions informing dispositions and vice versa (McNay 1999; McLeod 2005). For this data, two thematic clusters emerged as particularly salient. The first comprises confidence, independence and resistance and the second relates to political, moral and ethical beliefs.

Whilst emotions and ‘values’ receive more attention from psychological research, the realm of the affective should not be dismissed from sociological interrogation (Burke 2000). As Hochschild (2012) notes, feelings are woven through all our navigations. They are creative and integral to our subjective realities, yet often remain hidden from easy observation (Bourdieu 1987). Feelings are not simply ‘biological urges’ but culturally-influenced phenomena, shaping how we define and manage situations, cross-cut by power and social structures. Hochschild’s suggestion that feelings are a ‘clue’ to what we see, recall or fantasize about is pertinent to PGT trajectories, as these ephemeral forces guide people’s journeys:

*‘Emotion, like seeing and hearing, is a way of knowing the world. It is a way of testing reality. [...] Every emotion has a signal function. Not every emotion signals danger. But every emotion [...] signals the often-unconscious perspective we apply when we go about seeing. Feeling signals that inner perspective’*

(Hochschild 2012:34)

#### 7.2.1 Confidence, independence and resistance

*‘People think [the way I focus on my work] is like dick behaviour, but I wouldn’t have got this far if I wasn’t extremely motivated to do it. I could have stopped [...] there [points to 6<sup>th</sup> Form on timeline]’*

Steel, Newnorth

As Steel’s quote indicates, participants often suggested that without ‘drive’ they would not have entered M-Level study. This seemed particularly critical for PGT entry as this required more deliberate, effortful steps than the relatively more familiar and established pathway to undergraduate study (see Section 5.1). Many (at least initially) used distinctively individualistic constructions of self-confidence and self-efficacy to position themselves in the context of their trajectory, framed in psychological terms. Pointing to a lack of support from wider social structures, a number of participants suggested being ‘self-reliant’ – posed as a defining personal characteristic – was paramount. Whilst the way this was experienced was subjective and varied,

feelings shared a common thread of resistance. This materialised, as Ethel described, as an internal voice that *'said [...] "Right, I'll show you"'*. People centralised the importance of *'feisty'* attitudes, suggesting that without the instinct to push back against dominant and marginalising deficit discourses, they might have arrived on a pathway that did not – ultimately – lead to PGT study. Participants thus framed resistance and independence as a persistent and important part of their identity and journey.

Particular contexts engendered these worldviews. For example, Christine recounted a moment with her Head of Sixth Form who she felt *'looked down on her'* and other students whose parents did not have *'jobs that you obviously needed degrees for'*. When her A-level grades were lower than predicted, despite still meeting the entry criteria for her preferred university, Christine went to the Head of Sixth Form for advice. She was deeply upset by the reaction: *'she laughed and said, "They're not letting you in"'*. Comparing herself to her brother – who she felt would have given up on university in that very moment – Christine dissented *'because I'm stubborn – I was like "No, I'm going to uni, I'm going to prove you wrong"'*. This points towards multiple dynamics at play, a complex intersection between internal and external forces which produce myriad identity formations and outcomes, even amongst close siblings. The impact is rhizomatic, extending its tendrils along trajectories. Christine mapped this feeling along her journey to PGT, explaining how it helped her cling to the idea of doing a Master's degree over several years when her circumstances prevented her. Rebecca similarly shared a sense of *'stubbornness'* linked to struggle and confrontation, explaining her desire to study in the physical sciences was a reaction to her father's chauvinistic views on women in STEM:

*'My Dad's also quite sexist, so I think he was always a little bit like... I don't want sound just like a girl with "Daddy Issues", but I think that the more people go, "You can't do that", the more I go, "Yes, I fucking can"'*

Rebecca, Newnorth

Whilst a few interviewees, like Rebecca, cited a lack of parental support as something to rebel against, as interview conversations unfurled, participants increasingly positioned kinship bonds as engendering confidence and independence as defining identity characteristics. Acknowledgement of this collective dimension to identity formation was striking, given the apparently individualistic way that people initially located themselves and their feelings. Unpicking narratives in more depth further confirmed that there was a clear relational dimension in participants' constructions, evidencing how support from others could become pivotal affective resources in peoples'

identities, but perhaps more hidden given the doxa of individualism in the neoliberal turn. However, confidence, independence and resistance were not a feature of every trajectory, nor could participants be easily bifurcated into ‘confident’ and ‘not confident’ people. Instead, trajectories comprised various moments where feelings waxed and waned in response to structural support or insecurity. This illuminates that affective parts of identity are not fixed phenomena but instead complex webs of feelings that are continually navigated and (re)made.

Similar to the forces shaping time (see Section 5.3), conditions which produce worldviews rely on happenstance and chance encounters which can make or break for individuals (Regan and Graham 2018). Just as a wellspring of confidence at the ‘right’ time could route a trajectory in one direction, a dearth could move it in the other. For example, Timothy recounted his 11-Plus entrance exam and interview by the Head of his local Grammar School. He explained:

*‘Coming from a working-class background, I had absolutely no social skills whatsoever. I kind of looked at his shoes and went, “Oh... ah... erm...” as an answer to most questions. Needless to say, I didn’t pass’.*

Timothy, Newsouth

Entering a Secondary Modern instead, Timothy’s confidence was knocked-back for several years and he ‘sank down’. What might have been a more linear, ‘academic’ trajectory instead became more complex. None of this invalidates Timothy’s journey. Instead, it illustrates how the affective dimensions of our identities bestow particular resources and thus produce particular trajectories. Moments where confidence dissipated were peppered throughout interviewees’ narrations, with students second-guessing themselves or turning away from seemingly unsurmountable challenges. Prospective students who did not ‘make it’ to PGT study – about which so much is unknown – may well have been unable to access conditions of serendipity at critical moments throughout their trajectory to draw upon affective resources.

### 7.2.2 Political, moral and ethical beliefs

A further cluster of worldviews was connected to political, moral or ethical beliefs which were frequently central to interviewees’ self-concepts and demonstrably influential on PGT trajectories, making them intensely personal journeys. There was a broadly left-leaning perspective across most participants and an even more widely shared belief in social justice as a defining and inalienable part of people’s current sense of self. In part, this may reflect the nature of the sample which had a high proportion of students studying sociological and political social sciences and, as

Hochschild (2012) notes, ties between labour, study and philosophical beliefs are many and diffuse.

Whilst these feelings obviously influenced PGT programme choice and desired careers, it was interesting to observe how they had changed. It was common for these positions to emerge during or even after undergraduate study. Several participants told a very similar story of a 'lightning bolt' when learning sociological and political theories for the first term, as if a shroud over social inequity had been pulled back:

*'My first ever Sociology class, where they talked about like, Marxism... They literally explained how a very small amount of people have the majority of the money [...] I was like, "Well that makes no sense! Why is that a thing, that makes no sense? That should not be a thing. Why don't we revolt? Why do we live like this?". I was immediately like, this little Karl Marx. And then... It just went from there, really.'*

Beatrix, Newsouth

There was a clear link between newly emergent political subjectivities and a shift in academic and professional interests (particularly desires to enter research, policy or charity work) (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Ball *et al.* 1999; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). The knock-on effect of bringing PGT to the fore of people's thinking was clear.

Jonathan's journey is emblematic of how perspectives shift and how these then shape identity and thus PGT journeying. Growing up, Jonathan remembered watching *The Apprentice* and exalting business, seduced by the aspiration of making '*loads of money*'. This initially drew him towards Business and Economics, hoping to enter accountancy or some high-paying managerial position. However, during his degree, the 2010 election and 'Cleggmania' piqued his interest; he began keeping an eye on current affairs. An initial soupçon of intrigue developed, drawing him towards modules on globalisation, poverty and development. This combined with his experience of a challenging industry placement where Jonathan realised the sector was not going to be as fulfilling as he hoped. He concluded '*that I wasn't that suited to wheeling and dealing. It's not very me. [...] So, I started to move from a business-y thing to an economics thing. Quite politics-y as well*'. A chance conversation with his dissertation supervisor highlighted the option of a Master's leading to a PhD to explore a more politicised approach to economics. It is important to note that Jonathan explicitly links this to being more 'me', a close alignment with a newly emergent selfhood formation.

Education was not the only field that altered political orientations and made journeys personal. For example, Orchid explained that over his life he had *‘grown into a person [...] with a set of values and a sense of equality that didn’t really exist in my childhood’*. He particularly spoke about one child coming out and both children’s passionate anti-Brexit stance as influences which provoked real diversions from his father’s politics. Similarly, Timothy discussed how his discovery of *‘pacifist tendencies’* during Naval Officer Training ultimately pushed him to drop out and follow an entirely different career trajectory. Rather than participate in armed conflict, Timothy maintained his interest privately, channelling it into PGT study in retirement, a rather different manifestation of his curiosity:

*‘I sat and thought, “Hey, we’re going to sit on a platform, over the horizon you’re going to fire a missile at someone who you’re never going to see and you’re going to decimate them. Is that really what you want to do?”. I started to think, no, it’s not what I want to do’*

Timothy, Newsouth

In addition to a commitment to equity, many participants spoke of a desire to actively help others. This formed years (or sometimes decades) before PGT entry as slightly abstract goals to *‘change the world’* or *‘make a difference’*. Bit by bit, it became more clearly articulated, ultimately leading to PGT study. This taps into the multidirectional influences between experiences and identity whereby both cause changes in worldviews and result from it, producing a complex and dynamic relationship (Davey 2012a). For example, Marianne and Sandy both undertook specific undergraduate programmes with the aim of furthering social justice and planned to work for NGOs afterwards. After both worked in the third sector through placements whilst studying, they quickly became disillusioned with voluntary sector organisations as a means to achieve their goals after experiencing obstacles first-hand. Wanting to make longer-term, sustainable impacts, both turned to research (on 1+3 doctoral pathways), with Sandy explaining that she now viewed research rather than other means as *‘probably the most helpful thing I could do without being Prime Minister or running the UN’*.

### 7.3 CLASSED COMPLEXITIES

The following section explores how social class plays out in PGT trajectories as a processual, dynamic and intersectional facet of identity formation. It then discusses moments of classed epistemic and symbolic violence which reveal how this evolves in the context of social inequalities and marginalisation within and beyond the academy.



### 7.3.1 Classed hinterlands

When discussing identity, participants frequently drew on highly nuanced understandings and discourses of class to explain their dynamic subjectivity and navigations of social inequalities. This operationalised a particularly fluid and elastic understanding of class (Maguire 2006). For example:

*'[My class] is something that I've struggled to try and think about [...] I think inside of me there's an angry working-class man [...] but I'm also reticent to define a class for it'*

Roger, Newnorth

*'I don't think I've changed, I haven't suddenly sprouted tweed... it's really weird, just the perception that people have of you, that you don't really quite belong in this space and you don't really quite belong in this space either'*

Georgina, Oldnorth

As these quotes from Roger and Georgina illustrate, participants did not comfortably subscribe to unitary classed labels. There was a sense of being in a 'hinterland', a lack of classed fixity, particularly around the transition to PGT study, reflecting the 'plasticity' of class discussed by Maguire (2006). This also suggests, as feminist Bourdieusian theorists have argued, there is a high degree of critical reflexivity involved in habitus development (McNay 1999; Reay 2004; McLeod 2005). Roger and Georgina's insights exemplify how participants were hyper-aware of linguistic, material and embodied classed discourses. For example, Georgina makes explicit mention of 'tweed', the rough woollen fabric associated with elitist leisure activities, whilst Roger evokes a gendered trope of classed anger, a refrain similar to the 'Angry Young Men' discussed by Skeggs (1997). These ideas – the ambiguity of class and participants' attentiveness to its nuances – are followed throughout this section.

Although university is sometimes positioned as a site of class (re)negotiation (Waller *et al.* 2011), the structuring of HE produces much tension, meaning narratives about 'becoming middle-class' through university obscure complex experiences (Burke 2000; Maguire 2006). This tension is due to the academy's form – "*a highly competitive system*" which prioritises practices, values and knowledges often simplistically or erroneously positioned as 'middle-class' by the dominant discourse (Burke and Hayton 2011:14-5). As a result, students are not equally resourced to align with institutional orders or adopt performances of selfhood held in esteem by the dominant discourse (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Crozier and Reay 2011). Indeed, students navigating multiple intersecting social inequalities face ambiguities, power relations and denigration of demotic

knowledges which many of their peers *'do not have to deal with to anything like the same extent'* (Reay 2001:337; Burke 2000; Tett 2004; Burke 2014).

