

**Degrees of Discrimination? An  
Exploration of the Lived Experiences of  
Working-Class Students in Higher  
Education in Wales**

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## Abstract

This study examined the lived experiences and future aspirations of working-class students and considered the extent to which they felt that class-based bias and discrimination influenced their higher education journeys. Through an exploration of the accounts of these working-class students the study illustrates the ways in which pervasive patterns of inequality still dominate the field of higher education.

Legislation and policy shifts, including higher education institutions (HEIs) employing inclusion initiatives such as the widening access agenda, have been positioned as attempts to diversify and support the student body. However, the lack of systemic change within the higher education sector still leads to inequalities for working-class students in access, attainment, and outcomes. Accordingly, the study questions the commitment of HEIs in tackling class inequalities as part of equality, diversity, and inclusion frameworks and initiatives under the Equality Act 2010, and it explores how these inequities manifest in individual student journeys.

The sample was recruited from Wales-based HEIs and featured 16 participants who self-identified as having working-class backgrounds as well as diversity in other intersections of personal and protected characteristics. Several methods for data generation were used in the study: (i) in-depth semi-structured repeat interviews (ii) timelines (iii) letters to and from imagined future-selves.

The research sought to identify whether students recognised the backdrop of class inequalities, including bias and discrimination, in their own experiences. The findings illustrate that higher education journeys are complex and often anxiety-laden for working-class students. A lack of affinity and sense of belonging within the higher education field, disconnections from family, and reinventions of the self through changing classed identities were identified in the participant accounts. The research also explored whether participants felt HEIs should be obligated to tackle classed based inequalities and how HEIs might incorporate the experiences and capitals of working-class students, positively positioning working-class identities in ways that are meaningful to these students.

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*Mama did it!*

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## Glossary

| Term  | Description                                        |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------|
| EDI   | Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion                 |
| EHRC  | Equality and Human Rights Commission               |
| HEFCW | Higher Education Funding Council for Wales         |
| Medr  | The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research |
| REF   | Research Excellence Framework                      |
| SEP   | Strategic Equality Plan                            |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter reflects on my own classed identity and journey(s) into higher education, outlining how I came to be interested in this topic, and why it has intrigued me for so many years. The chapter conveys to the reader how I brought my personal experiences, work history, and academic training together to formulate this doctoral study. A reflexive account of my researcher positionality, and the considerations and mitigations which I incorporated as part of the research process, is provided in the Methodology chapter, section 4.3.2. After outlining my own relationship with the research, I provide an overview of the broader context and focus of my study and outline the research questions attended to in this thesis. Lastly, the chapter provides a guide to the structure of the thesis.

### 1.1 My journey

I grew up in a single-parent household with my mum and sister. Housed in a council flat in South-East London we lived in what was a deprived area, yet we still managed to be the poor ones in our social circle. We received free school meals (FSMs) in the days, now happily consigned to history, when you had to declare your impoverished status to the ‘dinner ladies’ in front of everyone else. A humiliating daily ritual which led me to beg my mum to send me to school with a packed lunch. She obliged, and I look back guiltily with an adult’s perspective at the cost this would have incurred. Aside from this memory, class was not on my radar in my early years. I was aware we lived in a flat and others had houses; we used Sellotape wrapped around our palms to ‘hoover’ as my mum did not own a vacuum; and we walked everywhere or occasionally caught buses (never the expensive tube) while friends had cars. Otherwise, I felt the same as everyone else around me. We watched the same programs on television, enjoyed the same games, and I never felt ‘out of place’.

When I was nine my mother remarried. This changed our economic status dramatically and I began my own social mobility journey. We relocated from London to a middle-class village in Oxfordshire and then after more house moves we eventually settled in South Wales. We were no longer council flat kids on FSM. The changes were sudden and apparent in external ways: a house with a bedroom each, and a fancy car.

However, I suddenly became a ‘fish out of water’, as I found myself out of step culturally with peers. I was mocked for my Eastenders<sup>1</sup> accent which I was at pains to modify (see also Loughran 2018). I was unable to keep up with schoolwork - learning never having been a focus in my household and six schools in three years having severely disrupted my formal education. Most bewilderingly, I was suddenly treated as if I had money which filled me with unease. People wondered how the girl with that ‘cor-blimey’ accent lived in that big house and was dropped off in a sports car each day, my own embodied class signifiers betraying the material appearance of my now apparently middle-class status. These experiences created years of confusion in me about my own social class and set me on a path of exploring how our classed identities are subjective, malleable, changeable, and are formed not only in relation to how we perceive ourselves but, perhaps more saliently, how others perceive and treat us.

My mum had left school at 15 without qualifications and worked a series of cleaning jobs when I was growing up, manual work which then morphed into secretarial work of which she was very proud. Although my mum tried studying as a mature student to gain a GCSE, she did not complete the course, her shame at her inability to follow along in class burned through in her relaying of frustrations with the teacher, the other students, and the lack of help. Consequently, I already knew by the time I sat my own GCSEs that these represented an important juncture for me. If I passed these exams, I would have choices. I could leave the school I did not like and go to college and study a topic which I loved (media, film, and photography). Although I did not enjoy being at school, I did not share my mum’s shame about academic ability. Despite not showing any aptitude for academia as far as teachers were concerned, not being one of the ‘bright’ kids at school and so passing under the radar, I loved to read and devoured everything I laid my hands on. I also had an unending curiosity with the social world and how experiences shape our pathways in life. My experience of being an ‘outsider’ in several educational settings during my formative years no doubt affording me a distance and ability to observe differences and injustices.

At a young age, I was astute enough to know that talent and ability could be manufactured with the help of some tutoring or clever parents and that inequalities underpinned so many experiences. My own experiences of being plucked from a familiar environment and then learning to navigate new spaces and people taught me that change and transformation are

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<sup>1</sup> Popular TV soap opera about the goings-on in a working-class suburb of London.

part of the narratives of so many lives. I could not have articulated any of these musings during my younger years, but these experiences left a significant impression. My desire to examine classed inequities was foregrounded during my early 20s when I opted to study at university to learn more about issues of social justice and politics. I took an evening class as a stepping stone to university life which led to an undergraduate degree and then a Master's, and, after years of low-skilled bar, cleaning, and factory work I made use of my degrees and worked in social justice roles in the voluntary sector with refugees and asylum seekers, and in higher education.

In the 2010s I was an equality officer in a post-92 institution in Wales when I began to connect my own experiences as a working-class person with being a professional in the higher education landscape. My role focused on the nine protected characteristics, designing action plans, monitoring progress towards equality objectives, and setting up initiatives that were designed to afford better engagement and representation for students and staff with minority protected characteristics. Social class was entirely outside of the equalities portfolio of the university I worked at, as it was for all other institutions in Wales which I collaborated with, and was instead a segregated and limited focus of the institution that was channelled through widening access teams. And yet, many equalities discussions routed back to the impact and intersection of socio-economic status on student application rates, as well as retention, and outcomes.

I was aware that the silo framing of strands of identity within the Equality Act, which delineates the nine protected characteristics and arbitrarily treats them as segregated elements of a whole, permitted intersectionality to be overlooked, particularly factors relating to social class, a characteristic which had not even been afforded the same status to begin with. When I sought out the views of others on the connection of social class to equalities in higher education, I was a lone voice. Apparently, we had enough to do with combating regular forms of discrimination and colleagues did not share my views. Working-class students were expected to just fit in at university, so it was deemed a non-issue.

However, the talk (or non-talk) around social class in higher education reminded me of wider discourses of ethnicity, sexuality, and disability when everyone was expected to assimilate into majority groupings. Policymaking had thankfully moved on from this position and I was responsible for designing race, gender, LGBTQ+, and disability action plans in my work role, helping the university to become more inclusive and supportive of minority students. Yet a

blinkeredness towards social class inequality remained. When an opportunity arose to apply for PhD funding, I nervously put all my eggs in one basket and took the chance to formulate a proposal that would enable me to explore connections between social class, higher education, equalities and discrimination. Returning to study in my late 30s, a newly single mother of three young children who had grappled with social class for more than 30 years, seemed completely do-able at the time. I was excited to explore the topic academically, with empirical research that would shine a much-needed light on this understated issue, hopefully to the benefit of policymakers, institutions, and the working-class students who would come after me. This thesis is the research project which resulted from that intention.

## 1.2 Context and focus of the study

The scope of my research cuts across the political landscape of the UK and devolution in Wales. Education is a devolved power, and the Senedd in Cardiff oversees Welsh educational policymaking for the nation. Equalities legislation however is a ‘reserved’ power, meaning that the UK Parliament in Westminster passes statute on behalf of the UK nations. That said, as outlined in Chapter 2, the Senedd has the ability to incorporate specific aspects of equalities legislation in Wales, as does the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood, setting themselves apart from English law.

My study explores the lived experiences of a sample of working-class students within higher education in Wales and seeks to understand the varied motivations behind their higher education journeys and explore their future aspirations. Against a backdrop of social mobility rhetoric, my research focuses on the extent to which narratives of social mobility and meritocracy feature in the perceptions and experiences of higher education journeys, in a higher education context that is concerned with attracting working-class, and other non-traditional students to the field in attempts to increase equality of engagement with tertiary learning. Social class has long been acknowledged as a determining factor in the life chances of individuals: those raised in low socio-economic status environments experience multiple layers of inequality impacting on their educational success, pay prospects and ultimately their ability to lead prosperous and secure lives (Social Mobility Commission 2017). Such disadvantage is often difficult to overcome as social class is one of the main gateways, and equally one of the main barriers, to opportunity and choice. Accordingly, a person’s social class frames and dominates their access to resources, financial security and forms of capital.

Education, particularly higher education which this study is concerned with, has long been heralded as a vehicle for achieving social mobility and raising the life chances of the poorest in society (Mckenzie 2022), a key focus of successive governments since the 1980s (Cunningham and Samson 2021). In our neoliberal UK society, responsibility for lifting oneself out of poverty and disadvantage is firmly framed as the responsibility of the individual, with stigma and shame being twin levers designed to induce self-improvement (Folkes 2019) all the while overlooking the role of structural barriers and difficulties such as the state of the economy (Tyler and Slater 2018). Despite the dominance of social mobility as a key aim which has remained at the top of the political agenda for decades, scholars (such as Pearce 2011) argue that it is failing to deliver on its promises and that little net change has been evidenced for working-class students. As the Social Mobility Commission (2024, p.24) states, the cost of funding higher education is a risk to be balanced against the potential benefits; benefits which are seeing a steady decline in recent years:

“While better educational qualifications make upward occupational and income mobility much more likely, they are no guarantee of later success. Coupled with the costs (both upfront and student debt) of university study, this situation has understandably resulted in some of those who have committed their time and effort to gaining a degree questioning the financial value of doing so”

Rates of participation in higher education have also been declining and despite government and institutional efforts to widen access to non-traditional cohort of students for several decades, enrolment of working-class students remains low “Just 29.2% attend university compared with 49.4% of non-working-class students. Furthermore, only 5.3% make it to high-ranking universities, versus 14.4% of non-working-class students” (Woolsey and Major-Smith 2025, n.p.). Upon graduation, the picture remains bleak, particularly among the elite / non-elite split within the higher education sector, with the Social Mobility Commission (2024) highlighting how those who graduate from elite institutions typically earn more than those students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend non-elite institutions, noting how working-class students are not only underrepresented at such universities, but are missing out on income and opportunities.

Despite such concerning trends, the commitment to social mobility remains high, not only politically but also within the higher education policy landscape. Higher education institutions and successive UK and Welsh national governments have prioritised widening

access to tertiary education to encourage uptake to a range of underrepresented students, including those from working-class backgrounds. Costly initiatives seek to encourage these target cohorts to engage with higher education, inducing the self-improvement agenda which Folkes (2019) referred to, although it is long-argued that academia is “a field that is dominated by and privileges middle-class habitus and forms of capital” (Bradshaw et al. 2025, p.181).

Alongside the focus on widening access, the equalities agenda has grown exponentially within higher education since the enactment of the Equality Act 2010. However, institutions have been slow in responding to the intersection of social class and equalities policymaking within the context of higher education (Bradshaw et al. 2025). Presently, with social class a non-protected characteristic under the Act (Walkerdine 2021), as discussed in detail in Chapter 2, working-class students have no recourse to the specific protections afforded to other minority students, intersectionality aside. My study is also therefore concerned with the experiences of these students from an equalities perspective, and it seeks to understand how working-class student journeys can be understood through the lens of equality, specifically bias and discrimination on the basis of social class.

### 1.3 Research questions

As noted in section 1.2, this study intends to develop the existing knowledge base around the lived experiences of working-class students, specifically exploring perceptions of whether class-based bias and discrimination featured in their journeys through higher education.

The research questions this study is concerned with are as follows:

1. To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?
2. In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, institutional narratives of social mobility?
3. How might working-class students’ higher education journeys be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?
4. Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

## 1.4 Guide to the thesis

The thesis comprises nine chapters, including this first one. Chapter 2: Equalities within the higher education landscape: the Welsh context, presents the legislative and policy context of both higher education and equalities in Wales. It provides an overview of the expansion of the higher education sector in recent decades and the emergence of the widening access agenda that has come to dominate non-traditional student engagement. It then presents the central legislation that governs equalities in the UK - the Equality Act 2010 and the socio-economic duty in Wales specifically - and provides an overview of the main principles and levers within the legislation that are pertinent to advancing equalities within the higher education sector. It explores the limitations of the Act and the ways in which institutions have chosen to enact the legislation within institutional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) portfolios, drawing out opportunities and barriers which both help and hinder progress within advancing equalities priorities across the sector.

Chapter 3: Thematic review of literature, explores pertinent literature and previous research which provides the wider academic context to this study. It presents an overview of the central concepts and theoretical frameworks that have influenced this research. Following this, a thematic review by topic area is provided which explores three key areas: firstly, classed identities and the construction of identity; secondly, classed experiences of education, the role of the family unit, and the influence of social mobility and meritocracy; and thirdly, classism in higher education and positive classed identities. Chapter 3 also outlines gaps in the existing literature and explains how these have given rise to the research questions.

Chapter 4: Methodology, introduces the participants in my study with full participant portraits included in Appendix A. It explains how participant accounts were generated via qualitative creative and oral methods, and provides a rationale for the selection of these methods. The chapter offers details of the analytical approach to the data set and explains how thematic analysis was employed to generate the themes which formed the basis of the four findings chapters. Chapter 4 also reflects on researcher positionality, the ethical considerations I negotiated, and the mitigations I put in place to overcome the study's limitations.

Chapters 5 to 8 set out the empirical findings thematically and attend to the research questions. Chapter 5: Navigating identity, examines participants' sense of their own classed

identities and how they define social class through the application of class signifiers. It also explores how participants navigated their classed identities in different fields, particularly within the higher education landscape. Chapter 6: Family and education, focuses on the role that education played in the participants' upbringing and the extent to which formal education was valued within the family unit. This chapter also examines the role of parenthood and the complex changes to family relationships which participants needed to manage during their higher education journeys. Chapter 7: Hope and uncertainty, the higher education experience, looks at the lived experiences of participants during their higher education journeys and examines participants' understandings of meritocracy and social mobility. It considers participants' motivations, expectations, and aspirations for educational journeys and presents the challenges facing the participants as they navigated the higher education field. In Chapter 8: "That's just how it is" But does it need to be? Overcoming classism for inclusivity, participants' journeys are explored through the lens of bias and discrimination and personal experiences of classism within higher education. This chapter examines notions of student contributions, presenting participants' views on the capitals they bring to higher education institutions and whether they feel these are valued and harnessed by education providers.

The final chapter in the thesis, Chapter 9: Conclusions, revisits each research question in light of the findings presented. It highlights the key contributions of the study and its limitations, and provides recommendations for further research. Lastly, I conclude by offering some personal reflections on the topic and the process of undertaking the research for this thesis.

## Chapter 2: Equalities within the higher education landscape: the Welsh context

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of key legislative and policy frameworks which ground my study within its broader context. It begins by presenting an overview of the evolution of access to higher education since the 1980s during which time successive governments, driven by neoliberal ideals concerned with meritocracy and engendering social mobility (Cunningham and Samson 2021), have prioritised widening access in tertiary education to traditionally underrepresented cohorts. The chapter then presents the central legislation that governs equalities in the UK - the Equality Act 2010 and the socio-economic duty in Wales specifically - and provides an overview of the main principles and levers within the legislation that are pertinent to the higher education landscape.

The latter part of this chapter is concerned with the evolving ways that higher education institutions, as designated public bodies, enact legislation through widening access and equalities policymaking. Although the socio-economic duty presents an opportunity to cohere the distinct statutes that govern widening access and equalities in higher education, tensions remain in the framing of these within policy-making discourse. With widening access approaches, the main driver for addressing socio-economic disadvantage, the lack of coherence with equality priorities undermines progress in class equality within the higher education sector.

The legislative and policy contexts discussed in this chapter are intended to support the reader when navigating the themed review of literature in Chapter 3, as well as the data analysis within my four findings chapters. Gaps across the themes in the literature related to the aims of this study and its research questions - in both this legislative and policy section as well as the thematic review - are summarised at the end of the next chapter, in sections 3.4 and 3.5.

### 2.2 Legislation: Tertiary education and equalities

This section presents an overview of the key legislation that governs policymaking within higher education and equalities in the UK. From the expansion of the sector in the early 1990s to more recent changes within Wales, it is evident that post-compulsory education has been, and remains, a crucial policy area for government. Alongside changes within

higher education, the last 20 years have also seen a significant shift in the coherence of equalities legislation. The Equality Act 2010 brought together several separate strands of legislation into one supra-Act, streamlining anti-discrimination measures and protections for the sector. As will be shown, whilst these duties placed on higher education institutions under both strands of legislation provide opportunities for engendering change, there are limitations which threaten to undermine significant progress being made in tackling class-based inequalities.

### 2.2.1 The changing face of UK and Welsh education legislation

From the late 1980s, the UK higher education landscape has evolved significantly. Widening access to post-compulsory study for a broader wider range of individuals had been a concern raised as far back as the early post-World War II years and into the 1960s, formed from a desire to foster a prosperous post-war society as part of national recovery plans (Mckenzie 2022). The 1988 Education Act introduced the National Curriculum<sup>2</sup> as a blanket approach to compulsory education across the UK, reflective of neoliberal desires from the 1980s to engender social mobility in the populace, which remains prevalent today.

The 1988 Act was swiftly followed by the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 which introduced two significant changes that still underpin the higher education landscape across the UK today. Firstly, the 1992 Act provided degree awarding powers to polytechnic educational colleges and allowed them to convert to higher education institutions, thereafter, commonly referred to as ‘post-92’ institutions. There are four such institutions in Wales, some of which feature in this study. Secondly, the 1992 Act saw the creation of funding and regulatory bodies for oversight of the higher education sector across the UK, with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)<sup>3</sup> formed in 1992 to oversee Welsh institutions.

Devolution in 1999 provided the Welsh Parliament (the Senedd) with autonomy over all stages of educational legislature and policymaking within Wales. The last notable change to education legislation, besides the creation of Medr, was the 2004 Higher Education Act which permitted institutions to begin charging students tuition fees of up to £3000, increases which have since been permitted to rise to £9535 in Wales, as of the 2025/26

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<sup>2</sup> The National Curriculum for all primary and secondary settings was replaced in Wales by the [‘Curriculum for Wales’](#) in 2021

<sup>3</sup> HEFCW was replaced by [Medr](#) as the regulator for Wales in 2024.

academic year. With the cost of studying in Wales and indeed England having risen exponentially, Welsh Government undertook a review into student finance. The subsequent Diamond Review<sup>4</sup> led to several changes designed, from a government perspective, to ensure that higher education remained accessible, affordable, and more flexible. Changes included the introduction of combined approaches to funding - such as loans and maintenance grants, the introduction of postgraduate taught and research loans to encourage engagement in higher education beyond undergraduate level, and an increased focus on supporting flexibility through changes to part-time provision funding.

Besides educational legislation, within the Welsh context another prominent statute is the crosscutting Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015<sup>5</sup> which sets out seven well-being goals designed to improve the economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being of all citizens in Wales (Welsh Government 2015). One of the seven goals - A More Equal Wales - defined as “a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio-economic background and circumstances)” (Welsh Government 2015, p.7), firmly places equalities at the centre of the sustained and long-term focus of this priority area, the overarching legislation for which is explored in section 2.2.2.

With the creation of HEFCW in the early 1990’s, Wales gained a national regulator with oversight and funding responsibilities, answerable to the Senedd following devolution in 1999. With regards to widening access, an important role for HEFCW was to regulate the mandatory Fee and Access Plans of Welsh institutions. These plans were devised following the raising of the cap on tuition fees and required institutions to utilise some of their fee income to promote EDI and monitor progress for traditionally underrepresented students at key stages in higher education journeys: recruitment, retention, and outcomes. Students with particular characteristics, such as those living in pre-designated areas of deprivation, were identified as priority groups for this widening access activity and are identified and tracked using data such as the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)<sup>6</sup>.

In recent years, royal assent of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 led to the dissolution of HEFCW and the creation of a new regulator, Medr, which has collective

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<sup>4</sup> [Diamond reforms to student finance: evaluation plan 2024](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation](#)

responsibility for all tertiary education in Wales, bringing together the further education, adult education, apprenticeships, and higher education sectors with the intention of cohering the post-16 offer and streamlining strategic priorities, of which equality of opportunity in education is one (Medr 2024).

### 2.2.2 The Equality Act 2010

Aligning with the higher education legislative context, equalities legislation has a long history and has undergone many changes over the last 20 years. Unlike higher education however, equalities is a non-devolved area and as such is determined at UK-level via Westminster and the UK Parliament. The Equality Act 2010<sup>7</sup> brought together myriad pieces of legislation related to race, sex, gender, and disability to name a few, under one statute to guard against discrimination. The Act defines three types of discrimination, summarised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2019) as:

1. Direct discrimination: when a person is treated less favourably than another person because of a protected characteristic;
2. Indirect discrimination: when a provision, criteria or practice is applied in the same way for all people or a particular group, but this has the effect of putting others sharing a protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage;
3. Discrimination arising from disability: when a disabled person is treated unfavourably because of something connected with their disability, and such treatment cannot be justified.

Drawing a distinction between legal understandings and the inclusion of discrimination within legislative frameworks, and how this compares and contrasts with a 'laypersons' definition of what might constitute discrimination, Khaitan (2015, p.2) argues that

“For laypersons, discrimination entails some fault [...] It [discrimination law] applies only to a select group of duty-bearers, whereas the ordinary understanding condemns intentional discrimination in all contexts.”

This is a helpful perspective for the purposes of my study, which explores notions of how bias and discrimination are defined and understood subjectively by the participants, and how these understandings fit within the context of existing legal definitions and regulatory concerns - such as the Equality Act as well as Medr's prioritisation of schemes to redress

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<sup>7</sup> [Equality and Human Rights Commission: Equality Act 2010](#)

inequities (as covered in section 2.3.1). The participant accounts of their lived experience are presented throughout the empirical Chapters 5 – 8, with specific focus paid to classism as discrimination in Chapter 8. Alongside legal definitions of discrimination, the Equality Act also introduced the concept of ‘protected characteristics’ – broadly understood as a set of social identities that disproportionately attract inequalities which are used to categorise people into groups based on these shared identities. Consequently, the Equality Act affords protection from the types of discrimination listed above on the basis of nine protected characteristics, namely: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion/belief, sex, and sexual orientation. For the purpose of my study, it is important to note at this early stage that social class is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. As outlined in section 2.2.2.1, whilst some provision is made within the Equality Act for social class, this is not on par with the specific legal protections afforded to individuals on the basis of the nine protected characteristics. As Benn (2020, p.31) states

“Despite the seriousness of classism, the UK Equality Act 2010 (EA) does not include class as a ‘protected characteristic’. Mind the gap: classism is not a wrong known to discrimination law in the UK. This means that, in discrimination law in the UK, a person has no claim based on class”.

Through the Act, social class is relegated as a “(non)protected characteristic” despite calls for it to be recognised as such due to entrenched socio-economic disadvantage operating throughout society and its institutions (Walkerdine 2021, p.6), as will be explored throughout this thesis and specifically in sections 2.2.2.1 and 2.2.2.2.

#### *2.2.2.1 Public Sector Equality Duty*

Besides adhering to the anti-discrimination requirements of the Equality Act, as designated public bodies higher education institutions are also bound by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) within the Act, commonly referred to as ‘the general duty’ which requires them to pay due regard to advancing the following three equality aims (EHRC, 2022):

1. Put an end to unlawful behaviour that is banned by the Equality Act 2010, including discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
2. Advance equal opportunities between people who have a protected characteristic and those who do not;

3. Foster good relations between people who have a protected characteristic and those who do not.

In addition to this UK-wide duty, numerous specific duties on public bodies in Wales outline further requirements, such as obligations to assess and monitor policies and practices, to identify and collect information about equality information, and to set organisational equality objectives at least every four years - with the requirement to publish the outcomes of these equality objectives so these are in the public domain and accessible. Since the early 2010s when the Equality Act came into force, higher education institutions in Wales have tended to funnel their equality objectives through the formation of Strategic Equality Plans (SEPs) (discussed in more detail in section 2.3.2) a mandatory requirement under the specific Welsh duties. SEPs are a central tool used by Welsh higher education institutions to capture a range of institutional EDI priorities, delivered through measurable initiatives and annual reporting which cut across all protected characteristics.

#### *2.2.2.2 The 'socio-economic duty'*

Although social class is not a legally recognised protected characteristic, within the Equality Act a socio-economic duty was incorporated, often referred to as 'the Section 1 duty' or 'the socio-economic duty'. The duty applies to designated public bodies and outlines expectations of them regarding minimising inequalities based on socio-economic characteristics, as defined in the Act : "An authority to which this section applies must, when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise its functions, have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage" (Equality Act 2010). Three key areas of focus make up the Section 1 duty with public bodies required to:

- Have evidence to understand the potential impact of their decisions on different groups, including evidence from consultation if appropriate.
- Consciously and actively consider the relevant factors before and at the time a decision is made, ensuring the duty influences the decision-making process.
- Not delegate the duty to third parties carrying out functions on their behalf.

For many years however, the Section 1 duty was dormant in the UK, with a lack of political will – despite its inclusion in the first instance – and successive governments choosing not to enact it (Parken 2022). Despite this reticence on a UK-level, through subsequent legislation

the duty came into force in Scotland in 2018, through the Scotland Act 2016, and in Wales in 2021 through its incorporation in the Wales Act 2017. Although this marked a positive step forward in terms of the acknowledgement and provision of social-class within equalities legislation in Wales and consequently in public sector policymaking, higher education institutions were not included as authorities to which the Section 1 duty applies. As Medr notes, although neither they nor “higher education providers, are currently named public bodies, [Medr] has committed to ‘act within the spirit of’ the duty, as expected by Welsh Government and we expect regulated institutions to do the same” (Medr 2024, p.40). Whilst Welsh Government has produced numerous guidance documents and monitoring tools to support public bodies with implementing the Section 1 duty, such as scrutiny frameworks, template impact assessments and guidance, and progress trackers, it is unclear whether these are being utilised by the higher education sector in Wales, or indeed the extent to which these institutions are committed to honouring Medr’s request to ‘act within the spirit’ of the duty and incorporate socio-economic considerations into their policy-making. Further examination of equalities policymaking in higher education is explored later in this chapter, in section 2.3.2.

#### *2.2.2.3 Limitations of the Act*

Although the Equality Act was a cornerstone in the evolution of legal protections to combat inequalities, there are several important limitations in the legislation, particularly in relation to class, which undermine its potential effectiveness. Firstly, the silo nature of the nine protected characteristics, with social class existing in the fringes via the Section 1 duty, combined with limited, if any, appreciation of intersectionality creates artificial borders between innate characteristics that deny the multifaceted identities and lived experiences that we all hold. This might be less consequential if it were not that policymakers and institutions have mirrored the Act’s silo mentality in their approaches to the design and implementation of EDI frameworks and initiatives, as discussed in section 2.3.2.

Secondly, the language of the Act moves current discourse, and subsequently policymaking, away from a nuanced focus on equity – of opportunities, access and outcomes – to the narrower field of equality of opportunity. Whilst these terms can on the surface appear to be interchangeable, equity instead acknowledges that playing fields are not level and that opportunities cannot be taken up equally, leading to a more in-depth and comprehensive appreciation of the multidimensional aspect of inequalities. The prominent placement of

equality over equity leads to reductionist policymaking and oversights, further explored in the fourth of my findings chapters.

Thirdly, higher education institutions being excluded from the list of designated bodies required to enact the Section 1 duty presents a quandary for those concerned with equalities within higher education. Evidence shows that accountability, rather than the requested 'goodwill' of regulators like Medr on the sector, is a determining factor in the likelihood of equality within decision-making being embedded in public bodies (WCPP 2021). In addition, as the regulator of equalities in the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has a large, UK-wide remit with limited enforcement powers on duly named public bodies across all aspects of the Act. Consequently, their enforcement options are limited when compared to other regulators, with no powers invested in them to fine institutions in breach of equalities legislation.

Lastly, as evidenced throughout this thesis, classism is a pervasive and longstanding issue within society and, consequently, the higher education sector. However, the inclusion of socio-economic status as a 'due regard' duty rather than a protected characteristic in its own right presents significant challenges in effectively tackling class-based disparities in higher education. As Benn (2020, p.30) argues: "Classism is a form of discrimination. We should use discrimination law to address classism". The nine protected characteristics afford individuals protection from all forms of legally recognised discrimination, a significantly higher level of protection than ascribed under the Section 1 duty which Medr asks institutions to invoke. The (non)characteristic status of social class and subsequent lack of prominence within the Act, as my findings will evidence, renders classism invisible by comparison.

### 2.3 (In)equality in higher education: Evolution of institutional approaches

This section explores how higher education institutions have enacted the legislation that governs widening access and equalities within the sector. It begins with an overview of how widening access to higher education has been conceptualised and embedded in policymaking in Wales, before moving on to present some of the flagship schemes that Welsh Government, through the regulator and funder Medr, and institutions have developed to deliver programmes of widening access. The section then examines the enactment of equalities legislation by critiquing institutional approaches to equality planning and the development of strategic equality objectives, highlighting limitations in the design and

implementation of these particularly in regard to intersectionality and the exclusion of social class.

### 2.3.1 Widening Access

As noted in section 2.2.1, improving access to higher education has been a political priority in the UK for many decades, a concept which has become known as ‘widening access’ or ‘widening participation’ within higher education discourse and policymaking. Widening access is a concept in higher education built on the understanding that some groups of students do not access or participate in higher education studies, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Budd 2017). Mass expansion of higher education in the UK over the last 30 years widened access on a scale never before seen (Harrison and Hatt 2012). Yet inequalities in the access, participation, and retention of low-socio economic status students, particularly in elite institutions, has been a blight on this progress: “While the number of young people entering [higher education] generally has undoubtedly expanded, young people from lower social class groups have not had equal access to elite institutions and as such remain a minority group within such contexts.” (Byrom, 2009 p.210).

As Harrison and Waller (2018) and McKenzie (2022) highlight, *access* and *participation* not only refers to admission to university but has also come to include conceptualisations of the student experience. This is an increasingly important consideration for institutions since the early 2000’s when tuition fees were introduced, a key concern for the sector with the risk that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be put off from attending university due to prohibitive costs (Evans 2014). Widening access has therefore come to be defined as the process of developing strategies and policies which seek to improve the access and participation of a broad range of traditionally underrepresented students often referred to as *disadvantaged*, *first-generation*, *low-income*, or *non-traditional* (Budd 2017). This includes students that are listed as priority groups in Wales by Medr - such as students from the bottom two quintiles of the WIMD, and those from areas with traditionally low rates of participation in higher education. An important consideration when regarding monitoring data is to note that for many widening access strategies, geographical location has become a central criterion for the targeting of initiatives. As McKenzie (2022, p.11) points out this is however without any “consideration for other factors such as family characteristics or individual experiences”. This is particularly important to bear in mind when reading my

study, which allowed participants to self-identity their classed backgrounds (as outlined in section 4.3.1) to take into account broader aspects of classed identities.

Although the desire to widen access originally emerged from post-war market-led drivers (Kettley 2007) to provide long-term economic prosperity, through the continuous evolution of higher education legislation it is evident that access to higher education is viewed by Welsh Government as an important feature of a socially just Wales, however monitoring data presents some concerning trends. Universities Wales (2025a) highlights how the rates of participation for 18-year-olds in higher education in Wales dropped in the year 2023-24 to 32%, a decrease from the previous year and lower than the UK average of 40.6%, with them further noting that: “the gap in higher education participation between the most and least disadvantaged is wider in Wales than elsewhere in the UK” (Universities Wales 2025b, p.2). This is a trend mirrored in applications from mature students in Wales, with the 2023-24 figures representing the lowest number of applications made per annum in the last decade (Universities Wales 2025a). In Wales, legislation dictates that the Welsh higher education sector set strategic priorities to widen access to their institutions in attempts to combat such downturns in non-traditional participation. Through the adoption of widening access as a strategic aim, institutions acknowledge there are: “structural barriers and constraints that may impede progression, for example, through educational disadvantage or the operation of the higher education sector” (Harrison and Waller 2018, p. 141) for these cohorts of students.

All Welsh higher education institutions have fee and access plans and widening access strategies which provide the frameworks under which widening access policy is developed. In Wales, several flagship schemes are delivered through partnership working amongst institutions and Medr, most notably the Seren Academy<sup>8</sup> and Reaching Wider<sup>9</sup>. In addition to these, Welsh institutions participate in UK-wide initiatives such as Step-Up<sup>10</sup> and The Brilliant Club<sup>11</sup>. Widening access schemes rely on a mixture of government funding (Reaching Wider

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<sup>8</sup> [The Seren Academy](#) is a Welsh Government funded programme aimed at supporting ‘the aspirations and ambitions of the most able learners, helping to widen their horizon [...] regardless of socio-economic background’.

<sup>9</sup> [Reaching Wider](#) is a partnership of tertiary education providers in Wales funded by Welsh Government which aims to support the widening of access to higher education for students from underrepresented groups, including those in the bottom two quintiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD).

<sup>10</sup> Step Up is a UK-wide scheme for college and sixth form students to experience university life through summer schools and academic masterclasses which aims to equip them with the skills and knowledge to apply to university.

<sup>11</sup> [The Brilliant Club](#) is a UK charity which aims to support social mobility for ‘less advantaged’ students through increasing their access to elite universities.

and the Seren Academy) as well as charitable donations via trusts and foundations (The Brilliant Club), and contributions from institutional tuition fees (Reaching Wider), as agreed in fee and access plans.

Besides schemes like these targeted at KS4<sup>12</sup> in secondary schools, institutions offer a range of other widening access provision such as contextual admissions – which take into consideration individual circumstances and background, rather than solely focusing on academic achievements – as well as entry-level qualifications such as foundation degrees, part-time provision, and adult learning. Besides centralised programmes, institutions otherwise have discretion over the widening access schemes and initiatives they fund and design (Evans et al. 2019), which allows for a variety of initiatives including outreach activities, work within the local community, and widening access research (Budd 2017). Although reflective of the autonomy of institutions, such variation in the breadth of initiatives raises questions about how institutions interpret and enact widening access policy (Evans et al. 2019) and equity in the higher education offer across Wales.

