

Students' Experiences: Choice, Hope and Everyday Neoliberalism in English Higher Education

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I declare that this thesis is my own work; has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere; and that the word length conforms to the permitted maximum.

Elizabeth Houghton

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Abstract

The idea of a neoliberal subject has become prevalent within critical debates about changes to higher education. This neoliberal subject is framed as an entrepreneur of the self and an investor in their human capital (Foucault: 2010). Students are urged by political policy and sector discourses to think of themselves as investors in their own futures. This manifests itself in the fetishisation of league tables and market rhetoric in the name of student choice; a concern for future employability and earnings; but also in the everyday practices of university life. This thesis aims to redress a gap in the literature on neoliberalism in higher education concerning this neoliberal subject by examining students' experiences of higher education across different stages, subjects and universities. Drawing on Foucault (1978, 1985, 1986, 2010), Archer (2003, 2007) and Bourdieu (1986, 1988, 1990, 1991), the thesis explores how neoliberalism within higher education may affect students' processes of self-work. In defining these narratives, it draws on broader critiques of the neoliberal project, particularly Philip Mirowski's (2013) concept of 'everyday neoliberalism'. In capturing students' experiences of higher education, the thesis uses interview data alongside identity portfolios, consisting of biographical data and examples of different presentations of the self students enact during their higher education studies. The students' narratives are analysed against the theoretical background of subject formation and neoliberalism.

List of abbreviations

AGCAS – Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services

BIS – Department of Business, Innovation and Skills

BME – Black and Minority Ethnic

DLHE – Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey

FE – Further Education

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

HE – Higher Education

HECSU – Higher Education Careers Services Unit

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

HMRC – Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

LEA – Local Education Authority

LEO – Longitudinal Education Outcomes

MASN – Maximum Aggregate Student Numbers

NEET – Not in Employment, Education or Training

NSS – National Student Satisfaction Survey

OFFA – Office for Fair Access

ONS – Office for National Statistics

PCAS – Polytechnics Central Admissions Service

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency of Higher Education

RAE – Research Assessment Exercise

SNS – Social Network Site

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

THE – Times Higher Education

UCAS – University and Colleges Admission Service

UCCA – University Central Council on Admissions

UGC – University Grants Committee

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Preface

The first cohort of students paying £9,000 tuition fees had not even started university when I first began thinking about this project in February 2012. The academic year before I had helped organise Lancaster University's contribution to the largest student demonstration in a decade. In November 2010, over 50,000 students and lecturers took to the streets of Whitehall to protest against the Coalition government's plans to increase the lower level of university tuition fees to £6,000 and the upper level to £9,000, a three-fold increase on the previous amount (Lewis *et al*, 2010). The anger amongst the student body was palpable: students who would not wake up for 9am lectures queued at 3am for coaches to London; and the march culminated in an attack on the former headquarters of the Conservative Party. By December the protests had spread across the country, but the majority of the protesting students would not be directly effected by the fee increase: their battle was for the students that would come afterwards, and for the values of the UK's higher education system.

That battle was lost. Parliament voted to increase the fees threshold, the protesting students graduated, and in the 2012/13 academic year 72 English¹ universities set their tuition fees to the highest level – £9,000 a year – while the mode average of the remaining 36 was £8,500 a year (The Guardian, 2011).

¹ The funding situation was, and remains, different in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Admittedly, the main question at the forefront of my mind when I began this project was ‘why were new students not angry about this?’ It was the subjective question of a former students’ union officer. Instead, over the course of this thesis, I explore how these new students engage with a *neoliberalised* higher education sector: one where they are told they have more ‘choice’ (Browne, 2010) by a political and social narrative that also frames them as being individually responsible for the consequences of that choice, for their own futures and their employment prospects, especially their own *human capital*. It is not necessarily the case that these new students are particularly happy with the current system, but what other choice do they have?

Introduction

Understanding students' experiences

The principal aim of this research is to address a gap in the literature on the *effects of neoliberalism* on English higher education (HE) by examining students' experiences of university. My starting point was the so-called 'Browne Report' of 2010, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*; the 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*; and the rhetoric of 'increasing student choice' that was one of the Coalition government's key arguments for the changes they made to the higher education sector. I focused first on research that explored how circumstances of class affected students' *choice* (Brooks, 2002; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Reay, David and Ball, 2005), but while these contributions were valuable, I felt that the increase in the top level of tuition fees to £9,000 – combined with a reinvigorated discourse that advocated competitiveness in higher education and in the graduate job market – must affect students' choices in ways that were different to when the fee level was a third of what contemporary students face, and when employment prospects were more favourable (High Fliers, 2013; Lansley and Mack, 2015).

My approach to neoliberalism is based primarily on Michel Foucault's writings on the phenomenon as not simply an economic ideology, but also a political, cultural and social mechanism that promotes competition, risk taking and individualised responsibility (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996; Foucault, 2010; Giroux, 2009; Lemke, 2001; Mirowski, 2013). These factors of

competition, risk and individual responsibility underpin my concept of neoliberal enterprise, and the neoliberal *enterprising subject*. Foucault's (2010) neoliberal subject, the *entrepreneur of the self*, does not distinguish between opportunities to acquire capital and leisure, between private life and work. For this subject, the personal is recast as an opportunity to continuously earn and invest. As Nikolas Rose writes:

The enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximise its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be. The enterprising self is thus both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates *about* itself and that acts *upon* itself in order to better itself. (Rose, 1996: 154)

This active subject does not see itself as a powerless figure in an uncertain world, but as an empowered agent who can forge the path of its own life through calculated choices and hard work (Bröckling, 2016). Although it may only be partly achieved, being an active neoliberal subject is in many ways presented as an ideal in contemporary higher education.

Building on Foucault's approach, I apply Philip Mirowski (2013: 68) concepts of 'everyday neoliberalism' – the small but constant brushes with neoliberal policies and practices that begin to shape the way individual subjects view the world and themselves – and the 'double truths' of neoliberalism, the idea that there is an exoteric narrative of neoliberalism that is the *popular-face* presented to broader society, and an esoteric narrative understood by 'a small closed elite'. One example I employ throughout the thesis is the neoliberal discourse of *merit*, whose exoteric face presents the idea that anyone can prosper if they work hard enough, while the esoteric face recognises that there

is only limited room at the top, and that structural inequalities and *luck* play a large role in individual success.

This framing of everyday neoliberalism sustained by double truths will be used to explore the idea of a higher education sector populated by students who are encouraged through various practices and discourses to become enterprising subjects. I explore the position the students take as subjects and whether they necessarily conform to the characteristics that have been associated with neoliberal subjects in the literature – while being mindful of the double meaning of the concept of subjects, which might position actors either as active initiators of their own agency, or as being subject to larger forces and influences. More specifically, my research will address the following research questions:

1. How contemporary students construct narratives around choosing their university and course, and the extent to which they reflect on that choice as being influenced by economic rationales, concerns about student debt, and investing in their human capital?
2. How far are students' reflections on their experiences of university influenced by their broader hopes and concerns for the future, and experiences in their pasts?
3. Whether, and if so how, higher education as an arena of life attempts to engineer students into enterprising neoliberal subjects – *entrepreneurs of the self* – and whether students actively embrace or reject this subject position?

My research focuses on the experiences of 28 full-time, undergraduate students who studied under the £9,000 fee system, providing a small-scale, in-depth look at the hopes and concerns of students from different stages of study, courses, and universities. I interviewed first year students and students in the final year of their studies, studying either computer science or history,

and attending a Post-92 university or a Russell Group university² in the North of England. I selected these variables to examine subject-based, and institution-based differences in students experiences, which I examined through a methodology that included interviews and assembling an *identity portfolio* for each student - a collection of different sources that presented the students' biographical narratives (see Chapter Three). I analysed these students' narratives of choosing where and what to study, and how they might be encouraged to think of university not simply as a period of academic pursuit and personal discovery, but of investment in their human capital, seeing themselves as *enterprising subjects* (Kelly, 2007; Peters, 2011; Rose, 1996; Williams, 2013). In studying a small group of students my aim was to understand their outlooks, and how these might influence their future behaviour and prospects. The emphasis on student data is deliberate, as many accounts of neoliberalism in higher education have not addressed students' experiences of it.

This student data is supplemented by interviews with key informants from within the universities – admissions tutors, employability advisors, and heads of department – as well as key figures from the HE sector, including the Director for the Office for Fair Access, policy workers from the former

² The Russell Group universities are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics and Political Science, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen Mary University of London, Queen's University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London, Warwick, and York.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)³, and University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) staff.

Since the 1980s, the so-called marketisation of higher education has been justified under the guise of offering more choice to students (Browne, 2010; Collini, 2012; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2012). League tables and annual surveys are used by universities and media outlets to help applicants make *informed* decisions about where and what to study, while encouraging universities to compete against one another for the valuable resource of undergraduate students and their fees (BIS, 2016; Collini, 2012; Jones-Devitt and Samieie, 2011; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011; Williams, 2013). Students are encouraged towards a more instrumental consumption of HE and are framed as ‘students-as-consumers’ (Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011; Williams, 2013). There is greater emphasis placed on *employability* and teaching practices that endorse *transferable skills*, so that students leave university with a competitive edge in an increasingly crowded graduate job market (BIS, 2011, 2015, 2016, Collini, 2012; Collini, 2013; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011), as if competing harder will make a job available for every student seeking one. This competition is supported by a discourse of meritocracy that suggests anybody, regardless of their class background, can succeed as long as they work hard enough. But it also suggests that failure is the sole consequence of individual actions and

³ BIS was replaced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in July 2016, and responsibility for higher education was divided between this new Department and the Department for Education. As the vast majority of this research was conducted while BIS held sole responsibility for higher education I have opted to continue referring to it, rather than confuse the old system with the new.

decisions. In so doing, it ignores structural barriers (Littler, 2013) or the zero-sum nature of the graduate job market: that with only a finite amount of graduate jobs, one person's success must mean another's failure. I argue that rather than simply embracing the neoliberal model, students *hedge* their decisions about higher education: they weigh up the debts they will take on⁴ against the careers and lifestyles they hope higher education will open up for them; a precarious graduate job market (Brynin, 2013; High Fliers, 2016; Williams, 2013); and the belief that not going to university would be an inferior option. (In making this evaluation some students have various advantages over others.) I contrast these hedged decisions with debates around *student choice* in the HE sector and the purpose of higher education as advocated by policy makers since 2010 (BIS, 2016; Browne Report, 2010). Behind the neoliberal rhetoric of choice, I argue the reality is that economic, cultural and social capital still play a significant role in students' understanding of where they *fit in* within higher education and what their life outcomes are likely to be once they have graduated (Cullinane and Kirby, 2016; de Vries, 2014; Holdsworth, 2006; Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Though participation in higher education has increased across the social classes in recent years, those from disadvantaged backgrounds have largely increased their representation in former polytechnic colleges, commonly known as Post-92 universities. The same is true of ethnic minorities, while white working class males and females remain the least likely of any ethnic group to attend university (Brookes, 2002; Cullinane and Kirby, 2016; Jerrim, 2013). In the

⁴ An estimated average in cash terms of £66,897 per student (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2014).

context of a neoliberal discourse emphasising economic rationales for higher education and promoting individual responsibility for students' decisions, it is important to establish the extent to which these factors are impacting on students' *choices*.

In looking at the sociological aspect of choice, especially in relation to class, I utilise the theoretical tools of Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1988; 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) alongside researchers who place more emphasis on evaluation and judgement, such as Margaret Archer (2003, 2007). I also address the ways in which university choice involves a 'social classification of self' (Ball et al, 2002: 53) and the extent to which students are conscious of this classification when making their choice. Understanding the students' framing of this choice is imperative when assessing the extent to which students really have choice, particularly in the neoliberal sense; whether they adopt the criteria and priorities of a neoliberal view of higher education as an investment in human capital; and whether their tendency to do so differs depending on social position. I am also interested in the extent to which students' attitudes and behaviours do *not* appear to fit with those expected of neoliberalism, as doing so is important for assessing how far they have been affected by it.

I will now outline my definitions of some of the key, but contestable, terms used above. These definitions will carry through the thesis, and help to frame my analysis and conclusions. These definitions will be followed by a short overview of the chapters and the arguments and analysis that they will address.

The higher education sector

It should be noted that I am deliberate in my use of the term higher education, rather than referring exclusively to universities. Some commentators use the terms interchangeably, conflating HE with universities, as if they are one-and-the-same. However, while universities form the significant part of higher education, they do not make up the entire sector. I would argue that any critique of HE must also acknowledge the role of organisations that support and interact with universities, such as BIS, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and UCAS, as well as the role of the media – especially those sections of it dedicated to reporting on higher education, and the various national broadsheet league tables⁵.

Higher education is big business: Universities UK (2014) reported that for 2011-12 the HE sector generated over £73 billion of output, both in direct and indirect effects, contributing to 2.8% of UK GDP. The Association of Business Schools (2013: i) has advocated its members' role in making 'significant contributions' to regional economies, as well as the national economy⁶. There are 159 higher education providers in the UK (Universities UK, 2016a), and 2,266,075 students enrolled on higher education courses: 1,524,225 of them undergraduates (HESA, 2016a). A small army of HE employees supports these

⁵ An exercise tabloid newspapers do not engage in. This is worth remembering, especially in light of the class divisions within newspaper readership. Readers of *The Times* and *The Guardian*, two newspapers whose university league tables contribute to *The Complete University Guide*, have a readership with a higher education and income level than tabloid readers (Johansson, 2007). This is just one example of how information about universities and HE, on which the concept of student choice depends, is classed.

⁶ The growth in the number of UK business schools can be seen as one of the clearest signs of neoliberalisation within the sector.

two million students. Within universities there are the equivalent of 395,780 full-time workers in academic roles and 194,245 in non-academic roles, and for every 100 full-time jobs within universities, another 117 full-time-equivalent jobs are generated outside of the sector through knock-on effects. Higher education accounted for 2.7% of all UK employment in 2013 (Universities UK, 2014). Within universities jobs range from cleaners working on minimum-wage zero-hour contracts, to Vice Chancellors earning up to £623,000 a year (Coughlan, 2015), and cover an array of areas: teaching and research, departments, faculties, accommodation halls, students' unions, careers services, welfare services, marketing, admissions, facilities, and increasingly, international development. Henry Giroux touches on this shift in the physical presence of universities, from pedagogical sites to increasingly diverse and commodified providers, and the way these aspects contribute to the *effects of neoliberalism* on HE:

In addition, housing, alumni relations, health care, and a vast array of other services are now being leased out to private interests to manage and run. One consequence is that spaces on university campuses once marked as public and noncommodified – places for quiet study or student gatherings – now have the appearance of a shopping mall. Colleges and universities do not simply produce knowledge and new perspectives for students; they also play an influential role in shaping their identities, values, and sense of what it means to become citizens of the world. (Giroux, 2014: 35)

Though he does not make the link, Giroux is effectively highlighting the impact of Mirowski's (2013) *everyday neoliberalism* on higher education and how it may begin to impact on students' experiences within the sector.

Students' experiences

The *student experience* has become a staple concept in the management and administration of higher education (Parkes et al, 2014; Temple et al, 2014), but the term itself provides a potentially useful theoretical tool for researching university students. The managerial concept of *the student experience* operates as a strategic and policy-informing idea, both at national level through organisations such as the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and the QAA, and on an institutional level, with individual universities seeking to define their 'student experience'. This latter approach is often reduced to a marketing concept, primarily aimed at selling individual universities and only tenuously related to actual individual students' experiences⁷. These concepts are frequently informed by large-scale surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) that produce various metrics that are in turn translated into league tables. Universities UK (2016b: 3) report that HE providers can respond to over 525 student experience data requests a year from over 90 organisations.

Students are also frequently targeted by various national and institutional surveys trying to capture *the student experience*. In 2016 roughly 310,000 final year undergraduates took part in the NSS, (HEFCE, 2017): 17.75% of the total number of undergraduate students studying in 2016 (HESA, 2017). The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (THE, 2016) contacted

⁷ For example, Lancaster University (2016) promotes *Life at Lancaster* as 'diverse, varied, international, exciting and vibrant; you couldn't ask for a better student experience', linking it to the 'uniqueness' of the city and the facilities offered at the University.

over 15,000 full-time undergraduates, asking them how strongly they agreed that their university offered provision such as ‘high quality staff/lectures’, ‘good extracurricular activities’ and ‘good support and welfare’. Both the NSS and THE rankings can be a powerful advertising tool for universities that score well, despite the relatively low response rates at institutional level⁸.

The HE sector – as well as the students studying in it – is subject to an increasing amount of evaluation (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2015). However, while these mechanisms may claim to provide an insight into the generalised student experience, the disadvantage of mass quantitative data is that it can miss individual narratives and contexts, while topic-specific surveys such as module or self-evaluations lose the nuances of how different aspects of a student’s university experience are interconnected. What is often lacking in this managerial concept of the student experience is an awareness of the many individualised aspects of students’ experiences. Additionally, recent academic literature on changes to higher education often either neglects students’ experiences or takes them for granted, making normative assumptions about students’ attitudes and approaches towards higher education – that they will operate as ‘students-as-consumers’, feel entitled to good grades, and be more likely to complain about not getting *value for money* (for example in McGettigan 2013, Collini 2012, or Williams 2013). While there have been some reported cases of students taking this approach to higher education –

⁸ The University of Nottingham had the most respondents for the THE survey, with 302 of its students completing the survey: just 0.9% of its 33,435 total students (University of Nottingham, 2016). The NSS only surveys final year undergraduate students leaving undergraduates at earlier stages of their study, as well as postgraduates, without a comparable opportunity to give their views.

the Oxford graduate who attempted to sue the university because his 2:1 degree has ‘prevented him from having a successful career’ (Taylor and Sandeman, 2016), or the apparent 63% of students who do not feel university is ‘good value for money’ (Neves and Hillman, 2016) – these headline grabbing cases are often misleading. The Oxford graduate gained his degree 16 years ago, while the same survey found that 85% of students were satisfied with their course, they just didn’t know where their tuition fees went. As Roger Brown, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education Policy at Liverpool Hope University has commented, there is ‘very little clear evidence’ about the impact of recent changes in HE on the ‘quality of student education’, where student education refers to their holistic ‘experience’ of university, including factors such as:

increased term-time employment; pressure on pass rates and grade inflation; students [being] less prepared for university-level study; [...] declining levels of trust between students and lecturers; students adopting a more ‘instrumental’ approach to their studies; and a growing tendency for higher education to be valued for its ‘exchange’ value, especially in the labour market, at the expense of its ‘use’ value to the student (‘commodification’). (Brown, 2014: *online*)

But even Brown’s comprehensive list misses one of the key elements of the contemporary student experience: students’ loans and debts. The common usage of the terms ‘student loans’ and ‘student debt’ are again arguably misleading, as they do not always account for the full variety of loans students may incur during their studies, including bank loans and overdrafts, or money lent to students by family members. The general policy definition of ‘student loan’ is the amount lent to students by the State, including their tuition fee loans and maintenance loans, with ‘student debt’ being the amount to be

repaid on those loans (House of Commons Library, 2016). When referring to student loans and debt, I employ them in this sense, but will draw attention to other examples of debt students may have.

It was a concern with this lack of students' accounts of the effects of neoliberalism on higher education – not just the academic literature, but more generally in higher education research – that informed the direction of my research and its methodology. I was conscious that over the course of their HE experience a single student may be expected to hold identities as varied as a studious academic, a forward-thinking career planner, a party-animal amongst their friends, a leader as a sports club captain or student society president, and a son or daughter – especially for the 49% of students who remain living at home (GVA, 2012) – and more generally as young people, with many hopes, concerns and fears. Students are not blank canvases when they enter university, so it is important to understand their engagement with these various identities and how they draw distinctions between them.

In attempting to understand both the *student experience*, and whether – and if so how – the higher education sector engineers students into *neoliberal subjects*, the nuance of students' experiences needs to be understood so we can see when students *do not* follow the neoliberal narrative, and how these various and sometimes conflicting influences act on students at the same time, requiring them to suppress or accentuate certain traits. One of the key aspects to consider when exploring the various influences on a student's experience is their class background, and the advantages or disadvantages they may take with them into the higher education field. Again, we should note how these

classed aspects might also be affected by discourses of neoliberalism that pretend these differences do not exist. I explore this in more depth in Chapters One and Two, but it is important first to have an understanding of how I approached the concept of class in my research.

Class and advantage

One of the double truths of neoliberalism is its claim that we now live in a classless society, when in truth economic inequality has reached levels not seen for almost a century (Lansley and Mack, 2015; Mirowski, 2013; Savage, 2015; Sayer, 2014). Part of my aim in this thesis is to address how some of the effects of neoliberalism on higher education are classed.

The term ‘disadvantaged students’ is already a common concept in education research and policy, but I believe there is an additional aspect to it that is relevant to the effects of neoliberalism on HE and students’ experiences.

‘Disadvantage’ can cover the many intersectional ways in which a student may be disadvantaged in higher education. For example, working class female students face more struggles than middle class female students, while students from ethnic minority groups face more barriers within the higher education system than their white peers (though this can also be seen as a classed concern, as family income and educational background still have a significant impact). Students with disabilities or caring responsibilities face a similar situation. Discourses of merit and individual responsibility imply that everyone has an equal starting point and so, in order to explore and accurately critique such discourses, it is as important to acknowledge that some students begin from a position of *advantage*, as it is to acknowledge that there are

those who are disadvantaged. These multiple aspects are sometimes missed when using terms like working and middle class, and so I have chosen to instead frame students as *advantaged* or *disadvantaged*. Where the terms middle and working class are used in this thesis it is in relation to other studies or participants' particular use of the terms.

Outline of the thesis

In Chapter One I review existing literature and theories on subject formation. Using Foucault's idea of technologies of the self, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Archer's work on reflexive thinking I explore how a student may or may not come to embody the neoliberal narrative and act as an enterprising subject. I outline a concept for an *ideal* neoliberal student who approaches higher education as an investment in their human capital, and actively works towards gaining an advantage in the competitive graduate job market, though this work may be driven by what Lauren Berlant (2011) has called *cruel optimism*. I suggest that one of the ways students may try to do this is by actively improving their social and cultural capital through the opportunities higher education presents.

Having established how an *ideal* neoliberal student may act, Chapter Two explores the broader effects of neoliberalism on higher education. I outline the historical context of higher education policy and how that has manufactured an artificial competition between universities, where institutions differentiate themselves in terms of their prestige, league table positions, grade boundaries, and graduate employment prospects. I discuss how universities with *prestigious* reputations were able use their reputations to create a false sense

of meritocracy within the sector; and suggest that student debt is a misleading term. I argue that these practices position students as the ideal neoliberal subjects outlined in Chapter One, but suggest that this more complex subject has been missed by literature that frames students simply as ‘consumers’.

In Chapter Three I outline the research methodology and the challenges faced while conducting the empirical research. I establish the identity portfolio method, which consists of UCAS personal statements, social-network site (SNS) data, life-grids and background information, informed by a series of interviews.

I begin primary data analysis in Chapter Four by analysing the historical context of the university application system, and the advice and guidance university applicants receive on how to complete their UCAS personal statements. In exploring this advice I suggest that the personal statement can be considered a technology of the self, one that encourages students to draw on discourses of neoliberalism in how they present themselves. I examine personal statements from the first year student participants, and analyse these using different discourses of neoliberalism.

In Chapter Five I move onto analysing the interview and life-grid data from the first year students. I explore the different influences behind students’ choice of university and subject, and examine what role the students’ hopes for their futures had in these decisions and how they approach higher education. I also address whether students are concerned about their student debts, and if this concern affects their student experience.

I finish my data analysis in Chapter Six by presenting data from students in their final year of university study. Exploring how the students reflect back on their higher education experiences and choices, I suggest that the students' narratives present university not as an investment in human capital, but as a time of personal growth and 'betterment'. I also explore how experiences outside of university can impact on a student's experience of higher education.

I conclude my discussions in Chapter Seven, and explore how my data related back to my research questions, discussing all of the data collected, and questions for possible future research.

Chapter One

Becoming ideal: framing the student as a neoliberal subject

In this opening chapter I set out and analyse the main theories underpinning the research, building a picture of the idealised neoliberal student. This ideal student will then act as a model the real students and their experiences are compared to in later chapters. I begin by exploring subject formation, and the interplay of personal agency and hegemonic discourse that is involved in developing a subject. I draw on Foucault's work on technologies and practices of the self, and how individuals work on themselves as active subjects. I frame Foucault's theory against Bourdieu's work on habitus and Archer's on reflexive thinking. In bringing these three theories together I present a multifaceted picture of subject formation. The second section explores the broader aspects of the neoliberalism project as a hegemonic discourse. I then use the theories presented in the first half of the chapter to conceptualise an ideal neoliberal subject, and position this subject within higher education. The final section questions how a neoliberal perspective may affect different aspects of a student's life and why some students may embody, either wittingly or unwittingly, certain aspects of an ideal neoliberal subject.

1.1 Practices of the self

In attempting to make sense of the varied aspects of the neoliberalism project, many theorists have found Foucault's work a useful starting point (Jessop, 2011), while others exploring identity and subject positions have also adapted

his concept of the self (Hall, 1996; McNay, 1992; Rose, 1989, 1996). It seems appropriate then that an attempt to understand the subject positions of neoliberalism should start with a reflection on Foucault.

In his later work Foucault made an important theoretical shift, moving his focus from the body and the disciplinary power that binds it, to *the self*. While his previous work focused on the productive nature of power on a grand scale to regulate, discipline and produce subjects, from the *History of Sexuality* onwards this process of subject formation was complemented by a recognition that there must also be a response from the subjects themselves. Crucially for my analysis, Foucault argues that in order to understand the modern subject:

[O]ne has to take into account not only technologies of domination, but also techniques of the self. [...] Techniques of domination [...] are only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. Having studied the field of power relations taking domination techniques as a point of departure, I should like [...] to study power relations [...] starting from techniques of the self. (Foucault, 1985: 367)

With this point of departure subjects ceased to be simply passive bodies in what Lois McNay (1992: 48-9) describes as ‘monolithic and functionalist account[s] of power’, and instead became understood as active subjects through processes of self-constitution, recognition and reflection: processes Foucault terms *technologies of the self*. However, these processes are still influenced by dominant narratives, and as such, the subjects enacting them will also be influenced by these narratives.

Foucault’s technologies equate to the means of defining an individual, and governing their conduct (Besley, 2005). While his technologies of power ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or

domination' his technologies of the self are the various 'operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being' individuals make in order to reach a 'state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (Foucault, 1988a: 18). It is from these technologies that practices of the self arise. Foucault himself is not explicit about the difference, but it is important to understand how the elements differ. While the technology is the broader mechanism, it is the practice that acts as the 'operation'. It is in the practices associated with these technologies that he finds the means by which individuals self-regulate, self-fashion, and self-produce. For example, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault is mainly concerned with *truth telling* as a technology of the self: the practices of this range from letter and diary writing in the Classical age, through to confession in the Christian age. It is through these different practices of the self that the technology is reworked to fit with the dominant narrative of the time. I similarly explore writing as a practice of the self, taking the personal statements students must write for their UCAS applications, and their online presentations of self through social network sites as examples from within higher education.

Foucault finds technologies of the self in practices of liberation, rather than in domination (McNay, 1992) but stresses that such freedoms are still conditioned and determined through the socio-cultural context in which they operate (Hall, 1996). These practices rely on the mutual dependency between structure and agency: though subjects may exercise a degree of choice in how they conduct themselves, that choice will be shaped by larger social and cultural narratives. This is the foundation of the dual nature of the subject I referred to in the Introduction. This dependency is not one-sided: agency

plays as much a role in subject formation as narrative. As McNay (1992: 60) states, the factors influencing the activities of subjects are multiple and at times contradictory, and cannot be reduced to the power of a 'single monolithic system'. Crucially, there is always more than one *system* imposing narratives and structures on subjects, and these may have conflicting effects. While individuals are influenced by these different structures they have some agency given their current influences, so different individuals may respond differently to the same structures. It is this subjectivity of subjection that means no two individuals will respond to social narratives and structures in exactly the same way. These distinctions in responses to dominant narratives are of particular interest for this research, as it may help to explain why students embody certain elements of an *idealised* neoliberal student, but not others, or hold what may appear to be contradictory subject positions.

To understand how these positions come to be embodied it is useful to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus*, which provides a conceptual bridge between Foucault's technologies of the self and Archer's reflexivity, to understand how different subjects respond to the same social narratives, and how this may happen on a subconscious level. Bourdieu's (1990: 56) habitus refers to the 'embodied history, internalised as second nature' of individuals. This embodied history manifests itself as a disposition, which is affected by the social world around it. A key feature of habitus is that it is not simply internalised, but embodied: it affects the way individuals speak, dress, act; what interests them; what they consider to be valuable and – conversely – what may be considered as worthless (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, David and Bell 2005; Sayer, 2005a). Bourdieu (1990: 53-56) suggests that the habitus is 'a

spontaneity without consciousness or will', arguing that individuals have little control over how their habitus is shaped, as it is framed in response to the world around them and constitutes 'the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence'. Different, and sometimes contradictory, narratives and structures can effect the habitus. As I have illustrated through McNay (1992: 60), power cannot be reduced to a 'single monolithic system', and similarly personal histories draw from a range of factors and adapt to new circumstances. This is important to note, as it prevents the habitus from being presented as a *fixed* disposition. This adaptability gives habitus a more lasting impact than the codified social rules that may be associated with the concept of dominant power and narrative, as it allows for expansion and alteration. As Bourdieu says:

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (Bourdieu, 1990: 54)

Framed in this way, the idea of habitus becomes a useful tool when attempting to understand how the past experiences of students' may affect their experiences of higher education. But like any history the habitus can – to an extent – be rewritten as new knowledge is gained. Bourdieu (1990; Bohman, 1999; Swartz, 1997) emphasises the importance of early experiences and socialisation in shaping an individual's habitus, but the importance of early experiences rests particularly in the fact that they provide the lens through which new information is assessed, adopted or rejected. This ability to

respond and adapt prevents the habitus from being deterministic, but it may also be the space where conflict arises: for example, the internal conflict of trying to reconcile one's habitus with an environment that does not match it - the idea of feeling like you do not *fit in*, as reported particularly by working class and black and minority ethnic (BME) students in so-called prestigious universities (Lehmann, 2014; McKenzie, 2015; Reay, David and Bell, 2005; Savage, 2015). Some students face these conflicts throughout their university experiences, as I will explore. But even those students whose habitus aligns with the perceived *traditional* environment of higher education may find themselves adapting to the *neoliberalised* sector, by developing a neoliberal habitus. This could manifest itself in becoming more disposed towards the neoliberal narratives they encounter during higher education, and may be key to understanding whether students' experiences of university encourage them to become neoliberal subjects. What is also interesting is how this narrative interacts with students' existing dispositions: what elements are embraced, and which are rejected.

However, the problem with simply using habitus as a framework for analysis is that it largely operates on the pre-cognitive level. Bourdieu himself offered little discussion on how the habitus interacted with, and was influenced by, larger social narratives and histories (Bohman, 1999; Sayer, 2005a). These restrictions make it a difficult concept to apply outright to an analysis of how concrete decisions, such as choosing a university, may be *influenced* to some extent by larger social narratives, such as neoliberalism. While Diane Reay, Miriam David and Stephan Bell (2005: 27) suggested 'choice is at the heart of habitus', I suggest that an additional framework is needed, to help understand

how individuals *articulate* their choices. For that purpose, Margaret Archer's work on *reflexivity* provides a final stepping-stone from dominant narratives through to individual action in the formation of a subject. Here, I am departing from Archer in combining the concepts of reflexivity and habitus: while Archer might reject the idea of a habitus, I believe – as others have argued before (Sayer, 2010) – that in order to develop a richer understanding of individual's actions it is necessary to understand both.

Archer (2007) acknowledges that there is no common concept of reflexivity across the social sciences, and so positions her own theory as the study of people's 'internal conversations', their inner dialogues or monologues, and how these are used to reflect on their own concerns and position within their social context. These internal conversations, she says, make us 'active agents' in our own lives, rather than passive agents subject to external forces. The forms these internal conversations take are varied – from short ruminations through to vivid daydreams – but they have a central focus: to consider a course of action, and then to set about achieving that course of action. Archer terms these courses of action 'projects'. They are the result of reflexive thought about what a subject cares about most, goals she calls 'ultimate concerns'. 'No one person,' she writes (2007: 7) 'can have an ultimate concern and fail to do something about it'. Much as Foucault's (1988a: 18) practices of the self are a means of acting upon oneself in order to reach a 'state of happiness', Archer's reflexive thought can be the means of driving individual action towards achieving a desired project.

Whatever project we set for ourselves, this element of reflexive thought is crucial as it gives us agency to act. Working from the proposition that ‘the subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action’ Archer (2007: 5) says that it is only through the study of reflexive thought that we can attempt to understand why people act; how these actions are mediated by social influences and – I would add – personal habitus. She theorises the different types of reflexivity subjects may experience, and suggests that different people will be more prone to certain types of reflexive thinking. She presents three models of reflexive thinkers: autonomous reflexives, who initiate their ‘own inner dialogues, conduct lone deliberations and come to conclusions for which they are solely responsible’ (2007: 114); communicative reflexives, who need to share their internal thoughts with others in order to conclude whether those thoughts are a firm basis for action; and meta-reflexives, who will reflect, question and critique their own reflections and goals, leading to quite complex deliberations. In all of these modes of internal conversations – whether reliant on others’ input or worked through purely in an individual subject’s head – there is an element of active self-constitution. Like Foucault, Archer (2007) recognises that there is a balance to be struck between the self-steering actions of individuals driven by these different modes of reflexivity, and the influences of social narratives. These influences work automatically, though they are dependent on human activity in both their origin and exercise. Agency works reflexively, either following these influences or in anticipation of them. The anticipation of such influences can either act as a constraint on or enablement to different subjects based, to an extent, on their social position and corresponding habitus. These constraints and enablements

are the result of the causal powers of social narratives, and could be seen as offering different individuals certain *advantages* or *disadvantages*.

The concept of reflexivity becomes especially useful when addressing issues of personal choice, experience, concerns and hopes, and adds an element of agency missed by Bourdieu's concept of habitus. In some regards the study of reflexivity offers almost the antithesis of rational choice theory or cost-benefit analysis: it allows room for decisions to be emotionally charged, rather than the result of instrumental rationality. That is not to say that reflexive thoughts are *irrational* – the commonplace assumption for actions and thoughts based on emotion – but rather that it is through such reflexive deliberations, acting on a range of information, habitus, and feelings, that an individual makes a choice. Some of this information may be conceptualised as rational: for a student this may be the choice of deciding whether to move away from home for university, or to stay and save money. What is framed as rational is dependent on the narrative within which the deliberation operates (something that will be explored in the context of higher education in the next chapter).

Archer (2007) suggests that in order to identify reflexive thought there should be a demonstrable motivation. For example, while a college pupil deciding which universities to apply to may not know about the hierarchies of historical prestige, influence and connections that make Russell Group universities more appealing to employers, they may recognise that going to such a university 'looks better on their CV'. The motivation is there, and the decision reinforces several narratives: that Russell Group institutions are seen as more *desirable*, both by employers and students, and that going to university is a

rational investment in an individual's human capital. This examples leads me to Mirowski's (2013: 154) concept of 'everyday neoliberalism', the 'thousand and one little encounters spread over a lifetime' through which 'the average person begins to absorb a set of images, causal scenarios, and precepts that begin to add up to something approaching a worldview'. In *everyday neoliberalism* we find the influences, affects and practices that form Foucault, Bourdieu, and Archer's concepts of subjectivity. It is through looking at the myriad everyday encounters of a student's experiences of higher education that I aim to explore how a neoliberal narrative – particularly one that favours education as an enterprising act – is promoted to students; how they may come to reflect on and embody it, and so come to act as neoliberal subjects; or how they come to act otherwise? To understand how a neoliberal narrative may affect students, it is first necessary to define neoliberalism.

1.2 Capturing neoliberalism

There is no shortage of accounts of neoliberalism within academia, though it is perhaps testament to how embedded its narrative has become in so many facets of society that no two accounts are ever quite alike. Every theorist understands neoliberalism differently, arguably because every theorist studies neoliberalism through their own lens and applies it to diverse circumstances. Indeed, some now argue that that concept has been overused to the extent that it has lost any meaning (Venugopal, 2015). However, I would argue that it is the fact that it is so multifaceted that makes it worth examination.

For all the different applications of the term there are many recurring themes that form a concept of a neoliberalism that I believe strengthens its use. These

include the fetishisation of competition, and market fundamentalism (Gilbert, 2013; Foucault, 2010; Mirowski, 2013; Standing, 2011); an emphasis on individualised responsibility and the withdrawal of the Welfare State (Clarke et al, 2007; Lazzarato, 2009); a narrative of investment in human capital, both by individuals to increase their own employment prospects, and by the State to drive up national productivity (Foucault, 2010; Hill, 2010; Huber and Solt, 2006; Olssen and Peters, 2007); a reliance on debt-fuelled consumption (Cooper, 2008; De La Barra, 2006; Lazzarato, 2011); a shift from populations made up of people as citizens to people as consumers (Clarke et al, 2007; Tyler, 2013); a move in the West from productive capitalism to financialised capitalism (Sayer, 2014); widening inequality featuring rapid enrichment at the top of the income distribution, presented as the justifiable consequence of entrepreneurial meritocracy (Antonio, 2013; Gilbert, 2013; Littler, 2013; Sayer, 2014); and, finally, a prevailing sense of insecurity, both on a global scale and for individuals in their daily lives (Lazzarato, 2009; Standing, 2011, 2014; Wacquant, 2009). These discourses not only co-exist, but also interweave, permeating various areas of life. As David Harvey notes:

Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world. (Harvey, 2005: 2-3)

Though plenty of attention has been given to neoliberalism's 'theory of political economic practices' (Harvey, 2005: 2), it is its hegemonic capturing of 'common-sense', the way we 'interpret, live in and understand the world' that is not only more relevant to this research, but also more revealing in establishing how this new phase of capitalism has engrained itself into the

global political consensus as well as the small, everyday actions and thoughts of people (Clarke et al, 2007; Giroux, 2009; Harvey, 2005: 3; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Mirowski, 2013). This includes – to no small extent – how they conceive of and understand themselves as individuals: how, in short, they develop their identities. It is from everyday acts of neoliberalism that the encouragement to frame one's life as an act of neoliberal enterprise stems.

The neoliberal identity, according to Foucault (2010: 226), is that of the enterprising subject, the 'entrepreneur of [the] self'. Being an entrepreneur of one's self entails being one's own 'capital...producer...[and] source of earnings' (Foucault, 2010: 226). Foucault argues that *consumption* is an enterprising act, as it is through consumption that individuals *produce* their own satisfaction. In order to fuel this enterprising consumption it is necessary for an individual to have a means of consumption, that is *capital*, and for the majority this requires remuneration for labour, ergo *a wage*, the amount of which is supposedly determined by the qualities that they possess as a worker. These qualities take the form of *human capital*: innate and acquired elements, inseparable from their human bearer, for which an individual is remunerated by income. With that income they can fuel the consumption that in turn produces the individual's 'satisfaction' (Foucault, 2010: 226-229). Foucault notes that neoliberalism is particularly interested in *acquired* human capital, which is gained through education and training. Neoliberalism, he argues, advocates an instrumentalisation of learning in line with this purpose. A good, enterprising subject will *invest* in their human capital, particularly through education.

In his conception of human capital, Foucault takes his lead from Gary S. Becker (1964: 1) whose study of activities that influence the ‘future monetary and psychic income’ of workers presented these activities as investments in human capital. Becker suggests these activities include what we would recognise as ‘educational investments’, such as schooling and on-the-job-training, as well as activities more concerned with the maintenance and movement of human capital - medical care and migration. Leaving aside the latter activities, Becker (1964: 2) suggests that evidence for the importance of human capital comes from the apparent fact that ‘more highly educated and skilled persons almost always tend to earn more than others’. Today we may recognise such sentiment in the so-called “graduate premium”, the suggestion that those with higher education degrees earn more than non-graduates. Although the premium does bear out in the vast majority of cases (de Vries, 2014), equating it simply to a difference between those with university degrees and those without misses the vast differences in pay and employment-type between graduates. This becomes more relevant in light of the difference in pay between the graduates of different subjects and universities, as well as genders and ethnicities (de Vries, 2014; Savage, 2015). The starting salaries of Oxford and Cambridge graduates are around 42% higher than graduates of Post-92 universities, while graduates at other *selective* institutions are likely to start on £3,000 per annum more than those at less selective universities (de Vries, 2014), suggesting that additional education qualifications alone are not the sole guarantor of economic success.