In this context, participants often embraced the language and semiotics of class when explaining how their identities evolved throughout their PGT trajectories and how this shaped their navigations of social cleavages. Class distinction was commonly shared as a part of participants' journeys and frequent tangent of social inequalities. Echoing with the literature, this often emerged when interviewees first engaged with HE, particularly for those who attended high-status institutions for undergraduate study (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Reay *et al.* 2009; Lehmann 2014). As Terry explained:

*'I didn't realise I was poor until I went to university. You don't feel poor when everyone comes from the same socioeconomic background you do'*

Terry, Oldnorth

Suddenly finding himself amidst a cohort which appeared wealthier, more articulate and more symbolically resourced, Terry's subjectivity was confronted in ways he felt unprepared for. This experience was shared by many students at the same point in their trajectories, often producing painful responses. Frank recalled his bitterness and anger:

*'I started to notice how these people... they'd say they'd worked so hard to be here, but they had no idea of their privilege. You had parents that paid for tutors, parents that could give you advice, that had been here, that knew how it worked. They had all these advantages and it... irked me'*

Frank, Oldsouth

Scanning across trajectories indicated that classed disquiet seemed to peak in the first year of undergraduate study (for those with a Bachelor's degree) and were particularly acute for participants at high-status institutions. As Frank and Terry's insights show, in part this emanated from the 'culture shock' of suddenly being in more a socioeconomically diverse environment – both had entered Russell Group universities – and the complicated processes of coming to terms with this (Reay *et al.* 2010; Crozier and Reay 2011). However, acute discomfort was not persistent. For example, Olive traced the evolution of class in her identity, explaining how in her first year she 'covered up' her background, pretending she knew *'what certain things are [...] social customs'*, veiling financial disparities between her and her friends. It was not until her third year, leading into her Master's, that she began to lay some claim to a working-class identity. For Olive, this linked to a growing confidence in an academic identity and growing awareness of how deficit discourses

were socially- and politically-manufactured, leaving her feeling less compelled to mask her personal history. Yet, an awareness of difference and some discomfort still remained.

Whilst each person's identity navigation was personal and distinctive, Olive's journey is emblematic of a broader trend of the ongoing-ness, plasticity and processual dimension to class (Skeggs 2004a; Maguire 2006; Dunne and Gazeley 2008). When it came to PGT study, there was not necessarily the same intensity of anxiety, yet neither had struggle entirely dissipated. Reflecting on this complexity, I was frequently drawn back to an interaction between Sandy and Beth during the Oldsouth workshop where they discussed their identity formations as non-Southerners from working-class backgrounds at a high-status Southern university. Sandy grew up with her Mum in the Midlands on a small estate. When it came to secondary school enrolment, her Mum was concerned about the estate's secondary comprehensive, sending Sandy to a more affluent school several miles away and then to a high-status state Sixth Form college: '*a bit old and Hogwarts-y*'. Sandy recognised schooling choices as the major turning points in her life which afforded her many opportunities and 'smoothed' her journey into and through high-status universities (Ball 1997; Power *et al.* 2013). Beth grew up in the North-West but moved away for part of her schooling, returning to her home city for university and to escape difficulties at home. Beth was troubled by what she saw as a lack of parental engagement in her education and felt this may have resulted in a far less linear trajectory (Lewis 2009). For example, she changed degree programmes after struggling with the demands of her first choice and found it far harder to get onto a funded 1+3 Master's programme than Sandy, requiring multiple attempts over several years.

The salient conversational moment in question approached class through the lens of accents. Beth and Sandy traced how their speech changed as they moved between different places and phases of education, in particular how their accents (perhaps deliberately) 'softened' at Oldsouth. Both felt this placed them in a hinterland, where the '*twang*' of a 'regional' accent marked them out – particularly at a high-status Southern university – as potentially working-class, or at least different enough to be commented on. Conversely, when they returned to where they grew up, they were questioned on having become 'posh', unsettling connections to 'home'. As a result, both alluded to being stuck between these two ascribed subject positions – the 'middle-class' postgraduate and the 'working-class' Northerner/Midlander – whilst being fully accepted in neither. Their feelings about the visibility and performance of their classed subjectivity signified a point of departure.

Sandy was comfortable to 'lose' an accent *'that people think doesn't sound very nice [...] I'm not sorry that I don't want to display that'*, whereas Beth felt that *'the more it's pointed out to me that I'm working-class and from the North, the **more** I want to display that'*. Thinking across the data more broadly, other participants felt their accent had provoked hostile classism. Attacks and comments operated in a disciplinary fashion, with participants explaining they had tried to mask or alter their accents by the time they reached M-level study, again pointing to subtle code-switching and hybridising interviewees were involved in. Even softened accents still attracted commentary. Protective adaptations could later be a source of sadness and shame, as accents themselves had been previously. However, it is important to note that this experience was institutionally and geographically located, occurring solely in high-status universities and most commonly in the South of England. For example, five out of the six Oldsouth interviewees all experienced other students commenting on their accents:

*'I never noticed I used to not say the difference between a "th" and an "f"... you know, "free hundred and firty free"... when a friend [at university] pointed it out, I got really self-conscious about my accent... I tried to hide my Essex accent'*

Frank, Oldsouth

Returning to Beth and Sandy, the commonality in their experiences was a fear of 'fraudulence'. Both questioned whether their speech was an idiosyncrasy which positioned them as an 'imposter' both as postgraduates and in their natal region, unsettling any unitary and comfortable identity positionings. Sandy elaborated on the tension she found herself embodying, on the one hand worrying that she had 'fallen' into performing 'Southern middle-classness' which did not reflect her own sense of class, yet she also no longer identified *'as being from my little estate'* or *'how people at home are... and how they act and be'*. Beth shared the same ambivalence, emphasising that PGT is a particularly tricky field to navigate class. Her final questions left a pregnant pause in the air:

*'I'm proud of the fact I've managed to be better than the circumstances I lived in. Had I not gone to university, I'd probably just be working in a shop like my Mum [...] It's tricky, because I don't identify with the people, but it's my home... Also, I do feel like I'm working-class still, but because I don't fit in with the people from my home, can I still be working-class? Because I'm not the same as them... Can you be working-class and have a degree?'*

Beth, Oldsouth

The messy, knotted sentiments in Beth's narrative can be traced across many interviews and seems distinctive to PGT transitions, given the connotations and cultural capital ascribed to postgraduate study and prior HE exposure. Although massification and reduced graduate labour market premiums might be assumed to have unsettled the myth that university 'makes everyone middle-class', participants' narrations suggested this pernicious folk tale was alive and well. For example, Georgina railed against *'that whole sort of narrative that we have in society [...] "You've gone to university, now you've ascended in some way"'*. The process of obtaining a degree and moving into PGT study troubled peoples previously neat(er) senses of classed identity, rather than replacing it with a new *'shiny, acceptable, middle-class persona'* (Reay 2001:341).

This also points to the 'plasticity' of class which cannot be neatly ascribed or fixed and instead evolves through contingencies, subjectivities and practices (Maguire 2006). Participants at all four fieldwork sites felt qualms about calling or continuing to call themselves 'working-class', but simultaneously identified dispositional continuities that remained part of their habitus which they explicitly positioned as working-class (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This included an aversion to debt, complex relationships with money, worries about vocabulary or speech, discomfort in elitist spaces and – perhaps most commonly – an intergenerationally-enculturated 'work-ethic'. All of these factors were invoked as important resources and seminal influences on peoples' PGT trajectories, whether it be the 'graft' they emulated to engage in higher-level study, strategies to manage additional student loans or decisions around how close or weak an institutional connection to maintain during PGT study.

Whilst most interviewees talked about classed identity and distinction, a few were resistant to reading their experiences in this way. This was particularly clear during the Newsouth workshop when CP commented that selected data excerpts about class, used as prompts for discussion, *'aren't echoes that I recognise'*. He elaborated that while his family experienced 'difficult' times during his youth, including financial straits, *'that hadn't rubbed off on me'* in later life. His view was shared by a small number of other interviewees who did not use explicitly classed discourses to narrate and interpret their experiences. They tended to be older, mostly male, grammar- or independent school-educated and were (or had been) in senior, professional roles. This points towards intersections between capitals, experiences and dispositions under the 'first-generation' umbrella which variously influence how people understand their subjectivities and PGT trajectories (Savage *et al.* 2013; Savage *et al.* 2015).

### 7.3.1.1 *Classed intersections*

Despite the dominance of class in the data, this was not the only framing of selfhood. As the literature demonstrates, other co-constitutive structural contexts such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, geography and medical status, to name a few, are all reflexively incorporated in identity construction and speak to processes of subordination (Crenshaw 1991; Boyne 2002; Yosso 2005; Hill Collins 2015).

All participants negotiated life at the intersection of such structures, but certain trajectories particularly illuminated gendered and raced tensions alongside class. The experiences of Maham, Maryam and Sandy indicate how they – as self-defined working-class women of colour – were positioned as other to PGT study in multiple ways, producing tensions in identity navigations and selfhood performances (Ahmed 2012). This experience was deeply disenfranchising and may be unsurmountable for some prospective students.

Maham discussed public speculation ascribed to her body as a hijabi woman, suppositions she must be oppressed, voiceless, set to marry and have children rather than pursue postgraduate study. Reflecting further during the Newnorth workshop, she shared inner conflict about her clothing as a Muslim woman in UK HE. In particular, she wanted to dress modestly and wear hijab but felt this ‘stood out’ from the normative ‘professional’ style adopted by other postgraduate students and members of faculty. She felt caught, wanting to ‘blend in’ and have her academic identity be ‘taken seriously’, whilst not wanting to erase visible markers of her faith. Maryam also spoke about exclusion, including how hard it was to position herself as more closely enmeshed with HE when university sociality was so alcohol-centric and she lacked role models who reflected her experience. This initially dissuaded her from continuing in HE after her Bachelor’s, had it not been for the encouragement of a lecturer who came from the same cultural and religious background who also wore hijab (O’Shea 2018). Sandy also spoke of being visible and labelled as a woman of colour in HE, particularly being targeted at PGT enrolment:

*‘I got all the emails, and one of them was about... because I’m BAME or whatever it is, I’m more likely to drop out of uni, So, there were a couple of days at the start of term where I could go and get support so I wouldn’t drop out of uni, and I’m like... I’m actually offended, like... That is so rude. Like, why do you think that’s going to work? [...] Like... Are you alright? Seriously? What White, middle-class man thought this was a good idea?’*

Sandy, Oldsouth

These moments speak to the real diversity of people's subjectivities and how they interpolate with their navigations of social inequalities. This underscores the fallacy of assigning homogeneity to any label – and to broad umbrella terms such as 'WP' or 'first-generation' students – as multiple social structures co-constitute identities in complex, fluid and personal ways.

### 7.3.2 Epistemic and symbolic violence

As inferred in previous sections and chapters, students navigating intersecting social inequalities can become 'caught' in a troubled disjunction between prior dispositions and those of the neoliberal academy (Ball *et al.* 2002; Lehmann 2012; Lehmann 2014). In part, these identity conflicts are rooted in the realms of the symbolic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and knowledge itself (Spivak 1988), requiring 'protective' practices (Burke 2000; Waller 2006; Reay *et al.* 2009; Waller *et al.* 2011; Lehmann 2012). Such moments are important to consider as catalysts of some of the identity ambiguities discussed in Section 7.3.1 and also as complex events which can have long-lasting effects on peoples' trajectories.

For some students, moments signalling potential identity conflict in HE far preceded thinking about PGT study. Christine and Steel recalled particularly powerful memories of AimHigher, the flagship New Labour WP policy. They read their experience as a patronising affront and worrying window into how HE would position them and their cohorts, families and communities as pollutant bodies (Burke 2000; Leathwood and Connell 2003). Christine reminisced about an information session where a speaker talked '*at the parents, almost like it was their fault their kids were in this cohort*'. Looking around, she noticed the room was full of people who, like her, were from the local working-class Irish Catholic community, engendering a sense of identity-related stigma. Later that night at home, Christine overheard her Dad in another room, deeply upset and questioning whether he was responsible for 'limiting' her opportunities. She was furious: '*I remember just sitting there and just thinking, "I don't want to [go to university], if you're upsetting my Dad. He's done nothing wrong but you're making him feel like he's done something wrong"*'. Steel also struggled to understand why he was targeted, firstly thinking it was a practical joke – '*Am I being punked?!*' – and later feeling resentful at the inference he was less able. Both excerpts speak to how a first exposure to HE can be read as violating and highly suggestive of the power disparities of the sector, views both Christine and Steel continued to hold, particularly about high status institutions. This illustrates how embodied stigmatisation can be deeply felt and cast a long shadow.

Incidents of epistemic and symbolic violence became increasingly common as students moved into undergraduate study and left lasting impacts on how they positioned their own identities in relation to other students and institutional habitus when it came to PGT study (Lehmann 2014). Classist attacks were often occluded in small asides and were recalled as ciphers for the middle-class image of HE and the gulf between interviewees' subjectivity and this normative structure (Haggis 2006). Various participants, particularly those who attended high status institutions, retold overheard conversations between housemates which they felt signified their exclusion and 'ill-fittingness', including mentions of private schools and long-haul international holidays. This was a source of internal strife, with participants feeling decidedly othered yet unwilling to reveal this to their peers. Money also bred frustrations. Participants recalled the irritation of hearing wealthy friends who received monthly bank transfers from family complain of being 'skint', whilst they were working to support themselves.