It is evident that these schemes are costly to run. For example, the longstanding Reaching Wider programme, which has been in operation since 2002, received a budget of almost £6m for the academic years 2022-25 inclusive. Systemic inequality between the working- and middle- classes led to the development of these expensive schemes throughout the UK in a bid to improve access and participation and level the field. However, their effectiveness has been questioned, as previous research suggests that these efforts have not produced the social mobility gains purported for working-class students and have been little more than window dressing (James 2018; Harrison and Waller 2018; Cunningham and Samson 2021). In terms of widening access, James (2018: n.p) reflects on the lack of progress in making higher education more equitable noting that: “the overall picture is one of net failure”, a central theme of this thesis which is discussed in more depth in section 2.3.2.

### 2.3.2 Strategic Equality Plans: both a help and a hindrance?

Through the Equality Act 2010 duties, since 2012 Welsh higher education institutions have been required to monitor EDI data for staff and students and use this to produce SEPs which outline equality objectives related to each of the nine protected characteristics over a four-year cycle. SEPs must also detail how institutions monitor progress against their objectives,

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<sup>12</sup> KS4 covers the final two years of compulsory secondary education for students aged 14 to 16 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

the timescales involved in meeting equality objectives, and the data and monitoring arrangements they have in place to track progress against targets. SEPs must be published in the public domain and institutions need to also publish annual progress reports (against the objectives, but also in relation to pay inequalities) (EHRC 2014).

Despite guidance from the regulator which states that equality objectives must be provided for each of the protected characteristics (EHRC 2014) it is not uncommon for institutions to weight these differently in practice, with a more overt focus on some characteristics – such as race, LGBTQ+, and gender - over others. Several high-profile schemes have been developed to assist higher education institutions, for a fee, in planning and tracking progress against their equality objectives. These include charter marks and national rankings, such as Advance HE's Race Equality<sup>13</sup> and Athena SWAN<sup>14</sup> (gender) Charters as well as Stonewall's LGBTQ+ Diversity Champions<sup>15</sup> programme, all of which have gained status within the sector as key indicators of an institution's commitment and progress towards EDI targets. Whilst these schemes are reflective of key inequalities that have characterised the higher education sector throughout the decades (Bhopal and Piktin 2020; Rosser et al. 2019) the focus on a few key characteristics results in others being de-prioritised. Although most institutions have broad universal objectives that are relatable to all protected characteristics, the generalisability of these means that some characteristics are afforded more prominence than others.

The silo mentality within institutional EDI planning, with objectives tied to individual protected characteristics, is indicative of a lack of more sophisticated understandings in how identities intersect and the interplay of discrimination across characteristics (Nichols and Stahl 2019). Whilst universities can choose to develop their equality priorities and SEPs as thematic and cross-cutting, it is more common for characteristics to be compartmentalised and addressed as separate entities, creating false boundaries that belie the complex identities and lived experiences of students within higher education.

Whilst the concept of discrimination is defined within the legal framework of the Equality Act, bias is not and is therefore harder to define and, arguably, to determine. Bias and discrimination can be understood as existing on a continuum, ranging from subtle forms of

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<sup>13</sup> [Race Equality Charter](#) mark

<sup>14</sup> [Athena SWAN](#) charter mark

<sup>15</sup> [Diversity Champions](#) programme

bias to overt acts of discrimination. Within higher education equality discourse and planning, bias is often framed as the expression of *explicit/implicit* beliefs and behaviours towards members of different social groupings, often directed towards those who hold minority protected characteristics. Explicit bias is ‘known’ to the person holding such views (Sabin 2022; Vela et al. 2022) and, by extension, these opinions are therefore consciously held. In contrast, implicit bias, referred to in higher education EDI discourse as *unconscious* bias, operates outside of conscious awareness (Vela et al. 2022). By this reasoning, whilst the key differentiator between consciously or unconsciously held biased beliefs is *awareness*, it remains that both types of bias can result in discriminatory behaviours, practices and policies on the part of individuals as well as higher education institutions themselves. In their work on racism within higher education regarding racial disadvantage, Tate and Page (2018) highlight how higher education institutions have embraced notions of unconscious bias and developed initiatives to address inequalities that are seemingly unintended. However, they warn against this as a watering down of the discrimination continuum though an emphasis on bias noting that: “unconscious bias has become the magic bullet for organizations, including universities, in the face of the continued occurrence of racism” (Tate and Page 2018, p.1). In an argument which lends itself to matters concerning social class, or indeed any protected characteristic, in the same paper Tate and Page go on to argue that the framing of racism in this way overlooks the role of structural inequalities, maintains the supremacy of ‘whiteness’ (the majority grouping in this instance) within institutions, and absolves the higher education sector of effecting any meaningful change, issues explored in more detail in relation to social class in section 8.3.2.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have situated my study within the legislative and policy frameworks that shape higher education and equalities in Wales, highlighting how neoliberal ideals of meritocracy and social mobility (Cunningham and Samson 2021) have driven successive reforms. Key legislation, such as the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022, have seen a commitment to the widening of higher education to non-traditional students within the sector, while the Equality Act 2010 cohered anti-discrimination protections across the nine protected characteristics, embedding equalities priorities within institutional EDI frameworks across Wales. While these mechanisms demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, their siloed approach and emphasis on equality rather than equity risk perpetuating structural disadvantage: the

available data illustrates that successive Welsh government administrations, and higher education policymakers, have not been able to fulfil the commitments they set out. The absence of social class as a protected characteristic (Walkerdine 2021) is therefore a critical limitation in the legislation, highlighting persistent gaps in addressing class-based inequalities.

As shown in this chapter, legislative frameworks lead to artificial boundaries and silo policymaking and practices across the separate strands of education and equalities legislation, with separate regulatory bodies meaning there is little, if any, coherence in practice. As such, current structures do not reflect the complexity of lived experiences of social class and the intersection of class with different protected characteristics, a theme which is explored in more depth in section 3.2.1 of the next chapter. Additionally, weaknesses in the regulatory frameworks further compound these challenges. Although SEPs fall under EHRC oversight, there is little evidence of active regulatory monitoring when it comes to progressing equalities agendas in the sector. Similarly, although Medr has encouraged institutions to adopt the socio-economic duty, reliance on voluntary compliance in contrast to class being afforded protected characteristic status presents significant challenges in effectively tackling class-based disparities in higher education.

The next chapter builds on the overview I have provided here with a thematic review of literature which, when taken together (and alongside the gaps I identify in section 3.4), have informed my research design and the research questions I developed for this study.

## Chapter 3: Thematic review of literature

### 3.1 Introduction

Building on the policy context, set out in Chapter 2, in relation to both higher education and equalities, this chapter presents a thematic review of the literature which underpins the study. It begins by providing the academic literary context for central concepts and theoretical frameworks associated with the study, drawing on these to examine two central areas connected to the core research questions, and subsequent findings. As such, this chapter is presented thematically and covers the following areas: (i) identity and the lived experience of class; and (ii) classed experiences of education. The chapter then evaluates limitations and gaps within the existing literature, both in relation to this thematic review as well as the policy context outlined in Chapter 2, before presenting the research questions which this study will endeavour to attend to.

### 3.2 Identity and the lived experience of class

This section provides an overview of the key concepts and theoretical frameworks utilised in this study alongside a review of key literature regarding the construction of class classifications, their application in the literature, and limitations of these frameworks which influenced the research design for the present study.

#### 3.2.1 A Bourdieusian lens

To understand class within social spaces and make meaning of working-class student experiences in higher education within the context of socially just concerns, it was useful to draw on Bourdieu's pivotal conceptual work on habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence. Bourdieu's theoretical frameworks provide an expansive overview of societal inequalities and of the reproduction of capital and inequalities within the higher education field (Bourdieu 1986) and these have therefore provided an overarching theoretical framework within which to understand and analyse the experiences and perspectives of the participants in my study.

Class is a central concept within equality disclosure and one which has been extensively researched and argued over in the social sciences. As an intersectional element of identity, class cuts across all of the legally recognised nine protected characteristics. However, due to its subjective and changing nature, defining class in representative and meaningful ways continues to prove problematic for social scientists (Pilgrim-Brown 2013). Binaries or siloed categorisations, whilst potentially helpful - and certainly deemed necessary by researchers

and policymakers, often fall short of adequately capturing the varied lived experiences of individuals, rendering such categorisations incomplete. Bourdieu himself was opposed to the constraints of binary explanations and sought to instead reveal synergies as well as tensions within sociological class-discourse and applications of theory (Reay 2019). Whilst I am not proposing new definitions which can resolve these difficulties within this thesis, I argue that it is essential that broader understandings and definitions of class, and class in relation to identity, are formulated: ones which are more encompassing of the sometimes ambiguous, moving picture of social class identities which working-class individuals negotiate as part of their daily lived experience.

Bourdieu's habitus is a fundamental concept that provides opportunities for thinking relationally about how our roles as social actors are formed within the spaces we occupy. Habitus encapsulates the myriad human interactions and exchanges which present in different arenas and can be explained as

“the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world...Habitus is rooted in family upbringing (socialization within the family) and conditioned by one's position in the social structure.” (Edgerton and Roberts 2014, p. 3).

Habitus is therefore concerned with assumptions about individual free will and agency within the constraints and socially acceptable norms of different environments: about how rules are created through interaction and how they govern the behaviours, practices and patterns of not only individuals but also the structures found within different spaces. Within habitus, Bourdieu explores how the agency of individuals and societal structures converge and how our 'inner' selves and the 'outer' social world interact and shape each other (Maton 2008). Habitus is a concept that is integral to understanding the norms and practices of higher education institutions and of how working-class students come to negotiate their classed identities and selves within these environments during academic journeys. Habitus is intrinsically connected to background, transformation and power and as Maton (2008, p.52) highlights, it is the link: “not only between past, present and future, but also between the social and the individual, the objective and the subjective, the structure and the agency”, a fluid construct that reflects the interplay between the personal and the social and how habits and dispositions formulate into norms that create social structures, including those found in higher education institutions.

Regarding capital, Bourdieu (1986) argued that social capital exists as a person's social connections and networks and that cultural capital presents in three forms (Grenfell and James 1998). Firstly, embodied cultural capital is connected to individuals themselves and is located in their characteristics, such as accent and dispositions. Secondly, objectified cultural capital is connected to the 'outer' world that Maton (2008) referred to, such as objects, books and qualifications. Thirdly, institutionalised cultural capital is connected to structures in which learning occurs, such as higher education institutions and libraries. Bourdieu (1986) states that capital dictates interactions and exchange between individuals and groups, with some capitals more highly valued and sought after than others. Whilst egalitarian rhetoric may appear to drive policy-making and educational discourse, Bourdieu (1986, p.15) notes this is a fallacy, albeit a well-bought into narrative, which overlooks inequitable capitals that play out within the higher education arena, instead noting the dominant discourse which presents

“an imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties [where] every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything”

Beyond forms of capital, another central concept within Bourdieu's work is that of field, in which Thomson (2008) highlights the role that social spaces play in setting and framing the context within which interactions and exchange between people occur. A Bourdieusian lens positions social spaces - both literally as a physical space as well as figuratively - as 'fields' which produce knowledge, a key form of capital that is associated with power and legitimacy (James 2020). As has been long argued in higher education class research, the higher education field favours knowledge and capital held by middle-class actors within these spaces, with middle-class students who already possess the cultural capital and habitus demanded by the field benefitting from the structurally biased ways that education is delivered (Maclean 2022; Walkerdine 2021; Reay 2018).

This field is therefore argued to be designed by the middle-classes for middle-class students and, through the interactional and relational nature of habitus and capital formulation and development, the higher education field reproduces middle-class norms, practices, and structures (Reay 2017). Although successive governments and policy-makers have sought to widen access to higher education to non-traditional students for several decades, as

outlined in section 2.3.1, the continuation of these educational fields being predominantly designed by and for the middle-classes presents an inherent challenge in achieving this agenda, one which Reay (2017) reflects upon as a troubling paradox that creates a segregated system of unequal quality, access, and outcomes for working-class students.

Commentators (Grenfell and James 1998; Reay 2017) have long argued that students without the 'right' capitals and habitus within the higher education field internalise their differences as personal failings, with notions of student deficit taking prominence and educational institutions viewed as needing to save the working-classes from themselves (Loveday 2015). Cunningham and Samson (2021) argue that to maintain the notions of neoliberal meritocracy that have come to dominate the marketisation of the higher education field, institutions rely upon the student deficit narrative, with the promise of social mobility rewards serving as motivations for embarking on higher education journeys.

Moving beyond the fallacy of social mobility for working class-students (Friedman and Laurison 2020; Reay 2017; Walkerdine et al. 2001) and the acceptance of class-based inequities within the higher education sector would require institutions to look beyond the window dressing of equalities initiatives that have not overcome persistent issues within the field (James 2018). However, as Reay (2017, p.122) notes this: "requires an analysis of the powerful ways in which educational systems [...] work to reproduce the existing order rather than transform it", which brings us to the last of Bourdieu's concepts that this study is concerned with, that of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to power structures within social spaces which dictate and impose dominant meanings as legitimate, whilst obscuring the unequal power relations which underpin such structures (Watson and Widin 2015), with symbolic violence therefore argued to reinforce and perpetuate class-based inequalities, particularly in educational settings (Wacquant 1998). Within the higher education field and society more broadly, symbolic violence results when systems of classification, such as class, constructed by dominant actors who hold power and habitus dictated by and designed for the field, are mistaken as being part of a natural order (Schubert 2008) and are subsequently accepted as legitimate. As Bourdieu and Eagleton (1992) state:

"Symbolic domination [...] is something you absorb like air, something you don't feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult"

Schubert (2008) adds to this by highlighting that symbolic violence's pervasiveness in the structures and hierarchies of social structures prevents actors from even contemplating alternative fields and relational interactions between those who hold power and those who do not. Alongside this Schubert (2008, p.192) identifies that the subtlety of symbolic violence renders it invisible, noting that "we fail to recognise its very existence, let alone the way it is at the root of much violence and suffering". Classism can be viewed as a display of class-based symbolic violence, whereby the working-classes are subject to prejudices, negative stereotyping, and inferior treatment which positions them in terms of a deficit model (Bletsas and Michell 2014). As O'Connor and Bodicoat (2017, p. 436) highlight, the deficit model places responsibility and blame on the student, rather than the institutional structure and features a light-touch approach whereby it is expected that "the removal of the most obvious barriers to access will somehow level the playing field for all", as seen in current equalities and widening access discourse to have little effect (as discussed in section 2.3).

This maintenance of the status quo could be positioned as an abdication of responsibility on the part of higher education institutions and a downgrading of the seriousness of classism and its impact of working-class individuals. Schubert's (2008) contention that symbolic violence is not recognised is further reflective of classism being invisible within higher education policymaking and practice (Morley 2021). Although numerous studies and scholars have documented the classist 'othering' of the working-classes in society (Jones 2020; Tyler 2008; Holt and Griffin 2005), an overt recognition of long-standing structural class-based inequalities being classist manifestations of symbolic violence and discrimination are lacking within current discourse. This limitation within the literature of higher education discourse is an area which my study seeks to explore in more depth, as outlined in 3.4.1.

#### *3.2.1.1 Beyond Bourdieu*

Although Bourdieu's work underpins the conceptual and theoretical framings of this study, it was necessary to draw upon other conceptual contributions from the literature – namely human capital theory and intersectionality - in order to more fully understand the enduring relationship between higher education inequalities and social class.

Firstly, in addition to Bourdieu's theory on capital, human capital theory is useful to explore the motivations and expectations of working-class students during their higher education journeys, which is of interest in the current study. According to human capital theory,

human capital is the investment which individuals make in themselves, through education, in order to enhance their economic productivity and rewards (Olaniyan and Okemakinde 2008). Scholars have argued that human capital theory provides the rationale for state prioritisation and expenditure on educational systems that are intended, in neoliberal societies, to provide opportunities for advancement to individuals (Fägerlind and Saha 2014), an important aspect which aligns with the pervading social mobility discourse within the UK (see section 3.3.2). However, there are limitations in human capital theory which, given this study's concern with constrained choices and inequities facing working-class students due to structural inequalities, are important to highlight. For example, human capital theory posits that education and training are investments that increase an individual's productivity and earnings. For Bourdieusians this is a problematic perspective which ignores ingrained class inequalities and symbolic violence and instead reflects the myth of meritocracy through attributing advantage to individual skill:

“Human capital theory is optimistic. It promotes the idea that education is a very powerful individual and social lever” (Vandenberghe 1998, p.3).

Neoliberal assumptions about the role of education in an individual's advancement places human capital in the centerground, a position which Holborow (2012, p.94) contests:

“is a fundamentally false representation of both labour and capital in that it effaces both social class and the actual mechanisms of the labour market in capitalism; [human capital theory] constitutes an ideological device which reifies the role of the individual in order to obscure class conflict”.

This is a view endorsed by numerous others, such as Marginson (2019) who states that a primary weakness of human capital theory is its lack of realism in acknowledging that socially differentiated educational outcomes are a function of prior inequalities. As Marginson (2019) goes on to highlight, human capital theory relies upon notions that individuals are rational actors able to equally express their agency and follow linear pathways from education to the labour market, with influence in determining their graduate earnings. As such, human capital theory is unable to explain the multi-layered and complex experiences underpinning working-class trajectories, the realism of classed identities within higher education spaces which Marginson refers to, and the associated inequalities which working-class students, despite investing in themselves, still experience in relation to middle-class peers. Further to this, human capital theory does not account for declining

graduate outcomes (Brown et al. 2010) within a massified higher education system that promotes investment in educational journeys - a theme that is explored in more detail in my empirical chapters, particularly in the participant accounts which feature multiple journeys.

In light of all these limitations, I accept that human capital theory is problematic for sociologists who are concerned with understanding social class advantage and disadvantage. However, I have chosen to include it as an aid to the theoretical underpinnings of Bourdieu which frame my study. I did so because my study is, amongst other things, concerned with the subjective motivations of working-class class students who embark on higher education journeys and seeks to understand how they navigate these educational spaces. As my empirical chapters will demonstrate, it was evident that several of my participants framed their own journeys and motivations within the theoretical context of human capital, with individual agency – or at least perceptions of it – playing an influential role in their decision-making and their understandings of autonomy, opportunity, and social mobility when it comes to educational journeys and choices.

Human capital theory also remains useful to consider due to its central positioning in UK educational policymaking discourse. Alongside notions of meritocracy, human capital is central to institutional narratives that drive social mobility messaging within the higher education sector, perspectives which have come to dominate post-compulsory educational spaces particularly in relation to the widening access agenda (Budd 2017). As outlined in section 2.3.1, despite evidence that social mobility does not deliver in the main for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds students are still encouraged to invest in themselves through education in order to reap ‘justified’ rewards. To more fully understand the subjective lived experiences in working-class student journeys, embarked upon within a higher education system that is predicated on perceived individual merit and success measures, human capital theory – for all its limitations – alongside Bourdieu can therefore provide helpful insights which as a “distinct standpoint [...] tell us about the policy problems in [higher education]” (Davies et al. 2014, n.p.).

Secondly, the conceptual work of Crenshaw (1989) in relation to intersectionality was of interest. Originally developed in relation to critical race theory, intersectionality has evolved within social science discourse and is concerned with ensuring that the intersections of identities across a range of characteristics such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, are taken into account when seeking to understand the different dimensions of

lived experiences (Davis 2014). Intersectionality demands that we move away from silo thinking regarding identities and is especially helpful to studies which seek to understand how multiple factors contribute, dynamically, to inequitable experiences. Furthermore, intersectionality enhances Bourdieu's work on the relational interplay of habitus, capital, and field amongst actors who interact within social spaces including higher education institutions. As highlighted in section 2.2.2.3, discussions regarding equalities in higher education remain siloed, to the detriment of individuals with minority protected characteristics as well as to the furthering of the equalities agenda within individual institutions and the sector as a whole. Theoretical framings which encompass intersections of identity also allow for a nuanced exploration of the varied and multi-layered experiences which are found in working-class higher education journeys. Whilst Bourdieu provides us with an invaluable framework within which to make sense of these experiences, scholars have noted the male-dominated focus of his work. Skeggs (1997) sought to provide feminist extensions which probe more deeply into the distinctions which are to be found in classed trajectories when they are viewed through a gendered lens. In her seminal work, Skeggs (1997, p.1) positions the concept of 'respectability' centrally within discussions of class and gender, noting it is

"one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others, what we study and how we know who we are (or are not)".

Skeggs's work indicates a concern that social theories of identities can overlook the experiences of women and how they navigate identities which encompass class, gender, femininity, and caring. As such the inclusion of feminist perspectives and expansion of Bourdieu's theoretical framework to take account of these intersecting elements of identity - and how they are reproduced through societal expectations and norms in educational spaces, in the home, and within the family unit - is a welcome inclusion to the wider debate. As my empirical chapters will show, it has therefore been beneficial to draw upon feminist perspectives in my study given that the vast majority of the participants were women (see Table 2 in section 4.3.1). Utilising this focus alongside Bourdieu enables an exploration of how gendered expectations, norms, and constraints can engender an additional layer of precarity for working-class students on higher education journeys. In addition, intersectional framings which provide a gendered focus to lived experiences, such as Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) work on the psychosocial challenges surrounding female, working-class identities

further expand Bourdieu's work. These nuanced explorations allow us to understand how social structures, such as class and gender are, as Walkerdine (2023) asserts, deeply embodied and felt by individuals as complex emotional realities in which the 'affect' of lived histories, which often feature poverty and social struggle, are not only felt at an individual level, but also within communities. For Walkerdine (2023, p.478) this manifests as

"The felt, the unsaid, the unspeakable, the traces of class are passed down the generations, although they can mutate in the process and no longer make rational sense".

This aligns with the upcoming discussion in section 4.2.1 regarding how the material realities of people's lives, and their subjective understandings and interpretations of their experiences, converge to create unique, and yet through Walkerdine's assertion *simultaneously shared*, histories which resonate across generations, spaces, and contexts. Intersectionality therefore affords a useful lens with which to view the limitations of current approaches and as Webb et al. (2017, p.1) highlight, introducing intersectionality alongside Bourdieu's legacy enables "more nuanced understandings of how complex and intersecting social inequalities in higher education are realised or challenged".

### 3.2.2 Class models and constructions of identity

The main framework used for social class classification in the UK is Goldthorpe's social class strata schema developed in the 1980s, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (Goldthorpe 2016), comprising seven categories that assess level of income, economic security, and autonomy over work roles and tasks. Goldthorpe's schema uses these economic metrics to sort individuals into classed groupings, originally categorising class status through ranking the occupation of the head of heteronormative family units, usually a male and so at the exclusion of females. Unsurprisingly, this exclusion was met with resounding criticism (Evans 1996) and Goldthorpe's approach broadened over time to focus on the dominant occupation within a household, determined as the breadwinner's occupation, regardless of sex. Whilst this was a welcome development to the previously overlooked classed position of females within society, the narrow focus on occupation and on categorisations based on social groupings within constructed family units remains problematic to social scientists who seek more inclusive schemas which acknowledge nuance and reflect the multifaceted composition of classed identities.

Savage et al. (2013) attempted to formulate a new seven-point framework that would reflect such intricacies following their large-scale survey of the British public - The Great British Class Survey. Whilst their schema moved the debate around class classification into more inclusive and nuanced territory it was not without limitations. Critics such as Bradley (2014) noted how the categorisations once again focused on individuals and the accumulation of capital, albeit broadened beyond purely economic metrics, rather than the relational interplay of habitus, capital, and field between actors who interact within social spaces. Despite the "UK's quiet obsession with social class" (Folkes 2019, p.45), classification models such as Goldthorpe's and Savage et al.'s therefore remain problematic and leave discussions incomplete.

Given that the present study is concerned with perceptions and understandings of class by working-class students, it was essential to draw upon literature which explores how notions of social class are formulated, applied, and transformed within the self. Due to the drawbacks of class definitions within the confines of any one stratification model as aforementioned, self-identification instead provides opportunities to capture the subjective nature of class, particularly when status is intended to be moveable as is the case with policy and studies regarding social mobility. Scholars (Rickett and Morris 2021; Crew 2020) have noted that researchers are increasingly utilising self-identification to explore variances in the application of social class markers, signifiers, and the formation of identities. The incorporation of self-identification into class studies can therefore go some way to bridging gaps in standardised classification models that overlook the relational aspects of classed identities within different fields, including higher education institutions (Rubin et al. 2014). However, as Pilgrim-Brown (2023) highlights, self-identification can present divergent interpretations of class categorisations which pose difficulties for scholars in knowing how to evaluate studies about lived experiences, with Sayer (2005, p.70) adding to this caution:

"lay understandings do not have to be consistent or correct: people often waver between treating class differences as unfair or fair, or deny that classes exist when their actions imply the opposite. We therefore cannot simply reduce class to whatever actors imagine it to be"

However, ambiguities of this nature are to be expected due to the subjective nature of class, and self-identification can be incorporated and navigated to better understand and gain insight from lived experiences: indeed, the current and accepted categorisations themselves

are not without significant issue. As explored in 4.5, for this study therefore, despite the cautions noted above, including self-identification within discussions of classed identities enriches and challenges the dominant framings that are utilised by government and policymakers, including those concerned with higher education, equalities, and social mobility.

Self-identification of class further allows exploration of how working-class students navigate the higher education field in terms of their classed identities. This is particularly evident in discussions that explore performance of the 'self' (Goffman 2002) and class hybridity - being transitive in two realms and operating versions of the self as a strategy to find 'fit' (Voicu 2011; Luke and Luke 1999; Abrahams and Ingram 2013). Both of these strategies enable working-class students to develop a sense of belonging within higher education fields (Christie et al. 2008) and are relevant to discussions of hybridity and intersectionality - such as between class, race, and gender. Studies such as Hunt and Seiver's (2018) exploration of hybrid identities within American educational settings highlight how negotiations of characteristics within the context of the norms and capitals that operate in social spaces allow students to navigate aspects of their identities within different arenas in order to remain accepted in both. Intersections of gender and working-classness have been extensively studied by social scientists, such as Reay (2001, 2005, 2017), and Walkerdine et al. (2001) who have written extensively on female working-class identities and challenges. This body of work highlights the demands which face working-class women in education from family and home, and the obligations placed on them in fulfilling traditionally gendered and classed roles often at great personal cost (Edwards 1993). Accordingly, these themes have direct relevance to the aims and objectives of the present study and its interest in the lived experiences of working-class students in higher education.

### 3.3 Classed experiences of education

This section provides an overview of the influential role which family units play in the journeys of working-class students in higher education. It pays particular attention to exploring how narratives of meritocracy and social mobility have become embedded as dominant discourses within the higher education field and outlines how these concepts are inherently problematic to both higher education and equalities discourse. Lastly, this section presents some of the challenges which face working-class students as they navigate their journeys, such as managing money and debt as well as parenthood, and the effect these have on the cultivation of legitimate learner identities.

### 3.3.1 Family influence and impact

In order to better understand the educational aspirations and experiences of working-class students, it is essential to consider the influence of the family unit. Educational background and family habitus has long been shown to have a significant bearing on educational journeys (Reay 1998), with the family unit playing a pivotal role in the decision-making of working-class students when it comes to opting into further study. Traditional measures of social class focus on the educational composition and background of family units, which in turn have been shown to have an influence over educational pathways and the achievement of young people (Lehmann 2013), with stark differences noted between the working- and middle-classes.

Previous studies (such as Thibodeau 2011) have highlighted how working-class families do not traditionally place the same level of value on education as their middle-class counterparts with practical barriers often constraining choice. In their study of 13 high-achieving university students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Thiele et al. (2017) found that family expectations significantly impacted the decision-making of working-class students who were considering applying to university, particularly when there had not been a history of higher education within the family. In their findings, Thiele et al. (2017) highlighted that practical considerations, such as the need to enter paid employment and contribute financially to the family unit, were shown to influence the educational decisions of the students in their study. These norms align with other studies regarding gendered expectations on men to enter paid employment (Ward 2018) and women to become caregivers (Lucey et al. 2003; Morgan 2015), and are indicative of how working-class students must navigate the family unit and habitus if they are to embark on higher education journeys.

The cultural and social capital that resides within family units and which young people are raised with has also been shown to have an important bearing on the educational experiences of working-class students. Research by Lareau (2003) on the differences between working-class and middle-class parenting styles regarding approaches to education, noted variances in the ways that working-class and middle-class children are raised and guided in their interactions with actors in the education field. These differences were deemed class-specific, with middle-class mothers noted to raise their children to pursue extracurricular activities that are designed to cultivate future CVs, with the effect that these children developed a sense of power and confidence when engaging with adults

who were 'custodians' to the educational experiences they sought. In contrast, working-class students in the study did not receive similar attention and investment in hobbies from their own parents, nor did they develop the confidence to engage with adults on an equal-footing.

Whilst Lareau (ibid) is sympathetic to highlighting the disadvantages at play between the working-class and middle-class young people in the study, at times the findings place the responsibility for these shortcomings with working-class parents, rather than a system of education that is structured to favour middle-class capitals, which working-class families lack. As Reay (2017) highlights, the state has increasingly shifted the responsibility of education onto the family unit, with families expected to supplement formal education, including higher education, from the home. Reay notes this encompasses financial resourcing, private tuition, and holistic activities which would otherwise, until the 1970s, have fallen within the remit of the state. This outsourcing of 'top-up' education presents a clear disadvantage for working-class families who are unable to afford – in both time and money – such additional support. This disparity is more acute in working-class single-parent households that have less resourcing, with the gaps in equity even more pronounced (Reay 2017).

Alongside educational background and disadvantages in resourcing higher education journeys previous research, such as Reay et al.'s (2010) case studies of 27 working-class students enrolled on degree programmes, has shown that once at university, working-class students must navigate shifting familial relationships which threaten their connection to the family unit. Romito's (2023) qualitative study of 40 first-year working-class students found that the self-perceptions of working-class students who embarked on higher education journeys were formed in family units, with changes to identity needing to be carefully managed in order to maintain connection and minimise distance. This reflects the earlier findings of Mannay's (2013) study of nine mothers and nine daughters in a marginalised housing estate and their aspirations for higher education, whereby "the difficulties faced in families when children decide to follow an academic trajectory that is in opposition to the traditional pathways of their local community" (2013, p.105) must be negotiated in order to minimise disruption to the family unit, negotiate change in classed identities, and maintain continuity to prevent a distance forming between working-class students and their family units.

### 3.3.2 The rise of meritocracy and the social mobility dream

The notion of meritocracy dates back to the 1950s and has become embedded in the fabric of political discourse and educational policymaking ever since (Lawler and Payne 2018). Michael Young wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958 and inadvertently coined the term 'meritocracy' (Cunningham 2023), proposing a temptingly uncomplicated formula for success which still dominates thinking to this day:  $IQ + Effort = Merit$ . The simple premise in Young's concept being that talented people who put the effort in will be justly rewarded, a seemingly straightforward principle for ensuring that rewards for hard work and talent are fair and can be relied upon as having been earned (Mijs 2015). Meritocratic ideology has thrived under successive neoliberal governments, with the presentation of society as a level playing field whereby equality of opportunity dominates (Cunningham and Samson 2021). However, it remains a contested concept. Beck (1992) maintains that neoliberal meritocracies provide 'ordinary' people with autonomy and control over their own lives and the opportunity for personal growth and success. However, others such as Walkerdine et al. (2001, p.2001) argue that such simplistic interpretations rely upon an assumption that "the production of us all as neoliberal subjects, as rational and autonomous psychological individuals, is both a solution and an easy process" when in fact structural barriers and class inequities are still the most determining factors in the success (or not) of working-class students in educational spaces, and society more broadly.

Entrenched belief in meritocracy, evident in the policymaking of government and the higher education sector in the UK, is used to justify to the working-class student's 'seat at the table', but it overlooks structural disadvantages that create the conditions in which students' access and take-up opportunities. The social stratification schema that Goldthorpe developed in the 1980s has enabled scholars (such as Haveman and Smeeding 2006; Beck 1992) to argue that meritocracy provides a natural process of selection which overcomes social class inequalities. The simplistic notion being that meritocratic societies need not be concerned with class barriers as ability and talent will sort the wheat from the chaff and ensure that those who are able will be afforded opportunities regardless of social class background. However, as Reay (2017, p.122) cautions,

"a meritocratic system is a competition in which there are clear winners and losers, but in which the resulting inequalities are justified on the basis that participants have an equal opportunity to prove themselves"

The pervasive rhetoric that supports meritocratic discourse has led to higher education institutions, and indeed working-class students themselves, buying into the notion that equality of opportunity will naturally allow the most talented and able to 'rise' and achieve deserving educational success. Meritocracy has been fashioned as a way to escape working-class lives, with Reay's (2005) observations from 20 years ago that working-classness is a status which has to be left behind still apparent in institutional narratives to this day. The glossy promotional materials which institutions use to publicise themselves rely upon meritocratic ideals that confirm narratives of success, ability and social mobility (Walkerdine 2021). The selective nature of higher education, particularly in elite institutions, only serves to validate meritocratic discourse, with the binaries of ability and inability and success and failure overlooking underlying inequalities. Mijs (2015) argues that meritocracy is not only an unfulfilled promise, but an *unfulfillable* one, noting that educational opportunities and success are in fact explained by non-meritocratic factors and societal structures. Unlike dominant meritocratic discourse which positions all individuals as autonomous actors with the same access to resource and capitals, scholars have therefore argued that meritocracy is a myth (Sobuwa and McKenna 2019; Themelis 2017).

In tandem with meritocracy, social mobility is a concept that has come to define government policymaking (Pearce 2011; Lawler and Payne 2018; Littler 2018), reshaping the educational landscape since the 1980s. As Folkes (2019, p.11) highlights, social mobility is described as "the movement or opportunities for movement between different social groups, and the advantages and disadvantages that go with this in terms of income, security of employment [and] opportunity for advancement". Invariably though, the politics of social mobility is always concerned with that of *upward* mobility, with meritocratic constructions of class change focused on raising the social standing of those at the bottom of society - the working-classes.

Social mobility narratives give the impression that there is plenty of room at the top for everyone. However, there is little space at the top, occupied in any case by those in privileged positions and thus rendering common conceptualisations of social mobility problematic (Folkes 2019; Folkes 2025). Indeed, social mobility for the working-classes has been shown to be stagnating in recent years (Pearce 2011; Brown 2013) with the widening access agenda having failed to deliver on its promises (James 2018). Despite this, higher

education narratives and policymaking reinforce notions that social mobility is available to all because of the meritocratic structure of society, and those who are deserving of mobility can achieve it. As outlined in section 2.3.1, institutions have used widening access as the main vehicle to encourage engagement from non-traditional students embarking on social mobility journeys. However, critics (Reay 2017; Friedman and Laurison 2020) warn against the pull of social mobility, noting it is a dream little often realised by working-class students with Walkerdine et al. (2001, p.24) noting that upward mobility, whilst purported to be a vehicle for personal growth and transformation, is “an illusion, since education is little more than a protection against downward mobility”.