A crucial development since Becker and Foucault’s time is that the allure of personal investment in one’s human capital is no longer simply the financial

advantage of a graduate premium, but also a greater sense of security in employment (Mason, 2015; Mirowski, 2013; Standing, 2011, 2014). The expansion of higher education over the past two decades has led to increased competition between graduates, as this expansion has not been met with an equal increase in number of jobs that require this high level of education (explored in Chapter Two). Given this competition, when higher education is viewed as an investment in human capital students must weigh up what their job prospects will be depending on the type of investment they choose: the subject they will study and the institution they will study at – if they are acting as the rational economic agents that the narrative of recent higher education policy suggests they should be (BIS, 2011, 2016; Browne, 2010).

1.3 Becoming a neoliberal subject

It can be taken from Foucault's analysis that an individual who chooses to attend university can be seen as investing in their human capital, whether intentionally so or not. But is this in itself an act of everyday neoliberalism, and does it make the student an enterprising, neoliberal subject? To assume the student is actively conscious of investing in their human capital leaves little room for alternative motivations for entering higher education, and relies on that choice being a rational, economic decision. Some students may go to university with the sole intention of increasing their human capital (though they are more likely to understand it as *employability*); some may go for more academic reasons, such as love of their subject, or to have a good time, or to gain independence; and some for all these reasons and more. Not all students who act in an enterprising way will do so with investing in their human capital as their primary motivation, and being enterprising is not the

only subject position students will subscribe to. Nor does it automatically follow that being *enterprising* means being *neoliberal*: one could be enterprising in activities that do not yield economic profit and for reasons other than gaining a competitive edge. However, a current, dominant narrative of higher education tends towards encouraging students to think of themselves in that calculating, competitive way, as I explore in Chapters Two and Four.

It is important to note that it is very rare for a subject to act through only one narrative. Foucault (1988b) himself was insistent that there is no sovereign subject. Instead of suggesting that there could be a 'true' self who could be liberated through self-reflection, Foucault argued that there are instead only 'becomings' as subjects constantly change, a sentiment that echoes in Bourdieu's changing habitus. As Tina Besley (2005) explains, this amounts to a forging of identity through practices of the self, though perhaps the forging of *identities* would be a more accurate interpretation. This difference between the actual and the ideal is a point that is at times forgotten in Foucauldian accounts of subjectivity: the extent to which individuals become a certain type of subject is always an empirical question, hence the need for empirical research. So while we may sometimes talk of students as neoliberal subjects, this is not to say they will operate exclusively through that frame. What it does mean is that there is an encouragement towards the construction of such an identity almost to the exclusion of other types of self.

Higher education as a concept fits into Nikolas Rose's category of 'human technologies'. Rose describes such technologies as:

assemblages of diverse forces, instruments, architectural forms and persons to achieve certain ends [...] Human technologies comprise a range of related methods for linking together, shaping, channelling, and utilising the forces of individuals and groups in pursuit of certain objectives. (Rose, 1996: 121)

He includes prisons, schools, and hospitals in such assemblages: institutions that as a consequence, or indeed intention, of their very nature encourage the people within them to act and think in certain ways, though Rose himself suggests it is more a matter of manipulation than encouragement. In channelling individuals towards certain objectives such technologies allow for the exercise of power over them. However, as I have established above, the idea of subjugated subjects denies the agency of the people within these institutions, offering them less room for resistance against attempts at 'shaping' that occur within these 'human technologies', and leaves no room for reflexive thinking. Given that higher education is still framed in some discourses as fostering reflection and critical thought, and the university experience as a process of becoming a more learned individual (Newman, 2009), I prefer not to view it as a 'human technology', but instead, using another phrase often associated with Foucault, as an 'arena of life' (Hollinshead, 1999). This phrase better captures the many contests that are acted out between the different forces of institutional power, personal habitus, socio-political narratives, and the agency of the subject and, I think, better represents the realities of such institutions rather than the deterministic character of technology.

It is still worth drawing on Rose though to establish how universities, as arenas of life, may promote a neoliberal narrative towards students, even

within the different – and sometimes contesting – narratives of academia. Like other organisations, universities operate both as relatively autonomous units with their own histories and practices, as well as cogs in wider ‘mechanisms of domination’ (Foucault, 2010). One particular cog of the last three decades is the so-called marketisation of higher education and the positioning of students as consumers of education, though reducing changes to higher education to simply the introduction of market forces misses wider mechanisms at play. Much has been written on the *student-as-consumer* (see Chapter Two), but this model presumes students act from a consumer subject position simply because higher education has been framed as a market. While the consumer model does lend itself to the narrative of the instrumentalisation of higher education, it does so in a simplistic way. I explore this more in the next chapter, but it is necessary to reference this student position now in order to suggest that instead of consumers, universities encourage students to think of themselves as enterprising individuals. This idealised subject, the product of political, societal, and cultural discourses, is presented as something individuals should *aspire* to be. Indeed, in later work Foucault (1988c) argues that practices of self, based on culture and society, are established as norms to either aspire to or disaffiliate from. Whilst the *ideal* subject may be held up through dominant discourses, no individual will ever fully match the criteria. But that does not mean they might not attempt to, working on their selves in an attempt to match the ideal, or do so without realising it. Within higher education, for example, the student who expects more contact hours because ‘I’m paying nine-grand in fees’ (You and Yours, 2014) and is looking to get *value for their money* from their student loans may not necessarily see such an attitude as feeding into a

larger, societal narratives of the will of the consumers overtaking the rights of the citizen (Clarke et al, 2007; Nordensvärd, 2011), or the normalisation of debt (Graeber, 2014; Lazzarato, 2011): but the two actions, micro and macro, feed off each other. This reinforces the point that individuals do not act in isolation, but are affected by their societal position. Whilst a subject may have a level of *choice* in how they fashion themselves through reflexive thinking, the practices and judgements through which they embody this will be ‘conditioned and overdetermined by the socio-cultural context’ (McNay, 1992: 61), though they cannot necessarily be simplified down to the direct result of that context. As Foucault suggests, what is of interest is:

the way in which the subject constitutes [themselves] in an active fashion, by the practices of self, [though] these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by [themselves]. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group. (Foucault, 1988c: 11)

It is arguably erroneous of Foucault to suggest that the agent does not invent some practices of the self. The internal conversations involved in reflexive thinking could be conceptualised as a practice of the self, and while such conversations will take cues from the social world, by their very nature they are internalised and dependent on how a subject chooses to talk to their self. This is important as it allows room for subjects to process their own histories and experiences, and as such reinforces their agency. As Archer (2007) suggests, ideologies and narratives, however hegemonic they may appear, are not determinants, but rather attempts to influence. It is an important distinction that places power more evenly between societal narratives and individual agency. While Archer proposes that in order for a subject to be

influenced by social factors, they must find such an influence good, I would add that they may equally be influenced by factors they find bad, whether by putting up an active resistance to these influences or by hoping to avoid them. It may also be the case that agents are 'not sure' about the factors, or do not notice them, and in which case are guided by their habitus – or as they may understand it, emotions, or simply going along with a norm. In such conditions there would still be reflexive thought, and while no firm personal opinion is necessarily reached, there is a decision to follow the norm. An example may be the student who decides to go to university simply because it is the 'done thing'.

It is the actions that are taken though once a subject has been influenced – whether good, bad or indifferent – that reinforce different narratives. Archer (2005) notes that casual powers – cultural and social narratives – have to be experienced by subjects. Through everyday neoliberalism – made up of *unnoticed* everyday acts – Mirowski writes (2013: 154) that our very consciousness becomes 'the perimeter of the "economy"', making it possible to frame it as the dominant narrative that influences our internal conversations (though it is not necessarily the case that subjects consciously accept or refuse the narratives working on them). This perimeter may also extend to our subconscious, a possibility Archer's framework does not allow for. While there is still scope for agency, as these different encounters may have more or less success at affecting subjects depending on how they are interpreted, it may be that individuals are simply not wholly aware of *what* is affecting them.

Though not entirely comparable, there are interesting parallels to be drawn at this stage between a neoliberal identity and those of gender or race. McNay (1992: 71) writes on how (in the case of her study, patriarchal) technologies of power suggest and impose practices of the self onto individuals through their wider social context, arguing that gender, seen as practices of the self, becomes ‘an active and never-completed process of engendering and enculturation’ rather than a static model of self-construction. She draws on Simone de Beauvoir’s statement (2014) that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ to suggest that gender is culturally constructed, but also something an individual constructs for themselves: though a subject does not necessarily choose how to enact gender, they create an identity through the ‘gradual acquisition of a skill’ based on relations with the world around them. The obvious difference with the neoliberal self is that gender and race – usually – carry with them clear physical attributes that have culturally imposed expectations and identities, but it is useful to entertain the idea of *becoming* and the practices and reflections behind that. No one is born a neoliberal subject, but rather may *become* one.

1.4 The *ideal* student

The ideal subject within the neoliberal narrative will invest in themselves and their futures; are adept at being flexible and making calculated choices; and are individually responsible for the consequences of those choice, whether good or ill. Mirowski in describing the ideal neoliberal subject paints a picture of an individual who is not simply

...an employee or student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of [their] *résumé*, a biographer of

[their] rationales, and an entrepreneur of [their] possibilities [...] provisionally buying the person [they] must soon become. (Mirowski, 2013: 108)

For the enterprising subject, almost every act becomes a sellable advantage in a competitive world. Neoliberal competition is increasingly enacted within higher education not just between institutions, but also students. For example, the student who plays for their university football team may begin doing so simply because they enjoy playing the sport and like the social aspect of being in a team, however those intrinsic reasons are placed in the background (though they do not disappear) when the student is encouraged to think about how they may 'stand out' in a competitive job market: suddenly playing on the football team becomes an investment in their human capital, an experience of gaining employable skills such as leadership, team work and the ability to cope under pressure.

How students understand and enact this competition will be affected by their social context. Students' social worlds are varied, drawing on experiences from university and from their lives before they entered higher education. Some students find that their previous experience and their university experiences complement each other well, while for others the difference seem vast, as various studies have illustrated (Bourdieu, 1988; Bradley et al., 2013; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Reay, David and Bell, 2005). Such studies suggest that students with a habitus more acquiescent to the expectations of higher education enter it with an inherent advantage over those whose previous frame of reference has not encouraged study and contemplation. As Diane Reay (2012: 592) has argued, 'educational inequalities are inextricably bound

up with social inequalities'. The neoliberal narrative conceals these structural inequalities. In unearthing them, it is useful to apply Bourdieu's theory of *capitals*.

Bourdieu's capitals extend beyond monetary values, and include 'all forms of power, whether material, cultural, social or symbolic' (Swartz, 1997: 73).

Capitals are in some respects akin to material goods, possessing exchange- and use-values, but instead of generating economic capital they also generate prestige and status (Sayer, 1999). Andrew Sayer (2005a: 142) observes that this status can be both non-instrumental – a genuine belief that their goods are better – and instrumental, 'because the more these goods are desired by others the greater the profit that the dominant can derive from monopolising them'. It is a flaw in Bourdieu's theory that he suggests almost every action taken by individuals is calculated in relation to these capitals and how best to use them to gain advantage (Sayer, 1999). While the use of these capitals may not always be so calculated, what is of interest when conceptualising the ideal neoliberal subject is discovering whether, and if so how, individuals may actively attempt to increase their various capital, in order to give themselves a competitive edge, particularly through higher education. Young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face more obstacles in higher education, and certain institutions are still seen as beyond the reach of such students (Basit and Tomlinson, 2014; Bradley et al, 2013; De Vries, 2014; Savage, 2015). While the narrative of widening participation focuses on getting disadvantaged students into higher education, there has been less emphasis on where they study, and the type of experience they have while at university (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). As university degrees become

more commonplace, the focus has shifted to where a student studied, with graduates of so-called *prestigious* universities – such as those in the Russell Group – have an advantage in the graduate job market.

The prestige of these institutions is based on measures other universities cannot compete with, such as an institutional culture orientated towards research, nurtured over decades that generates an international reputation; a network of alumni who, having graduated from such universities, look on applicants from them more favourably (De Vries, 2014); and finally a higher entry grade tariff, justified by the reputation of being academic, research-led institutions. In comparison other universities, particularly those that received university status after 1992, do not have the same *prestige* and may be perceived to offer ‘devalued degrees’ (Bourdieu *et al*, 1999).

The point of entry grades is important. It not only means that students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to work harder to get into these universities (Jerrim, 2013; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009), but it also reinforces the idea that students with higher grades are *better* than other students. As Bourdieu (2008: 72) observes, education as a social mechanism derives ‘a large part of [its] effectiveness to the fact that [achievement is] misunderstood. [...F]amilies believe [...] that personal gifts and merit, rather than environment, are solely responsible for educational success’. The result of this misunderstanding is that, as Jay MacLeod (2009: 14) comments, ‘schools serve as the trading post where socially valued cultural capital is parlayed into superior academic performance’. This is likewise true of universities, though we may now argue that ‘superior academic performance’ is then parlayed into

higher human capital. This shift comes as universities become sites of enterprise as well as academia. As Paul Verhaeghe (2014: 163) suggests, if ‘young people must regard themselves as enterprises, and see knowledge and skills above all in economic terms – that is, as something they can use to increase their market value’, the *cultural capital* once associated with education, becomes diluted into another aspect of Becker’s human capital. If we take it from Bourdieu (1986) that practices and goods that are valued have to be rare or *difficult to acquire*, it follows that a degree from a high tariff university⁹ would be seen as having more worth than a degree from a university that could be branded as ‘easier’. The test of this would be how far the choice of applying to a prestigious university was based predominantly on the hope of expanding one’s knowledge and critical thinking skills, and how far it was based on gaining an edge in the job market. The ideal neoliberal student would arguably follow the latter reasoning.

Implied in this description of the ideal neoliberal subject is the implication of a neoliberal *Other*: an *unideal* subject. The existence of a student *Other* is important: as Hall (1996: 4) notes, identities are constructed ‘through, not outside, difference’. The easy explanation of who the student Other is would be someone who has not been to university and can be found in the villainisation of sections of the working class (Jones, 2011; Tyler, 2013). *Skivers, teenage mums, unaspirational NEETs*, and *chavs* might seem a world away from university students, but the stark dichotomy between these two types of subject offers an interesting insight into why some students –

⁹ The sector term for such institutions are ‘highly selective universities’, which itself implies a competitive element.

especially those from a lower socio-economic background – might construct themselves into neoliberal students. We may expect to see a level of value judgement attached to these student Others. As Sayer (2005a: 123) suggests: “the construction of identities” is not merely about the aesthetics of lifestyle but about moral worth and recognition,’ and so it may be that the Other are looked on as being somehow *less* than those students who have *pulled themselves up*.

1.5 A ‘state of happiness and wisdom’?

Of course being mindful of the future and wishing to secure the best possible outcome is a narrative that is projected at young people in many areas of life (Adams, Murphy and Clarke, 2009), not just higher education, and has existed longer than any concept of neoliberalism. The transition from childhood to adulthood has long been portrayed as a time of decision-making and change (Brannen and O’Brien, 1995; Valentine, 2003), and with that change an element of *hope* for a better life. This idea of ‘growing up’ is not a new narrative: it can be read in William Blake’s transition from innocence to experience, and has long been tied to taking responsibilities for one’s actions, with fables and morality tales offering an insight into the accepted forms of responsibility for different periods. What is distinct now is how the framing of the decision-making and responsibilities of adulthood have shifted; and what the realities of an insecure, and therefore undesirable, future have become. To that end, it is important to take time to look at what these *everyday* hopes and concerns are, in order to understand how the social world shapes young people’s thoughts and actions.

In writing about ‘the political economy of hope’ Carlos Novas (2006) has positioned hope as being both an individual pursuit and collective bond, something that ties a social group together (Tutton, 2011). Students carry their hopes for the future into higher education with them, but it is how these hopes are framed that may tell us whether they follow a neoliberal narrative of hope, or something different. Such considerations tie together the theories of self-formation discussed at the start of this chapter: *habitus*, which involves examining what is felt to be valued and hoped for; reflexive thinking, how that hope is articulated and worked towards; and practices of the self, the acts carried out on the self in the pursuit of ‘happiness, purity, wisdom’ (Foucault, 1988a: 18). Matters such as love and friendship may not readily be associated with neoliberal narratives, but as they are important to securing a *happy* future they merit consideration.

The human need for friendship is longstanding. Like Shakespeare’s Timon, we may all hope to be ‘wealthy in our friends’. The hope for finding friendship is a strong feature of young people’s accounts of going to university, partly because university offers a fresh opportunity to find people they ‘click’ with, rather than friends based on circumstance as school friendships are often framed (Finn, 2015; Warin and Dempster, 2007). Here, making university friends is framed as involving more *choice*. As much as identification may be against the student Other, recognition may come from association with people of *worth*. The judgement of this worth will be influenced by individuals’ *habitus*, which will presuppose them towards others who share similar experiences, practices and capitals. Friendship under the neoliberal narrative however is transformed into a form of *labour* which ‘involves constant

attention and cultivation, the rewards of which include improved standing and greater opportunity' (Gregg, 2007: 5), so we may expect the neoliberal student to attempt to cultivate new friendships at university as a means of *investing* in their social capital through *networking*, undermining the very nature of friendship. Those who do not *labour* in this way may have a different, non-instrumental understanding of what it means to be wealthy in friends.

Recognition may also come from work: in the past there was a strong narrative, particularly amongst the working class, of gaining 'dignity' through work (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Work has always been more than simply a means to the end of a *wage*: domestic work may be underpinned by an element of *affection* (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010); and Max Weber's (2001) Protestant ethic – though itself an apparatus of early capitalism – did suggest that work offered a spiritual, as well as material, reward. Work in a university context has two elements: there is the work required of students during their studies, and the work they hope to do afterwards. The quantifiable measure of this work is the grade a student receives, and so again we may expect a neoliberal student – looking to invest in their self and their future – to be consciously working towards achieving the highest grades to give them an advantage in the graduate job market. The *everydayness* of this neoliberalism can be found in blogs such as *Guardian Students* that post headlines exclaiming, "Got a 2:2? Don't panic, get some work experience" (Callender, 2016)¹⁰, the implication being that the reader with a 2:2 classification will be

¹⁰ And it should be noted that the ease of finding work experience is very clearly impacted by a person's class position, with those who can draw on economic capital more likely to

panicked, which in turn implies there is something panic worthy about a 2:2 degree. The legitimate reasons for this panic in an increasingly competitive graduate job market will be explored in the next chapter, but it also signals valuation of graduates according to their degree grades and suggests there is *shame* attached to lower classifications, if we take shame as the feeling that you have somehow not achieved the standards held up as worthwhile and valuable (Sayer, 2005b). When educational achievement is linked to idea of merit, a 2:2 may indicate a lack of effort. In such a circumstance we may see a tension between habitus and social structure: a student and their family and friends may be proud of a 2:2, but wider society would suggest they should not be.

It is worth reiterating that the pressure on young people to secure their futures is not new: for all their appearance of romance, the works of Jane Austen, for example, are primarily about young women seeking to secure a comfortable future for themselves within the confines of the society at the time (Kirkham, 1997). But what is recognised as good and to be hoped for, and what is recognised as bad and to be avoided if possible – is shaped by our habitus and social world (Sayer, 2005a). For instance, the assumption of 200 years ago was that the way for a young woman to gain *respectability* – that is *good* recognition – would be to marry, and preferably marry well¹¹. Now a young woman may gain it through her career or an endeavour, though the heteronormative marriage narrative would still suggest that marriage *adds* to

secure unpaid experience, and those with high social capital more likely to gain meaningful experience through social connections.

¹¹ Though as Emma reminds us, this assumption was classed, as ‘a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable’ (Austen, 2002).

her respectability, as she becomes someone who can ‘have it all’ (Coontz, 2006). It is in this concept of ‘having it all’ that the historical shift in the narrative of what it to be hoped for is encapsulated. Lynne Layton (2010: 316) argues neoliberal culture promotes ‘unwarranted optimism that generates fantasies of having it all’. In optimism we can find again those ‘creatures of the future tense’ (Selin, 2008) that guide our thoughts on the future – hope, expectations, *becomings*. The description of the optimism as unwarranted, however, reminds us that these hopes are not solely the responsibility of the individual who is holding them. Hopes will be realised – or dashed – in the social world, and are as much at the mercy of luck and structural obstacles as the abilities or ambition of the person who holds them. This is one of the reasons why neoliberalism has adopted the rhetoric of meritocracy¹²: promoting hard work and aspiration as all that is needed to succeed, and presenting that those who are not successful as in some way lacking in these attributes (Littler, 2013). While this attitude is salient in political rhetoric, its intrusion into the ‘mundane’ speaks for its everydayness.

Hopes for that future that do not account for these structural obstacles may be ‘misplaced’. Lauren Berlant (2011) goes further, and suggests such optimism may be *cruel*. In her account, attachments of ‘cruel optimism’ refer to things individuals desire that are an ‘obstacle’ to their flourishing. Berlant’s explanation draws on the psychoanalytic in more detail than we need cover here, but she does also offer the phrase ‘cruel optimism’ as an ‘analytic lever’

¹² Hayek actually suggested that success in a market is also a matter of luck and rejected the idea that income in a market-based society was relative to merit, but this caveat has been largely ignored by the political discourse of neoliberalism (Hayek, 1979; Turner, 2008).

for tracking ‘the affective attachment to what we call “the good life”’ (2011: 27), and it is in this manner that I apply it. The cruelty of the optimism students may have in higher education could lie in lack of understanding of the broader social structures at play in universities; that there are hierarchies of institutions, subjects, and degree classifications. While these may seem obvious, what is of interest is whether students recognise that *where* one studies may be just as important as what one studies, and how well one performs in those studies. Students who do not understand that all universities may not be perceived equally may suffer from misplaced hope, while even those who do might also be subject to a *broader* cruel optimism. The current narrative of higher education partly rests on the assumption that graduate status offers a better life and a level of security. But in an increasingly insecure world any such assumption could be seen as unwarranted. Aside from various personal crises that graduates may face later in life, there is a growing national and global insecurity. My empirical research was conducted before the referendum for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, but it would seem remiss not to acknowledge it as an example of how quickly instability can arise. Likewise, the effects of climate change may create problems in the future that are difficult to conceive of now (Urry, 2011), and for students from minority and liberation groups the rising tide of right-wing popularism across Europe must be a cause for concern. There is, arguably, something cruel in the idea that investing in one’s personal future will mitigate against collective crisis.

1.6 Conclusion

I have drawn from a range of theories in this chapter on subject formation as a process that involves individual reflections and dispositions, as well as influences from wider societal discourses. In combining these theories I have attempted to shed light on students' experiences of university, and how they can be framed as ideal neoliberal subjects. I have explored how incidents of everyday neoliberalism may encourage students in higher education to reflect on, and embody, a neoliberal narrative and in doing so come to act as neoliberal subjects.

An ideal neoliberal student would seek through active reflection to gain a competitive advantage from their education, particularly in regards to their employment and financial prospects. How they set about gaining this advantage may illustrate acts of everyday neoliberalism. Being neoliberal will not be the only subject position that students embody, but while it is important to note that they may not assume all of the characteristics of a neoliberal subject, there may be times in when students have little choice but to act in a neoliberal manner. This may be especially true if they feel their future stability rests on following a particular practice.

I now move to explore the nature of everyday neoliberalism in higher education in more depth and how this may affect students' experiences.

Chapter Two

Beyond the student-as-consumer: the effects of neoliberalism on students' experiences

I now turn to outlining the social, political and economic influences at work within the higher education that may encourage students towards *becoming* neoliberal subjects. In analysing these influences I build on the definition of neoliberalism offered in the previous chapter. This analysis will provide contextual information for the research questions (see page 10) and will critique the idea of the *student-as-consumer*, arguing that this model is too simplistic in its conception of how students approach higher education. This model is one – problematic – aspect of a broader shift within higher education. While some call this shift the *marketisation, privatisation, or commercialisation* of higher education, I take a more holistic view, opting for the *effects of neoliberalism on higher education*. The distinction is an important one: although marketisation, privatisation, and commercialisation are certainly key effects in-and-of themselves, reducing changes to higher education to just these characteristics misses the less obvious, but arguably more insidious, processes of everyday neoliberalism that are at play within the England's higher education field. I will explore these in this chapter, and then in later chapters through the data collected from the students.

The first section establishes the historical context of higher education in England, and identifies some of the early examples of neoliberal policy in higher education. I then look at recent government policy and rhetoric, and

how this has shaped the current higher education environment and the rise of *credentialism* in the UK. Following this, I explore how the language of social mobility and merit has been used to justify these recent changes, and critique the student-as-consumer model, exploring how it is linked to the concept of *student choice*. I argue that this *choice* may be heavily influenced by students' lives before university and their prospects after graduation, and how the added problematic concept of *student debt* may frame these decisions as a '*Hobson's choice*'¹³. The discussions within this chapter will frame the analysis of the empirical data collected from the students beginning in Chapter Four.

2.1 A short history of English higher education

In order to understand the effects of neoliberalism on higher education and students' experiences, it is necessary to understand some of the history of the higher education sector, and the impact the last 30 years of reforms in particular have had on its institutions and students.

In many ways the history of higher education mirrors that of capitalism in the UK, expanding alongside the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century, adopting the peacetime ideals of the post-World War Two years, and finally subject to the market fetishism of the 1980s. Understood in this context, the effects of neoliberalism – itself an era of capitalism, rather than its replacement – on the higher education sector become more prominent because of the foundations they were built on.

¹³ A choice that only has one real option and is offered on a 'take it or leave it basis', so is not really a choice at all.

With this historical context in mind it is worth noting early on that the State subsidised, grant-generous higher education sector of the post-war years may have to be seen as the exception, rather than the norm (Collini, 2012; Williams, 2013). Prior to World War Two UK universities were largely civic rather than State institutions. They were financed by wealthy individuals, usually either from industry or the Church, and supplemented by students' fees. Breaking away from the aristocratic and ecclesiastical halls of Oxford and Cambridge, industrialists began to establish universities in the UK's main manufacturing cities to provide the knowledge that would sustain the UK's industrialised economy (Collini, 2012; Stevens, 2004). These new universities were distinguishable by their *redbrick* facades, and were seen as sites of Victorian social mobility.

It wasn't until 1919 and the advent of the University Grants Committee (UGC) that the UK government began to take an active interest in the funding of higher education, an interest spurred on by the need to reinvigorate the country's economic competitiveness following World War One (Collini, 2012; Stevens, 2004). Even with this interest, only 50% of higher education funding came from the government, with 14% still coming from private donations and 36% from student fees (Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010). The cost to the government was radically different compared to today's sector. In 1939 there were just 50,000 students and 21 university-level institutions across Britain to fund (Collini, 2012); in 2014/15 there were 2,266,075 students and over 130 institutions (HESA, 2016a). The landscape of the current higher education sector is far more crowded, and arguably more differentiated today. The

process of charting this new landscape begins in 1979, with the first indications of the higher education system that was to come.

In 1979, the newly elected Thatcher government announced that the remaining subsidies for overseas students would end and these students would have to pay full-cost fees for their course. This decision has been overlooked, arguably wrongly, in many chronicles of the *marketisation* of higher education: true, there were not as many international students in 1979 as there are today, and such a change could have passed below the radar with far more ease than is the case now, but it was the first time since 1962 that students in the UK were expected to contribute directly to their higher education. Two years later the government implemented a 'savage reduction in university funding', a move Stefan Collini (2012: 33) suggests 'appeared almost deliberately to undermine rational planning and damage morale'. This reduction amounted to 11% across the whole sector, though some universities experienced it far worse: for example, the University of Salford saw its budget suddenly cut by over 40%.

With fees introduced and funding cut, the next major hallmark of today's higher education system came in 1986 with the separation of institutional funding for research and teaching, and the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Devised by the chairman of UGC, Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, the RAE was a means of measuring the quality of research carried out in different universities and departments; the results determining how much research block grant funding would go to any given university, and the whole process

contributing towards the competitive audit culture within universities that has now become inescapable (Brown, 2011; McGettigan, 2013).

Two years after the RAE came the 1988 Education Reform Act, which heralded the creation of an education market (Reay and Wiliam, 1999) and the abolition of the UGC, replaced by the short-lived Universities Funding Council. Events progressed rapidly from there. In 1989, Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State for Education, said that the 1988 Act's aims, and those of his government, were to expand British higher education based on the American model, with greater engagement from private resources (Brown, 2011). By 1990, there was an increase in the undergraduate fee level, coupled with a reduction in the teaching grant given to higher education institutions, though both continued to be paid by the government (with the exception of international student fees, which had now been payable by the student for over a decade). 1990 also saw the Education (Student Loans) Act, and with it the introduction of student loans to supplement maintenance grants, while 1991 brought the publication of the White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework*, which outlined the government's plan to abolish the dichotomy between liberal and vocational education by allowing polytechnic colleges and certain other institutions to apply for university status. This plan became a reality in 1992 with the Further and Higher Education Act that, in effect, cemented the low-funding, mass higher education system that had been waiting in the wings for over a decade. Collini (2012: 34) laments on how, at the time, 'even the most prestigious of [universities] offered remarkably little resistance to these changes, bending the knee whenever their funding masters passed by'. These prestigious universities were the same redbrick institutions

that had begun as *new, vocationally* orientated civic universities, set up to offer an alternative to the dominance of Oxbridge. Over the course of a century they themselves had gained the reputational capital to become prestigious, as the next wave of *new, vocationally* orientated universities entered into the sector.

A major justification for both the 1988 Act and its 1992 predecessor was to increase *choice*. In the 1988 Act it was parental choice over where they could send their children to school. In the 1992 Act, it was *customer* choice, as further education colleges – having been removed from LEA control and granted status as further education corporations – became a series of ‘individual education “businesses” competing with one another for “customers” within the centrally controlled legislative framework’ (Benn and Chitty, 1996: 14). The aim with the 1992 Act was to create a State authorised, mass market of FE providers – the hallmark of what was to come in HE.

The reclassification of polytechnic colleges as universities led to an increase in participation rates in higher education, though this increase was not simply the result of the reclassification: students who attended polytechnics were already included in the higher education participation statistics. It was the expansion of universities of all levels of prestige that drove up student numbers. Simply put, there were more spaces for students in higher education, and these spaces were met with demand. There were 937,000 students in the UK in 1985-86, and 1.72m in 1995-96 (Brown and Carasso, 2013). Roughly 15% of people aged 21-and-under were university in 1988: this rose to almost 35% over the next decade. This rapid rate of expansion had a

large impact on the State's student expenditure, so in 1994 the decision was taken to limit student numbers, instead of student grants, using the model of Maximum Aggregate Student Numbers or MASN (a method of cost control which would last almost exactly 20 years, being completely abolished in 2015). Institutions that went even 1% over their set quota incurred a financial penalty, though the limit did not stifle demand.

This desire from students for universities, and universities for students found a champion in 1997 in (New) Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Blair's rhetoric of 'education, education, education' led to a promise to have at least 50% of young people taking part in higher education. This expansion would come at a cost, yet funding per student had fallen consistently throughout the 1980s and 1990s (McGettigan, 2013). Blair's answer to an underfunded sector, and an electoral commitment to expand post-18 education, was to switch the cost from the State to the student (via, the State), through tuition fees – introduced for home students for the first time in 1998.

2.2 Higher education in austere times

The decade following the introduction of tuition fees did see some resistance from students, but it also saw a general political and economic acceptance of the neoliberal narrative that began in the 1980s. This status quo lasted until 2008 and the global financial crash – though it has arguably continued afterwards, albeit now through a discourse of austerity rather than prosperity. While I would stand by Lorenza Antonucci's claim (2016) that it is reductive to lay the blame for the economic and social problems facing students today

solely at the feet of the crash without looking at longer term processes, it certainly accelerated many of those problems.

The narrative shift towards austerity came with the general election of 2010, and the new Coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – a party that had unanimously campaigned against any rise in tuition fees. This coincided with the publication of the so-called ‘Browne Report’ (2010), *Securing a Sustainable Future For Higher Education*, which advocated unlimited tuition fees and a full-fledged marketplace of higher education. Despite being initiated by the previous Labour administration, Browne’s recommendations were ‘enthusiastically accepted’ by the Coalition government (Holmwood, 2011: 1). This was hardly surprising: as Andrew McGettigan (2012: 1) points out, austerity provided ‘the occasion which makes the prominent changes [to higher education] more acceptable politically’. There was never any talk of increasing the higher education funding block grant again once austerity was over, or lowering or abolishing student fees.

In an interview for this research, Nick Hillman – Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute think tank and a former BIS special advisor to David Willetts, the Universities Minister who oversaw the fee increase – countered the view that austerity was simply a useful guise for introducing more market mechanisms into England’s higher education sector, suggesting instead that it was done to cut costs. Hillman argued that the reforms were ‘portrayed as [a] sort of nakedly ideological desire to have a market in higher education, but I’d say the primary aim was to save money’ (Appendix Three). But the result has been seen in the public purse’s pocket: the student loan

book, which is publically backed, has led to more State spending, not less¹⁴ (McGettigan, 2015).

The changes Browne's report suggested to England's HE system were neoliberal in intent and substance, though in subtler ways than 'naked ideology'. The report argued that in order for the UK to keep its 'competitive edge' in the 'global knowledge based economy':

HEIs must persuade students that they should 'pay more' in order to 'get more'. The money will follow the student. [...] Students will be better informed about the range of options available to them. Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education. (Browne, 2010: 1-4)

Surprisingly, the words '*consumer*' or '*customer*' are never mentioned in Browne's report. The implication of students actively buying an education was perhaps too crass for those inside the political establishment who still viewed higher education as a *public good*. Articulating entry into higher education as something that can be *purchased* also implies that it is open to anybody who is able to afford it, regardless of *merit*, a position that did not sit well with the framing of an education system founded on the principles of *meritocracy* (discussed in section 2.3).

The Browne Report was shortly followed by the Comprehensive Spending Review, which – among other austerity entrenching measures – saw a commitment to cut the block grant universities and colleges received for

¹⁴ Figures suggest that the gap between new loans and repayments will rise from £9.8bn in 2014/15 to £13.9bn in 2019/20, before bottoming out at £8bn a year by 2040.

undergraduate provision from £5bn to roughly £2bn by 2014/15 (McGettigan, 2013). Some direct funding was to remain for high priority or high cost STEM courses, which were felt to contribute more to the UK's standing in the global knowledge-based economy and were therefore worth investing in. The funding gap caused by this reduction to the block grant would be filled by the increase in student tuition-fees the Browne Report advocated.

Browne's report (2010: 16) argued that 'HE matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. HE helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity'. But in order for this to continue, student choice would, presumably, have to align with employers' demands. According to Browne (2010: 23), this was not the case as '48% of employers were dissatisfied with the business awareness of the graduates they hired'. In Browne's vision of higher education students would *choose* to study subjects based on a course's ability to improve their *employability* and human capital, a vision that was given further political backing in the 2016 White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. Browne suggested that courses that failed to attract students on the basis of not offering good employment prospect would close, in logic reminiscent of the creative destruction of capitalist development, a suggestion echoed in the White Paper five years later:

We [the government] must accept that there may be some providers who do not rise to the challenge, and who therefore need or choose to close some or all of their courses, or to exit the market completely. The possibility of exit is a natural part of a healthy, competitive, well-functioning market and the government will not, as a matter of policy, seek to prevent this from happening. (BIS, 2016: 10)

The insinuation is that by introducing more market mechanisms ‘institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers’ (BIS, 2011: 5), overturning the pre-existing hierarchies of the HE field. In Browne’s higher education sector, *student choice* is the mechanism through which student consumers are engineered: one will necessarily follow the other. It is a tactic New Labour utilised in many of its public policies, shifting the societal discourse from citizens to consumers through the promotion of more ‘choice’ in key services (Clarke et al, 2007; Nordensvärd, 2011).

2.3 The ‘student-as-consumer’ model

Reading about the introduction of the tuition fees and the effects of marketisation on the UK’s higher education sector in some academic literature, it would appear that a homogenous, essentially complacent –even complicit – student body largely welcomed the changes. Rob Behrens (in Abrams, 2014), the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education between 2008 and 2016, said in light of the increase to £9,000 fees: ‘I think the decision to raise the fees has had an impact on student thinking. Students do see themselves more as consumers than they used to. They want the best possible degree they can get’.

The student-as-consumer model has become almost the *commonsensical* articulation of changes to English higher education since the introduction of tuition fees (Saunders, 2015). Higher education policy expects students to act as consumers, focusing on what impact this student-as-consumer has on higher education provision (Chalcraft, Hilton and Hughes, 2015; Koris, et al, 2015; Saunders, 2015). But there is remarkably little empirical evidence for a

consumer-orientation in students (Brown, 2014; Chalcraft, Hilton and Hughes, 2015; Koris, et al, 2015; Saunders, 2015): one could argue that much of the academic polemics around the student-as-consumer is based on anecdotal fears rather than hard fact. What is telling is how this assumption is articulated, often presenting more demanding students as driven by a consumer-oriented approach to higher education. It may instead be that more demanding students want a more rigorous academic challenge, or perhaps, facing a competitive graduate job market they are after more to make them stand out from the crowd: it depends on what the motivations for these demands are.

In the foreword to Joanna Williams's *Consuming Higher Education* (2013: i), Professor Arthur L. Wilson explains that both he and the author have heard the phrase 'you have to pass me, I paid for it' from a student 'more than once'. In her book Williams attempts to explore the trends that have constructed the student-as-consumer, citing a decline in the liberal education tradition and a new emphasis on higher education as essential for employability and, as a result, social mobility. But Williams' work serves again as an example of how empirical evidence is lacking on whether this consumer-orientation is widespread, with critiques often relying on the anecdotal accounts or pure polemics: though she cites interviews she has conducted for her work, there is no explanation of the methodology involved, or the criteria on which students were chosen, so I would argue that her claims that these are representative are misleading at best. It also highlights the disparaging viewpoint of students that the student-as-consumer model actively encourages. Williams (2013: 148) writes about students feeling 'entitled' as a result of 'paying' fees,

spending their time at university ‘counting contact hours or ticking off learning outcomes’ and being adverse to taking intellectual risks. She does not question whether this may stem from a need to safeguard themselves against the larger risks – or insecurities – of the modern world, especially the world of employment, which is increasingly tied to the world of education.

What evidence there is for the student-as-consumer model is often found after examining just one university, or subject, with little attempt to chart attitudes across subjects or institutions. Daniel B. Saunders found this in his research, which tried to identify consumer-orientations in 2,674 first year undergraduates at a public research university in the northeast United States:

While a number of scholars have discussed the pervasiveness of the conceptualisation of students as customers, to date there has been limited reliable research examining the extent to which students actually view themselves as customers. (Saunders, 2015: 5)

He concludes that the absence of such research may be symptomatic of the ways in which this orientation has become accepted within higher education: a symptom that poses interesting and potentially soul searching questions for universities. Does higher education, in anticipating that students will act like consumers, endeavour to treat them as such, perhaps in a misguided attempt to perform better in measures such as the NSS and league tables – interpreting their demands as consumer-orientated without considering other motivations or subject positions? In short, has higher education, in expecting students to act out of consumerist motivations, decided to treat their actions as such without first establishing whether this is really the case? And if so where did such an assumption come from?

According to Rina Koris et al's (2015: 41) study, based on a questionnaire completed by 405 business undergraduates from HEIs in Estonia, much of the existing literature on consumer-orientations in students 'misrepresented, misinterpreted or over-generalised students' views'. They found that while students were consumer-orientated in areas such as expecting universities to collect and act on student feedback¹⁵ and campus facilities, they did not expect it in the form 'of you have to pass me, I paid for it'. They found that these students experienced no consumer orientation towards graduation¹⁶, and tended not to express one towards curriculum design, rigour or the pedagogy of seminar tutoring. There was some consumer-orientation in educational experiences, but by no means all, and this did not mean other motivations were not also at play. University students, Koris et al (2015: 41) found, do not expect to be "served grades on silver plates" as is a none-too-seldom assumption among scholars'.

If we return again to the idea of meritocracy from Chapter One, then it becomes even less surprising that students do not expect this: students who are invested in the merit discourse would instead expect to get the grades they believe their hard work deserves (or does not deserve). If they are mindful of other students as potential competitors in the graduate job market, they may additionally be mindful of their peers getting grades their work does – or does not – deserve. There is an inherent tension between the student-as-consumer model and the meritocratic competition of education, one most literature on

15 Though this could have come from a democratic, rather than a consumerist, perspective.

16 They expected graduation to require hard work, and did not expect to be handed a degree simply because they had 'paid' for it.

higher education does not note. It is another example of the simplistic nature of the students-as-consumer model, and how it hides some of the more *everyday* effects of neoliberalism in higher education.