Highly confident peers could also be a real shock. Luna explained how during undergraduate seminars she would be *'shaking with my piece of paper, trying to get the words out'*, comparing herself to 'posh' classmates who thrived with public speaking. It was not until her third year that she discovered her marks were the same or higher than peers she always thought outstripped her. The discovery came almost by chance as a result of exploring PGT options with encouragement from her tutor, thus 'breaking the silence' on grades. This may have remained undetected had she not had a serendipitous 'epiphany' around postgraduate study:

*'The only time I ever got to know about their ability was during these seminars [...] Partly I knew what background they came from; I knew they came from posh, middle-class backgrounds [...] All of them. And I don't know if that affected me, but I knew they'd been to the best schools and stuff, and I knew they were so much more confident in what they said in class. Upon reflection they were probably talking a load of rubbish, but because they said it confidently, I was just like, "Oh my god, you're so clever, you know so much"'*

Luna, Oldsouth

University was not the only field where identity tensions and violations emerged. The literature demonstrates that at 'home', HE students may fear family and friends attacking *'newly acquired bourgeois pretensions'* or *'airs and graces'* (Waller *et al.* 2011:517; Ball *et al.* 1999; Archer and Hutchings 2000; Tett 2004; Reay *et al.* 2010; Lehmann 2014). This was reflected in the data. Many participants explained that what appeared to be a newly emergent or shifting habitus was challenged by family and friends with 'blame' laid at the feet of their HE participation. Around



undergraduate study, this was typically linked to clashes of political beliefs, new interests or changing vocabularies. Challenges took on a distinct flavour around PGT study, which critics positioned as an excuse to be a ‘perpetual student’. There was a real lack of recognition of PGT as a valid transition, despite it becoming a more normalised progression route within the UK context (HEFCE 2016). Hostility appeared to centre on bifurcating the ‘real world’ and ‘university’, with PGT students being accused of ‘*avoiding real life*’ – a euphemism for work and earning money – and instead choosing to follow ‘lofty’, ‘bourgeois’ pursuits:

*‘[My partner’s] family, sometimes... people are a bit unsure why I’m still studying... ‘still’. They’re like, “So, when are you finishing?” and I hate that question, I hate it so much. When someone comes to me and says, “When are you finishing?”, I’m like, “Why are you not asking me what I’m doing, and I can tell you all about it!”’*

Maryam, Newnorth

Frank referred to these views as ‘*real reverse snobbery*’ whilst Jess felt it stemmed from staunchly instrumentalist, work-focussed, anti-education views. Following this thread, Oldnorth workshop discussions suggested that much of this is rooted in the realm of the symbolic and the epistemic rather than observable behaviours. As Georgina explained, ‘*I think some of my family have a bit of a bee in their bonnet about people that go to university and how I’m “one of them”, and it’s not necessarily about me as much as it is just that conception of what that means*’. This suggests that in part there was push back against the mythical trope of the ‘pretentious’, ‘perennial’ student which is read by others as jeopardising previous understandings of identity and positioning (Waller *et al.* 2011).

## 7.4 REFLECTIONS

This chapter has explored the complex ways in which participants navigate various dimensions of their identity and how this process shapes their negotiations of intersecting social inequalities and their PGT trajectories. The data illustrates how social, cultural, economic and affective forces are differently positioned in each person’s trajectory and configured together in complex relationships, each being given different prominence and shifting in relative influence over time. In turn, this resources students in varied ways across the life course and makes a clear case for the processual, discursive nature of identity formation. A deeply personal and subjective endeavour, this speaks against any homogenisation or stasis in our understanding of PGT students’ identity constructions. Moreover, it shows how past and present are deeply linked; the ‘smallest’ moments

even decades before can cast a long shadow. The deeply personal nature of this in turn makes the process of journeying to PGT personal and contextual.

Firstly, the chapter emphasises the varied ways in which participants have – and have not – positioned learning in their identity formation over the life course. Contra to the notion that PGT students are all ‘HE experts’ (Tobbell *et al.* 2010) who know how to navigate the system and study without challenges, the data makes a clear case that it is not only those positioned as ‘perennially academic’ throughout their lives who can thrive in a PGT environment, providing certain structural, contextual and serendipitous conditions converge. Nonetheless, there is a shared sense of ‘geekiness’ or ‘nerdiness’ which pertains to M-level study, a facet increasingly owned and voiced by people as they reach this point in their journey. The chapter also highlights how identity is not merely a tangible and materialist subject position but also possesses clear affective dimensions (Hochschild 2012). Feelings are inconsistent, as experiences and identity comeingle in complex ways, co-constructing one another and shaping how people make their way towards PGT study. Lastly, the data illustrates that class is a lens which many participants drew up in detailed, nuanced ways to narrate their experience of navigating intersecting social inequalities. However, this is not a unitary or fixed label, and instead highlights the ‘plasticity’ (Maguire 2006) of class over the life course. This suggests that class still matters (Reay 2017) and has a significant interpretative currency but should not be used in a labelling or species manner, nor allowed to trump other means of constructing or understanding identity or social inequalities. Moreover, the data illustrates how this operates at the intersections with various other structures including race, gender and age (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2015). Significant diversity results from this complex interplay, belying any simplistic operationalisation of broad-brush categories such as ‘first-generation students’. Drawing these notions together with the insights from the previous two chapters, discussion now moves towards crystallising and refracting these insights in an endeavour to consider what we might conclude from this research (Richardson 2000; Richardson 2001).

## 8 Conclusions

This final chapter synthesises insights from this research, demonstrating that a focus on PGT offers a significant development in and new understandings of social inequalities and HE trajectories.

This is a critical endeavour, as although PGT is increasingly prominent in national and international HE landscapes, it remains under-interrogated, particularly from an equity perspective (Wakeling 2005; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Despite the former chair of the Social Mobility Commission, Alan Milburn, issuing a clarion call several years ago that we must attend to this social justice ‘*time-bomb*’, substantive attention was not forthcoming outside of a few key researchers and the blogosphere (Snowden and Halsall 2018:62; UKCGE 2019; Wakeling and Hancock 2019). This study thus occupies a powerful position to address the research lacuna engulfing this significant part of the HE landscape. In particular, this research supports Tobbell *et al.*’s (2010) argument that it is a fallacy to assume M-level students face few issues when it comes to their postgraduate transitions. Moreover, we cannot simply impose the historic literature about HE inequalities and approaches to WP to plaster over the cracks because these are overwhelmingly informed by undergraduate experiences. There is a need for a more deliberate PGT agenda sensitive to the particularities of M-level study and the diverse lives of Master’s students.

The chapter first consolidates responses to the two overarching research questions, elucidating important insights concerning how participants navigate their journey into PGT study and negotiate social inequalities, alongside implications for policy and practice. Following this discussion, the chapter moves to reflecting on PGT in light of contemporary issues including the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM movement. Methodological reflections are next explored, detailing how my particular theoretical and empirical approaches offered significant benefits which may not have emerged in a different study. Next, future research directions are considered and contextualised in light of the particular design and nature of this research. Finally, a closing reflection is offered, more succinctly highlighting the key contributions of the research.

Crystallising key conclusions from any research is essential. However, historically the notion of ‘concluding’ conjures up ideas of neat parcels and simplification for me, born of my background in applied social research where bite-sized policy ‘takeaways’ are a familiar and broadly unquestioned means of communicating ‘what matters’. This formulation would not do justice to the principles of this study which embrace the fragmentary and fluid nature of people’s lived

experiences. So, rather than drawing things together all-too-easily, this chapter maintains part of the messy discursiveness which was inherent to my participants' journeying towards M-level study. (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) (Richardson 1990; Richardson 2000; Ellingson 2009). In addition, I acknowledge this research is speaking about a particular group of 41 UK-domiciled Master's students in England who shared their stories under particular research conditions on a particular day. Speaking to different students – including those who were not part of the first generation in their family to go to university – may produce a very different picture. Indeed, even talking to the same students on a different day or using a different vocabulary or theoretical framework is likely to produce a different picture (Kvale 1996). These reflections do not undermine the richness of the data, the importance of the conclusions or the depth of participants' narrations. They offer an abundance of insights to enrich our understanding of a concerning under-researched dimension of HE.

## 8.1 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following sections offer answers to the two overarching research questions. Within these sections, implications for HE research and practice are first introduced in a consolidated manner and then more fully fleshed in the subsequent commentary. This discussion illustrates that PGT cohorts are diverse: PGT students' relationships, commitments, navigations and life experiences are playing out in all sorts of different ways and the rationales for study are varying affective, pragmatic, critical and linked to the economic-political context. Moreover, the fact that there appears to be clear continuity of exclusions and resources from undergraduate through to PGT study suggests that historic approaches have not been successful in unsettling these issues and addressing inequalities in the long-term. Differential starting points bestow people with varied constellations of capitals and dispositions; those beginning in advantageous positions are more able to monopolise opportunities, meaning inequalities persist throughout the life course and affect PGT (Skeggs 2004a; Boliver 2011; Skeggs 2011; Pemberton and Humphris 2018). Those who do not possess particular valorised capitals, an embedded sense of the 'rules of the game' or a particular vantage point within certain fields are particularly likely to be more at the mercy of inequity (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1997).

### 8.1.1 How do students navigate their trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study?

#### **Policy and practice implications from Research Question 1**

- Universities need to (continue to) move away from 'one size fits all' pedagogy and provision which can be affectively and materially exclusionary. Multiple, flexible and supportive approaches are needed, covering diverse strategies for teaching and learning as well as varied PGT delivery models and mindful timetabling.
- Across the sector, we need to espouse new anti-deficit discourses which recognise and embrace both the ubiquity and value of non-linear educational journeys.
- Universities must advocate for FE as a critical yet politically under-valued and under-funded space, including campaigning for the reversal to budget cuts which have drastically constricted alternative pathways for learning.
- Whilst macro measures are useful and important in certain circumstances, practice and policy should also think deeply about students' lived experience in personal, interconnected and contextualised ways.
- HE stakeholders need to pay greater attention to dynamics of happenstance and serendipity which may currently fall outside the scope of current practice.
- As PGT study may be viewed as a means to access doctoral study, institutions need to reflect on how they market their programmes and advise students given the competitive nature of PhD funding and academic careers.

In the dominant discourse there exists a particularly neoliberal idea about how students make their way into and through HE. Percolated through policy, this view is hyper-individualised, (over-)emphasises agency over structure and proffers an erroneously tidy and straightforward picture. For example, the UK's HE regulator, the Office for Students, promotes a doxic outlook where students are simply in need of more 'impartial' and 'complete' information to conduct 'better' decision-making and thus access '*positive employment and study outcomes*' (OfS 2020a:2; OfS 2018). For PGT specifically, this perspective is bolstered by the (relatively small) body of psychology and business studies survey research which often suggests that PGT is all about work outcomes and Master's students are simply engaged in some instrumental form of careership (c.f.

Hesketh and Knight 1999; Ho *et al.* 2012; Kember *et al.* 2014; Banahene and Sykes 2015; Mellors-Bourne 2015; Bamber *et al.* 2017). Such thinking exists against a neoliberal backdrop of the ‘ideal’ – linear – student trajectory built on the fallacies of ‘free choice’ and ‘unhampered progress’ (Barnett 1996; Vázquez 2009; Farrugia 2018; Haas and Hadjar 2020). On the contrary, this research suggests that PGT students are engaged in a far more complex and personal process of non-linear journeying, a process shaped by the interrelations of agency, structure and happenstance.

Thinking first about the idea of journeying, the research illustrates that participants make their way towards M-level study through an uneven and sometimes labyrinthine terrain in distinctively idiosyncratic ways which never exist in stasis. This personal voyage is indivisible from the historical and socioeconomic contexts through which it unfurls. As a result, no story shared with me looked identical to another. All were deeply intimate and reflexive, bound up with critiques of capitalism, neoliberalism and social inequalities, indicative of how value was consistently struggled in a highly unequal terrain (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This included (but was not limited to) lived experience of labour market precarity, (in)accessibility of mental health support and structural and institutional classism and racism. Journeys were also deeply imbricated with intrinsic feelings, worldviews and constructions of self, making them intensely personal. Participants were engaged in complex and ongoing processes of becoming as students, as classed and intersectional subjects, as professionals, as parents, as partners, all reflective of the ongoing nature of habitus development (McNay 1999; McLeod 2005; Leaney 2019) and learning journeys (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). Indeed, the complex plasticity with which participants positioned themselves as intersectional, classed subjects and as individuals navigating multiple challenges undermines the notion that undergraduate provision re-moulds students into a homogenous body of burden-free middle-class graduates (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Boyne 2002; Hayes and Jandrić 2014). Thus, it would be erroneous to consider PGT students as a standardised cohort who all have similar trajectories and motivations, need little support and are comfortable with adopting or performing a supposedly ‘middle-classed’ habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Alcott 1988; Boyne 2002; Hayes and Jandrić 2014). This means having a one-size-fits-all or *laissez-faire* approach in PGT policy and practice – whether in marketing, provision, course content, institutional habitus or pedagogy – will ultimately be very limiting by failing to suit the heterogeneity of lived experience or meet students’ support needs. This may lead to marginalisation of students who are unable to align with structures and practice or do not (feel they) fit the ‘mould’. By remaining wedded to a single ‘traditional’ mode of HE operation – a

model which is inherently classed, raced, gendered and otherwise positioned – institutions may (unwittingly) be closing off opportunities for growth and inclusion and entrenching socially inequitable dynamics (Burke 2000). Some institutions who have engaged deeply with the relationship between the varied needs and experiences of their students and their offer have already made substantial headway in dismantling some of the normative structures of HE practice and may well be able to lead the way in the sector. This may include institutions who have adopted Universal Design for learning and inclusive campuses as well those performing well against certain HESA equity metrics.