Although some working-class students do achieve upward mobility, it is common for higher education journeys to feature narratives of failure just as much, if not more, than success (Reay 2017). Due to the overarching framing of mobility journeys as an individualistic neoliberal pursuit, unsuccessful attempts at achieving social mobility are determined to be down to a lack of effort or personal ability, reinforcing notions of student deficit, as Reay (ibid, p. 116) highlights:

“Social mobility, or rather its failure, is presented as if it is a personal trouble that resides within the ‘character of the individual’ and depends upon the effort and agency of the individual”

Such framings are found within the language used to promote widening access schemes, such as The Brilliant Club and Reaching Wider (outlined in section 2.3.1), in which implicit reproductions of deficit model rhetoric and meritocratic narratives are apparent: ‘bright’, ‘able’, and ‘talented’ students are labels used to promote schemes that promise personal transformation and the opportunity to be upwardly mobile, in contrast to the typical promotional materials generated for ‘traditional’ students. This subtly frames higher education as open and available to the middle-classes by default, apparently regardless of ability, and yet only the most promising students from the working-classes are invited to access this field. These messages reinforce the notion that a select few disadvantaged students have the same level of ability as their middle-class peers and can undertake mobility journeys to rise up out of their class (Budd 2017) with institutions accused of “cherry-picking” the brightest and “naturally intelligent” prospective students to “save them from their working-class existence” (Wilkins and Burke 2015, p. 446).

### 3.3.3 Challenges on the journey

For those working-class students who do embark on further studies, higher education journeys often need to be managed against personal commitments and obligations in other roles outside of university life. In this section I will explore money and parenthood - two important considerations which some non-traditional students must navigate during their higher education journeys, particularly those who are attending university later in life as mature students. In addition, in this section I will present literature which demonstrates how the formation of learner identities and attempts to develop a sense of belonging are strategies which working-class students utilise in these unfamiliar educational spaces.

#### 3.3.3.1 *Money and debt*

The cost of higher education journeys for working-class students, especially since the introduction of tuition fees and the replacement of grant funding with loans, is an area of concern that scholars have keenly monitored in recent decades (Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Ross and Lloyd, 2013). Findlay and Hermannsson (2019) highlight that finance plays a crucial role in the decision-making of working-class students at the point of application to university, arguing that working-class students experience more financial strain during higher education and their graduate outcomes leave them at an 11% income disparity upon graduation and entry into the labour market. Studies into debt aversion (Callender and Jackson 2008; Callender and Mason 2017; Mazhari and Atherton 2020) have found that working-class students hold strong concerns about accruing debt when embarking on higher education journeys and confirm Findlay and Hermannsson's (2019) findings that working-class graduates experience 'class-gaps' in post-education wages. However, without the support of economic capital from family units, working-class students are often obliged to become indebted in order to pursue higher education. Although student finance provides a level of assistance, it is argued to be inadequate in providing cover for even basic living costs (Crockford et al. 2015).

Other studies (Britt et al. 2017; Hordósy 2017) have shown that it is not uncommon for working-class students to undertake paid employment during their time at university to supplement student finance loan payments, but doing so is noted to come with significant disadvantages. Firstly, time spent working reduces the capacity to be a fully engaged learner (Crockford et al. 2015); secondly, part-time employment is likely to affect attainment and degree outcomes (Hordósy 2017); and thirdly, term-time employment to pay for living costs

creates inequity within the student cohort, with some students able to use funds to pay for additional, experiential activities that are not available to those at an economic disadvantage (Crockford et al. 2015).

Additionally, financial concerns can contribute to poor mental health amongst working-class students, with the lack of a financial safety net via the family unit exacerbating the difficulties which face these students on their educational journeys. Managing poor mental health due to financial concerns has been shown to be a significant challenge in the lived experiences of working-class students (Moore et al. 2021; Dabrowski et al. 2025), with Britt et al. (2017) further observing that financial stress contributes to an increased likelihood of interrupted or even discontinued higher education journeys.

### *3.3.3.2 Parenthood*

Working-class students who are also parents face particular challenges when it comes to navigating higher education and remaining engaged in their journeys. Studies have focused on this through the lens of gender norms and expectations, with particular emphasis placed on the barriers which face working-class mothers (Morgan 2015; Christie et al. 2008). This body of previous research has demonstrated that for these students, the demands and expectations of home life – namely caregiving and domestic duties – do not lessen in light of higher education journeys and must be precariously balanced. This is further reflective of Skeggs's (1997) work (section 3.2.1.1) regarding womanhood, motherhood, and the societal norms which govern how women behave in both personal and public realms. Despite increased choice and the opening up of access to university, gendered norms about women's roles within the home remain steadfast and as Morgan (2015) highlights, for mothers in higher education academic study is relegated to a hobby that must fit into the demands of home-life. Navigating the practical constraints of motherhood whilst also seeking to cultivate learner identities is therefore a significant challenge which is often overlooked by higher education institutions in relation to recognising the diversity of their student cohort and the challenges which working-class parents, especially mothers, face during their journeys.

### *3.3.3.3 Navigating higher education journeys*

The cultivation of legitimate learner identities is an important psychological process for working-class students in higher education who, in an unfamiliar field where their lived experiences and capitals are often unacknowledged, seek to develop a sense of belonging

and 'fit'. Developing such identities whilst also balancing demands outside of university – such as work and caregiving roles as noted in 3.3.3.1 and 3.3.3.2 – has been shown (Reay et al. 2010) to place competing demands on working-class students as they navigate their roles in each field. The formation of learner identities is essential for working-class students to foster a sense of belonging and avoid being at risk of being rejected by peers or of dropping out of higher education studies (Bradley 2017). Learner identities are therefore an important part of personal transformation and are a central consideration for working-class students who are embarking on higher education journeys with a view to being upwardly mobile. Legitimacy within the higher education field, as non-traditional learners, leads working-class students to seek common ground with peers (Christie et al. 2008) yet working-class students also risk rejection due to lacking the accepted social, cultural, and economic capitals which are favoured in the dominant middle-class space of the higher education field. This tension, and the impact of compromised learner identities, are areas which are important to the present study.

Cultivating learner identities is also noted to positively contribute to increasing the confidence levels of working-class students who internalise negative messaging about academic ability within a broader context of student deficit discourse (Mallman 2017). Fears of not being a 'good enough' student who is deserving of a place in higher education have been shown to form part of the lived experiences of working-class students at university (Reay 2001), worries which are compounded by a lack of familial capital, knowledge, and experience that guide working-class students during their journeys. Such framings can undermine confidence levels of students who are adjusting to new educational spaces that already clearly favour middle-class capitals and lead to feelings of being an imposter - defined as feelings of fraudulence, illegitimacy, and a lack of confidence in academic ability (Chapman 2014) - within these fields. As shown in section 3.2.1 family habitus and the educational background of those within the family unit are central influences on classed experiences of education, and these family dynamics contribute to the self-perceptions of working-class students' views of their own learner status. The formulation of legitimate learner identities therefore enables working-class students to overcome fears of being exposed as inadequate learners and remain engaged in their educational journeys. However, the extent to which working-class students are able to cultivate these identities within higher education fields that devalue their capitals and contributions (section 3.4.2) is an area of focus within my study.

### 3.4 Limitations and gaps in the literature

Following my review of the policy context (Chapter 2) and this chapter's thematic review of existing literature, I have identified two areas where limitations and gaps currently exist. Firstly, in relation to the framing of classism as discrimination within higher education discourse and practice, and secondly in relation to the perspectives of working-class students regarding the extent to which they view their own classed capitals as assets within higher education spaces. By conducting empirical research with working-class students regarding their experiences of class-based bias and discrimination and through exploring their perspectives of their own classed contributions, as demonstrated by the inclusion of both areas within my study's research questions (section 3.5), I seek to address these gaps in the literature and provide further insight into these aspects of working-class higher education experiences.

#### 3.4.1 Framing of classism as discrimination in higher education

Although it has been well documented that working-class students fare less well than their middle-class counterparts and must navigate higher education fields which reproduce class-based disadvantage (Walkerline 2021; Reay 2018), current discourse does not place this systemic bias and discrimination within the context of the legislative framework that oversees equalities policymaking within the UK. As such, whilst being a fundamental concern of social scientists, discourse which examines class-based disadvantage, bias, and discrimination in higher education overlooks the alignment of this with anti-discrimination theory and practice. Existing studies either explore the context of legislative arguments regarding equality laws (for example, Kadar 2016) or fall within ongoing discussions regarding class advantage and disadvantage within higher education and explorations of widening access policy (Devas 2011; Lehmann 2013). Framings of these social class inequalities as biased and discriminatory, in line with discrimination definitions already found within the legislation related to protected characteristics, are limited in the existing academic literature, despite policy changes that are intended to redress class-based inequities (as outlined in section 2.3).

The literature on widening access practices and associated limitations is rich and in-depth but lacks a nuanced exploration of how widening access agendas may be contributing to sustained inequalities for working-class students. The silo approach which higher education institutions follow in segregating their widening access and equalities portfolios could be

argued to prohibit institutions from tackling class-based disadvantage through legislative frameworks that are intended to eradicate inequalities within the sector. In turn, equalities and anti-discrimination discourse also lacks nuanced discussion regarding the impact of class-based bias and discrimination on working-class students and explorations of how institutions could best tackle such challenges within their widening access strategies.

Furthermore, there are no studies which examine the effectiveness of the socio-economic duty in higher education institutions in Wales following its enactment, nor any which identify whether any higher education institutions have actually incorporated the duty into their equality practices given they are not required to do so by law (as outlined in section 2.2.2.2). However, a minority of scholars have sought to align these discussions. Firstly, Walkerdine (2021) laments that class discrimination has never been legally recognised in the same way that other forms of discrimination historically have, despite classism existing in society and, therefore, in educational spaces. Walkerdine's (2021, p.63) framing of class as a (non)protected characteristic reflects her view that there is a lack of political will "to recognise, much less tackle, the deep-seated, endemic class discrimination that exists within Britain".

Conversely, although not writing from an educational perspective, Benn (2020) firmly ascribes classism as a discriminatory practice which meets the threshold for the legal definition of discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. Benn (2020, p.67) argues that the absence of classism as a protected characteristic under the Act "represents an incomplete and superficial understanding of discrimination. With no persuasive justification for that absence, and many good reasons to include class, lawmakers should amend the [Equality Act]". Although Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence (section 3.2.1) lends itself to fundamental discussions about bias and discrimination, it remains the case that, in the main, discussions regarding class-based disadvantage within higher education sit firmly outside of the scope of higher education equalities discourse. Building on the positions of Walkerdine (2021) and Benn (2020) therefore, my study seeks to expand this discourse and explore how working-class student journeys might be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination.

### 3.4.2 Working-class student views on classed contributions

As this thematic review has demonstrated, whilst many previous studies have explored the experiences of working-class students in higher education, the contributions which working-

class students make to their higher education environments has received relatively little attention. Unlike race and gender contributions discourse, scholars have not focused on a student contributions model for understanding the value which working-class habitus and capital brings to the higher education field. As explored in 3.2.1 higher education providers have traditionally placed an onus for change on working-class students through the framing of working-classness as a deficit, much the same as assimilation rhetoric (Harman 2017) regarding students with minority protected characteristics, such as gender and race, did before the Equality Act 2010 reframed equalities discourse within the sector (as explored in Chapter 2).

In addition, in Folkes's (2019) study on reconceptualising social mobility she argues for the construction of alternative systems of value which recognise working-class communities and assets. However little is known about the value which working-class students themselves place on their own classed identities and the assets they may feel they bring to the higher education field. Small studies, such as Smith et al.'s (2016) research with 15 working-class postgraduate students have provided some insight into this area, with their findings indicating that in contrast to pervasive rhetoric about saving working-class subjects from themselves (Loveday 2015), working-class students do reflect positively on their social class backgrounds through positioning their working-class identities as positive contributions to higher educational spaces. My research seeks to expand on these insights with a specific focus on equality discourse within higher education specifically within the Welsh context.

### 3.5 The research questions

As noted in section 1.2, this study intends to develop the existing knowledge base around the lived experiences of working-class students, specifically exploring perceptions of whether class-based bias and discrimination featured in their journeys through higher education. Following the review of the higher education and equalities policy context in Chapter 2, the thematic review presented in this chapter, and the gaps and limitations highlighted in the existing literature, the following research questions were developed which will be attended to in this empirical study. These questions will each be returned to in the findings chapters and in Chapter 9 - Conclusions, recommendations and final reflections.

The central research questions for this study are as follows:

1. To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?
2. In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, institutional narratives of social mobility?
3. How might working-class students' higher education journeys be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?
4. Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the key concepts and theories which are relevant to understanding working-class higher education journeys. As demonstrated, identity and the lived experience of social class is complex and multifaceted, and Bourdieu's pivotal work on habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence is still of relevance to scholars who seek to understand the relational interplay of actors and social structures within the field of higher education. Working-class students navigate their way through these spaces, utilising existing class models to place themselves within their environment and construct legitimate learner identities as they manage changes to classed identities and personal transformation. As highlighted in this chapter, classed experiences of education, formed within family units and habitus greatly influence working-class students' relationship to formal education, impacting the varied motivations and choices which working-class students navigate when it comes to embarking on higher education studies and managing challenges which arise during these journeys.

Lastly, this chapter identified two key areas where there are limitations and gaps in the literature and outlined how these have informed the central research questions of this study. The following chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology and the research design that was followed when conducting the empirical research to attend to these questions.

## Chapter 4 – Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I detail the methodology and methods which I used in this study and provide the rationale for the approach taken. I begin by outlining the research design for this project, before introducing the research sites and the participants, their key characteristics and how they were recruited to the study. I then address researcher positionality along with the mitigations which I put in place in an attempt to limit researcher bias. Details of the process I followed for data generation is provided alongside associated ethical and reflexive considerations. Lastly, the framework of analysis that I applied to the findings is presented in the final section of this chapter.

This study aimed to develop the existing knowledge base around the lived experiences and future aspirations of working-class students, specifically exploring perceptions of whether, and if so how and to what extent, class-based bias and discrimination has featured in their journeys through higher education. Alongside the core offer of undergraduate and postgraduate courses within higher education, this project is also concerned with the role of inclusion initiatives, such as widening access, as a route used by higher education institutions to diversify the student body, with a view to engendering social mobility. I sought to explore what role social class and class inequalities play in perpetuating dominant patterns of inequality in higher education, and how these translate to the individual student's personal journey through university. Lastly, this study sought to understand what scope participants thought there may be for higher education institutions to incorporate the experiences and capitals of working-class students: positively positioning working-class identities in ways that are meaningful to these students. The methodological approach taken in this study was selected to address these aims, which were developed in response to the literature presented in Chapter 2, responding to the gaps highlighted therein.

The focus of this study was designed to specifically address the following four research questions:

1. To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

2. In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, institutional narratives of social mobility?
3. How might working-class students' higher education journeys be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?
4. Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

## 4.2 Research Design

### 4.2.1 Theoretical framework

After an examination of different epistemological approaches, I decided that social constructionism was the one best suited to exploring the views and experiences of the participants in relation to the research questions. Social constructionism is a dominant paradigm within the fields of research relevant to this project, namely class, social mobility, discrimination and inequality. The origins of social constructionism are rooted in idealism, whereby meaning and the “external world is a creation of the mind... [idealists do not] necessarily deny the existence of a ‘real’ world, but rather that we can never directly perceive it” (Williams 2016, p.95). For Cunliffe (2008, p.128), in social constructionism

“the focus is not on what that social reality is—because there is no fixed, universally shared understanding of reality—but how people shape meaning between themselves in responsive dialogue”.

Williams (2016, p.204) goes on to highlight that “whilst an explanation of the social might well be grounded in individual subjective understandings, those subjective understandings can only be understood in their social context”, as part of an iterative process created and derived through interactions between social actors. This perspective is especially useful in the present study as it permits changing definitions and understandings of social constructions such as inequality. At this stage it is worthwhile to offer some explanation of how I have used this positioning alongside that of Bourdieu in this research. Burr (2015, p.52) argues that language is at the heart of social constructionism and that language and our use of it does not only describe material reality and how we see it, but also “constructs the world as we perceive it and has real consequences.” Burr extends this framing of language into discourse, encapsulating how language, informed by limitations and norms, manifests into social practices, noting that “Discourses are intimately tied to the structures

and practices that are lived out in society from day to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of truth” (Burr 2017, p.88). Social constructionism is criticised for its perceived prioritisation of subjective constructions - varied and changeable over time - over material reality, and of being at risk of sidelining the structural context in which people experience their lived realities (Gergen 2018; Searle 1997). On this basis social constructionism could appear to be at odds with Bourdieu’s perspective which foregrounds the structural conditions of class and the impact of such structures on people’s material realities, irrespective of subjective understandings and acceptance of this manifest context. However, as Haslanger (2012, p.12) notes, “Social theory [...] must always be alert to the interdependence of material and cultural realities”, a view further supported by the nuanced work of Burningham and Cooper (1999) who highlight the variance to be found within social constructionism debates. They draw attention to how, in mild social constructionism (also referred to as contextual constructionism), the material realities of lived experiences are implicitly accepted. Nuanced contextual constructionism therefore allows for attention to be focused on the social processes that are involved in the development of institutions and how social reality is socially constructed, and Sismondo’s (1993, p.522) work extends this perspective further: ‘Institutions are primarily social realities, not material ones, and it is social reality that is socially constructed’.

There is much to be gained by aligning the theoretical positions of Bourdieu and mild/contextual social constructionism, with each contributing perspectives that, when taken together, enable a deeper understanding and appreciation of how structural contexts are formed, how people relate to these, and what scope there is to engender change within the structures which govern individual lived experiences. The two approaches are therefore not in conflict, but rather important insights can be gained by drawing them together.

Within the higher education sector, central concepts such as discrimination and equality are understood predominantly in relation to the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010, of which social class/socio-economic status is not one. As Walkerdine (2021, p.63) notes, interpretations of the Equality Act in higher education therefore see “class as a (non)protected characteristic [...] while class discrimination has existed from the inception of class itself as a mode of classification and categorisation, it has never been legally recognised in the ways that racism and sexism have been”.

Nonetheless, over recent years there has been a growing acknowledgement of the disadvantages faced by low socio-economic status students in higher education institutions, which universities have chosen to address through various widening access schemes (see section 2.3 of the Literature Review). Practical changes have been introduced by some universities in what appear to be attempts to mitigate this inequality, such as expansive widening access agendas (Budd 2017) and a broadening of admissions criteria to include individual contextual indicators, like eligibility for Free School Meals (Gorard et al. 2019). However, the extent to which institutional narratives are leading to a cultural shift in the framing and understanding of class inequality is debatable.

This study is primarily concerned with examining working-class students' subjective perspectives on and experiences within higher education. Social constructionism provides a context through which to explore, and make-meaning of, the participants' own varied and diverse notions of inequality, social class, and their lived experiences as students on a journey through higher education environments. This epistemological approach guided the methods selected to generate data, as will be outlined in the following section.

#### 4.2.2 Research methods

Quantitative data within the fields that this study is concerned with is undoubtedly both insightful and informative. However, a quantitative research design would not have afforded an in-depth understanding of the participants' subjective experiences, and it would therefore have been at odds with the epistemological positioning of this project.

Accordingly, within the framework of a social constructionism epistemology, I felt that a qualitative approach was most appropriate to explore the research questions. Hammersley (2013, p.12) defines qualitative research as a

“form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis”

The qualitative methods chosen for data gathering were in-depth interviews with participants, accompanied by two creative methods - a timeline and a future-selves letter (one to complete per interview). The different methods (elicitation interviews and creative tasks) worked together to create each participant account. Interviews were essential but, when produced, the creative methods generated nuanced insights into participants'

experiences. The creative artefacts were woven into the fabric of the discussions, as sections 4.2.2.1 and 4.2.2.2 outline and therefore also formed an integral part of the interviews. In-depth elicitation interviews have long been a feature of, and the most widely used tool for, collecting data within qualitative research (Kallio et al. 2016; Denzin 2001). Interviews are noted for their versatility and flexibility (Kallio et al. 2016) and providing access into the “world of others [...] to provide a rich set of data” (Qu and Dumay 2011, p.239). To build on the affordances of interview methods in the current study, I included creative methods as these have been highlighted as an effective way of enabling participants to speak for themselves and to be active in the research process (Mannay 2015b).

Based on the methodological review of qualitative studies focusing on social class in Chapter 3, I felt that in-depth first-person accounts would afford a nuanced exploration of my research questions and the key themes, particularly in relation to the participants’ understandings of social class, their own working-class identities and social mobility journeys, their experiences in higher education and their aspirations, hopes and ambitions for the future. I also wanted to explore what obligations, if any, the students felt their higher education institutions had towards them in terms of recognising and valuing their socio-economic background and working-class identity, akin to broader equality objectives concerned with gender and race which form a central part of institutional EDI priorities (see section 2.2).

As noted in see section 2.3.2, although there is some evidence of broad institutional acknowledgment, universities do not appear to prioritise addressing class-based disadvantage in the same way as (some) of the legally-recognised protected characteristics. I therefore wanted to understand this wider context within the higher education sector from the perspectives of student participants and felt the methods I had chosen would afford me these insights. Bringing together these different methods of data production was a purposeful methodological decision, intended to elicit rich and varied data across the participant sample. In addition, the inclusion of creative visual methods to the data generation was a deliberate attempt to ‘fight familiarity’ as a partial ‘insider’ researcher (Mannay 2010), which is discussed further in section 4.3.2. Details on each of the selected research methods is provided in the following sections, and a thorough account of the data generation process undertaken for this research is provided in section 4.4.

#### *4.2.2.1 Interviews*

My interactions with participants needed to cover a range of topics and enable participants to speak in a detailed manner about their personal experiences. With this in mind, I felt that semi-structured elicitation interviews would be the most appropriate way of covering the range of subject areas, whilst also enabling the participants to guide the discussion to some extent. As noted by Kvale (1996) and Sewell (2009) (both cited in Ruslin et al. 2022, p.23) qualitative research interviews are “an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of research subjects. The conversation [aims] to unfold the meaning of their experiences and to uncover their lived world”. Consequently, the semi-structured nature of my in-depth interviews was appropriate for eliciting participants’ understandings of class and their own higher education journeys, and it also enabled me to question the wider-context and interpretation of their knowledge and experiences, aligning with the social constructionism epistemological framing of this study.

Each participant was invited to attend two interviews with two to three months between interviews. The criteria for joining in the study (detailed in section 4.3.1) was for there to be six months remaining of a participant’s course, which allowed for a longitudinal aspect to the data production. Rajulton (2001 p.171) highlights the following benefits to adopting an extended timeframe in qualitative research

“longitudinal studies can show the nature of growth, trace patterns of change, and possibly give a true picture of cause and effect over time. Social processes have become increasingly complex and if we would like to grasp this complexity, we need longitudinal data for establishing temporal order, measuring change and making stronger causal interpretations”.

Although the longitudinal aspect of this study was relatively short, with only two to three months between participant interviews, this was an intentional methodological decision aimed at revisiting and re-examining potentially shifting perceptions and experiences as the participant journeyed through higher education. I did not want to lengthen the time period between interviews because the participants were very busy meeting academic deadlines and timing the interviews to fit around these commitments was crucial in retaining participants in the study. This was an important consideration given the size of the sample (see section 4.3.1). Furthermore, the review of the literature suggested that working-class students might be likely to have caring and employment responsibilities alongside their

studies. Consequently, if the gap between interviews was too long, despite planning to maintain semi-regular contact with participants in between time to keep them engaged, I may have been at risk of losing them from the research due to demands from outside of their studies.

Although I was keen to incorporate walking methods into this study, as noted in section 4.4, part-way through planning my research design I had to adapt my methods due to beginning fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, alongside walking interviews I also conducted interviews online and adjusted my research design to accommodate this variance. All interviews were therefore conducted either face to face, or they were held remotely utilising online platforms such as Zoom or Teams (see section 4.4 for further details).

In recent years, walking as a method has gained prominence in qualitative methods and “walking has a diverse and extensive history in the social sciences and humanities, underscoring its value for conducting research that is situated, relational, and material” (Springgay and Truman 2018, p. 14). Moles (2019, n.p.) highlights how

“data gathered on the move might offer a useful methodological consideration: what kinds of research questions might call for the researcher to accompany their participants while they are mobile? What analytical affordances, or claims made through the data, might that method offer that gathering accounts of these actions while both researcher and participants are stationary might not?”.

Walking interviews was a method I was already familiar with, having used them in a previous study (McAlister-Wilson 2019). I therefore felt comfortable with this method and, based on my previous experience and knowledge gained from the literature, I felt it would also work well in this study and elicit rich data. As Moles (2019) notes above, I found walking interviews provided several affordances. Firstly, mobile interviews can reduce the pressure which can be present in seated face-to-face interactions that may rely heavily on eye-contact and create an (undesired) level of formality. This was especially important for establishing a rapport within the first interviews conducted when I met each participant. In the minority of second interviews which took place with extended periods of being seated (see below) this bond had already been established and I did not therefore find the change to being seated and face-to-face to be a hindrance.

Secondly, it was important that participants felt at ease and comfortable when discussing topics which were highly personal and often emotive. Walking interviews created an environment in which discussions were exploratory and could comfortably meander around the topic areas. This approach was more akin to an in-depth but semi-structured conversation than a formal interview, which I felt was the most appropriate way to gather data that would provide insight to my research questions. This 'natural' flow to the discussions was also confirmed by instances of interruptions which occurred in many of my walking interviews – a dog bounding over to be fussed, young children cycling and blocking a path – interruptions which provided small but important moments of commonality and often shared laughter between myself and participants, developing our rapport as well as providing moments for participants to pause and reflect and then return to the discussion in hand.

Thirdly, walks were conducted in settings which the participants had chosen and which held importance for them in relation to their higher education journey. Walking in locations which were significant to the topics being discussed was a useful mechanism in opening up conversations and enabling participants to reflect upon their journeys in meaningful and evocative ways. It was also a purposeful methodological choice designed to pass some ownership of the research process to the participants, and to mitigate my role as partial insider in the research process (explored in section 4.3.3). As Kinney (2017, p.2) highlights, walking methods position a participant as “an expert guide, a docent, who escorts the researcher to and around specific areas in their lives that are significant to them”, a notion which extends beyond the methods and into the data that is generated through an exploration of the link between place and self (Evans and Jones 2011). The walking interviews I conducted reflected this, with the choice of location expressly discussed at the start of the interviews, serving as a gateway into the participant accounts of their higher education journeys.

Lastly, the cyclical nature of topics being discussed, then moved away from, and then revisited again in semi-structured interviews was reflected in the walks themselves though looping the same routes and re-walking the same pathways within the locations chosen. This mirroring – between the physical space and the flow of conversation - was an interesting methodological contribution to the study which I felt was an affordance of the walking methods approach that was not present (in the same way) in other participant interviews.

In my study, the majority of the face-to-face interviews were conducted while walking and included regular breaks (such as taking a rest on a bench) with the exception of the second interviews for Bex, Pete, and Josie. In these second interviews (amounting to 3 out of the 20 walking interviews conducted) there were extended breaks and more time was spent sitting while talking due to participant preferences (for example, stopping for a coffee with Bex who then chose for us to sit). Josie preferred to sit for all of her second interview due to mobility issues, and Pete chose to sit for most of his second interview but for us to remain facing the same direction (as would have been the case if we had walked). Pete explained this was due to his autism (see section 5.2.1) and preference for minimal eye-contact, which our positioning provided. In this respect, both the interview with Pete and the walking interviews had the benefit of reducing eye-contact as we primarily focussed our gaze on the features of the surroundings environments.

Whether interviews were conducted while walking or remotely, I identified five key areas to be explored with all participants in order to attend to my research questions. To support this approach, I designed an interview topic guide in advance (see Appendix E) with sample questions which were used in both interviews. Rather than ask standard and scripted questions, as per my semi-structured approach, I took this guide with me to interviews to serve as prompts and to ensure I had coverage of the following topic areas:

1) Social class: background, upbringing, understanding of social class

The questions under this topic provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their upbringing and working-class background. Nuances of social class were explored in relation to the participants' own identity and social class status, as well as their classed understandings of friends, family, and others they came into contact with, for example university peers, lecturers and work colleagues.

2) Higher education

The questions in this area were focused on participants' education, from school through to their present-day higher education journey. Discussions focused on the reasons why participants had chosen to opt into higher education, exploring their aspirations in the past and for the future. Access and barriers as well as attainment and the support and encouragement (or not) of family, friends, and educational practitioners such as teachers and lecturers were also explored under this theme.

3) Social mobility and meritocracy

The questions asked in this topic explored notions of social mobility and meritocracy, specifically how firmly held the concepts were and what the participants' experiences of them had been. Questions also examined whether participants felt that by embarking on their higher education journeys they were, or would become, socially mobile themselves, and if so, how they would know. Lastly, barriers to 'achieving' social mobility were discussed.

#### 4) Stigma, bias, and discrimination

The questions within this area focused on participants' sense of belonging and explored whether they had experienced classism in the form of stigma, bias, or discrimination. Discussions also focused on whether participants felt comfortable being themselves at university, or whether they adopted hybridity as a strategy to 'fit-in' during their time in higher education. Additionally, this topic area explored whether participants felt that higher education institutions were in any way obligated to understand more about class differences within the student body and to what extent they might remove barriers and proactively support working-class students during their time at university.

#### 5) Positive identities:

The questions within this topic explored the extent to which participants did or did not place value on being from a working-class background, and whether they felt their class background and status had any bearing on their experiences in higher education. This theme was also concerned with the influence that role models may have played in participants' educational journeys, and how visible and prevalent these role models were in higher education.

I was not prescriptive regarding the order in which I covered these topics, other than to always begin each interview with topic area 1) Social class: background, upbringing, understanding of social class, as this was a 'natural' starting point given the study's eligibility criteria. In addition, I was aware of the potential risk that not all participants would return for their second interview, and so I tried to ensure coverage across all five topic areas in the first interview to mitigate this risk. In the case of the twelve participants who remained engaged in the study, I made a point of listening to the audio-recording of the first interview in advance of the second interview and was therefore able to delve more deeply into the most pertinent points raised across these five topics, and explore areas which had not

featured as much during the initial interview conversations. The creative methods played an integral role in the participant interviews, as the following section highlights.

#### *4.2.2.2 Creative methods*

The creative methods adopted in the study took the form of two participant tasks, namely a timeline and a letter to or from the participant's imagined future-self. Timelines are defined as a visual arts data production method created by participants which capture pertinent life events in chronological order (Kolar et al. 2015; Adriansen 2012). In this study, they were intended to provide an overview of the participant's history and journey to higher education by highlighting key milestones, achievements, difficulties, and significant events or periods along the way. Participants were asked to present information chronologically, starting at a point in time which felt relevant to them.

The letter was written by the participant in one of two ways: either from their current self (in the present) to their imagined post-university future-self, or the reverse (from their imagined future-self to themselves in the current day). Letters were written in narrative form and participants were not directed to pinpoint a specific moment in time in the future to write to or from, but instead to select a timeframe which was meaningful to them. The inclusion of letters was intended to facilitate engagement with the research that was participant-led and somewhat removed from my direction as the researcher. As Milligan (2005, p.215) highlights, letter writing places "decisions around the form of participation, the extent of the data given, and the ownership of the data more firmly in the hands of the researched", a key methodological consideration for me both in terms of ethically engaging with my participants as well as 'fighting-familiarity' (Mannay 2010) (see section 4.3.2 regarding researcher positionality). Furthermore, Stamper (2020, p.180) advocates that "letter writing [offers] a space in which participants feel able to open up, reflect and share difficult experiences and feelings in a way that feels comfortable and safe", a device which I felt would therefore complement the semi-structured longitudinal interviews and provide further rich data for my analysis.

Participants were asked to prepare the creative tasks in advance: the timeline for interview one, and the letter for interview two. The timeline method was intended to provide a useful summary of the participant's background and higher education journey before I had met them, and so was requested for interview one. The letter method was designed to provide in-depth insights into the aspirations, hopes, and barriers which participants anticipated,

consciously or sub-consciously, might feature in their journey through higher education and beyond. The letter was therefore requested for interview two when I would have already met and formed a research-relationship with each participant.

A timeline template was provided in advance to the participants, which can be found in Appendix F. No templates were provided for the letter, but a description of the task was explained to participants as part of the recruitment process, and again at the end of interview one in preparation for interview two. An anonymised and redacted example of a timeline produced for this study can be found in Appendix G and an anonymised and redacted example of a letter produced is in Appendix H.

My preference was for the participants to complete the creative tasks as, based on my review of the literature regarding these two creative methods as aforementioned, I anticipated gaining rich data from their inclusion in the project. However, completion was not an essential criterion for taking part in the study. Although I advertised the creative tasks and encouraged their completion, not all of the participants wanted or were able to engage in this aspect of the study. The main barrier appeared to be a lack of time, and although I attempted to mitigate this by providing templates and guidance, I was aware the participants were already giving their time freely to participate in the interviews and so I did not feel in a position to insist on the completion of the creative tasks as a criteria for engaging in other aspects of the research.

Once participants were recruited, I reminded them a few times about the tasks and highlighted that they could be completed and sent to me post-interview(s) if a participant did wish to complete them but had not been able to before we met. When participants had completed the creative tasks in advance, these artefacts were integrated into each interview. The creative data served as valuable discussion points which helped to steer questions. Due to the semi-structured nature of the elicitation interviews, I was able to weave these creative artefacts into my discussions with the participants. With some participants, when the creative tasks had not been completed, I instead conducted interviews around the themes which participants raised, followed up with questions from my interview topic guides to ensure coverage of the topic areas. Further details on how I navigated the inclusion/exclusion of the creative tasks within the participant interviews is provided in section 4.4.2, and details of how creative artifacts were used in the data analysis can be found in section 4.5.2. However, before discussing the data generation process it is

important to outline the context of the study, which will be the focus of the following section.

### 4.3 Research Sites

The research sites and face-to-face interview spaces were all located in Wales, UK, and were a mixture of higher education campuses and public spaces such as beaches and country parks. A breakdown of interview spaces is provided in Table 3 in section 4.5.1 of this chapter.

Students from six different higher education institutions participated in this study. Although only a small number of institutions featured in this project, they represented a diverse range of higher education providers and just over two-thirds of the institutions operating in Wales (n=8). Table 1 provides an overview of the types of higher education institutions which participants in this research attended, and all institutions have been provided with pseudonyms in this project for the purposes of participant anonymity. One, Hiraeth, was a post-92 institution, a former polytechnic that was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Two institutions, Cymorth and Hendre, had university status prior to the aforementioned 1992 Act and students in this study attended Hendre on campus but also remotely as distance-learners. The study also included a distance-learning institution, Adref, as well as an affiliated institution with degree awarding powers operating in Wales, Cymydog. Lastly, students from Aelwyd, a research-focused elite institution, also participated in this research.