2.4 Fair access?

The participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education has been a policy point for successive governments since 1992. It should not be disputed that this is a worthwhile pursuit, but what I hope to demonstrate is that this purpose has been unfavourably co-opted by the neoliberal narrative and has, to an extent, reinforced rather than challenged existing barriers into higher education and the professional careers that students hope will follow.

One of the main political justifications for the expansion of higher education has been the agenda of social mobility, which was pursued by the New Labour, Coalition and now Conservative governments. The narrative around widening participation – which in the language of higher education is equated with social mobility – has involved opening up opportunities, unleashing potential, and fostering aspiration, as seen with New Labour's *Aim Higher* initiative, and in the Browne Report's use of social mobility as justification for the introduction of more market mechanisms into England's higher education sector. One of the final acts of parliament in 2010 was a vote on a motion that would increase the 'basic threshold' for fees from £3,290 to £6,000, with the BBC reporting that:

The motion, which still has to be backed by the House of Lords, raises the ceiling on annual tuition fees for English students to £9,000 -

although the government says that would only apply in ‘exceptional circumstances’ where universities meet ‘much tougher conditions on widening participation and fair access’. (BBC, 2010: *online*)

The government had calculated that this narrative of widening participation would justify the ‘exceptional circumstances’ under which a university could charge the higher rate of tuition fees. This was evident in the 2011 Education Act, which linked universities’ ability to charge the higher £9,000 fee band to their widening participation provision. The same logic was also applied to abolition of the MASN. As Universities Minister, Jo Johnson (BIS, 2015: *online*), outlined in a speech in 2015, removing the cap on student numbers would – apparently – mean ‘anyone with the ability can now make going to university their goal’. This political language often hides the classed barriers that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face when trying to enter into higher education, reducing participation in higher education to simply a matter of ability and aspiration. During his interview Hillman offered a more direct justification for why the Coalition government felt lifting the cap on student numbers was necessary in order to advance social mobility. He explained:

The only way really to widening participation is to have more places. [...] I think the middle classes will always win the race, if it’s a race with only a certain amount of places. [...] The middle class will always do that little bit extra to win the race, if places are very tightly constrained. So the minute you relax the number of places, I think it is the single best mechanism for widening participation. (Appendix Three)

While Hillman does at least acknowledge that more privileged students have an advantage, it is simplistic to see removing the cap on student numbers as a *cure all* for the barriers facing disadvantaged students. Lifting the cap is

arguably as likely to help middle class students: over the last decade as the number of student places have grown, pupils from private schools remained two and a half times more likely to enter prestigious universities than their State school peers (Garner, 2016). There is a long-standing phenomenon of the middle classes benefiting from policies designed to *level the playing field*, and it is no different in higher education.

Tellingly, in his interview, Hillman (Appendix Three) explained that ‘there was a very brief belief [within the government] that £9,000 wouldn’t be standard across the board’ and that the ‘standard’ would be the lower £6,000 fee band. The reason for this was a mistaken belief that the sector’s widening participation regulator, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), had ‘more power than we quickly learnt it did’. This mistake on the part of the policy makers betrays not just a naivety about how the sector operated, but also the intention to link price competition in higher education to social mobility: the plan had been for those universities that *appeared* to be good at widening participation to be able to charge £9,000 while other institutions could charge upwards from £6,000, with clear price distinctions. As it stands, in 2016 only four universities in England charged less than £9,000 for undergraduate courses (The Complete University Guide, 2016a). The price market established under the guise of facilitating social mobility backfired and students from all backgrounds faced a sector where £9,000 tuition fees was the norm, as few universities wanted to be seen as offering *cheaper* degrees.

Without an active price-based competition universities needed a different way to distinguish themselves in the apparent marketplace of student choice. The

Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, Professor Les Ebdon – who was a vocal critic of the fee increases – suggested in his interview for this research that instead of *price* universities began to trade on *prestige*. While hierarchies of universities existed long before the introduction of tuition fees, Ebdon noted the increased profile of the Russell Group universities following the higher fees as an example of how these hierarchies have now become *selling points*:

We have certainly seen a much greater strengthening of the Russell Group. I would say five years ago the average parent hadn't heard of the Russell Group, now people will ask me if 'this or that university is in the Russell Group, because my child is thinking of applying there'? And I'm thinking: 'where have you picked this thing up about the Russell Group?' (Appendix Three)

Strictly speaking, the Russell Group (2016: *online*) is a lobby group that 'represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector'. These universities are characterised by high entry grades and an emphasis on research-led teaching, and all of their members held university status prior to 1992: these combined factors giving them prestige within the higher education sector. This prestige has disguised the Group's role as a lobbying organisation, and presented it instead as an exclusive – if somewhat intangible - stamp of *quality* within higher education. This has been a remarkably successful tactic, given many of its members do not fare particularly well in the league tables relative to their perceived status. Many of the Russell Group institutions began as either the Victorian vocational, civic redbrick universities, or were established following the 1963 Robbins' Report, which called for fairer access to higher education.

But these institutions are now firmly positioned as *elite* institutions compared to the new Post-1992 universities (de Vries, 2014; Savage, 2015).

It is not necessarily surprising that the increased competition of the higher education sector has accentuated these hierarchies between institutions.

Education in the UK has always been stratified across all levels: what has changed under the political narrative of neoliberalism is that this stratification has been actively encouraged through policy, in the name of increasing *choice* and enabling social mobility. This latter aspect has been justified and allowed to go relatively unchallenged by the discourse of meritocracy.

Ideas of merit have always been problematic, but as Jo Littler (2013) remarks, meritocracy has been co-opted by the narrative of neoliberalism as a means of further embedding competitiveness between subjects under the guise of increasing social mobility. She explains:

Meritocracy offers a 'ladder' system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community 'by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other'. (Littler, 2013: 54)

The discourse of rewarding merit allows prestigious universities to market themselves to the *best and brightest* students. Bourdieu (1991) would suggest that ideas of 'brightness' in education are problematic, as they favour students' whose habitus compliments with expectations of the education system. This becomes particularly relevant for higher education when examining how different institutions rank themselves through their entry grades. In asking for set grades universities suggest there is equal access for equally 'bright'

students, but – as evidence suggests and Hillman attested – this negates fact that middle class students have more material and symbolic goods at hand to help them achieve better grades, and in this way have an inherent advantage. Universities may be required to ensure that they meet certain quotas of disadvantaged pupils, but across the sector there is little consideration of students' educational background when asking for grades, requiring students from disadvantaged backgrounds to work harder than more advantaged peers to achieve the same grades that allow them into prestigious universities. These students start with unequal odds on an unlevel playing field.

The prestige attached to these high entry universities manifests itself in better employment prospects and earning potential for Russell Group graduates (de Vries, 2014). An economically rational, *ideal* student should be aware of the difference in the status of universities, and the effect this would have on their own prospects. But while it is assumed that students have some conception of the differences between Russell Group institutions and *the rest*¹⁷, what I want to question with this research is the extent to which students have equal access to that knowledge about the differences, whether they are aware of the disadvantages attending a new university may bestow, and whether that influences their choice? I would argue that students who believe that all universities, and all degrees, are created equal are operating at a disadvantage to those who know they are not.

¹⁷ Mike Savage (2015: 237), for example, recalls a chanting match between Sheffield Hallam and University of Sheffield students:

Sheff H to Sheff U: I'd rather be a poly than a ****!

Sheff U to Sheff H: I'd rather be a **** than unemployed!

I am however wary of falling into the trap of suggesting that Russell Group universities are inherently better or that courses they offer, which tend to be more academic than vocational, are superior – or even that students should *aspire* to apply for them. It may be that a student simply does not want to attend such university, if it does not offer a course they wish to study, or if they feel they would not be ‘comfortable’ at such an institution. Course choice however is a somewhat less well-researched topic in relation to the implications it has for where a student would feel they fit in to. When interviewed, Ebdon suggested that students from disadvantaged background ‘cluster in particular around programmes’ that ‘tend to be more vocational’. He explained:

Your care leavers cluster in social work: so they want to be social workers, why should that surprise us? Because in terms of the professionals they’ve met, people who’ve helped them in their lives, they’re care leavers. (Appendix Three)

He added that ‘middle class kids [...] see a range of professionals and they’ll be excited by a range of things’, while students from family backgrounds where work was more limited tended to have a more fixed idea of what job they wanted to do once they leave university, and so were ‘much more likely to see higher education in functional terms: “Will I get a better job from it?”’.

Elizabeth Nixon, Richard Scullion and Mike Molesworth provide some evidence for this functional choice making by students at vocational universities. Their 2007/08 study of 60 students at a vocational university found that ‘students may use choices offered to deliberately narrow their learning experience. Choice allows students to negotiate the perceived ‘easiest’

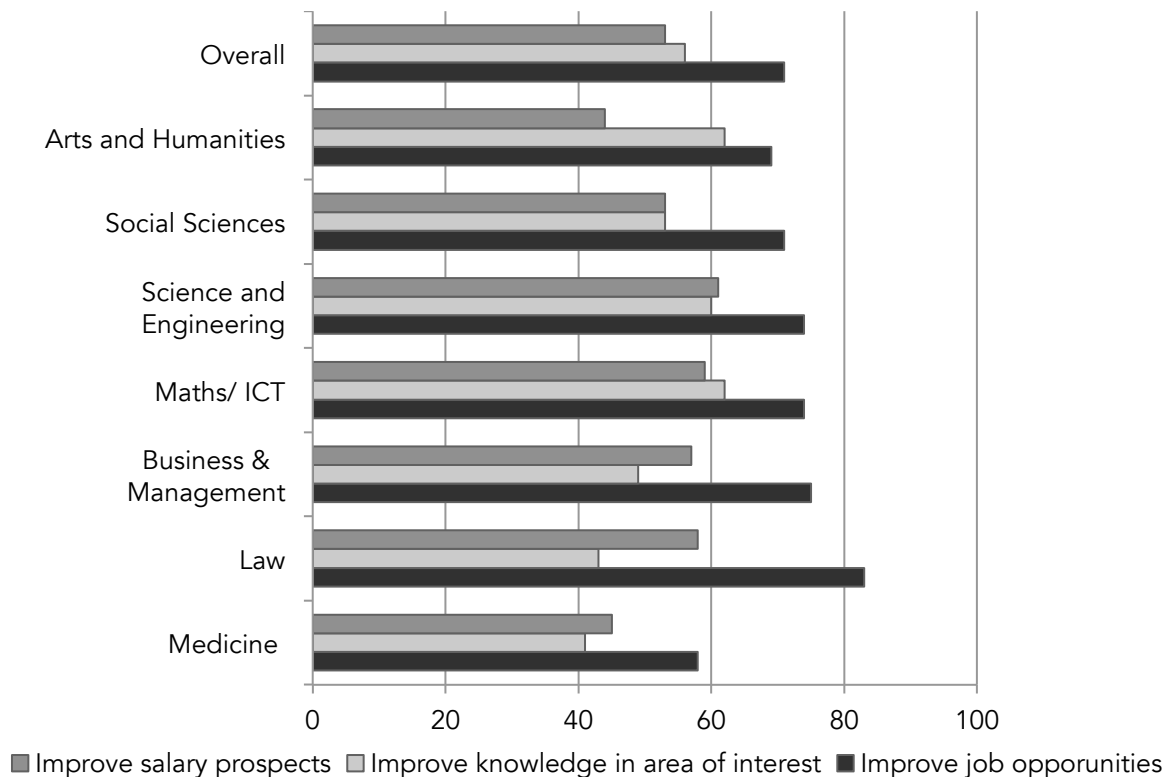
route through the degree' (Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth, 2011: 203). They suggest that this route minimised 'the opportunity for, and discomfort of, intellectual challenge and personal transformation'. This however, was somewhat at odds with a different study conducted by the same authors (2009: 281), which found that 'students have long experienced a tension between approaching learning with an internal drive for self-development and the external requirement to have the right amount and type of knowledge to operate in the [graduate job] market'. And neither study explored in depth how students' socio-economic backgrounds may affect this choice and 'internal drive'. They also both took place during a time when graduate prospects were more optimistic and student debts lower than today.

More recently the Student Lifestyle Survey (Sodexo, 2016) found that, amongst its 2,000 respondents across a range of universities, the main reported motivation for studying at university was to improve job opportunities. (These students, unlike those in the studies above, have experienced the £9,000 fee band.) The quantitative data does not go into the level of detail about the rationale for these choices that the qualitative studies do, however on the face of it these more recent findings support the 2009 study in suggesting a tension between enjoyment of a subject and the ability to find work after graduation (see Table 2.1 below).

Usefully, the Lifestyle Survey offers a comparison of different disciplines, and it is interesting to note the relative closeness of 'improving knowledge' and 'improving job opportunities' for Arts and Humanities students against subjects such as Law. It is also interesting to note that despite improving job

opportunities being the main reason across the subjects it is never matched by improving salary prospects, suggesting that the two are not necessarily linked in students' minds¹⁸.

Table 2.1: Top three reasons for going to university by percentage



(Sodexo, 2016)

What studies like Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth's (2009; 2011) or the Lifestyle Survey do not allow for is that students may simultaneously hope that their degree provides them with opportunities for personal development, an enjoyable course, preparation for the job market, and a hope for social mobility: these elements are not mutually exclusive and it would be

¹⁸ 51% of students said they wanted to specialise in a certain subject or area; 49% cited a desire to obtain an additional qualification; and 45% said a degree was essential to their chosen profession (Sodexo, 2016: 15).

reductionist and simplistic to imply that they are. Students' may have multiple selves, as I discussed in the previous chapter, and they may desire different outcomes from the same course. I am interested in how the different narratives students draw on when framing their hopes for their degrees and future interact. These multiple-selved students are complex subjects: while the scope of this research, unlike a large-scale survey, cannot claim to be empirically representative, I hope that in providing a more in-depth account of the different selves of students it will provide some additional insight into their motivations.

2.5 The state of graduation

The concept of credentialism is useful for understanding the effects of neoliberalism on higher education. Framed as the gaugeable *proof* of knowledge and skills through educational qualifications, it is as a consequence of credentialism that higher education as an arena of life has largely become the gateway to professional careers, and the relative security attached to them. In this way it also has implications for social mobility. Guy Standing explains the growth of credentialism as part of the neoliberal programme in education:

The austerity era saw an acceleration of what had been happening to education for many years. Education ceased to be a right: it became an entitlement, which can be bought and sold [...] 'Credentialism' holds sway as more and more qualifications are demanded to obtain a job. Schooling for jobs is more blatantly an investment in human capital (Standing, 2014: 63).

The definition of credentialism I take forward encompasses: 1) the extent to which a society positions individuals within the job market based on their educational qualifications, as aspects of credentialist hiring; and 2) the

persistent trend towards ever-increasing educational requirements for jobs, and the gradual *professionalisation* of careers that previously did not require higher education degrees – a form of credential inflation (Bills and Brown, 2011; Brown, 1995, 2001) – for example, journalism and the law (see page 119).

The truth of this trend can be clearly seen in the UK's national statistics. By 2013 there were 12 million higher education graduates living in the UK: almost a fifth of the population (ONS, 2013). In central London, six out of every ten residents are higher education graduates. Of the first-degree graduates who completed university in 2014, 56.5% were working full-time six months after graduation; 12.8% part-time; 12.1% were undertaking further study, training or research; 6.3% were unemployed; and 5.5% were working and studying¹⁹. Of the 74.8% in some form of work, 14.6% work as health professionals; 9.8% as business, HR and finance professionals; 6.1% as education professionals; and 12.1% as retail, catering waiting and bar *staff*²⁰, note, not professionals (HECSU and AGCAS, 2015: See Table 2.2 below for the full list of types of work for first-degree graduates in employment). According to the ONS (2016) the high skilled employment rate for graduates declined between 2014 and 2015: 1.3 percentage points across the working age population (16-64 year olds) and 2.2 percentage points across the young population (21-30 year olds). Graduate salaries have remained mostly flat since 2008, and while across the working age population graduates earned

¹⁹ Leaving 4.9% who are classified as 'other', and 1.9% who are working overseas.

²⁰ Sales supervisors/sales and retail assistants/retail cashiers and checkout operators/customer service managers and supervisors/kitchen and catering assistants/waiters and waitresses/bar staff/leisure and theme park attendants.

£9,500 more than non-graduates, on average these gaps were narrower for the young population with graduates earning £6,000 more than non-graduates – making the graduate premium for fee paying graduates less than for the group that includes graduates whose higher education was State subsidised. It is also important to note that black graduates have a lower rate of high skilled employment, higher unemployment rates, and lower median salaries than white and Asian graduates: only 37% of this group are in graduate jobs (ONS, 2016a).

Table 2.2: Type of work for 2014 graduates in employment by percentage



(HECSU and AGCAS, 2015)

The ONS data also suggests that degree class has more of an impact for the young population than the working age population: young graduates who achieve a first class degree earn, on average, £3,000 more than those who achieved an upper second; young graduates who achieve an upper second earn £2,500 more than those who achieved a lower second or third in their degree.

As the number of graduates increases, the importance of degree class increases as a means of differentiating them. Similarly, the subject studied at university becomes more pertinent: graduates who studied STEM subjects have higher employment rates, greater high skilled employment rates, lower unemployment rates and higher median salaries than graduates who studied ‘Other Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities’ subjects (ONS, 2016a).

Although cohorts before 2015 did not pay the higher rate of fees, higher education may still seem like a poor investment – at least in human capital terms – for those not working at a graduate level. University is marketed on the understanding that graduates will gain graduate level employment and earn more than non-graduates, though the ranges within graduates’ salaries are equally significant. This, for example, is the rationale offered by the independent advice website, *applytouni.com*:

1. Better Job Prospects

Having a degree won’t mean that getting a job is an easy ride but it will open up more options to you. Did you know that only 15% of those who graduated within the last six years are unemployed? When you compare this with the 27% of people who are unemployed after leaving school within the last six years without higher education we know which group we’d rather be in!

2. Following your dreams

If you’ve always wanted to follow a vocation, such as being a doctor, vet, teacher, or lawyer you’ll need a degree and you’ll often find that these career paths are only open to graduates. [...]

4. Eventually, you’ll earn more money

As we said above, there are graduate training programmes that allow you to fast track your career and this acceleration will continue. Working at a higher level will mean a higher salary that will only get better. (*applytouni.com*, 2015: *online*)

For a fair proportion of graduates, however, a non-graduate job is a distinct possibility, and the first cohort to pay the £9000 may be more acutely aware of this than their predecessors. Browne's report, and the subsequent government policy that followed it, framed students as empowered *choosers* who – with the right information – would make the right choice over where and what to study. The information on which Browne felt students should make this decision was their 'employment prospects':

Students choose their degree courses for many different reasons. Some will be particularly interested in one course and decide to pursue it with relatively little concern about what it will do for their employment prospects. Others choose a course because it will improve their employment prospects.

Our proposals will improve the information that is available about employment prospects. The UCAS portal will allow students to compare courses on the proportion of students in employment after one year of completing the course; and average salary after one year.

Employment outcomes will also make a difference to the charges set by institutions. Where a key selling point of a course is that it provides improved employability, its charge will become an indicator of its ability to deliver – students will only pay higher charges if there is a proven path to higher earnings. When complemented by the improvements we propose to information, this will help students make a better choice about what to study. (Browne, 2010: 31)

In Browne's higher education sector the right information relates almost exclusively to employment prospects, and this again has been strengthened by the 2016 White Paper (BIS, 2016: 58), which called for the establishment of the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset that, by linking higher education and tax data, will provide a method for measuring graduates' earnings. This data was intended to be a 'valuable source of information for prospective students to have a better picture of the labour market returns' for different courses and institutions. But, as Roger Brown (2014) contends, it is

impossible to accurately provide this type of information: *employability* is one of higher education's 'post-experience goods', and so while universities can give rough information about how previous graduates have fared, prospective students must in effect *hedge* their chances of success based on the odds provided by universities.

Little has been done to explore how 16- and 17-year-olds are expected to judge what their choices actually involve and how their *odds* are affected by their social, cultural, political and economic backgrounds; in short, how this choice may be *classed*. We know from previous research (Ball, Davies, David and Reay, 2002; Bradley et al., 2013; Reay, 2006, 2001) that prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not given the same level of information about university as their more advantaged peers, partly due to fewer resources and knowledge within schools, and partly because of a lack of knowledge within the family. A recent study by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015), for example, found that just 19% of the young, full-time undergraduate entrants into Russell Group universities in 2011/12 came from disadvantaged social backgrounds²¹ – compared to 33% for all UK universities in 2013/14 – and that these students would have had to have worked harder to get into these 'top' universities. This research suggests State school applicants have to achieve one grade higher in their A-levels to have the same chance of being accepted into a Russell Group university as otherwise identical privately educated students. Not only does this affect 'fair access' into HE, but the

21 Measured through whether a student received of Free School Meals, their parents' educational background, and whether they attended a non-selective State school, a selective State school, or a fee-paying school (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015: 8).

Commission's report (2015: 9) also found that professional employers target the most selective universities more heavily than they do less selective institutions, this being one mechanism through which 'access to elite professional firms remains unequal' so that 'professional employees generally have privileged backgrounds in comparison to the UK population'.

We may expect to find that students who face higher levels of *student risk* – those who are the first generation to enter into HE, and come from poorer backgrounds – to be more cautious in their choices. In choosing what to study these two stances may coincide: the safe option for success may appear to be studying a STEM subject, whose graduates are in high demand²². The riskier option may be to study a humanities or social science subject as graduates in these subjects are not seen as 'in demand', though social science graduates have better job prospects than other groups: 84.2% are employed three years after graduation, compared to 78% of STEM graduates (Burns, 2013). This could potentially lead to a classed division in subjects as well as universities, with students who are more secure in their economic, cultural and social capital being able to study *riskier* subjects, though perhaps with less consideration for how risky they are. Again, understanding whether students see risk in these decisions is important for framing whether they are acting from motivations that could be interpreted as neoliberal, or if they are making their decisions based on other influences, such as simply enjoying a particular subject. Even in this it is important to remember that some students may be

²² According to The Social Market Foundation, assuming that the number of STEM graduates who enter non-STEM professions remains the same, an extra 40,000 STEM graduates will be required in every year until 2020 – a rise of nearly 50% – to fill the 100,000 vacancies annually in jobs requiring degrees in STEM subjects (Broughton, 2013).

making these choices from a position of assured (or assumed) security, while others feel less secure; either way they face risks. If we allow that the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self must embrace risk in order to maintain their competitiveness, and with it social advancement, then it follows that *student choice* – or judgement – must involve an assessment of *risk*.

There is an additional source of information prospective students may draw on when deciding whether to enter into higher education: their peers. This peer led information may be quite innocuous: a friend enjoyed studying X at the University of Y, so an applicant intends to follow suit. But such an approach does not fit within the Browne Report's normative assumption that the student should be a rational, calculating economic actor. Leaving aside the problems with this assumption, if we do treat prospective students as rational, economic actors then it is logical to expect them to be at least partly aware of the current, high levels of youth un- and underemployment, and to pay at least some heed to this information when making their *choice*.

During the 2008 financial crash youth unemployment rose at twice the average rate, and by 2014 stood at three times the national average. By the middle of 2015, 950,000 young people²³ were not in employment, education, or training (Lansley and Mack, 2015). As Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack explain in their study of the rise in poverty in the UK over the last 30 years, *Breadline Britain*:

²³ Those aged between 16 and 24.

[...w]hen the young do get work, they are much more likely to work in low-paid sectors, while through the recession real wages fell more sharply among the young than for any other group. Three times more young women were found to be employed in low-paid, low-skilled jobs in 2012 than twenty years earlier. The proportion of recent graduates working in non-graduate, often low-skilled jobs rose by a fifth after 2008 to reach 47% by 2013. In the fiercely competitive hothouse of Britain's jobs market, this also means fewer jobs for non-graduates. (Lansley and Mack, 2015: 112)

It is probably unsurprising that when 'the ill-effects of economic hard times have been concentrated on one particular generation, despite the way in which they are also better qualified than their predecessors' (LSE, 2013: 8) some students may *choose* to take a more instrumental view of higher education, though how much choice one has when the options are unemployment or underemployment is debatable. Arguably the students who are more likely to be aware and influenced by this are those who come into contact with it more frequently: those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who see the damage NEET status does to their peers. It may be that the student and the NEET *Other* each other: from the student's perspective, one is willing to take risks to invest in their self to secure a better future, and the other – in a simplistic view – is not. The *Paired Peers* project (Bradley et al, 2013: 4), which explored how the experiences of University of Bristol students and University of the West of England students were differentiated by class, suggested that working-class students, especially those who were the first in their family to go to university, could be seen as 'pioneers': 'leaving their schoolmates behind, they set out into uncharted territory'. The implication again was one of risk: the uncertainty of entering into the unknown is not for the fainthearted (though it is worth noting that this was probably always the case for 'pioneer' students and not necessarily a trait of neoliberalised HE).

Mirowski makes a similar analogy when considering the mentality of Foucault's (2010) risk-taking 'entrepreneur of the self', suggesting that from this subject's perspective:

(U)nreserved embrace of (this version of) risk is postulated to be the primary method of changing your identity to live life to the fullest. [...] Alternatively, anyone who participates in the welfare state is just a dull drone, lost in a vegetative state. They are debased because they expect the state to shield them from risk, when in fact, they should be revelling in the opportunity to remake themselves. (Mirowski, 2013: 119)

Another trait of the idealised neoliberal subject is that they take sole responsibility for their actions and take sole credit when these actions are successful, but equally that they must bear sole responsibility when things go wrong, a form of justice based on merit. In the neoliberal worldview every choice carries with it the risk that it might not 'pay off'. The judgement students must make is that they may not get the graduate lifestyle they went to university in the hope of achieving – arguably one of relative job and financial security, as well as enjoyment and comfort – but they will nevertheless incur graduate debt. What we do not fully understand yet is whether students see this *debt* as a risk, and if so, how it affects their decision-making.

2.6 Student debt

As more cohorts go through university on the higher fee rate there is increasingly evidence that the debt is having an effect on student habits and attitudes. For example, there has been a perceived trend that students are less 'fun' since the implementation of the £9,000 fees (Garner, 2012; Goble, 2016): the 2016 Student Lifestyle Survey (Sodexo) found that of the 2,000 students surveyed, only 21% cited the importance of 'having a good social life'

as a key reason for going to university (the lowest score this question has received in the Survey's 12 year history). Over a quarter of students reported spending nothing on socialising in a 'typical' week. It is possible that the survey responses are not entirely accurate, as students may not want to admit to placing high importance on the social side of university, but if this is the case it arguably strengthens the impression that students have been led to believe that university is primarily a process for gaining human capital, and to see it as anything else is to go counter to what is expected.

However, in the manner in which many commentators refer to it, *student debt* is a curious concept: it is a term which does not really refer to all the debts a student may have, but the debts incurred as a consequence of being a student, in effect tuition and maintenance loans. And it is only loosely a *debt*. The tuition and maintenance loans are – for the time being at least – publicly owned. Currently these *loans* only begin to be paid back once a graduate begins to earn over £21,000 per annum²⁴, repayment stops if their annual wage falls below this, and what is remaining of an individual's debt is written off after 30 years²⁵. Repayments are taken from salaries via an individual's tax code, removing the worry of missing a monthly payment. This is all a far cry from the late-payment fees and threat of bailiffs and bankruptcy that accompany bank or other private lender loans, and yet student overdrafts, credit cards or bank loans are rarely included in calculations of student debt. The risks associated with tuition and maintenance debts are currently

²⁴ This threshold has remained unchanged since 2012, despite an increase in inflation.

²⁵ The HE Commission estimates that 73% of students will not have paid back their student loans by the end of the 30-year period (2014).

underwritten by the State, although as we have seen the system appears to be unsustainable in its current form. Perhaps it is fair to say then that one of the other elements students must *hedge* on in their decision to take on the debts is that a new government will not change the terms with little notice²⁶.

Positioning these repayments as ‘debts’ may also mean that students come to think of being indebted as *normal*, though it is too early yet to tell what effect this framing will have on graduates’ long-term attitudes to debt: will they be more inclined to take on mortgages and bank loans because being in debt has become a standard state, or will they think £66,000 is already enough and shy away from taking on more than is absolutely necessary? We may not know the exact answer for some years to come as more of the £9,000 fee cohorts move from student-life into graduate-life. (Though David Ellis (2014) already reports that students burdened with higher levels of student debt are less likely to be able to afford a deposit for a house.)

There is a final, political contradiction in the concept of the student debts. To return to austerity, the former Chancellor, George Osborne and Prime Minister David Cameron often claimed that was it important for the country to pay off its national debt so that it is not a burden on future generations (Wren-Lewis, 2012). There is an interesting double standard at play here, as the government appeared to have little concern with burdening future generations with student debt for their education. One argument may be that

²⁶ This would be a reasonable concern to have, given that increasing tuition fees was not part of either the Conservative or Liberal Democrat’s 2010 election manifestos: the Lib Dems promising to abolish them completely.

student debt, though still underwritten by the State, is seen as an individual's personal debt incurred by investing in themselves and their futures: 'national debt' is money individuals have to pay for services that they may feel they do not benefit directly from²⁷.

There is also a certain politics at play in framing payments as *debts* and *loans*, rather than a so-called graduate tax. The idea of taxation carries with it at least the implication of a broader social contribution: tax is the price paid for being a citizen in a society, not an individual consumer. Student loan repayments are collected by HMRC; it will be tax data that is used to compile LEO information (BIS, 2016). In many of the characteristics I have discussed above, the student loans are arguably more akin to a graduate tax, in everything if not name. But making student debt *appear* as an individual's burden, rather than a societal contribution, may arguably reduce the risk of any collective action against it: if an individual *chooses* to take on student debt it is their own responsibility to repay. If it were a *tax* then perhaps there is more scope of negotiation, especially as graduates grow older and become a target voting demographic. This is a hypothetical now, but the idea that the student debts could become a political bargaining point, in the same way taxes may be, is one Hillman suggested in our interview:

Young people by and large don't care about the student debt, [but] my view is when they're 45 and they've got two kids' nursery fees to pay, and they've got a mortgage to pay, and they've got a car hire purchase thing to pay, and they're still paying 9% of their income to the Student Loans Company – 20 years after they left university – I think that's when it becomes political. [... Changing the terms of repayments] will

²⁷ Though this is largely a fallacy, it is an enduring one none-the-less.

be a popular policy for 5m graduates: it will be a popular policy for a very significant group of voters. (Appendix Three)

2.7 Conclusion

In Chapter One I established the model of an ideal neoliberal student. In this chapter I have illustrated some of the key effects of the neoliberal narrative on higher education, and more broadly on students' experiences of higher education, influencing them towards becoming ideal neoliberal subjects. I have explored how the political narrative of neoliberalism has impacted on higher education, and made it adopt many of the discourses of this narrative, such as marketisation driven by a discourse of consumer choice; a misconstrued idea of social mobility that plays on a discourse of merit, but does little to acknowledge the historical and structural advantages different students, and universities, may benefit from; and an idea of higher education as a personal investment in a student's own human capital, paid for through a personal government-sponsored loan. Alongside these discourses I have highlighted some of the current problems facing contemporary students, particularly the competitive graduate job market, which by its nature must produce winners and losers. I suggested that students must hedge their choice of where and what to study, in order to increase their chances in this competitive job market – though again, some students will make this decisions with an advantage based on their socio-economic position.

With these conditions established, in the next chapter I set out the methodology I employed to test my research questions and explore how students reflect on their experiences of higher education, and the extent to which they may be influenced by these neoliberal effects.

Chapter Three

Research methodology

In the previous two chapters I set out the conceptual framework for this research: what follows now is a discussion of how that framework was tested. Just as Chapter Two outlined the challenges facing students in the modern higher education sector, this chapter will discuss many of the challenges I faced in researching those students. These challenges included a low response rate for student participants in the final year of their studies that affected participant numbers; not gaining access to a third university; and a delay in gaining ethical approval from Lancaster University, which meant primary data collection began later than I had hoped. Consequently, my methodology had to be responsive, and evolved throughout the research. While student participant numbers were lower than I had hoped for, the smaller numbers did allow me to conduct more in-depth interviews and data collection than would have been practical for a project of this size if the number of participants had been higher. The student data was collected over a series of interviews, and used a variety of different methods and sources that would make up the students' *identity portfolios*. The identity portfolios were made up of a range of methods, chosen to capture how the participants crafted their identities as higher education students – both consciously and unconsciously – and how broader narratives affected these identities. Through this range of methods I explored whether the students embodied everyday instances of the neoliberal narrative, or acted otherwise, and how they held different subject

positions at different times, allowing me a good insight into different aspects of the students' lives, and the multiple selves they presented. So while the research was not extensive in terms of coverage, it was *intensive*. The full range of methods used for this research is outlined in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Research methods by chronological order

Method	Participants	Purpose
Desk-based background research	N/A	Contextual information to inform staff and student interviews; data analysis.
Interviews with university staff	Heads of department and admissions tutors at both universities	Understand admissions process at each department; contextual information to inform student interviews; data analysis.
Observations of university and department open days	Heads of department and admissions tutors at both universities	Understand admissions process at each department; contextual information to inform student interviews; data analysis.
Observation of the Russell Group university's clearing day operations	History and computer science staff at the Russell Group university	Understand admissions process; contextual information to inform student interviews; data analysis.
Interviews with higher education experts	Nick Hillman, former BIS special advisor; Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education; UCAS staff	Contextual information to inform student interviews; data analysis.
Group interviews with students	First year students; students in the final	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data

	year of their studies	analysis.
Student background information sheets	First year students; students in the final year of their studies	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data analysis.
Life-grid interviews with students	First year students; students in the final year of their studies	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data analysis.
Collected UCAS personal statements	First year students	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data analysis.
Collected social network site (SNS) data	Students in the final year of their studies	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data analysis.
Six month graduation interviews	Students in the final year of their studies	Understand <i>students' experiences</i> for data analysis.

In setting out my research method, I first describe the context of the research and why it was appropriate to use qualitative methods to allow students to reflect on their university experiences. This is followed by a short discussion of the main empirical tools: semi-structured interviews and identity portfolios. The second section looks at how participants were recruited, how interviews were conducted and the data analysed. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations involved. Lists of the student and professional participants are provided in Appendices One, Two and Three.

3.1 Research Design

My initial hope had been to conduct the research across three universities and two courses: a Russell Group university; a Post-92 university; and a young university that did not participate in league tables. The selection of these

institutions was based on recent research highlighting the difference in employment prospects for students from different types of university (de Vries, 2014), as well the perceived differentiation between *prestigious* universities, and *the rest* (Bourdieu, 1988; Havergal, 2016). As Russell Group institutions are widely perceived as being more prestigious than other universities – even in cases where their league table position is lower than non-Russell Group institutions – it seemed obvious that a member of the Group should form part of the research, which then made it imperative to find a non-Group member within the same city in order to compare the institutions and their students (Bradley et al, 2013; Reay, David and Bell, 2005; Savage, 2015)²⁸.

The institutions chosen for this research were located in, or close to, a city in the North England. This was a key variable in understanding the students' knowledge of the job market: the North of England has the lowest employment rate of mainland Britain, with only Northern Ireland having a lower rate of employment in the UK (ONS, 2016b). The two courses I selected were history and computer science, as I wanted to test any differences between Liberal Arts students and STEM students²⁹, following the discussion in Chapter Two. History is seen as a classical subject, though one often

28 In order to distinguish between the broad groups of institutions collected within the Russell Group and Post-92 universities, and the two institutions used in this research, from this point on the Russell Group university used in this research will be referred as the RG; the Post-92 will be referred to as the P92. The student participants' institutions will be identified in-text. Their course will also be identified, with H signifying History, and CS for Computer Science. For example, a computer science student at the Post-92 university will appear as Name (CSP92).

29 I chose to avoid social science students as they might have acquired a sociological view of neoliberalism that could have biased their responses.

believed to have no obvious fixed career at the end, while computer science suggests a more definite career path and job security, as the digital technology industry continues to grow even in times of recession (Tech City, 2016; TIGA, 2016). It was also necessary to choose two subjects that were offered at all of the universities.

My intention had always been to interview students at the beginning of their first year, and end of their final year as I believed this would allow me to capture their initial and then final feelings about higher education and the decisions that guided them in it. I was particularly keen to capture the feelings of the 2014/15 cohort of final year students as these would be the first to graduate from the £9,000 fee band. Initially I had planned to interview up to 60 students: 20 from each university, equating to five from each year and course. However recruitment proved more difficult than anticipated, as explained below, and was further impeded by a delay in gaining ethics approval, so – for final years at least – the numbers were lower than I had hoped for. This was compounded by a lack of response from either of the departments in the new university, despite several varied attempts to make contact. Having gained the consent of the RG and P92 departments I eventually decided it would be best to continue researching these two institutions, rather than delay the research further looking for a new set of three.

3.1.1. Identity portfolios

While Foucault's theory on the enterprising self provided a starting point for the theoretical framework for this research, his work on the self was left

unfinished (Hall, 1999), and offered only a theoretical ideal type. As subjects cannot be assumed to automatically comply with this ideal model, it was necessary to conceptualise an empirical method with which to test it. It was in Bourdieu that I found a method for understanding how a student may embody an enterprising subject, and other conflicting selves. In his study of structural power in France's higher education system Bourdieu (1988) used academics' CVs, as well as public biographies, press reports and data from universities to develop portfolios of different academics. With these portfolios he was able to establish their divergent levels of cultural and social capital. Bourdieu did not interview the academics, or get them to actively reflect on their own positions within France's higher education system, but through these various *technologies of the self*, he was able to capture a sense of their *professional* identities, and use this to critique the French university system. It occurred to me that students in England's modern higher education sector had comparable examples of written data through which they presented different selves. Most students now used social network sites, which construct public identities through written text. Additionally, students are required to submit a written personal statement to universities as part of the admissions process. Both of these forms of self-presentation could be understood as technologies of the self.

The inspiration for using identity portfolios to supplement these written presentations of the self came from Karen Nairn and Jane Higgins's (2007: 266) study of New Zealand's 'neoliberal generation'. This asked school-leavers to construct an 'anti-CV', expressing their identities beyond 'the narrow prescriptions of the standard CV'. This method of allowing an individual's

narrative to guide the interview was intriguing. However, the anti-CV had drawbacks for my own research, as it became apparent that it could lead to a limited portrayal of a student's identity. The next stage in developing my method for the identity portfolio came from a conversation with Paul Ashwin, of Lancaster's Educational Research Department. He described a method in educational research called *life-grids* that – combined with recorded interviews – captured biographical data on students' experiences of education and learning (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean, 2013). This method involved presenting biographical data on a pre-defined grid, building up a tapestry of an individual's life across different times and topics. Having access to this comparable data, Andrea Abbas, Ashwin and Monica McLean (2013) argue, allows researchers to gauge what recurring influences from individuals' pasts may affect their experiences of education. For example, they found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who went to university often had positive experiences with teachers at school, something I saw amongst my student participants. So while individual narratives can appear very different, the life-grid offered a method of comparison across broad themes.

The life-grid presented an opportunity to explore the students' wider life narratives, and how those affected their experiences of higher education. For this to work the design of the grid was paramount. I produced the grids on A3 sheets of paper, with timespans based on educational milestones in the English education system along the vertical axis, and themes across the horizontal, as demonstrated in the extract below (see Appendix Four for an example of a full grid). The themes were based on areas known to influence educational experience (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006), with the intention of

not over-shaping students' accounts of their lives but to offer broad, *everyday* themes and explore how students' representations of these areas fed into their accounts of their student experience.

Extract of Danny's life-grid

	Education	Money	Own employment	Parent's employment	Housing	Family
Primary school	one of the best parts of my life because I got to do so much	Having £4.00 pocket money	Wanted to be a Archeologist because of Jurassic Park	both work in Santander	always stayed in same house	Dad split up with my mum
High school	I struggled through it because I didn't take it seriously	getting money off my dad a lot to go out	Worked in dominos and had a paper round	Santander	same house	mum got married again
College	I had to make sure that high school didn't happen so I really tried	my dad stopped supporting me so my mum had to	dominos	Santander dad for big promotion	Mike moved in	dad got married
University - first year	struggled at first but getting better	student loan tuition maintenance	none	Santander	same house	step sister had a baby

The main variation in my life-grid from the original authors' was the omission of the 'health' theme and its replacement with 'money', partly due to the nature of the research but also drawing on wider evidence about what students are concerned about before and during university (Independent Commission on Fees, 2015). Omitting health – largely in the interests of space on the grid – was with hindsight a mistake, as for the students who had health issues it did have a bearing on their educational experiences: in these cases students were encouraged to add a health field freehand on their grids. The other variation was the addition of three 'future' timespans: one year after graduation; five years after graduation; and ten years after graduation. The inclusion of these allowed me to examine how students imagined their lives after university, and what impact going to university had on their hopes for

the future. This was done to test the idea that a university education was a personal investment in the self. Following Abbas, Ashwin and McLean's (2013) lead, a form was sent out to all student participants prior to the interviews so standard biographical information – such as age, gender, and family educational background – could be collected, saving time during the interview (see Appendix Five for a completed example).