Turning to the idea of non-linearity, the data illustrated how each part of life may be compressed or extended in a plethora of different durations, expansive for some, and full of hurry and haste for others (Campbell 2013). Participants' trajectories did have moments of decisive forward momentum and exacted planning but also included diversions, false starts, pauses, cyclical navigations and multiple attempts at particular things. As a result, there was a surprising range of trajectories to PGT even with a relatively small qualitative sample, with little evidence of simple, stepwise journeys. Most participants were 're-visitors' to HE with gaps in learning ranging from a year or two up to several decades. Others were first time entrants to HE, having met their M-level entry requirements through professional experience and vocational education rather than a Bachelor's degree. Even amongst younger participants, who might at first glance be considered to have somewhat more straightforward trajectories, there were complexities. For example, health conditions meant some had to enter university later in life or take more time to complete their undergraduate degree, whilst others had dropped out of programmes to change direction. In actuality, practically every storied life shared with me was complex and multi-directional. However, the doxic discourse about direct, straightforward trajectories being more desirable was a spectre hanging over interviewees. As a result, participants positioned their own navigations as 'not normal' or 'odd' and in the past had sometimes questioned whether their experiences and shape of their trajectory would preclude their progression into PGT. This illustrates how (prospective) students are consistently confronted with normative tropes and discursive power in distancing, marginalising ways that are hard to resist (Farrugia 2018).

This poses significant implications for how we speak about and resource M-level progression. Firstly, there is a need to actively espouse new, anti-deficit discourses which deliberately unsettle the normativity of coercive linearity. Attributed to the civil rights activist and lawyer, Marian

Wright Edelman, the familiar quote *'it's hard to be what you can't see'* is pertinent. As non-linearity is rarely highlighted as a normal (let alone positive) part of HE stories, participants were troubled that their lives did not follow a particular sort of unhampered journey. Potentially, prospective students may completely discount the idea of PGT study if they, too, see their life stories are positioned as 'lesser' to what the sector and labour market desires and/or expects. Moreover, if we begin to establish non-linearity as a more ubiquitous occurrence, diverse student experiences can be repositioned as common rather than 'atypical' which puts pressure on practice, pedagogy and wider student support to adopt flexible and varied means of delivery as a matter of course. Furthermore, this would allow us to begin to consider how a more 'protracted' pathway may actually resource people with enriching life experiences which ultimately may be more beneficial for both their personal HE journeys and for more diverse and effervescent teaching spaces.

In addition, recognising non-linearity underscores the importance of championing and properly funding multiple entry routes into HE. There was real appetite for learning across the life course, not simply to further a career but also to re-engage with identity construction, (re)claim selfhood, correct previous ills including educational disenfranchisement and allow people to repackage and re-understand themselves as valuable subjects (Skeggs 2011). For many participants, FE, work-based learning, Access to HE and community education were all critical spaces which opened up possibilities to move into PGT study. However, despite the immutable importance of these offers, cuts to FE following the 2008 recession have been far deeper than those for pre-school, school or HE (Belfield *et al.* 2018b). Thus, campaigning for a reversal to these reductions in national and local funding is an important strategy to open up possibilities for a greater number of potential PGT students, not to mention the wider benefits of having spaces for life-long learning.

Delving deeper into the non-linear journey theorisation, at some moments in their lives, interviewees had a degree of clarity about the journey they were tracing. However, it was perhaps more often the case that an intelligible roadmap was unavailable, particularly for postgraduate education. As such, richly visual metaphors of uncharted waters and rolling fog were used to describe the affective experience of not knowing which way to go, how to walk along the trail and the nervousness of forging forth into a mysterious future. This was intensified for participants who, as first-generation students, were often unable to draw on intergenerational familial HE experiences and the privileged 'hot knowledge' this can afford (Ball and Vincent 1998). However,



thinking about capitals from a feminist Bourdieusian perspective challenged a deficit understanding, particularly via Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) idea of personal-values, a theorisation which goes beyond the schema laid out by Bourdieu himself. In particular, their work highlights how we can draw on resources other than valued economic, social and cultural capitals which is illustrated when we *'include the excluded and their social values, action and affect'* (Skeggs and Loveday 2012:476). Using this framework highlighted that interviewees were not un-resourced to negotiate these challenges. What spoke very clearly through the data was how journeying was continually informed by prior life experiences and interactions, as detailed in this research's conceptual framework (see Section 3.4). In fact, past moments could cast an incredibly long shadow into the future, influencing participants' perceptions and actions sometimes years or decades later; the journey itself provided tools and learning for subsequent navigations. Especially influential seemed to be moments in education (both *'that one magic teacher'* and more disenfranchising encounters), first visits to university campuses, interactions with fellow students or colleagues, close relationships, experiencing a WP activity and going through significant trauma. More particularly, it was sometimes the small(est) moments in these experiences that stayed with participants and informed their voyage, be it an off-hand comment, emotional responses to the architecture of a building, a university slogan or someone's tone of voice. Thinking through the lens of the journey allows these intricate connections, small stories and longitudinal, life course navigations to be more apparent than is the case when thinking about a single truncated phase of life or a disembodied and depersonalised imagined student. This challenges policymakers, institutions and practitioners to start thinking and talking about issues such as progression and the student lifecycle in a decidedly different way. Until we begin to step away from simplistic high-level categorisations, abstraction, decontextualization and a siloed model of experience, we will not have a satisfactorily deep understanding. Instead, this research argues that we must think about people's lives as storied, context-embedded, intricate and interconnected.

Thinking about non-linearity and the journey also illuminated how a Master's degree was not necessarily the end educational destination in and of itself but a stop along the way of longer, hoped-for paths. Nearly half of interviewees mentioned a desire to progress to doctoral study (especially but not exclusively younger participants), many spoke passionately about the future and there was a real collective sense of learning being a life-long endeavour. Such reflections conjure up the Deleuzian notion of the rhizome, which is always *'in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo'* where the Master's degree can be positioned as a mid-point or tributary

rather than a terminus (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:25). However, the prominence of doctoral desires raises concerns. Although some participants had secured funding through 1+3 studentships, others explained how Master's study – despite its financial, affective and temporal burden – was their only option to try and access sought-after funded doctoral places. Such issues demonstrate the neoliberal ideology of individual risk at play. With such limited options, students who wanted to engage were faced with no other option but to assume the burden and hazards of trying to reposition themselves in very constricted landscapes of choice (Reay *et al.* 2001). This begs questions of universities and how they position their PGT offers, given they are well-aware that doctoral funding and academic careers are so hard to come by. As Wakeling and Hancock (2019) caution, there are ethical issues in encouraging students to dedicate their time, money, resources and emotions to doctorates given the underemployment of doctoral graduates. The introduction of the postgraduate doctoral loan is thus perhaps not the policy panacea it is sometimes presented as. Whilst offering no guarantee of what might happen next, it further extends student debt and is capped at a level which could require punitively high hours of work alongside study for those without substantial existing economic capital.

Lastly, the third part of the answer to how students navigate their trajectories to PGT study is the triumvirate of structure, agency and happenstance and the interactions between them. There was, certainly, some very granular constrained decision-making taking place, where structural forces and participants' capitals interacted with limited agency, in turn dragooning or expanding horizons of possibility. Interviewees were working through and against intersecting and competing responsibilities including caregiving, work, looking after their health, relationships with others, paying bills, rents and mortgages and managing homes. Indeed, it seemed that being older on average, having more commitments and some stronger ties to place could make the process more complicated and multifaceted than many interviewees' undergraduate transitions. In this context, finding the space, the time, the money, the energy and the support to move into M-level study could be akin to a complicated game of 3D chess with concurrent moves and negotiations being played out on different plains simultaneously. This immediately points towards some concrete actions which would support progression into PGT study, such as ensuring delivery models are designed with working, caregiving and disabled students in mind, comprehensive part-time and flexible programming and the need for greater bursary provision.

However, it was often the third space between and connecting structure and agency – happenstance – where the most important ‘turning points’ in peoples’ trajectories emerged. Happenstance is both temporal and emplaced, where particular times and spaces offer different conditions of serendipity and horizons of possibility. Key people – guides on the side (O’Shea 2018) – were particularly critical spaces of serendipity where a ‘chance’ conversation with a teacher, lecturer, colleague or friend could spark an ‘epiphany’, assuage concerns or shed light on a formerly ‘mysterious’ possibility. In other cases, happenstance emerged as something more intangible and affective, a fuzzy, hard-to-lock-down sense of ‘readiness’ or ‘rightness’ (Waller *et al.* 2011). A number of participants had sudden ‘aha!’ moments where particular conditions transpired, a ‘lightning-bolt’ sensation, revealing PGT to be a possibility. This was often in non-quotidian times and places, such as having just finished a degree, receiving grades, going on holiday or after a big life event. Others instead spoke about longer periods of reflection where serendipitous conditions slowly emerged. Thinking about what the importance of happenstance means for HE practice is complicated as much of it is either incorporeal or occurs in everyday conversations and ruminations. As elusive happenings, they are harder to interrogate, evaluate and influence than – for example – summer schools or open days. However, a first step is simply to recognise how influential these little moments are and to acknowledge that some of the most critical junctures in people’s lives may take place beyond the current scope of HE policy activity, university recruitment, marketing, careers guidance and WP practice.

Moreover, the difficulty in engaging with happenstance must not preclude action, as this study clearly indicates that there are complex social inequalities which need to be addressed within this complex terrain by multiple actors. In particular, happenstance is not socio-politically neutral. For example, it was frequently ‘high achievers’, employees in senior roles or people that had been able to form personal, strong relationships with educators that found themselves party to illuminating conversations, indicating that positionality, capitals and relative power intersect to allow certain people to access conditions of serendipity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1997; Regan and Graham 2018). Information, advice and guidance about M-level study was thus seen as something of a lottery, resourced by occupying a particular time-space and positionality. One possible way to challenge this might be to consider the sorts of revelations and insights that were important in these moments and to find channels to disseminate this in a more open and inclusive manner. However, happenstance also had particularly affective and interpersonal dimensions. Thus, any future action should be mindful that this is not simply about providing

objective information via staid, one-way transmission, but also about mutually respectful emotional encouragement and emplaced, trusting, personal relationships.

8.1.2 How do students' subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their PGT journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

### **Practice and policy implications from Research Question 2**

- PGT must be more deliberately integrated into equity agendas in light of the continuities of social inequalities which extend into this space
- Institutions need to reflect on communication strategies to ensure that M-level options are neither a mystery nor a lottery. This includes comprehensive discussions with undergraduate students but should expand beyond this, given potential PGT students may have had a break from university or have no prior HE experience.
- The stratification and elitism within the UK's HE sector must continue to be challenged. However, responsibility does not lie within the sector alone, as employers and wider society are complicit in maintaining the myth of the 'good' university.
- Institutions and employers should consider the stickiness of place, the uneven distribution of (post)graduate opportunities and regional or municipal affordability. Devolution agendas should be promoted, alongside more opportunities for remote working and studying.
- Policymakers must review the justification and equity implications for certain PGT programmes costing above the maximum loan amount. The exception may be MBA programmes which are more likely to attract employer support. Moreover, whilst the introduction of the Master's loan is an important policy lever, more bursary and grant funding is needed.

One of the big conversations in the PGT space over the last few years has been the extent to which the glass (or class) ceiling has shifted from undergraduate to M-level study, following the advent of massification and credential inflation (UKCGE 2019). However, aside from the insights of voices such as Wakeling (2005; 2019), Tobbell *et al.* (2010), Pollard *et al.* (2016) and Strike and Toyne (2015), there is little in the literature which has explored barriers to PGT participation. This is a gap that needs to be redressed. Although students from underrepresented groups are now accessing

Master's degrees at a greater rate following the introduction of the Master's loan, economic disparity is just one dimension of inequality, and the loan is not addressing all financial barriers (Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020). Whilst prior research has established that the 'stickiness' of capitals and (dis)advantage becomes entrenched throughout school and undergraduate study, this research extends the evidence base by demonstrating ongoing continuity in the challenges that people navigate which extends beyond undergraduate study to PGT (Harrison 2018; Pemberton and Humphris 2018).