**Table 1: Higher education institutions featured in this study<sup>16</sup>**

| <b>Institution pseudonym</b> | <b>Type of institution</b>    | <b>No. of participants in this study</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Hiraeth                      | Post-92 institution           | 2                                        |
| Cymorth                      | Pre-92 institution            | 3                                        |
| Hendre                       | Pre-92 institution            | 2                                        |
| Cymydog                      | Affiliated institution        | 1                                        |
| Adref                        | Distance-learning institution | 1                                        |
| Aelwyd                       | Pre-92 institution            | 7                                        |

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<sup>16</sup> Only minimal detail has been provided in Table 1 to preserve anonymity.

#### 4.3.1 Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used for this research in relation to the participants who were recruited and their associated institutions. Etikan et al. (2016, p.2) highlights that purposive sampling is a deliberate selection of participants based on the characteristics which they possess: “simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience”.

Students studying in different types of institutions were invited to participate to examine a broad range of student experiences and institutional approaches that best attended to the research questions, offering insights into potential divergences in institutional approaches to inclusion initiatives, such as widening access. I purposefully chose to only sample students who self-identified as having a working-class background because I was interested in the everyday lived experiences and future aspirations of these students, and how they understood classed identities in relation to themselves and others (as explored in section 3.2.2 and in 4.5). I was also interested in their definitions of social class, including how they applied these categorisations to themselves. I produced a Research Flyer to advertise the study (Appendix B) and introduced the aims of the research by providing details of what participants could expect from opting-in. The flyer stated the following eligibility criteria for engaging in the research:

- participants who were studying with a university in Wales (either on-campus or distance learning), and;
- who self-identified as being from a working-class background, and;
- had at least 6 months of their course remaining.

I intended to include the experiences of a diverse range of students, not only with regards to different modes and subjects of study, but also personal characteristics, including some which are protected. This diversity covered the following: those studying via different modes; different ages and genders; at different stages and levels of degree programmes/courses; those with varied external circumstances (such as parental responsibilities and employment commitments). The purposive sampling approach, featuring diversity in participant demographics and their identity intersections, was anticipated to bring to the surface potential commonalities and differences across the sample. Additionally, some participants had experienced higher education journeys at

different institutions by the time they participated in my study, with almost two thirds being postgraduate students (Table 2 in 4.3.1). The participant sample also reflected a range of institutions which participants were students at during the point of data generation for this study, with a mixture of pre-92 and post-92 institutions reflected in the sample as well as an affiliated institution and a distance-learning provider (outlined in Table 1 in 4.3). This diversity in institution type and level of study provided me with rich data in terms of the range of experiences which could be drawn upon within participant accounts, and it also provided insight when seeking to understand participants' perspectives on social class, their own classed identities and social mobility, social class bias and discrimination, and how these viewpoints had evolved over time and in different educational contexts. This included explorations of whether type of institution – such as pre-92/post-92 - had a bearing on participants' perspectives of classed identities and the considerations which they navigated across higher education journeys in different institutions. Participant contributions to the study were therefore shaped by these perspectives and varied educational contexts and are highlighted and explored in the empirical chapters.

I was also interested in whether postgraduate study might frame understandings of classed identities in the context of a massified higher education system (as noted in section 2.2.1) and could provide insight into why some participants continued in higher education and undertook multiple journeys after undergraduate degrees. Having participants from all levels of study represented in the sample provided me with the opportunity to explore motivations for embarking on repeat higher education journeys, including whether postgraduate study might be considered a preserve of the middle-classes and therefore viewed as a necessity for some of the participants seeking to achieve social mobility. Where pertinent, discussions arising from this are presented in the findings.

As can be seen in the empirical chapters, some students on social science courses presented nuanced and, quite likely, academically informed understandings of social class in their accounts. It could be argued that social science students may be more naturally drawn to discussions of social class and have more informed understandings than other students. However as evident in my findings, subject discipline was not necessarily as a pre-cursor to a more theoretically informed understanding of social class, with students in this study across a variety of courses expressing high levels of understandings and appreciation of the role which social class plays in education and educational spaces.

Research participants were accessed in several ways. I contacted academic staff in three institutions via existing networks, and they circulated the Research Flyer to students in undergraduate, postgraduate, and widening access programmes via their own networks. Participants were able to self-refer into the study, rather than be identified by course tutors, as my email address was provided on the Flyer. This led to one participant being recruited. I followed up after two weeks with each academic contact and offered to attend a seminar or lecture to explain more about the project and, if desired, provide a presentation or overview of related research to give more contextual details to the study. I was subsequently invited to give a presentation at a widening access workshop run by one of the institutions which resulted in an additional one participant being recruited (two had been recruited originally but one later withdrew before fieldwork commenced due to being unable to commit time to the interviews). I was also invited to attend a mature student's social event at one institution, leading to two more participants being recruited.

In addition, I approached the Student's Union, societies, and informal support groups at four of the six institutions (I did not have access to do this in the remaining two institutions) to advertise the project directly to potential participants, leading to two participants being recruited. Lastly, existing social networks and social media sites were utilised, providing the opportunity for potential participants to contact me directly in order to find out more about the study and how to participate. This resulted in the remaining 10 participants being recruited (an additional three people were recruited this way and then withdrew before fieldwork commenced on health grounds or a lack of time to participate).

In total, I recruited 20 participants into the study, of which 16 participated in the interviews and/or creative tasks. As noted, four participants withdrew from the research before interviews commenced. Of the 16 participants who took part in fieldwork, five were studying on undergraduate degree programmes, five were studying on postgraduate taught degree programmes, five were studying on postgraduate research degree programmes, and one was studying on part time widening access course with a view to progressing to a degree programme.

Table 2 provides demographic details for each participant and the data generation activities that they engaged with during the study. Comprehensive pen portraits of each participant including details of their journey to higher education as well as key contextual information about their upbringing and background is provided in Appendix A.

**Table 2: Participant breakdown**

| No. | Pseudonym | Gender Identity | Age Range | Parent (Y/N/Single Parent) | Employed | University Pseudonym | WA / Foundation | Level of Study  | Full Time / Part Time | Year of Study | Int. 1 | Int. 2 | Timeline | Letter |
|-----|-----------|-----------------|-----------|----------------------------|----------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------|--------|----------|--------|
| 1   | Eiriol    | F               | 40-49     | Yes, SP                    | Yes      | Aelwyd               | No              | PhD             | F/T                   | 3             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 2   | Josie     | F               | 50+       | No                         | Yes      | Aelwyd               | No              | Master's        | F/T                   | 1             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 3   | George    | M               | 30-39     | Yes, SP                    | No       | Aelwyd               | No              | Master's        | F/T                   | 1             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 4   | Lena      | F               | 30-39     | No                         | No       | Aelwyd               | Yes             | WA              | P/T                   | 1             | Yes    | No     | No       | No     |
| 5   | Manon     | F               | 30-39     | Yes, SP                    | Yes      | Aelwyd               | No              | PhD             | F/T                   | 2             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 6   | Bex       | F               | 18-21     | No                         | Yes      | Hendre               | No              | UG              | F/T                   | 3             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 7   | Seren     | F               | 22-29     | No                         | Yes      | Aelwyd               | No              | PhD             | F/T                   | 3             | Yes    | Yes    | No       | No     |
| 8   | Kel       | F               | 30-39     | Yes                        | Yes      | Aelwyd               | No              | UG              | F/T                   | 3             | Yes    | Yes    | No       | No     |
| 9   | Pete      | M               | 50+       | No                         | No       | Cymorth              | Yes             | Foundation + UG | F/T                   | 2             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | No     |
| 10  | Danny     | M               | 40-49     | No                         | Yes      | Hendre               | Yes             | Foundation + UG | F/T                   | 1             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |
| 11  | Francesca | F               | 40-49     | Yes, SP                    | Yes      | Hiraeth              | No              | PhD             | F/T                   | 3             | Yes    | No     | No       | No     |
| 12  | Mel       | F               | 50+       | Yes, SP                    | No       | Cymorth              | Yes             | UG              | P/T                   | 2             | Yes    | No     | Yes      | No     |
| 13  | Ally      | F               | 40-49     | Yes                        | Yes      | Cymydog              | No              | PhD             | F/T                   | 1             | Yes    | No     | Yes      | No     |
| 14  | Nikki     | F               | 30-39     | Yes, SP                    | Yes      | Hiraeth              | No              | Master's        | P/T                   | 1             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | No     |
| 15  | Zoe       | F               | 30-39     | Yes                        | Yes      | Adref                | No              | Master's        | P/T                   | 2             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | No     |
| 16  | Jules     | F               | 50+       | No                         | Yes      | Cymorth              | No              | Master's        | F/T                   | 1             | Yes    | Yes    | Yes      | Yes    |

#### 4.3.2 Researcher Positionality

As noted in section 1.1 of the Introduction, I am a higher education student from a working-class background. As illustrated in the existing literature (Mannay 2010; Holmes 2020; Reich 2021) debates surrounding researcher positionality focus on validity, and whether it is more appropriate for researchers to be 'insiders' or 'outsiders' to their fields of study. I afforded close regard to my own positionality for this research project, particularly the notion of privilege of knowledge, as outlined by Mannay (2010, p.92): "Such discourses of epistemic privilege can be dangerous because they produce a false binary, which silences the multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives". As Roberts (2018, p.114) cautiously notes these matters are far from clearcut and must be given broader consideration than just this seemingly straightforward binary: "the apparent insider can prove to be an outsider as well, as the researcher's characteristics (gender, age, class, ethnicity and education) and personal experiences might differ substantially from the people they are studying". Whilst the research participants featured in this study were a diverse range of individuals with differing identities at the intersections of class, gender and age, for example, it remains the case that I was operating from a position of a partial insider during this study. As outlined in section 1.1, I was personally motivated to explore the research topic due to my own working-class family roots and having been exposed to social mobility during my formative years. Furthermore, as a mature, female student with caring responsibilities and a long history of professional work experience in the areas of inequality and higher education, I was acutely aware of the need to acknowledge both the benefits and drawbacks of such positionality whilst conducting this study.

Beneficial aspects of operating as partial insider were most notable in the ability to 'relate to' research participants and carry out fluid, conversational interviews. Setting participants at ease was an important methodological consideration in this study, and being a partial insider, due to having shared characteristics of being working-class, engaged in academic study, and (in some cases) a single parent, was a useful means of achieving this outcome. Conversely, this also risked being a drawback within the study: conversational interviews, following a semi-structured style, could have, at times, relied on implicit understandings and 'taken-for granted statements' between myself as the researcher and the participants and might not have been articulated as clearly as if I had been an outsider. This aligns with

Reich's (2021, p.576) perspective that qualitative research requires researchers to examine their own positionality "as embodied actors that inform the questioning, analyses, and representational decisions, which [...] powerfully improves understanding of how participants' lived experiences and meaningful perspectives are historically and socially located."

Whilst there are clearly benefits to operating as an insider, distance needed to be maintained to, as Reich (2021) goes on to note, afford appropriate ethical care to participants during the study. With this in mind, important methodological decisions were made in an attempt fight familiarity and 'de-familiarise' myself with the participants (Manny 2010).

The use of the two creative methods, as discussed in section 4.2.2.2 was an intentional device intended to create methodological distance between myself and the participants. Whilst these methods were primarily chosen with the expectation that they would produce rich and varied data, they were also employed as a visual means of engaging with the themes and data outside of a reliance on verbal communication between myself and the participants. Additionally, the development of these creative tasks was owned by each participant. I provided guidance on their creation and templates to assist where possible, but this was a participant-led aspect of the data generation. I was guided by these creative artefacts, and therefore by the participants themselves, when conducting the interviews as I used the creatives tasks to steer the direction of the conversation based on what the participants had revealed to be significant and meaningful to them.

Furthermore, to mitigate the potential for researcher bias when conducting the fieldwork and when analysing the findings, I created a reflexive journal to note feelings and responses to the data. As explained in section 4.4.5, reflexivity helped me to manage my relationship to the research participants and subject matter, ensuring my own experiences and familiarity with the subject did not overshadow the meaning-making in participants' accounts.

Lastly, I sought out and made use of academic papers highlighting the risks of over-familiarity in research and offering guidance on distancing oneself from the subject matter when it is inherently a part of one's own identity (for example, see Roberts 2018; Holmes

2020). All of the considerations and mitigations mentioned here framed the process of data generation which I undertook in this study, details of which are provided in the next section.

## 4.4 Data Generation

### 4.4.1 Pilot Study

I undertook two pilot interviews to trial-run the interview style, themes, questions, and creative tasks. The two people in the pilot study were not eligible to be in the final study because they were in my social circle. I conducted one pilot interview with a participant who had produced the creative tasks and a second pilot interview with a different participant who had not completed any of the creative tasks: the intention being to test out the combination of methods, and to provide me with experience of how to conduct interviews without the benefit of having the creative tasks to build the themes and questions around.

Feedback from the first pilot interview, indicated that a template timeline would have been helpful as the participant had not been sure of how to visually present their timeline.

Subsequently, I included two templates in the instructions for the main study for the participants to choose from when creating their timeline. With regards to the second pilot interview, which did not feature any creative artefacts, I made some adjustments to the beginning of the interview to better incorporate more substantial 'icebreakers' and build rapport quickly. I noticed that I felt I 'knew' the pilot interviewee who had produced the creative tasks, particularly the timeline as this gave more details about them in advance, compared to the pilot interviewee who had not created this data. Applying this thinking to the main study, given the tasks were optional, I felt it would be important to give increased attention to establishing background details from the participants and to build rapport early on with those who chose not to create data as part of their engagement with this study. This was also an important consideration given the creative tasks served an additional function in my research regarding fighting-familiarity, as noted in section 4.3.2.

### 4.4.2 Main Study

When I first met all of the participants, whether online or for an in-person walking interview, I started with a few icebreakers to set the participants at ease. This consisted of a brief summary of the research and its aims, as well as me confirming details which I already knew about the participant (either from their timeline or from our initial email exchange),

such as their course discipline or year of study. For the participants who chose a walking interview, when we met I would ask them to explain why they had chosen that specific location for our walk and what resonance it held for them, which was another way of opening up the discussions.

If participants had completed the timeline creative task, they would bring a copy of it to the interview, and I would refer to it after the icebreakers. Doing so provided me with a direct route into the participant's personal journey at the outset of our interview, and it also enabled me to focus in on specific elements which the participant had already drawn out as being pertinent to their experience by way of inclusion on their timeline. For those participants who had not provided a timeline, following the icebreakers, I began the interview by inviting them to tell me more about their upbringing and background, as had been trialled in one of the pilot interviews (section 4.4.1). Most of the participants who completed timelines had listed life events and key details from early childhood in chronological order and so, with the non-timeline participants, starting in this manner afforded some parallels with interviews which had featured creative tasks, despite the difference in background information provided to me beforehand.

I recorded face-to-face interviews using a portable audio recorder and a smartphone app recorder as a backup. I conducted online interviews on Zoom or Teams and audio recorded these via computer software, with a smartphone app recorder again serving as a backup. Creative tasks were produced by the participants either in hard copy or electronically, according to their preference: the timelines tended to be hand-drawn and the letters to or from their imagined future-self were hand-written or typed. Whether we met online or face-to-face, participants were asked to read their letter aloud for the recording, but only if they were comfortable doing so (all participants did read their letter aloud), and in most cases this practice elicited emotional responses in the participants.

The face-to-face interviews in the main study were conducted during the daytime and online interviews were held in the daytimes or evenings, usually to work around the participant's other commitments such as caring responsibilities or work. I also made myself available on the weekends for participants who could not commit to a weekday meeting, whether face-to-face or online. For all interviews, I made field notes post-interview to add

context and document other relevant aspects of the meeting (such as description of the setting/location in the case of walking interviews).

#### 4.4.3 Procedural Ethics

It is essential that sound ethical principles underpin a dependable and reliable piece of academic research. As such, ethical considerations for this study have been informed by Diener's and Crandall's (1978) four guiding ethical principles: (1) whether there is harm to participants; (2) whether there is a lack of informed consent; (3) whether there is an invasion of privacy; and (4) whether deception is involved. In addition, Cardiff University's Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approved the study (reference SREC No: 38) prior to its commencement and guidance was also sought from the Economic and Social Research Council's ethical framework<sup>17</sup>.

Part of this study explored whether participants experienced bias and discrimination in higher education because of their working-class identity and low socio-economic status. It was possible that the participants, who had invested time and resources in their education, may not have considered this perspective before. Consequently, there was a risk of participants reflecting negatively on their higher education experiences as a result of engaging with this study and finding this upsetting. I sought to mitigate this concern through purposefully designing conversational and semi-structured interviews, and through the incorporation of creative methods with data produced directly by the participants. The use of these two approaches sought to engender a sense that the data production was, in part, being led by the participants as aforementioned, albeit still covering the list of themes pertinent to the research questions (see section 4.2.2.2). In addition to mitigating potential harm to participants through the selection of methods and my interactions with the participants, I ensured that all of the participants were made aware of the support available at their institutions should they have felt the need to access it. Participants were provided with a list of support services as a matter of course before or just after the first interview was conducted.

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<sup>17</sup> ESRC ethical Framework: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/>

Regarding ethical considerations for myself, and due to my positionality (section 4.3.2), I anticipated that elements of the interviews and creative tasks might be difficult noting that, for example, the potential relaying of bias or discrimination by participants might give rise to strong emotions in me if discrimination or perceived discrimination was disclosed. I was aware that disclosures might pose a risk of potential harm to me during the data generation or when writing-up the findings, particularly if these affected my perceptions and feelings in relation to my own experiences. To mitigate this, I familiarised myself with Cardiff University's student support services and maintained regular supervision meetings, mindful of the need to raise any concerns about my own perceptions and experiences arising from conducting this research and which could be harmful. Furthermore, I utilised the knowledge and support of my research project supervisors in guiding me to make appropriate decisions about the ways in which the research was conducted to ensure it was ethical, reliable, and had integrity.

Regarding the confidentiality of participants, only basic data about their protected characteristics was collected (gender, ethnicity, and age within an age-banding). Consent Forms, which included the participant's name, were either returned electronically or provided in hard copy to me and then scanned in and stored securely on Cardiff University's OneDrive network, via a password-protected device. In addition, all participant files connected with the research project, including audio recordings, interview transcripts and copies of the creative tasks produced by participants were also stored on this OneDrive network and accessed through the password-protected device. Only I had access to the data on the network and device.

All personal information including names, university, and home location was anonymised from the interviews and from the creative tasks. Before data production commenced, the guidance provided to participants advised against the inclusion of personal information and other potentially identifying details in the creative data. It was explained that if for some reason a participant could not omit these details then the data artefacts would not be included in the write-up or would be redacted where necessary to maintain participant anonymity.

To ensure confidentiality was maintained as much as possible, the following steps were also taken:

- All participants were provided with pseudonyms and the details of their courses and schools of study were not disclosed in the write-up (only generic subject areas such as 'medical studies', 'social sciences', and 'arts').
- The higher education institutions were given pseudonyms and details about any specialist or renowned subject areas were not identified.
- Any geographical locations mentioned by the participants, including where they studied at university, were given pseudonyms and described in broad terms in relation to size and location.
- Audio recordings were saved under the participant's pseudonym, and pseudonyms for both institution names and the geographical locations of these institutions were used in the transcripts.

Despite giving pseudonyms to the institutions, the risk remained that they could potentially be identifiable, given the relatively small number of higher education institutions in Wales (as noted in section 4.3). It was therefore anticipated that, collectively, the measures outlined above would help to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants in this study.

Prior to agreeing to engage in the research, potential participants who were eligible and interested in taking part were given a Research Information Sheet (Appendix C). This provided a full project description outlining the aims of the research, confidentiality and safeguarding, and details on how to withdraw from the study. The Research Information Sheet indicated that participants could withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, up until the point I wrote up my findings. If a participant chose to withdraw before the findings were written up, I made clear that their contributions would be removed from the thesis. Participants were given three weeks to decide whether to participate or not and those who did not reply during the initial three weeks but got in contact later were still able to take part, as long as the two interviews (two to three months apart) fell within the timeframe for fieldwork in the study.

If a potential participant wanted to proceed I asked for their consent, utilising the written Consent Form (Appendix D). This was signed by the participant and confirmed they had received the Research Information Sheet, had been given a chance to ask questions, and were giving informed consent to take part in the study. Verbal consent was obtained for

participants who opted to engage via remote interviews if they had not returned their consent form by email before the first interview commenced. In all cases, participants were sent the Consent Form and Research Information Sheet in my first substantive communication with them. Seeking informed consent was crucial to ensuring participants had the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their engagement at the outset, before data production commenced.

#### 4.4.4 Researching during Covid-19

During the planning and design phase of this project, the Covid-19 global pandemic occurred and social distancing measures were enacted across the UK. This meant that face to face research was prohibited for a substantial period of time, not only by Cardiff University's regulations but also due to the distancing rules put in place by the Welsh Government<sup>18</sup> to limit the spread of the virus. This disruption was felt across the research community (Lobe et al. 2020; Keen et al. 2022) and the continuity and continuation of research projects during this time was significantly threatened (Rahman et al. 2021). During the pandemic, government social distancing measures were subject to change and review and, although they were eased during some periods of this project's design phase, they were re-introduced at other points. This meant that face-to-face data production was restricted and somewhat unpredictable to organise.

Such uncertainty in being able to effectively plan walking interviews led to an adaptation in the research design. The original intention for this study was to feature face-to-face walking interviews as the only method of interview data production. However, I needed to adapt and introduce other means of engagement if I was to build resilience into the research design (Rahman et al. 2021) and be able to continue with the study. Online interviews were never intended to form part of this study because all of the anticipated research sites were within a reasonable travelling distance for me, and thus there did not seem to be any barriers to meeting participants face-to-face.

In addition, pre-pandemic, I was heavily invested in my preferred approach of conducting walking interviews and remote discussions therefore appeared to be a redundant option, not worthy of consideration: why would I opt to meet people online when I could instead

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<sup>18</sup> [Coronavirus legislation: restrictions on individuals, business and others | GOV.WALES](#)

see them face-to-face, was my naïve perspective. This was a stance I had also absorbed from some of the methodological literature regarding qualitative research. Remote interviews were less commonplace as a research method pre-pandemic, with face-to-face contact often viewed as the preferred means of engagement (Keen et al. 2022). Furthermore, remote interviews had been regarded as a 'lesser' method by some methodologists within the research community due to 'slowness' of discussions during interviews because of the medium of interaction, as well as perceived difficulties in developing relationships between researchers and participants (Rubin and Rubin 2011). In some quarters, caution was also voiced that this style of interviewing could negatively affect the depth of engagement with research participants (Irvine et al. 2013).

The pandemic restrictions also led to adjustments in the timeframe for advertising and recruiting participants, and for conducting the research itself due to the changes I needed to make in my planning. However, when I was ready to commence fieldwork many social distancing rules had been removed and face-to-face data production became unrestricted again. I decided however to proceed with my adapted plan of offering both online and face-to-face meetings as I found the range of options more inclusive than the original design. For example, I had participants who wished to engage but were not comfortable with meeting face-to-face given the impact of the pandemic, and associated risks, on their physical health. Additionally, the introduction of online interviews led to me recruiting participants from a wider geographical area than I may have otherwise been able to if the interviews had required a face-to-face meeting as originally intended.

The discussions which formed part of the 'small-talk' at the beginning or end of some interviews indicated that three participants may not have opted into the study if the online option had not been available. For example, one participant was studying via distance learning and not ordinarily based in Wales (although their institution was, and they were therefore eligible to participate: see sampling criteria in section 4.3.1). This participant remarked that being able to meet online was the only way they were able to take part in the research, and that they would not have responded to my recruitment advert if this had not been an option available to them.

Another adaptation to the research design was allowing participants sharing their creative tasks electronically, as well as in hard copy. Originally, I had intended to collect the hard

copies of all creative tasks during the walking interviews. However, because of the pandemic's impact on my methods and the inclusion of virtual interviews I subsequently gave participants the choice of whether to provide me with hard copies or to send these electronically. Whilst face-to-face participants provided me with their creative data both electronically and in hard copy, the virtual participants all sent me electronic versions of their creative tasks, with none choosing to send hard copies via post (an option available to them). Without this adaptation, virtual participants may not have completed the creative tasks and this study would not have benefitted from the insightful creative data which these participants contributed.

In summary, although the Covid-19 pandemic presented a degree of upheaval in the research planning and timeframe of this project, in other ways it afforded new opportunities to recruit a wider-pool of higher education participants, which improved the both the sample of participants and the data generated for this study.

#### 4.4.5 Reflexivity

A reflexive journal was kept throughout the project to complement the research process, which I found to be an essential tool. As Seale (1999, p.160) advocates, reflexivity is a crucial element within research and "Telling the story of how a research project was done can serve many purposes". However, Seale goes on to weave a cautionary tale of how reflexive accounting needs to 'walk a line' between, "apparently placing the research account beyond criticism" and developing "into an excruciating degree of self-consciousness" (Seale 1999 p.177), words I believe I took heed of when conducting my own research.

I found that writing reflexively about snags and difficulties in the research design and planning stages, as well as during data generation, analysis, and the writing-up of findings was enormously beneficial. Reflexive writing enabled me to notice and explore bias and over-familiarity, as mentioned earlier in section 4.3.2, and was a means of ensuring I was being transparent and accountable. The reflexive diary also provided the opportunity to guide my decision-making throughout the project, whilst being mindful and taking note of Seale's (1999) aforementioned reference to over-examination of the process (and to myself as the researcher). The reflexive journal allowed this balance to be struck. With this in mind, some reflexive notes are offered below.

As highlighted in section 4.4.4, the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown, and social distancing rules initially meant it was not possible to only continue with one method of participant engagement, namely the walking interviews. Whilst I had been prepared for some participants to want to walk less than others or of the need to adapt and walk/rest when required (for example because of mobility issues), I had not given enough consideration to broader means of engagement as being a potential selling-point of the study. Whilst the pandemic proved initially challenging, this disruption meant that I was required to adapt and become more inclusive, to the benefit of the project and my own experience as a researcher. Timelines and letters were always planned to accompany the walking interviews, however the move to also offering remote interviews fostered in me an increased focus on utilising these additional ways for participants to express their experiences and engage with the research aims.

When recruiting participants, some academics who were willing to let me speak to their students were keen for me to provide a presentation of my own journey in higher education to them. This was with a view to me being an ‘inspiration’ for what the students could potentially achieve themselves if they were to remain engaged in university and progress through degree levels. This proved challenging for me as both a researcher and as an individual, for two reasons: firstly I was being positioned as a social mobility success story, and might be seen to be advocating for the very concept which I was attempting to critique, and secondly it required me to consider what I was prepared to reveal about myself, being mindful to not divulge details which I might be later reflect uncomfortably on, and equally being mindful to not steer the participants down particular avenues or exert influence over them. Further to this, four participants who were nearing the end of their studies (two at undergraduate and two at Master’s levels), indicated in their second interviews with me that they would like to continue with their higher education journeys. This led to these students asking me to share my experiences and knowledge of the PhD process – how had I funded my studies, how did I apply for my programme, how had I found the process and so on. I was reminded of my own desire to anchor onto others who I felt reflected me in some way when I had been considering applying for a PhD myself several years earlier. I therefore felt some familiarity, and a not unwelcome sense of obligation to assist and share my own

knowledge with these four participants, knowing how important nuggets of information had been to me during my own higher education journey.

Research questions three and four proved somewhat difficult to address in this study, as outlined in sections 8.2 and 8.4. As noted by Charlesworth's reflection on their own research (2000, p.134) "My naïve questions became meaningless to the interviewees who simply could not recognise the question as denoting something *in* their world". Besides forthright accounts from Eiriol, Jules, Manon, Seren, and Ally (which I will return to) most of the participants had noticed and identified class-based differences and inequities as being relevant during their higher education journeys, but they were hesitant to describe these experiences in higher education as bias or discrimination.

All of the participants had a theoretical understanding of access and attainment gaps between working class students and their more affluent peers, but not all were able to picture themselves as actors in such an arena. That class-based bias and discrimination could be factors in structural inequalities proved difficult to discuss with several participants given their firmly-held beliefs in equality of opportunity and having bought into the myth of meritocracy for all (Sobuwa and McKenna 2019; Themelis 2017). Consequently, my descriptions of society being unmeritocratic and of the failure to achieve social mobility being due to structural inequalities and not personal failings was resisted by several participants beyond theoretical discussions.

#### 4.4.6 Limitations of the study

There were two particular limitations in this study which, in the interests of presenting a well-rounded account of the methodological considerations I navigated when carrying out my research, it is important to draw attention to.

Firstly, as noted in Tables 2 and 3, only a small number of men opted into the study (three out of 16 participants). As I did not purposively target women when advertising and recruiting for the study (indeed the channels and networks I used appeared to be gender-balanced) I had not anticipated there would be such a gender imbalance in the final number of participants. It may be that as participants knew my own gender from the Research Information Sheet (which featured my photograph as a means of personalising the research and putting a 'face-to-the-name' so to speak), this inadvertently appealed more to women

than men. I did not raise this with the participants who opted-in to the study and so I do not have an explanation for this beyond conjecture on my part. Three of the four participants who withdrew from the original sample of 20 were men, meaning there had originally been a more equal gender balance in the sample, although not parity. Unfortunately, due to time constraints I was not able to re-advertise the study and complete more fieldwork to redress this imbalance. Besides gender however, the final sample of 16 participants is diverse in terms of other personal and protected characteristics, which does help to ensure a range of perspectives have been gathered and included in this research.

Another limitation regarding the sampling strategy is that only a small number of participants who had engaged with institutional widening access initiatives opted-in to the study. I did purposively target this cohort of students and, as noted in section 3.3.1, I directly approached academics within departments who delivered widening access initiatives and gave a presentation to students on a widening access course, however this only led to a limited number of potential participants coming forward. Although the research questions in this study pay attention to the role of institutional initiatives, widening access is not the primary focus of my research. Given this, I do not feel that the limited number of participants in this study who had engaged with widening access schemes, whilst a limitation, has prevented me from adequately attending to the research questions in the findings I present over the subsequent chapters.

#### 4.5 Framework of Analysis

The study took a thematic approach to the data analysis, which involved generating initial codes and constructing themes as detailed in section 4.5.2. I also wanted to understand in what ways Bourdieu's central concepts of habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence presented in the accounts of my participants and the extent to which these provided explanation and meaning to the higher education journeys which participants were on. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how notions of discrimination and bias, defined in section 2.2.2, were reflected in the participant accounts and the extent to which their journeys could be understood through this lens. Although Bourdieu's concepts are, of course, inter-related and, when utilised as a collective, they grounded my analysis, it is useful to take a moment and also reflect on each in turn and their particular contribution to my analysis. Firstly, habitus was especially useful in exploring participants' family

background and their (and their family's) perspectives on education as well providing a context in which to understand how habitus shapes people's experiences and influences their perspectives and behaviours as they move between spaces which feature, and are perceived to demand, a different dominant habitus. Utilising concepts of capital, in the different forms outlined in section 3.2.1, enabled me to draw out themes related to motivations for higher education journeys, as well as providing an explanation for both the challenges and opportunities observed in participants' perceptions of their own agency and interactions with others, contributing to understandings of how participants identified their 'place' and autonomy within the structures in which they found themselves. Similarly, the concept of field provided the analysis with a grounding in which to understand how variances identified in different spaces – be that home, the workplace, or educational settings – influenced participants' perspectives and informed strategies which were utilised to navigate these different realms. Lastly, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence was drawn on in relation to a central concern of this research - that of the extent to which working-class higher education journeys can be understood through a lens of bias and discrimination. Symbolic violence provided a framework in which to make sense of the challenges which the working-class students in this study faced in relation to structural disadvantage, as well as helping to question the role of higher education institutions in tackling class-based inequality.

In addition to Bourdieu, I drew upon human capital theory, the concept of intersectionality, and feminist perspectives (outlined in 3.2.1.1) to inform my analysis. I used these to account for complexities in the data which I did not feel Bourdieu's concepts always responded to, such as participant perceptions of human capital investments in the self to support social mobility, and in relation to understanding how intersecting categories of identity – particularly gender and class - shaped my participants' lived experiences both in relation to their family background as well as their higher education journeys. The participants' accounts were, as noted in 4.5.2, analysed thematically with a view to providing a robust and critical exploration of the data, and in this coding and analytical process connections were made with all of these theoretical perspectives.

Regarding the utilisation of frameworks for social class, as highlighted in section 3.2.2 this study resisted adopting a recognised classification as the sole measure of class, such as

Goldthorpe's National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (Goldthorpe 2016), or Savage et al.'s (2013) seven-point framework. A key consideration in my study was exploring the ways in which participants understood social class and how they formulated social class definitions and markers, and then applied these – to themselves, others, and within their different environments. Self-identification was therefore an important methodological reflection of the need for this consideration in the sample (highlighted in 4.3.1) as well as within the approach to data generation and data analysis. Whilst being mindful of Pilgrim-Brown's (2023) and Sayer's (2005) caution that self-identification can present divergent interpretations which might give rise to difficulties for social scientists when evaluating and analysing data (as noted in 3.2.2), I felt that my utilisation of thematic analysis (outlined in 4.5.2) enabled me to examine the data and draw upon established frameworks as well as subjective understandings of these definitions as found within the participant accounts. Reay et al. (2011) emphasise the benefits for social scientists when adopting a multi-faceted collaborative approach and forging the lived experiences of individuals with overarching frameworks in order for each to provide a mirror to the other, noting

“we are interested in individuals, but we are just as interested in what they show us about social practices, spaces, positions and relations...[identity] is always both a reflection and an enactment of these social dimensions” (Reay et al. 2011, p. 22).

#### 4.5.1 Data Produced

Of the 16 participants who engaged in this study, four attended one interview and twelve attended two interviews, a retention rate of 75% from interview one to interview two. Twelve participants produced a timeline for interview one, and seven produced a letter to or from their imagined future-self for interview two, meaning 75% of participants contributed at least one creative artefact to the study. The length of each interview depended on how much participants had to contribute and how quickly the topic areas were progressed through, however most were between 1 – 1.5 hours in length. As noted in section 3.2.2, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner allowing for a natural flow of conversation around the topics. This approach enabled the narrative, in part, to be guided and led by the participants which was an important methodological consideration and was also intended to provide an environment where participants would feel

comfortable and relaxed. Table 3 illustrates the extent and mode of engagement for each participant, and outlines which creative tasks they completed.