The life-grids were used across students at both levels of study. But using a variety of other resources to inform the identity portfolios allowed greater scope for capturing the students' changing identities at different stages of their university experience. Mirroring the stages of the student experience, I calculated that the UCAS personal statement would provide a rich data source through which to examine how first year students presented themselves to universities, and set out to test this. For the students in the final year of their studies, it was more fitting to attempt to capture an account of their time at university, and how they would soon present themselves to potential employers. By gaining access to these students' online identities through their social network sites (SNS) I was able to track their performances of their student identities across multiple modes (Finn, 2015). The two SNSs I looked at were *Facebook*, the world's largest SNS; and *LinkedIn*, the world's largest 'professional' SNS. *Facebook* was chosen as it was felt to be most likely to show the identity the students were happiest about their family and peers seeing (Vraga et al, 2015), while the identity a *LinkedIn* profile attempts to engineer users into adopting is one of a polished, ambitious professional who is attractive to employers (Walters, 2015). For an investigation into how technologies of the self might encourage students to craft their identities

around the idea of the entrepreneurial subject, *LinkedIn* presented an interesting opportunity. Given that the personal statement and the SNS profiles were constructed largely before the research began, they were not influenced by the research itself.

3.1.2 Interviews

Alongside the various aspects of the identity portfolio, there was also the nature and schedule of the interviews to consider. The interviews would act as an important complement to the identity portfolio data, as it was only through the interviews that I would be able to gather the biographical narratives needed to really understand nature of the students' experiences and understand the hopes and concerns that influenced these experiences. Here Archer's approach to interviewing in order to examine participants' approaches to reflexive thinking provided a useful foundation. Archer's (2003: 154) 'very small scale, in-depth' research involved interviewing 20 people from a diverse range of backgrounds, ages and genders with a focus on the intensive data needed to develop an understanding of individuals, the structural constraints and enablements they encountered across their lives, and how these structural issues influenced their agency. For my research, a similar approach and focus on in-depth data allowed an opportunity for the students to reflect on their hopes and concerns for higher education and wider life, what they saw purpose of higher education as being, and provided an insight into aspects of *everyday neoliberalism* they encountered or enacted.

Two interviews were conducted with each first year student, and three for the students in the final year of their studies. In each case, the first interview was

a group interview; followed by an individual interview, when the students constructed their life-grids. The third interview for the final year students was also one-to-one. All of the interviews were semi-structured, in order to allow a more natural flow of discussion – especially important when working in a group setting.

I decided to begin with group interviews as this format allowed for discussion of the broader themes of university and course choice, as well as capturing a general sense of the students' experiences. Doing this in a group setting allowed students to recall different aspects of their own experiences, as the students reflected on their different responses to shared events or practices. The group format also helped to prompt students' reflections, as different students recounted different aspects of their experiences during the interview. The group interviews consisted of between two and three participants, depending on the students' availability and lasted 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how responsive the participants were. In order to encourage all participants and avoid any one student dominating the discussion, questions from the interview schedule were addressed to different students at different times, until everyone had been given chance to comment. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that tangential discussions sometimes took place, but these were allowed as they both presented interesting comparisons between the students' experiences of university – especially when they discussed their assignments and workload – and helped foster a better sense of rapport. Following the group interviews the students were emailed individually to arrange a time for their individual interview, and also to request access to their UCAS personal statements/SNS profiles.

The group interview schedules were identical for the different universities and courses (see Appendix Six). For the individual interviews, the schedule consisted of a mix of standardised questions relating to the different topics of the life-grid, as well as personalised questions following the information provided by that specific participant during the group interviews and background sheets (an example can be seen in Appendix Seven). It was during the individual interviews, usually conducted a week later, that the students completed their life-grid.

The individual interviews began with an explanation of the life-grid: the students were then given time to complete these, usually taking between 10 to 20 minutes. They were then asked to explain what they had written and why. Questions then proceeded from the individualised schedule, with ad hoc additions based on their life-grid data. This section lasted up to an hour. Ideally this would have also been an opportunity to present the students with their personal statement or SNS data, but it was often the case that these were not received in time: though as both of these forms of self presentation were not intended to be open to re-interpretation, I decided to analyse them without additional comment from the students.

3.1.3 Class

A final important part of understanding the students' biographical narratives was framing their socio-economic position, in terms of *class*, and how this affected their experiences of higher education. I have used a multifactorial approach to defining the class of the students who took part in this research. During the individual interviews I asked the students directly to self-classify

their social class, and to provide a reason for that classification. However, while this was useful for understanding the students' conceptions of their selves, when referring to their class and social position I have also used information from their identity portfolios, as these allowed me to examine their wider life experiences, and decipher which social class they may *appear* to belong to. I have also taken into account students' gender, race, and whether they declared disabilities or other health conditions. I found that Guy Standing's (2011) categories³⁰ offered a useful means of situating the students' family backgrounds, particularly for students from *precarious* family backgrounds, such as parents who had little or no experience of higher education themselves, who were in unstable jobs and had either been made redundant or faced the threat of it, and where the family had relied on aspects of the Welfare State. The students whose families had not experienced this precarity tended to present a narrative that positioned them as being more advantaged in their experience of higher education compared to those students who had lived through precariousness. This approach helped to inform the classification of the students as either advantaged and disadvantaged, as I discussed in the Introduction.

30 Standing's (2011: 7-8) identifies five socio-economic groups in the 'global market system of the twenty-first century': at the top is the *elite*, the 'tiny number' of 'absurdly rich' individuals; the *salariat*, who have stable, full-time employment and enjoy the security of pensions and have disposable income; alongside the salariat are the small grouping of the *proficians*, who have marketable professional-technical skills they can earn a high income from; below them are the *core manual workers*, who are akin to the old working class; below this core is the *precariat*, characterised by their precarious employment and financial situations, the lack of a secure, work-based identity, and consequently, instability in their wider lives.

3.2 Conducting the research

The first stage of conducting my empirical research was desk-based. I used the background research conducted for Chapters One, Two and Four to inform the interview schedules for both sets of student interviews and the interviews with HE professionals.

3.2.1 Professional participants and observations

I conducted interviews with staff members at all the participating departments to get an informed understanding of the student demographics their courses tended to attract, the ethos of the courses and universities, and any necessary background information. I interviewed heads of department and admissions tutors (professional participants are listed in Table 3.2 below). I also attended open days for all of the courses and universities: this was done so I could get a *feel* for the institution in a similar way to how potential applicants would. Ultimately, there was not much opportunity to use this data in the final analysis, but it did provide helpful context for understanding the first year students' accounts of open days. I also observed the clearing day operations at the RG University. Field notes were taken during all of these observations and transcribed shortly after the visits.

I also interviewed two key informants from inside BIS and OFFA during the period of changes to HE policy that occurred in late 2010/early 2011: Nick Hillman, a former special advisor to the then Universities Minister David Willetts; and the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, Professor Les Ebdon. I approached these two individuals for interview as I felt it was important to have an insight into the different aspects of HE policy at time of

the fee increases, in order to offer contextual information and provide an insight into the avowed motivations of the policies. Having these *insider* accounts allowed me to directly question the motivations of the policies rather than rely on my own conjecture. For similar reasons, clarification was sought from UCAS about the personal statements, though this correspondence was all conducted by email, and the respondent asked to remain anonymous. In the case of the professional participants, all were initially approached by an email that included a consent form and information sheet similar to that provided to the student participants. These interviews followed the ethical guidelines outlined in section 3.4, though Ebdon and Hillman both consented to being named.

Table 3.2: University-based professional participants

Institution	Department	Roles
The RG University	Computer Science	Head of department Undergraduate admissions tutor Undergraduate employability tutor
	History	Undergraduate admissions tutor
The P92 University	Computer Science	Head of department
	History	Head of department Undergraduate admissions tutor

3.2.2 Student participant recruitment and complications

Before the student interviews began I piloted the group and individual interview schedules, as well as the life-grids and background sheets, to ensure

the methods worked and the questions were understood. These pilots were conducted with final year history and computer science students from Lancaster University during the autumn term of the 2014/15 academic year. However, unexpected delays in gaining ethics approval (see section 3.4) prevented the recruitment of participants until the summer term of that academic year.

Once ethics approval had been granted, I contacted departmental administrators and heads of department at the universities in order to gain access to their students. Having gained permission to interview the departments' students, I focused on recruiting the final year students in April 2015. In all cases I asked departmental administrators to email final year students with a call for participants, as formal teaching had ended. The email contained the information sheet and consent form: interested students were asked to contact me directly by email, and it was explained that they would receive a retail voucher for their participation. For this reason the sample was self-selecting. However, due to the timing of the call for research participants – in the run up to final year exams and during job applications – uptake was low. Following repeated calls, including through social media, only two history students from the P92 expressed an interest, with the same number for computer science at the RG. Initially there were no volunteers from the other two courses. I decided to reduce the sample size for the final years from five to two, but compensate by extending the period the students would be interviewed over. In addition to these two sets of two interviews, these students were also interviewed six months after graduation, the timeframe

used for the national DLHE survey. This change had the benefit of allowing me to track part of the students' post- university experience.

Eventually, following calls on their social media course groups, two participants from the 2014/15 cohort of RG history students were also recruited. It proved far harder to recruit from the P92 computer science course: email calls for participants failed to get responses, as did appeals on social media groups, culminating in an attempt at face-to-face recruitment at the course's graduation day in order to maintain a sample from the 2014/15 cohort, though this was also without result. I finally decided that it was more important to interview students on all courses than to ensure they were all of the same cohort, so the two P92 computer science final years came from the 2015/16 cohort. I had met one of these at an open day when he was acting as a student ambassador and he then recommended his course friend. This was the only example of 'snowballing' in the study, as all the other participants did not know each other.

Recruiting the first year students was more successful. I was able to speak at the beginning of lectures in all the departments in October 2015, and passed round an expression of interest sheet to the students in attendance³¹. I then individually emailed students the consent form and information sheet. I selected participants on the basis of being one of the first five who could agree a time to be interviewed: later students acted as reserves. The students were self-selecting and participation rested on which students responded first, the

³¹ This asked for their university email, and did not include a name field in the interests of confidentiality and data protection.

only stipulation was that the students had to be classed as Home or EU students for fee purposes, as the difference in International student fees and access to student loans was too great to make them comparable.

All of the interviews took place in cafés on the two university campuses, as I felt it best to avoid a setting that was too formal as that risked bringing with it unhelpful power relations (Rich, 1968). The cafés were noisy enough for the students not be over-heard, but without the formality of an office. It was hoped that a neutral location would help the students to feel more at ease and on equal footing with me as a researcher (Liamputtong, 2007).

In total, eight students in their final year were interviewed for the research, and 20 first year students. Of the 20 first year students interviewed for the research, 15 still had access to their personal statements and were able to provide copies. Table 3.3 below shows the breakdown of statements by university and course. The numbers lent themselves to an intensive study of their experiences of higher education. My hope is that in emphasising the depth of these individual experiences in terms of the inter-relating, different elements of the students' biographies that led them to university, as well as their individual responses to the higher education, I have been able to offer a more contextualised account of the students' experience than may have been possible in a study with much wider coverage. As with most research where the main empirical component is qualitative the scope would always have been limited and as such the findings – though informative – could not be said to be representative of English university students.

Table 3.3: UCAS statements by university and course

	History	Computer Science	Total
Russell Group	2	5	7
Post-1992	5	3	8
Total	7	8	15

3.3 Approaches to analysis

Following the student interviews, I analysed the data using a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research as a method, but it is arguably under acknowledged (Boyatzis, 1998). Qualitative health researchers, Immy Holloway and Les Todres (2003: 347) suggest that ‘thematising meanings’ is one of the few generic skills across qualitative research, leading some to characterise the process as a tool rather than a specific method for analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark however, argue that thematic analysis should be considered a method in its own right. They suggest thematic analysis is:

a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic. (Clark, 2006: 79)

I share their view that qualitative research is an interpretation, rather than a means through which the researcher can ‘give voice’ to their participants. The ‘giving voice’ approach still ‘involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our arguments’ (Fine, 2002: 218), and so still involves interpretation on the researcher’s part. There will always be an element of analytical choice in how a researcher chooses to present their research, whether they acknowledge that choice or

not (Holloway and Todres, 2003). That is not to say however, that there is one ideal theoretical framework for conducting qualitative research. Rather, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 80), state, it 'is important that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognise them as decisions'. I have attempted to acknowledge such decisions in my analysis and conclusions.

Interpreting my data involved becoming familiar with it through multiple readings: generating initial codes³² based on the research questions; coding patterns and themes; reviewing these themes and how they related to the research questions; and defining and naming these themes. Developing this set of consistent themes and associated sub-themes formed the story of the analysis in the write-up. For example, when analysing the personal statements, broad themes included *skills or reason for subject choice*: while sub-themes included *use of illustrative anecdote; employment skills related to study skills*; and *promise of student quality*. This process meant that early themes from one data set often became incorporated into later analysis, leading to a fusion of themes for the final conclusions (Hammersley, 1989).

In coding it is important to define what would be considered a theme. Themes capture an important aspect of the data in relation to the research questions, and represent an element of patterned response or meaning within the dataset (Tuckett, 2005), though this point also raises the question: how often does a pattern need to occur before it may be considered a theme? Does a pattern need to occur across multiple participants for it to be coded as a theme, or is a

³² I manually coded the transcripts and identity portfolios using ATLAS.ti software.

strong pattern in one participant's dataset enough if it is related to the research questions? Given that this research would not claim to be representative I opted to include patterns that emerged in single participants' narratives as well as patterns across participants. For example, one of the first year students' narratives differed quite widely from the other first year participants, especially in his attitude towards the classification of universities: but his responses were interesting enough to merit analysis by themselves, and they related to the broader code associated to the research questions. It was with this broad approach that I analysed my data and began the process of writing up my findings.

3.4 Ethics

I conducted my research in compliance with Lancaster University's Ethical Code of Practice (2009) and in accordance with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and British Sociological Association guidelines (ESRC, 2016; BSA, 2002). Before primary research began, I submitted a proposal to Lancaster's FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee for approval. This process took longer than expected: having submitted the proposal in early October 2014, the first response was not returned until late December, and approval granted in March following revisions and successful appeals³³. This delayed the start of my primary data collection until the end of the 2014/15 academic year.

³³ The University and Faculty have since acknowledged problems with the ethics approval system, and have changed the process.

All potential participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form prior to confirming their participation in the research (see Appendix Eight). The information sheet provided a brief overview of the research objectives, though I was conscious not to provide too much information that might bias responses. I gave participants a full debrief at the end of their final interview, explaining my interest in students' attitudes to university choice, employability and student debt, and whether this affected how they viewed university and their student experience. At that stage I offered students the opportunity to discuss the objectives more explicitly. I made clear to all participants that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the interview process.

Confidentiality and anonymity were particularly important for the research: if the student participants felt their comments might be attributable to them, they might not have been honest in their responses in case they were reported back to their department. It has been noted that for adolescent participants concern about confidentiality can jeopardise interview data if they feel that what they say in an interview will be reported back to an authority figure (Bassett et al, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Liamputtong, 2007).

I recorded all interviews on a digital recorder: once the interview finished, I transferred the audio file to a password-protected computer and deleted it from the recorder. I deleted audio files from the computer once they had been transcribed. I manually inputted the handwritten life-grid data in to a Microsoft Excel template, and then destroyed paper copies. During transcription, I took care to redact any personal information that may have

identified the participant, unless they stated that they were happy to be identified. In order to protect their identities, I refer to all student participants by pseudonyms and code numbers in all documentation, except consent forms. I followed a similar process for the life-grids, personal statements and SNS data, and background sheets. I filed all of this data under code numbers, and redacted any identifying information.

3.5 Conclusion

Having begun this thesis with an acknowledgment of the holistic but under-researched nature of students' experiences, I have outlined my approach to capturing a more defined picture of those experiences. My framework and methods allowed these students to reveal hopes and concerns that went beyond formal education into their social lives, and in turn how their social lives influenced their studies and educational experience. The overarching objective was to see whether these different, everyday experiences of higher education encouraged the students towards adopting a neoliberal approach to HE and broader life; whether evidence could be found of where they either actively accepted or rejected such encouragement or, as I suspect is more likely, engaged in sometimes contrasting narratives of their experiences, as different aspects of their selves and their identities were acted on or suppressed.

Through the development of the identity portfolios I hope to present these different selves more explicitly than would be possible through just the use of interview data. The data gathered from the identity portfolios and interviews

allowed me to observe of the different identities of the students, as well as a form of comparison through which to analyse the students' experiences.

The next three chapters will now summarise the main evidence and research findings. The first year students' experiences will be addressed over Chapters Four and Five. The final years' will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four

The UCAS personal statement: writing the neoliberal student?

In this chapter I argue how the UCAS application, particularly the personal statement, can be considered a technology of the self. Beginning with a short history of the university application process and personal statement, I discuss how the neoliberal narrative within higher education has influenced the statement's development. I examine samples of statements from the student participants, questioning whether they follow this neoliberal narrative.

Out of the 20 first year students interviewed, 15 were able to provide copies of their personal statements: these covered both universities and courses (see Table 3.3). Although these 15 cannot be claimed to be representative of the 718,500 applicants who used UCAS during the same 2015 application cycle (UCAS, 2015), even on this small scale there are noticeable similarities in how the students (or, at the time, applicants) presented themselves. It is important to note that none of these students attended the same school or college so these similarities cannot be attributed to receiving the same advice from the same teachers – though it may be that their teachers received the same advice from UCAS. An interview with a member of UCAS staff (Appendix Three) clarified that the organisation runs annual training events for teachers to ensure consistency in the advice given to applicants. Although I was unable to trace whether these students' teachers had attended such training events, the accounts of the students did suggest they all received similar guidance. While

some of the students received help from parents when writing their statements, the main reference points were their teachers/tutors and the UCAS website. In analysing the advice given to students (and possibly teachers) by UCAS, and the students' statements, I hope to offer a new insight into the role of the UCAS application process in students' formation of themselves as subjects.

4.1 The university application process

What is it then about the university application process that lends itself to an analysis of everyday neoliberalism? University applicants have always had to promote themselves to universities – they've also always had to choose which universities to apply to. To really understand the statement as a practice of neoliberalism we need to understand it in a wider context, and look at how it has evolved alongside other trends in higher education policies and practices.

The University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) was established in 1993, following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Prior to that the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) dealt with admissions for the UK's 67 universities (Heap and Lamley, 1988). UCCA was established in 1961, after a decade that witnessed an unprecedented rise in university admissions (Kay, 1985). Before the 1950s university admissions had, theoretically, been based mainly on an applicant's performance in the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate examinations, though their social and economic capital also affected their ability to apply (Dale, 1954). Applicants would write a letter of application to their chosen university and may have subsequently been interviewed for a place. Applicants normally only

applied to one university, 'probably because a place was available for every qualified applicant who could afford to take it up' (Kay, 1985: 7). In 1950, less than 2% of the university-age population entered into higher education.

Robert Stevens, who has written on the history and politics of higher education, suggests that the low participation rates:

made no real difference in a society that saw little or no role for the entrepreneur. The idea that universities should contribute to the economic success of Britain was not even thought of. (2004: 17)

At the time many professions relied on apprenticeships or on-the-job training rather than entrants having a degree. In 1950, over 90% of barristers had not attended university (Stevens, 2004), a situation almost unthinkable today as academic credentialism has expanded into the professional and semi-professional classes. The situation changed as the beneficiaries of 1944 Education Act worked their way through the lower education system. That Act made secondary education free, raised the school leaving age to 15, and laid the foundations for financial support for students going to university. As a consequence, the number of 17-year-olds in full-time education increased from 4% in 1938, to 15% in 1962 (Stevens, 2004). In these early days of large student numbers universities did not monitor the extent to which 'applicants tried to improve their prospects of admission by applying independently to different universities' (Kay, 1985: 7), a practice that was in part fuelled by the fact that public funds, unlike traditional scholarships, did not restrict applicants to applying to only one university.

By 1961, there were 113,000 students in the UK (Stevens, 2004). As the number of university applicants increased, Vice Chancellors began to consider

the need for a centralised process to manage and monitor applications. UCCA was established soon after, and the first admissions procedure came into effect in the 1962-63 academic year: applicants would apply to their chosen universities (up to four) through UCCA, who would then produce copies of applications to send to universities (Stevens, 2004)³⁴. In this respect at least there has been little change in the procedure, as a member of UCAS staff described for this research:

From the outset there was a shared belief that a centralised admissions system should adopt a holistic approach to assessing applicants. Therefore the application form should not just contain factual information – e.g. name, address, school attended, number of GCES and A-levels – but should, *in addition, provide an opportunity for all applicants to demonstrate their commitment, knowledge and suitability for their chosen subjects.* (Appendix Three, my emphasis.)

Part of my reason for speaking to UCAS was the lack of archival evidence on the university application process. The other sources I was able to use include application guides from the 1980s, which provided a useful opportunity to compare the application process at the start of the *marketisation* of higher education and the present day. The guides I used were *A Guide to University Entrance 1981* by John Garner (1981), and *Getting into University* by Brian Heap and Stephan Lamley³⁵ (1988). Heap and Lamley helpfully reproduced the UCCA application form from 1989, allowing a direct comparison between

34 UCCA also dealt with applications to polytechnic colleges through their PCAS wing. Their annual reports show that by the 1980s it was not unusual for an applicant to apply to both a university and a polytechnic college. In 1986, 173,799 UCCA applicants (45%) listed a polytechnic as one of their choices (University Grants Committee Annual Survey, 1989).

35 Garner was admissions tutor for the Department of Civil Engineering of Leeds University; Heap was a director at the Centre for Higher Education Advice and Planning; and Lamley was director of admissions at the Lancaster University.

today's UCAS form and its earlier counterpart (Appendices Nine and Ten). A comparison of the two forms is enough to reveal a large change in the priority given to the statement element of the application. The UCCA form allowed just nine, handwritten lines of 'further information' about '(a) practical experience; study abroad; occupations studies after leaving school; interests (intellectual, social and other)' and, separately, one line for '(b) proposed career (if decided)'. This has evolved into the 4,000 characters of today's personal statement, along with an online tool for helping applicants write it (Appendix Eleven).

According to UCAS the 4,000 character limit 'was introduced as part of the software development for UCAS's online application system (*Apply*) around fifteen years ago', which places the statement's development around the time tuition fees were first introduced in 1998. And while the information provided by UCAS implies that it was always important to give applicants an opportunity to demonstrate their 'commitment, knowledge and suitability for their chosen subjects', it is fair to say that the current statement's format makes it appear a more integral part of the application process compared to the previous 'further information' section, if only in terms of the amount of work that is expected of the applicant. Interestingly, UCAS acknowledged that the current format was developed through conversations with educational professionals, not applicants, and that this may have resulted in a disconnect between professional expectations and what applicants are able to deliver:

The [character] limit was discussed and agreed through a school and college liaison group as well as through UCAS's Regional Group meetings for providers. From an applicant perspective, it is clear from looking at social media sites used by young people (e.g. The Student

Room) that few want a higher limit and, indeed, many threads are about how to write enough to fill the existing space! (Appendix Three)

The implied importance of the current statement compared to its 1989 counterpart is reinforced by the difference in the advice given on how to write the two sections. Heap and Lamley's advice, presented in more formal language than the advice given today, reads:

This section of the form is usually (though not always) of secondary importance, but a good entry may help, especially at interview or if you are borderline after your results are published. [...] Think what impression you want to create. Emphasise interests and activities that are relevant to your chosen courses and, perhaps, your future career. [...] Above all, be truthful and specific about what you do. Say what kind of music interests you (if it does) [...] Say what standard you have reached in sports, or chess, or bridge. Give details of practical work experience, voluntary social work, or time spent abroad. (Heap and Lamley, 1988: 33-34)

The UCCA advice does carry with it certain (classed) expectations – it assumes applicants will have reached a 'standard' in sports, chess, bridge, and that they will have spent time aboard – but it is still guided by the suggestion that these activities should be relevant, or practical, to the applicant's chosen course. The UCAS advice however shifts this focus on to what skills an applicant has, with the activities secondary to the skills that they have given the applicants:

- 1) Why you are applying – your ambitions and what interests you about the subject, course providers and higher education.
- 2) What makes you suitable – any relevant skills, experience or achievements gained from education, work or other activities. (UCAS, 2016a: *online*)

An additional difference lies in how this 'further information' is presented, as well as the implied usefulness of it. While the UCCA advice states the

‘secondary importance’ of this further information, the narrative created by UCAS and other advice available to today’s applicants makes the statement seem of parallel importance to their grades, an impression strengthened by the amount of advice provided on how to write a statement. This impression was evident in discussions on social media sites. One user on the website *The Student Room* wrote about how difficult it was to fill the 4,000 character limit for their personal statement. They were obviously concerned about the impact this would have on their application despite being predicted straight A* grades:

I find that my personal statement is quite lacking in stuff, in fact im struggling to fill the **4000** character limit; HOWEVER do you think i will get offers (especially from cambridge) with an A*A*A*A* prediction at A2??? <sic> (Kelefi, 2016: *online*)

The response given by another user in some ways encapsulates why the personal statement may be a problematic format:

Have you read any books? Found anything in your lessons interesting or inspiring? Has your school run any events to do with sciences such as trips to the Science Museum, events at different universities? Watched any interesting science documentaries? If you are lacking then these are all things you can do. (ThatPerson2, in Kelefi, 2016: *online*)

The second student is, in effect, reeling off a list of recommended talking points to include in a statement, echoing the professional advice of UCAS. In reciting these *tropes* they are reinforcing the idea that the personal statement must present a particular version of the applicant, even if the applicant does not think them important enough to include in their first draft. In this case, Kelefi used this advice and ‘filled it with whatever i<sic> could’.

If applicants were unfortunate enough not to meet their predicted grades, then their personal statement would be unlikely to make a difference in any case. In my conversations with admissions staff at the RG University they admitted that personal statements were not used when making decisions on whether to accept an applicant. The admission tutor in the RG's computer science department said that he saw the statements as secondary to grades when considering applicants:

My impression by reading the statements and in general [is that] as far as I'm concerned they're a little bit too engineered. So normally I look for a simple statement that is short and to the point. My impression is that students put probably too much of an effort on the statement rather than maybe on the grades. I think the grades are always the most important thing. (Appendix Three)³⁶

Seeing how readily other students can advise their peers on what they believe universities expect to read in personal statements, this insinuation that statements are 'engineered' is hard to dispute.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between the two application processes though is in the contexts in which they operated. In 1988, there were 160,000 university applicants for 70,000 university places³⁷, including polytechnic colleges. This was a far more competitive situation than today, when 608,820 applicants (UCAS, 2016b) will be applying for a theoretically unlimited number of places, now the cap on student numbers has been removed. In

³⁶ For some subjects, such as medicine and social work, the personal statement does carry a lot of importance in the admissions process, but my point is to illustrate that this is not the case for all subjects even though it may be presented as such.

³⁷ The University Grants Committee (later Universities Funding Council) set the number of student places, with universities required to 'bid' for funding and student numbers (Committee of Public Accounts, 1990: 17).

2015, universities made a record 1.9m offers to applicants, with 384,100 getting into their first choice (UCAS, 2015). A situation that saw more than two applicants to every university place should, in theory, have induced a more competitive attitude than is demonstrated in the UCCA form's 'further information' section, but it could be argued that while there was more competition for places, the stakes were not as high: Britain had not yet reached a stage of credentialism whereby the vast majority of professional employers expected workers to have degrees (Standing, 2014; The Guardian Editorial, 2016), and so not getting into university did not necessarily result in exclusion from the professional or semi-professional classes. It is against this context of manufactured competition, misplaced merit, and the growing sense of insecurity within employment that we can begin to frame the statement as a technology of the self.

4.2 A statement of subjectification

Foucault identifies writing is a key technology of the self, arguing that practices such as keeping a diary and writing letters are a type of self-reflection and subject formation (see Chapter One). In the context of their student journey the personal statement is the main form of writing applicants have to reflect on how they might become an ideal student. It provides space within the application process where applicants can actively promote or 'sell' themselves, in competition with others.

Anyone applying to a UK university as a full-time undergraduate student must do so online via UCAS. Applicants must provide basic personal information, the names and details of a referee, and list their five choices of course to apply

to³⁸. They are also required to submit a personal statement, which allows applicants space to show their ‘ambitions, skills and experience that will make [them] suitable for the course’ (UCAS, 2016a). Through the statement applicants are told they can convince their chosen universities why they would make a good student as ‘course tutors read personal statements to compare different applicants’ (UCAS, 2016a). Applicants are encouraged to constitute an ideal version of their selves: a promise of what they will become if granted the position of student on a particular course, at a particular university (while never actually being able to specify which university or course, as the same statement could go to up to five universities).

Foucault (1978) describes how technologies of the self require individuals to recognise the ‘truth about themselves’, often within the bounds of the discursive knowledge established within a particular power relation - in this case the everyday neoliberalism of higher education. From a Foucauldian perspective, the personal statement might be said to declare such a ‘truth’ in accordance with the model of the idealised neoliberal student discussed in Chapter One. How – or whether – university applicants ‘recognise’ this truth is debatable: they may appear to recognise it, complying with what is expected, without really believing what they are writing. But even these acts of ‘going through the motions’ reinforce what is expected of applicants, and any critical thought about the necessity of that exercise is quashed under the *need to comply*.

38 The form is centered on choice of course, rather than university. Each course at each institution is allocated its own UCAS code. Applicants can apply to the same university, but for multiple courses, or apply for the same course at multiple universities, and any mixture in between.

The narrative of the UCAS statement, as a technology of the self, ‘does not so much tell people what they are; rather it tells them what they have to become’ (Bröckling, 2015: 21). This can be seen in the advice given to applicants on how to write a personal statement. For example, the *Which? University* site, includes in its list of ‘10 Things To Put In Your University Statement’:

Do talk about what inspires you about your chosen course, but try to avoid the more obvious and popular things that hundreds of other applicants will write about. For example, a criminology statement that reflects on crime in 15th century Spain or the causes of the vandalism encountered in your part-time job in a leisure centre might have more impact than yet another one that talks about serial killers or CSI. Think outside the box! (Bullock, 2015: *online*)

The sense of competition is notable: the applicant reading this advice will have to stand out from ‘hundreds of other applicants’, and while they should talk about what ‘inspires’ them, they are instructed to be very selective in what they find inspiring. Cast in this light, the statement becomes a discursive act of ‘truth telling’ by the applicant, but rather than recognising what the applicant believes to be the truth about themselves it instead promotes a truth that is deemed acceptable by the authority (UCAS), and is set within the confines of what universities are said to look for in students. In this way the personal statement becomes a *statement of subjectification*.

The various guidelines UCAS (2016c) produces for the personal statement identify several ways in which applicants are steered towards promoting this particular truth about themselves. In 2016 UCAS introduced an ‘online tool’ to get applicants ‘thinking about what to include’ in their personal statement. The tool is another online form: applicants are given a series of questions to answer, with the responses helping them to develop a first draft of their

statement (Appendix Eleven). These same questions were provided in a paper/PDF version of the tool in previous years, (Appendix Twelve). The guidance questions are similar in nature to the therapeutic or confessional practices Foucault writes about: they are crafted around certain power relations that articulate a particular type of knowledge in an attempt to steer a subject towards a particular truth (Brownlie, 2004; Foucault, 1985, 1986; Illouz, 2008; McNay, 1994). In posing these questions, UCAS is asking applicants to reflect on certain aspects of their knowledge and experiences, but carry with them considerable expectations about what is an appropriate reflection. For example, it would not be acceptable for an applicant to respond to the question, ‘include any other achievements you’re proud of, positions of responsibility that you hold or have held both in and out of school’ (UCAS, 2016b: *online*) with simply ‘none’, or to suggest that the ‘skills you have that will help you on the course, or generally with life at university’ (UCAS, 2016b: *online*) include the ability to cook or manage their laundry, though in other contexts these may be perfectly valid responses.

The UCAS questions expect applicants to be able to rationalise their decision to apply to university, and articulate those reasons to a university audience.

They recommend demonstrating:

Enthusiasm, motivation and focus about the subject you’re applying to. Mention extra-curricular activities, transferable skills and include what your future career plans are after your degree. (UCAS, 2016d: *online*)

The UCAS blog provides advice from various *experts*, ‘admissions staff at universities and colleges (the people who spend their time reading personal statements!)’ (UCAS, 2016d: *online*). In the advice from these experts the

emphasis on universities competing for students is shifted to applicants competing to be chosen by the universities:

‘Do not mention a specific university. Unless you reveal otherwise, we will think that you really only want to come to us!’ Emily Bell, the University of Liverpool.

‘Remember you have a lot to offer – you just have to write about yourself in a positive way and sell all the skills and experience that you have.’ Amy Smith, Nottingham Trent University. (UCAS, 2016d: *online*)

Bell’s advice offers an interesting insight into the everyday neoliberalism of the exercise: it’s an explicit double bluff. She is in effect saying: *we know you’ll be applying to other institutions, but let’s just pretend this is just between us*. It is a piece of advice that is often repeated through other sources, and suggests that while applicants may have *choice*, they are unable to acknowledge it in their only real forum for directly addressing their chosen universities. The questionable nature of some of the UCAS advice around writing the personal statement is heightened by the misrepresentation of who exactly is providing that advice. UCAS (2016c: *online*) states that admissions staff answer the ‘quick-fire’ questions. However, *LinkedIn* – itself, a neoliberal technology - reveals that this might not always be the case: Bell, of the University of Liverpool is actually ‘Undergraduate Communications Manager’ (Bell, 2016) and has been since 2004. This may be a case of communicating what the admissions team expects – a symptom of what Gerlinde Mautner (2010) suggests is the ‘brand policing’ evident in universities as a marketing practice – but even so, those giving advice on what a university is looking for may not be academics who will be teaching the students: the advice comes from the *professional services* and marketing side of higher education.

Further evidence for the influx of marketing culture can be seen in the relaxed, informal tone of the UCAS advice, which is presented in a style reminiscent of marketing-talk, rather than an academic style (Fairclough, 1993). Writing about language and power, Norman Fairclough (2013: 529) suggested that education is a 'key domain of linguistically mediated power', and in this context use of language is important in managing applicants' expectations of university – and universities' expectations of applicants. As such, it seems peculiar that the application process into academia, arguably one of the sites where the symbolic domination of language is felt most strongly (Bourdieu, 1991), should be so informal.

The UCAS advice adopts a *chatty* style; referring to universities as 'unis', addressing the applicant directly and using upbeat language: 'You can write up to 4,000 characters of text that show you'd make a great student – so it might take a few redrafts until you're happy with it' (UCAS, 2016a: *online*). In addressing the applicant directly, it partly nullifies the fact that every applicant has access to the same advice. The chatty style also masks the seriousness of the process, which is paradoxical when one considers that young people who do not attend university face increasing difficulties in finding work, and heightened insecurities when they do (Chakraborty, 2016; House of Lords, 2016; The Guardian Editorial, 2016). If higher education is to be seen as an investment in one's future, and the UCAS application as the first part of that investment, it could be expected to carry more gravitas. That is not to say that an overly formal tone should be adopted, which may have the consequence of dissuading applicants with lower cultural or linguistic capital, but that the upbeat tone hides a more downbeat reality.

This chatty style extends beyond UCAS and into advice on websites like *Which? University*, *The Complete University Guide* and broadsheet newspapers, suggesting it has become embedded in the culture (read, *semiotics*) of university admissions: more egalitarian, less overtly elitist, but also more illusionary³⁹.

Given the emphasis placed on the statement by people who are apparently well informed about its importance, it is unsurprising that the first year students interviewed for this research all reported feeling stressed by the process. They all felt the pressure to ‘make sure it was good’, sometimes even more so than in achieving the necessary grades to get into their chosen universities. They may not have read this particular piece of advice from *The Daily Telegraph*, but they would certainly have recognised its sentiment:

While writing your personal statement can seem like a weight around your neck, it’s your chance to show why you would be an asset to any higher education institution. (Gurney-Read, 2016: *online*)

It is a crude, throwaway remark, but the fact that it is so easily acknowledged that applicants must show why they would be an ‘asset’ to a university is consistent with the everyday neoliberalism that the statement as a technology of the self embodies.

³⁹ This is even true of the University of Oxford, who comfort applicants concerned that they may not have enough to write about in their personal statement, in a similarly chatty, informal style:

We understand that not everyone has the opportunity to do work experience or to go travelling so these activities are not a requirement for any of our courses. Tutors won’t be impressed by your connections, or the stamps in your passport, but they will be impressed by how you’ve engaged with your subject. (University of Oxford, 2016: *online*)

But it is the applicants' use of language that turns the statement from a technology of the self into an active practice of subjectification. In writing their statements applicants must be conscious of their imagined audience: university admissions tutors. In addressing this audience, and in hoping to be viewed favourably by them, they must adopt their language – or at least an approximation of it. David Bartholomae offers a nice summary of how new students must 'invent' a university to address when writing their first essays, in order to achieve the correct 'tone':

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialised discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience [their lecturers], as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'. (Bartholomae, 1986: 4-5).

The UCAS applicants are also required to 'carry off the bluff' of speaking the language of the university before they arrive, by imagining what their audience will expect of them. To borrow from Bourdieu (1991), they must adopt the 'legitimate language' of their university audiences. By virtue of their educational, cultural and economic capital some applicants will be better equipped to carry off this bluff than others (Bourdieu, 1988, 1996; Reay, David and Bell, 2005). William, one of the first year students interviewed for this research, admitted he had an advantage in writing his statement because his father was an admissions tutor at a Russell Group university and was able to

help him with the tone and structure of his statement. Other applicants must rely on the help of teachers in their colleges or online advice.

The advice they receive on the language they should employ in their statements is misleading. Applicants are told to ‘write in an enthusiastic, concise and natural style’ (UCAS, 2016a: *online*), but the idea of a natural style is problematic. What might be a natural writing style for an applicant may not be the legitimate language of the university field. In such a case applicants must forgo the ‘natural’ and show that they can appropriate the language of an ideal student. The result is the stilted, uneasy syntax seen in examples from the participants’ statements. The problematic nature of expecting young people to write *naturally* when addressing universities becomes particularly apparent when thinking about how young people employ language in contemporary culture, with more interactions taking place in digital and online settings (Barton and Lee, 2013; Courtois et al, 2015) where conversations are conducted just as easily through *emojis* and *gifs* as through words (Skiba, 2016; Stark and Crawford, 2015; Vidal, Ares and Jaeger, 2016). The long-form format of the statement may not seem natural to applicants, but they must show their potential as students by demonstrating that they can adopt what they believe is the language and conventions of universities. In the ‘structures of the linguistic market’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 37), an applicant who can demonstrate a good command of the lexicon of universities may expect to have an advantage over their competitors. However, this depends on the type of university they ‘invent’ in order to adopt its language: the language of a university whose purpose is academic pursuit may be very different to the language of one whose purpose is to provide *human capital* for a *knowledge-*

based economy, though both models may well exist within the same institution.

4.3 Future plans and cruel optimism

The discourse of higher education as an investment is seen in the UCAS advice (2016c) that encourages applicants to write about their future plans, and how they ‘want to use the knowledge and experience that [they] gain’ at university to help them achieve these plans. Crucially, it expects applicants to have reflected on these plans, and be able to articulate how university will help in realising them. Many of the applicants accept this, writing about how a university degree will help them in their career progression, though as I will demonstrate this is largely reduced to merely having a degree, with little reflection on *how* the experience of studying their subject will aid them in the future.

Looking at the statements, the applicants did not write about their future plans in much detail. This might be due to their lack of understanding around how attending university will really help with their futures, beyond simply having a degree. Rupert (CSRG) and Sam (CSP92) exemplified this, writing in their statements:

My career plan is to become either a web developer or to work in robotics and artificial intelligence. I consider myself to have all the skills necessary for my life abroad as well as to fit in at your university. By doing all the projects stated above I've gathered skills like patience, leadership and the ability to organize and sort information efficiently. (Rupert)

It has been a lifelong ambition of mine to work in the IT Industry and would like to advance my knowledge through the course being offered at your academic institution. I believe that with hard-work and

determination alongside my innovative personality I feel that I would be an ideal student for a University degree based around ICT. (Sam)

In these cases, the applicants dedicate just one sentence to their future plans, and place these sentences within larger sections about what would make them *ideal* students, which must be linked to an idea of what they will do once they graduate, even if they only have a vague idea. A *non-ideal* student may have no idea at all, and may be seen as frivolous, taking on the endeavour and debt of a university education for no economically rational reason.