In particular, the data suggests that many of the familiar dynamics that we know shape undergraduate participation still matter when it comes to PGT study, where students' M-level navigations are informed by their resources and prior experiences. In particular, well-versed aspects like previous educational experiences and attainment, money, geographical (im)mobility, labour market structures, competing responsibilities, 'fitting in' and selfhood constructions continue to be salient for PGT progression. However, these dynamics can look different to the way that they manifest at undergraduate study and sometimes become more 'hidden'. Many factors were evident fairly comprehensively across the sample, despite the significant age range (between early twenties into the seventies) and were present across different geographic areas. Contrastingly, some of the issues – such as a sense of belonging – are particularly pronounced within high-status universities, indicating sectoral segmentation is a pressing issue. Thus, this study provides in-depth qualitative evidence which elaborates on Wakeling and Laurison's (2017) argument that social inequality has 'hydra-like' features, apparently disappearing only to rear its head(s) in new ways and spaces. This begs significant questions about the legacy of WP and what its future direction, approaches and focus may be, whilst recognising that WP is only one area of practice within the HE field, and the HE field itself sits within the broader context of a structurally unequal society. Nonetheless, the existence of these inequalities means HE institutions and policymakers cannot leave (potential) Master's students to navigate the terrain by themselves with only a loan in their arsenal. They must instead fully integrate PGT study into access and equity agendas.

Thinking about particular dynamics in more detail, awareness of HE and 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) – linked to social and familial capital – was relevant to both undergraduate and PGT navigations but was differentially resourced and experienced. Being part of the first generation in their family to attend university, participants were not often able to access advice from parents or

caregivers about undergraduate study but could turn to peers, colleagues, schools and colleges (Lewis 2009; Banahene and Sykes 2015). Moving towards PGT study, most participants had personal HE experiences to resource them but this was basically limited to exposure to a single Bachelor's programme at a single institution (Tobbell *et al.* 2010). Simultaneously, they were not provisioned with – or did not know where to access – comprehensive quality careers and education information, advice and guidance about PGT study. Those who were able to draw on social capital of family, friends or colleagues with postgraduate experience or close relationships with academic faculty were able to glean some insight. However, for most participants, M-level options remained opaque. For example, older interviewees were unaware of the Master's loan. This is intensified as (unlike undergraduate study) UCAS is not a comprehensive platform for programmes and admissions, requiring more effortful steps to explore options (Tobbell *et al.* 2010). This suggests a pressing need for HE institutions to reflect on whether they are truly meeting their responsibilities to support graduates' future steps. Although institutional careers services offer events and information about postgraduate opportunities, it seems that this may not be adequately permeating through cohorts, suggesting a need for universal delivery of detailed and timely information and practical support. Furthermore, given that PGT students are not all recent graduates, it is also important to consider how to help potential applicants who are not closely connected to the academy. Maximising alumni communications is one potential strategy, but others are necessary to reach those who have no prior HE experience or who have been away from the sector for some time. This might include closer partnerships with colleges and other FE providers as well as relationships with local employers and services.

Furthermore, like undergraduate decision-making, the machinations of neoliberalism, capitalism and institutional hierarchies constrain agency when it comes to PGT study. On the one hand, there was a surprisingly consistent perception amongst participants that older (pre-1992) institutions were more 'snobby' and 'elitist' and perhaps undeserving of their reputation, whilst new (post-1992) universities were more 'friendly' and 'welcoming'. Notably, this view was shared by interviewees who had attended different types of institution for undergraduate study, not only those with or without personal experience of a particular HE space. When they had not attended particular sorts of institutions themselves, interviewees drew on their experience of open days, university marketing, interactions with students from other institutions and from their everyday experiences and conversations. Moreover, participants' nuanced and granular awareness of class distinction, their complex, fluid and hybrid subjectivities and understanding of the plasticity and

continuities of class could be intensified by (high status) institutions' expressive orders. However, despite the strength of interviewees' views, many appeared to be increasingly limited in how much they could take these feelings into consideration for their M-level navigations because they were increasingly aware they operated in tension with other factors. These included how high-status institutions had larger or more specialist PGT offers and bigger bursaries, how research council funding only applies to some institutions and an increasing awareness of the *de facto* and quasi-doxic status and returns associated with highly-selective universities (Britton *et al.* 2020). The latter appeared particularly important for some younger students who had been exposed to the precarities of a very competitive graduate labour market. As a result, participants had to balance competing discourses and forces whilst being '*thrown back on themselves to make sense of the rules*' (Crozier *et al.* 2008:149; de Certeau 1988). Thus, concerns about 'fitting in' may not be so obviously born out in where PGT students study as it is at undergraduate education, where research has indicated that people occupying relatively less powerful positions may opt for universities with '*people like us*' (Reay *et al.* 2010:109). Nonetheless, affective discomfort does not seem to necessarily fade away and instead may be bubbling beneath the surface, indicating an uneasy disjunction between inhabiting a space and feeling comfortable (Ahmed 2012). To some extent, this points towards a need for much broader societal and structural change, as this complex issue cannot be dealt with by the sector alone. For example, employer views about recruiting from 'good' universities needs to be openly troubled alongside advocacy for institution-blind (post)graduate recruitment. The persistence of affective dimensions of stratification also unsettles the justification for high-status spaces to continue with their particular instrumental and expressive orders, as the exclusions these can produce appear to permeate across the life course (Lehmann 2014). It seems that studying in high-status HE spaces does not necessarily change the way that participants feel about them. So, rather than putting the focus on 'acclimatising' and 'enculturating' students to particular forms of valued habitus, high-status institutions should turn inwards and reflect on changing their praxis and institutional dispositions.

Geographical divisions also continue to play out in PGT trajectories – although this is slightly more complex than the common refrain of the North-South divide would suggest. There was a growing level of awareness and frustration about the impenetrable borders of London, where the living expenses, commuting costs and the fee levels at certain high-status inner-London universities effectively excluded participants who were not able to access enough economic capital to breach the walls (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Bathmaker *et al.* 2013; Hinton-Smith 2016). This impresses

the need for policymakers to review the legitimacy of programmes charging more than the maximum loan amount, other than MBAs which tend to be one of few courses employers are willing to fund; there are ethical questions about using public funding to upskill the private sector. Moreover, not only did geographic-economic divisions make certain PGT courses inaccessible but also limited participants' future journeying, as interviewees explained that many desirable careers in the civil service, research or not-for-profit sectors were concentrated in the capital. Concurrently, participants' lives were often quite tied to place when it came to M-level study through their work, caring responsibilities and relationships, meaning that PGT options available locally were often their only options. This underscores the continuing importance to progress a regional devolution agenda, break London's stranglehold on opportunities, promote remote working rather than relocation and, as mentioned in the previous section, for institutions to think about their offers in more flexible ways, perhaps through greater use of distance learning, blended provision or block release courses.

Economic pressures and disparities also extended to PGT study. Most interviewees had worked throughout their journey and talked about the stress borne of unequal economic capital, particularly compared to peers whose families were able to financially support them. However, PGT decision-making took place in the context of more constricted student finance (covering fees and not living) and huge variation in fee levels between institutions and disciplines. These factors enmeshed with geographical affordability, greater personal financial commitments and having to work longer hours than during undergraduate study. Furthermore, Muslim participants highlighted the problematic nature of loans which accrued debt coming into tension with their religious beliefs. Moreover, for some students, the fears of taking on (additional) student debt meant they were either unwilling to take out the Master's loan or requested as little as possible. This appeared to be particularly the case for interviewees occupying especially precarious positions and navigating multiple inequalities, suggesting that the classing of debt aversion extends throughout the life course (Callender and Mason 2017). Indeed, the fact that the Master's loan led to an initial uplift in UK-domiciled enrolments which then plateaued suggests it effected some latent demand for PGT entry from people who hitherto had been unable to access other financial capital, but did not resolve all the economic barriers to participation, particularly for those occupying relatively less powerful positions (Adams *et al.* 2019; Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020). This research supports this inference, as a number of interviewees explained that the loan and/or alumni discounts would not have been enough to allow them to enter PGT study and emphasised the



inexorable importance of grants and bursaries. This thus points towards the need for more targeted support and non-repayable student finance options.

## 8.2 PGT AT A PIVOTAL MOMENT

Every year presents its own challenges. However, the end of 2020 (when the research was finalised) feels particularly saturated with risks that have renewed our focus on pressing social inequalities. Beginning with COVID-19, in the UK we are experiencing the pandemic through a particular neoliberal policy context. With universities now so reliant on (international) student fees in the neoliberal turn, an expected drop in numbers meant universities swiftly looked to cut costs (McKie 2020). The assumed scenario did not actually emerge, with 2020-21 international enrolments breaking records in the UK, perhaps in part due to other popular destinations closing their borders and US-China tensions (Adams 2020). Nonetheless, the sectoral response – with jobs and bursaries immediately coming under fire – indicated how quickly institutions turned to neoliberal austerity strategies. Furthermore, the significant efforts put into maximising recruitment whilst cuts were being made or mooted illustrated the precarity of neoliberal financing models (Nietzel 2018). It will be essential to keep a critical and focussed eye on PGT recruitment practices to ensure they do not err into economic exploitation. Moreover, although it is impossible to make any cast-iron predications about how the future may pan out, this crisis has put us on the precipice of an especially deep and painful recession. Across the UK, many redundancies have been announced and more are expected, with the service, hospitality and creative sectors under particular pressure (Gustafsson and McCurdy 2020; King 2020). These are the very same area that younger participants and those occupying relatively less powerful positions were using to support themselves through PGT programmes. Bringing together these specific pressures together – the precarity of both university support and the labour market – raises the spectre of the sector returning to a context where only those that can independently afford PGT study will be able to do so, a real step backwards.

Furthermore, this study has already illustrated the (im)mobility of Master's students who are often tied to place in relatively strong ways. Due to the pandemic, the level of spatial movement that will be possible and, indeed, desirable for many people over the coming months and years is unclear. This suggests that a more localised approach to PGT may be prudent. Related is the rapid transition to virtual provision that has occurred (Batty and Hall 2020). Whilst this may potentially open PGT in exciting ways, there remain questions about pedagogic and equity implications in

order to inform sensitive future development. Universities have a responsibility not only to protect the wellbeing of their staff and students but also to ensure that students learning remotely are able to access the space, conversations and technology needed to fully participate. Turning to digital pedagogy experts, such as the Open University, may be critical to share learning across the sector.

Moreover, the pandemic has created the '*largest disruption of education systems in history*' following school closures and the quarantining of staff and students (UN 2020:2). Furthermore, the scandal around the initial use of algorithms to grade UK school leaver qualifications in summer 2020 was highly problematic and inequitable, privileging private schools both through their smaller class sizes and historic attainment data (Elbanna and Engesmo 2020). The disturbances to learning for successive incoming cohorts must be considered by universities not only in their (contextual) admissions but also through their inductions, on-course support and wraparound services. Over the coming years there may well be many students who were unable to mitigate the disruptions of school closures, illness, trauma or teaching staffing issues. This may have a knock-on equity impact in terms of who is positioned to be able to access PGT in the coming years.

Furthermore, the pandemic is certainly not the 'great leveller' that was initially touted (Milne 2020). Bambra *et al.* (2020) have highlighted that we are in a 'syndemic pandemic', a combination two epidemics: COVID-19 and inequality, particularly affecting poorer communities and people of colour. Alongside the global encroachment of this novel coronavirus, the murder of George Floyd and the BLM movement brought renewed global attention to structural racism, with many in the UK highlighting our complicity in structural racism through our colonial past and inequitable present (Joseph–Salisbury *et al.* 2020; Samayeen *et al.* 2020). Thinking about PGT, it is important to reflect intersectionally. Without a decisive anti-racist agenda, the interactions between race and socio-economic inequality may conspire particularly to exclude poorer students of colour from M-level study, especially Black students (Bambra *et al.* 2020).

Drawing these reflections together illustrates how, as a sector and society, we are existing in particularly precarious and risky times. Those occupying relatively less powerful positions are ever-more at the forefront of exclusions and insecurity and 2020's consecutive crises appear to be reinforcing rather than dismantling existing inequalities. This impresses the need to think deeply and critically about ways to move forward in more equitable ways that challenge dominant neoliberal agendas.

### 8.3 THINKING THROUGH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Insights and conclusions were made more readily available and novel due in no small part to this study's methodology. The small body of prior research on PGT study has often drawn on high-level quantitative data or relied on small case studies, often students on a single programme at a single institution. Some of this, especially the scholarship of Paul Wakeling (2005; 2017; 2017), offers seminal insights about the location and level of inequalities in PGT participation. However, this left questions about *how* social inequalities play out across different M-level trajectories and how these navigations are experienced by students themselves, a gap that in-depth sociological qualitative inquiry could make significant headway in. Moreover, there are specific elements of the chosen methodology and research design which facilitated particular understandings of journeyed, storied lives.