**Table 3: Data produced (per participant)**

| No. | Pseudonym | Institution pseudonym | Number of interviews attended | Interview medium (face-to-face, online) | Interview location (if face-to-face) | Creative method(s) produced:<br>Timeline (T) Letter (L) |
|-----|-----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Eiriol    | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | Beach                                | T + L                                                   |
| 2   | Josie     | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | University campus                    | T + L                                                   |
| 3   | George    | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | University campus                    | T + L                                                   |
| 4   | Lena      | Aelwyd                | 1                             | Face-to-face                            | Local town centre                    | Neither                                                 |
| 5   | Manon     | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | Country park                         | T + L                                                   |
| 6   | Bex       | Hendre                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | University campus                    | T + L                                                   |
| 7   | Seren     | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | Country park                         | Neither                                                 |
| 8   | Kel       | Aelwyd                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | University campus                    | Neither                                                 |
| 9   | Pete      | Cymorth               | 2                             | Online and face-to-face                 | Local town centre                    | T                                                       |
| 10  | Danny     | Hendre                | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | University campus                    | T + L                                                   |
| 11  | Francesca | Hiraeth               | 1                             | Online                                  | N/a                                  | Neither                                                 |
| 12  | Mel       | Cymorth               | 1                             | Online                                  | N/a                                  | T                                                       |
| 13  | Ally      | Cymydog               | 1                             | Online                                  | N/a                                  | T                                                       |
| 14  | Nikki     | Hiraeth               | 2                             | Face-to-face                            | Beach                                | T                                                       |
| 15  | Zoe       | Adref                 | 2                             | Online                                  | N/a                                  | T                                                       |
| 16  | Jules     | Cymorth               | 2                             | Online                                  | N/a                                  | T + L                                                   |

#### 4.5.2 Data analysis

Key stages in the ‘art’ of transcribing are highlighted by Bird (2005, p.230) who notes that “the act of transcription is interpretive in that it is the process of formulating and producing a meaning unique to the situation of utterance”. Within this research project, transcription of the data formed part of the methodological process, with the recorded interviews fully transcribed to engage with the data as a first stage of analysis. This enabled me to immerse myself in the data, whilst reflexively paying attention to my own interpretations and understandings of the application of these during this first stage of the analytical process. For Bird (2005, p.228), “As researchers locate themselves within the context of their own

assumptions about language and culture and discourse practices, they are more able to recognize their own interpretive acts". Therefore, although consideration was given to partial transcription, on commencing the analysis I felt a more thorough exploration of the data would be afforded if full transcription was undertaken. I also felt that full transcription would provide a more robust approach and limit the potential of researcher bias in the early stages of the analytical processes, as outlined in section 4.3.2 regarding researcher positionality.

I listened to each interview recording at least twice before beginning to transcribe the audio, with a view to becoming very familiar with the data prior to transcription.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that despite good intentions, conveying meaning, nuance, and the intricacies of conversation via transcription is challenging. As Bird (2005, p.242) asserts, "The reality of a multidimensional communicative event does not easily lend itself to reproduction in the two-dimensional realm of the printed page". Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1994) emphasise that authenticity in data analysis is a crucial element in valid qualitative research: studies must seek to ensure fairness of representation in the research findings and in the impact of the research both on the participants and the wider context. Consequently, full verbatim transcription, used alongside the rich and unedited data obtained from the creative tasks, was deemed appropriate to establish the analysis as being part of a thorough and reliable process.

Following transcription, I undertook a thematic analysis of all the data generated by each participant (up to two interview transcripts, one timeline, and one future-selves letter each) utilising the pivotal body of work regarding thematic analysis from Braun et al. (2022) to guide me. This process enabled me to better understand each dataset and provided a framework for the development of codes, themes and the analysis, drawn from across all of the data produced for this study: 28 interview transcripts, 12 timelines, and seven letters. Braun et al. (2022) stress the importance of identifying themes as patterns in the data which feature shared ideas, meanings, and concepts. The intention is not to summarise topics and be led by the frequency of codes within the findings, but moreover to actively immerse oneself in the data and produce themes through patterned analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2008) also highlight, thematic analysis, whilst not prescriptive in approach or style, provides a framework within which to identify, analyse, and report patterns and themes found within

data. Data can therefore be organised and viewed systematically both within and across datasets. This was particularly useful in this project as some participants contributed four individual pieces of data each if they had attended both interviews and had completed both creative tasks.

When the participants' accounts are referred to in my empirical chapters, these references encompass findings from across all aspects of the data produced – interviews, timelines, and letters. Where excerpts are included, these are drawn from interview transcripts, unless specifically attributed to the method through which they were generated (an excerpt from a letter for example). For each participant, the majority of data was produced during the one or two interviews in which they engaged, of which the creative tasks – when they were completed – played an integral role in steering the interview focus and questions (as highlighted in 4.2.2.1 and 4.2.2.2). Through focusing on a timeline or letter, the creative artefacts therefore became the vehicles through which conversations were generated, and the interviews themselves became reflections of these creative activities. As noted in section 4.5.1, not all participants completed the creative tasks, but all engaged in at least one interview and most engaged in two. As such, although more excerpts from interviews than letters or timelines appear in the empirical chapters, in the cases where participants had completed the creative tasks, the themes and discussion points generated from these were intrinsically woven into the data elicited during their discussion(s).

In this project, transcribed data was organised and managed under the generated themes using NVivo software. Data was coded by concepts, terminology, repetition and frames of reference, a beneficial approach as, “thematic analysis does not require the detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of approaches [it] can offer a more accessible form of analysis,” (Braun and Clarke 2008, p.81). In addition, thematic analysis was used to mitigate the potential for researcher bias when analysing the findings: as noted in section 4.4.5 of this chapter, I was reflexive during this process, utilising a journal to note feelings and responses to the data as I conducted the analysis. Reflexivity helped me manage my relationship to the research participants and subject matter during analysis, ensuring my own experiences and familiarity with the subject did not overshadow the meaning-making of the participant accounts.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the methods and methodology for the research undertaken in this study. In addition, I have included justifications for the research design decisions made when planning my research, building on literature included in the literature review chapter as well as the methodological literature which guided the framing of this study. In this chapter I also considered the limitations which I had identified in my sampling strategy and gave a reflexive account of some unanticipated and challenging aspects that I navigated during the research.

The following four chapters detail the findings which were generated through the data production and are presented thematically, reflecting the thematic framework of analysis. These findings respond to my research questions and draw together my analysis with the broader contextual literature within which this study sits.

## Chapter 5: Navigating Identity

### 5.1 Introduction

In the introductory chapter (section 1.4) I offered an overview of the four findings chapters in this thesis. In this first one, I will explore participant understandings of social class and social mobility and discuss how participants navigated their classed identities.

Drawing on the data produced with participants in interviews, timelines, and future-selves letters this chapter covers two core themes, namely (i) difficult definitions: understandings of class, and (ii) hybridity: revealing and concealing. Each theme highlights converging and diverging meanings produced through the data analysis, delving deeply into the nuanced and multifaceted complexities within the substantive topic areas of this research project.

The difficulties of defining, living, negotiating, concealing, and revealing class featured across participant accounts. Participants spoke of developing class awareness while growing up or when experiencing a change in social circumstances. They also reflected on the difficulties they experienced when attempting to define class using (previously) accepted signifiers which no longer seemed to hold firm. Participants spoke of class in relation to the self - how they saw themselves and how they were seen by others - and the analysis highlighted the ways that participants employed strategies within these moveable definitions, such as performance of the self (Goffman 2002) or hybridity (Luke and Luke 1999) which is demonstrated in this chapter. Given the subjective nature of classed identities, and how these are framed within higher education and institutional EDI initiatives, it is important that, early on in the presentation of my findings, I engage with the difficulties experienced by participants when applying class definitions. Through exploring the complicated relationships to classed identities which feature in my participants' accounts in this chapter, I will be able to discuss key themes against this contextual backdrop in subsequent findings chapters, exploring how these understandings are experienced by working-class students when in higher education environments.

Utilising the literature introduced in Chapter 3, particularly in relation to Bourdieu, class definitions and markers, I present analytic insights about the ways participants in this study make meaning in relation to their own identities across different contexts. In addition, I explore intersectionality in the participants' accounts, particularly in relation to intersections

of class, gender, and disability due to the prevalence of these social groupings within the participant demographics (see Table 2 in section 4.3.1) and the data which was generated.

The themes explored in this chapter connect to aspects of the different research questions, particularly research question one:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

## 5.2 Difficult Definitions: Understandings of Classed Identities

In keeping with numerous other studies (Keels 2013; Strand 2014; Morgan 2015), class was viewed through a variety of lenses by the participants in my study. The markers used by participants when identifying class, as illustrated throughout the accounts in this chapter, reflected defined forms of capital, particularly that of Bourdieu's cultural capital with competencies which are (i) embodied; (ii) connected to objects; or (iii) institutional (Edgerton and Roberts 2014; Grenfell and James 1998). Alongside this, other class frameworks and classifications were found to be present in the participants' accounts, such as Erikson and Goldthorpe's Nuffield class schema (1992) which is concerned with employment as the unit of class analysis, and the work of Savage et al. (2013) in revisiting the Nuffield approach and developing a new model of categorisation to encompass broader social class indicator criteria (these frameworks were discussed in Chapter 3). As such, the understandings of class and the application of markers by participants was varied and included the environment a person is raised in, accent and style of dress, the type of work they undertake and associated level of pay (whether manual, service-based, or professional), type of school attended, and the level of education a person has achieved. Discussions also focused on use of language, material tastes, and on the intersection of class with various protected characteristics related to personal identity, such as disability and gender, which are noted where relevant throughout all of the findings chapters. However, in several cases these indicators proved to be problematic and confusing to participants due to changing social patterns which inform subjective understandings of class status and norms, as well as personal experiences of change, transformation, and social mobility.

### 5.2.1 Identifying and applying class definitions

Regarding their own social class, when I asked the participants about their upbringing and whether they were conscious of social class in their childhoods, eight highlighted how their class awareness developed through noticing differences between their own family and others. This was most commonly expressed as differences related to monetary and lifestyle markers, indicating economic as well as cultural capital differences as being salient for participants from an early age.

For example, Pete, a mature student mid-way through his undergraduate degree, recalled passing his 11+ exam and attending the local grammar school, a move which took him away from his childhood friends who had also sat the exam but not secured places. Pete's parents were resistant to him taking the exam, the focus within the family being on entering into a trade post compulsory-schooling, rather than excelling academically. Pete explained that he had only taken the exam because he wanted to be with his primary school friends, who he then "left behind". He then encountered difficulties fitting in with the children at the new school, with classed differences between Pete and these new peers emphasising his working-class upbringing.

I got into grammar school. Which I mean, no one wanted me to do it [sit the exam] even in the family or anything. Yeah, I was gonna fail it horribly. But I passed it and ended up going to like, the top grammar school in [the region], which in some ways was great. In other ways really not. It was a boy's school. Very old fashioned. Very focused on assuming therefore I was going to Oxford or Cambridge like most of the other kids there. They were from wealthy families. I mean, they had horses and stuff. We didn't even have a car. So I didn't really talk too much. I think looking back...people tried to bully me about being poor and working-class. (Pete – undergraduate arts student and disabled aged 50+)

Pete described an emerging awareness in his younger self of the material differences between his family and those of his new grammar school peers, and a sad realisation that those children sought to bully him because of his working-class background. Pete noted that he was rebellious and struggled to adapt to the strict expectations in his grammar school, often being taken aside by teachers and spoken to about his behaviour and attitude. As highlighted in the excerpt, and expressed further in Pete's interviews, his coping mechanism

with his peers in this new environment was to withdraw into himself despite being a “bright child” who “coasted through my GCSEs”. Pete’s account of his secondary school years and the exposure to different, more privileged peers and a new educational field suggests a struggle with class identity similar to Ingram’s (2011) work which examined the difficulties faced by some working-class boys in grammar schools when personal aspirations were difficult to realise in light of class background and identity conflict. As Ingram (p.300) notes: “for working-class boys who are high achieving there are potential emotional difficulties involved in the process of forging an identity that is seen to be compatible with a successful pupil and one that is different from that which is typical for someone from their background”. In Pete’s case it is important to note that he discovered, as an adult, that he is autistic. This intersection of class and disability may have compounded Pete’s difficult experiences during his school years, points of reflection which Pete was trying to unravel when the data production for this study took place.

Like Pete, a change in circumstances influenced Eiriol’s view of herself and her class status, jarring her into an awareness of classed differences and her classed identity. Eiriol spent her younger years living on a large council housing estate<sup>19</sup> where her mother raised her and her brother single-handedly. Eiriol had felt “the same” as the other young people around her and, similar to Pete, it was only when Eiriol moved to a different environment that an awareness of her social class began to evolve in response to the differences she noticed between herself and her new peers. When Eiriol was approaching her teenage years, the family moved to “a posh little village [...] and mum had the only council house in the whole area”, catapulting Eiriol into a different social circle. Echoing Pete’s account, Eiriol began to be aware that her peers had greater economic capital and lived a different lifestyle to her, describing this as noticing that they “had cars” and that she “had less” material items, that her clothes were second-hand and her belongings were not “as shiny”. Eiriol relayed a memory of her mum not being able to afford a gym bag for school use, meaning she would have to take a carrier bag instead.

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<sup>19</sup> A council estate is a collection of houses/flats which are owned by the state and rented out at subsidised rates to those who meet certain criteria (such as homelessness and overcrowding). The Housing Act 1980 gave council house tenants the ‘right to buy’ their homes, leading to many council estates becoming a mixture of state-owned and privately-owned properties.

All the girls at the time were shopping at River Island<sup>20</sup>. And I went into River Island just to get a carrier bag to put my PE kit in, because mum tried to give me a Tesco<sup>21</sup> carrier bag [for it]. And I used the same one for an entire year. And it was crumpled like, but...it *was* River Island. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

Eiriol's experience resonates with Bauman's (2004) description of the 'defective consumer' whereby a society's consumers express agency through exercising choice, with those in the poorest factions most limited in their range of options. Bauman notes that beyond the extremes of material deprivation, poverty is also a "social and psychological condition: as the propriety of human existence is measured by the standards of decent life practised by any given society, inability to abide by such standards is itself a cause of distress, agony and self-mortification. Poverty means being excluded from some aspects of whatever passes for a 'normal life'" (Bauman 2004, p.37). Eiriol felt this exclusion acutely, describing herself as standing out in her environment with her peers and having "the poverty badge" growing up. As she did not possess a gym bag, her best attempt to mask the class difference she embodied and mirror the economic capital her peers held was to obtain a carrier bag from a shop which would be acceptable to her peer-group, as opposed to her mother's Tesco suggestion. This resonates with Hamilton's (2012) work on coping strategies used by low-income families to avoid social exclusion, namely the visible use of branding to mask inequality. Eiriol was aware that by using the Tesco bag she would be 'outing' herself as a 'defective consumer' and member of society, with reduced economic capital and lacking, unlike her more affluent peers, "the luxury of continually (re)constructing consumer identities" (Hamilton 2012, p.75). Through choosing the River Island bag Eiriol was able to express agency, albeit limited, and pass for an appropriate consumer.

Other participants noted how they had observed their own childhood perceptions of class evolving more gradually as they grew older and began to notice more about their peers and environment, without the sudden confrontation of identity as noted by Eiriol and Pete. As

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<sup>20</sup> River Island is a mid-price range high-street clothes chain, popular with fashion-conscious young adults and teenagers.

<sup>21</sup> Tesco is a mid-price range supermarket chain, well-known in the 1990s for its budget line of products under the 'Tesco Value' brand.

children, these participants described becoming increasingly aware of differences between themselves and their family, and other young people and their families. Bex noted how she was aware that other fathers worked, whereas her dad was long-term unemployed; George explained that his parents lacked formal qualifications, and this separated him out from his peers as a young man; Nikki spoke of having to work from her mid-teens, unlike her peers who utilised the resources of their parents.

Reflecting on their experiences and understandings as adults, all participants felt that class was multifaceted. They reported that in many ways they felt that some markers made class easy to define, such as distinctions related to displays of cultural and symbolic capitals via consumption practices, clothes and speech (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013). However, other indicators, particularly those related to work and education, complicated their understandings of class and made classifying class status more difficult for them. Some participants felt this was further challenged by what they saw as movement within class markers, now being harder to discern compared to in the past.

During the interviews several participants reported feeling “unclear” and “confused” due to these changing patterns, when previously they had been able to rely upon descriptions of work and education to guide their own interpretations. This calls in to question the continued relevance of rigid frameworks which examine class through a narrowed scope within a few metrics, such as the Erikson and Goldthorpe’s schema (1992), which have dominated class labelling for several decades. When asked whether she could identify people’s social class, Seren believed there were markers which she was finely tuned to notice, and which other people would notice about her in return. Seren’s understandings of class markers were in relation to education and work and the area you reside in, as well as accent and dress, mirroring Bourdieu’s three forms of cultural capital competencies of embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 2011).

However, as Seren reflected on her life experiences, she highlighted that people could simultaneously hold classed attributes that are notionally tied to one class or another. This view aligned with contradictions that she observed in her own classed identity (see section 5.2.2), further rendering these well-established signifiers as unreliable. Nearly all participants felt that being able to identify social class was important as a way of categorising others as well as finding their own place in their environments, reflecting the

perspective of Thomas and Azmitia (2014, p.196) “we become aware of differences and use this information to understand who we are and where we stand in society”. Feeling that these identifiers ought to be fixed evidently aided the participants’ desire to classify, albeit with limitations. However, despite the desire to categorise, the movability of these markers generated a level of uncertainty and unease amongst participants about their application and understanding of class definitions.

In another example, related to consumerism and Bauman’s (2004) notions of class signifiers, Seren referred to her boyfriend as stating that he is not “Poshmark”: a play on words regarding the inexpensive fashion-chain Primark, also referred to colloquially as ‘Primani’ “a mashup of “Primark” and *haute couture* label “Armani”” (Chatterjee 2023, p.502). For many years, Primark had been regarded as a low-end option for those with limited disposable income, but it is now frequented by consumers from the middle-classes, even though, as Partington (2013, p.18) notes, “even if they might be slightly embarrassed about doing so”. For Chatterjee (2023, p.502), “[Primani] acknowledges the (failed) class aspiration in the very moment of its defiance and mockery”. As a way of rejecting his middle-class label, in this example Seren’s boyfriend was trying to make sense of his own social class by saying that he was not one of the new middle-class Primark consumers. He further acknowledged that Primark was not a store he was comfortable shopping in, the implication being it was not for people like him. Whilst Seren’s boyfriend did not shop in traditionally working-class stores, despite this becoming more popular in recent years with middle-class consumers, his overt rejection of this brand appeared to solidify differences between himself and Seren, and other working-class consumers. The middle-classes have choices on where to shop, whereas the working-classes need to take what is in their budget-line or enter into debt to wield their limited economic capital.

In relation to higher education and positioning the class of others, Kel, an undergraduate in a medical school, had found it hard to place her fellow students and academics in terms of their class background, and utilised the embodied cultural capital of speech and language as one of her main indicators.

There is a mixture. It's very hard to tell to be honest I would say. Like you can tell which younger ones [other students] are from a wealthy family... Generally, most of the academic staff are all well-spoken and you get a few that are more common...but

generally they're well spoken. (Kel - undergraduate in medical studies and mother aged 30-39)

Kel was identifying that both linguistic habitus and linguistic field (Grenfell and James 1998) were present and that both played an important role in her understanding of others and her placement of them regarding their class. Utilising Grenfell and James's (1998, p. 74) explanation of linguistic habitus we can understand Kel's summary of the university staff "linguistic habitus: those features of language [...] individuals are disposed to have and acquire in the course of their upbringing and trajectories through life, and which come into being in language used in a particular context or field". Kel further understood that the linguistic field - the structured system of social relations in the higher education institution in which she was operating - provided the broader context through which language played out as a marker of difference in social class between Kel and some of her academics and peers. The use of language in higher education, by students and by academics, is a theme also explored in section 8.3.1. In another example, for Ally a clear distinction between the classes was the extent to which work formed a central part of a person's identity and how relevant, and interesting, they then felt their work was to other people. Ally likened her PhD studies to work, a topic which would not ordinarily be discussed in her family dynamic but, as she went on to say, was a discussion point amongst her middle-class friends and colleagues.

So when I'm with my family I definitely don't talk about [the PhD] as much but that doesn't seem odd because to me it's just like work. I mean, we don't talk particularly about what [Ally's sister] does in her cleaning job. I think in working-class circles we don't really talk about our jobs whereas I think in the middle-class circles, that I know, people talk about their professions a lot more, a lot. And I do think that's a difference: in the middle-class, professions are really part of their identity. (Ally – PhD student in environmental studies and mother aged 40-49)

Ally had herself adopted this definitional distinction, expressing how she was comfortable to speak about her work and studies with some peers, but not others and not with her family. She delineated settings according to where these topics for conversation would best fit: it appeared that Ally was being mindful and considerate to others but also that she was operating a form of class hybridity and choosing when to reveal aspects of her identity, and to whom, and when to conceal them.

The impact that relationships with partners and spouses had on participants' classed identities was also explored during the data production. Seren, Kel, and Ally were in relationships with partners from middle-class backgrounds. In these cases, their understanding of their own class backgrounds was partially formed and defined in relation to their partner's class background and the perceptible, identifiable differences. These contrasts were noted in relation to upbringing, journeys into higher education, and social norms. Seren, for example, relayed the differences between herself and her boyfriend, and how he attempted to play-down his own middle-class upbringing.

My mum has always said money doesn't buy you class, but finance does come a lot into it. I look at my partner now. He grew up in a very middle-class family. He's funny, he's like "I don't feel like I'm posh" ... Well, most people do tend to say that. He's like "We were the poor ones in my sailing club." But you still went sailing I thought!

(Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Seren discussed differences between her and her partner in relation to their social activities as children, work experience histories, and sense of financial security. However, Seren states that she "thought" her reply, rather than having said it to her partner. The available data does not permit me to explore why Seren thought rather than spoke. However, Seren's partner's apparent lack of self-awareness of his own privilege, denials of being "posh" and his self-relegation of being "the poor ones", coupled with her lack of challenge to the statement could indicate that they were both performing a version of the self (Goffman 2002), perhaps finding mutual ground on which to build connections with each in order to find a 'fit' across their different class categories.

Like Seren, Ally was in a long-term relationship with a middle-class partner. During her interview, Ally recalled the differences between her first journey into higher education as a young person and that of her partner's, who she met in her mid-thirties. Ally's partner had attended an elite institution aged 18 as a 'traditional' undergraduate student, entering straight after completing his A-levels. Ally described her upbringing as unstable, with a difficult family homelife marred by addiction and poverty. She left home during the middle of her A-levels to live in a house-share, and she noted how it was friends she met in the house-share who pointed out that, as she had achieved good grades in her A-levels, she could get into university. Ally herself had not been aware of what her next steps could be,

and she did not know how to apply to university, so subsequently spent time researching this herself. In comparison, Ally's partner was from a stable middle-class family home with professional parents who guided his journey to higher education, the "normal route" as Ally notes in contrast to her own educational trajectory.

We love that we're able to just laugh about these things, but we really noticed these differences. Like he went to [elite university] straight from school. The normal route. And his mum coached him through it and said "just look up the professor and phone them up and talk to them about how interested you are", and I was just totally gob-smacked like "What?! You just phoned up the professor when you were 18?" And that's kind of those differences in class, that ability to navigate [...] And then he got in. (Ally - PhD student in environmental studies and mother aged 40-49)

Ally's example of the contrast in agency between working-class and middle-class students has been noted in numerous studies (Reay, 2017; Walkerdine 2001). There are also alignments with Lareau's (2003) research which highlights middle-class children's confidence when engaging with educational gatekeepers. Unlike Seren's example, Ally and her partner voiced the disparities they noticed, and Ally noted that this was done with humour. Ally's description of her laughing with her partner over their alternative approaches could be read in myriad ways. It could be reflective of an understanding of their class differences which had evolved into a coherent shared identity as a couple, with Ally gaining an equivalent standing with her partner in terms of her own social mobility. Ally had achieved this through her PhD-level education, career, and home ownership and perhaps it was this safety net and knowing that she had crossed class boundaries which gave her the distance to reflect on her own background with a sense of humour, albeit a fragile notion given the challenges her wider family still faced (as noted in section 5.3.2). Alternatively, Ally's keenness to stress to me that they found this funny could instead be interpreted as a use of humour to mask and guard against difference, echoing Goffman's (2002) argument that performance of 'the self' requires observers to take seriously the impression put to them. Furthermore, it is unclear just who out of Ally and her partner, or which version of their histories (*both?*), was being laughed at: Ally's naivety over her options and having to pave her own way to university, or her partner's boldness and confidence to engage with the gatekeepers of higher education.

### 5.2.2 Social mobility: personal transformation, to what extent?

Regarding classed identities and personal transformation, it was difficult for several (n = 10) of the participants, who were all aware that participating in higher education is viewed as a route to social mobility, to definitively say which social class they now belonged to. This is supported by previous work which argues that class is intrinsically tied up in notions of the self and identity and a person's social, cultural and economic capital (Cunliffe 2008; Reay 2017). For Seren, the picture was far from clear:

It's quite hard to pin down. I think sometimes it's quite personalised...like I'm from a working-class background. On paper I am middle-class probably, because, you know, I nearly have a PhD, I have a fairly well-paid job. [But] I don't see myself as that - listen to my accent, you know? I've done jobs which have been low-end. I'm willing to do things just to earn money. When I hear somebody's accent sometimes I'm like "Oh, you grew up somewhere quite nice, [you're] wearing labels, you're from where I live now [an affluent suburb]". (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Many of the participants struggled to define their own, current, social class status. Whilst they all were able to clearly say they were from working-class backgrounds, they found it much harder to identify their social class in the present. As noted in the previous section, the participants' subjective understandings of class against a backdrop of shifting societal measures, left some unable to clearly express and articulate their social class status. Apart from Lena and Zoe, all other participants (n = 14) spoke of having multiple signifiers which placed them into both working-class and middle-class categorisations, identities formed in their own minds according to their subjective understandings of class, but also within their wider societal contexts and norms regarding group identity (Hornsey 2008). As Jules noted, defining her current class status was difficult given her own social mobility journey and the markers she identified as part of her own personal transformation.

So we just went and did a glassblowing class, as you do. We went and it was amazing just going and learning something new. But that to me is so middle-class and I would never say that I was particularly middle-class, I don't know what class I think I am. I want to say I'm working-class but my area, [my] surroundings are not. Yeah, I'm not worried about where my next meal is coming from...but it wasn't that long ago [I was]. (Jules – Master's student in humanities and disabled aged 50+)

In several cases, the participants' engagement with higher education was one such marker which challenged their notions of classed identities: holding a degree represented a shift into the middle-classes according to these participants' own application of class indicators. Several of these participants, particularly those further into their higher education journeys and undertaking postgraduate studies, said they would consider themselves as having transitioned into the middle classes if they were to apply pervasive rhetoric and markers for social mobility. Jules was aware she had taken onboard a taste for hobbies which she felt were middle-class and had moved away from being concerned about money and being able to provide for herself and her family. Similarly, Seren stated that "on paper" she would be defined as middle-class due to markers such as where she lived and her PhD studies placing her outside of working-classness. However, Seren, like several other of my participants (n = 13), emphasised that she still *felt* working-class. This retained affinity with working class identity is reflective of other studies, for example, in Scandone's (2022, p.177) research with British-Bangladeshi working-class young women in the UK, a participant 'Chandi' did not want to "completely lose [her]self" as a result of social mobility. This suggests that, personal to each individual, aspects of identity relating to class and ingrained habitus are retained, calling into question the depth of any social mobility transition which might occur for working-class students.

However, participants often shared a categorical reluctance to call themselves middle-class even when, according to their own understanding of class definitions, they had 'achieved' that status in terms of education, employment, financial stability, and material possessions. This indicates that it is not only class markers which are complex and at times contradictory to participants, but also relationships to the self. Kel was steadfast in her view that higher education would not lead to a change in class identity for her as an individual, or for her family. Apart from her youngest children who were still school-age, all of Kel's immediate family were also on journeys through higher education. Kel's oldest child, who she partly raised as a single parent before meeting her partner and having subsequent children with him, was already a graduate. Kel's other older children as well as her partner were all enrolled on degree programmes or were waiting for them to start.

You're gonna end up quite a qualified family. Would you entertain the idea that you're middle-class, or moving into [the] middle-classes? (Sam)

Even if we all had those jobs, all those qualifications, and we lived as a three-car family...it's not gonna change. I don't think it'll ever change who we are. (Kel – Undergraduate student in medical studies and mother aged 30-39)

Kel went on to say she feared that by becoming middle-class she would lose something about herself: about the essence of who she is as a person, and what she can offer. For Kel, remaining working-class in her identity was very important to her, not only as a connection to her past, but also to her future and remaining authentic. The notion that she may move into the middle classes and have this aspect of her identity change was unsettling to Kel.

What is it that would not make you middle-class? [If] it's not about money and qualifications...(Sam)

I don't want a sense of self-entitlement. And I want to remain accessible to anybody who wants to talk to me. (Kel)

You mentioned [that is] really important about the families you work with? (Sam)

You do tend to match yourself to whoever you're speaking to. And I think you need to be able to target your audience. I've met health visitors, for example, middle-class, I know they're middle-class. Yeah, it's not particularly encouraging because I think 'You haven't got a clue. You don't know how hard those struggles can be'. It's not like they don't try...but to *empathise* - I was homeless when I was a single parent, yeah. You can't teach that lived experience. (Kel – Undergraduate student in Medical Studies and mother aged 30-39)

Kel was hopeful she would have the gains of social mobility with changes to only some aspects of her identity – a well-paying and stable career through investing in her education – but she was adamant she would retain other aspects. It was hard to know from the available data just how successful Kel was managing this approach, but it could be suggested from her descriptions of the immediate family unit and their closeness that she was certainly attempting to avoid the fate which Reay (2017) describes: “Social mobility [...] is always about failure as much as it is about success. You become more equal in relation to privileged others, but at the cost of those you love and care for becoming less equal in relation to you” (Reay, 2017, p.116).

The desire to maintain strong connections to family and roots was noted in several (n = 10) participant accounts, including Manon and Danny, as well as Faye's reflections on the area she grew up in. As an adult, Faye described the love that she and her siblings held as children for the neighbourhood and estate they grew up in, a place where she felt accepted and happy.

I had a very good upbringing, you know, my mum and dad didn't have much money and they will say they are working-class and very proud of it. You know, we're all very proud socialists in our family and we like it that way. Even if we got money we still say, you know, we [are] working-class. They [Faye's parents] were skint because my dad was studying [...] and they actually wanted us to move out of that street and buy a better house and we were like "No!". I mean, when you go there now it seems really rough, but it wasn't at the time. It was all elderly people living there. You go there now you think "Jesus". But when you were young you loved it. (Faye – PhD student in health studies and single mother aged 40-49)

Faye's parents' desire to move to a different street and their apparent dislike of the area where they raised their children is at odds with Faye's own recollections as a child. It was only as an adult, with an adult's perspective, that she acquired a similar judgement. Connection to home and obligations to family often held complex connotations for participants in relation to their own social mobility journeys. This is reflected in some of the participant accounts from Mannay's (2013) study into the significance of home and educational journeys. In one account, Adele's, there are some similarities with Faye regarding views on their home estates "Adele: Up until like quite recently, if people like took the mick out of [Adele's estate] I'd stick up for it and say [...] I'm not a gippo [sic] or ... my parents are working, but now I think I am really just seeing what it is like." (Mannay, 2013, p.100). Faye could see her home estate with an adult's perspective and relate to her parents' desire at the time to move away, but as a child and then a young person, the familiarity of home and sense of community Faye felt in her surroundings meant she wanted to 'keep close' and she chose to stay at home and work instead of moving away, choices which her parents were very supportive of.

The participant accounts in this section demonstrate the inherent tension felt by some participants regarding markers of their own social class and an embodied sense of class

within the core of their identity. In a study which problematises the linear nature of social mobility debates, and takes issue with the 'up' and 'down' model that dominates much of the discourse on social mobility as well as public policy, Savage and Flemman (2019) note that people's own perceptions of mobility vary greatly and are centred around jagged movements, turning points, and interruptions in their lives. This sentiment is reflected in accounts from my research through the complexity felt by several participants about class and their inability to confidently express their own mobility journeys. Participants' accounts suggested that these feelings are intrinsically tied up not only with the sense of self but also constraints around change and transformation. As Savage and Flemman (2019, p.98) contend

“we need to move beyond standard motifs which have characterised social scientific mobility discourse into a more complex and affective approach to the stories people tell about their lives...[whereby] individuals place their mobility narratives into a wider web of significance which switches between public and private realms”.

Indeed, binary descriptions of middle-classness and working-classness were rejected by many of my participants, yet in doing so they were often left with a void in classed identities rather than an exciting landscape with which to confidently weave their own new identities. Accordingly, pervading norms about class and an overriding sense of linear social mobility journeys still held firm.

### 5.3 Hybridity: Revealing and Concealing

A significant aspect which featured in many of the interviews, timelines, and letters was that of hybrid identities and versions of 'the self'. As outlined in Chapter 3 (see Christie et al. 2008; Hunt and Seiver 2018; Goffman 2002) hybrid identities are defined as “complex ways of representing and positioning oneself within larger social constructs of racial, social class, gender, and cultural difference” (Luke and Luke 1999, p.223).

Participants spoke of being aware of occupying multiple identities and changing between versions of 'the self' depending on the setting, whether in higher education, the workplace, or in different social spaces as illustrated in the excerpts throughout this section. My analysis of participants' accounts supports findings from Hunt and Seiver's (2018, p.349) literature review exploring hybrid identities within educational settings in the United States which

reported that “students perform hybrid social class identities [...] as they navigate between middle-class school spaces and their working-class homes and communities”. Hybridity offered participants a layer of protection from the challenges they faced when navigating classed identities and moving between different fields. At times, participants were aware of cultivating these different identities for different audiences and settings, and they spoke positively and with ease about doing so. However, for some participants hybridity, although a useful device for maintaining links to family whilst integrating into other environments, caused tension and concern amongst participants about their own authenticity and sense of belonging.

### 5.3.1 Strategising identity

Alongside her PhD studies, Manon was employed in a managerial role within a government organisation, a career high-point after many years working her way ‘up the ladder’. Manon explained how she had purposely crafted an image of herself in this environment by embodying middle-class signifiers, which was at odds with her home life. This was due to Manon’s supposition that her colleagues, who she identified as middle-class based on her own application of class markers, would accept her and treat her as an equal in this environment if she too were middle-class and not working-class. Manon spoke of power dressing and having the “right” clothing and fashion labels visible, reflective of Hamilton’s (2012) position on the use of branding to mask inequality. Therefore, Manon was quite confident that her colleagues thought of her as a professional, middle-class woman, a high-achiever academically with no money worries and a supportive and stable family network.

Yet, Manon’s home life featured poverty, drug abuse, incarceration, and unemployment amongst her family, and Manon reported switching to an alternative version of herself, one which reflected her working-class upbringing and the lack of social mobility amongst her family members. Manon described how she was aware of not becoming “too big for my boots” in this environment, a reference to needing to keep her academic and employment prowess minimised, and that “you can take the girl out of [hometown] but you can’t take [hometown] out of the girl”. As the breadwinner in her household and a source of financial stability for the wider family, Manon described money worries and being in debt and discussed how her work colleagues did not see or know about this side of her life. Manon used hybridity in the different environments she navigated, and this was coupled with a

performance of the self in her workplace. This is not to say that Manon did not 'fit' with her work environment and her colleagues: she explained how she felt she was a mixture of both personas and that both were genuine representations of her, albeit carefully constructed. However, it was clear from talking to Manon, and other participants in this study, that this careful negotiation of classed identity left her as partial insider and partial outsider in both environments.