It could be argued that the link between degree and career is more easily drawn for a subject like computer science, but there was a similar approach in the history applicants' statements, who also wrote from the assumption that simply attending university would help them with their future careers.

Katherine (HRG), for example, displayed a level of naivety about her future profession. Her 'future plan' is to become a well-known historian, and while she was aware that studying history at university would help her with this, she made no mention of wishing to go onto postgraduate study, which would be necessary for the type of work she is describing:

I want to be an academic historian and author to inspire others; further developing our understanding of our past [...] I want a job where I can explore the subject I enjoy and nurture the future generation of historians. Reading history at university will help me achieve these things.

It may be fair to question just how much of a fully developed future plan 16- to 17-year-olds could be expected to have, especially as there is a finality to this expectation that is arguably at odds with the idea of an ever improving, entrepreneurial subject. It implies that following university there will be no

need to change, adapt, or retrain, which is what this subject should be willing to do. It also denies any precariousness in employment, or that future plans may not come to fruition for reasons beyond an applicants' control. This may be one example of cruel optimism at work in the application process in asking applicants to set out a desired future. This is particularly *cruel* in the case of a student like Richard (HP92), who wrote in his statement:

I truly hope to be able to attend university, and I aspire towards a career in law as a barrister or a solicitor. I look forward to the challenges of university life and the continuation of my academic work. I truly hope that I am able to join your university and to have a bright future and career.

As a young working class man with a disability, an alumnus of a low-achieving State academy and now a first-generation student of a Post-1992 university, Richard will face many structural barriers if he does try to become a barrister or solicitor. The legal profession remains dominated by the graduates of independent schools and Russell Group universities (Ashley et al, 2015; de Vries, 2014; Milburn, 2012; Savage, 2015), so it is hard to see objectively how a student like Richard would be able to enter into it, at least without a great deal of support and a fair bit of *luck*. Richard was seemingly unaware of these structural barriers, and though he was understandably proud of being the first in his family to attend university, he did not realise that while it may not be entirely impossible for him to become a barrister, his history degree from a Post-92 university would not in itself be enough.

The narrative of an economically rational student requires that applicants have an idea of what they want to do professionally after university, and while ideally they should be able to link that to their university study, it does not –

yet – require them to have a full knowledge of that chosen career. In this narrative a statement like Bradley’s (HP92) stands out for its relative non-attachment to a future professional plan:

The most important reason for me wanting to study history is that I will be able to further my historical knowledge and interest also, the subject will help me to gain more transferable skills that I would need when applying to virtually any job for example, better communication which I will gain through presentations of my findings during my degree.

It would be tempting to read resistance in Bradley’s lack of a firm career path, and while it does go against the norm of the other statements, he is arguably being *neoliberal* in being open to possibility of ‘virtually any job’. This flexibility implies that Bradley – who in interviews said he was actually hoping to go into film production – is willing to mould the ‘transferable skills’ (human capital) he gains from his university degree to fit whatever role the job market presents him with. Although he may have other ambitions he did not write about them, and while it may be ‘most important’ that he gains historical knowledge, he still feels compelled to write about how higher education will help him to invest in his human capital, even if he is not quite sure how or to what specific end. He is simply aware that it is a narrative he must conform to.

4.4 Human capital and promotional genre

In his introduction to *The Foucault Effect*, Colin Gordon offers a brief summation of how subjectification relates to human capital theory:

The idea of one’s life as the enterprise of oneself implies that there is a sense in which one remains always continuously employed in (at least) that one enterprise, and that it is a part of the continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction

and reconstruction of one's own human capital. This is the 'care of the self' which the government commends. (Gordon, 1991: 44)

This is a useful starting point for understanding how technologies of the self and human capital theory can be combined. Rather than the subject of *homo economicus*, who will naturally act through its rational economic nature as long as the State does not hinder them, entrepreneurial selves must be guided by the State into recognising a truth about themselves. We can apply this supposition to the level of the personal statements, casting UCAS as the State – the authority – that guides the applicants.

I would say again that this does not imply that university education has not always been linked in some way to *employability*, but what has changed is the manner in which the sector, and wider society, sees it fulfilling this role, and how that mirrors the changing nature of employment. The nature of work in the neoliberal-capitalist economy has been well documented (see Harvey, 2010; Mason, 2015; Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011), and at this stage I will only draw from that literature that the liquidity of modern employment favours *transferable* skills over mastery, as Mirowski writes:

those seeking employment must learn to regard themselves as a 'bundle of skills' for which they bear sole responsibility. Over time, the language of 'skills' has transmigrated away from older notions of craft mastery, and toward a vague set of 'life skills', 'communication skills'. (Mirowski, 2013: 110)

The shift from secure to flexible, ergo *insecure*, work has resulted in a shift in what makes an individual employable: now the employable self must be adaptable, able to *transfer* knowledge from one experience and apply it to an entirely new setting. In this vein, we see applicants making apparent leaps of

logic from playing rugby to studying computer science, implying that in essence the two must be similar because they (apparently) require the same *skills*:

Playing rugby has developed both my communication and team work skills; being a captain has also helped to develop my leadership skills. (Patrick, CSRG)

Admittedly it is hard to quantify the qualities that make *a good student*. It is likewise difficult to determine how a subject is best studied, and what knowledge – in the broad sense – can be gained from the study of a particular degree. Content knowledge can be tested through assessment, but it is harder to measure how less tangible knowledge or skills are learnt. Even so, the current prominence around employability in the narrative of higher education means that course programmes are required to ensure all students have at least a basic instruction in certain skills that are expected of graduates. These expectations are set out in subject benchmarks, standards set by the QAA (2016: 2) that define ‘what graduates in a particular subject might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their programme of study’. The benchmarks themselves can be seen as an example of the increasing audit culture of higher education, as well as indicative of the vagueness that must be adopted when trying to guarantee a standard across such a diverse sector⁴⁰, but for our purposes they also offer a useful (relatively) objective measure of what skills computer science, and history

⁴⁰ Though they may likewise act as a foil for some elements of the marketisation narrative of higher education: if there is a set standard guaranteed through quality assurance mechanisms, and a set price through fee level caps, where are the justifications for ranking universities – other than the arbitrary scores of newspaper league tables and divisions based on ideas of prestige that make it impossible for newer universities to compete?

students are supposed to be working towards. (To that end the benchmark sections relating to employability for computer science and history are reproduced in Appendix Thirteen.) What is noteworthy that the benchmarks refer to such skills as simply ‘generic’, a phrase very much as odds with the promotional language university careers services use, which advocate ‘employability’ or ‘transferable skills’. If the personal statements give applicants a measure of rhetorical agency over how they wish to be seen as a potential student, then their persistent focus on generic skills offers an insight into how the ideal student has been conceptualised.

In their statements some applicants attempted to appropriate the academic language and skills more successfully than others. The awkwardness of Bradley’s (HP92) syntax suggests that he has found it difficult to write the statement in an appropriate tone. But Katherine (HRG), for example, recognised the need for analytical and research skills, and has enough awareness of her subject to know that these are the skills necessary to be not just a student, but a *successful* one:

When studying the WWI poets, Sassoon and Owen, in English Literature, I found the social contexts of the era greatly interesting, allowing me to view history in a more contextualized and empathetic manner. Interpreting novels analytically and researching the socio-historic influences developed the skills I need to become a successful history student.

In linking her English studies to her application to study history she was attempting to demonstrate an interdisciplinary awareness, and while her syntax may also be awkward, it does show a passing resemblance to the academic genre. The other attempt to illustrate academic skills came from

Loui (CSP92). Although in his statement there was a mismatch between genres and skills, Loui demonstrated an awareness of the nature of university study: he knows that it requires independent research, but he ultimately links his knowledge with generic skills, such as *communication* and *problem-solving*, rather than academic ones:

My problem solving skills have been further enhanced through the study of Mathematics and Biology at A' Level<sic> and I have used these skills, with listening and communication skills to develop my database. I have also refined my ability to study and research independently and learned how to get to the heart of problem quickly, before deciding upon a method or mechanism to solve it logically and effectively.

Loui attempts to mimic academic language in the subordinate clause of the final sentence; in explaining the nature of *problem solving* he displays an ability to conceptualise and apply that generic skill to his studies. But later in the statement he returns to the UCAS trope of listing skills that he has gained from extra-curricular activities, without explaining why they are relevant to being a student:

As a scout, I led a team of 8 in a shelter building activity that we were to sleep in overnight. Here I demonstrated both leadership and teamwork skills.

The UCAS advice encourages the reappraisal of hobbies and employment as mechanisms for gaining skills, but there is no clear guidance on justifying how these skills and experiences are relevant to the subject an applicant is applying to study. Without that clear direction, the applicants are left to make their own judgements about what is relevant for universities to know. Some applicants have an advantage in this over others by virtue of life opportunities they can

write about. Many of the computer science students, especially at the RG University, wrote about work experience weeks they had participated in through their schools at large software and technology companies. The majority of the students wrote that this experience helped them to develop *leadership* skills – without illustrating how that was relevant to the subject they were applying to study. Less fortunate was a student like Danny (CSP92), who did not have the same opportunities through school, and instead had to attempt to link his work experience placement – assisting with primary school P.E classes – to his desirability as a computer science student:

In P.E I had to lead the class and tell the children what to do. I feel that I improved on my leadership skills and I feel that I am able to give out more clear instructions which is an important skill.

In his *Lectures at the Collège de France* Foucault (2010) spoke about how, under the neoliberal narrative, a mother reading to her child becomes an act of developing their human capital: in this case, Danny teaching children to run becomes an investment in his human capital.

The importance placed on demonstrating skills again raises the problematic question of what can be expected from 16-17-year-olds, as most applicants are. The necessity to turn mundane activities into *transformative* events is an example of neoliberalism's tendency to claim that everything, and everyone, can be exceptional when approached with the right, enterprising mindset. It is not necessarily the case that the students are being knowingly untruthful in their claims about what skills they have gained – it is in the nature of growing-up that events that feel transformative when one is young are less significant in later years – but applicants are certainly encouraged to exaggerate

experiences in order to promote themselves. This exaggeration can be seen in the awkwardness of the applicants' language when writing about their skills. Contrary to the UCAS advice there is little that is natural about the applicants' writing. Furthermore, the genre they appropriate is promotional, rather than academic. Fairclough (1993: 141) described the promotional genre as the 'generalisation of promotion', the means of selling commodities, concepts, or people. In explicitly instructing applicants to 'sell themselves' UCAS is clearly inviting students to use a promotional genre, which – as Andrew Wernick has established – makes 'the job interview, the resume [...] all become not just indices of success but permanent zones of competition in the struggle to get ahead' (1991: 194). The personal statement uses the same mode of self-presentation as that of the job interview or resume with some of the students commenting on this similarity:

I found writing the personal statement was easy for me because I have had experience writing a CV which I thought was quite similar. (Rachel, CSP92)

What became evident when looking at the statements was the lack of resistance from the applicants to this mode. All of the statements given to me adopted the promotional genre, rather than attempting to question or subvert it. In complying with the genre the applicants are forced to turn the mundane or generic into the exceptional in the naïve hope that this will help them stand out from the crowd. They are instructed to find something 'interesting, special or unique' (UCAS, 2016c) about themselves – advice that in itself mirrors promotional advice given to businesses or commodities to find their *unique selling point* – but they must do this within a context of subject knowledge

and skill acquisition. The result is that unique experiences are secondary to *generic* skills, so that applicants are effectively competing with the ‘virtually identical products of their rivals’ (Wernick, 1991: 185). An example of the logic of this competition to make the mundane exceptional can be seen in Jenni’s (CSRG) personal statement, in which she writes:

Over the past year I have tutored a yr 11 pupil in Maths to help him achieve a C. To do this I had to be organised ensuring I had questions and work for him to do, as well as having patience when explaining the work. This required me to take more of a leadership role as I led the sessions and adapted to the learning style of this pupil.

Her suggestion that a one-to-one session with a younger pupil is in some way a leadership role⁴¹ borders on the absurd. But it was not unusual: six of the other statements cited similar experience in a tutorial role as evidence of ‘leadership skills’. It is not for A-level students to know they are unexceptional in having such experiences, especially when the advice they receive tells them they must find something unique about themselves.

If we accept that the statement is a means for applicants to sell themselves, and that it is relatively deceptive in this purpose, then this deception is problematic for the function of the statement. It is a problem that has gone largely unnoticed in the literature on higher education, and is another example of the double truths of neoliberalised HE sector: universities, UCAS

41 In his critical discourse analysis of the marketisation of discourses around universities, Fairclough (1993) notes the interesting lexical choice of using leadership in academic CVs. He suggests this term belongs more to the managerial genre than promotional. The prevalence of it in the applicants’ statements suggests they do not grasp the real connotations of the phrase. Perhaps it has become promotional, its managerial meaning becomes cheapened through over use.

and teachers will, for the most part, know that applicants are engaging with a buyers market, but they still encourage them towards thinking they must stand out and that grades alone are not enough. Applicants do not dare risk going against this advice, as their future security is tied to having a university degree.

4.5 Promoting merit

What then drives this need to present the everyday as exceptional, given the limited amount of competition for university places? Applicants are convinced that they need to stand out from the crowd, and of the apparent truth that universities are looking for particular skills and potential human capital. But to survive universities depend on students: tuition fees remain their main income stream, and the more students an institution takes on, the higher that income will be. On the other hand, in the labour market, it is widely assumed that job applicants need a degree to get into the professional class, and hence the costs of failing to get a degree are high (Chakraborty, 2016; Standing, 2011, 2014; The Guardian Editorial, 2016). In selling themselves through their statements, the applicants are encouraged to write not as potential students pursuing academic subjects, but as potential human capital. Activities that, at the time of UCCA form would have been considered hobbies have now become experiences that develop transferable skills:

I have completed two work placements during my time at the [local] academy which helped me with not only my skill at keeping to deadlines but also assisted me in improving my organisational skills, as well as helping me to improve my professionalism and reliability. [...] Along with these experiences I believe that other important skills have been learned through hobbies in my personal life. These include chess, reading and writing short stories, I believe that the analytic skills

necessary in all three of these things will be invaluable to me throughout my studies and future career. (Richard, HP92)

Seeing these generic skills as human capital *in potentia* helps us to understand where the *competitive* element of the personal statement lies: applicants are not preparing themselves for the unlimited number of student places in higher education, but for the limited number of graduate jobs that await afterwards. Jenni (CSRG) offered a particularly stark example of this, linking her choice of subjects, and skills, directly to her employment prospects:

Combining [ICT at GCSE] with Maths and French has given me a balanced insight into higher education, as well as French offering me a competitive edge and potential employable quality for the future. Pairing a language with computing was an intentional decision as both of these subjects are in high demand and have many potential job prospects.

In her statement Jenni subscribed to the economically rational version of student choice advocated in the Browne Report (2010): she is seemingly aware of the skills that employers find desirable. This passage comes from her opening paragraph, before she writes about an intrinsic love of the subject or studying, implying she places greater importance on her *employable* qualities. But there is an echo of cruel optimism in Jenni's understanding of what would make her employable. In her interviews she expressed no desire to move to a French-speaking nation: she hopes to be a software developer, potentially for Apple or Google, but had no explanation as to how speaking A-level French would help with this. It suggests the need for skills for the sake of skills.

While it might be tempting to dismiss such an instrumental approach to subject choice, in being honest about her rationale, Jenni is simply articulating a key narrative of contemporary higher education: that young people can be reduced to the sum of their skills, and, if they want to improve their life chances, they must invest in these skills. This investment is an individual's own responsibility to pursue, so they must suggest that it is only through their own initiative that they have gained their skills. This explains the somewhat egotistical character of the personal statements, and how the reflective 'I' and 'my' become promotional. For example, Isabelle (HRG) lists a range of activities that she was apparently able to achieve because of her 'determination' and 'time management skills':

Since December 2013, I have been a part-time waitress in a local village restaurant. Balancing schoolwork, homework, sport and music is something that *I* have managed very well due to *my* organisational and time management skills. (My emphasis.)

But Isabelle makes no mention of support received from either her school or her parents (both teachers) in facilitating these activities, whether through her monthly allowance, buying equipment, taking her to classes, or simply providing a stable home life that encouraged these activities. There is little room for crediting the help of others: all achievements and skills are presented as the results of the applicant's own efforts. This is important for understanding the everyday neoliberalism in the students' experiences, as it reinforces the narrative of meritocracy that underpins much of the social and cultural machinations of the neoliberal project. As I explored in Chapter One, the economic inequalities produced by neoliberalism have become disguised as the product of effort and merit (Littler, 2013; Monbiot, 2014; Piketty, 2014;

Reay, 2013). Thomas Piketty has suggested that popular narratives now favour hierarchies of skill and human capital over hierarchies of wealth, and that the social representation of inequality has shifted to from the haves and have-nots, to the skilled and skill-less⁴². When skills are seen as the result of individual endeavour, their acquisition becomes a point of merit, and so any financial gain a person's just reward. But in writing about their skills, some applicants start from a more favourable position than others, by virtue of their social, cultural and economic capital. Steven Jones (2012, 2013, 2015) has argued that ignoring the unequal access to such opportunities damages claims that the personal statement aids widening participation, though this may be somewhat reductive. Valarie (HP92), for example, had the opportunity to write about her experiences at Oxford University as part of an outreach activity, but she was only able to access this experience because she was a widening participation student:

In April 2014 I was a part of the 'Access to Oxford' programme where I spent 3 days in St. Peters College attending lectures and learning about life at University, it was an amazing experience.

Several of the students interviewed for this research took part in similar activities, but this should not suggest that this has levelled the playing field. Instead, it is likely that there were other applicants from their schools who did not receive the opportunity to take part in these experiences, especially as such programmes tend to be aimed at the 'gifted and talented', who achieve higher grades. Bourdieu (1996: 5) would recognise this as part of the

⁴² Though the proof of these skills is often reduced to has-a-degree or does-not-have-a-degree.

'legitimizing illusion' of education: that education is an equalising force in which natural talent can 'triumph' over advantages of birth. In order to maintain this illusion there must be some opportunities for 'gifted' students to advance on merit, but what is considered 'gifted' is dictated by cultural and economic hierarchies. In this way we can start to understand the personal statement as an example of the *classed* nature of everyday neoliberalism. This illusion becomes all the more apparent when considering what is not included in applicants' statements.

4.6 Hiding setbacks

The framing of the statement only allows for one particular portrayal of the applicants and leaves no room for the parties, heartbreaks, mistakes and misadventures that also make up both university life and applicants' experiences before university. It was particularly noteworthy after interviewing the students how much was left unwritten in their personal statements: family break-ups; disabilities and accidents; mistaken A-level choices. The exclusion of these 'life upsets' follows the trend of neoliberal culture that does not allow room for interruptions or mistakes in the idealised trajectory of its subjects, that is unless they can be redefined as a challenge the individual overcame through initiative and perseverance, demonstrating their enterprising credentials.

Out of the 15 applicants who provided statements, three were autistic, though they made no mention of what effect this had on them in their statements; three had been through a parental divorce; two had not performed well in certain subjects at AS-level, so had stopped doing them; two had long-term

illnesses; one experienced a serious family illness; and one had been hit by a car during their GCSEs. In some cases these incidents overlapped, but in no case were such things mentioned in the personal statements, although they all had a formative effect on the students. The absence of these broader aspects of life from the personal statements demonstrates the statement's position as a practice that promotes – almost exclusively – an entrepreneurial self. And it is not just reflections on the past that are suppressed by the mechanisms of the statement. In the interviews all of the students said that what they were looking forward to the most about going university was the opportunity to gain independence and *grow-up*, a sentiment that is never explicitly stated in the statements. Quite the contrary, the precocious language of the statements suggests the applicants were already confident grown-ups before entering university. It might be possible to read the desire to gain skills and knowledge in order to enter the world of work as part of this growing-up narrative, but it doesn't fit with the students' framing of their selves in their statements. In the statements, they often attempt to portray themselves as already grown-up, responsible and possessing mature skills:

I was lucky enough to be appointed the position of Deputy Head Boy in my school this year. This role has a lot of responsibilities such as ensuring that the school policy is being met by all of the students, assisting at school events and representing the school at public events. (Sam, CSP92)

In portraying themselves in this confident way the applicants are conforming to UCAS's advice to sell themselves, arguably because they are aware of the risks of not having a degree and the consequences. In understanding this we must see the position of the university applicant (rather than student) as a

precarious one. The students who came from backgrounds where higher education was not the norm had a heightened sense of what the consequences of not going to university may be. In their interviews there was a strong narrative of distancing themselves from peers who were not thinking about going to university. But though this narrative came across strongly in the interviews, it was not present in the personal statements.

Not acknowledging this precarious situation is seen particularly in Anne's (HP92) statement. Reading it, you would not know that she left school at 16 with fewer than five GCSEs, the result of bullying and undiagnosed dyslexia and dyscalculia; that she had been unhappy in a low-skilled job that she knew she was too clever for; that she worked her way through further education to gain the qualifications needed to access higher education; that having seen how supportive the FE environment was she decided to become a teacher so other children would not be as unsupported in school as she was. It is a subjective claim, but that framing of triumph over adversity seems a better account of an individual's dedication and self-discipline, but it is left out of Anne's presentation of her self. Instead, she quickly mentions learning discipline in the sea cadets:

I used to attend my local sea cadet corps, where I achieved my cadet status. This taught me discipline as I was growing up. I also attended a karate class from the age of seven and when I turned fifteen I gained my black belt, which was a highly satisfying achievement and this taught me dedication, which I have applied to my studies.

Though Anne's untold story might fit well into the social mobility narrative of higher education, it does not fit into the human capital narrative in which the personal statements operate. The complete omission of this period of her life

from her statement suggests that nothing *good* came out of it: it was not a *formative* experience, as no skills or qualities were gained. This obviously is not true, but for the statement's purposes it was not formative in the *right* way. Anne has another self, but we do not get to learn about her through the statement: she is repressed in favour of the enterprising self, even if that self is less interesting. This mismatch between students' personal narratives and their personal statements and raises questions about what its role really is in the admissions process?

4.7 Conclusion

The advice on the UCAS personal statement prioritises university education as a means of developing human capital. The subject an applicant is applying to study becomes somewhat inconsequential, reduced to a means of refining what skills they have, and developing those they don't. Though competition for university places is not as great in the past, the stakes of not getting into university are considerably higher. There is an implied risk in not following the sanctioned advice on how to write the statement, though ultimately universities appear to put more stock in an applicant's grades when making a decision on whether to offer a place. This reality is unacknowledged by universities or UCAS.

Applicants are told they must portray themselves in a certain way – they must promote a particular truth about themselves. In writing this truth, the statements I analysed all adopted the language of promotion, rather than academia. The need to promote skills leaves some applicants at a disadvantage, depending on the types of opportunities life has afforded them,

and their linguistic skill in articulating these experiences. Those who cannot reflect on how their life experiences have equipped them with certain skills – or worse, who feel their life experiences equate to a form of failure – must repress aspects of their selves and their lives in order to fit the constructed ideal.

Meanwhile, higher education has largely fabricated the importance of the statement, and fostered an element of competition between applicants. After the application process the statement becomes entirely redundant: universities do not hold students accountable for the version of themselves they presented in the statement, and there is no requirement for students to reflect back on what they promised. The lack of retrospective reflection on the self presented in the statement once the applicant becomes a student is perhaps regrettable from a neoliberal point of view, which might see in it another avenue for getting students to think about how they plan on improving the skills with which they entered into university. But, it is also perhaps regrettable for the students' themselves, as it allows no scope for the writer to see how they have developed since the statement, whether they recognise themselves to be the student they *promised* they would become, or indeed if they recognise the type of student and university they had imagined?

I now move to examining the selves the first year participants presented in interviews, how these differed from the selves presented in the statements, and what insight these differences might offer into everyday practices of neoliberalism in higher education

Chapter Five

First year students' experiences: securing their futures through higher education?

Following the students' experiences from applicant to first year, this next chapter summarises interview data collected from the first year students. I assess the data against the idea that universities encourage students to adopt a neoliberal model of education, addressing the research questions set out in the Introduction (see page 10). I examine the students' reasons for choosing to study at a particular university, and on their particular course. In looking at this choice I also cover how the students eliminated certain universities, and what differences – if any – they perceived between Russell Group and Post-92 institutions. The second section looks at the students' motivations for going to university, whether these were primarily financial, and what they hoped to achieve through their university degree. In looking at these hopes, I examine how the students sought to get the most out of their education. The final section outlines the students' attitudes towards their student loans and debts, questioning whether the students saw higher education as something to be *consumed*, or whether they had a different understanding of it.

5.1 A rational choice?

The assumption of recent higher education policy – and the neoliberal narrative it draws from – is that young people will engage in a process of rational choice when selecting where and what to study at university, and that

this choice will be primarily guided by improving their job prospects. The information and processes through which students are believed to make this choice have been covered in Chapters One and Two. What remains to be seen is the extent to which the students followed those expectations.

5.1.1 Factors influencing choice of university

All of the students taking part in the study were asked what research they conducted prior to applying to university. Rachel, studying computer science at the P92, offered what could be considered the model rational choice response. She did:

a lot of research into the university I wanted to go to as well as the course. I started off by looking into league tables on different websites such as *The Guardian* and *Independent* for computer science and based my decisions on the league table. I also viewed prospectuses and visited open days to ensure I made the right decision for me [...] League tables are important because for me I would like to gain a successful career with the best opportunities so understanding which were the best universities to go to really helped me in making my decision.

Her response appears exemplary from a rational choice perspective. However, compared to the other 19 students, Rachel was the exception rather than the rule. Most of the students reported looking at league tables at some stage during their decision process, but the majority used them to narrow down the field of choice, rather than looking at how particular universities ranked. Ginny (HP92), for example, used them as a means of discounting certain universities, as she 'didn't want to go too far down the list'. Although this is still a method of selecting universities based on their rank, she approached it as decreasing the field of choice, rather than focusing in on individual universities' standing. A similar approach was taken by Katherine (HRG), but

she added: 'league tables didn't really help me, it was more sort of the actual feel of the uni, so it was mainly the open days that decided it'. The feel of the university was also a big factor for Isabelle (HRG). Her mother 'got the newspaper with the league tables' – a small insight into the benefits of having parents who are familiar with HE practices – she had 'a quick look' but 'didn't just go on that' (see section 5.1.2).

There were only two students who said they did not use league tables, and their two reasons merit some comment. Both Loui (CSP92) and Anne (HP92) are P92 students, and for Loui that was influential in his refusal to use league tables. He said that he 'didn't look at the league tables' because he 'kinda felt it was disappointing'. Loui was very conscious of peers – particularly an ex-girlfriend – who were at the RG, and was highly self-critical of his inability to join them. This sense of disappointment was rooted in a feeling of shame that he had not performed well enough in school to get into a 'top' university. Although the RG did not rank as highly in the league tables as many non-Russell Group institutions, for Loui 'top' did not signify league table position, but rather prestige and status. Anne, on the other hand, 'didn't even know about the league tables'. Being a first generation student who entered university through an access course, Anne missed the information the other students had gained through college, family or friends. Asked to reflect on whether it would have been useful to use the tables when making her choice, she was critical of the value of quantified rankings: 'A league table? Yeah it could show that they're the better one, but it depends on how they teach, and what type of environment it is, cause that's how you learn.' This reasoning is perhaps testament to Anne's earlier educational experiences: starting

university as a slightly more mature student, her choice narrative revolved largely around feeling comfortable at university, which had led her to reject the apparent pretensions of the RG. (I explore this feeling of *comfort* in relation to the students' habitus in section 5.1.3.)

For all of the students the location of the two universities played an important role in their choice, either because of a desire to move away from home or to stay local. Far more of the P92 students were local than the RG students: four of the P92's five computer science students were local, and three of the history students. Money was a strong factor in all of their narratives about why they chose a local university, consistent with more representative findings (NUS/Unipol, 2012). What is particularly interesting in looking at individual cases however is the number and type of contributing factors that swayed local students into staying close to the family home. Lisa (HRG) offered a compendium of reasons why a student may choose to stay at home:

One of them was money [...] I thought, I'm going to struggle with money. [...] And there were things like I passed my driving tests and had a car and I wouldn't have been able to take that with me, and just people moving out and into accommodation and I heard some horror stories about it, whereas I'm not the most social person, will I really fit in? [...] Once I started thinking about it I thought I'd much rather stay, and as much as I didn't want it to be a reason at the time I'd been in a relationship for 18 months [...] I was thinking realistically about that as well, then realised it has to play a bit of a part in my decision. And I was thinking about what happens if I get stressed or if I get sick and I can't cope and it's so far away.

Lisa's list demonstrates the amount of concerns a student can have about

moving away for university: while for some it is the chance to gain their

independence, for others it can mean upheaving a well-established life. Rachel

(CSP92) cited both as reasons for choosing a local university:

I had always wanted to live at home as I am from [City] and it suited my life with only [the P92] being a 15 minute train journey, plus I would only be in £27,000 debt rather than over £50,000 if I decided to move out or attend a different university. [...] The majority of my friends were staying in [City] and this made my decision slightly easier as we have been friends for many years.

Here Rachel shows several different selves making the one decision of where to study: the self who values her friends, who likes where she lives, but also the self who has made a financial judgement. No one self is presented as having more sway, but rather all the considerations come together to provide a rational justification for why she chose to remain at home. (It was the female students who also included wanting to be near friends and family in their reasons for staying local. The male students only cited money.)

Rachel's assessment of the varying levels of debt she would have if she moved away from home also highlights the other financial consideration students must take into account when deciding where to study – the additional debts incurred for living costs. It is these *living* debts that provided the cost variable in choosing where to study rather than the *fixed-priced* tuition fee debts. A student who moves away from home incurs a larger debt than one who stays. Though it should be noted that the local participants were, to an extent, lucky to live within commuting distance of two good universities: students in other areas, particularly rural communities, are not so lucky and so have less choice about whether they take on the larger debt.

5.1.2 A non-rational choice?

For the non-local students, the decision to move away from home allowed new factors to influence their choice, particularly where they would like to live.

This feeling was harder to articulate, though these students often pointed to key features of the city, rather than the universities, as deciding reasons.

For both Isabelle (HRG) and Darcey (HRG) one of the main pulls of the RG was the city's Northern setting: 'That was a big factor for me, I could never be like [in the] midlands or that' (Darcey). But Darcey also had the added influence of grandparents living close by, explaining that 'it was mainly family' that swayed her into applying to the RG as she had never had chance to live near them before. For Bradley (HP92) it was the fact that the city was home to his favourite football team, while William (HRG) was initially put off applying to the RG as he visited an open day when Bradley's favourite team were playing their local rivals and found that the 'town was actually rammed, so many people, and I just didn't really like it'. He put the university as his insurance choice.

Considering these factors can hardly be seen as calculating or rational, at least on the assumption that university serves as an investment in future human capital, rather than any other purpose. While the local landscape is not likely to enhance Isabelle or Darcey's employability, forging their own identities by living somewhere they felt had a defining feature is consistent with the narrative of 'growing up' whilst at university (see section 5.2.2). Such influences are largely outside of universities' control, and support a view that choosing a university – perhaps much like buying a house – is an emotional, as well as financial, investment (Kenyon, 1999). These *non-rational* factors in student choice were probably best articulated by Isabelle who said that she had:

put [the RG] on my UCAS as an option because it was a good university, and I just really enjoyed it and really fell in love with it when I came. I guess it was just luck that I'd actually put it down as one of the options.

Here, there is some acknowledgement of the quality of the university, though again this is grounded in status rather than league table position, but also of the role of feelings and luck. Student choice may be as much about affect as it is rationality, and this can have particular resonance when examining where students feel they 'fit into' higher education.

5.1.3 Perceived differences between universities

Only a few streets separate some of the buildings of the RG and P92 universities. Aesthetically, the history departments are quite similar, and while the P92's computing department is housed in a relatively modern building, it is surrounded by architecture from the same period as the building the RG's department is in. It is important to understand this context, as the students' perceived difference in the institutions came from the atmosphere and prestige of the universities, rather than their appearance.

The RG students recognised the reputational distinction of their university. But the P92 students who were most aware of the difference in reputation and prestige between the two institutions had all entered their university through their insurance choice or clearing, their first choice having been a Russell Group institution. Some felt their *demotion* quite strongly. These were the students most likely to compare the two universities: for the rest the other institution was something they rarely considered.

Box One: Students' perceptions of employers' attitudes towards Russell Group universities

At the end of the day it doesn't matter whether you have the best degrees or nothing, employers look whether you've been to a Russell Group to tell if you're smart or whatever, so it seemed sensible. (William, HRG)

It's another thing that I was always told employers would look at, if you went to a Russell Group university or not. Whether it's true or not I don't know. (Patrick, CSRG)

Say [employers have] two identical people and they've learnt the exact same thing, just one's been to a Redbrick the other a polytechnic, an employer would just favour the Redbrick. [...] I don't feel by coming here I'll get a lesser education, I just feel I might struggle a little bit more in terms of getting a job – no not getting a job: getting a higher tier job. (Loui, CSP92)

Obviously the employers will look at the Oxbridges [...] I think Post-92's is an okay reputation, I couldn't honestly tell you at all, that sounds pretty bad that, I don't know my own university. But I know the Russell Group university does have a good one. (Martin, CSP92)

The RG students found it difficult to articulate why their university was 'better', though they all had a sense that it was. They largely attributed it to being better known than the P92, especially amongst employers. A view expressed by many of the students who understood that there was a difference between the universities was that employers looked more favourably on Russell Group graduates, as seen in Box One. William's (HRG) understanding came from his parents, both lecturers at a different Russell Group institution. Jenny's (CSRG) experience was more representative: one of her sixth form tutors had:

put a real emphasis on Russell Groups. He wasn't dismissing others he was just saying that if you come from a Russell Group university you're more likely to get a job from the same course than someone who isn't.

None of the students referenced any research that supported their claims – though it does (de Vries, 2014; Savage, 2015) – instead, they took it for granted that employers looked more favourably on Russell Group graduates.

For the non-local RG students the P92 University was simply not on their radar. This narrative was reversed with the P92 students: they had all heard of Russell Group institutions, but in most cases had not applied to them because they knew they would not achieve high enough grades. Interestingly, this was often paired with a rejection of the apparent *worth* of a Russell Group education. Both Anne (HP92) and Richard (HP92) actively rebelled against the idea that a Russell Group university was somehow better.

Anne had a bad experience at the RG's open day. But her experience of the P92 open day was far more positive as she felt it was:

more comfortable. I think it's more modern, if I can say that? It was up to date with everything, but [the RG] I think it still needs to catch up, evolve a bit more I think.

That Anne felt more 'comfortable' in the P92 suggests an alignment between her own habitus and that of the institution, which is not surprising given her education background, having come from a FE college that she also felt was 'modern'. The easy-going feel of the P92 reminded her of the college tutors, and so there was a strong sense of familiarity. Richard was more damning in his comparison, questioning why the RG asked for higher grades when 'they have the same type of facilities' as his university. He had seen that the RG was expecting A-level grades of ABB and thought 'who do you think you are? I get

it, you're supposedly the best, but still'. He explained that his experiences of the P92 had reinforced his poor opinion of the RG:

I'm not a big fan of the [RG] anymore. [...] Everyone from the [RG] is always like 'none of the lecturers want to talk to us, we try and ask advice, they won't say anything', whereas here they're willing to talk to you.

This rejection of the perceived conventions of research-intensive universities hints at a tendency to devalue what is denied. It is certainly not something the RG students complained of: instead, they justified the lack of teaching contact as the *trade-off* for being taught by researchers who, as Patrick (CSR92) noted, are 'leading in their field of research'.

The most interesting insights came from the P92 students who had not actively chosen to be there, instead getting in through their insurance choice or clearing. Martin's (CSP92) first choice would have been the RG, but as he did not have the required A-level in maths he was not offered a place. Loui would have also preferred to have applied to the RG, but did not have the grades. He was 'kinda ashamed that I missed that opportunity, but that's my own fault [as] I didn't work'. This sense of resignation was also evident in Valerie's (HP92) narrative: she had been accepted onto the RG course, but had missed out on results day. She said:

Now I'm here and there's nothing I can do, and I see it as it's not as if I'm having an awful time and want to leave. I'm still getting the same degree, it mightn't be the same subject⁴³, but I'm still getting a degree to the same level as I'd get anywhere else.

43 She had originally intended to study History and Politics, but the Politics option was not available at the P92.

Valerie's description of her situation is hardly a ringing endorsement, and even her note of optimism at the end feels misplaced: she is right to say she is getting a degree to the same level, but as explored in Chapter Two, it is not necessarily the case that all degrees are valued equally. These students' classification of their university was tainted by the idea that they had 'let themselves down' by being there. The language the students employed reflected the downside of meritocracy: for Loui (CSP92) and Martin (CSP92) their own personal failure in not trying hard enough had meant they had not achieved, and so faced the consequences⁴⁴. This was complemented by a view from the RG students and their friends that they were expected to work harder, as they were at the 'better' university. As Lisa (HRG) said: 'a friend of mine is in the P92 and he's glad he didn't go to the RG because he sees the

Box Two: History students' subject choice

In Year 12 when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do at university: history just always kept coming back to the front, even if I wanted to combine it with something else it would always go to history. I just fell in love with the subject. (Lisa, HRG)

I wasn't ready in sixth form to make a decision about what I wanted to do: I didn't want to do something that just led into one place, so I just did history because it's the only thing that I enjoyed. (Darcey, HRG)

Yeah it's been my favourite subject since I can't remember, so it's just always been something that I've wanted to keep going with. (Katherine, HRG)

I just got a passion for it, you know at a personal level. Me mum used to take me to the museums and take me to other places and I think that's just sparked something inside me and I thought, 'well why can't I study it and then teach it'? (Anne, HP92)

⁴⁴ Valerie explained her poor exam performance was the result of stress. While she did blame herself for this it was not something she could 'take responsibility' for.

amount of work I have to do, but then it's like that's why you're in the RG University, you have to do so much work but it's fair enough'.

5.1.4 Factors influencing choice of course

All of the students had decided what subject they wanted to study before choosing where to study. But this decision was rarely described as an active, rational process: the narratives presented by the students broadly split into those who enjoyed a particular subject and performed well in it⁴⁵, and those who might have preferred to study something different but did not get the required grades.

As Box Two shows, enjoyment of the subject was a particularly prominent reason amongst the RG history students (Lisa, Darcey and Katherine). They all said that one of the reasons they enjoyed the subject was because they were good at it and had all received encouragement to continue it. It was a similar case with the RG computer science students, with Damian (CSRG) offering a succinct explanation for why he had chosen to study computer science: 'Natural talent. So why should I bother doing anything else?'

The students believed that choosing a subject they enjoyed was more likely lead to a job they enjoyed, even if it might not be as high paying as other options. Lisa (HRG) had contemplated doing law because it had a 'concrete job at the end of it', but after researching the workload involved decided: 'I don't want to do that [...] I want to do something I'll enjoy'. Patrick (CSRG)

⁴⁵ Though I am conscious in reporting this that students who were keen on their subject may have been more willing to be interviewed about it than others.

said he knew other students who had chosen their university course based on subjects that would ‘make them a lot of money, not because they’re enjoying it’, but had decided for himself that ‘it’s a lot easier to make money doing a job if you enjoy going to work every day’, so followed the path of the subject he enjoyed.

A common perception is that degrees like history do not lead to ‘concrete jobs’, but in the students’ narratives this was taken as a positive reason for choosing the course. As Table 5.1 shows, the majority of the RG history students were unsure about what career they wanted to pursue after graduation. As Isabelle (HRG) explained, she:

quite liked the broadness of options after doing a history degree, because I still have no idea what I particularly want to do. [...] Instead of just doing a certain degree that just have a lot of narrow career paths.

It was not necessarily the case that the history students were not motivated by future employment, but rather they were less fixed on what that employment would be, and were open to the opportunities university could present them. Valerie (HP92) suggested that this uncertainty was part of the appeal of her degree as ‘there’s a lot of doors that can open: some degrees are so specific’. Despite being very fixed on becoming a teacher she knew university would present options she had not yet considered.

Unsurprisingly, the computer science students – seen in Table 5.2 – were all set on careers in the IT industry, though they all explained that they had chosen the broad computer science subject, rather than a more specific

computing degree, as they also appreciated the range of options it would bring.