Firstly, theoretical groundings – namely Bourdieu, feminist theory and poststructuralism – furnished the research with a particular sensibility by coming into conversation with one another. Bourdieu's work proved to be a powerful basis to reject the 'species' approaches and labelling that is deployed in the dominant discourse about HE equity, replacing this with more fluid and structural interpretations (Davey 2012a). This replaced deficit discourses like 'disadvantaged students' or 'poverty of aspiration' with a consideration of how positionality and life experiences differentially resource people and their navigations through the social world. Moreover, when intertwined with feminist (re)readings, capitals, habitus, field and doxa can be understood in less deterministic ways, thus better accounting for change and continuities sometimes in a more subtle fashion (Moi 1991; McNay 1999; Adkins and Skeggs 2004; Skeggs 2004b; McLeod 2005; Reay *et al.* 2009). Epistemologically, the diptych of feminism and poststructuralism ensured that relative, positioned and discursive power was centred. It also encouraged a continual dedication to disrupting simplifications, troubling 'objectivity', focussing on discourse, attending to subjectivity and reflexivity (Alcoff 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Butler 1999; St. Pierre 2000; Burke 2002a; Honkanen 2007; Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Ahmed 2017; Phipps 2020). The resulting framework offered rich and complicating ways to interrogate overarching sociological stalwarts such as structure, agency, identity, time, space and the life course. Moreover, it gave rise to a particular ethical sensibility informed by principles of care, voice and representation where the research was conceived as 'travelling' (Kvale 1996) and committed to a continually reflexive and intricate awareness to ethics as they emerge in practice (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Additionally, using a narrative approach meant connections could be made between past—current-present, time-space-subject and context-trajectory by facilitating deep personal reflection, allowing ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories to speak through the data (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). This allowed for a complex understanding of how dynamics are co-constructive and interrelated over the life course, reaching out tendrils in knotted, tricky and obfuscated ways. Further, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990:2) note, *‘humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives’*. So, ontologically and epistemologically, using narratives means looking at phenomena in a way that reflects how people experience the world. Moreover, as they represent storied content, narratives offer a window into temporality, place, social context and complicating events in a coherent but rich manner (McAlpine 2016). However, focussing on experience narratives and ‘small stories’ rather than event narratives, made space to embrace the ‘messiness’ of life, the undefined tributaries, moments which are yet been concluded or fully understood (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Squire 2008b). By not artificially ignoring data which did not adhere to strict syntactical rules – people are not always coherent narrators who follow a story from start to finish – important yet fragmentary parts of experience became integral to the research. These small moments were often so illuminating, rich and nuanced. The research would have been poorer without them and an alternative, more structured form of data collection may not have allowed them to emerge at all.

It was challenging to find a way to tap into inequalities as there are no perfect proxies which precisely mirror what we want to speak about (Dunne and Gazeley 2008; Harrison and McCaig 2015). Indeed, macro measures such as POLAR, TUNDRA, standard occupational classifications or eligibility for free school meals define inequality in a particular way and often erroneously construct a simple binary where individuals are defined as either advantaged or disadvantaged. This, firstly, does not reflect how geography, money, family experiences, education, social connections and relations to the labour market interrelate and produce complex matrices of inequalities. Secondly, these metrics and their usage implicitly label people and so act as *“significant forms of inscription”* (Skeggs 2004a:5). Although there is no perfect mechanism to solve this conundrum, the approach of speaking to students who were part of the first generation in their family to enter HE proved to be productive. On the one hand, first-generation status is not the most discerning of indicators; it may include people with professional parents (such as engineers who followed vocational routes or a pilot who trained in the Armed Forces) alongside those whose caregivers are not so resourced or relatively powered. Indeed, within my sample

there were younger participants experiencing multiple, severe challenges alongside older participants in established careers on relatively high-paid salaries whose parents had left compulsory schooling prior to massification when HE entry was not so normative. There are, therefore, valid reasons for not focussing on first-generation status as a meaningful target for pre-entry work. Simultaneously, the literature indicates there are important relationships between first-generation status and key dynamics of HE entry, including lower PGT progression (Morgan 2014; Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling *et al.* 2017), lower rates of participation and attainment (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Harrison and Waller 2010; Moore *et al.* 2013; Hope 2014), less access to practical and tangible advice (Gale and Parker 2015; Harrison and Waller 2018) and a perceived lack of ‘fit’ in the academy (Hope 2014; Morgan 2014). So, the framing is not without empirical justification. More importantly, because it speaks to a relatively wide group of people, it allows inquiry to recognise how people can be both advantaged and disadvantaged along different tangents concurrently. As a construct which is somewhat more relative, multi-dimensional and fluid, it allows an exploration of relative power and intersections of various forms of capital. So, it provided the research with a framing to think about inequalities as a continuum or double helix, rather than something more static or simplistic. Indeed, this framework provided a means to explore how participants faced varying challenges around money, networking and prior qualifications among other facets, but none were dealing with precisely the same landscape.

Lastly, the research design – deciding which institutions to focus on – was initially an incredibly challenging and detailed process, involving triangulation of the HE literature alongside a variety of data sources including institutional and student data, universities’ strategy documents, census data and industrial profiling of different areas. Being able to explore different types of institutions in different geographies meant it was possible to explore the connections between participants’ trajectories and how they were embedded within their contexts. Discussion about geographical differences was perhaps a little more muted than I expected. Conceivably, given that many participants felt fairly settled ‘in place’ by this point in their life, their attention was more focussed on divisions between local institutions rather than differences between more geographically disparate places. In other words, perhaps discussions about geographical differences were muted because moving for PGT was not an option – nearly four in five interviewees were studying in the same area they had been living in the years prior. So, the importance of having provision close-by was a clear common theme. Other pressing issues worthy of further interrogation included the fiscal inaccessibility of London, regional disparities in costs of living and classist attitudes towards

‘Northern’ and/or ‘working-class’ accents within elitist spaces in the South of England. On the other hand, institutional stratification between universities came through incredibly clearly. Throughout participants’ narratives, there were clear tensions between the *de facto* reputation or associated ‘rewards’ to high status universities and the often-exclusionary nature of their praxis and institutional habitus. Moreover, being able to speak to students in different institutions showed how pervasive this seemed to be, regardless of the path interviewees themselves had followed. This indicates that segmentation of the HE sector may become entrenched over undergraduate study and participants – especially those who were younger and more vulnerable to the precarities of a capitalist labour market – were not always able to resist its coercive power.

#### 8.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study offers a broad interrogation of the possible intersections between social inequalities and PGT trajectories in the face of historic silences surrounding M-level study in the academic literature. However, this is very much a beginning and there are several possible directions that would develop theoretical, empirical and practical understandings.

Firstly, due to the time-limited nature of doctoral study, it was necessary to adopt a cross-sectional design and the data is thus a snapshot of participants’ memories and histories as they were recalled that day. This, by its nature, leads to a somewhat partial picture. Future research may wish to take a more longitudinal approach, following people over several years to explore how PGT does and does not feature in those trajectories. However, aside from recruiting from final-year undergraduate students who might be mulling the idea over, there would be significant recruitment challenges. It would perhaps be more prudent to explore what happens ‘next’ to extend the picture presented in this thesis – both on-programme and in subsequent years. There are unanswered tangents implicit in this research – such as desires for doctoral study or certain careers – which are unknown at present.

Secondly, this study limited inquiry to universities, a legally-enshrined title which only makes up part of the picture of HE provision. This was a helpful strategy given the dominance of universities in providing PGT study but does not tell the whole story. The trajectories of students who pursue postgraduate study in other contexts – in FE colleges or private providers – may be significantly different and worth exploring, particularly in the context of policy announcements aimed at

diversifying the HE landscape. Moreover, fully remote-delivery and rural/campus universities may experience dynamics in slightly different ways.

Thirdly, participants in this study were those that ‘made it’ to PGT, for whom the barriers presented along the way were not insurmountable. Some inferences can be drawn in that certain obstacles may have proved impassable for other students, but this cannot be concretely asserted. Accessing the unknown unknowns – those students who considered PGT but never made it to the point of accepting an offer or even formalising an application – would be a very difficult endeavour but is an essential missing piece of the picture. Those who enter PGT are not a good counterfactual for those that do not. Moreover, at least one participant had to leave their PGT programme due to the inflexibility of their employer. Attrition from M-level study was somewhat beyond the scope of this study but is another essential dimension of inequalities in this space which is worthy of further interrogation.

Fourthly, this research was committed to focusing on student voices and lived experience, and so decided not to include other perspectives as part of its inquiry. Future research may wish to bring other perspectives into conversation with student narratives. One direction may be loved ones, colleagues and key associates of PGT students to understand the interrelatedness and connectedness of these navigations. Alternatively, the perspectives of WP practitioners, policymakers, academic faculty and other stakeholders may help move this research further into the realm of applied practice, offering up opportunities to further resourcing and planning.

Fifth, this study restricted its inquiry to England only, due to the desire for an in-depth study with multiple intersections (demographic, geographic and institutional). Whilst there may be some transferability of these insights to international contexts, how this may play out is unclear from this current vantage point. Looking across international contexts, perhaps in a comparative way, would be a very useful next step. Moreover, some particular English geographies were not included because of the desire to look at spaces where learning may be more transferable to other context. As such, the particularities of inner London, rural areas and Oxford and Cambridge may well present dynamics which were not possible to explore in this research.

## 8.5 A FINAL REFLECTION

To close, I want to reiterate the important contributions this research makes. Firstly, the lens of non-linear journeying offers an alternative theorisation for HE trajectories. This moves away from

more neoliberal thinking which focuses simply on abstract student decision-making or siloes trajectories into unlinked transitions. Instead, the journey motif positions trajectories as connected, contextual and deeply embedded in the historical and socio-political conditions they evolve in. Moreover, this framing facilitates reflection on the real humanity in educational navigations and their personal nature, illustrating learning is not simply 'for' enhancing labour market outcomes. It is also a space that holds a huge amount of meaning for people and thus can be a place of passion, transformation and an opportunity to redress previous ills and injustices from years or even decades before. Secondly, thinking about non-linear journeying highlights the importance of happenstance and serendipity, a third space between and connecting structure and agency which is both temporal and emplaced. This is often side-lined but holds significant explanatory power. These 'little moments' are often obfuscated and transient but can manifest as significant turning points and are worthy of far greater attention within HE practice and research. Thirdly, the research evidences the continuity of inequalities and obstacles throughout the life course into the PGT space. In particular, the research offers in-depth qualitative evidence illustrating how this plays out in people's lived lives, adding richness to the existing quantitative research which indicated divisions were present. This suggests that although undergraduate education serves many purposes, on its own it is neither fixing systemic social inequalities nor converting all students into 'middle-class', 'productive' 'global citizens' who no longer face challenges. This all makes a clear case that policy needs to continually be informed by lived experience in a way that recognises its complexity, situatedness and personal nature, rather than seeking to homogenise or obscure variation.

I began this doctoral journey from a place of passion for postgraduate education, frustration that it was out of reach for so many people and a deep sense of guilt that my journey and positionality had resourced me to be able to access PGT at a time when so many others could not. Conducting this research has reaffirmed those feelings, impressing the need to continue this work and seek to break down educational inequalities in the academy. Moreover, finalising the insights from this research has made me aware of further areas that need to be explored, including what happens to students further along their HE journeys throughout and beyond PGT, how we might be able to widen participation without intensifying credential inflation and how we might be able to do access and inclusion work more ethically. Injustices are perennial and cannot be ignored; continuing to develop our understanding of the lived experiences of people from different social backgrounds as they move into, through and beyond the academy remains vital to addressing



persistent inequalities in society. I hope that the insights developed through this doctoral research have gone some way to elucidating important issues that will inform future policy, practice and research, namely the relationships between social inequalities and university access for PGT students in the UK.

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## 10 Appendices

### 10.1 LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The literature search strategy took several approaches. Firstly, a quasi-REA was carried out which allowed for a structured, rigorous search strategy and quality appraisal of sources whilst not being as time and resource consuming as a full systematic review (Bearman *et al.* 2012; Varker *et al.* 2015). A search term/string matrix was designed (see Table 13) with secondary search terms being combined with primary search terms when more specificity was needed. A range of academic databases were targeted, including the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), the British Education Index (BEI), Emerald and Taylor and Francis. Purposive searches of key grey literature domains were also conducted including UK Government department and agency publications, the Office for Students, the Sutton Trust and HEFCE. Over the course of doctoral study, additional iterative and purposive searches were performed to identify new publications related to key domains and authors as well as emergent themes identified during analysis and writing up. Bibliographies of relevant papers were also scanned for further sources and citation searches were performed on particular key papers of most relevance to the research. Lastly, snowballing and recommendations from contacts was used to identify additional recommended papers with salient insights.

Empirical evidence was generally restricted to studies published after 1997 (i.e. after the massification of UK HE), and more recent post-recession literature (2010 onwards) was prioritised where appropriate. These criteria were dropped for theoretical and methodological papers where a broader insight was more appropriate. UK studies were prioritised, supplemented by a small number of relevant studies from the US, Canada and pan-European studies.