Utilising the work of Bhabha (1984) on hybridity in relation to post-colonial understandings of globalisation, Lucey et al. (2003) question whether students operating hybridity can ever truly be at home as one or the other, noting from Bhabha's (1996, p.58) later work that these constructions are "neither assimilation nor collaboration". These notions were also reflected in the accounts of other participants in my study when discussing field and their roles in spaces which demanded different interactions through different habitus. Lucey et al. (2003, p.287) ask "what of the hybrid who moves back and forth between competing identities? Can the 'border-crosser' ever find a place or condition of her own and therefore some stability?". For some participants, such as Manon, the limitations of hybridity were trade-offs they were willing to accept in order to find a place within the arenas of both home and work.

In contrast to Kel's own classed background, her husband was from a middle-class family. When her husband's immediate family visited, Kel employed a different version of herself, one which would 'fit' the social dynamic of entertaining middle-class people. This suggests that Kel had to modify herself, rather than her parents-in-law making adjustments to fit with her. Whether this was self-imposed, or if the dynamic between Kel and her husband gave rise to the 'requirement' for Kel to adapt in this way is unknown from the data produced. However, it reinforces the notion that working-classness is something to be minimised and hidden.

It sounds like you're aware that you move between different versions [of yourself]?  
(Sam)

I feel like I'm a chameleon [depending on] whoever I'm with. Yeah, it sounds a bit false, but it's just a different side of me. You know, we had [Kel's husband's] family over for dinner. Our conversation is a very different [then]. It's the same thing when

you go for an interview, you're gonna try and show the best side of you (Kel – undergraduate student in medical studies and mother aged 30-39)

Like Manon, as this excerpt from Kel's interview shows, some participants were aware they were operating a performance of self, the importance of which is outlined by Goffman (2002) whereby he states that status and position is to be portrayed and enacted. However, unlike Manon, in Kel's example performance of the self included an element of self-imposed judgement. Kel articulated notions of inauthenticity and being "false", when the version presented had to be her "best side" and that other elements of 'the self' were to be hidden. To varying degrees, this outlook was reflected by the other participants who were operating class hybridity, drawing on their (at times limited) social and cultural capital to navigate and forge a path through different realms, albeit one which may betray elements of their identity which they had sought to conceal.

For example, Eiriol highlighted how she struggled to provide for herself during an unpaid internship abroad at a prestigious Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), and regularly made excuses as to why she could not join her fellow interns for lunch or evening drinks, noting to me how she had only been able to budget for "\$10 a day for everything I needed, like food and the subway". In addition, Nikki spoke of minimising aspects of her classed identity from her peers during her undergraduate years in order to fit in, noticing how they resided in family-owned property whilst she struggled to make ends meet. As Reay (2001, p.337) notes "Class hybridity does not sit easily with a sense of authenticity. Feelings of being an imposter are never far away", a sentiment which was certainly expressed by Kel, Eiriol, and Nikki. Feelings of not fitting in and being an "imposter" were articulated by these and other participants in this study not only in relation to physical spaces but also psychologically, affecting their own view of their identity, academic abilities and sense of belonging, aligning with previous research (such as Chapman 2014).

Findings from the analysis suggest that aspects of classed identity were used strategically by participants, to either be consciously 'revealed' or 'concealed'. This related to working-class backgrounds and the higher education journeys participants found themselves on, particularly in relation to class markers and personal class transformation through social mobility. What to reveal and to whom, and conversely what to conceal and from whom, was a common theme in the participants' accounts. Although some participants had a strong

sense of pride in their classed identities and were forthright in their desire to retain elements of their working-class identities, some of these participants also described experiences where they had (attempted to) conceal this very same aspect of their identity. This manifested as participants' attempts to minimise or hide elements of their working-class identities, which was coupled with a sense of shame in a few cases: it seemed that participants' attempts to undergo social mobility through higher education could lead to a sense of 'alienation' and 'othering' of them surrounding their classed identity (Loveday 2016; Lucey et al. 2003) and an inability to express an authentic 'self', both in higher education and in family life.

Participants used the strategy of hybridity to navigate their changing identities within different spaces. Ally spoke of interactions with her family and how they differed from those with her work colleagues and university staff and peers. For example, Ally outlined how she avoided discussing her PhD with family members, none of whom had attended university themselves and likened this to differences between the middle and working classes, explaining that the working classes do not feel a need to discuss 'work'. Ally's approach also provided her with a reason to avoid discussing the differences between her own educational and work trajectories and those of her family members, a downplaying of difference which may reflect a desire to minimise disparities between herself and her family members. Ally's approach enabled her to experience personal change in her classed identity whilst retaining strong connections to her family, something she was adamant was important to her despite experiencing a difficult home life when young.

Building on the work of Leonard (Barker 1972) in relation to attending university Mannay (2013, p.105) highlights that "keeping close is central to maintaining an acceptable working-class femininity and higher education can be interpreted as a direct threat to keeping close and experienced as a betrayal, engendering a conflicted sense of self." Arguably, through choosing not to discuss her PhD with family, Ally was maintaining the bonds which tied them and enabled her to 'keep close', a careful negotiation which was not needed in other relationships in her life such as with her own partner who was a graduate, or in her work and academic circles. Compounding this was Ally's sense of responsibility towards her father, who had numerous health needs that meant Ally was often on call to visit and help at a moment's notice. For Ally, the intersection of her gender and classed identity required her to

perform a caring role in the family unit. The desire to stay close to family and roots despite experiencing changes to classed identities was also reflected in Faye, Kel, and Manon's accounts. This was particularly noted in relation to gendered roles around care and the family unit, aligning with other studies (Walkerdine et al. 2001; Lucey et al. 2003; Morgan 2015) on female, working-class identities and the tensions which face these women when following educational advancement whilst also fulfilling classed and traditionally gendered roles within the family unit.

### 5.3.2 Hybrid identities in higher education

Aspects of revealing and concealing elements of class-based identities was found to be acutely felt in the realm of higher education, as students in this study attempted to 'hide' or 'play-up' facets of their identity. Doing so was an attempt to secure social and cultural advantage when required but it was also noted to be an important aspect of developing a sense of belonging and 'sameness' with peers, a finding which links with Bourdieu's conceptual framing of the higher education institution as a 'conservative force', which both perpetuates and justifies social inequalities (Bourdieu 1986).

Referring to broader debates within sociology, Tyler and Slater (2018) reject the terminology of shame, preferring instead to position shame as 'stigma', an intentional strategy to discriminate and exclude which draws on Goffman's earlier 1963 work as "a way of seeing, classifying and understanding a vast array of discriminatory social attitudes and practices" (Tyler and Slater 2018, p.729). Manon spoke of acute worries that her home life, which was at times chaotic and challenging, would be "found out" at university, much like her fears within her workplace. Manon was studying for a PhD in social sciences, a discipline which she felt should be understanding of the complexities of working-class lives and insecurity and would therefore enable her to be open about her wider family background. However, her practical experience of higher education - the institution, academics, and other students - left her with a feeling of shame that she would be judged and misunderstood if her full identity were to be revealed. Manon felt this most acutely in relation to the academics in her department.

I love the idea of having all these people with lived experiences [in higher education], you know, women from poverty, women in families without degrees, women with

children. Oh my god women over 25: tick, tick, tick, tick. But we're talking about an academic system, it's fairly ironic isn't it, that we are the very subjects [in] - I am the subject of the research. So there's a certain limit to which my life can infiltrate that PhD. So I stop and I shut it down. The academics...they can't [know] this about me.

(Manon - PhD student in social sciences and mother aged 30-39)

Manon's resoluteness in concealing her identity for fear of being found out and exposed is reflected in Reay's (2017) own painful account of being a working-class student at university. Perhaps, as in Reay's example, Manon's caution and fear was well-founded.

"My sociology lecturer suggested that I could talk in the sessions about the experience of being working-class. He said it would be helpful for the other students who lacked experience of working-class lives. In his words I 'could bring working-classness to life'" (Reay 2017, p.153).

Similarly, Ally said that she had experienced 'othering' in her workplace. Ally described how in her organisation, through using her own interpretation and application of class markers, she was the only employee from a working-class background. This was confirmed to Ally through a request by her employers to run workshops for her colleagues on how they could, as an organisation, better understand and attract people from working-class backgrounds into the workforce and to join (environmental) campaigns which the organisation ran. Ally clearly found this bemusing in our interview, but she spoke of having strong relationships and trust with her colleagues and appreciated their attempts to be more aware of diversity and inclusion. However, the implication of working-class people servicing middle-class needs (in these examples, through demonstrating a 'usefulness' and gateway to working-classness) is troubling because it comes at a cost which others do not need to pay. As Reay (2017, p.153) contends, attempting to maintain an authentic self in such circumstances is part of a "painful struggle to be accepted and included in middle-class contexts".

However, in contrast to Manon, within higher education Ally felt able to be open about the challenges her family faced due to "intergenerational poverty that has existed throughout my family" which had led to her experiencing many disruptions to her undergraduate, Master's and PhD studies. Ally described how these disruptions were caused by physical and mental health issues amongst her parents and siblings as well as poverty and alcohol

addiction, all of which were still very much present in the lives of her extended family. Ally had concealed this for much of her higher education journey, and it was only during her PhD studies that she felt comfortable enough to reveal these aspects of her home life, acknowledging the toll it was taking on her studies. Ally explained she had found a role model in one of her PhD supervisors and she credited his openness in talking about his working-class background with her own ability to share the challenges of a complex home life. Ally did not intimate that these revelations were made in her work-life to work colleagues however, but only in her most recent university setting, suggesting Ally had an understanding of hybridity and revealing and concealing when moving between different aspects of identity in different fields.

I think this is the first time that there's been...acknowledgment [through] my supervisor openly discussing what being working-class in higher education is like. The first meeting I had with him, he straightaway told me a bit about himself and it was so useful because it's so rare that I'd heard someone you know, say very matter of factly that they grew up in a very poor area, council estate, that they had suicides happen in their family, addictions...and that they've gone through all that. [Now] my supervisor has made it so much easier. He really gets that I have to go back and see my dad sometimes as he had to care for his own dad for a while and so it makes it a lot easier. There are very few spaces that I've been able to openly talk about things in my family that have been caused by poverty, like addictions and alcoholism. I don't think [in] middle-class circles, academic circles - I think a lot of people know that in theory, they know that poverty causes these things, right - but I think when they hear it in their own circles, it becomes more shocking. (Ally – PhD student in environmental studies and mother aged 40-49)

#### 5.4 Navigating Identity Conclusion

This chapter has explored participants' understandings of social class and social mobility and has highlighted how participants navigated their classed identities, attending to research question one from this study:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

It was evident from speaking to the participants that their understandings of class and identity were multifaceted and complex. Participants shared clear examples where they were, with growing awareness, able to position themselves in childhood in relation to their social class and wider environment: understandings that developed as they grew up and entered different fields. Participants' early understandings of social class were developed through a growing awareness of the social class status of others, with economic capital and the visible signifiers of embodied, objectified and institutionalised cultural capital competencies being the main social class markers from which participants drew their definitions. Yet as adults, despite greater awareness of class and identity compared to their younger selves, many participants spoke of finding class harder to define. Participants were heavily bound to notions of markers and signifiers that could reveal class status, highlighting how the desire to categorise in order to make sense of their own identities and social groupings wielded strong appeal. The participants however, found class to be a moveable picture: hard to definitively identify in both themselves and in others, with established yet narrow class markers and frameworks proving to be unreliable. As such, the subjective nature of defining class as well as change in categorisations over time presented complexities, with some participants reporting difficulties in reconciling their desire to retain elements of working-class identities whilst being able to accurately define themselves after having transitioned to a life that had attributes associated with the middle-classes. This demonstrates that difficulties in negotiating and navigating classed identities continues to be a pervasive issue in the lives of contemporary working-class students. Ever shifting classifications and understandings of the need to move beyond the simplistic alignment of job role and education created additional complexities for participants in their journeys, which they often navigated with a sense of confusion.

Personal class transformation was fraught with tension and complex notions of the self and change, and it was resisted by several participants. Some participants emphasised that *being* and *feeling* working-class remained important and an integral part of their identity, particularly so for those who felt that, following higher education social mobility journeys, they had acquired markers of middle-class identities. Whilst some participants wanted the material gains of middle-classness, it was without the sacrifice and loss of their working-class identities. The definitions and rhetoric used about social mobility, endorsed within

higher education and policy-making arenas contributes to constrained perspectives for students and limitations when trying to understand and make sense of personal changes to their class identity and educational journeys. Drawing on earlier studies (such as Lehmann 2009a) my findings indicate a need to move beyond traditional class dichotomies and recognise the complexity of classed identities, particularly in relation to social mobility.

Class hybridity and performance of the self were strategies which participants employed to navigate their way through different fields, be it home life, work life or within higher education. Although participants felt hybridity was an effective way to transition between different settings and maintain social group identity with family, colleagues, and peers, it was not without limitations and difficulties. Hybridity raised notions of inauthenticity, challenging some participants and compounding their sense of confusion over social class status. The analysis of the interviews illustrated the centrality of strategies of both revealing and concealing whereby participants carefully chose what to reveal and to whom, and equally what to conceal and from whom. Participants' motivations for revealing or concealing were related to a sense of pride or conversely a sense of shame depending on the context. Underneath these semblances were implicit understandings that working-classness does not 'fit' in middle-class environments and must be minimised. Where classed identities were viewed as something to be managed, this risked giving rise to uncomfortable notions of inauthenticity and being caught between 'two worlds'. The findings in this chapter are similar to observations in numerous other education studies over the last three decades (Granfield 1991; Ingram 2011; Radmacher and Azmitia 2013), with some participants in my study still feeling the need to conceal their working-class identities on their student journeys due to stigma and negative connotations. This indicates that the participants illustrated an awareness that working-class identities need to be managed and could suggest they recognise that there is class bias. Concealing their identities could perhaps therefore be seen as a strategy employed by working-class students to avoid forms of discrimination, such as those set out in the Equality Act (section 2.2.2).

Building on the findings within this chapter, the following findings chapter will explore the role of the family unit in terms working-class participant journeys into higher education.

## Chapter 6: Family and Education

### 6.1 Introduction

In this second of four findings chapters, I will outline the role of the family unit and explore the relationship between family and education in the participants' accounts. This chapter covers three themes (i) family role in education (ii) distance and staying connected to family, and (iii) parenthood. The role of the family unit was explored with all of the participants, and the findings are drawn from the data produced with participants in interviews, timelines, and future-selves letters. Each theme explores the varied experiences of the participants and seeks to understand and make meaning of the complexities found within the substantive topic areas of this research project.

This chapter firstly explores the educational background of participants within the context of their family units. There were mixed experiences of the importance and value of education within families, not only regarding compulsory schooling but also tertiary education, including higher education. The participants reflected on their family's understanding and acceptance, or not, of journeys into higher education. In several cases, participants highlighted how their higher education journeys were important to the family unit, with both immediate and extended family members being invested in the outcomes. Role models, from within and outside of the family unit, were particularly important to some participants and were seen to play a vital role in inspiring their decisions to embark on higher education journeys.

The chapter then explores how higher education journeys can lead to a distance emerging between participants and their families, and the challenges this brought for participants in being able to stay connected to family members. Within the study there were examples where participants experienced a growing disconnection between themselves and their families due to their pursuit of education. For some this resulted in careful management of the family dynamic in order to retain connection, whereas others spoke of accepting the distance, seemingly as an inevitable by-product of the higher education journey. However, this was not the case for all participants, with some noting how they had not felt distanced from their family as a result of pursuing further study.

Lastly, this chapter explores the extension of the family unit, through those participants who had children of their own. Parenthood was a motivating factor for these participants, underpinning their decision to embark on higher education journeys as well as serving as a point of reflection for them regarding their own upbringing and educational backgrounds.

As in Chapter 5, the themes explored in this chapter also establish a foundational base for attending to research question one. Additionally, some of the accounts presented in this chapter resonate with aspects of research question two, and in my next findings chapter these are developed further to attend more directly to the second research question:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, higher education institutional narratives of social mobility?

For the purposes of the discussion within this chapter, when family is referred to it encompasses immediate family such as spouses/partners, parents, step-parents, children, and siblings, as well as extended family such as grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Where relevant, distinctions between immediate or extended family are made. None of the participants were care-experienced or had backgrounds which included kinship care.

## 6.2 Family Role in Education

The influence of the family unit is central to understanding educational aspirations, journeys, and outcomes, and the findings of this study indicate that an array of complex and challenging family expectations, norms, and experiences are found within the stories of working-class student journeys into higher education. As will be shown, family habitus and the value and importance which the family unit places on education provide a framework of norms which the participants in my research had to navigate when embarking on their further studies.

This section explores the educational backgrounds of the participants and the role that family played in their decision-making surrounding higher education. This area has received attention in earlier studies (Archer et al. 2007) with Romito (2023, p.17) identifying that

decisions to embark on further study “could be interpreted as expressions of habitus tensions and transformations, characterizing the experiences of working-class students and families attempting to break the cycle of intergenerational inheritance of educational credentials”. In order to better understand the complex array of factors which are found in classed identities and educational journeys, educational expectations from immediate family members are discussed along with an exploration of the family stake in higher education outcomes. In addition, the importance that role models play within participant decision-making about educational choices will be explored. Role models were found within the family unit, however, participants also sought them out externally in cases where no educational role models existed within the family.

#### 6.2.1 Family expectations and feminism

Of the 16 participants in this study, 12 were the first in their family to go to university. One participant had siblings and a parent who had gone before, two participants had one sibling who had already been to university and one other participant had a parent who had been before. Some participants spoke of the importance that education held within their family unit, specifically for immediate family such as parents and step-parents. However, resonating with earlier studies of working-class students in higher education (see Chapter 3) others highlighted how their families, again specifically parents, did not place importance on education and were instead ambivalent about studying beyond compulsory schooling (up to age 16 in the UK).

Mel, a mature student in her 50s, highlighted that as the only daughter of “old-fashioned” parents not only was she not expected to go to university, unlike her older brother, but she was actively discouraged from doing so by her parents. Mel describes her parents as being staunchly gendered with strict expectations for her future. Mel’s account and her family’s expectations of her resonates with Deem’s (1981, p.132) writing at the time “Women play an important role in [the] social reproductive process not just because they bear children but because, to varying degrees in different historical periods they are expected to take on the responsibilities of caring for and socialising children, performing free domestic labour for paid workers and caring for the sick and elderly”.

Deem (1981) goes on to highlight that the widening of access to education for working-class children, through the 1944 Education Act, had by the late 1970s and early 1980s not

delivered for working class boys, never mind for working class girls. Within the capitalist and patriarchal UK state system, social policy and societal norms emphasised that girls' schooling must correlate to their eventual place within the nuclear family unit - the home - unlike the education and positioning of boys' futures within the labour market. However, the young Mel was determined to continue her educational journey. Consequently, she set about planning a different future for herself, one which depended on educational achievement as a vehicle to a new life with opportunities beyond the home. This resonates with some of the participants in Lawler's (1999) study, despite Lawler's work being more than two decades later.

So it was the '70s and feminism and all the rest of it was going on but for my family girls didn't have an education. They didn't have an opinion. They had to smile a lot. They had to not talk first. They had to find a husband and then learn to cook the meals that the husband would want...and whatever happens, boys are in charge. And they [Mel's parents] couldn't get where they went wrong with me because I wasn't any of those things – [I was] rebellious because I was *not* going to find a husband and move three doors down. You know, education was the way out, and university was going to be the escape. (Mel – undergraduate arts student and mother aged 50+)

However, Mel's plan did not come to fruition. During her A-levels Mel had an acute mental health crisis and failed her exams, bringing with it the end of her hopes to enter university, escape from home and carve out a different future for herself. Mel described the subsequent period as a time of being stuck at home waiting "for this mythical husband...and so I ran away". Although she escaped the confines of homelife as a young girl, Mel did not enter higher education until much later in life after a long period working in the health service led to burnout.

Two decades later in the 1990s, Eiriol's mother also held expectations that focused on marriage and children for Eiriol, rather than education. Eiriol's mother had not been in higher education herself, and neither had Eiriol's older brother. Eiriol had been independent from a young age, moving out of home aged 16 with the hope of breaking away from these gendered confines and being more financially secure than her family was. However, her experience of poverty growing up with the family living on benefits was further compounded by feelings of financial insecurity when she left home. Being independent from

16 years of age saw Eiriol spending time working in a series of jobs to pay her rent and bills, rather than studying. Unlike Mel's family, which did value education for boys but not for girls, pursuing education was not something which Eiriol's family unit valued.

What about your mum's views on education, did she have aspirations for you? (Sam)

There was not like conversations about the significance or importance of education and my future. My mum's perception of successful femininity was very much "do I [Eiriol] want children, do I wanna get married?". I think it's a product of her background. She would sort of like say "you can do anything" but I think that term is wholly ambiguous if there's no resources. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

Despite enjoying learning subjects which she was passionate about, Eiriol described herself as not valuing formal education as a young person, mirroring her mum's ambivalence. She explained that she did not see how she could continue studying alongside needing to work, which had taken priority, and that moving back home in order to study was "[...] not an option. Mum wouldn't get it". Eiriol's mum's statement that she could do anything she wanted was at odds with the practical application of "successful femininity" which Eiriol observed in her mother's life, and which she tacitly absorbed as a familial expectation for her own life.

Societal expectations and aspirations for girls had to some extent progressed since Mel's experiences in the 1970s (Evans 2009), and it could be that Eiriol's mum was acknowledging this, albeit without direct experience of what "anything" might look like. The expansion of access to higher education and the dominance of meritocracy created the narrative, still prevalent today, that futures are for the taking. However, Eiriol's experience highlights how, as Tapper and Palfreyman (2005) note, it was predominantly middle-class girls rather than working-class ones who benefitted from the expansion with Evans (2009, p.343) further stating that, regarding class and gender inequality for working class girls, there "is a discernible pattern in which levels of education and educational aspiration have been raised but that the social impact of this shift is limited by those cultural factors which structure the context of educational participation."

Although Eiriol's mum wanted to give the impression to Eiriol that life beyond the home was a possibility, due to her limited knowledge and inability to support Eiriol this came without practical help to identify a path forward or any form of resourcing. Eiriol had significant barriers to participating in education: she did not have the resources, knowledge, or guidance to do so and, due to her family background, nor did she realise that education could be an avenue available to her. Eiriol's experience indicates a tension found in higher education journeys for working-class students regarding notions of equal opportunities and social mobility. Bourdieu's central concepts of field and habitus provide a framework for understanding Eiriol's experiences: "habitus has provided a means of counteracting the view that everything is possible and that individuals have complete freedom to choose futures of their own making" (Bathmaker 2015, p.64), a frustration which Eiriol felt at her mother's apparent naïvety to the realities of constrained choices.

When Eiriol was in her 20s and working in professional roles she began to mix with others who were university educated. At this point Eiriol was now married with two young children, having followed the path expected of her by family. Despite being in the early stages of a successful career, Eiriol felt inadequate by comparison to her university educated colleagues because she did not have a degree. University educated colleagues with a different form of habitus, family background, and education also aroused a curiosity about learning in Eiriol and she found mixing with them to be intellectually stimulating. Eiriol subsequently began exploring options for entering higher education, which caused some tension at home: Eiriol's husband had not attended university and, like her mum, did not value education. As such, Eiriol's husband was unsupportive, and she highlighted that he "only agreed" to her studying for a degree as long as the cost of it "did not come out of the house money" and that her ability to work and raise the children would not be negatively impacted. Reay (2001; 2005; 2017) and Lucey et al. (2003) have written extensively on female, working-class identities and their work evidences the tensions that working-class women face when attempting to undertake educational advancement whilst also required to still fulfil traditional gendered and classed roles. Despite being married to a husband who worked part-time whilst she was the main earner, Eiriol was still expected to fulfil the gendered domestic work within the family related to keeping house and childcare.

Over the next 15 years Eiriol, managed to navigate these competing demands, and went on to gain two Master's degrees and was mid-way through studying for a PhD during the data generation for this research. At this point Eiriol had been in higher education for many years however she still found that her family did not connect with her desire to advance educationally, a void which she had accepted but one which she acknowledged led to the careful management of relationships with her immediate family. This echoes the experiences of Ally in section 5.2.1 whereby higher education was not a language that was shared amongst some participants and their family members.

What was your family's take on you going to do the Master's and then a PhD? (Sam)

It's all the questions that come up - what are you gonna do next? Yeah, I think there's a bit of "What's it for? Where is it taking you? What kind of job can you get?" But normally they're just like "Oh, that sounds intense. Anyway, do you know that your uncle's car has died?" [laughing]." (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

Despite all she had achieved and the pleasure which she derived from studying, Eiriol herself still grappled with a dichotomy of loving learning and wanting to pursue education, against the need to be financially productive for herself and her family. Although Eiriol hoped her advanced studies would lead to better job prospects, this was a long-term goal which she said felt like a "...huge gamble. It might not work out". Unlike Eiriol, Manon, Kel, Zoe, Ally, George, and Bex did not indicate that these two notions were in competition. These participants were more hopeful than Eiriol that their higher education outcomes would be achieved and appeared to be making strategic choices about using education to clearly advance their employment prospects. Like Eiriol however, Danny, Nikki and Pete had less confidence in whether they would be able to achieve their desired higher education outcomes, which generated deep concern and worry for them. These experiences resonate with a fear of failure often found in working-class higher education journeys that are framed by neoliberal notions of individualised success and failure, as documented in earlier studies (Reay 2018; Jackson 2006).

Two decades after Eiriol's description of her homelife, in the 2010s, Seren and Bex were considering their post-compulsory options. Both described not having any educational

expectations placed on them by family, but there were notable differences in the value which each family unit placed on education. Bex described parents who were not particularly educated and did not value education, with neither having attended any form of tertiary education. Bex's dad had spent years working in manual roles and then being a house-husband and her mum worked in a low-level but professional role. The focus in Bex's family was work first and foremost, and her mum's experience was viewed as proof that education was not necessary to secure a "good job". Seren's family, like Bex's, had no experience of higher education. However, they did value education and instilled this in both Seren and her older sister. Seren describes parents who expected them to always do their best and to be aspirational, believing that if they worked hard academically then they would have many options available when it came to their futures, aligning with the ubiquitous discourse on neoliberal promises of meritocracy and social mobility which do not reflect the lived experiences of many working-class students and graduates (Brown 2013; Reay 2017; Reay 2021). Seren emphasised that despite the importance of education to her parents, she did not feel any pressure from them to go to university.

Like Seren, Zoe and Faye also came from families who valued education but did not hold strong expectations for them to enter higher education. Unlike Seren's family, Zoe's and Faye's respective parents did have experience of higher education themselves with each reporting having a parent who had obtained a degree as a mature student (when both Zoe and Faye were children) and who therefore understood Zoe's and Faye's desire to go into higher education. Alongside Seren, both of these participants described their immediate family as very understanding and who did not "mind" whether their children worked or studied, but just "wanted me to be happy" (Faye). There appeared to be a high level of autonomy in the decision-making of Zoe, Faye, and Seren, with them having the freedom to choose their own direction after finishing compulsory education.

Faye had left school and spent time in the workplace before she began to think about entering higher education. By the time Faye was in her 30s she was the only one of her siblings (four children in the family) who had not gained an undergraduate degree. Faye expressed how, over time, this troubled her and, although there was not an express expectation from her parents or siblings, a desire to go to university began to build in her, with Faye sensing she needed to retain her connection and habitus within the family unit

through undertaking a higher education journey of her own. This sense of belonging and desire to fit in was similar to both Eiriol's and Seren's experiences with their colleagues. Although they did not have express expectations placed upon them by others, each identified a need to belong, as Faye highlights below:

I had some quite good jobs over the years. But it always stayed with me, you know, that I was the only one [child] in the family who didn't have a degree. My mum and dad had photos of us on the landing. Three of them [siblings] in cap and gown, and then me. But there was no expectation from my mum and dad, [they] are just fabulous. I mean, they were just proud of what I did. Yeah, it was me. It bothered me.  
(Faye – PhD student in health studies and single mother aged 40-49)

Manon's experience was unique within the participant sample. Manon's family, most notably her mum, Sylvie, held high expectations for her on three fronts: home, work, and education. Manon described herself as being a "bright child", one of three siblings and the only girl. Her brothers were not academic and did not do well at school, one leaving without qualifications and the other with just a few. In contrast, Manon was a high-flier academically. She described Sylvie as being delighted by this and pouring all her hopes for her children's education into Manon, who went on to study at medical school when she was 18. However, Manon's first foray into higher education was stunted: she became pregnant during her degree and withdrew to raise her child. Although Sylvie was initially disappointed by this, Manon describes her as also being conflicted: she wanted a child of hers to succeed academically but was also happy that Manon would now become a mother. This position is reflective of Skeggs's (1997) assertion that motherhood is a validation of legitimacy and respectability for women (Lewis et al. 2025) who must navigate identities that encompass class, gender, femininity, and caring. Several years later, and by now with two young children, Manon went back into higher education and gained an undergraduate degree whilst also raising her family and being the main earner in the household. Manon felt her mum lived vicariously through her: she valued education and Manon explained that she would have loved to attend university herself. However, having three children while young and being in a family unit which was unsupportive of educational pursuits left Sylvie unable to fulfil her own educational aspirations and so she instead channelled these hopes into Manon. Sylvie, although younger than Mel's and Eiriol's parents, also held strongly gendered

views about the role of women in the household, tied up in her own sense of achievement as homemaker and caregiver and her family's own habitus. These high standards for Manon's education were also prevalent in Sylvie's view of Manon's other central roles, that of being a mother and excelling in her career.

Although Manon's and Eiriol's experiences differed in terms of family expectations for their education, the pressure to succeed in home life was evident for both. Manon and Eiriol each spoke of limited explorations of themselves as learners due to the pressures of home life, with their student identities often slotting in behind other commitments. These accounts are reflective of the broader literature, as evidenced by Morgan (2015) and Christie et al. (2008) in relation to the barriers facing working-class mothers in higher education (noted in 3.3.3.2) as well as Walkerdine's (2023) notion of lived histories: both Manon and Eiriol were experiencing higher education journeys against a backdrop of gendered expectations from the wider family unit, with both expressing an understanding that their family (in both cases their mothers) expected them to be successful homemakers and mothers in addition to (Manon) or regardless of (Eiriol) their higher education aspirations. The pressure which they articulated was clear in both of their accounts. Manon spoke of how she found it extremely stressful to combine studying with family and work, and that because of limited time, found she did not have the attention span to diligently apply herself in her learning, leading to a sense of imposter syndrome. Eiriol felt guilt and confusion when exploring her academic interests, viewing study as a personal indulgence compartmentalised away from the rest of her identity, yet also as a hopeful endeavour to a secure future for herself and her children through social mobility. This ranking of aspects of identity is reflected in the literature, such as a study by Reay et al. (2010, p.118) which found that learner identities were "constantly at risk of being subsumed by responsibilities and commitments as workers and family members through the psycho-social strains and academic costs of juggling work, family and university course". These costs and complexities will be discussed further in the following section.

#### 6.2.2 Whose degree is it? Family's stake in higher education

Although only two participants stated that their journeys into higher education held value and importance not just for themselves but also for their immediate and extended family members, this wider stake in family education was a significant factor in their student

experience. The motivation for family investment in these higher education journeys was multilayered: to secure increased cultural and social capital by way of association; to reap the material gains of positive (anticipated) social mobility outcomes; and to secure and retain an elevated class position for future generations.

As noted in section 6.2.1, in contrast with Eiriol's family's educational expectations, Manon's family, particularly her mum Sylvie, expected her to achieve in all realms: academically through higher education as well as in the workplace and in her gendered role of caregiver and homemaker. Manon also emphasised that her academic achievements and the anticipated social mobility gains were of importance to her wider family: with siblings who were not academic, one of whom also had a long history of substance abuse and incarceration, Manon felt the weight of the family's hopes and aspirations being pinned on her and her academic abilities. She described this as understanding that she was the family's "best chance" of achieving, vicariously through her, social mobility, a gain which was also expected to be passed down to the next generation through Manon's children, an important inter-generational concern of some working-class families (Mallman 2017). After a gap in studies Manon returned to university in her 30s gaining a Master's degree before then embarking on a PhD whilst still working and caring for her children as well as elder family members. Manon spoke of her mother as being the driving force behind her studies, with Manon's educational achievements a proud reflection of Sylvie's successful mothering. Manon highlighted how her mother had not had the opportunity to study in higher education herself and therefore Manon's trajectory was of great significance to Sylvie. During our interviews, Manon stated that the main reason she was studying for the PhD, which came at great personal sacrifice to her in terms of time, stress and acute self-doubt, was because of her mother's expectations and the guilt she had felt from withdrawing from her medical degree all those years earlier, stating "my mum's happy that I'll finally be a doctor".

Manon's family, whilst not being academic, understood that Manon's pursuit of an undergraduate degree had already provided her with a well-paid job, the gains of which were shared amongst the family unit (Manon distributed a significant proportion of her monthly wages to her immediate and wider-family each payday). Manon's salary increased following promotion after she obtained a Master's degree, and she anticipated further

financial gains once she completed her PhD. Manon wryly observed that her family supported her educational choices, which took up a lot of time in Manon's daily life, as they benefitted from them, but she was also acutely aware that her family still demanded that she perform the traditionally gendered roles of caregiver and homemaker: providing personal care to relatives with disabilities, raising her own children and hosting family gatherings. The tensions for Manon in servicing both university and family resonates with Morgan's (2015) work which notes the toll that these two 'greedy institutions' take on marginalised mothers, a term previously used by Currie et al. in 2000, further demonstrating the frustrating longevity of these fundamental issues that still face working-class women in education.

Besides anticipated future financial benefits, Sylvie was also invested in the outcome of Manon's latest higher education journey due to a ripple of social and cultural capital within the immediate family, perceived as a measure of Sylvie's successful motherhood. Thinking about what it would mean when she graduates with a doctorate, Manon explained that the qualification would be a positive reflection on Sylvie, a shared achievement in the family and not just her own:

My mother will have a race day hat everywhere she goes! There's a real sense of...a badge of honour. That she's raised somebody who could have a doctorate. It's a real sense of status for her. (Manon – PhD student in social sciences mother aged 30-39)

As with Manon's experience, the following example from Seren's account shows how family members (both immediate and extended) have a stake in the perceived social mobility of working-class students. Seren's dad, an avid reader with a love of learning, used his speech at a wedding to say how his two university-educated children were his greatest achievements, having left school himself without any qualifications:

After [the wedding] he said like, there's a family member who when you girls were smaller before you went to uni she wouldn't be in touch. She wouldn't give [Seren's dad] the time of day. Now she found out that we're both university educated and living here [in an affluent part of the city] then she starts talking to him. (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Seren's extended family member's interest in her achievements (and those of Seren's sister) indicates a stake in the outcome of higher education journeys which extends beyond the participant and their immediate family, into the wider family network. This was also echoed in Ally's account when she reflected on her own journey with an observation about her extended family, mentioning how when she was growing up there was "one rich uncle who had made it" in the family, who everyone else held aloft. Ally observed that she had now, in her family's view, stepped into those shoes.