Table 5.1: History students' ideas for future careers

	RG	Post-92	Total
Journalist	2	-	2
Writer	-	1	1
Teacher	-	2	2
Barrister	-	1	1
Not Sure	3	1	4
Total	5	5	10

Table 5.2: Computer science students' ideas for future careers

	RG	Post-1992	Total
IT specialist	-	3	3
IT developer	2	1	3
IT programmer	1	-	1
Engineer	1	-	1
Not Sure	1	1	2
Total	5	5	10

But while all of the students enjoyed their course, in some narratives there was an insight into opportunities lost. None of the students explicitly stated that they had been left with no other option than to study their course, but in four cases earlier educational setbacks had restricted the avenues the students could take. These are shown in Box Three below, and were particularly evident among computer science students who had been keen to follow other STEM subjects, but had underperformed at other GSCE or AS/A-level sciences. In the case of Bradley (HP92), this failure left him with only history – his AS-

level outlier – to continue with. It is an interesting insight, and offers a different side to the earlier point that subject choice is linked to performance.

Box Three: Impact of subject failure on student's course choice

I was failing at chemistry, I was failing at physics, the only things I was doing alright was maths and computer science. So I just went for them. The choice was pretty much made for me in a way. (Rupert, CSG)

Originally I wanted to do medicine because I wanted to be a doctor, and in my first year of A-levels I took all three sciences and history and I basically failed all the sciences and did really well in history. (Bradley, HP92)

I didn't think about computer science until maybe towards the end of after I got my first results back, my ASs, that's when I realised that yeah, medicine's not an option. (Loui, CSP92)

I used to love Jurassic Park when I was younger, and so I wanted to become an archaeologist. In high school I struggled because I didn't take it seriously, and so I didn't get the grades that I wanted so that stopped me wanting to become an archaeologist because I just didn't do well in my GCSEs. (Danny, CSP92)

The students' choices of university and courses were often motivated by affective reasons as much as (economically) rational ones. There was some consideration of future employment, but this involved finding a career that was engaging and enjoyable, rather than one that would make them *rich*. The choice of university involved a complicated balance between the economically rational and the affective. A common theme was that the students saw university as not simply somewhere they would study but where they would develop into adults, so it was important that they felt comfortable in where they were studying.

5.2 Securing the future

For all of the students, attending university represented an integral step in securing a comfortable future: there was a general assumption that having a degree guaranteed a stable, well-paid job, which in turn would lead to a comfortable lifestyle. As Anne (HP92) said: ‘a degree opens many opportunities, especially for your career prospects’. Although all of the students adopted this narrative, students whose parents had not enjoyed security, either in work or in life, expressed it particularly strongly.

For Richard (HP92) – from a single parent, precarious household – a university degree represented his ladder for upward social mobility. Talking about what he hoped to gain from having a degree, he explained that for him his ‘long term goal’ was ‘stability’ as ‘once you’re stable you can work on making things even better than that’. Richard’s ‘stability’ is a good lens through which to view the students’ hopes. The elements of this stability were not found in simply getting a good job, but in being financially stable; becoming *emotionally* stable through growing up and developing into an adult; and *socially* stable, by acquiring a level of perceived respectability and either upward mobility, or maintaining a current social position, by becoming a member of the graduate class.

5.2.1 Employment stability

As Table 5.2 demonstrated, the computer science students generally had a more definite idea of what career they wanted to pursue after university. For Rachel (CSP92) obtaining a degree was a necessary gateway into her chosen profession:

I decided when I found the career I hope for in the future – which is an application developer – and to pursue this career I would need a degree [in order] to be at an advanced level.

The computer science students often saw their degree as a way of proving knowledge they already had, rather than necessarily increasing that knowledge: it gave them a quantified way of demonstrating they were skilled enough to enter the IT industry. In this approach to their studies these students expressed traits of the credentialism that has accompanied the increased need for acquired human capital (see Chapter Two). For a student such as Rupert (CSRG) – who said: ‘I honestly don’t expect to learn much that will be tremendously useful. [...] It’s just, the degree pretty much proves that you’re able to learn and to understand.’ – a university degree was not a matter of learning for the sake of learning, but an essential means of *quantifying* his knowledge and turning it into a form of symbolic capital⁴⁶.

The narrative was different for the history students. For them, being at university presented an opportunity to gain more knowledge, not just about history but about what they might wish to pursue after graduation. While there was little difference in the employment hopes of the computer science students at the two universities, there was in the history students. The P92 history students were more likely to have a fixed idea of what they wanted to do after university, while the RG students were open to the possibilities higher education would present them with. As Darcey (HRG) said: ‘I’m basically giving myself three years to actually sit and think about what I actually want to

⁴⁶ This would nominally take the form of human capital, but might also be a form of cultural capital as he gains the prestige of having studied within a university context, rather than, for example, being self-taught.

do'. This approach to her student experience hints at Darcey's social position. Although a first generation student, her parental employment background was one of security and relative comfort; she saw little risk attached to higher education study, especially with the additional buffer of a Russell Group institution's prestige (as explored in Chapter Two). Darcey had the benefit of being able to spend her time at university reflecting on different imagined futures, a situation that contrasted strongly with some of the P92 history students. Anne and Valerie – in both cases from families with parents in precarious employment – wanted to be teachers, and entered higher education with their minds set on this one, specific future. Both saw the lifestyle accompanying that career as very desirable, linking it to stability. Valerie had often told her mum she would be 'rich' one day, though she had always been set on being a teacher. The median salary of a secondary school teacher is £28,937 (Payscale, 2016): this is far from the top 1%, but for a young woman who grew up in a household with a collective income of less than £16,000 per year, this career would signify a significant change in circumstance. She hoped in the future to have:

enough money to live comfortably and being able to afford nice things; being able to go on holiday every year. I [had] never been on [a] holiday until this September.

It would be accurate to say that Valerie was motivated by the additional income a graduate career offered, but the hope in that motivation was for comfort and stability, rather than extravagance. The hopes of Anne and Valerie offered a lived example of the proposition posed in Chapter One: that the appeal of acquired human capital today is not simply the improved

earning prospects, but also a greater sense of security in employment. Tied to this was also a desire to distance themselves from past insecurity, the social consequences of which are explored in section 5.2.3.

In describing their hopes for the future all of the first year computer science students expressed a desire to work for a big, well-established IT company, often citing Apple, Google, or Microsoft. Eight of them were willing to move abroad to do so. Danny (CSP92) in particular felt there was security in being a useful ‘cog’ in part of a bigger organisation. Like Valerie, he wanted to have enough money in the future so that he could distance himself from past insecurity, and:

have fun, go out more, like go on holidays and explore the world. Just have the life that I never thought I would have. And obviously I want to get promotions, making sure that I’m getting enough pay, getting enough hours⁴⁷, just making sure that I’ve got a stable enough job.

None of the students expressed a desire to establish their own company or to be self-employed in any capacity, even though both Rupert (CSRG) and Damian (CSRG) already ran small businesses hosting online servers. These student entrepreneurs described their current businesses as ‘good practice’: a means to the end of a secure, stable job as part of a bigger organisation. As Rupert suggested, his business was ‘something to showcase in the CV’. Their hope was for the security of a large organisation, rather than embracing entrepreneurial risk.

⁴⁷ Coming from a family in precarious employment, and having only worked in casual, zero-hours jobs before becoming a student, Danny’s concern with ‘getting enough hours’ is rooted in his previous experiences and concerns.

Like the history students, most of the computer science students did not express a desire to become ‘rich’. The amount they expected to earn once they started work was hazy, with predictions ranging from £21,000 to (an optimistic) £60,000⁴⁸. Though the students had an idea of the type of lifestyle they were working towards, this imagined future involved more than simply becoming a ‘product to be sold, a walking advertisement, [...] an entrepreneur of [their] possibilities’, as Mirowski suggested (2013: 108). Their narratives instead suggested that the human capital they would gain from their degree was useful mainly as it would allow them to be financially stable, and build a good life around that stability. It was the means to an end, not the end itself.

5.2.2 Emotional stability

In expanding on why financial stability was important, the students often made the link to a certain lifestyle that they believed would be ‘comfortable’, a refrain that was repeated in the group interviews as well as one-to-one interviews. This idea of ‘comfort’ was grounded in the hopes outlined in Chapter One; namely family, friendship, and fulfilling work. None of them explicitly stated that this would be good for their mental wellbeing, but it was implied that happiness as an adult was linked to the stability that being a graduate would bring. This happiness was imagined as more than simply having a ‘good job’, as Ginny (HP92) explained:

I want to do well in life and I think you’re more likely to do well if you’ve had a good education and a good degree and it’s going to be

⁴⁸ The mean starting salary of a computer science graduate working a professional job is £25,203; a history graduate can expect to start on £21,621 (The Complete University Guide, 2016b).

easier to get a better job that pays well that you're going to enjoy more. So obviously that would help me get a house and a family, things like that, and just live comfortably.

Framed in this way higher education is seen as more than simply a practice in gaining human capital, but as a gateway to a comfortable life with an assumption that this future life would be free from struggle and necessity.

Box Four: Students' responses to 'what are you hoping to get from university?'

Independence:

I came here to be by my own, to lead my own life, not depending on anyone. And it's looking pretty good. (Damian, CSRG)

The main thought would be that I would be entering adult life and not having as much guidance along the way. (Rupert, CSRG)

Just sort of develop and become a better person I guess. Like get used to being on my own – well not on my own but independent. (William, HRG)

Skills, knowledge, and just general preparation for being a proper adult. (Richard, HP92)

Just grow myself as a person really. (Bradley, HP92)

Friendship:

I am kinda hoping to expand my social circle, though that's a bit of a struggle right now. That's what they always told me about university is you make friends and everything so I'm trying to do that. And become more independent as well. (Lisa, HRG)

Hopefully skills that will then help me so whatever I want to do. And I want to know what I want to do by the end of the three years hopefully as well, that's kinda the main thing. And then obviously like making friends and being able to live on my own as well. (Isabelle, HRG)

I think it's just sort of easing you into independence over three years instead of just throwing you straight in to a job. I just think it's three years of learning and cause everyone says at university you'll make your friends for life, I just feel like that really. (Darcey, HRG)

Ginny's use of 'easier' is particularly interesting. The evidence of Chapter Two certainly suggests that life as a university graduate is generally 'easier' than life without a degree, especially for people of her generation. However, it may not be as easy as some think. Ginny's hope and her apparent belief that a university degree can secure all that she wishes for in this statement may ring of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011): a cruel optimism etched with an idea of 'merit', in which this 'good life' is her reward for ensuring she had a 'good' (i.e. higher) education.

Responses like this prompted me to ask the students what they wanted to 'get out of' university, other than a degree. The main response was that university provided a safe opportunity to develop into an adult, as shown in Box Four. In these hopes the students expressed a collective, social understanding that this process of 'becoming a proper person' was part of the higher education experience.

To return to Foucault, for these students higher education represented an 'arena of life', consisting of varied practices and discourses with which they hoped to engage. They saw higher education as neither a solely academic endeavour, nor as simply a means of investing in their human capital, but as something more complex. The numerous – and at times contradictory – narratives and structures of this higher education arena can be seen as an affirmation of McNay's (1992) assertion discussed in Chapter One, that individual subjects are influenced by multiple narratives that they either engaged with or against, albeit in these students' cases often from a passive position rather than an active, *entrepreneurial* one.

The unifying strand of the students' narratives was the prospect of 'becoming' that their experiences at university afforded them. They all spoke about seeing higher education as an experience that would allow them to gain independence and space to mature into their own person⁴⁹. These future-facing narratives involved a level of work on the self, as the students actively envisaged the type of person they hoped to 'become', and the lifestyle they believed would go with pursuing this process. This was guided by their own reflexive thoughts (Archer, 2005), as they worked towards this hoped for future.

Alongside this personal growth, the female students expressed an additional hope for friendship, as seen in Darcey's (HRG) and Lisa's (HRG) quotes and their desire to associate with people they felt were similar to themselves. This was a recurring theme, and is consistent with Kirsty Finn's (2015) findings discussed in Chapter One. Finding friendships can be linked to emotional stability, as association with people with whom we feel comfortable is essential to our wellbeing. This in itself implies distancing from other groups, but also allows for self-identification through Othering.

5.2.3 Social betterment and stability

One of the prominent narratives that emerged from the students was the idea that going to university would allow them to 'better themselves'⁵⁰. This

⁴⁹ Recalling Chapter Four, this growing up narrative appears at odds with the image the students presented in their personal statements of already having many of skills attributable to adult life (see section 5.2.4).

⁵⁰ Though it could be argued that in a purely human capital narrative, all of the students looked on university in this way, as a chance to better their employment prospects.

narrative was particularly strong in the P92 students, who often framed the 'better self' they hoped to become against peers who were not attending university. Their reflections on these 'better selves' offered an insight into the students' different hopes for university.

While all of the students saw higher education as a means of improving their life chances, the idea of becoming 'better' carried different connotations, especially for those who had struggled to get to university, who were predominantly at the P92 institution. Richard (HP92) knew a lot of people from his school who had not gone to university, 'and quite a few of those, I can tell you, are smarter than me', including one 'who, simply, he's unemployed: he always got higher scores than me but he doesn't do anything'. He suggested these old school peers did not want to 'progress' from school as that was where they had felt 'safe and relaxed'. The 'smarts' were there but the drive to become 'better' was not.

Richard explained that his school stressed: 'if you want to make a future for yourself you have to go to university'. He had taken that advice very much to heart:

My plan for life is to just try and live a happy, content life, which to me means get a job, make a living for yourself, do all the things that human beings are supposed to do.

He was sure that in order to do these things he needed a university degree and viewed those not actively working towards this form of betterment – 'student Others' – in a poor light. This was mirrored in the narratives of other students at the P92 University. Valerie's (HP92) school peers were also held up as

Box Five: Anne's social mobility narrative

On her memories of school:

A few of my teachers are still there: one of them keeps asking if I've had a baby yet, cause I think I'm the only one in the year who hasn't had any children [...] It's so irritating just because I was in that year, everyone else has you should. I feel like saying to him, 'when I do become pregnant I will tell you, you can even come to the scans if you like'. I want to get like a career, not just a little job, so I know I'm financially sorted.

On her hopes for the future:

I think where I live I see the girls hanging on street corners getting drunk, which I did used to smoke and drink as well, but I was thinking, I don't want that, I want to move away from the area, I want to go to a nice area and I want my children to grow up in a nice area, which I would tell them about how I got to university [...] I want them to know that it was 'difficult for me, so you are lucky really. Because there's always someone worse off and that was me, and now I've changed for the better'.

examples of student Others to be defined against. She said of her former classmates: 'a lot like – I'm not being stereotypical – I know one's in the newspaper because the police are looking for them, a couple have had like kids'. Loui (CSP92) suggested that any future romantic partners would have to be a university graduate as 'intellectual conversation's a big thing for me, you know if someone's done a degree they ain't stupid'. For Loui, being a university graduate meant 'a better quality of life, more respect in the community' and he found it hard to contemplate 'sharing his life' with someone without that social experience.

As Box Five shows, Anne's (HP92) narrative of social mobility also includes an Other against whom she wants to become 'better'. Her idea of 'better' felt particularly embedded in her previous social position and came from both from a reflection on her past, and a conscious effort to work towards a 'better'

future. Her narratives revolved around children: the expectation of former teachers; and her own hopes for her future family, all to some extent influenced by her own habitus. At 25-years-old, Anne was beginning to think seriously about a future family and linked her hope for this to a graduate lifestyle. She suggested that a university degree was not simply a means of securing one's own future, but also that of a potential future family as well.

Anne's narrative drew heavily on the discourse of individualised responsibility. Given the bad experiences she had at school, Anne's journey into higher education was one of self-sufficiency and drive. Drawing on the language of a typical *self-made entrepreneur*, she argued that through being 'dead determined' and believing 'you've got to make something of yourself [...] you can change your life completely', but in doing so did not account for the structural barriers she, and other students like her, faced.

In the hopes of these students the echoes of Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism might again be heard, both in the belief that higher education will act as a guarantor against *individual* social disadvantage, and in the hope of moving into a 'better' life, away from their pasts and perceived student Others. The cruel outcome of this is that they may distance themselves from aspects of their previous lives that they did value, such as family. The students who feel this distance may find themselves in a type of social-limbo, suspended between two social worlds with a habitus that does not acquiesce to either.

This leads to a theme that was evident in the narratives of students at both universities: the desire to do better than the previous generation. Eleven of the students were first-generation, but all of the students wanted to improve on

their parents' lot – or at the very least emulate it. As Katherine (HRG) explained:

My parents don't have amazing jobs but they pay the bills. But they've always sort of told me 'oh don't have a family until you're older, make sure you get a good career and stuff, don't end up like us', so I don't know it's just kind of – I don't want to say not make their mistakes, 'cos that sounds bad – but they've always told me just do what you enjoy, experience life a bit first and find a job that you enjoy doing.

For some of the students there was the added incentive of being able to ease their parents' situation. As Sam (CSP92) said, he was likely to start on the same salary that his mum 'has been getting for years'. He was looking forward to being able to 'help her out'. There is research that suggests working class female students feel a sense of obligation to their parental family more strongly than middle class female students (Evans, 2009), though Sam's statement suggests there might be a similar sense amongst working class male students. The neoliberal narrative does not allow much room for family life (Garrett, Jensen and Voela, 2016), especially when it involves interruptions to employment, but for these students university was as much about securing their families' futures as it was a good career.

A significant caveat in these expressed hopes is that they were all grounded in an apolitical, seemingly individualistic belief that the route to a better life lay in personal effort, and not in political change or involvement. Whilst these hopes were not expressed with the sentiments of an active, idealised neoliberal subject – which would favour individual responsibility, economic competitiveness and constant risk taking in pursuit of upward social mobility – the lack of any sense of *collectivised hope* may point to a more docile type of

neoliberal subject, one who accepts the world the way they believe it to be with little recourse for change, and holds the simple hope of making their own corner of it more comfortable and secure.

5.2.4 Working to secure their futures?

With the students placing such high value on the stability of graduate life, it could be expected that they would be actively working towards ensuring they left university with the best possible range of outcomes: framing themselves within a competitive graduate job market and perhaps regarding other students on their course as competitors. Some of the students understood that getting higher grades would help with their employment opportunities, but the general sense was that having a 2:1 was good enough – as William (HRG) said, employers ‘won’t look down’ on a 2:1. The insinuation being that anything less than a 2:1 would be disappointing, as explored in Chapter One.

However, this desire for a good degree classification could not be reduced to its employment advantages. Many of the students simply wanted to perform to the best of their abilities, suggesting that a sense of personal fulfilment and achievement were equally, if not more, important than having a competitive edge. As Valerie (HP92) put it, there was ‘no point in aiming low’.

The students were all aware that they would have to work hard to get a good degree classification, though this was expressed to varying extents. The apparent bravado of a student like Rupert (CSRG) who did not ‘expect to learn much’ (see page 170) was at odds with one of the predominant discourses of higher education, that of intellectual exploration. Having examined the course

modules before arriving at the RG University, Rupert was secure in feeling that his degree would not be too intellectually challenging. It was not that he expected to not work hard at his degree, but rather that he did not expect to be challenged by any new learning that would take him out of his subject-knowledge comfort zone and risk his performance on the course. Rupert was arguably making a calculated choice, which he believed held very little risk: as he felt he already had sufficient subject-knowledge, having this confirmed through academic credentials would give him an advantage over those who did not have a similar form of recognised proof. In Rupert's case, higher education as a practice of the self was about being an 'entrepreneur of [his] possibilities' (Mirowski, 2013: 208. See Chapter One.), and not an active and critical student.

While in their personal statements the students presented themselves as ideal potential students who would rise to the challenge of university study, these confident selves appeared quite different to the selves presented in the interviews. Isabelle's (HRG) personal statement boasted that:

balancing schoolwork, homework, sport and music is something that I have managed very well due to my organisational and time management skills. I am confident that my determination to succeed together with my love of history will enable me to flourish in a university environment.

But, when asked in the interview to describe herself as a student she simply said that she was:

kind of average. I try and study but then sometimes if there are people in the kitchen and I talk to them instead. Then I'll be up until about half 11 or something doing the work I should have done.

The disparity between Isabelle's statement and this other, more candid reflection on her self provides a useful example of how ideal types rarely match the actual. It also demonstrates how much influence different discourses can have on individuals: the practice of answering questions for the research interview guided Isabelle to give a different – and possibly more honest – account of her self than the one presented following the various UCAS guidance on writing the personal statement. The statement as a practice of the self made Isabelle appear within the model of an ideal neoliberal student: an already complete package of sellable skills. However, it became clear through her interviews that she instead saw higher education as a practice of the self that would help her to gain not simply subject knowledge, but self-knowledge through an understanding of what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be.

In terms of actively working to improve their *employability*, the computer science students had more definite ideas of how they would achieve this. All said they felt the 'year-in-industry' component of their course (offered at both the RG and P92 universities) would greatly improve their employment prospects. This was the main activity they were relying on to increase their employability, and it was one organised by the universities, not the students:

I heard that it was a good option if the company likes you you're more likely to get a job there when you finish, so I thought that's a good option. (Jenny, CSRG)

I also chose my course so that I would have a year-in-industry in my third year so I would actually go forward and work and gain some experience before I would actually graduate. (Fred, CSRG)

The competitive drive here was by the university to give their students an edge in the graduate job market. For the students, the active work they engaged in towards this was limited to choosing a university that offered this year-in-industry opportunity, effectively a 'pre-packaged' work experience programme with the majority of risk associated with finding a meaningful work placement – liaising with companies, negotiating pay, agreeing a job description – taken out of their hands.

Other students had set out to find part-time work, citing the need for experience and 'building a CV' (William, HRG) rather than money. Ginny (HP92) was looking for work and, while she originally 'didn't really want to just get a shop job, [as] that wouldn't add to my CV', she was gradually realising that 'you don't really have much of a choice [around where you can work]'. Anne (HP92) likewise did not need a job financially, but felt having one whilst studying 'would look better on my CV that I've had the experience'. She felt it would be good to demonstrate she was able to handle the pressures of university whilst holding down a job. The students' sense of why having part-time work whilst studying would 'look better' on their CVs was vague. As with the personal statements, and the focus there on generic skills, there was a general feeling that part-time work was something they *ought* to be doing, or at least thinking about. The position of CVs and the personal statement as technologies of the self was explored in the last chapter: what is of interest here is how they form part of a broader practice of the self, as the students actively reflected that they should be pursuing part-time work in order to become 'better'. This was one of the clearer examples of everyday neoliberalism in the students' reflections: a vague idea of needing to stand out

in a competition – in this case for graduate jobs – as something they should be thinking about and working towards. Perhaps significantly, they did not indicate any critical attitude towards this.

In an increasingly competitive graduate job market, the students may have also been mindful of other students' employability, but this was not the case. I questioned whether they thought they would begin to see each other as competitors, even in their first year. The computer science students in both universities expressed a sense of camaraderie, helping each other out and sharing solutions for problems. As Danny (CSP92) explained, 'we're all like one big team trying to help each other out, everyone does it', though there was some expectation that this might change as the course progressed, and graduation drew closer. Martin (CSP92) echoed these sentiments:

I mean, there is going to come a point on this course where you're going to have to go, 'right, it's lone wolf time, you're going to have to work on your own, it's become a competition'. But now, when you've just started and you're trying to meet new people, you are going to try and help.

While the computer science students did not see their classmates as competitors, they did have a sense of a broader field of competition from graduates of other universities:

There's so much competition nowadays. You have to get the best grades to make sure they look at your CV, and if someone has really good grades and not that much experience, they'll look at my grades and I've got some experience, they're going to pick him over me because he's got the better grades. (Danny, CSP92)

There was more of a sense of competition from the history students, though this was expressed as a concern that they were not performing as well as their

peers rather than one-upmanship. In the group interviews the students would often begin talking about how they had found their latest assessment, acknowledging that this comparison was something they would often silently do:

I was in a seminar for [an] essay I handed in the next day, and I just felt when people are discussing it, I felt I'd just done everything wrong and I got really freaked out. (Lisa, HRG)

Richard (HP92) also compared his performance to other students, though in his case the comparison sparked resentment, not anxiety:

It does annoy me, especially when you get ones that come in hungover, and you're like 'you've not done the reading, you smell like a brewery'. [...] 'Cos it always happens were regardless how hard you work, some idiot who doesn't actually do things will hand it in and still score better than you.

These anxieties and frustrations betrayed a sense of wanting to perform as well as, if not better than, course peers, though none of the history students equated this with wanting to gain an advantage when it came to looking for graduate jobs. There was a different narrative guiding their actions and reflections: the desire for a sense of pride and achievement.

5.3 Student debt

The final issue is whether, and how, the students understood higher education as an investment in monetary terms. The narrative of higher education policy expects students to be conscious of cost of their education, both of the fees they will pay and their likely returns on their investment.

5.3.1 Attitudes to student debt

The students displayed a relaxed attitude towards their student loan debt.

Isabelle (HRG) reflected that ‘I’m not really worried about it, ‘cos I know that you don’t have to pay it back until you earn a certain amount of money’; while Martin (CSP92) explained:

I haven’t given it a second thought to be honest, I probably will when [they say] ‘oh you have to pay back this 40 grand’. But in all honesty I haven’t given it a thought.

The students frequently said that they were not concerned because, as they understood it, they would not have to start paying back their student loans until they were earning at least £21,000. Few had actually researched the terms of the loan, so it was taken with an element of faith that the situation was as they believed. As Bradley (HP92) understood it, ‘if I don’t earn enough money then I’m not going to have to pay them back’. Sam (CSP92) was similarly relaxed about the terms of repayment: ‘I’ll deal with it then in the future whenever I’m able to, especially because the money doesn’t go out until I’m making a certain amount which I’m fine with.’ When I explained that the terms of the loan repayments could change there was a sense of incredibility from some students, with Loui (CSP92) remarking: ‘that’s not good then! I’d be pretty unhappy if they changed that, it should be exactly what you agreed to.’

Their ignorance of the possibility that the terms of the loan could change was consistent with the students’ views about them, particularly that there was a difference between a student loan and a ‘regular loan’. As Rupert (CSRG) suggested: ‘the way that they collect [the student loan] back, it’s not that

crippling as a regular loan. [...] I just don't think it should it is something to be concerned about. It won't come back and bite you.' In his study of attitudes towards debt, Ellis (2014) found that students understood their student loan debt differently to bank debt, a situation that was also evident in this study.

Going beyond simple acceptance, Damian (CSRG) felt the current system was 'fair' as 'I've made a loan, I'll pay it back and yeah I actually don't care about it'. He found the system surprising, not because it was based on loans, but because the terms were so, in his opinion, favourable:

I came to understand that if I don't make more than £2,000 or so a month they will not tax it and in thirty years or so they'll repay the loan.

Loui (CSP92), Anne (HP92) and Valerie (HP92) also suggested that the automatic repayments were one of the reasons why they were not worried about taking on the debt. Anne, who 'researched everything' about the student loans to make sure she understood them, had concluded that:

If I'm earning a teacher's salary I think I start on £22,000 I shouldn't miss it, because obviously I haven't had that big income anyway. So I shouldn't miss it: what you don't have you don't miss.

Richard (HP92) brought together the key themes expressed by the other students. While he 'absolutely despise[d] debt' because he did not like the idea of being beholden to someone else, he viewed the student debt as being very different. For him, the difference was that:

with the normal student debts, that is factored in once you start getting paid, it's not like you're losing money because that money was never yours to begin with. And that to me seems like the kind of debt I can manage, 'cos I don't need to directly go about paying anything, it's just

going out of what I'd be getting anyway. [...] The difference is, if I got into a regular debt once I'm out of university, even if I couldn't get a job I'd still have to pay it off directly and find some way to do that, without a job, whereas the other one is only once you get into a job.

However, it was by no means the case that the students had always been so untroubled by the idea of taking on their student debt. Many had initially balked at the idea of being in debt for the rest of their lives, but said that further information and research had put their minds to ease over the situation. Bradley (HP92), for example, 'used to think it was going to costs loads, but then I found out about how the loans work and I wasn't too worried about it'. Applying for her student finance was a 'scary moment' for Rachel (CSP92), as she felt 'as though all this money was just given to me and being paid for at once', but having the repayment system explained 'calmed [her] thoughts'.

The students who did not understand how the student loan system operated often made assumptions based on their knowledge of conventional bank loans. For example, Anne was under the impression she could have been denied a student loan, 'cause I've never had any credit history so I was thinking well will that go against it?' Credit history is not considered in student loans, but this is again a small insight into some of the confusion between the conventions of a bank loan, and the State funded student loan system.

Few of the students spoke about any similarities between the loan system and a tax, though of those who did the comparison had helped them to understand that the student debt was not akin to bank debt. Lisa (HRG) explained that she had initially been put off going to university by the idea of being in over

£40,000's worth of debt 'for the rest of your life', until a teacher had told her to 'just think of it as a bit of extra tax, think of it as a tax for your degree. So [now] it doesn't bother me'.

5.3.2 Other financial considerations

Of the 20 first years interviews only six had a student overdraft, a smaller ratio to the 43% of students who rely on one nationally (Save the Student, 2016).

For those students who did take an overdraft, they presented it as a safety net, rather than 'free money'. There was also a difference between the students who received grants and bursaries, and those who did not. This was especially noticeable on the RG history course, where the students came from the most diverse backgrounds and, accordingly, had diverse financial experiences.

While Isabelle (HRG) was 'being as careful as I can with spending' because she did not receive 'any grants', Darcey (HRG) received a grant and a bursary, and saw this as 'free money'.

An interesting insight into how the students perceived paying for university as their own responsibility came from the students who had purposefully saved for university. This is consistent with the finding that 44% of students now report using savings to help finance themselves through university (Save the Student, 2016). Katherine (HRG) began saving in Year 11 'when I was working, I was more saving towards going to uni 'cos I knew I wasn't going to get a lot of money to live off'. Katherine knew the amount she would receive for her maintenance loan would not cover her basic costs of living whilst at university: 'I've got about £50 spare for the whole year when you take out my accommodation costs, so I literally just had to live off my savings'. Other

students who had saved money for university echoed this. Patrick (CSRG) only received a small amount from his maintenance loan, so he had also ‘worked full time over summer: I’ve managed to save some money up’. The students did not consider spending these savings on their tuition fees to offset some of their future debt, but rather for the immediate costs of getting through university. There was neither the time nor data to look into this further, but the motivations of the student savers presented some interesting questions for further study.

5.3.3 Thoughts on ‘paying nine grand’

None of the students spoke about ‘paying nine grand’ until they were directly asked about it. Then, their responses were very different to their nonchalant attitudes towards their student loans. There was no discernible difference in attitude across the courses or universities, but there was between students’ backgrounds.

Of all the participants, William (HRG) was the outlier, as his parents had paid his tuition fees for him. He still had the debt of his maintenance loans, but this was considerably less than most of his peers. William’s approach to higher education was the most consumer-orientated. After explaining that the idea of being in debt had bothered him until his parents had said they would pay his fees, he mused:

What are we paying nine grand for? [...] I mean at the end of the day I’m not sure what we pay for, and it’s kinda impossible to find out directly where your money goes. But if I’m getting a good education and I’m getting a good degree and I’ll be more employable then in the long term I think it’s worth what I pay for. And it is what it is: everyone

else is in the same position. It's not like it's just attacking me. It's everyone. So suck it up. There's worse things in the world.

Here he shows the tension that was characteristic of most of the students' responses: although he was angry about the fees, and questioned what they actually paid for, in the end he accepted them in order to enter into the graduate class.

In questioning directly where his money went, William was joined only by Martin (CSP92). The other students seemed to believe it was either simply to lecturers - 'I think it makes me want to go to lectures more because I know that I'm paying nine grand to go to lectures' (Darcy, HRG) – or understood that it covered access into *academia*, though work was still required:

I think some people don't understand that obviously you don't learn everything in your lectures, you have to do a lot of independent work, so they're like, 'what are we paying nine grand for, I'm only there for like 11 hours a week or something?' I think we probably don't understand that it's not just about that, you have the facilities as well and you have to do the work yourself. (Ginny, HP92)

While all of the students accepted the situation of the fees, some reported taking more active steps to resist them. Darcey 'signed quite a lot of petitions to get tuition fees back down' and it had 'definitely influenced the way that I voted in the elections'. Isabelle found unfairness in how steeply the fees had increased in just one year, while for Lisa (HRG) the rise in fees 'still does make me angry and it would be great if we didn't have to pay, but that's the way [it is]'.

With the exception then of William none of the students characterised their university education as something they were buying. But some – particularly

the male students – did refer to their education as an investment, seen in Box Six below. It would be interesting to explore in further research whether this gender difference is more widespread and, if so, why?

Box Six: Framing higher education as an investment

It's true in the end, it is an investment, you buy it, you basically buy your education and you'll be able to work in better paying jobs and so on. (Damien, CSRG)

I think it's made people a bit more wary sort of thing about coming to university 'cos they think it's a massive investment but really it's not too much 'cos you don't have to worry about it till after. (Bradley, HP92)

It's not something I think I'll particularly notice, I don't think it feels like a debt 'cos at the end of it you come out with a degree, and your degree is worth that much more in thousands of pounds a month or a year or whatever, so, I think it's an investment more than anything. (Patrick, CSRG)

5.4 Conclusion

The students presented narratives where their choice to study at university was influenced by economic reasoning, but not as the student consumers. Rather, theirs was a hopeful model that required a certain amount of optimism – that they had made the right choice of where and what to study, and that they would get a 'good job' at the end of their degree. The financial aspect of this hope was felt to be favourable as they would not have to pay back the large amount of money owed if the future did not turn out as they imagined. If it did go to plan, they were all confident that they would not 'miss' the amount paid for their student loan.

But there was another side of the students' hopes for the future that saw university as the means of either 'bettering' their social position, or at least maintaining it. The most striking aspect of this, seen in all of the students' narratives, was the perception that gaining a university degree would guarantee a more comfortable lifestyle. The idea of comfort and stability gave a new dimension to the idea of an *economic rationale* for going to university: the students wanted a comfortable lifestyle, equating this to a secure job.

There was little difference in the attitudes of the students across course and university. The computer science students seemingly had a better defined idea of the type of job they wished to have after university, while the history students – especially those from the RG – were less sure of what they wanted to do. The key point that made a career desirable across both institutions and courses was that it would involve work they enjoyed doing. In hoping for enjoyment in work, and comfort in life, these students were far from embracing the narrative of an ambitious, flexible entrepreneurs-of-the-self expected in the neoliberal narrative and its critiques.

The one prevalent difference between the groups directly related to the third research question (see page 10), and concerned how the students at the different universities saw both themselves and their institution. The RG students did not actively *look down* on the P92, but it was simply not on their radar. They expected to work harder as they were at the 'better' university, and understood that their employment prospects would be improved by being a Russell Group graduate. The P92 students, on the other hand, either dismissed the possibility of studying at the RG outright, knowing that their

grades would not be high enough, or adopted a narrative of either rejecting the apparent worth of a Russell Group degree, or felt a sense of shame in not having performed well enough to get into such an institution. Regardless of their attitude towards it, it was evident that these Post-92 students thought about and reflected on Russell Group institutions more than their Russell Group counterparts thought about Post-92 institutions.

All of the students' narratives - even those of students not at their first choice university - reflected an element of hopefulness that the next three to four years would set them on the path to achieving the stable life they evidently desired. What remains to be seen now is whether the students at the other end of the university experience remained as hopeful or if, with hindsight, they would reconsider their earlier choices. This shall be addressed in the final analysis chapter.

Chapter Six

Graduating students: facing the future and reflecting on the past

This final analysis chapter will conclude the student journey, examining the interview and social network data collected from students finishing their degrees at the two universities. I present the data in relation to the ideas outlined in Chapter One and Two, questioning whether the students' experiences of university encouraged them to conform to a neoliberal model. As with the first year students, these students' narratives will at times support, and other times contest, this presumption.

The first section examines the students' various experiences of university, from why they chose to study a particular subject at a particular university, to different aspects of the students' experiences, including their identities as learners, balancing part-time work, and their academic performance. In the second section I look at the students' hopes for the future, and how their imagined futures as students compared to their experiences as new graduates. The third section examines the students' attitudes towards the financial aspect of their university experience: their student loans and debts, and whether at the end of their university experience they considered their debt a financial burden. The fourth section explores the idea that higher education is a *process of becoming* and how the students developed into different types of subjects as they encountered different narratives and practices of higher education. The final section will examine how the students transformed these

experiences into 'employable' skills in their online self-presentations, and the extent to which they rejected this practice.

6.1 Reflecting on the past

The graduating students' memories of applying to university were less immediate than the first years', but reflecting back on their experience of university gave them the opportunity to either affirm the choices their younger selves had made, or to reconsider them with the benefit of hindsight. The experiences of the two cohorts of student cannot be directly compared, but by asking the students at the end of their degrees to reflect back on their expectations of university, I hope to offer a better understanding of the nature of the student experience.

The first stage of reflecting on their experiences was remembering how and why they came to be at their particular universities and on their courses. These students began university in the 2012/13 academic year, just as the £9,000 tuition fees came into effect. For them, this higher fee band was still the exception, rather than the norm it had become for the first years. However, as the students all understood the *need* to go to university in order to access the professional classes, they accepted the fees as something they needed to pay in order to attend university (see section 6.3).

The RG students had always expected to go to university. Rhiannon (HRG) characterised this general feeling, seeing university 'as a rite of passage nowadays', which was required in order to get a *good* job. But, as she explained, it was also a key stage of growing up: 'I wanted to have my own

life'. For Greg (CSRG), going to university was part of his 'plan for life: secondary school, sixth form, university and then job. I've never seen anything other'. University was a vital step in this plan 'because you just can't get a decent job: you need university to get a good job now'. The idea of university as a 'rite of passage' or 'plan for life' suggests that although the students' individual choices may have been self-steering, they were still influenced by social narratives and expectations that left them little choice but to go to university.

This was not the case for the P92 students: three of the four had never expected to attend university. Dave (HP92), John (CSP92) and Kevin (CSP92) all left school with the intention of going straight into work, but various life experiences led them into higher education. In their narratives there are echoes of first year Anne's account. Dave entered university through an access course. Like the RG students, he explained that university was seen as the 'natural progression' in his school, but in breaking with this expectation he developed something akin to pariah status:

I remember when I told my head of sixth form that I was not going to university I was blackened among the common room, as if 'what's the point in being here then?'

Dave went against this expectation because at the time he was earning what he considered to be a good wage at McDonalds, and did not see the point in continuing in education. He soon came to regret that decision. While dating a woman who was at university, Dave began to question whether his minimum wage job was a viable long-term option. He reflected that the wage his 18-

year-old self was earning was ‘not good when you’re 25, [and] it’s certainly not good when you’re 30. So I thought I need to do something better with my life’.

John also adopted this ‘something better’ narrative. Entering university at 24, he had also compared his future prospects to those of his student partner’s. Experiencing life as a *student Other* had made him realise that his future career options were limited by not being a university graduate:

You realise you’re not going to get nowhere working in Asda for the rest of your life, so I had to do something about it. It was just the more mature I got the more I realised I’m going to have to get a degree.

John and Dave’s decisions to go to university arguably involved more self-steering than if they had simply followed the HE-orientated expectations of their schools⁵¹. Kevin’s experience was different. He was one of the few students who did not have any expectation of going to university placed on them even at school. A first generation student, but also a pupil at ‘a naughty school’, he claimed to be the first person from his school to go to university in over a decade. He said his school peers were now mostly in prison.

Kevin left school with a handful of GCSEs. It was the Job Centre that sent him to FE college to gain more qualifications: a situation that appears to frame academic credentials firmly as a means of increasing his human capital.

Coming from a different social sphere gave Kevin a sense of otherness at

⁵¹ John is still with his partner: they moved in together during his first year. She completed her university studies and got a full-time graduate level job, and supported him through his final year of university. Dave met a new partner the year before he started university and began living with her. He explained that as she had no GCSEs he had become the budding professional in the relationship, with implications that can be seen throughout his student narrative.

university, as well as feeling he was bettering himself through it. This was a position implied throughout his interviews and reinforced through his social media accounts. In announcing on *Facebook* that he had a place at the P92, Kevin shared a picture of his confirmation email, with the caption: ‘I h4v wurkd so h4rd on mi 3n9alish dis yr 2 g3t int4 un4iversurty nd it haz p4yed ov lol’⁵². This self-deprecation reinforced the apparent strangeness to Kevin that he would be doing what no one *expected* of him: attending university.