*Table 13: Literature search terms*

Domain	Primary search term(s)	Secondary search term(s)
Higher education	Postgrad*	Course
	Postgrad* AND taught	Qualification



	Master's OR Masters  M-level  PGT  "Higher education" OR HE "Tertiary Education"	Degree  Study  Educat*
<b>Widening participation</b>	"Widening participation OR WP  "Fair access"  "Widening access" "Fair access"  Diversity  Equality  "Social mobility"	"Higher education" OR HE  Postgrad* OR PG OR PGT OR Master's  Agenda  Universit*  Student*  Learner*  Educat*
<b>Social inequalities</b>	Social AND (inequality* OR equalit*)  (Social OR cultural) capital  (Socioeconomic or "socio-economic" OR social) AND disadvantage*  "Working class" OR "working-class"  "Social class"	"Higher education" OR HE  Postgrad* OR PG OR PGT OR Master's  Universit*  Student*  Learner*  Educat*
<b>Methodology</b>	Narrative	Method*

	Interviews	Qualitat*
	Ethic*	Feminist*
	Post-structural* OR poststructural*	

All bibliography sources were maintained in an Endnote online repository, organised in thematic groups such as HE equality, methodology and policy context. Publications were reviewed and analysed using an interactive extraction framework, providing detail about the source, methodology and key findings under various headings (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Extraction framework screenshot

	A	B	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
1										Findings									
2	Reference details				Methodology					Locating the HE student				Conceptualising (dis)advantage			HE Trajectories		
3	Author(s)	Year	RQs	Summary	Overview of method	Data sources/sample population	Method of data collection	Method and process of analysis	Limitations	Learner identity	The 'consumer'/neoliberal student	Belonging	Positioned subjectivities	Proxies (i.e. postcode data)	Deficit discourses	Valuing different knowledges	Social model of disadvantage	HE trajectories	Motivations and fears
74	Yosso	2005	How can cultural	This article conc	Theory	Theory	Theory	Critical race theo					p.74 "CRT recognize		p.75 "Deficit thinking t p.82 "deficit scholars				
75	Clark et al	2015	Intersection betw	Rising tuition fee	Mixed methods	One Russell Gro 17-18 year olds f	Longitudinal surv Focus groups (N Interviews with te	Thematic analysi	Single HEI, high	p.3 "Increasingly, stu p.8 "In a liberal mode p.2-3 "Discrepancies b p.5 "The students dri "The young men p.7-8 "Students often e p.8 "Rationalised em p.10 "young people in						p.8 "The strong discor	p.8 "students' 'ration terms of nuance their choices of s [NOTE RMR - n		
76	Haggis and Poug	2002	What are the ped	It is suggested t	Qualitative	13 students aged Single HEI	Reflective journa	Inductive analysi	Single HEI	p.332 "The link between "Teaching the t c p.326-7 "Th e rst them "Although the stu p.331 "at the end of th p.334 Karen again - "H			p.334 "From a slightly v	p.324 "Responses to tl					
77	Burke	2008	How do writing pi	In this article, I e	Qualitative	Personal reflecti Qualitative interv	Personal writings	Thematic analysi		p.203 "Hegemonic exp p.202 "On the course, "In his text, Gre			p.202 "Poststructuralisr	p.204 "Students const	p.201 "WP" students	p.200 "In higher educ p.203 "Importantly, heç "However, the im p.204 "Other' bodies o			
78	Archer et al	2018	How do subject s	'Setting' is a wide	Mixed methods	12,178 Year 7 stu 33 students - qui	Survey, focus grc	Thematic analysi							p.121 "discursive const p.123 "Thus setting, as [NOTE RMR - w				
	Haggis	2004	How could pedag	It might be expect	Qualitative	12 Access studie	Longitudinal case	Narrative analysi Uses 'interdeterm		PAPER CHALLE p.339	p.335 "the new role of t "The specifics of		p.337 "the fact that hun "The specifics of				p.343 "Negative' storie	p.343 Even although nc "As the various s	

## 10.2 INSTITUTIONAL ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical Review Application (ER/RAM38/2)		Copy Application	Help
<b>Project Title</b>	Exploring postgraduate taught (PGT) trajectories through the narratives of first-generation Master's students in England		
<b>Status</b>	Approved		
<b>Email</b>	[REDACTED]		
<b>Phone No.</b>	[REDACTED]		
<b>Applicant Status</b>	PG (Research)		
<b>Department</b>	Education		
<b>Supervisor</b>	Hinton-Smith, Tamsin		
<b>Project Start Date</b>	17-Sep-2017		
<b>Project End Date</b>	20-Sep-2020		
<b>External Funding in place</b>	✓		
<b>External Collaborators</b>	✗		
<b>Funder/Project Title</b>			
<b>Name of Funder</b>	SeNSS - ESRC		
<b>Project Description</b>	<p>This PhD is focused on exploring UK-domiciled first-generation students' trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study in England. The profile of the participant group and the topic of study means this study is being submitted to C-REC as low risk.</p> <p>The study will involve interviewing taught Master's students in four universities in England. Two universities will be based in a Southern region, whilst two will be in a Northern region. Each pair will comprise one 'high status', more selective institution and one more inclusive institution which serves the local community. The study has identified preferred pairings and alternative options if access cannot be secured for these preferred options. Preferred regions and institutions have not been named here to maintain anonymity.</p> <p>The study will target 'first-generation' students, which means people whose parent(s) or primary caregiver(s) have not participated in Higher Education. Although these are an under-represented group in Higher Education, their status as adults on Master's programmes means they are not an inherently vulnerable participant group.</p> <p>Data collection will involve 40 one-to-one interviews early into the 2018-19 academic year with self-selected UK-domiciled first generation Master's students, and four workshops (one in each institution) later in the 2018-19 academic year with any interview participants who agree to be recontacted, as well as eligible students who were not able to participate in the initial interviews. Interviews and workshops will each last approximately 90 minutes.</p> <p>Individual interviews will form the main component of my data collection. These will be open, semi-structured discussions of participants' journeys into PGT study. It is likely they will likely cover at least some of the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal, family and community background</li> <li>- Educational and undergraduate experiences</li> <li>- Aspirations, goals and expectations</li> <li>- Key influencers and information sources</li> <li>- 'Life events'</li> <li>- Funding, finances and resources</li> <li>- Identity</li> <li>- Barriers to participation</li> </ul> <p>I am not planning on asking sensitive questions, as the interviews are focused on my informants' experience of their journeys to PGT study. However, I am aware of the open nature of qualitative research, where participants can disclose highly personal and sensitive information unprompted. Similarly, I am aware of the potential for emotional impact of qualitative research interviews. In this event, I will signpost interviewees to the appropriate student support services in their institution of study.</p> <p>Workshops will take the format of a group discussion, based on a presentation of emerging anonymous findings from across the individual interviews. The workshops will be geared towards making sense of the findings and generating recommendations based on the data.</p> <p>All consent processes and data management will be compliant with the GDPR 2018. As such, the consent forms and information sheet included with this application have been based on the templates provided by the UK Data Service to ensure they meet the new required standards.</p> <p>Interviews will be conducted only under condition of prior fully-informed consent. Interview recordings and transcripts will be assigned anonymous unique IDs and will be stored separately from (password protected) demographic data and contact details. Participants will be granted access to their recordings and transcripts on request. I will use pseudonyms in all research outputs (i.e. thesis, articles, chapters, blogs etc.). Being mindful of the highly personal and in-depth nature of narrative interview, where necessary I will omit or change specific interview data (at the expense of richness) to guarantee confidentiality.</p>		

## 10.3 INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



### Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Trajectories

Individual interview informed consent form

Please tick the appropriate boxes

#### 1. Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated 16<sup>th</sup> July 2018, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

☐

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

☐

I understand that taking part in this part of the study involves participating in a semi-structured qualitative interview about my trajectory into PGT study. The researcher will complete written notes of our discussion and audio record the interview. Interviews will be fully transcribed. Audio recordings will be destroyed on completion of Rosa A. Marvell's PhD study or by January 2022, whichever occurs sooner.

☐

#### 2. Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for a PhD in Education as well as verbal and written dissemination of the research findings.

☐

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared with any third parties.

☐

I agree that my information can be anonymously quoted in research outputs.

☐

I agree to joint copyright of the visual timeline produced in interviews to Rosa A. Marvell

☐

I understand that I have the right to request access to my personal data and the correction (rectification) or removal (erasure) of such personal data any time up until 1st October 2019

☐

I agree that anonymised transcripts of my interview can be retained for additional research and publication connected to this PhD study. This data will be securely stored, with all personal data removed. The data will not be shared with any third parties and will only be used by Rosa A. Marvell.

☐

#### 3. Signatures

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

#### 4. Study contact details for further information

Rosa Marvell

[R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk)

Department of Education, The University of Sussex

Essex House

Falmer, Brighton

BN1 9RH



## First Generation Students' Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Trajectories

Workshop informed consent form

Please initial the boxes

### 1. Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated 16<sup>th</sup> July 2018, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

☐

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

☐

I understand that taking part in this part of the study involves participating in a group workshop to discuss the findings of interviews with first-generation Master's students. The researcher will complete written notes of our discussion and audio record the interview. Interviews will be fully transcribed. Audio recordings will be destroyed on completion of Rosa A Marvell's PhD study or by January 2022, whichever occurs sooner.

☐

I understand that I should not share information provided by other members of the workshop outside of this discussion

☐

### 2. Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for a PhD in Education as well as verbal and written dissemination of the research findings.

☐

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared with any third parties.

☐

I agree that my information can be anonymously quoted in research outputs.

☐

I understand that I have the right to request access to my personal data and the correction (rectification) or removal (erasure) of such personal data any time up until 1st October 2019

☐

I agree that anonymised transcripts of my interview can be retained for additional research and publication connected to this PhD study. This data will be securely stored, with all personal data removed. The data will not be shared with any third parties and will only be used by Rosa A Marvell.

☐

### 3. Signatures

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

### 4. Study contact details for further information

Rosa Marvell: [R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk)

Department of Education, The University of Sussex

Essex House

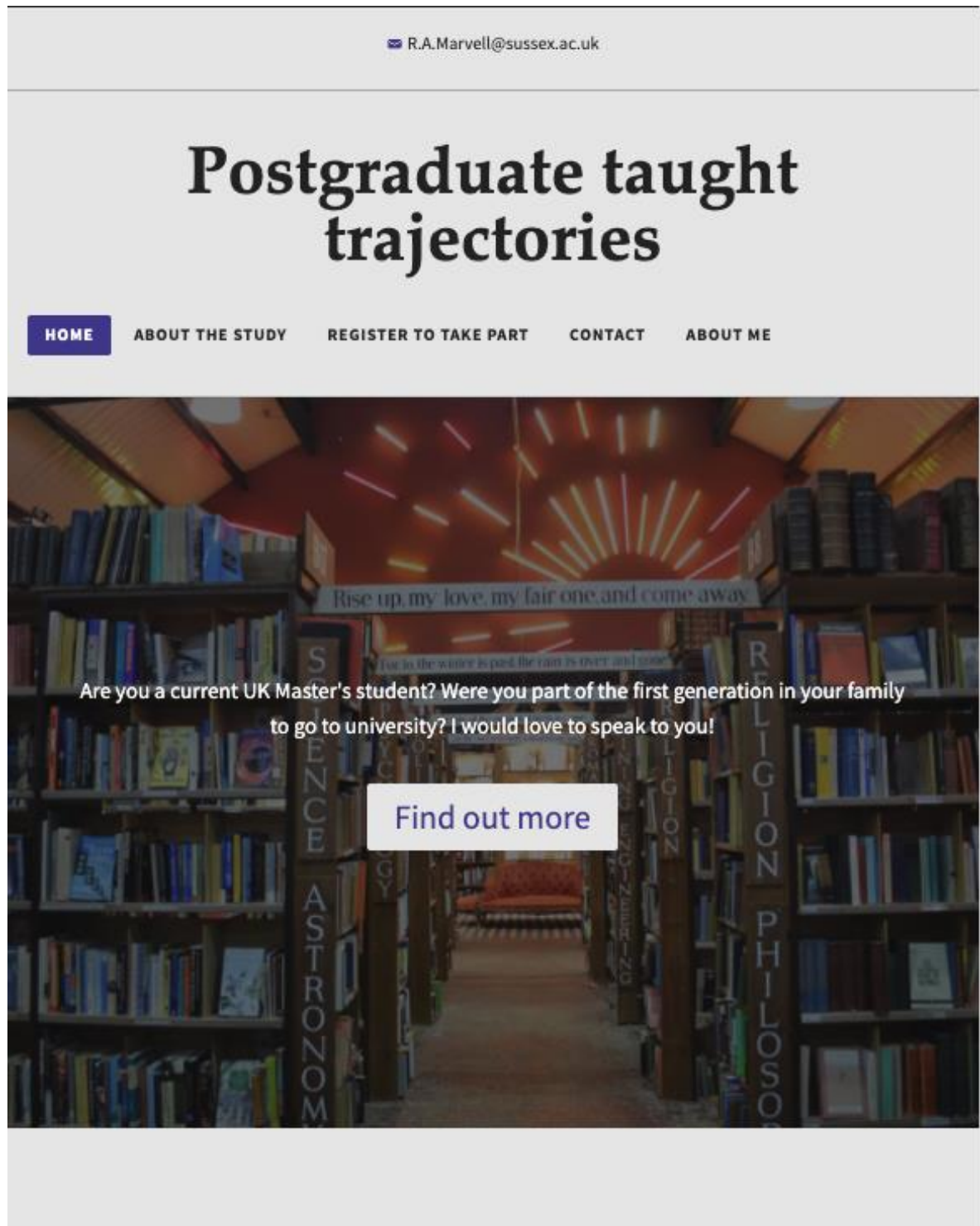
Falmer, Brighton

BN1 9RH



## 10.5 RESEARCH WEBSITE

### 10.5.1 Homepage



# About the study



This page provides information about the study, why it matters and what participation in the study would involve.