### 6.2.3 Role models

The majority of the working-class students in this study lacked a role model from within the family unit, with just three students able to identify a family member who was influential to them in their higher education journey, a limitation found in other studies (such as Lehmann 2009). Wainwright and Watts (2021, p.115) cite the importance of role models in their study of first-generation students' narratives of university participation and family, stating that "Support from a role model [...] is important, not least because they are able to share concerns about their own lack of confidence and how common it is to have difficulties in particular areas.". Without these figures, the majority of the participants in my study were without such focused guidance and support as they embarked on their studies.

As noted in the previous section, mature students Zoe and Faye both spoke fondly of their childhood memories of having parents who had opted to go back into education as adults (in both cases, their fathers) and mentioned witnessing hard work and dedication from their respective parents, citing these family members as sources of inspiration. Having parental role models gave both Zoe and Faye confidence and self-belief and, to some extent, a familiarity with the higher education experience: they were both resolute about the positive benefits of studying, and they had first-hand experience as children of the juggling act which parents undertake when combining studying and family life. However, unlike in Wainwright and Watts' (2021) study, neither mentioned being guided or mentored by their fathers during their own higher education journeys. Unlike their fathers, who had working wives within the family unit and therefore financial support and the sharing of childcare, both Zoe and Faye were single working mothers as well as students and both spoke of how hard it had been to combine studying with working and also raising children single-handedly. Although their parental role models had served as inspirations to them when considering applying to

university, there were limits as to how relevant their fathers' experiences were when it came to the difficult realities of Zoe's and Faye's higher education experiences within the context of being single mothers with demanding home lives.

In Faye's case, she was facing being unable to complete her PhD due to the demands of single motherhood, financial insecurity, and a close bereavement. Although her dad's completion of his studies had clearly been inspirational to her, Faye felt that the personal cost of completing her degree given the difficult circumstances she faced was too great a price to pay and at the point of data generation for this study Faye was on the verge of withdrawing from her PhD programme despite having almost completed it<sup>22</sup>. Faye's experience resonates with Walkerdine et al.'s (2001, p. 210) study on psychosocial explorations of gender and class: "Holding together fecundity and intelligence is no mean feat for women whatever class position, [but] crossing over to the other side, whether to the masculine professions or to upward mobility, is physically and socially extremely difficult and only achieved at great cost, even amidst its celebration". Although Walkerdine et al. were writing 25 years ago, disappointingly their findings still resonate with Faye's more contemporary account whereby her single-parent-female status intersected with her classed identity to create a painful reality, far removed from the fond childhood memories she held when recounting her father's educational journey.

Besides Faye and Zoe, Mel and Seren were the only other participants who had family members (siblings) who had attended university before them. Of the 16 participants in this study, only Seren spoke of being given advice by a family member (her sister) when she applied to university, with Seren noting her sister was a role model and that she "could follow in her footsteps". However, several participants spoke of the important part that role models outside of the family unit had played in their decision to go to university and the support they had provided while there, such as Seren's and Eiriol's work colleagues, and Ally's tutor. Jules was another participant who did not have a role model from within her family and instead drew upon two figures who were her inspiration for applying to university as a mature student: her childhood best friend and her best friend's father. Jules and her friend had attended the same school and they both lacked encouragement from teachers to

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<sup>22</sup> Due to poor health, Faye did not participate in a second interview and so it is not known whether she finished her studies or withdrew from the course.

continue in post-compulsory education. Her friend's father had been a manual worker in his youth, then as an adult attended night school and went on to become an academic and a professor in a prestigious institution. As a young adult and now a mother, Jules' friend, with guidance from her now university-educated father, had gone to university via a widening access scheme, going on to complete an undergraduate degree. They kept in touch and Jules kept track of her friend's academic accomplishments. Jules discussed how she had not regarded herself as "bright enough" to go to university and, unlike her friend, she had no encouragement from family to continue in education. However, witnessing her friend's determination and achievements and knowing her friend's father's story planted a seed in her mind. Following a decline in her health, Jules recalled these role models and decided to embark on a higher education journey of her own.

You know, so my friend had three children and then went back when her youngest was quite young, bloody hell - I have absolute admiration for that. I thought if [she] can do it, then I can bloody well do it. You know, there's no reason why if she could do it with three kids [then] I can't get off my arse and I should have more confidence in myself. (Jules – Master's student in humanities and disabled aged 50+)

In this study, the role models that the participants identified served an important function in helping them to become aspirational about their education as well as, for some, to challenge assumptions of their own abilities and potential which had been formed during their younger years. The prominence of role models is further explored in section 8.3.2.1, particularly in relation to gaps in the representation of working-class student role models in higher education against positive shifts in diversity connected to other EDI institutional priorities, such as gender, race and disability.

### 6.3 Distance and Staying Connected to Family

As seen in Reay et al.'s (2010) case studies of 27 working-class students in higher education institutions, the data generated for my study highlighted the family tensions which working-class students experience when continuing with, or opting in to, further study. Nine of the participants spoke of a distance developing between them and their family as a result of entering into higher education and seeking or achieving social mobility. As explored in section 5.3, hybrid identities were often employed by participants, including with family

members, as a strategy to navigate changes in their classed identities. In my study, themes of distance and staying connected were commonly associated with the notion of forming learner identities in higher education (as discussed in sections 5.2.2.1 and 7.3.1). Central to this is the cultivation of habitus, specifically that of a competent learner (Christie et al.'s 2008) and the fostering of a sense of belonging within the higher education field to 'fit' with other students and avoid being at risk of being rejected, judged, or dropping out (Bradley 2017).

Five participants viewed distance between them and their families as an inevitability and expressed ambivalence about the disconnect with their family unit as they forged their new learner identities. For example, Danny had successfully managed the family business for many years but was personally unfulfilled by this role. He opted into higher education, the first to do so in his immediate and extended family, to study a subject which he was deeply motivated by, hoping to bring about social change in his topic area. However, this was not understood by his family who he explained thought he would be "better off" continuing to work and earn money. Danny spoke of a distance emerging between them as a result, reminiscent of a "disjuncture between working-class background and academic dispositions" (Reay et al. 2010, p.116) whereby tensions need to be managed during the higher education journey. Danny's family, like those of several other participants in this study, valued and prioritised work over study and viewed higher education as a somewhat redundant endeavour that would not lead to clear employment outcomes.

My brother left school when he was 16. Got a trade. Yeah, he's 50 now, works every day of his life. Typical working-class person. Works every day of the year for two weeks on holiday. Go on holiday. Go to Spain. British beer. Have a British fish and chips. Come back and go back to work (Danny)

I take it you're not like that then? Have you always been different in that sense, to family? (Sam)

Yeah. (Danny – undergraduate student in social sciences aged 40-49)

Although Danny had worked in the family business himself since his teenage years, he had always felt 'different' due to wanting to explore his academic interests but felt that he was unable to. His journey into higher education as a mature student marked the beginning of him being able to explore this side of himself, but it visibly marked him out as different to his family, something that had been more carefully managed during the decades he spent working for the family firm.

Mid-way through the end of his first year of undergraduate studies, Danny was finding university life extremely challenging: he struggled with the academic requirements of his first-year to the extent he was considering dropping-out, was having problems making friends, and had been unable to find private accommodation for a period of time which he attributed to being a male in his 40s, more than 20 years older than the other students. Like Danny, nearly all of participants in my study were mature students and there were intersections of age, disability, class, and gender present in their accounts (see discussions of parenthood in section 6.4 and hybridity in section 5.3). Danny did not feel able to discuss with his family the issues that he was experiencing, not wanting to draw attention to the difficulties he was facing perhaps due to a fear of being viewed as having personally failed, a dominant and entrenched viewpoint in student deficit discourse (McKay and Devlin, 2016; Devlin 2013) regarding working class experiences of higher education. This fear of failure, coupled with his growing academic knowledge and journey of self-discovery which he did not feel his family could relate to, meant that the distance developing between Danny and his family left a void in his support network.

In another example, Pete spoke of having a loving relationship with his mum and step-father but explained there was a palpable distance in his relationship with them regarding his choice to enter higher education in his early 50s, more prominently with his step-father (who had been in Pete's life since he was a young boy). At grammar school Pete failed his A-levels and therefore did not think university was an option open to him. He mentioned that neither of his parents were concerned about this and, like Danny, Mel, Eiriol, and Faye, Pete entered the workplace instead of continuing into tertiary education, a path which mirrored the ones his parents had taken. Regarding educational background, Pete's mum had not studied beyond compulsory schooling but was a keen reader, which created some common ground with Pete and some sense of connectedness with her. Pete's step-father was also not

educated and, unlike his mum, was instead “largely illiterate”. Pete was studying for an arts-based degree and spoke of feeling acutely aware of the differences between himself and his step-father, articulating this as feeling that he was a disappointment as a son: Pete’s step-father was a manual worker, skilled in many practical areas which Pete readily explained that he was “useless at”. Pete’s forte was instead poetry, literature and music, interests which he now studied in depth through his undergraduate degree, representing a disconnect with family through Pete’s rejection of conventional roles of hegemonic masculinity associated with male working-class culture. Dunk (2003, p.136) refers to this as a division between mental and manual labour, whereby in male “working-class culture the manual side is more highly valued”, as shown in Pete’s account through the excerpt below.

I get on with my dad but he doesn’t understand me or what I am doing at all. It validates it [studying] if he thinks this is something which is gonna get me on [in life] but he’d still rather I had a trade. (Pete)

Does he think “how’s that [the degree which Pete is studying for] gonna pay the bills”? (Sam)

Oh yeah. And also [he’s] frustrated with how completely impractical I am. He can do anything – building works, plumbing, [he] can build cars. And he’s a bit disappointed I can’t even put up a shelf. (Pete - undergraduate arts student and disabled aged 50+)

Pete explained he did not think that his step-father would be disappointed if he was leading a “successful” life in the arts, which he defined as one where he was making money. Pete felt this would provide a rationale for his journey into higher education, which was currently missing for his step-father. Pete interpreted his step-father’s perspective as being connected to social mobility and success. He was hopeful that if his arts work took off there would be a change in his step-father’s attitude and that he would be “less disappointed than he was before”, with the gap between them closing through greater connectedness. However, this did not seem to be on the horizon for Pete: at the point of data production, Pete was struggling financially due to large and unexpected bills and whilst he was very prolific in the freelance work he undertook, which was connected to his arts degree, he was barely making any money from it. As in Danny’s case, Pete did not confide in his family about his difficulties, perhaps to avoid his situation appearing to confirm his step-father’s view of his

choice to study in the arts and the lack of practical benefits this seemed to yield. Doing so could draw further attention to Pete's failure to uphold dominant gendered norms, which require the "projection and cultivation of hegemonic masculine norms of behaviour as paramount" (Gard 2001, p. 214).

Several other participants, such as Eiriol, Bex, and Ally, all spoke of a distance between themselves and their families regarding education but not to the extent that they struggled to retain family connections and a sense of identity, albeit an altered identity managed through hybridity and performance of the self (sections 5.3 and 5.2.1). Unlike the findings of other studies, whereby choices about moving away to go to university were constrained "by both the desire to remain a 'homebird' and fiscal concerns" (Mannay 2013, p.102), the majority of female participants in my research who first entered into higher education when young did not speak of being bound by these factors. Only Seren and Bex spoke of wanting to maintain a degree of physical proximity to family, albeit still some distance away, with both opting to leave home and live independently within easy reach of the family unit (Seren, within two hours travel-time, and Bex within three).

In other cases, especially where a lack of desire for class-change was expressed, participants such as Ally spoke of wanting to retain connections with family, in light of a growing distance which they were keen to minimise and manage. Conversely, seven participants felt confident that their journeys through higher education would not negatively impact on their family relationships, even if they progressed with their studies and were to secure some of the resulting social mobility benefits that they thought may occur. These participants, particularly those who had parents that had themselves been mature students such as Faye's and Zoe's, did not feel that their own higher education journeys created a distance between themselves and their family members. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was felt that having the shared experience of being higher education students had enhanced the closeness of their family unit rather than detracting from it. Higher education journeys were therefore also seen to forge a new sense of connectedness to family for these working-class students.

## 6.4 Parenthood

As well as the family units which participants grew up in, this study explored the impact of parenthood on higher education journeys for participants who had extended their family and had children of their own. Parenthood was an important motivational factor for several of the participants in their decisions to embark on higher education studies and many perceived that their journeys would lead to gains for their children as well as for themselves. However, parenthood also presented great challenges for many, with sacrifices regarding time and money being noted most frequently. Parenthood further presented a point of reflection for several of these participants regarding their own upbringing and educational backgrounds, and the aspirations they held for their children such as social mobility and financial security.

Nine of the 16 participants who took part in this study were parents, and of those five were single mothers and one a single father. The remaining three parents had at one time or another experienced single parenthood, and all were in relationships with partners who were not the biological parent of some or all of their children. For some of the parent participants, opting into higher education meant striking a delicate balance between personal sacrifice and wider gain, sacrifice in the present in the hope of future gain for themselves and their children. These participants included George, who had left his home country to pursue a Master's degree and PhD in the UK, which separated him from his infant daughter; Nikki, who had moved across the country to pursue her Master's degree bringing with her a daughter for whom she was solely responsible; and Faye, who was struggling to complete her PhD having extended beyond the funded period while working full-time on low pay and raising her son alone.

All eight of the mothers in this study spoke of prioritising family first and of how their pathways to higher education were determined by family commitments. For these female participants education had to be slotted into busy schedules driven by the practical and emotional requirements of raising and caring for children, resonating with other studies over the decades (Morgan 2015; Christie et al. 2008) and demonstrating how barriers to the educational advancement of mothers are long-standing and are still determining women's choices. Some mothers, like Zoe and Ally, did have supportive partners and family members who could offer some practical help, while others, such as single mothers Eiriol and Faye, did

not. As Morgan (2015, p. 118) highlights “gendered expectations around household chores and childcare mean that academic study is often viewed as an ‘extracurricular’ activity or hobby, to be fitted into, but not disrupt, an already busy schedule”: a view expressed by Eiriol’s husband when she started her first degree (see section 6.2.1).

At the point of data generation for this study, Eiriol was supporting her two children as a single mum after her marriage ended and she was also providing practical and financial support to her (single) mum who was struggling to get by on benefits. This meant that alongside her PhD studies she cared for family as well as working almost full-time hours in several part-time jobs. Unsurprisingly, Eiriol was struggling to manage all of these responsibilities and her experience is reflected in other studies of working-class mothers which examine gendered roles within education (James 1995; Morgan, 2015; Edwards 1993). Further to the practical constraints facing working-class student mothers, these studies have shown how these women must balance maintaining equilibrium in the home with the formation of new identities in educational settings in order to endure in both arenas, an educational gain which often comes at great personal cost and sacrifice. This difficulty in ‘walking the line’ was felt acutely by Eiriol, along with the financial instability she had experienced as a child being replicated in her adult life. Independence at such a young age meant she found it difficult to reconcile spending her time learning, which she framed as a self-serving pursuit that was luxurious, with the need to earn money and keep a roof over her family’s head as her priority.

Eiriol hoped that in the longer-term her PhD studies would both enable her to enter a profession she was passionate about, perhaps alleviating some of the guilt she felt towards education as being indulgent, as well as, like the women in Haleman’s study (2004) provide a means of financial security for her family through social mobility and increased earnings. However, in the short-term, Eiriol’s higher education studies required numerous sacrifices with little gain including financial difficulty, stress from lack of time, and prolonged self-doubt. Eiriol’s letter from her future-self outlined a moving account where she envisaged that all the sacrifices had paid off and she was financially secure in a job that she loved, with her children also succeeding in their own lives due to the higher education journey she had chosen to undertake. These notions of social mobility and the power of hope are explored in depth in the next chapter. Eiriol’s imagined triumph in the face of so much adversity was a

prominent theme in the data generated by several other mothers in this study (Nikki, Manon, Kel) as well as George (the only father in the study) and some non-parent participants (including Danny and Josie), and is reflected in studies of social mobility which demonstrate a dominant yet treacherous narrative of individualised success against the odds and, conversely, personal failure when individuals are unable to succeed (Reay 2017).

Mothers in this research spoke of needing to be mindful of limiting disruptions to family life because of their studies. Although some had to manage this as single parents without strong networks of support, this was not the case for others. For example, Ally had a supportive partner who, although not the father of her child, provided stability for them all during her various educational journeys. Similarly, Zoe had family members close by who were encouraging and helped her with caring for her children, and Kel had support from her husband, a step-parent to two of her children and the father of her others, that enabled her to focus on her studies and undertake lengthy placements and shift-work which reduced her family time. These examples are further reminiscent of Morgan's (2015, p119) findings on mature, student mothers which identified that "When available, support systems of wider family members and friends are often asked to help out with childcare, and thus academia is pursued depending upon the cooperation of others and under conditions of constraint". Morgan's note of caution highlights how, as well as benefits (a theme explored earlier in this chapter regarding the family unit's stake in higher education journeys) the sacrifices associated with studying in higher education may also end up being dispersed amongst the wider family unit (and in the case of Morgan's 2015 study, friends too).

Notably, the only male parent in this study, George, was able to pursue his Master's and PhD studies uninterrupted despite being a father, a situation which was unique amongst the participant sample. George had relocated to the UK to take up a scholarship, leaving his infant daughter with her mother, who he was no longer in a relationship with, in his home country. Undoubtedly, this was an immense sacrifice for George and he explained that he was motivated to secure his future for the sake of his child. In the short-term, he was hopeful that his sacrifice of missing her formative years would pay off with high gains when he was qualified and could return home and improve the life of his daughter. However, unlike the female parents in this study, George did not have to minimise his studies due to parental responsibilities and family commitments, nor was he faced with the same

challenges as the mothers in this study regarding forging a new identity in order to succeed in both realms of university and home. George noted feeling out of step with his peers due to his fatherhood, and like the mothers in this study, he felt the heavy weight of responsibility and pressure to succeed in his endeavours for both himself and his daughter. However, unlike the working-class student mothers, he only shared some of the barriers that they needed to negotiate, and he did not have to compromise his time nor validate his educational aspirations.

In addition to the practical challenges facing working-class parents in higher education a more subtle theme also emerged within the data with some of the parent participants speaking of a desire to 'correct' their past in some way. Journeying into higher education, with the sacrifices that entailed for these parents, not only mattered in terms of future prospects for themselves and their children - such as being able to provide financial security or stability to their children - but also because in many instances this security had been missing from their own childhood and family units. Four of the participants were hoping to not only map out a different future for their children, but to also rewrite aspects of their own histories through social mobility and education. Drawing on the work of Borer (2010) and Glass (2016), Holgersson (2017, p.75) speaks of how the past and the future are "both products of the present, constantly being renegotiated". This resonates with Lehmann's (2009b) study with working-class Canadian students, whereby he notes "For most students in the study, rather than signalling a break from their class back-ground, the decision to study at university was based on a very strong reflection of it" (p.141). Even Bex, the youngest of the participants and who did not have children, spoke of expecting to be able to provide security for her anticipated future children as a result of having gone to university and gained a degree, specifically being able buy her own house to avoid renting like her parents had done all their adult lives while she was growing up. Further participant motivations and perspectives on the financial benefits of social mobility are explored in depth in the next chapter.

## 6.5 Family and Education Conclusion

This chapter has explored the role of the family unit and the relationship between family and education in the participants' accounts, attending primarily to research question one and

providing contextual understandings for research question two, both detailed as a reminder for the reader below:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, higher education institutional narratives of social mobility?

Reflecting earlier studies (Romito 2023; Archer et al. 2007), the accounts detailed in this chapter illustrate that family habitus strongly influences perspectives on education and the higher education decision-making of participants and plays a significant role in the direction that working-class student journeys in education take, with participants replicating family behavioural patterns and attitudes towards education, formed in childhood and carried into adulthood. Higher education journeys do not operate within a vacuum but are instead created within a context of societal norms and the dynamics of each family unit which absorb and replicate these broader conditions and expectations. Participants spoke of their family's educational expectations of them, or not, and participants were heavily influenced and impacted by the family unit framings of education in childhood, which are shown to last well into adulthood. For a minority of participants, investment in the higher education journey was shared by the family unit, with a ripple effect of increased social, cultural, and financial capital benefitting other family members and not just the participant themselves.

Changing aspirations for the education of female working-class students were tracked across the decades through the different participant accounts, from Mel in the 1970s, through to Eiriol in the 1990's, and Bex and Manon in the present day. However, although it was evident from the participant accounts and existing research (Reay 2001, 2005, 2017; Lucey et al. 2003) that aspirations and participation have changed over this time, traditional gendered expectations such as domestic work and the raising of children remain and significantly impact the student experience and practicalities of undertaking further study (James 1995; Morgan, 2015; Edwards 1993). Although protections against sex discrimination are in the Equality Act - and are reflected in university policies and the increased accessibility of higher education to women over time - this has not transferred to the home, where inequalities in

domestic and emotional labour are still deeply entrenched. The wider societal context of inequality was seen to frame the experiences of the working-class students in this study – in this case the intersecting aspects of class and gender – with these students having to deal with unequal gendered expectations and practices alongside negotiating aspects of classed bias and discrimination during their higher education journeys. Despite decades of working-class women featuring more prominently in the higher education field, these significant inequities feature in homelife, hindering their ability to remain engaged in higher education journeys. This was particularly the case for the single mothers who participated in this study, highlighting the layered challenges which face these higher education participants. Although single-motherhood was shown to be a motivating factor in educational journeys, this additional layer of responsibility was fraught with sacrifice and little (immediate) gain.

Role models, although not commonly cited by the participants in this research, were important to those who did seek them out, confirming the work of other studies (Wainwright and Watts 2021; Lehmann 2009a). Role models were highlighted as being inspirational figures who had a bearing on participants' decisions to enter higher education, and they were identified from within and outside of the family unit. However, role models did not always reflect the complex and intersected identities of the participants, particularly when it came to gender, although they served an important function in raising aspirations. With the exception of Ally, no participants spoke of having identified role models from within their higher education institutions once they had begun their studies, a time that is often fraught with difficulties and barriers as this chapter has shown (and the next chapter will cover in-depth). Relatable and intersectional working-class student role models appear to be missing from the higher education fields which these participants operated within, an important consideration for providers who have, seemingly, increasingly sought to expand representation and present a diversified picture of the student body under EDI institutional frameworks.

Parenthood brought an additional layer of complexity to the higher education experiences of several working-class parent participants in this study. Committing to study, at all levels from undergraduate to postgraduate research, and navigating practical constraints and barriers was a significant challenge for these students, particularly those who did not have practical help and support from family or friends to draw upon. Of particular note were the gendered

differences that emerged from the participant accounts. Although there was only one male parent participant in the study, George's experience of being a parent and embarking on his higher education journey was vastly different to the accounts from the eight participants who were mothers, most notably in being devoid of any gendered expectations around home and caring.

This chapter has demonstrated that working-class students need to actively manage their familial relationships during higher education journeys, and that they do this while also cultivating learner identities which often challenge the working-class identities that are formed and defined within family units. This careful negotiation can lead to tension and challenges for both the participant and their family members regarding family habitus and evolving and shifting working-class identities. Higher education journeys were seen to challenge family dynamics and expectations, especially those tied to gender norms (Mannay 2013), which led to students strategising shifts in their classed identity alongside a concentrated maintenance of family relationships. While some participants spoke of feeling that their higher education journey did not have an impact on their sense of connectedness to family, others highlighted that their further studies brought them closer family members, particularly those who had relatives that had also studied at university as mature students.

Building on the themes within this chapter, the following findings chapter will explore participants' beliefs and understandings of social mobility and meritocracy, and the ways in which these notions play out whilst they manage their higher education experiences.

## Chapter 7: Hope and Uncertainty, the Higher Education Experience

### 7.1 Introduction

Building on the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6, in this chapter I will explore participants' understandings of two concepts central to this research project - social mobility and meritocracy - by examining their lived experiences of higher education and their aspirations for the future. Across these core themes, evident in all of the participant accounts was a tension between hope and uncertainty. As I highlighted in the previous two chapters, when embarking on their higher education journeys the majority of the participants did not have the benefit of any guidance from others who had studied at university such as family, friends, or networks. This required participants to take a leap of faith into the unknown arena of higher education and to develop hope in 'the self', in the journey, and in the future, all of which sat within a context of uncertainty.

Chapters 5 and 6, focused on participants' understandings of social mobility and what upward mobility would mean in terms of their own classed identities. This chapter probes these accounts further and explores them in light of institutional narratives of social mobility and widening access, seeking to better understand the related overlaps and divergences between these narratives. Participants were asked about their belief in meritocracy and the extent to which they felt this term applied to their own educational backgrounds and their higher education journeys, and their accounts are examined against a backdrop of structural disadvantage and inequality. The themes explored in this chapter therefore connect to aspects of the first three research questions, as outlined below:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, higher education institutional narratives of social mobility?

How might working-class students' journeys through higher education be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?

## 7.2 Social mobility and meritocracy

As noted in the work of Lawler and Payne (2018), social mobility and meritocracy are concepts that have dominated the political and educational landscape since the 1950s. These concepts are still used to present society as a level playing field whereby equality of opportunity applies universally, with the central narrative of reward through hard work, merit, and talent extending into the rhetoric of higher education via institutional narratives and educational policy-making. The influence of these dual discourses is critical to understanding the educational motivations, journeys, and aspirations of working-class students in higher education.

Despite research which indicates that socio-economic disadvantage is growing and social mobility is stalling (Luchinskaya and Dickinson 2019), this rhetoric still dominates discourse and policy-making and, consequently, working-class student experiences and narratives. Within this framing, higher education students, including those from working-class backgrounds, are presented as rational actors who are able to make rational choices over their education. Writing about educational policy-making almost 30 years ago, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p.141) criticised

“the futility of policy-making that over-simplifies, or is ignorant of, the social and cultural complexity at which it is directed [...] based on assumptions that young people and employers can and do act as rational customers for training”

As this chapter will explore, longstanding dual discourses of social mobility and meritocracy were ingrained in all of the participants’ accounts of their journeys into higher education.

### 7.2.1 Narratives of social mobility

Through embarking on higher education journeys, the participants in this study experienced forms of personal transformation and this was discussed in the context of their understanding of and desire for, social mobility. Some transformation was tangible and easy to identify – such as gaining qualifications, an increase in salary, taking on a new job, or changing career (indeed, establishing a career where previously there had just been ‘work’). Other aspects of transformation were less easily identifiable, beyond a sense of *difference* which participants identified in themselves when making comparisons to before, during, and after (for those who had completed previous studies) their higher education journeys.

Notwithstanding this, all participants stated that they felt higher education was considered to be a route to financial security and that educational success could provide the opportunity to change social class.

Participants shared a great deal in terms of views of what education could offer, and their understandings and beliefs around social mobility varied. All of the participants spoke of education providing opportunities for transformation, change and growth, both personally in terms of knowledge and wealth acquisition as well as professionally with enhanced work prospects. However, different interpretations of social mobility in relation to forms of capital were observed in the participant accounts and mobility definitions varied amongst the participants. Upward mobility through higher education was framed by participants as leading to cultural and social capital gains, but more commonly social mobility changes were identified as an increase in economic capital as participants focused on developing their human capital, with the expectation that this would lead to improved employment prospects and affluence (Lehmann 2019).

For example, Mel equated becoming degree educated as a “way out” of working-class life. As explored in section 6.2, Mel’s family had staunchly gendered expectations for her. For Mel, in her core conception of class in relation to her own identity, an upward change in class was therefore representative of increased choice and options, including when it came to work. Mel articulated this as being able to move away from manual and low-skilled employment and into “different types” of work, the inference being the *sort of* employment which would demand a strong academic record and provide a higher salary. Mel had wanted the affluence that she felt would come from social mobility and like several others in my study, developing human capital to facilitate more choice about work was a key motivator when embarking on higher education journeys.

That's the point of going to uni, to be able to apply for a different level of job with a different kind of salary and things like that, isn't it? It's about choosing a way of life that isn't going to be “I work in Spar to make ends meet” or “I've got to go and work in a care home and wipe people's bums because I'm not qualified for anything else.” It is not choosing that path. It's trying to choose another path. (Mel – undergraduate arts student and mother aged 50+)

Like Mel, Bex viewed social mobility as an increase in economic capital. Bex's desire for the financial gains associated with social mobility was reflective of her experiences of growing up in a household with limited funds, limited opportunities, and housing insecurity. Resonating with earlier studies with working-class higher education students (Mannay 2013), Bex was close to her family and although she wanted material wealth, she wanted to retain this familial closeness. Bex explained how her motivation for attending university and her hopes for the future were underpinned by a desire to have economic benefits for herself, which would also allow her to keep her family close and include them in her hoped-for gains:

So it sounds like you really feel you're investing in yourself? What do you imagine will be the payoff of all this [higher study]? (Sam)

You know, I'm happy not having the luxuries. I don't care about stuff like that. The only thing I want when I'm older is to be able to have a house, [so] I don't have to move all the time. (Bex)

So is it about security? (Sam)

I want to be able to afford to live in a house where I don't have to move all the time. Yeah. I don't want to ever move. (Bex)

You'd have choice over where you live? (Sam)

Yeah, just to have a house and then I want to be able to go on holiday. I've never been on holiday with my family abroad. Little getaways in the UK - but we've never been abroad as a family. (Bex – undergraduate student in social science aged 18-21)

Bex expanded on this sentiment in her second interview in relation to her own classed identity, social mobility, and future wishes.

If you were to change class, from working-class to middle-class, how would you know that change has occurred? (Sam)

It would reflect in my children's lives if I have kids - if I was able to provide for them and they had like a house and they didn't have to worry, they had their own money

[...] because, you know, I didn't get like pocket money from my parents or anything like that. I just had the money from my own wages. (Bex)

So being able to provide for the next generation? (Sam)

Yes. And for yourself...like if I didn't have my money worries at the end of the month: "How am I going to pay for food?" Yeah it has a lot to do with money, financial security. I feel you know, if I didn't have to worry about how I'm gonna pay my next bill or make sure that I was able to have dinner then I'll feel like maybe I've progressed (Bex – undergraduate student in social science aged 18-21)

Similar to Mel and Bex, Manon's description of social mobility was predominantly financially focused and, like Bex, Manon felt that being upwardly mobile should lead to her family, most notably her children, having more security. She also felt acute pressure that as "the academic one" in her family she had to succeed in her PhD in order to "not let people down", reinforcing pervasive meritocratic norms. Manon spoke of being the family's "best chance" for social mobility and noted how her studies so far had yielded career development opportunities and increased pay for them collectively (see section 6.2.2). At the same time Manon spoke of being worried about whether higher education would lead to social mobility for herself and her own children, expressing doubts about whether the gains which she and her family had benefitted from were embedded and could be relied upon.

This was a recurring theme in Manon's data, indicating the role which hope played in keeping her engaged in her higher education experience, despite a difficult journey and the unknown outcome. Manon stated that at times she felt too entrenched in the legacy of poverty to be able to visualise "a way out", feeling that she may have "nudged forward" her children's future prospects, but that the gains for herself, and for them by extension, were inevitably capped. This resonates with Walkerdine's (2023) perspective that lived histories are felt by individuals as complex emotional realities and are passed down through generations, which was also reflected in Ally's account of intergenerational poverty (section 5.3.2). Furthermore, this precariousness over the depth and reliability of upward mobility was also reflected in other accounts, such as Eiriol's, and demonstrates how for some working-class students, notions of social mobility can be transitory and full of potential

failure, in contrast to the institutional narratives of social mobility purported by higher education institutions. It appears these fears are not without foundation: as Tholen and Brown (2017) caution, in recent times there are noticeable limits to graduate employability which, set against a backdrop of a burgeoning higher education system (as noted in 2.2.1), sees graduates “facing an increasingly congested graduate labour market in which workers are increasing unequally remunerated” (Tholen and Brown 2017, p.13), with this inequality further exacerbated by characteristics such as class, race, and gender. Tholen and Brown (2017, p.14) coin this a “myth of graduate employability”, with the notion that higher education can provide improved opportunities for all its students - a key tenet of social mobility narratives – a fallacy. Compounding this, once engaged in academic journeys, students enter “into a relationship with an education provider [and] the institution’s own values of success come to influence how the student’s notion of success is conceptualised” (Cunningham 2023, p.22), which, as Cunningham (ibid) goes on to state are bound up in institutional framings through league tables and individualised ‘student success’.

Although few in number, there were a minority of examples in the accounts of participants who expressly connected studying to postgraduate level with upward social mobility. Eiriol clearly indicated that she felt she needed a PhD in order to secure financial security for her family through an academic career (explored in section 6.4). Similarly, Manon reflected on the importance that a postgraduate qualification – specifically a PhD – held for her wider-family (as discussed in section 6.2.2). Manon identified these benefits as both the status which the PhD would bring to the family unit (specifically Manon’s mother, Sylvie), as well as financial gains, as noted earlier in this section, that would be achieved and shared due to Manon’s improved career-prospects. Seren was another participant who clearly expressed how postgraduate study was required to continue her social mobility journey (in terms of financial security and improved work opportunities). Seren felt that she needed to pursue further studies after completing her undergraduate degree to retain an advantage in the workplace, realising once she had entered paid professional work post-study that “everyone had a Master’s”. She noted that to ‘get on’ she would need to reinvest in her educational journey by returning to university. Seren completed a Master’s degree followed by a PhD and stated that “on paper” she would now qualify as middle-class due to her educational achievements (see section 5.2.2). The higher education journeys of these three participants

were motivated by a desire for social mobility and its associated financial security, and they strived to reach postgraduate level in order to be deemed 'successful'. For Eiriol, Seren, and Manon, and Manon's mother Sylvie, postgraduate study appeared to be viewed as a preserve of the middle-classes and a nuanced and strategically considered route to social mobility, beyond undergraduate level. This is reflected in the work of Wakeling and Laurison (2017) who suggest that, through credential inflation, postgraduate study might now be considered to be a new frontier of social mobility for the working-classes, noting how "social class inequalities not only persist at postgraduate level, but have widened over time" (p.27).

#### *7.2.1.1 Desire for social mobility*

Pete was one of a minority of participants in this study who spoke of rejecting the pull of social mobility, however his account was complex. Pete did feel that he was financially better off (in the immediate term) as a result of attending university because he was in receipt of student finance. Although this did not mean Pete felt he had transitioned to the middle-classes at the point of data generation for this research, he made several references to hoping his studies would lead to success in his chosen career path and to financial rewards that would give him security and, possibly, demonstrate to his step-father that his work was worthy (see section 6.3). However he made a distinction between financial gain and changes in classifications of class.