6.1.1 Deciding where and what to study

All of the P92 students said the main attraction of their university was the location, as it allowed them to save money by living at home, while remaining close to family and partners. The four RG students were all attracted to their institution’s perceived prestige as a member of the Russell Group: it was generally understood to be ‘a good university’ (Rhiannon, HRG). The nature of this status was different depending on what the students valued from education. Greg (CSRG), who was driven by improving his employment prospects, gave an instrumental reason for the RG being a ‘good’ university:

[I] wanted somewhere that had a good name. I didn’t want to get a degree and put it on a CV, for employers to say ‘oh this university is rubbish’. I wanted somewhere that was a good, strong thing on your CV.

But for Roxanne (CSRG) the appeal of the RG was that it was not career focused in the way she imagined the P92 would be. She said: ‘I didn’t want to go to P92, and [the RG] is a very good university’. Her judgement of what was

⁵² I have worked so hard on my English this year to get into university and it has paid off (laugh out loud).

a 'good university' lay in reputation – 'I'd always wanted to go to like a really well known university' – while she felt the P92 was 'more for kind of getting you out into the world of work as quick as they can'. Roxanne associated her institution's higher status with its focus on 'theoretical knowledge', rather than getting students ready for 'world of work'. Valuing this distance from the necessity of work is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of class *distinctions*.

The RG students had the benefit of a social world prior to university that understood the distinctions of the HE sector: both Selina's (HRG) and Rhiannon's (HRG) parents told them which universities were 'good' and which were 'former Polytechnics', the implication being that the two terms were incompatible. The P92 students did not have comparable frames of reference. First generation Kevin (CSP92) said he did not even know that the local RG University existed until 'I came here and heard all the students shouting about it on a night out'.

Like the first years, these eight students wanted to study subjects they were interested in, and felt they were good at. However, more than the first years, their narratives presented revised and limited choices. These differences were clearly divided by the type university the students were at. The RG students had all chosen subjects they had performed well in and 'really enjoyed' (Rhiannon) at school. Greg (CSR92) additionally linked his subject choice to employment, as he 'want[ed] a job that's more of a hobby'. In contrast, all of the P92 students had had to revise their subject choice at some stage during their education. Dave (HP92) and John (CSP92) had initially wanted to go

into careers based around the law, before different circumstances led them to history and computer science; Colleen (HP92) began university as a sound technology student before changing to history; Kevin (CSP92) had wanted to be a 'labourer'. Colleen's decision to study sound technology followed the same logic as most of the other students: audio technology had been a hobby and she believed studying it at university would lead to an interesting career. However, her experience of the department and her fellow students quickly put an end that enjoyment. She changed course to history: 'one of the best decisions of my life I've ever made'. Dave also revised his subject choice, although in his case before he arrived at university. Initially he wanted to study law, but had not enjoyed the subject on his access course. However, having 'forked out just under three grand on this access course' he felt he 'need[ed] to do something with it'. He explained that it was 'fortunate' he had started to enjoy history 'otherwise I'd have probably ended up doing a course I hated just so I didn't feel like I'd wasted my own money and a year of my life'. Both Dave and Colleen recognised that if they did not enjoy the subject they were studying it was unlikely to lead to a fulfilling career afterwards.

While Colleen and Dave's course changing experiences came through education, John and Kevin re-evaluated their plans following different life experiences. John had always wanted to be a police officer, but discovered in college that a police caution he received when he was 12 barred him from applying. This left him to 're-evaluate everything'. He considered studying law, but after researching the various qualifications realised he 'couldn't get that, so that was when I decided the next best thing I'm good at is computers'. Kevin's decision to study computer science was also a process of forced

elimination rather than active choice. Kevin has dyspraxia and realised during his high school work experience that he ‘couldn’t do what normal people do’. His school offered ‘courses like brick laying and joinery’ but Kevin’s motor-mobility skills meant he could not do manual work. Instead, he was pushed towards IT. He said simply:

I’m in uni because of my disability. [...] That’s why I’m in university because I am so bad at my hands I had to take the education approach rather than the labouring approach.

The students’ reflections of applying to university demonstrate how these choices are influenced by various other experiences in education and their broader lives. Their choices were guided by reflections on what they broadly hoped to achieve in life, rather than being narrowly focused, economically rational decisions. While some decisions appear instrumental – Greg’s (CSRG) desire for a good name on his CV; John and Dave’s recognition of the need for a university degree to access a better life – there was also a strong hope for enjoyment.

6.1.2 The students’ experiences

Having arrived at university the first generation students reflected that it was not what they had expected. Both Kevin (CSP92) and Dave (HP92) had imagined an ‘American college campus’ (Dave), with:

lecturers with big massive weird personalities and all mental people all around and parties all the time [...] It’s more sitting in the library all night and doing work. It’s nothing like I thought it was going to be.
(Kevin)

With no personal experiences on which to base their expectations, Dave and Kevin drew on the image of university life they had from the entertainment media. The effect of the different information used by the students to formulate their expectations of university was seen in the other extreme with Greg (CSRG), who had only spoken about university to two former school friends, who had gone to Oxford and Cambridge. He observed: 'I think I expected it to be much harder and the competition harder'. Having expected to feel like a small fish in a big pond, Greg instead found his confidence boosted as he remained top of the class. This confidence shone through to his online presentation of his studies: Greg shared his exam results on *Facebook* during his first year – '97%, 79% and 74% in my exams! Pretty god damn happy with that!!!' – as well as claiming he had found an error in an exam question:

Lol just finished a 50 minute exam in 20 minutes and found an error in one of the questions causing it to have the complete wrong answer. Don't I feel like a nerd.

Although he apparently felt 'like a nerd' Greg placed a lot of emphasis on making academic performance look easy. For the other students studying was harder. John (CSP92) had 'expected [university] to be a lot easier'. Having always been 'good with a computer' he went into university with the:

mindset of, oh there's nothing they can teach me in uni, but then when I got to uni it was a big slap in the face. They're teaching you stuff you haven't got a clue about.

For Colleen (HP92), Selina (HRG) and Rhiannon (HRG), their learning experience eventually gave them new confidence. They all recognised that

higher education required them to be more self-reflective and active as learners, rather than relying on teachers. As Colleen said:

In university it's not the same as school because you have to go and say 'I need help', whereas in school if you're struggling the teacher will be like 'you're struggling'. [...] You've got to recognise that you're not doing as well.

These three students described themselves as perfectionists, but reflected that university had helped to accept that they would make mistakes and that they could learn from them. For Selina this was a productive process, as she 'learnt to be a lot kinder to myself and not have stupidly high standards and beat myself up if I couldn't reach them'.

As well as being concerned about their own personal academic performance, these students hoped that their course peers performed well too. Far from being competitive, enterprising individuals (see Chapter One) who saw each other as future competitors in the job market, the students instead displayed an active sense of camaraderie. These relationships were based on mutual support, which the students also acted out online. It was typical to see course friends writing about assignments on *Facebook*:

Colleen: 2 assignments down..3 to go...'
 Course friend: on a roll
 Colleen in reply: i'm having such a stress! i've finished and submitted the essay plan and the statement thank god! i can feel the reins of history slowly easing! haha :) You can do ittt! are you going the library tomorrowwww? :) xxx

Greg (CSRG) and Roxanne (CSRG) – who by her own admission rarely used *Facebook* – were both included in the update of another student, celebrating a successful group project at the end of their final year. A friend of Dave's

(HP92) shared with him a picture of Karl Marx, joking that Dave would be jealous that the friend was writing about one of his favourite writers.

However, these online performances were fleeting, and only took place around the times the students had assignments or exams due. The students more frequently posted updates and photos about old school friends, housemates, or family, suggesting that these relationships were something they preferred to share online.

This distinction between fellow students, friends, and family was not only confined to the students' online identities. Dave was explicit about not seeing course mates as traditional friends, but rather as 'colleagues'. While this distinction may sound instrumental, the reality was more nuanced. At the start of his second year Dave became a father. His partner did not have maternity pay, so Dave quickly became the family breadwinner, rather than simply a student: he saw university as a way of ensuring he could provide a stable future for his family, not an opportunity to socialise. Being the *breadwinner*, Dave worked full time as a manager in a bingo hall, while he was studying full time. He admitted that it was 'very hard' providing for his family, 'but it's got to be done because I've got bills to pay'. Dave was willing to put in the hard work, as 'it's something I need to get through for my better life at the end of it'. Unlike Roxanne (CSRG), who wanted to 'put off the world of work', Dave was forced into the workplace by necessity. This dichotomy of necessity and desire was seen across the students' experiences of working whilst studying. Of the eight students, three of the P92 students had jobs, while only Selina at the RG had a permanent part-time job. For these students, work was a necessity rather than a means of gaining new skills or

actively enhancing their CVs. It was not just Dave who found it difficult to balance work and studies: Colleen had to change jobs as the commute to work was impacting on her academic performance:

I was working in a bar and I struggled so much, such late nights and then I'd have to get up really early to travel to go to uni and then go back home. It was a nightmare.

Of those who did not work, John (CSP92) had the benefit of a partner who had already graduated and was working full-time, so was able to support him financially. Greg (CSRG), having done a year-in-industry, felt he had gained enough contacts, money and experience, and wanted to concentrate on his studies.

A constant theme throughout the students' narratives was the aim to graduate with a good degree. Like the first years, all of these students hoped to graduate with at least a 2:1 classification and wanted to perform well for their own sense of achievement. Greg commented:

I've always aimed for a first. If I was coming to university I might as well put the hours in and go for a first. I didn't want to come to uni and just aim for a 2:2.

A 2:2 classification was still seen as something to be avoided. Kevin (CSP92) said that on his course, the lecturers emphasised this point: 'they keep saying if you don't get at least a 2:1 you've basically wasted your time in uni, which is a bit worrying to hear'. This is a further example of the apparent *shame* in getting a 2:2. However, the idea that someone has not worked hard if they get a 2:2 was challenged in John's (CSP92) narrative. Although he was working hard to get a first in the hope that he could secure postgraduate funding, John

explained he had finished his second year with 59% overall – the upper end of a 2:2. The reason was:

I got married, so I missed a couple of weeks so I had to miss coursework. [...] I'd like to finish with a first, but being reasonable I think I'll probably finish with a 2:1 because I feel like I've missed too much now. But I wouldn't change it, I got married, so whether that means I finish with a 2:1 or 2:2, you know, I'm happy.

While John's second year 2:2 may look to some like a failure to work hard, it misses the larger life event. The *cruelty* of this is that employers, and other graduates, may not value these activities in the same way John does.

What is also missed when degrees are reduced to classifications is the pride felt in completing a degree. This was especially true for the first generation students. For them, the idea of being the first from their family to graduate, rather than simply getting into university, was a substantial achievement, both personally, and within the family. This achievement was played out in the students' wider social world through social media. Dave's brother and sister both posted updates on his graduation day congratulating him:

Dave's brother: So proud of my brother Dave, graduating with a 1st in his degree. Well done you deserve it after all the hard work.

While John's sister posted:

Would like to wish my amazing, intelligent, funny and gorgeous brother John my congratulations and good luck for graduating uni today. We are all so proud of u John and may ur future b bright and full of happiness. We knew u cud do it I am so proud of u. Love you so much and enjoy ur day xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

John's and his family's happiness at him graduating with a 2:1 was evident, and certainly well-deserved. But in missing out on the first class degree he was working towards, had he damaged his investment in himself? The neoliberal narrative does not allow for pauses or setbacks in an individual's accumulation of human capital – unless that pause can somehow be recast as an enterprising act. In the same way that Anne had to hide life experiences in her personal statement because they were not formative in the *right* way (Chapter Four), the narrative of neoliberalism would not consider John's wedding as a cause for celebration given the negative impact it had on his final grades.

6.2 Facing the future

Over the course of the interviews, the students had different opportunities to consider what they hoped for in the future. This was done just before graduation and six months after, to match the timescale used by the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. At both stages the students described immediate concerns as well as long-term hopes, and reflected on whether their undergraduate experiences had prepared them to face these futures. A common theme was the students' hopes and concerns for employment. Their long-term career hopes all involved professional jobs: the tables below show these hopes prior to graduation, and how the students would appear on a survey such as the DHLE after graduation, demonstrating how large-scale studies cannot show the individual stories behind generic categories.

Table 6.1: Students' hopes for what they would be doing after graduation

	RG	Post-1992	Total
Postgraduate study	3	2	5
Teacher training	-	2	2
Working full-time	1	-	1
Total	4	4	8

Table 6.2: Students' destinations six months following graduation

DHLE activity classification*	RG	Post-1992	Total
Engaged in full-time further study	2	1	3
Working full-time	1	1	2
Working part-time	-	1	1
Unemployed	1	1	2
Total	4	4	8

* Calculated from HESA definitions: destinations of leavers (2016b)

As Table 6.1 shows, prior to graduation almost all of the students had considered some form of postgraduate study, either a Master's degree or a postgraduate teaching qualification. Only Selina (HRG) did not consider postgraduate study, though she had thought about it earlier in the year before deciding 'it might be too much of [an] indulgence. As much as I'd love it, I need to earn money'.

The expansion of undergraduate education, coupled with slower growth in the number of graduate level jobs, has led to a new expectation that more students will consider postgraduate study to give them a competitive edge (Tholen, 2013; Wilby, 2013). Rhiannon (HRG) felt her combination of degrees would 'help me stand out: everyone has a degree nowadays'. Though she did not dismiss her undergraduate degree, Rhiannon saw it as a stepping-stone.

However, exploring the students' narratives, it would be wrong to assume that credentialism was their main motivation, though gaining an extra advantage in the employment market certainly played a part in most narratives. After graduation the students felt a level of security through their undergraduate degrees, but those working towards postgraduate qualifications believed it was this second degree that would take them beyond simply being stable into the type of lifestyle they hoped for.

Among the students considering postgraduate study⁵³, there was a notable threefold distinction between those who needed a postgraduate qualification for a specific career, such as teaching; those who believed it would help their job prospects, without postgraduate qualifications necessarily being a requirement of the job; and those who wished to continue studying out of interest. Colleen (HP92) and Rhiannon (HRG), hoped to do PhD research in areas they had found particularly enjoyable during their undergraduate studies. John (CSP92) and Dave (HP92) also hoped to become PhD candidates after doing a Master's degree, but neither could afford to: the female students had no family commitments and so could afford a period of precariousness as postgraduates. Rhiannon had decided to take a year out of her studies while she decided whether a Masters and PhD was what she really wanted to do: having no job six months after graduation she would be listed on the DHLE as unemployed, but in taking this time to reflect she had the 'indulgence' of choice - something Dave and John could not afford. Dave, who

⁵³ While the majority of these students were performing well academically – four eventually graduated with firsts, two with 2:1s, and one with a 2:2 – they had all considered postgraduate study at some stage of their studies, suggesting that it was not seen as dependent on grades.

eventually hoped to become an academic, devised a long-term plan that allowed him to continue supporting his family without having to place them in a precarious situation while he studied:

My sneaky-to-an-extent way of going about it is to get into a school and seeing if I can get the school to even part-fund my Masters and then hopefully after that I'll be able to get some sort of funding behind me to do a PhD at that stage.

The issue of funding postgraduate study was a major consideration for the students hoping to continue their education. As well as excluding those who could not afford it, it also influenced the approach of those undertaking postgraduate study, in different ways to how they remembered approaching their undergraduate studies. They felt that postgraduate study was a more serious financial consideration as they were spending their own money.

Rhiannon planned to take out a bank loan in order to fund her studies, while Colleen was using her savings. Greg (CSRG) had the benefit of being 'self-funded by my parents', who he would pay back once he started work. He was borrowing money, but on far more favourable terms than Rhiannon⁵⁴.

Colleen and Greg moved to different institutions for their postgraduate study, and in both cases moved up the presumed hierarchy of universities. Colleen moved from the P92 to a different Russell Group university. Interestingly, some of the differences in institutional habitus apparent in the students' undergraduate decisions were also evident in this next stage of university application. Colleen had grown more confident in her own academic ability

⁵⁴ Roxanne (CSRG) had opted to convert her undergraduate degree to an integrated masters, allowing her to continue funding her studies with her student finance loan.

and now wanted the more formally academic setting of a Russell Group institution:

[It's] not that it's not academic here [at the P92] but [the new Russell Group is] more, I dunno whether *professional* is the word but you kinda got that sort of vibe'.

Greg also wanted to improve his career prospects and had decided that moving to Cambridge for his Master's degree would give his CV more 'prestige'. Both students implied a difference in status between their previous institutions and the ones they hoped to study at. Colleen used 'professional' as a euphemism for this difference: Greg was more explicit. For him it was the higher status and prestige of Cambridge, rather than the postgraduate qualification, that was the main attraction:

I'd always said if I didn't get into Cambridge I'm not going to do a masters at the RG because I'm not really doing it for the Masters, I'm doing it for that extra step.

That 'extra step' he explained, was not just to 'put Cambridge on my CV' – a link between the symbolic capital of Cambridge and his own human capital – but also to access to a quality of education that he felt would be better than what was available at the RG:

[At Cambridge] rather than someone standing up and giving you a lecture – that anyone could stand at the front and read off some slides or have a bit of knowledge – there's a lot of back and forth: you're all sat round a big table and the lecturer will say tell me what you think about this, and then this huge group discussion and that's what I want. I want to get the information that the lecture spent all these years getting and get it out of them.

Greg's account is a striking example of how a student may view knowledge as a commodity to extract from higher education and the academics delivering it. His valuation of that commodity is based on a university's apparent prestige and an academic's reputation.

Roxanne (CSRG) was on the same course as Greg, but held a very different mindset. She had decided to extend her studies to postgraduate level, not so she could gain an edge in a competitive job market, but to delay employment. Describing herself as 'not a real world person', said she would 'like to do a PhD rather than go into the world of work, 'cause the world of work is scary'. This is quite the opposite of purposefully gaining additional education qualifications in order to advance one's human capital. For Roxanne, her university was a safe bubble away from 'the world of work'.

6.2.1 Concerns immediately following graduation

While most of the students saw postgraduate study as a way of improving their long-term employment prospects, half still had to face 'the world of work' and 'grow up' (Kevin, CSP92) after graduation. Selina (HRG) and Dave (HP92) had always planned for this, but this was not quite the case for the other students. Losing the relative security of their student status, the new graduates had to face a variety of different concerns after graduation. These concerns varied, but familiar themes still emerged, particularly the desire for stability.

After deciding to take a year out to consider whether she wanted to continue on to postgraduate study, Rhiannon (HRG) quickly realised that she did, but

too late to start in the academic year immediately after her graduation. This left her in a *limbo* year. For four months she worked in a cosmetics store, but when I spoke her for the six-month interview she had been ‘unemployed for three weeks’, as her temporary contract had ended. She was philosophical about her unemployment, partly because she already had a place on the RG’s postgraduate course for the next year, so knew her time being precarious would only be a ‘stint’:

I guess being unemployed and trying to find a job in the position I am now is something that I think everyone probably faces at least once in their life. And I’m not really an expensive person, I’ve saved quite a lot of money, so I’m not too worried. I should be fine.

Rhiannon was conscious however that this was not how her unemployed status would appear to others, so she had not created a professional *LinkedIn* profile because she had seen:

so many of my friends [making them] and they just had all these great things they’d done and I don’t want to put I’m unemployed at the moment. I’ll probably make one when I’m doing a postgrad ‘cos then I can make myself look really good.

In managing her online identity as a graduate, Rhiannon was consciously hiding her lived reality because she felt she had not matched up to the ‘great things’ her friends had done. Like the first years, it was not that she saw her peers as outright competitors, but she did worry about how she compared to them.

Selina (HRG) had also been looking ‘hard’ for jobs following graduation. She was conscious of needing to find a job, so as soon as she finished her degree, ‘the next day I started applying for jobs because I don’t want to end up with no

money'. Her concern with earning money did not come from wanting to be extravagant, but in desiring stability:

I don't want to be a burden to anybody. [...] I think that's kind of a large motivator is money, not because I particularly love money, but because I want to be able to like feed and shelter myself. I just don't want to have to worry.

Uncertainty and insecurity were a strong concern for Selina. This was tied to a desire not to be dependent on her parents and to keep the independence she had gained through university. She quickly found work as an administrator for 'a really small firm'. This was not what she had ever imagined she would be doing, but she found the security of a regular income and the ability to settle into her own adult life more attractive than finding a 'dream job'.

Also facing the need to work were John (CSP92) and Dave (HP92). John had hoped to begin teacher training, but life happened while he was making other plans: his partner became pregnant during his final year of study. Instead of teaching, John found himself unemployed after graduation with a young baby to care for. As one of the few students who updated his *LinkedIn* profile following graduation, John has now signalled himself as a:

hard working and determined graduate, recently completed Computer Studies at P92 [...] currently looking for an IT graduate job.

While he was still a student John had said that working as an IT technician would feel like he had wasted his degree because 'anyone could do it without a degree, whereas, you need a degree to teach'. It was a similar situation for Dave who, as the breadwinner, had to continue working part-time at the bingo hall while completing his teaching qualification: 'I do a 14-hour day [at the

hall] of a Sunday, and then I do two nights in the week. [...] It's needs must at the minute'. He reflected on how things may have been different if his daughter had not been born while he was completing his degree, saying that he would:

have had a lot more free time without a daughter. Just built up the funds to pay for my own masters. Plus I'd have got my loans. They wouldn't be going on gas and electricity and all that.

These students' hopes for their lives after graduation were disrupted at some stage of their university experience. John and Dave were constrained by family commitments, while for Selina it was the realities of post-graduation adult life that led her to alter her expectations. In all cases these students opted to work towards stability rather than 'the dream job'. Rhiannon, conversely, decided to endure a period of instability to work towards her 'dream' – but in having fewer commitments was in a better position to endure this than the others.

6.2.2 Imagining their long-term futures

The concern with stability became stronger as the students considered their long-term futures. As with the first years, they all hoped to have a job they enjoyed, but these students had more defined ideas of what type of jobs they would be. Before graduation Dave (HP92), John (CSP92), Colleen (HP92) and Rhiannon (HRG) all hoped to become university lecturers: Roxanne (CSRG) was also keen to undertake PhD study, though she was less sure what she wanted to do with the qualification. In the 2014/15 academic year there were 109,450 postgraduate research students in the UK (HESA, 2016c), compared to 1,391,705 undergraduate students (HESA, 2016a), so these five students

were – to some extent – exceptional in wishing to pursue a postgraduate research degree⁵⁵. In hoping to enter academia, the students offered glimpses of what they thought would make a job enjoyable. For Dave the appeal lay in being your ‘own boss’ and that:

to all intents and purposes you can look into and research whatever it is that you actually want to research in your life. They’ll pay for you to travel for it, they’ll pay for you do all this and that: quite appealing really, plus the wage.

Similarly, for Rhiannon and Colleen the appeal lay in working in a field they were interested in, while for John it was the opportunity to teach people who ‘actually wanted to be there’. This may be a somewhat romanticised view of academia, especially with the increasing amount of casualisation in the sector (Chakraborty and Weale, 2016). While this may concern academics, these students – whose previous experiences of work included fast food and retail – saw only the positive side of the profession.

Throughout the students’ narratives there was an active sense of self-work on their futures: they imagined who they hoped to be and the type of lifestyle attached to being that person. Greg (CSRG) gained this idea during his year-in-industry. He discovered that technician work was not what he wanted to do ‘for the next 40 years of my life’, and was eager to start his own business, explaining that he did not ‘want to work underneath someone’. This sense of self-worth was linked to Greg’s other hopes for the future. Of all the students, he was the most explicit about hoping to become ‘rich’, though his motives for

⁵⁵ This interest in postgraduate study may explain why these students were keen to take part in this study when many other students reaching the end of their degree said they were too busy.

this appeared not-so-much linked to lifestyle, as to self-image. At the same time, he wanted to remain 'middle class', rejecting the expectations he had of what being 'rich' meant:

I wouldn't like to get into the snobby upper class kind of thing, where I'm rich and I'm better than you. But something that would bring me a lot of pleasure is if I was there looking middle class, and you go somewhere that's really posh and upper class, and be like, 'oh sorry, it turns out I am richer than you'. Like wolf in sheep's clothing.

By contrast, Selina placed more value in family. She said that after graduation she had more time to 'think about what sort of direction I want to go in the longer term future', without the pressures of completing her final year. Away from the immediacies of university, she had decided that the 'heritage and cultural work' she had considered during her studies was incompatible with other aspects of adult life she valued: being close to her parental family, and buying a house. She explained: 'that's more important to me rather than getting the dream job, and I'm not sure what the dream job would be'.

There were no notable gendered differences in the students' hopes for the future. Neither Greg nor Rhiannon spoke in-depth about plans for future families, both focusing more on their immediate plans for postgraduate studies. It was a main consideration for Selina, Dave and John but as the latter two already had families of their own it is understandable that they would be at the forefront of their plans. Perhaps if these two male students did not already have families the difference would have been more pronounced.

Not surprisingly, the two students who did not have a fixed idea of what they wanted to do six months after graduation were also the two who said they

rarely thought about life after university. Roxanne and Kevin reached the end of their final year of undergraduate study without considering what came next. Faced with the future periods on his life-grid, Kevin said he had thought briefly about going into teaching, but only because it was something John was considering. He was not overly concerned about the future as he believed having a university degree would be enough to help him find a job, as ‘even just saying you’ve got a university education to an employer, it’s still better than going “I just went and got a job after high school”’. Roxanne had ‘always known I’d go to uni, and I’d never really thought of anything past then’. Like Kevin, she was also using her friends’ experiences to help guide her ideas of what she might like to do in the future:

Some of my friends have got jobs and you know they’re nice jobs and they’re getting paid but I think: “Oh my god that’s boring, that would bore me”. I don’t want to do something that’s boring.

Roxanne’s reluctance to picture her life after university appeared to stem from the fact that she had previously attempted to do this, and did not like the image she had conjured up. Work, she thought, was ‘all formal and people wear suits everyday [...] I think the thing about work that I especially wouldn’t like is not having a lot of holidays’. Roxanne’s imagined workplace shows the influence these imaginary scenarios can have in driving – or diverting – action. The students with a strong sense of the future they wanted were more active in working towards it, and saw a role for higher education in realising those futures. The students who had not considered the future instead saw university as an opportunity to put off the ‘real world’.

6.3 Student debt

Leaving university meant facing up to new financial commitments, and the common commitment across all of the students was the need to pay back their student loans. These students entered university just as the £9,000 fee band came into force, but they appeared to be less angry about the increase than the first years. Their acceptance came from a better understanding of the situation behind the change. As Dave (HP92) explained:

My understanding prior to going to university was that it's not that the university is getting any extra money, they've always got nine grand, it's just they don't get it anymore from the government so I've never really expected anything more because I'm paying more.

The irony of course is that universities still get their funding from the State, and there is now a larger debt owned by the State as a result of increasing fees. But as Dave points out, it was not the case that universities received additional money; it was simply a means of reallocating funding to rebalance the government's books. Nor was it the case that all of the students felt the increase in fee level was a bad one, as it was linked to an increase in the repayment threshold. Kevin (CSP92) singled this out as a benefit of the new system:

Even though you're paying back more, it's impacting your life less really isn't it? [Under the old system] I could have got nothing out of this course and worked in Primark for the rest of my life and I'd still be paying it back.

In the context of his fellow students' comments – particularly the first years – Kevin makes an important point: under the previous fee system, repayments started when a graduate earned £15,000 a year, and while there was less to

pay back, the impact of the repayments would have been felt more at that lower salary. The reason why so many of the students were now able to say that they only have to pay their loans back if their education improves their job prospects is because the threshold was raised.

But while the students were not angry about the increase in fees, it was only Greg (CSR92) who was not concerned about having student debt. He was confident he would never struggle to pay it back, painting a picture of his ‘worst case scenario’ where he would return to the company he did his year-in-industry with and ‘fall back onto a really well paid graduate job, and then [the repayments] will be a drop in the ocean compared to the pay’. Greg displayed a level of confidence missing in the other students, but given his life plan – to be self-employed, Cambridge educated and rich – this is not really surprising.

John (CSP92) was concerned about being in debt before he began his studies, but like Greg rationalised that the repayments would be so small, there was little need to worry about them, equating them to ‘only paying £40 [a month] – you spend more on take away, or coffee in a week’. Colleen (HP92) was likewise unconcerned about her student debts, similarly framing them to as ‘another bill’ to be paid:

Most people have [student debt] and it’s not the end of the world, it’s just one of those things. Most people just pay off, or if they never earn above whatever then they never pay it off and it just gets written off anyway, so it doesn’t really concern me too much. It’s like another bill to pay.

Colleen’s reference to ‘most people’ having a student loan offers an insight into the spheres of reference the students operate in when thinking about

their loans. It is not the case that ‘most people’ have a student loan (Student Loans Company, 2016). However, ‘most people’ in Colleen’s social circle did. This *everyday aspect* of the student loan was also evident in Rhiannon’s (HRG) narrative. She compared her experience of applying for her undergraduate student loan to applying for a bank loan to cover her Masters. She admitted that she ‘didn’t even think’ of the amount she would be taking on when applying for her undergraduate student finance. Describing the process she said:

You just sign a bit of paper and then you get handed all this money and you don’t really think about it. [...] It was so easy, as opposed to the Career and Development Loan which was quite difficult to do: I had to fill out a lot of forms, I had to sign all these agreements and terms and conditions. It feels like a bigger risk doing it.

As Rhiannon explained, the more complicated ordeal of applying for a bank loan, coupled with the stricter repayment terms, gave that debt a greater sense of seriousness.

While none of the students could say exactly how much student debt they were in, they all knew it was substantial, but preferred not to know exactly how substantial. Dave said it felt ‘horrible’ to have a debt of ‘60 grand or whatever I’ll be in’. He would have preferred to self-fund his studies, but as that was obviously not an option, he wanted to pay off his loan quickly as he felt being in debt was ‘a bit lousy’ and made him feel as if ‘I’m not pulling my weight: I’d rather get it all paid off and know that I funded this, it took me 30 years to fund it, but I done it’. It would be a point of pride for Dave to know he had paid for his education through his work. Disliking government ‘hand outs’ Dave saw his student loans as another example of these. Coming from a family

that had relied heavily on the Welfare State, for Dave the better life he hoped for meant the ability to survive off his own hard work alone.

Kevin, from a similar background, held a similar belief. Although he did not suggest paying for his education himself, he did suggest that the personal benefit of having a degree meant:

you're choosing to better your life by paying money. In an ideal world it would be nice if it was free, but you can't really say 'oh it should be', because you're improving your own life by doing it.

Both students' felt that the personal benefit of being university educated meant that there was some individual responsibility attached to its funding. Both suggested the case would be different for doctors and 'the roles that need to be filled for obvious public good' (Kevin), but for those setting out to better themselves, the onus was on the individual to fund it.

Selina (HRG) also did not like the idea of being in debt, but for her it was not a point of pride, but rather uncertainty. She was the only student who knew that the terms of the loans and repayments could change on the whim of the sitting government. This was a big source of concern for her as:

Because it's the government if they pass an Act of Parliament they can do whatever they wish: they can change the rate of interest, which they've done, and they can sell it off which they've tried to do. So essentially you've signed a contract but it's not even with a bank, they don't have to keep their word, which is very scary 'cos it's a lot of money.

That Selina was the only student who knew it was possible for a sitting government to change the terms of the loans may in some ways explain the

others students' lack of concern about their debts. In believing the repayment terms would also be favourable and manageable, the other students felt there was no real risk attached to having them.

6.4 A process of becoming

In Chapter One I suggested that university could be considered as a process of becoming, as students developed into different types of subjects based on their encounters with the different narratives and practices of higher education's 'arena of life'. These students, who were coming to the end of their university experience, presented an opportunity to test this idea.

Six months after graduation, the main benefit the students felt having a degree gave them was stability. As Colleen (HP92) said, she felt 'more secure [...] I always think if it all goes like wrong then at least I've got like a really good degree'. But it was not just having a degree that the students valued; it was the personal growth they had experienced at university. Selina (HRG) appreciated the 'transferable skills' – very much a term associated with neoliberal education – she gained through studying history. She explained that her administration job, though entirely unrelated to history, relied heavily on the skills she learnt through her studies:

It was [the] kind of soft skills [I'd learnt]: being able to work well in a team, being able to prioritise things and work by yourself, and learn new things quite quickly. I think that's what was important, not the fact that I did history.

Selina felt that these *soft skills* had given her an advantage over friends who had studied courses with 'more obvious transferable skills', such as languages,

who were still looking for work. But while all of the students reported gaining valuable skills, these were mostly *life* skills, rather than *employment* skills.

For Rhiannon (HRG), the most important thing she had gained from university was ‘learning about myself’:

I was so shy in first year. I feel like I wasn’t really true to myself a lot of the time, I was trying to be something I wasn’t. Now I feel so much more comfortable and confident in who I am.

Selina had also come to university ‘extremely shy’ and left ‘a much more confident person’. This new confidence did not simply manifest itself in how the students conducted themselves, but in how they thought about themselves. Colleen now had ‘confidence in my own skills’, while Dave’s (HP92) university experience changed his whole self-perception – from feeling like a ‘rubbish student in school’ to graduating from university with a first class degree and a sense of self-worth that made him feel on par with the academics in his department; university had given him a sense of pride. This is what the first years hoped university would provide them with, the opportunity to gain more confidence, not just socially but in their own self-identification. This is not necessarily the work of the enterprising self, at least not in human capital terms, but it is the work towards a state of happiness and self-knowledge that Foucault suggests is characteristic of a practice of the self (discussed in Chapter One).

This reflexive self is not formed in isolation: it is also a social self. The students all spoke of the social gains of university. Selina had ‘gained amazing friends and an amazing boyfriend’ while Colleen had made ‘friends for life’. Roxanne (CSRG) linked together her growing self-confidence with the new

social circle university had given her. On a course with a high proportion of male students, she found she had become more comfortable around ‘guys’, reflecting that:

I'd always been very shy around guys, I couldn't talk to them for toffee. But [being on the course] really boosted my confidence, knowing that not all guys are the idiots you met in school.

Roxanne's comment revealed another benefit of university: allowing students to move in social circles they felt they were better suited to. For example, John's (CSP92) 'big' gain of university was 'mates', saying that the people he'd met at university were a welcome change because:

I don't mean it to sound like nasty or anything, but, [university people] they're kind of on your level, you know what I mean? They know what you're talking about, they're easy to talk to.

Just as first year Loui (CSP92) had said he could not imagine dating someone who was not a university graduate – because being a graduate apparently ensured a similar level of intelligence – John's statement reveals some embarrassment about his own class strategy. As a first-generation student John had moved into new a social sphere through university and found he felt more comfortable in it. In valuing this new sphere, he was conscious that he was in some way rejecting his previous sphere. Dave recounted a similar experience. In finding themselves more at ease in academic settings, these two students had perhaps found that their habitus had, if not realigned, at least adjusted itself over the course of their time at university.

While it could be argued that the students would have grown in confidence even if they had not attended university, as Kevin (CSP92) suggested, it would

have been a different type of transformation, one he believed would not have been as beneficial:

[The benefits of university are] more about life than the course that I'm on. It feels like I've learnt more about how the world works [...] I don't think I would have grown up as much as I did if I hadn't been to uni, if I had just gone straight into a job, I don't think I'd have been able to cope as much.

For Kevin, the transformation was from a 'naughty school' pupil with no expectations of going into higher education, to becoming a university graduate. The environment of university allowed him to *grow up*, but without some of the more immediate pressures of adult life. Seen in this way the students' experiences can be seen as the process of *becoming* explored in Chapter One.

6.5 Presenting their experiences

Ideally, seeing how the students' reduced their university experiences to the human capital gains would involve tracking job applications, but that was beyond the scope of the research. Instead, I examined the students' *LinkedIn* profiles, as an example of a technology of the self through which the students could present the economic and employment benefits of their university studies to potential employers.

While creating a *LinkedIn* profile is commonly recommended by university careers advice (Lancaster University, 2014), only five of the eight students had

created a profile⁵⁶. Of these five, only Greg directly listed his university studies as valuable ‘experience’, writing:

Currently a student at the RG studying Computer Science. During my time here there i<sic> have learnt languages including: Java, C, SQL, Prolog, HTML, CSS and had a little experience with assembly code. I have also covered modules like Software Engineering, Logic, Formal Methods, Algorithms, Internet Principles and Group Software Engineering project.

This, however, is only a list of standardised computing knowledge and offers no real insights into Greg’s university education. In all other cases the students listed their work experiences rather than educational experiences, with examples ranging from simple dates and positions (John), to more developed accounts of the responsibilities their work entailed. Dave (HP92) provided the most detailed summaries:

My role at Gala Bingo includes all aspects of the business including but not limited to front of house, bar, diner, mainstage bingo calling and treasury. During my time at Gala I have also attended multiple courses to develop my skills in customer interaction.

These students’ *LinkedIn* profiles did not prove as rich a data source as the first years’ UCAS personal statements. There could be multiple reasons for this, though I would suggest that the necessity of the personal statements, coupled with the advice the applicants receive in writing them, explains why those written presentations of the self were more common and informative. Without the absolute need to have a *LinkedIn* profile, or guidance on how best to write one, these students did not fully adopt this method of self-presentation and promotion. In a different group of students, these results

⁵⁶ Dave, Colleen, Greg, Selina and John.

might have been more varied, but for my own research, the lack of an active, online promotional self suggests that the students either did not value this medium as a form networking and enhancing their employment prospects, or perhaps simply gave it no thought at all.

6.6 Conclusion

These students have now come to the end of their university journey. There was an economic rationale for some of their decisions around entering university, and this was differentiated between the RG and the P92 students. The P92 students, especially those who had experienced life without a university degree, understood the financial benefits that could come from being a university graduate, though this was again tied to a desire to be stable and comfortable, rather than 'rich'.

In navigating university the students underwent a process of self-reflection and self-work. It was the changes to their selves this process wrought that the students valued as one of the main benefits of university. This 'personal growth' became tied to the image that they had of themselves and their hopes for their futures as university graduates.

The students with the strongest sense of how being a university graduate would help them in the future were those who had engaged actively in reflexive thinking, who had an idea of what they wanted to achieve, and what they needed to do in order to realise this. In the majority of cases this ideal future involved a comfortable family life and an engaging job, rather than financial success. In some cases the steps required to achieve this involved a

period of precariousness, but those students were either willing to – or needed to – endure this for what they hoped would be long-term stability.

Chapter Seven

Concluding discussions

In the past three chapters I have looked into the experiences of 28 students at two universities, over two courses. There are millions of other students, each with their own experiences of higher education, but I hope that I have been able to illustrate some aspects of the contemporary student experience.

The research began with three, primary research questions:

1. How do contemporary students construct narratives around choosing their university and course, and the extent to which they reflect on that choice as being influenced by economic rationales, concerns about student debt, and investing in their human capital?
1. How far are students' reflections on their experiences of university influenced by their broader hopes and concerns for the future, and experiences in their pasts?
2. Whether, and if so how, higher education as an arena of life attempts to engineer students into enterprising neoliberal subjects – *entrepreneurs of the self* – and whether students actively embrace or reject this subject position?

These questions were addressed through a variety of means: an exploration of theories of the construction of the self; an analysis of the effects of the neoliberal narrative on higher education; and a methodology that attempted to capture different aspects of students' experiences of this neoliberal higher education field. Across the interviews with the students five broad themes emerged: the students chose to study their subjects because they enjoyed them, and hoped that doing this would lead to a fulfilling career; they believed

having a university degree was essential to finding an enjoyable job and having a stable future; they were generally nonchalant about their student debts, as they believed they would not have to start paying them back until they were earning enough to make going to university financially worthwhile; they all saw university as an opportunity for personal growth; and for the disadvantaged students, going to university was part of a process of socially 'bettering' themselves.

The students saw university as an act of becoming, a rite of passage into adult life, even those who came from backgrounds where university study was not the norm. However, the purpose and destination of this passage differed depending on the students' starting point: for some university was necessary in order to maintain their social position; others believed it was necessary for improving their social position. All of the students held a high level of optimism that going to university would lead to a stable life after they graduated. This suggests they tacitly agreed with Roger Brown's (2014) argument that higher education is a 'post-experience good', but is also an example of how collective hope has been framed around higher education. Only time, and further research, will tell if this hope is warranted.

Relating back to the research questions, these themes can be framed within three discussions: first, the extent to which neoliberal narratives affect contemporary students' experiences of higher education; second, how students respond to these effects and whether their responses position them as neoliberal subjects; and finally, the element of hope students attach to

higher education. Before those discussions begin, I will review the key points of the previous chapters, setting the scene for my conclusions.