---

*I want to understand people's' journeys into Master's-level study in England and how different factors shape those trajectories. The research will be centred on the real life experiences of current Master's students, examining how various moments, encounters, relationships and ideas influence access to Masters' programmes.*

*This study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and has received ethical approval (ref: ER/RAM38/2) from the University of Sussex's Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee.*

---



Postgraduate taught (PGT) study – which includes taught Master’s degrees – is an increasingly important part of the Higher Education landscape. With increasing numbers of graduates, growing skills requirements for work and troubling graduate under- and unemployment, more and more people are turning to PGT. Master’s-level programmes can also be a vehicle for professional development, personal satisfaction and an opportunity to form new social connections.

However, we know very little about how and why people participate in Master’s-level study. We know even less about how the different encounters and resources may help or hinder those trajectories. This means researchers, practitioners and policymakers do not have a full understanding of how fair current access to PGT is.

I am being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ([ESRC](#)) – via the [South East Network for the Social Sciences](#) – to research the trajectories of ‘first generation’ students into PGT study in England. ‘First generation’ means people whose parents or primary caregiver(s) have not participated in Higher Education.

## Why does this study matter?

This study will offer indispensable new knowledge about what it is really like to access a Master’s degree in the current HE landscape. Crucially, I want the study to be centered on the personal experiences of current Master’s students – in your words, from your perspective – as this is so often lost from the broader discussion.

More specifically, I want to highlight the particular experiences of ‘first generation’ students. This is often an important factor in people’s’ educational journeys. I am particularly interested in these perspectives because people who are the first generation in their family to go to university may not have had the same access as other students to experiences, information, advice and guidance about Higher Education or postgraduate study.

This research will contribute invaluable understanding of the intersection between fair access and PGT study, including the implications for widening participation to undergraduate study. I also hope my PhD will generate collaborative recommendations for universities and policymakers which could help them improve their provision for and make access fairer in future .

## What does the study involve?

The study involves life-history interviews and workshops with first generation PGT students at four different universities in England. Interviews will take place between October 2018 and February 2019. Workshops will take place in summer 2019.

If you decide to take part in a interview, we will have an open one-to-one conversation about your journey. The discussion will focus on whatever aspects matter most to you, but this might include your undergraduate study and other educational experiences, your personal and family background, your motivations for PGT study, funding, information, advice and guidance or other important people and moments in your life. During the interview, we will also complete a visual timeline representing your journey. Individual interviews will take place in a convenient and confidential location that you feel comfortable in. We will agree a time that fits in with your schedule. I will provide some refreshments.

If you would also like to take part in the workshop, you will be with a small group other first generation Master's students studying at your university. The group will hear about the findings from the interviews across all four universities, share their views on the findings and discuss potential recommendations which you think could help other people like you in future.

Please note, you do not have to participate in the workshops if you would like to participate in an individual interview.

To register to take part in the study, please click [here](#) or go to 'register to take part' above.

# Protected: Register to take part

**I would love to speak to you if you are:**

- 1. Currently on a taught Master's programme – in any discipline;**
- 2. Usually resident in the UK; and**
- 3. Part of the first generation in your family to go to university**

If you would like to participate in an individual interview and be invited to a group workshop later in the year, please **fill in the form below**. If you have any trouble completing the form, please email me at [R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk).

Participation is entirely voluntary, which means it is up to you whether you would like to take part or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be given an information sheet to keep and be asked to sign an informed consent form. If you agree to participate in the study, you can withdraw at any time, without having to provide a reason.

I am asking for some personal information (such as your age and gender) as I would like to speak to a range of different people, from different backgrounds and at different stages of life. All of this information will be stored securely and not shared with any third parties. If you would rather not provide this information at this stage, please select 'prefer not to say'.

**Name** (required)

**Email** (required)

**Telephone number**

**Which university are you studying at?** (required)

☐ Please confirm you are currently enrolled on a standalone taught Master's degree (required)

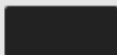
**What is the title of your Master's programme?** (required)

☐ Please confirm you are part of the first generation in your family to attend Higher Education. This means your parent(s) or primary caregiver(s) did not go to university. (required)

**Age** (required)

**Gender** (required)

**Ethnicity** (required)





#### 10.5.4 Contact page

# Contact



If you have any questions about the research or you would like an informal chat before deciding whether to participate, please fill in the form below and we can arrange a time to chat over email, phone or Skype. Alternatively, you can email [R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Marvell@sussex.ac.uk) directly.

**Name** (required)

**Email** (required)

**Comment** (required)

Customize Edit Statistics ...

# About me



My name is Rosa Marvell. I am currently a PhD researcher based in the Department of Education at the [University of Sussex](#), and am a member of the [Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research \(CHEER\)](#) and the [Centre for Teaching and Learning Research \(CTLR\)](#). I live and work in Brighton.

I am also a Sociology tutor and an academic mentor for the [Realising Opportunities](#) programme at the University of Sussex.

Before I started my PhD, I worked as a Research Fellow at the [Institute for Employment Studies \(IES\)](#), a not-for-profit independent research organisation based in Brighton. During my time at IES, I specialised in research about equality, diversity and inclusion in work, post-16 education, Higher Education and vocational training. I am now a Research Associate for IES.

I have a BA in Anthropology and an MA in Globalisation, Ethnicity and Culture, both awarded by the University of Sussex.

My university web profile can be viewed [here](#).







## 10.6 DISCUSSION GUIDE

### 10.6.1 Introduction

1. I'd like you to tell me a little bit about what you are currently doing – your course, and any first impressions?

### 10.6.2 Narrative elicitation

2. I'd like you to talk me through your trajectory to your Master's degree.

Start wherever you feel is most important and touch on any moments, thoughts, decisions, people, places or incidents you think matter to your story.

You can choose which moments you want to share, however big or small, and refer to any point in your life. I will try to not interrupt you until you feel you have said all you want to.

As you talk, we can map the things you talk about along the timeline to piece together your story

#### *10.6.2.1 Narrative prompts*

3. Is there anything you would like to add to your story?; OR  
Are there any other things you remember happening?
4. You mentioned X was very important, can you tell me more about that?
5. Y seems to be a prominent theme for you, could you describe why that mattered to your story in a bit more detail?

### 10.6.3 Specific follow-up questions

6. How important do you feel your background and where you've come from is?
  - i. Family, caregiver(s), social networks
  - ii. Location(s), geographical context, local economic context
7. What has been the influence of different educational and learning environments on your trajectory?
  - i. Different environments – compulsory schooling, 16-19 (where not part of compulsory education), work-based learning

- ii. Undergraduate study
  - iii. Attitudes towards education and learning
  - iv. 'Belonging' and 'fitting in'
  - v. Challenges and risks
8. In what ways have your hopes, goals and life expectations affected your trajectory?
- i. Intrinsic VS extrinsic/imposed
  - ii. Voiced VS silenced
  - iii. Accepted VS rejected VS 'let go'
9. Have there been any particular influential people or information sources that played a key role in your trajectory?
- i. Family, friends, social networks
  - ii. Teachers, educationalists, careers advisors
  - iii. Work, volunteering
  - iv. IAG, research and labour market information
  - v. Sudden or gradual personal insights, instincts and beliefs
10. Do you feel that you have experienced any big 'life events' which impacted on your trajectory?
- i. Having children, bereavement, changing work, unemployment, new relationships or relationships breakdown
11. How important have issues about funding and finances been to you?
- i. Master's loans
  - ii. Other external sources of funding (bursaries, employers, grants)
  - iii. Self-funding
  - iv. Employment
  - v. Perceptions of debt and investing in PGT
12. Can you tell me a little about you and your identity – what makes you the person you are?
- i. Learning
  - ii. Work
  - iii. Caring and family
  - iv. Class
  - v. Gender, sexuality
  - vi. Ethnicity

- vii. Attitudes and orientations
- viii. Passions, beliefs

## 10.7 INITIAL CODING THEMES

Life-long 'geeks', 'nerds' and 'thinkers'
Interrupted trajectories and temporary educational disillusionment
Reformulated, reoriented and newly emergent learner identities
Classed identities and evocations
Lived intersections and complex identity formations
The draw of the familiar
Affective experience of being othered and alienated
Feeling 'belonged'
Sociopolitical and ethical beliefs
Rebellion, resistance and persistence
Neoliberal and psychological discourses
Family backgrounds and stories
Family and community educational norms and perceptions
Family and community expectations for work and life
"Guides on the side" - teachers, tutors, educators and line managers
Challenge and support from friends and colleagues
Importance of bonds with friends and peers

<b>Bridging the gap through careers advice, information and guidance (CIAG)</b>
<b>Qualifications and credentials</b>
<b>Support (familiar and other) with educational decision-making</b>
<b>Classed 'code switching'</b>
<b>Earnings, income, savings and 'wealth'</b>
<b>Master's loans, other student debts and the changing student finance landscape</b>
<b>Employer support (tangible and in-kind)</b>
<b>Anger, anxiety and fear of failure</b>
<b>Passion (for a discipline)</b>
<b>Love (philia, storge) from and for family and friends</b>
<b>Processing traumatic events</b>
<b>Balancing work and study</b>
<b>Caring responsibilities</b>
<b>The 'right time' of life to study</b>
<b>Carving out time and managing 'continuous interruptions'</b>
<b>Constricted local opportunities for work and study</b>
<b>Cost of living</b>

Being 'in place' and 'at home'
Difficulties and positives of family/home life
Segmentation within and between schools and college
Streaming and 'gifted and talented' targeting
Pedagogical experiences
Importance of life-long learning and work-based learning
Experiences of engaging in national and HEI activities
Experiences of being targeted
Stratification and status VS specialisation
Institutional habitus - the 'inclusive' VS 'elite' binary
Space and place
Provision and modes of study
Precarity and credential inflation in the graduate labour market
Prestige and principles VS pay
Safety, security and satisfaction in work
Routine, manual and 'just jobs' occupations
Academic careers and doctoral aspirations

## 10.8 NVIVO CODEBOOK

Name	Files	References
1. PGT Trajectories and 'choices' in time	0	0
1.1 Living beyond linearity	0	0
1.1.1 Diverse journeys	31	73
1.1.2 Finding the 'right' time to study	21	29
1.1.3 Uncharted waters	28	53
1.1.4 Fear of future failure	18	33
1.2 (Constrained) choices	0	0
1.2.1 Motivations for PGT study	41	138
1.2.2 Finding, making and battling time	31	66
1.2.4 Affording PGT study	39	103
1.3 Turning points	0	0
1.3.1 Serendipity	29	80
1.3.2 'Misfortune'	25	44

Name	Files	References
1.3.3 Unexpected interruptions and diversions	36	92
2. PGT Trajectories in Place	0	0
2.1 Material space	0	0
2.1.1 Proximity and (im)mobility	36	84
2.1.2 Spatial affordability	21	33
2.1.3 Local opportunities	30	60
2.2 Symbolic Place	1	1
2.2.1 Constructing the university	43	152
2.2.2 No place like home	40	123
3. Navigating identity	0	0
3.1 Intersectional class identities	0	0
3.1.1 Class identity iterations	26	72
3.1.2 Classed intersections	10	19
3.1.3 Symbolic and epistemic violence	15	30



Name	Files	References
3.2 Norms, beliefs and values	0	0
3.2.1 Familial and community norms - alignment and codeswitching	37	104
3.2.2 Socio-political, moral and ethical beliefs	20	32
3.2.3 Confidence and resistance	20	35
3.3 Learner identities	0	0
3.3.1 Life-long 'geeks', 'nerds' and 'thinkers'	23	54
3.3.2 Educational disillusionment	22	34
3.3.3 Reformulated learning identities	16	33
Attributes	1	1
Age - 18-24	10	10
Age - 25-34	15	15
Age - 35-44	6	6
Age - 45-54	3	3
Age - 55-64	1	1

Name	Files	References
Age - 65+	2	2
Ethnicity - PoC	3	3
Ethnicity - White	35	35
Gender - Female	28	28
Gender - Male	13	13
HEI Status - High	20	20
HEI Status - Low	21	21
Institution - Newnorth	12	12
Institution - Newsouth	9	9
Institution - Oldnorth	14	14
Institution - Oldsouth	6	6
PG Discipline - Arts and Humanities	8	8
PG Discipline - Natural Science	5	5
PG Discipline - Social Science	28	28

Name	Files	References
PG Region - North	26	26
PG Region - South	15	15
UG HEI - 1994 Group	2	2
UG HEI - FE College	2	2
UG HEI - Million+	1	1
UG HEI - Non-aligned	3	3
UG HEI - Not applicable	5	5
UG HEI - Russell Group	11	11
UG HEI - University Alliance	16	16
UG HEI - Wallace Group	1	1

Note: Some notes have no files or references attached as these were parent codes for grouping purposes