7.1 Thesis review

The thesis began with a review of existing literature on subject formation, drawing on Foucault's concept of technologies and practices of the self, Bourdieu's habitus, and Archer's work on reflexivity. With this framework I theorised how students might come to embody the neoliberal narrative, as enterprising subjects. Referring back to Foucault, as well as Mirowski and Rose, I argued that this *ideal* neoliberal subject would see university as an investment in their human capital, be conscious of the competition for graduate jobs, and be actively working to gain an advantage in the job market. They would consciously work to improve their economic, social and cultural capital. However, I ended by suggesting that this neoliberal student might also be affected by *cruel optimism* – borrowing Lauren Berlant's phrase – in the hope that individual action will protect them against larger social and global insecurities.

Chapter Two outlined the historical context that has manufactured an artificial higher education marketplace, where institutions differentiate themselves on prestige rather than price, and how higher education policy has attempted to engineer students into neoliberal subjects. I explored how universities with *prestigious* reputations were able to create a false sense of a *meritocracy* within the sector, and rejected the student-as-consumer model as too simplistic, arguing that it disguised the wider structural issues at play within higher education and young people's lives, including uncertain job

opportunities, and financial and social inequalities. I also suggested that student debt is a misleading term that advances the belief that higher education is an individual's responsibility.

In Chapter Three I set out my research methodology and some of the challenges encountered during the empirical research. I explored the identity portfolio method for collecting student data. The portfolios consisted of UCAS personal statements, SNS profile data, life-grids and background information, and were informed by a series of interviews. The data collected through these methods was then analysed over the next three chapters.

Chapter Four considered the historical context of university applications, and the advice university applicants receive on how to complete their UCAS personal statements. I positioned the UCAS personal statement as a technology of the self and argued that the advice around them encourages applicants to draw heavily on discourses of neoliberalism. In examining the first year students' statements, I found that the students demonstrated an instrumental approach to university education, writing about their hopes for higher education as an investment in their human capital. The students drew heavily on the promotional genre, but the awkward forms of expression they used suggested that they were not comfortable with this framing of themselves. I also argued that this one-dimensional presentation *hid* any life experiences that might be framed as personal misfortunes or mistakes, an omission that only became apparent after learning more about the students in their interviews and life-grids.

Chapter Five outlined the interview and life-grid data from the first year students, exploring the students' reflective narratives of their choice of university and subject. The interview data revealed that enjoyment was a strong factor in subject choice. The students believed that higher education was necessary in order to access professional careers and secure a stable financial and social position in the future – though they all hoped that their subject choice would lead to an enjoyable career rather than an unfulfilling job. They also all hoped that higher education would lead to personal growth, and accepted their student debt as simply something they had to take on in order to go to university and secure the life they envisaged afterwards. The students were not too concerned by the scale of their debt, as they reasoned they would only begin to pay it back if they were earning enough to have made university financially worthwhile.

Chapter Six completed the data analysis chapters by presenting data from students in their final year of university, as well as interviews conducted six months after their graduation. It explored these students' presentations of self on *Facebook* and *LinkedIn*. As with first year students, these final year students' believed it was necessary to have a higher education qualification in order to access a professional career and lifestyle. Again, they hoped that through their choice of subject their future careers would be something they enjoyed doing, though many had realised that they would require additional qualifications in order to achieve this. Similarly to the first year students, these students were nonchalant about their student debts. However, they did present more criticism of the loan system than their first year counterparts. They all cited personal growth as the main benefit of their university

experience, though their narratives also illustrated how life outside of university could impact on students' studies and hopes for future.

7.2 Students construct narratives around choice in higher education

Arguably the most striking aspect of my findings was the extent to which the students did *not* actively embody the neoliberal ideal I established in Chapter One. While there were some mechanisms within higher education that could be seen as engineering students to fit into a neoliberal ideal, for these students it was not a wholly comfortable fit.

Neoliberalism treats the economy as being of prime importance, its rhetoric emphasising competition and individual responsibility. In practice, as many of the students' narratives indicate, this means economic insecurity for the vast majority who are at the mercy of social, political and economic forces outside of their control. The students saw higher education as a means of *securing* their personal futures, not embracing new risks. This saw them drawing on different discourses of neoliberalism, particularly the discourses of human capital, merit, and personal responsibility – though their actions were also influenced by other discourses that do not fit within the neoliberal narrative, such as enjoyment of their subject, gaining independence and self-confidence, and their hopes for a comfortable future.

The practice that saw the students most actively construct narratives about higher education in terms of improving their human capital was the UCAS personal statement. The selves presented in these statements were driven by a desire to invest in their 'skills'. Although they did not know how much of their

application's success relied on their personal statement, the importance placed on it by their sixth form or college tutors gave the students the impression it was a vital component, so they complied with the advice they were given. If they did not to follow the advice of UCAS and other higher education authorities then – the students believed – they risked not getting into university, which for many was a risk they could not afford to take.

The statements can easily be framed as an example of Foucault's technologies of the self: the advice presented to potential students engineers them into writing largely standardised, (im)personal statements, and hides the fact that it is the students' grades that remain the most important part of the university admissions process. It was, as I suggested in Chapter Four, a *statement of subjectification*, guiding the students into adopting a certain subject position – that of the enterprising student. Indeed, the practices around the statement almost suggest they were *intended* for a more general purpose of creating neoliberal subjects, separately from providing information for admissions decisions. It is highly unlikely that this was a calculated intention, but the implications of this framing of the statement merits more consideration in both academic literature and policy than it has previously been given, and raises questions about whether universities and courses that do not take the statement into active consideration are in some respects *misleading* applicants, and in other respects, engineering them.

In their narratives about choosing a university the students drew on affective rationales more than economic ones, which could be seen as *non-rational* – at least from a neoliberal perspective. The students did have some awareness of

the differing status of their two universities. The RG students generally knew that their university was seen as 'good', but this was related to its membership of the Russell Group, rather than its league table position. This suggests that *brand* may be a more effective tool for engineering the idea of prestige than league tables.

Some of the P92 students were aware of differences in universities status: this knowledge was often attached to either a sense of personal disappointment in not having performed well enough to enter a Russell Group university, or a rejection of the apparent worth of a Russell Group education, saying that they questioned the assumption that *prestigious* meant *better*. In their framing of the decision about where to study it is worth considering that some of the students may have tried to present their situation in the best possible light, framing as an active choice something they actually had little control over: for example, needing to choose a local university because of financial constraints. This may be particularly applicable to the P92 students, who were far more likely to be from the local area.

The students were generally unconcerned by their student debt. For them it was a necessary evil, one they felt they had to accept in order to experience the enjoyment, growth, and stability higher education offered. One element of the students' attitude towards their student debt that I had not anticipated was the extent to which it was at odds with the individualised responsibility narrative of neoliberalism. All but one of the students felt there was a level of security found in the repayment threshold of their student debt, as they believed they would not have to pay it back if they found themselves earning

under £21,000. Their lack of concern rested on the belief that they were protected against *unfair* repayments if they did not achieve the future they hoped for. The narrative of individual responsibility would suggest that if a student did not find a good job after graduation, then the fault would lie with them for not having tried hard enough, and as such they should still have to pay back their student debts as they would have received the same experience as graduates who did find well paying jobs. So while the students may have normalised their debt⁵⁷, it would be wrong to imply they adopted a wholly neoliberal perspective. The debts were rarely framed positively as an investment in human capital. The students were not overly concerned with ‘paying them off’ and for the few who were, this concern was rooted in a class-based strategy of distancing themselves from ‘State handouts’ rather than one based primarily on an enterprising drive towards financial success.

The students’ sense that they would only have to begin paying their debts back if university provided them with ‘a proven path to higher earnings’ (Browne, 2010: 31) may also be evidence of an underlying scepticism towards the idea that merit is always reflected in the labour market: having worked hard to gain their higher education qualifications, the students may expect to easily find a graduate level job in a merit-based job market. What they appeared to acknowledge in their lack of concern about paying back their debts is that this is not always the case – that there is a possibility they may not find a graduate level job, but in that eventuality at least they will not have to worry about repaying their student loans. This was a tacit acknowledgement, never

⁵⁷ This normalisation of debt matches Ellis’s (2014) findings.

explicitly stated, and was one of the clearer examples of cruel optimism within the students' narratives, especially considering their misunderstandings about the 'fair' repayment threshold. The £21,000 per annum repayment trigger has not risen in line with inflation since it came into force in 2012, though the cost of living and interest rate on repayments have risen and will likely continue to do so (Pells, 2017) – which means most of the students will be paying back more for longer. So this lack of concern may in itself be concerning, as it suggests the students do not have an accurate idea of the financial commitment they enter into with their student debts, but it does at least – from a pedagogical perspective – suggest that they are not allowing economic rationales to solely guide their higher education choices.

A final important point to consider when reflecting on the students' narratives about higher education is the idea of the student-as-consumer; a model that I believe, following my data analysis, remains too simplistic. In my own data, the students rarely positioned themselves as consumers of their education, even when directly asked. They were aware that they had to work hard to achieve good grades and did not feel 'entitled' to them simply because of their student fees. Granted the students in this study all said they enjoyed their subjects, so were perhaps more inclined towards learning and improving in their discipline, but the research cited throughout this thesis has consistently shown that subject enjoyment is a key factor in students' decisions of what to study, so it would seem acceptable to suggest that the idea of students feeling they can 'buy' grades is not as prevalent as some literature would suggest. I return to the question I posed in Chapter Two about whether higher education, in expecting students to act as consumers has decided to treat their

actions through that perspective - without first establishing whether this is really the case – and suggest that maybe it has done so. The students in this study did not expect to buy their education, and they were not ‘demanding’ customers. In fact, they did not present themselves as demanding at all (though this may have been different in aspects of their university experience I did not examine, such as module evaluations). It might at this stage be tempting to try and construe the students as prosumers or co-producers of their education, but even these models perhaps place too much emphasis on students perceiving a financial element to their education and taking an active role in shaping their learning. A popular alternative in some areas of higher education has been the concept of a *partnership* model between students and universities, but this does not feel appropriate either. These students were not involved in the broader mechanisms of their institutions enough to frame their approach as a *partnership*. Instead, higher education was something they *experienced*: a process of becoming.

The theme that came across most strongly in all of the students’ narratives about higher education was not one of consumption, or investment in their skills, but hope for their futures. Last year’s Higher Education White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (2016: 11), suggested that for most students ‘the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment’, but my research suggests that it is wrong to assume that employment in-and-of itself is students’ ‘most important outcome’. For these students, employment was a byword for stability: they all wanted jobs, but as something they could build a broader life around. What the students in the final year of their studies valued most from their experience of higher education, and what the first year

students hoped for the most, was personal growth. This was not framed in terms of employable skills, but as a greater sense of self-awareness, self-knowledge and, to an extent, a pride in their own abilities. In their hopes for friendship, and the sense of camaraderie rather than competition with their course peers, the majority of these students strayed away from the competitive, self-interested subject that the neoliberal idea would suggest and is assumed by policy-makers.

7.3 Higher education engineers students into neoliberal subjects?

Rather than conform to the neoliberal model, in their hopes for higher education the students appeared as *stability-seeking* subjects – and even this subject was only one of the multiple selves the students hinted at. While an enterprising neoliberal subject would accept uncertainty and embrace it as an opportunity to enhance their human and economic capital, these students followed the conventions of what is expected of young people wishing to have a comfortable future: going to university. Not going to university and rejecting that expectation would arguably have been the bigger risk, one an enterprising neoliberal subject might indeed have taken. But these stability-seeking subjects could not afford that risk and attempted to guard against it by being compliant with the general expectations of the neoliberal narrative. This may point to another kind of esoteric assumption in neoliberalism (at least in its political versions), that while independent, entrepreneurial actors are seen as ideal types, what is actually needed are self-motivating but compliant subjects, particularly in the workforce. This mirrors a broader shift in higher education away from independent study and looser forms of assessment that allowed students to pursue their own questions and interests, into more standardised

frameworks for study. For these students, being motivated in their studies involved learning what they were being taught well and following the stated aims of the course: none of them indicated that they had an independent drive to learn topics in their field outside of the set syllabus. While a few were keen to undertake postgraduate study, which they hoped would give them chance to explore some of their undergraduate subject interests in more depth, even there they were still focused on doing the best they could within the set course boundaries.

The students' emphasis on stability and conformity suggested a certain anxiety that is arguably a characteristic of neoliberalism. This could be seen in the stress involved in writing their personal statements, and in their comparisons of themselves to university course peers, which was a source of insecurity and self-doubt. The students' anxieties did have roots in the neoliberal project, but in ways it does not like to acknowledge: that in promoting flexibility there must also be uncertainty, and that competition must have losers as well as winners. The students – with a few notable expectations – were not actively trying to be *winner*s: rather, they were trying to ensure they were not *loser*s.

In understanding how the students acted as these stability-seeking subjects Foucault's concept of technologies and practices of the self proved useful, particularly in having his concept of the enterprising subject to contrast them with. The enterprising subject as an ideal type was clearly found in the higher education policy and some of its practices, but – without suggesting that there is a simple, unambiguous 'true' self – it was not really surprisingly that the

selves the students related in the interviews, identity portfolios and even SNS data did not match this ideal. (The exception to this was the UCAS personal statements, as I have explored.)

In many ways the students' narratives of how they responded to the effects of neoliberalism on their university experiences offered a counterweight to these effects. In the interviews and life-grids they focused mainly on the familiar preoccupations of young people – making friends, forming relationships, gaining independence from their parents, and beginning their adult lives – and framed university as an important conduit for achieving these hopes. The self they presented most clearly was their *future self*, who they hoped would be comfortable and 'better' than the self who entered into university.

In understanding this future self, Archer's (2007) work on reflexive thinking had a particular application for examining how the students understood higher education as an active process of self-betterment and either social mobility, or *social maintenance* for those students who were already in an advantageous position. While my research did not look directly at the students' 'internal conversations', in exploring their hopes for the future and how they conceptualised these hopes, Archer's work helped to frame the process. What linked all of students' narratives together was the work on their future selves – what I have termed *future-self work* – they engaged in when approaching higher education, through reflexive thinking and imagining their futures.

There was certainly some suggestion of the students drawing on different kinds of reflexivity for different elements of their future-self work. The

students' narratives presented a mix of autonomous and communicative reflexivity, and to some degree the balance of these two different types of reflexivity varied between the RG and P92 universities. Based on their interviews and identity portfolios, the P92 students appeared as more autonomous reflexives, holding definite ideas of what they wanted to do in the future and how university would help them in achieving this: future-self work that was often driven by a desire to improve their social position (though this was also the case for some for the RG students). Many of the P92 students' narratives fitted well with Archer's (2007: 286) description of these reflexives' characteristics: 'To have got things wrong does not prevent an autonomous reflexive from replanning how to put them right'. Most of the P92 students interviewed had experienced some element of 'getting things wrong', whether it was not having not achieved the right grades for other universities or courses, or entering into higher education later as more mature students after experiencing the limited opportunities available to those without degrees. In all cases, these students saw their P92 university experience as the plan for putting things right. There appeared to be more communicative reflexives in the RG, perhaps unsurprisingly, as they were more likely to have 'similar and familiars' who had been to university, but again there were also some cases of this type of reflexive at the P92. For her part, Archer found that communicative reflexives tended to be more conservative and conformist – which could perhaps be seen in the RG students' desire to maintain their social position through higher education and to do what was expected of them, namely attend university.

In framing my understanding of the students' reflections on their future selves Bourdieu's concepts of capitals and habitus had particular application for understanding the different advantages and disadvantages the students took with them into higher education. The better self that the disadvantaged students spoke of involved a valuation of their previous self, who must be *bettered*, and the future self, who would be *better*: this valuation was tied to improved economic and social capital, but not in the competitive sense that I proposed in Chapter One. As the students largely spoke about what they hoped to gain/had gained from higher education in terms of personal growth and confidence, it may also be that they hoped their better selves would be more *comfortable* in their own skin. This could be interpreted as a hope that their habitus would adapt to the lifestyle of a university graduate. Though in time they may find that this came at a cost if their *better self* was distanced from the groups they engaged with before university, most notably family.

This better future self certainly loomed larger in the students' narratives than any neoliberal self. From this examination of the neoliberal subject, there is perhaps a more general point to be made about this Foucauldian ideal subject: that it is a subject found in theory, rather than in empirical evidence. On the basis of these students' experiences, the everyday neoliberalism of higher education appears less effective than its proponents might hope, and its opponents might expect. While there is certainly a theoretical use for the idea of the neoliberal subject, the idea that students – or indeed people - can be adequately described by this model is, of course, reductive.

Throughout this research I have employed Mirowski's everyday neoliberalism with its emphasis on those small incidents that act on subjects, building up a larger worldview. But while the students certainly had encountered everyday neoliberalism in their experiences of higher education, and in life more broadly, it was apparent that there were other influences working on them too, evident in the valuation of friends, family, personal growth, and comfort. This suggests that Mirowski too may have overestimated the effect of 'everyday neoliberalism'. Like Foucault before him, his work is perhaps best treated as an ideal type to test the actual against, rather than a prescriptive certainty.

7.4 Hopes and concerns for the future

These students had not gone to university with the specific, reductive hope that it would lead to a specific career, but rather with the intrinsic hope that it would lead to a better future. Interestingly, the students did not suggest it would be the job they found after university that would make them *better*, though it would make them financially stable: it was higher education that would allow them to *become* better. This betterment relied on intangible improvements, such as becoming an adult, gaining independence, leaving home and becoming someone different, as well as meeting new people, having a good time, getting absorbed in activities that might not relate to their degree, and finding a partner – none of which form part of a neoliberal narrative of higher education.

For some of the students, particularly those at the RG institution, being a university graduate was necessary in order to maintain the lifestyle they were

accustomed to. For others, having a degree was necessary in order to move into new social sphere where this stability and comfort was found, or so they hoped. The students who believed this latter scenario came mostly from the P92 University.

There were notable differences in this future-self work between the universities the students attended, but not by the subject they were studying. In general, the RG students were more open to the possibilities for the future university would present: they had less fixed ideas around the careers they wanted to enter into, arguably because they were in a position where they could afford to be more open-minded. They simply knew that they had to go to university in order to maintain their social position. The P92 students held more definite ideas of what jobs they wanted to do, and saw university as the necessary first stage towards achieving those careers – though as we saw in the cases of some of the final year students, this did not always go as planned. These students' narratives drew on various value judgements, ideas of merit, and a level of dissociation from Others, notably former school peers, whom they believed had not 'bettered themselves'. This suggests, if only amongst these students, that the purpose of higher education was linked to social standing, whether it was maintaining a social position – in the case of RG students – or being (upwardly) socially mobile, as the P92 students hoped they would become. This is not a new purpose of higher education, but while the framing of what is a good social position – one of secure employment and a comfortable lifestyle – remains largely unchanged, the realities of being a university graduate have changed. Before the expansion of student numbers, graduates did not face the same concerns around finding a (graduate-level)

job as today's students do, and so social mobility may have seemed more assured.

This leads to another important consideration of how neoliberalism has affected students' experiences of higher education: the cruel optimism apparent in hoping a university degree will act as a guarantor against future insecurity and instability. One of neoliberalism's double truths is the belief that through hard work, and with the correct credentials and human capital, individuals can protect themselves against personal or collective crisis. But this is not inevitably the case. As Hayek (1976: 74) himself admitted, luck is a big factor in success and failure, and luck is something that cannot be guaranteed or protected against. Many of the students had experienced something unexpected in their lives, either during their time at university, or in their earlier experiences: these unexpected events could be framed as luck, though in some cases whether they were good luck or bad luck depended on the perspective through which they were analysed. The exoteric face of neoliberalism would deny that *luck* is a factor in individual's lives, instead positioning events as good or bad *personal choices*. To acknowledge luck would mean acknowledging that there are factors that are outside of an individual's control, and that people are not simply units of human capital. The extent to which the students *hid* elements of their pasts or suggested that their experiences of university may have been more *productive* if unexpected events had not occurred hints not only at the role of *luck*, but also at the discourse within neoliberalism that dismisses life outside of the work of producing or consuming as *distractions*. Here again the ideal neoliberal subject and the actual are very different: the actual students lives were full of

complexities idealised models cannot account for and stops them from acting through one, homogenous narrative. It was these complexities that made *cruel optimism* feel like a fitting term for some of the future-self work enacted by some of the students, because they in themselves were imagining ideal types that they were working towards.

All of the students entered into university with a degree of optimism, and while Berlant's (2011: 27) initial use of the *cruel optimism* concept – to describe something we desire but that would be an 'obstacle' to our flourishing – is not entirely applicable to higher education, which will largely always bestow some advantage to those who enter into it, it is the idea of a degree as a guarantor of future security that felt somewhat *cruel*, especially for those students who did not comprehend the many structural barriers they face within higher education and will face afterwards. The students who entered university with disadvantages will most likely continue to feel their effects after university, as we saw in some of the graduates' accounts of their lives following graduation. From my data, it appears that the P92 students, especially those who did not appreciate the hierarchies within higher education, were particularly at the mercy of this cruel optimism.

7.5 Considerations for further study

The obvious starting point for further developing this research would be to conduct a similar study on a larger range of students, disciplines and universities in order to achieve a more representative picture. It would be particularly interesting to see if students on more obviously *neoliberal* courses, such as business or management studies, had a more instrumental

approach to their education than the students sampled in this research. It would also be interesting to consider the difference in personal statements for students on courses where they are actively taken into consideration for the application process, such as social work or medicine.

Other examples of potential future research might include:

- Examining how students see university as a rite of passage, and particularly as a specific act of *becoming*.
- Specific research into the role and practice of the UCAS personal statements. While Steven Jones (2012, 2013, 2015) has written about how advantaged students are privileged in having more to write about in their statements, I would suggest there is a need to look more generally at the expectations of university, and of the students themselves, that the advice round the statements generates.
- How expectations around higher education may contribute to the current mental health crisis in young people. When university is seen as necessary for future stability, and has high cost attached to it, what happens when that hope is not met?
- Whether a focus on students' hopes for higher education could change policy and practice, and how these hopes might help to conceptualise a socially just education system for the 21st century?

At the beginning of this research I had not anticipated the extent to which the students would identify a comfortable life as a hope for university. The scope of this research did not allow much room to evaluate these hopes and the students' intrinsic ideas of personal development, but it is certainly an area that merits further exploration, and may offer a timely counter-narrative to pessimistic accounts of instrumental students and education. There is certainly cause for investigating this on a broader scale. Such an investigation could take multiple avenues: to what extent might this concern with stability

and comfort be influenced by the broader, social instability of (at least) the past decade, and to what extent is it influenced by personal experiences of instability? How might this differ by students' socio-economic background and other intersectional factors? And what does it mean for political policy that continues to emphasise higher education as predominantly an investment in personal and national human capital? All three of the questions might begin to form part of a wider discussion around what alternatives to a neoliberal higher education might look like.

Within higher education itself, this may lead to questions about the focus of admissions and recruitment, widening participation schemes, student services, and the various measures of 'the student experience'. If students value higher education as a process of personal growth, a way to foster friendships and work towards a comfortable lifestyle, should the idea of 'the student experience' place less of an emphasis on measuring *employability* as the key indicator of a good student experience, and look instead at students' experiences of personal growth and contributions to their field of knowledge? This may not require a large change in curriculum or teaching, but it would demand some reflection on what was considered to be a good 'outcome' of higher education.

Appendices

One: First year student participants

Alias	University	Course	Origin	First-generation student	Self-defined social class	Parents' employment class
Lisa	RG	History	Local	✓	Working	Precariat
William	RG	History	Home		Middle	Salariat
Katherine	RG	History	Home	✓	Working	Profician/ Precariat
Isabelle	RG	History	Home		Middle	Salariat
Darcey	RG	History	Home		Mixed	Salariat/ Profician
Jenni	RG	Computer	Local	✓	Unsure	Salariat
Rupert	RG	Computer	EU		Middle	Salariat/ Profician
Fred	RG	Computer	EU	✓	Working	Salariat
Patrick	RG	Computer	Home		Middle	Profician
Damian	RG	Computer	EU		Mixed	Profician
Ginny	P92	History	Home		Mixed	Salariat/ Profician
Bradley	P92	History	Home	✓	Working	Profician/ Precariat
Anne	P92	History	Local	✓	Working	Precariat
Richard	P92	History	Local	✓	Working	Precariat
Valerie	P92	History	Local	✓	Working	Precariat
Sam (M)	P92	Computer	Home	✓	Middle	Profician
Martin	P92	Computer	Local		Middle	Salariat
Danny	P92	Computer	Local	✓	Working	Precariat
Rachel	P92	Computer	Local	*	*	*
Loui (M)	P92	Computer	Local	✓	Middle	Salariat/ Profician

* participant preferred not to state.

Two: Final year student participants

Alias	University	Course	Origin	First-generation student	Self-defined social class	Parents' employment class
Selina	RG	History	Home		Middle	Salariat
Rhiannon	RG	History	Home		Middle	Salariat
Greg	RG	Computer	Home	✓	Middle	Salariat/ Profician
Roxanne	RG	Computer	Local		Mixed	Salariat
David	P92	History	Local	✓	Working	Precariat/ Profician
Colleen	P92	History	Local	✓	'Lower Middle'	Salariat/ Profician
Johnny	P92	Computer	Local	✓	Unsure	Precariat/ Profician
Kevin	P92	Computer	Local	✓	Mixed	Salariat/ Profician

Three: Professional participants

Name	Institution	Department	Role	Interview data
Professor Les Ebdon	OFFA	N/A	Director of Fair Access to Higher Education	24 August 2015
Nick Hillman	HEPI	N/A	Director	15 October 2015
Anon.*	UCAS	N/A	N/A	13 April 2016
Anon.*	RG	Computer	Head of department	6 March 2015
Anon.*			Undergraduate admissions tutor	5 August 2015
Anon.*			Undergraduate employability tutor	14 August 2015
Anon.*	RG	History	Undergraduate admissions tutor	31 March 2015
Anon.*	P92	Computer	Head of department	4 September 2015
Anon.*	P92	History	Head of department	13 July 2015
Anon.*			Undergraduate admissions tutor	14 July 2015

* Anonymity agreed.

Four: Example of a completed life-grid

(Danny, first year P92 computer science student)

	Education	Money	Own employment	Parent's employment	Housing	Family	Friends & partners	Leisure	Health
Primary school	one of the best parts of my life because I got to do so much	Having £4.00 pocket money	Wanted to be a Archeologist because of Jurassic Park	both work in Santander	always stayed in same house	Dad split up with my mum	Made lots of friends that I still have today	Always went to centre park every year	Had a heart condition, got tested with autism
High school	I struggled through it because I didn't take it seriously	getting money off my dad a lot to go out	Worked in dominos and had a paper round	Santander	same house	mum got married again	didn't make many friends in high school	Xbox	
College	I had to make sure that high school didn't happen so I really tried	my dad stopped supporting me so my mum had to	dominos	Santander dad for big promotion	Mike moved in	dad got married	made lots of new friends		heart condition, hit by a car
University - first year	struggled at first but getting better	student loan tuition maintenance	none	Santander	same house	step sister had a baby	made new friends and staid in contact with old ones		
University - second year	need to make sure that I work hard	student loan	hopefully some job in retail				try and stay in contact with everyone		
University - final year	make sure that I don't screw up	should have money from job to support myself	some job in retail		moving out to somewhere with friends		make sure to try and get new friends		
Graduation - year one	in my job I will probably need to learn some new things	money from job £21K	some job IT based		live in apartment		make sure to see them and not neglect them		
Graduation - year five	doing well enough that I don't need to learn anything	I want to have enough money so that I can have fun in life	to be high in my IT job		live in a house	have a girlfriend and happy	same		hopefully everything should be fine
Graduation - year ten	same	go and do the things I would never think I could do £80k	to be a big part in the company I work for		live in a little town outside a city	have a wife and a child	having fun with them and going out more		hopefully should be fit and not fat

Five: Example of a completed background sheet

Participant background sheet

Name: Ginny

Age: 19

Gender: Female

Members of family household:

Mother, Father

Please briefly outline your own history in education:

I completed Primary and Secondary School. I then went on to complete my three Alevels and one AS Level. After my Alevels I took a year out, during this year I retook one of my AS Levels, worked in Waitrose Café, learnt to drive and volunteered at a local charity (SOS Africa.) I have also done three lots of work experience placements and a few odd jobs.

Please briefly outline your parents' (and siblings') history in education:

My Mum completed Primary and Secondary School education. She then went on to do her Alevels. She then gained a first class degree and a Distinction in her MA. She has also done a CELTA. My Dad completed Primary and Secondary School education.

Please briefly outline your parents' employment history:

My Mum was a Vegan Chef for a while before she had me. When I was little she worked at a riding stables. Then she became an academic proof reader and copy editor, English Literature teacher at Secondary level and a World Literature tutor for adults and FE. Plus some free-lance writing. My Dad was a mechanic when he was younger before becoming a painter and decorator. However, for the majority of his life he has worked for Clarks.

Please briefly outline your own employment history:

I have worked for Waitrose Café for a year, but have applied for a job as an P92 Student Advocate.

Can you please briefly describe any experiences you think have had a significant impact on your education:

Being inspired by Mum's dedication to education and experience. My experiences travelling and seeing children with no home or chance of a decent future. Also through my voluntary work with the children's education charity, SOS Africa and my work in signing petitions for other charities. Finally, my own aspirations.

Six: Group interview schedule

First year, History group interview questions:

1. How did you all come to be here at [City]?
2. How did you decide to come to university?
3. How did you choose this course?
Did you do any research into different universities and courses before deciding?
 - a. Prospectuses, open days, websites?
 - b. Did you apply to [the RG/P92] university as well?
4. Do you remember what went through your mind when applying?
5. Did you worry about anything while you were applying to university?
6. How did you write your personal statement?
7. Do you remember what went through your mind when applying for Student Finance?
8. What did you think university would be like before getting here?
 - a. What about the social/academic [delete as applicable] elements?
9. What do you want to get out of your time at university?
10. What do you want to do after university?

Seven: Example of an individual interview schedule

(Anne, first year P92 history student)

Education

- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- Did you think about university during school?
 - How did you leave school with no qualifications?
- What made you decide you wanted to go to university?
- When did you first become interested in history?
 - Do you think you'd be doing history if you hadn't have had such influential teachers?
- When looking at universities did you look at league tables or reviews?
 - Do you think these make a difference?
- What made you decide you wanted to stay at a local university?
 - What do you think the difference is between [the RG] and [the P92]?
- Did you think much about the future when you were applying to university?
- What degree level are you hoping to achieve? (Why?)
- How have you found the transition to university?

Money

- What are the costs of doing a university degree?
- How are you funding being at university?
 - Do you have a student bank account?
- How do you feel about your student loans?
- Do you think about repaying your student loans?

Own employment

- Can you tell me more about the work you did before starting university?
- Do you think the job you are doing now will help you in the future?
- How do you think a university degree will improve your job prospects?
- When did you first start thinking about teaching?
- How did you find out about doing a PhD?
- What do you think you gain from working?

Parent's employment

- How much influence do you think mother had on your university choices?

Housing

- How does it feel living at home whilst at university?

Family

- Do you talk about university much at home?
- Do you talk about history much at home?

Friends & partners

- How have you made friends at university?
 - Have you found there is much competition between students on our course?
- Do you find there's a difference between your university friends and your friend from before you came to university?

'Debrief'

- What social class would you say you fit into?
- Do you think the increase in tuition fees to £9,000 a year has influenced how students approach university?

Eight: Information sheet and consent form

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Name of researcher: Elizabeth Houghton (PhD student): e.houghton@lancaster.ac.uk

Institutional Affiliation: Department of Sociology, University of Lancaster

Title of Project: The student experience in the English university.

Summary of Research

This research aims to explore students' hopes and concerns in choosing to study for a higher education degree, and how these hopes and concerns are affected by students' social and cultural background, year of study and plans for the future. It will explore differences between students from different cohorts, degree programmes and universities.

To inform this study I am conducting interviews with higher education students and professionals (heads of department, career advisors and admissions tutors).

Information for student participants:

Student participants will be asked to participate in two sets of interviews: a group interview followed by a one-to-one interview. The group interview will be with up to four other students from your degree scheme, which I will moderate: this will last approximately half an hour. The one-to-one interview with myself will take place a few weeks later, and will last approximately one hour and will include completing a life-grid, which charts the different stages of your education. As compensation for your time you will receive a £10 Amazon.co.uk gift voucher. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and the audio files stored on my password-protected laptop. Participant contact details will be stored in the password protected email address given above.

Participant information will be stored under pseudonyms on my password-protected laptop. Life-grids will also be stored under pseudonyms and kept in a locked storage unit, within the Lancaster University Sociology Department. Quotes from the interviews and summations of the life-grids will be included in the PhD thesis, and any reports, publications or presentations that result from it: they will be anonymised and each student participant and their corresponding institution given a pseudonym. I will retain participant data and interview data for at least 10 years in line with Lancaster University policy, but data will only be accessible by myself and my research supervisors.

You may withdraw from the research up to three weeks following the completion of the one-to-one interview. If you withdraw your data will be securely and confidentially destroyed. In the case of any concerns or complaints regarding my conduct during the research process please contact my researcher supervisors:

Prof. Andrew Sayer; a.sayer@lancaster.ac.uk; (01524) 594201

Dr. Richard Tutton; r.tutton@lancaster.ac.uk; (10524) 593044

Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YT Thank

you,

A member of Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) has reviewed and approved this project.



RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**Name of researcher:** Elizabeth Houghton (PhD student): e.houghton@lancaster.ac.uk**Institutional Affiliation:** Department of Sociology, University of Lancaster**Title of Project:** The student experience in the English university.**Please tick box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to three weeks after the final interview, without giving any reason. If I do withdraw I understand that any data held on me will be securely and confidentially destroyed.
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in the researcher's PhD thesis and any reports, publications, or presentations that result from it.
4. I understand that my name will/will not appear in the thesis and any reports, publications, or presentations that result from it (delete as applicable).
5. I understand that the researcher will retain my data for at least 10 years.
6. I agree to take part in the study.

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
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Researcher	Date	Signature
------------	------	-----------

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS FORM AND THE INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR RECORDS

Nine: UCAS personal statement submission page

3/6/2016

Personal statement

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Welcome > Personal statement

Our [guide to writing your personal statement](#) (opens in a new window) should help you complete this section.

We strongly recommend you write the statement using a word-processing package and paste it in to Apply.

You can type your statement directly into the box or edit a statement you have pasted in.

Need guidance? Watch the video advice below [[Hide video](#)].



(Unable to view videos here? You can watch them at www.ucas.com/connect/videos instead)

Personal statement

Click 'save' within 35 minutes so that your work is not lost.

You have used 0 of 47 lines based on the preview and 0 of 4000 characters.

Your completed statement must be between 1,000 and 4,000 characters (maximum 47 lines) including spaces

<https://2016.undergrad.apply.ucas.com/ucasapply/PersonalStatementServlet?functionname=perStatement&id=cb3303fd5210df322071b42974a7&ran=1qmc651...> 1/2

3/6/2016

Personal statement

Before you can mark this section as complete you must click on 'preview'. The system will then tell you how many lines and characters are still available for your personal statement.

Eleven: Example of UCAS personal statement online tool

3/8/2016

UCAS personal statement web app

Starting work on your personal statement

[◀ back](#)

What you need to do:

1. Simply answer the questions in the boxes on the left of the screen.
2. Review and refine your answers to make them really succinct and improve the flow. Remember you have a maximum of 4,000 characters of text, so keep an eye on how much you're writing for each section.
3. When you've finished, click the Create PDF button to take a copy of what you've written and get going with your first draft.

Click on the Advice tab at the top of this page to get handy hints on the dos and don'ts when writing your personal statement.

0 characters used

Writing about the course ()



Why are you applying for your chosen course(s)?

Why does this subject interest you?

Why do you think you're suitable for the course(s)?

Twelve: Questions from UCAS personal statement guidance

Personal statement worksheet

This worksheet is designed to help you think about information you could include in your personal statement. We've included space for you to write down any thoughts you have as you go along. More detailed advice and guidance about writing your personal statement, including our UCAStv video guide, is available at www.ucas.com/personalstatement.

Writing about the course

Why are you applying for your chosen course(s)?

Why does this subject interest you? Include evidence that you understand what's required to study the course, e.g. if applying for psychology courses, show that you know how scientific the subject is.

Why do you think you're suitable for the course(s)? Do you have any particular skills and experience that will help you to succeed on the course(s)?

Personal statement worksheet

Do your current or previous studies relate to the course(s) that you have chosen? If so, how?

Have you taken part in any other activities that demonstrate your interest in the course(s)?

Skills and achievements

Universities like to know the skills you have that will help you on the course, or generally with life at university, such as any accredited or non-accredited achievements. Write these down here. Examples can be found at www.ucas.com/personalstatementskills.

Also think about any other achievements you're proud of, positions of responsibility that you hold or have held both in and out of school, and attributes that make you interesting, special or unique.

Personal statement worksheet

Hobbies and interests

Make a list of your hobbies, interests and social activities. Then think about how they demonstrate your personality, skills and abilities. Try to link them to the skills and experience required for your course(s).

Work experience

Include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it's relevant to your chosen course(s). Try to link any experience to skills or qualities related to the course.

Mature students

Explain what you've been doing since leaving education, and provide additional evidence to support your application. If you're not in full-time education, you should give details of any relevant work experience, paid or unpaid, and information about your current or previous employment.

Personal statement worksheet

International students

Tell universities why you want to study in the UK and why you think you can successfully complete a course that is taught in English. Say if some of your studies have been taught or examined in English and if you have taken part in any activities where you have used English outside of your studies.

Future plans

If you know what you'd like to achieve after completing the course, explain how you want to use the knowledge and experience that you gain. How does the course relate to what you want to do in the future?

Dos when writing your personal statement

- Do use your best English and don't let spelling and grammatical errors spoil your statement.
- Do show that you know your strengths and can outline your ideas clearly. Use words you know will be understood by the person reading your statement.
- Do be enthusiastic – if you show your interest in the course, it may help you get a place.
- Do expect to produce several drafts of your personal statement before being totally happy with it.
- Do ask people you trust for their feedback.

Don'ts when writing your personal statement

- Don't exaggerate – if you do you may get caught out at interview when asked to elaborate on an interesting achievement.
- Don't rely on a spellchecker as it will not pick up everything – proofread as many times as possible.
- Don't leave it to the last minute – your statement will seem rushed and important information could be left out.

Thirteen: Extracts from QAA subject benchmarks

Computer Science subject benchmark

3.5 Generic skills for employability:

- I. Students are expected to develop a wide range of generic skills to ensure they become effective in the workplace, to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy. Students who develop generic skills, and are able to evidence and demonstrate such skills, will gain significant advantage when seeking employment. It is the responsibility of higher education providers to provide every student the opportunity to acquire and evidence generic skills; it is the responsibility of the student to make the most of that opportunity.
- II. Intellectual skills: critical thinking; making a case; numeracy and literacy; information literacy. The ability to construct well argued and grammatically correct documents. The ability to locate and retrieve relevant ideas, and ensure these are correctly and accurately referenced and attributed.
- III. Self-management: self-awareness and reflection; goal setting and action planning; independence and adaptability; acting on initiative; innovation and creativity. The ability to work unsupervised, plan effectively and meet deadlines, and respond readily to changing situations and priorities.
- IV. Interaction: reflection and communication: the ability to succinctly present rational and reasoned arguments that address a given problem or opportunity, to a range of audiences (orally, electronically or in writing).
- V. Team working and management: the ability to recognise and make best use of the skills and knowledge of individuals to collaborate. To be able to identify problems and desired outcomes and negotiate to mutually acceptable conclusions. To understand the role of a leader in setting direction and taking responsibility for actions and decisions.
- VI. Contextual awareness: the ability to understand and meet the needs of individuals, business and the community, and to understand how workplaces and organisations are governed.
- VII. Sustainability: recognising factors in environmental and societal contexts relating to the opportunities and challenges created by computing systems across a range of human activities.

History subject benchmark

3.3 The generic skills acquired through the study of history are:

- self-discipline
- self-direction
- independence of mind, and initiative
- a questioning disposition and the ability to formulate and pursue clearly defined questions and enquiries
- ability to work with others, and to have respect for others' reasoned views
- ability to gather, organise and deploy evidence, data and information; and familiarity with appropriate means of identifying, finding, retrieving, sorting and exchanging information
- analytical ability, and the capacity to consider and solve problems, including complex problems to which there is no single solution
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of oral expression
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of written expression
- digital literacy
- intellectual integrity and maturity
- imaginative insight and creativity
- awareness of ethical issues and responsibilities that arise from research into the past and the reuse of the research and writing of others.

3.4 As employees, history graduates may be expected to solve complex problems using critical thinking, their own initiative, and analysis and evaluation of diverse, partial or ambiguous data; to express themselves clearly through excellent oral and written communication skills; and to demonstrate a capacity to understand diverse human contexts, cultures and motivations.

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