I don't see the point of it really, especially at this point in my life. What difference would it make? I'd play golf? I mean I've got nothing against the middle-classes, they tend to be financially secure, own property, have access to a good education. That's a nice comfortable place to be but I'm not fussed about having to fit into that mould I don't think [laughing] (Pete – undergraduate arts student and disabled aged 50+)

Although Pete wanted the financial gains and security that personal transformation could offer, he simultaneously rejected the notion of social mobility being a desire of his, a rejection that was connected to his classed identity and own conception of class identifiers, noted through his phrasing of not wanting to "fit into that mould". Middle-class markers, defined by Pete as "playing golf", did not resonate with Pete's view of his own classed identity or his embodied cultural capital as explored in Chapter 2. Pete, like several of the participants including Kel, Nikki, and George, offered nuanced perspectives on social

mobility tied to identity and aspirations that were complexly constructed and deeply personal: Pete wanted *some* aspects of social mobility – the financial rewards - but rejected the middle-class cultural and social capital categorisations that he felt would also accompany this upward trajectory, and so he rejected the notion of wanting to be being socially mobile. This was a recurring discussion point in several of my interviews, with participants stating they wanted the financial gains of being socially mobile, and in some cases the cultural ones too, but did not want social mobility per se: they did not want to *feel* different and move away from their working-class identities, adopting class identifiers which they did not think would be reflective of them. Consequently, some discussions generated a complex and at times contradictory picture regarding social mobility and how participants understood, defined, and applied their understanding of this concept to their own experiences of the higher education journey and aspirations for the future.

For other participants, their definition of social mobility and understandings of their own classed identities enabled them to walk this line more comfortably, and these participants noted they did not feel that their working-class identity was (or would be) threatened due to being more financially stable. In one such case, Ally reflected on the financial gains she had secured due to being in a long-term relationship with a middle-class partner, her PhD level study, and having worked in a professional career. She pointed out that with two incomes and access to the resources of her partner's family there are "things I can do now that I couldn't do before", noting that her partner's parents had helped them to buy their house.

However, Ally spoke of still feeling very much working-class in her identity, partly due to her closeness with wider family and exposure to their difficult circumstances which kept her linked into the challenges which her relatives still faced. Although Ally had gained the affluence of the middle-classes, she very much still felt working-class. In addition, like Manon, Ally did not feel that these elements of security and stability in her everyday life were present on a deeper level and that upward mobility was fragile, again something which she attributed to her connection to wider family and their persistent struggles. Ally went on to wryly observe that she felt there was an implicit judgement from others that being with a middle-class partner should indeed have changed her class status in the way that it had, thoughts which she was sure would not be applied in return to her partner:

Definitely my life is easier than some other members of my family I would say, financially. Not loads easier, certainly not in terms of my own income, but because of having a partner. I suppose then you get into the realm of, you know: how much does having a partner who's middle-class then make you middle-class? Which is interesting isn't it as no one ever says - have I made him more working-class?

[*laughs*] (Ally – PhD student in environmental studies and mother aged 40-49)

As well as those who steadfastly maintained they were not interested in social mobility, several participants spoke of being caught between classes and not feeling working-class or middle-class. Difficulties in ascribing classed identities (Cunliffe 2008; Reay 2017) are further bound up in what Baxter and Britton (2001, p.99) identify as “a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority”. These participants recognised they had experienced some forms of social mobility, but they did not say whether this process was completed and spoke of feeling confused about changes to their classed identities. Viewing mobility through the lens of class markers and signifiers, such as higher education qualifications and professional employment, gave participants reference points in relation to habitus and connection/disconnection to family and friends through changes to classed identities, however these markers were often complex and sometimes contradictory (as explored in section 5.2.1). Reconciling these subtle and sometimes incomplete shifts in social mobility alongside classed aspects of identity made it hard for some participants to articulate where social mobility ended for them. This was compounded in cases where participants, such as Manon, also spoke of being close to family and of not wanting to be thought of by their immediate relatives (but potentially also by me in as a researcher and an outsider to their daily lives) as having rejected the family unit and its ‘working-classness’, a reflection of the superiority which Baxter and Britton (2001) note above.

Francesca was one participant who did not feel that attending university had provided her with the social mobility gains she had anticipated as, at the point of interview, it appeared she would have to drop out of her doctoral programme. During my interview with Francesca she spoke of how much better off she had been financially before embarking on her postgraduate research studies, noting how she was currently working in a low-paid administrative role to make ends meet when previously she had been manager and earned

more, a form of downward social mobility noted as a risk in Byrom and Lightfoot's (2013) study of academic failure for working-class students. The process had taken a toll on Francesca's mental health, and whilst she was noted she was grateful to have the admin job to help rebuild her stability, she was working far below her level of competence. Francesca's change in circumstances was partly due to having taken a pay-cut when she stopped her employment to take-up the funded doctoral place (resulting in a dramatic reduction in income) coupled with her marriage ending and Francesca becoming a single parent during her studies, the latter of which had evidently been a traumatic period. Reay's (2017) perspective that social mobility is achieved by few was reflected in Francesca's case, with money, time, and health being the driving factors for Francesca's perceived lack of success in her higher education journey and the interruption to social mobility.

### 7.2.2 Narratives of meritocracy

Many of the participants had firmly held beliefs that hard work and ability were *the* determining factors in succeeding educationally, including while in higher education. Even for the participants who had an understanding that structural factors set the overriding framework in which working-class students can succeed or fail educationally (Erviwo et al. 2021), firm beliefs that ability and talent are the driving forces behind educational achievement were still present, demonstrating how deeply entrenched the concept of meritocracy is in the field of higher education. These beliefs were observed to be intrinsically tied to the personal experiences and higher education journeys of the participants in this research: journeys which, through the dominance of meritocracy discourse and despite several participants having received negative meritocratic messaging themselves, required them to 'buy-in' to this pervasive rhetoric as part of their own hopeful narratives.

#### 7.2.2.1 Belief in meritocracy

The participants in my study displayed varying degrees of belief in the impact of meritocracy, along a continuum. All participants had heard of it as a concept and all felt it was part of the educational discourse that they were familiar with, however there was variance noted regarding the extent to which factors besides talent and ability had a bearing on educational progress, engagement, and outcomes. Participants such as Zoe and George stated that hard work and talent were the driving factors behind educational success and held strong beliefs in meritocracy. These participants felt their educational successes - Zoe about to complete a

Master's, George finishing his Master's before embarking on a PhD – were attributable to their abilities and commitment to their studies. Like Zoe and George, Francesca also expressed a strong commitment to meritocracy tied to higher education outcomes.

However, unlike Zoe and George, Francesca's story was marred by the difficulties of writing up her thesis during the 'cost of living crisis'<sup>23</sup> and being outside of her funded period.

Dabrowski et al. (2025) note how the cost-of-living crisis has significantly impacted higher education students and, as previously mentioned, it was likely that Francesca was not going to finish her doctorate having had to return to full-time work to support herself and her son whom she parented solo. Francesca described having "battled away" for a long time but she was struggling to make progress despite being so close to handing her thesis in, a bitter disappointment which she was trying to come to terms with. Francesca's account is a painful reflection of the meritocracy myth (Sobuwa and McKenna 2019; Themelis 2017), which relies upon the conviction that 'IQ + Effort = Merit' (Menand 2019). Working-class students, like Francesca, unsurprisingly feel an acute sense of personal failure when, against an overlooked backdrop of hardship and disadvantage, they are unable to meet the high educational expectations of individualistic and challenging journeys.

Participants, such as Eiriol and Ally, communicated an awareness of how structural factors can impact on working-class students' ability to engage with education and to progress academically. However, even when participants understood that wider factors have a bearing on educational engagement and attainment, both in compulsory and higher education, notions of meritocracy were still found to be deeply-rooted in their accounts. For example, discussions with these participants featured descriptions of confusing educational journeys and set-backs with numerous participants describing having opted out or dropped out of tertiary education at some point in their past - not due to academic inability but because of difficult home circumstances, a lack of support, or financial issues. The dominance of the meritocracy narrative, endorsed and promoted by stakeholders and key professionals in all stages of education, was evident in the accounts of participants who

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<sup>23</sup> The 'cost of living crisis' refers to a reduction in 'real' disposable income, adjusted for inflation and after taxes and benefits, and a rise in household and essential bills, which began in the UK in late 2021.

positioned their 'failings' as personal rather than the product of an inherently unfair educational field.

In their study of whether meritocracy is a reflective scale of educational achievement, Erviwo et al. (2021, p.2) highlight the inequity found in systems that are based on meritocratic principles:

“a major point of criticism is centred around the conception that a meritocratic system fails to take into account the unmeritocratic factors that contribute to the talents of an individual that allow them to procure success within the system”.

It can therefore be argued that unmeritocratic factors draw from the talents and capacity of working-class students as they navigate their higher education journeys. As this exchange with Bex highlights, participants can believe in meritocracy whilst simultaneously understanding that other students were able to progress, not from merit alone but, from clear advantages due to class-based differences, such as financial advantages.

Do you think that we live in a society where hard work gets rewarded? (Sam)

I think we do but I think there's a lot of people that get an extra helping hand. When I was younger, in terms of school, there's no way that my parents were going to pay someone [a tutor] for time and hours. *They* didn't even sit with me - I did my own homework. If I had help, I would have done a lot better. (Bex – undergraduate student in social sciences aged 18-21)

Despite having parents who “weren’t around much” and who were not in a position to help with her schoolwork, Bex spoke of being a diligent student growing up who “worked hard and got more confident” with her studies. This carried through into her academic journey whereby she attributed her self-confidence at university to having been academically independent from a young age.

I did my school homework myself and stuff. I wish they was a bit more involved in that sense, that they pushed us a bit more. (Bex)

Do you feel you were academic? (Sam)

I've always wanted to do well. I'm not smart. I have to really work to get the grades [...] So I guess the only thing I wish [was that] they were more involved in my education. They were working when I was younger. My dad worked nights for a while, he would be sleeping in the day and my mum would be at work. And when my mum was there in the night my dad would be at work. So there was never anyone to help me with my homework. Or check I was actually doing it. (Bex)

Did they value education? (Sam)

My dad didn't value it as such, he does value it now. And he wishes he had done well at school. He doesn't even have like GCSEs. (Bex – undergraduate student in social sciences aged 18-21)

Bex's use of "I'm not smart" casts doubt on the depth of her self-confidence, suggesting that she was not as confident in her academic ability as she was in her work ethic. As explored in section 7.2.1.2, notions of academic self-confidence are complex and fragile and formed in family units and educational settings. Bex's data highlights the often confusing path which working-class students navigate in relation to notions of their own 'cleverness'. Bex was the most highly educated in her family unit, yet she felt that she had not stood out educationally at school, not being one of the 'bright' kids. This paradoxical positioning was a feature in several accounts (Seren, Eiriol, Danny). These participants described themselves as "bright" – in their family habitus, having been the 'clever' one who went to university (in Seren's case, the 'clever' sisters in their wider family unit) – and yet at the same time positioned themselves within the higher education field as academically lacking, particularly in relation to other students, levels of confidence, and the cultivation of their own learner identities.

#### *7.2.2.2 Meritocracy messaging*

Using the social stratification work of Goldthorpe, Haveman and Smeeding (2006, p.127) argue that meritocracy is viewed as a natural process of selection which the higher education sector can rely on to mitigate social class inequalities: "In his discussion of what he calls "education-based meritocracy," [Goldthorpe] explains that a merit-based higher education system can offset the role of social class in determining economic outcomes". This idealistic perspective, which has come to dominate educational policy-making through the

stance that the most talented and able working-class students will naturally rise to the top on merit alone, is problematic for working-class students as well as for educational institutions. Such firmly endorsed and simplistic notions of meritocracy have been employed by educational institutions for decades, leading to a negation of system reform that could tackle deep-rooted class inequality in higher education. As Haveman and Smeeding (2006) note, in a meritocracy parental income ought not to restrict a child's opportunities but rather lead to social justice and social mobility. However, as shown in section 5.2.2.1, the meritocracy myth and subsequent longstanding lack of resolution in this field can be internalised as a sense of personal inability and learner failure by working-class students, a misguided interpretation of not having been "bright enough" (Seren) for higher education study after all.

Jules explained that her school did not have a sixth form or careers guidance and recounted how careers advice was provided by a teacher "having to do it in their lunch break", a lack of focus on the part of the school which was not lost on the young Jules at the time. Jules described differences between her school and a neighbouring one which her boyfriend at the time went to and which had a reputation for their "bright kids".

I remember going to see the careers teacher and them going "[sighs] Ughh, what do you want to do?" And I was not [in]the top set but was definitely the second set. So you know, there's no reason I shouldn't have gone on [to university]. None of us got that kind of "come on, you can do so much...have you thought about doing [uni]...?" There was no encouragement, it was just ticking a box. (Jules)

Was that the culture of the school or was that personal to you? (Sam)

I think it was the culture. We had a lad who was aspiring to be a goalkeeper and he got a traineeship for [premier league team] and that was kind of like "Wow!". You know, the school was fine - it had a library, it had some science books...it wasn't a bad school *per se*, but it just was very lacking on promoting students. Whereas my boyfriend at the time went to a different school about 10 miles away. They had a sixth form and it was assumed that they would all go to that sixth form and then to uni. So it was very different. (Jules – Master's student in humanities and disabled aged 50+)

The careers advice and support, or lack of, in Jules' school is reminiscent of Hodgkinson and Sparkes' (1997) *horizons for action* and the central role that habitus plays in aspirational-thinking – not only of working-class students, but also the educational practitioners who interact, guide and support them: “what we can see is limited by the position we stand in, and the horizons that are visible from that position. Those horizons enable us to see anything within them, but prevent us from seeing what lies beyond them” (Hodgkinson and Sparkes 2008, p.6). Jules expanded her account by saying “I didn't go to sixth form. I went to FE [further education], which everyone would say “Oh that stands for Fick ‘Eds”.” After this, Jules left education and did not return until she was in her 50s. At that young age Jules was being primed to think that higher education was not for someone *like her*, who came from a school *like hers*, unlike the children at a different school just a few miles away. These negative meritocratic messages were ones that she wholeheartedly took onboard and, as noted in her account in section 6.2.3, it was several decades later before Jules, having been inspired by working-class role models in her personal life, decided she too should be able to undertake further study.

Studies have shown that negative messaging about ability is internalised and affects the confidence of working-class students (Mallman 2017). Low-levels of academic confidence was a common theme amongst the participants, with them highlighting how they questioned their abilities and whether, as for instance Seren stated multiple times, they “were good enough” for higher education. Like the example above from Jules, many of the participants had not been encouraged educationally - by their families or by teachers during their time in compulsory education - and unsurprisingly did not think of themselves as *bright* or *able* (words frequently used by the participants) in a field dominated by meritocratic discourse which favours *other* students who possess the cultural capital to partake in higher education journeys.

These deep-rooted beliefs evidently still affected the participants at the point I spoke with them, in some cases many years after these impressions had taken hold. Pete talked of being a “bright young boy”. However, he tempered this by stating it was to the surprise of himself and his parents, indicating a lack of self-belief and support from his closet family members. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pete therefore thought his academic attributes had a shelf-life which ran-out, in his case at A-level. Pete discussed “coasting on natural ability” through his GCSE

years but struggling with A-levels, leading to him withdraw from tertiary education before he had finished. “Dropping out” as Pete referred to his A-level withdrawal, still negatively affected Pete’s view of himself 40 years later when we met for his interviews, and it contributed to his sense of low academic ability despite him having excelled in the university course he was undertaking.

I go through phases of like getting really good marks and thinking “I’m gonna get a first”. And then I get a subject that really stumps me and I really struggle and think “Shit I’ve hit my level”. I think I’m aware [because] it’s what happened in my A-levels.

Have you contemplated dropping out? (Sam)

No, no I haven’t. But things are getting harder every week. I’m aware there will be points in the future when I’ll have to give myself a pep-talk. There haven’t been any points where I don’t want to do this altogether. But like - I just need a break. (Pete - undergraduate arts student and disabled aged 50+)

From Pete’s description, the “pep-talk” was based in negative self-talk and a fear of failure: Pete was convinced that if he failed then it would be because he had not worked hard enough, in line with pervasive meritocratic norms regarding personal success and failure. As Clycq et al. (2014, p.3) observe “in hegemonic discourses on ‘success’, the privileges of those pupils with a dominant background are disguised”. Pete appeared to give little regard to the constraints he was operating within, significant money-worries and a disability, aligning with other research that explores the barriers and difficulties which often face working-class mature students (Soria et al. 2014; Moore et al. 2021).

From our conversations, it did not seem that Pete was at risk of failing any assignments and he held himself to a very high standard: Pete considered that a mark in the 60s (a 2:1 classification) was too low and if he did not achieve first class grades (70+) then he chastised himself for lack of effort, questioning his own abilities. Confirmation of ability through grades, and a need to excel to demonstrate ability, are found in other studies on minority students in higher education (Christie et al. 2008; James 1995). On several occasions in his two interviews Pete mentioned degree classification and was clearly aware that each assignment would be contributing to his overall grade when his course finished. Although Tomlinson (2008) positions student awareness of degree classifications for the purposes of

future workplace as an advantage, in the participants' accounts in my study, final grades appeared to be much more relevant to self-belief and fulfilment of potential, rather than post-university opportunities.

Higher education institutions and government departments have invested significantly in initiatives and schemes aimed at raising the aspirations and self-belief of young working-class students, with efforts typically focused at KS4 in secondary school. Initiatives connected to widening access, such as The Brilliant Club, Seren Academy, and Reaching Wider (as outlined in 2.3.1), schemes which in some cases have been running for over 20 years, have absorbed the focus of higher education institutions, problematising the seemingly limited aspirational thinking of young working-class students as the central issue which needs fixing. Best (2024) coins this “the aspiration industry” and argues that an industry of institutions must assemble to maintain neoliberal conditions which frame those underrepresented in higher education “in deficit terms, lacking in aspiration and character, and with limited capacity to imagine futures” (Best 2024, p.3).

It is undeniable that working-class student aspirations can be greatly impacted by negative educational experiences, and they can be constrained by a reluctance to shift away from established to new forms of habitus. However, the participants in my study reported a wide variety of reasons for delays and difficulties when engaging in higher education, beyond any sense of deficit in their aspirational thinking. These included having been “written-off” and not supported when younger by educational practitioners despite being a keen learner (Jules); poverty and material deprivation which were practical barriers to education (Eiriol); and being unable to commit fully to studies due to complex personal circumstances (Nikki). However institutional narratives and schemes rely upon meritocratic conceptualisations of talent and ability and, whilst successive governments have appeared to focus on expanding access to higher education, my findings indicate that dominant thinking on meritocracy is simplistic and outmoded.

### 7.3 Navigating Higher Education

This section explores participants' experiences of their time at university and how they navigated their learning journeys, exploring the lived reality of university life for these working-class students. As noted in section 2.3.1, higher education institutions have invested

heavily in widening access to higher education for a number of underrepresented groups, including working-class students, efforts which are primarily focused on increasing application rates. Through exploring higher education journeys as participants were embarking on them, my study identifies ways in which students keep engaged, the difficulties they face, and what strategies they employ to navigate these challenges, highlighting the hope which participants invoke in the face of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. Particular attention is paid to the role of money as both a facilitator and a barrier, a commonly recurring theme in the analysis of the data produced. Lastly, this section explores the role of higher education institutions themselves in supporting working-class students, considering the extent to which participants' feel that institutions are able, and willing, to fulfil this role.

### 7.3.1 "Getting through"

Participants understood the importance of establishing themselves as authentic and legitimate learners in the higher education field. Doing so enabled them to navigate the unfamiliar, build connections with others, and cultivate a sense of belonging but they reported varied experiences of having been successful, or not, in their efforts. A recurring theme in the data was of participants needing to navigate their way through university-life, mindful of finding ways to 'fit-in'. As highlighted in section 5.3.2, developing a sense of belonging was paramount to participants feeling included and accepted as legitimate students within the higher education field, on par with their peers. Reflective of previous research (Christie et al. 2008), all of the participants mentioned wanting to identify and find common ground with other students and community and kinship were observed to be fundamental to participants' being able to develop a sense of belonging and stay engaged during their higher education journeys. Intersectionality and representation were also observed to be important aspects within the accounts of participants who had formed strong bonds while at university. Reflective of the revealing of classed identities as explored in section 5.3.2, Manon and Eiriol both spoke of having developed valuable friendships with other working-class mothers who could understand the difficulties they faced. Ally also noted that when her working-class academic supervisor was open about difficulties he had experienced in his own life, she felt like the university environment was for people like her.

Mature student participants in my study were able to successfully build a sense of belonging with others, and these connections and relationships were evidently important anchors in navigating the unknown field of higher education. The accounts of Mel, Ally, Pete, and Josie featured positive stories of belonging and fit, and feeling accepted and valued – not only by peers but also by university staff. Mel and Pete both spoke of how they had identified other mature working-class students on their respective courses, and they expressed affinity with these students which led to supportive networks being forged, a key support mechanism that helped them to stay engaged in the journey.

In contrast, other participants mentioned they had found it difficult to feel that they belonged and fitted in. Frequently this was the case for mature students who had enrolled on undergraduate degree programmes that were comprised of ‘traditional’ university students: those aged 18 who had come to university straight from KS5<sup>24</sup>. This cohort of students was Danny’s experience as an older first-time student in his 40s. Danny had made significant changes in his life to attend university, which included paying rent in two towns, using savings to fund his living costs, and working long hours in the holiday periods to rebuild finances for the next year of study. Danny had tried hard but failed to develop friendships with peers, leading to isolation in his first year. Danny attributed his difficulty in finding common ground with others to the lack of a of shared background, his lack of previous academic experience, and his responsibilities outside of university. Passing his first year, and having the will to return for his second, were at the forefront of Danny’s mind when he wrote a letter to his future-self for this research project. Danny’s letter reflected the difficulties of his first year as an undergraduate, citing the accommodation issues he was experiencing and feelings of being unsupported by the university in particular.

One of the downsides to [institution] for me is, it doesn’t do what is says, they are all about support but pillar and post come to mind, I hope it got better for you...Did you make it work for you? (Excerpt from Danny’s letter to his future-self. Danny – undergraduate student in social sciences aged 40-49)

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<sup>24</sup> Key Stage 5 (KS5), the final stage of secondary education for 16-18 year olds in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland which includes A-levels and vocational courses taken in schools or further education (FE) colleges.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, during interviews Danny spoke of the higher education experience as something he was therefore “getting through”. Similarly, Kel, an undergraduate mother in her 30s studying in a medical school at an elite university, spoke of limited connections with other students and of not having much in common with them. Even for those who were ‘traditional’ students themselves when they first went to university, such as Seren who attended an elite institution aged 18, there were still difficulties in developing a sense of belonging as Seren felt at “at odds” with her peers who she identified as being middle-class, stating that “many were privately educated”. Seren noted how at the time she did not feel this ought to have been a barrier to forming friendships while at university, and reflected on how their treatment of her came as a shock: Seren was the butt of their class-based jokes and, unwittingly, as a subconscious strategy to fit-in she had originally played along with what she had thought at the time were instances of bonding (see also section 8.2.2). However, Seren spoke of reconnecting with high-school friends during her first year, friends who were also attending the same institution but on different courses. Doing so enabled Seren to evaluate and step away from the new friendships, and during our interviews she reflected on how she then “stuck with” her old friends for the duration of her studies: individuals who had come from the same working-class area as she had, who had the same regional accent as she did, and who, unlike the new friends, did not therefore judge her because of their shared working-class background. Seren’s sense of belonging was cultivated through links to her past which enabled her to navigate the unfamiliar and uncertain field of higher education in a manageable way.

Four of the participants at Aelwyd, an elite pre-92 institution, reported issues in developing a sense of belonging and/or finding a fit with peers due to their working-class backgrounds (Seren, Manon, Eiriol, as noted above, as well as Kel). Although Danny reported similar issues at Hendre, another pre-92 institution, this was predominantly due to him being a mature-student and the accommodation difficulties he experienced early on which undermined attempts to make friendships and bond with coursemates, as highlighted above. The participants studying at Aelwyd all reported difficulties in feeling accepted by coursemates, peers, and sometimes academics and, as explored in depth in section 5.3, some operated hybridity within higher education spaces as a means of ‘getting through’. Seren, Manon, and Eiriol all identified other working-class students who they connected

with in order to foster a sense of belonging in their institution: in the case of Seren this was through reconnecting with old schoolfriends rather than her coursemates and immediate peers, and for Manon and Eiriol, this was through forming friendships with other single working-class mothers to find a 'fit'. Only two participants, Mel and Nikki, were from a post-92 institution, Hiraeth, and they did not express the same barriers to developing a sense of belonging at their institution compared to those at Aelwyd. As only four participants were in an elite institution, it is difficult to claim institutional differences from the findings of this study. However, as has been reported in the wider literature (Abrahams and Ingram 2013), it may be that for working-class students, developing a sense of belonging in elite institutions is a particularly challenging part of their higher education journeys due to institutional habitus and a lack of class-inclusivity. These considerations will be explored in more depth in Chapter 8.

#### *7.3.1.1 Academic ability*

One aspect which was central to "getting through" and developing competent learner identities was confidence in academic ability, with several participants reporting difficulties and feelings of being an 'imposter', undermining their sense of security within the higher education environment. As explored in sections 5.2.2.1 and 5.3.1, participants commonly expressed low-levels of confidence in their academic abilities, and for a minority this presented significant challenges in their experience of higher education. The majority of participants had not accessed university straight from school or college and therefore lacked the cultural capital – in the form of knowledge, experience, and skills - that would assist them in the early stages of their journeys. Compounding this was a lack of cultural capital support from family, due to members of the family unit, for most participants, themselves not having previous experiences of tertiary level education. This led to participants fearing being exposed as inadequate learners, as the excerpt from Eiriol demonstrates.

How did you find the academic side of things when you first went to uni? (Sam)

I didn't know what I was doing. I loved writing, but that was for fun and for work stuff. Yeah I just didn't know what was expected of me when I got there [university]. I didn't know what essays were even supposed to look like. And, like, I couldn't ask

anyone, I didn't want them to know otherwise maybe they'd think I shouldn't be there. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49)

Like Eiriol, other participants spoke of their low-levels of confidence and of being fearful they would be thought of and exposed as an 'imposter', a complex and highly personal fear that connected with concerns about not being *good* or *able* enough to have deserved a place at the higher education table. The extent to which participants entered into university life with educational self-confidence and belief was varied and was often connected to their classed experiences of education as children and a lack of family support, which manifested as low-confidence and a lack of belief in their own academic abilities.

At each stage of their journeys, three participants spoke of internally capping their abilities whilst they gradually made their way up the academic ladder. This was apparent in Seren's case. Despite having encouraging parents she spoke of not thinking she was "bright enough" for higher education. Once she had graduated from her undergraduate degree, Seren applied this mindset to the next level of study, right up until her PhD. The following excerpt from her first interview shows that a lack of self-belief and imposter syndrome affected Seren's decision-making, even though she had received encouragement about continuing in education from supportive academics during her undergraduate degree.

And I just remember thinking at the time "I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough. I can't do it [a Master's]." Even though I had someone telling me I could do it. I was like, "No, I'm not good enough. And I can't do it." It was the same when I did my A-levels, you know, I have this track record of actually doing things, but this belief like "No, no, no, I can't do that". (Seren)

But you've done really well - with your A levels, and your degrees..? (Sam)

Yeah its crazy, I know! I look at my PhD and think "How did I even get here?". I mean imposter syndrome x1000. I am the walking definition of it. (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Issues of self-belief were also prevalent in Seren's second interview when I asked her whether imposter syndrome was still something she struggled with following her PhD, which she had recently submitted.

In the last interview we talked about ‘living up’ to the title [of ‘Dr’]. Thinking about imposter syndrome is that something which concerns you? (Sam)

Yeah I do worry about that – I worry now like when people say “You’ve done that [the PhD], wow you must be really good” I think: “Do not put that pressure on me”. I worry they’ll see that title and those letters and think [I] must be really good at this. (Seren)

But you are on the cusp of getting a doctorate from [elite institution]? (Sam)

I know, but that doesn’t seem real honestly when I sit down and think about it. (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Seren’s account resonates with insecurities and low levels of confidence that were communicated in other participant accounts regardless of the level of study: some of those on undergraduate degrees spoke of having lacked confidence to apply for undergraduate study in the first place (Jules, Danny); some on Master’s degrees had not thought they would be able to achieve beyond undergraduate level (Nikki, Zoe); and some studying PhDs mentioned never having believed they would be on the cusp of achieving a doctorate level qualification (Eiriol, Ally).

Previous studies (Christie et al. 2008; James 1995) reported that low confidence and self-belief for working-class students can be calibrated through assessment and feedback procedures during the higher education journey, a finding which was reflected in this study. Once Kel, George and Zoe began to receive good marks and positive feedback their confidence in their academic ability grew, enabling them to view themselves as legitimate learners in their respective higher education environments. This resonates with Christie et al.’s (2008, p. 574) position that students can identify themselves as competent learners when positive marks and feedback help them “to authorise and validate their new learning identity.” This was also noted in the interviews conducted with Eiriol and Pete, although Christie et al.’s (2008) presentation of this as a cyclical yet ongoing progression was not reflective of the ongoing uncertainty that Pete experienced. Pete had excelled in his marked work since starting university, usually achieving high-firsts in his assignments. However, he played down his own abilities and potential and in his second interview seemed unable to overcome his imposter syndrome through assessment feedback alone.

Do you see any barriers to you going on and achieving what you'd love to achieve?  
You said last time that if things don't come through for you, it will probably be  
because you've messed it up? (Sam)

Yep, probably. If I look at my assignments – I've got away with it and done well and  
scored well but a lot of the stuff I have given in has been so risky (Pete –  
undergraduate arts student and disabled aged 50+)

Danny was the only participant who mentioned that he sought support from the centralised services at his institution to build his academic skills and confidence, highlighting how he had attended sessions on academic writing, library searches, time management, and essay planning. Danny had noticed a significant difference between the support he was given during his foundation degree compared to being a first year undergraduate, describing a scaffolded foundation programme that made him feel ready for his first year when he enrolled on his full degree. However, Danny highlighted that the academic demands of the undergraduate course came as a "shock" because he had expected the same level of support and understanding from his undergraduate first-year lecturers as he had experienced from the academics on his foundation degree. Instead, Danny was taken aback by the lack of embedded support, feeling as though he was left to fend for himself and track down centralised assistance on top of his study time, rather than as part of it.

Other participants felt that centralised services were too detached from their everyday classes, with Kel questioning how tailored this support would be to her course. Additionally, Seren mentioned that had she needed support she would have expected this to come from the lecturers who were teaching her, rather than a service outside of her academic school. The participants in my study spoke of struggling with low levels of confidence and imposter syndrome well into their higher education journeys, yet only Danny sought help from his institution, specifically around academic skills development. This raises questions for institutions regarding how they can best design services to support working-class students during their time at university, in ways that are appealing and accessible, as explored in more depth in the concluding chapter.

### 7.3.2 Money

Money was identified as both a facilitator and a hindrance when it came to embarking on higher education journeys. Several participants, including George, Eiriol, Manon, and Nikki, noted that the cost of engaging in higher education represented a significant sacrifice for them in the present, one they were making in the hope of realising economic social mobility gains in the future. Funding access to higher education often meant financial sacrifices and a need to balance the costs of higher education against family and personal commitments. However, in a minority of cases participants reported being 'better-off' as students than they had been before commencing studies. With the exception of Lena who was supported by her husband, none of the participants received financial support from their families to attend university, either as undergraduates or postgraduates, and therefore nearly all participant accounts included experiences of debt, student finance, work, and living on a low income. Lack of family-resourcing of higher education journeys is at odds with assumptions found with human capital theory, the principles of which several of the participants in this study aligned their experiences to (for example in 7.4). Blondal et al. (2002, p.75) reflect that "financing education has implications for parents and other family members as well as students. Parents usually contribute towards the costs of human capital investment", an assumption that for working-class students - who do not have access such familial resources - further highlights the disadvantage at the centre of their educational experiences and draws attention to the disconnect between their perceptions of their own agency, choices, and personal investment and the actual material conditions which frame, and constrain, their learning journeys.

#### 7.3.2.1 Debt and financial (in)security

Amongst the participants there were varied perspectives when it came to funding the cost of higher education and whilst debt-aversion was apparent, nuances were at play. Debt was primarily identified as obtaining loans via student finance, but some students spoke of also using personal loans, credit cards and other financing options to help fund their way through higher education, such as Eiriol who, despite working, was also a single parent and needed to use credit to top-up her income. Debt-aversion for students has been defined as "an unwillingness to take a loan to pay for college, even when that loan would likely offer a positive long-term return" (Cunningham and Santiago 2008, p. 10). Numerous studies have

been conducted in relation to debt aversion for working-class students in higher education (Callendar and Jackson 2005; Callender and Mason 2017; Mazhari and Atherton 2020) and these paint a bleak picture in which working-class students are put-off entering higher education due to fears of debt; accumulate more debt during their time in higher education; and realise fewer material gains post-study. Indeed, as Callendar and Mason (2017) note, although future financial projections are more positive for graduates than non-graduates, there remain stark inequalities for working-class graduate students.

“Graduates are much more likely to be employed and earn considerably more than non-graduates. But graduates from wealthier backgrounds earn significantly more than graduates from poorer backgrounds even after completing the same degrees from the same universities” (Callendar and Mason, 2017, p.42).

Contrary to these studies all of the mature undergraduate students I spoke to, who had spent many years in the workforce, were not averse to accumulating debt (with the exception of Zoe) to pursue their journeys into higher education. This finding resonates with Evans and Donnelley’s (2018) study with KS5 pupils which found there was acceptance of higher education debt amongst their sample. Two participants in my study, Mel and Pete, highlighted how they were “better-off” living on student finance than they had been pre-university when living on low-incomes or being on benefits in the welfare system, noting that this security would last for the three years of their undergraduate degrees. Mel and Pete both highlighted that, as students aged over 50, they thought it unlikely that they would ever have to pay the student loan debt back: they could not see themselves reaching the post-study earnings threshold which would require them to do so and noted how they would be retired and receiving a state pension before the loan was likely to be repaid in full in any case. For Mel and Pete, student finance was not only an enabler to entering higher education but also provided them with relative financial security in the immediate term: an already realised financial gain without any apparent sacrifice.

In their comparative study about attitudes to debt from working-, middle- and upper-class students, Callender and Mason (2017) explored changes over a 13-year period. Their study found that, compared to students in other social classes, worrying about accumulating debt was a negative contributing factor in working-class students’ anticipated participation in higher education. However, the examples of Mel and Pete show that analysis of decision-

making on social class criteria alone provides an insufficient lens with which to view attitudes towards debt: in my research, age and level of study undertaken by the participants played a significant role in understanding the financial reasoning behind some working-class students' engagement with higher education.

Conversely, for participants in my study who were accessing postgraduate courses, debt-aversion was of significant relevance: seven out of the 10 participants who were on Master's or PhD programmes were in receipt of research council funding and spoke of only having been able to opt-into postgraduate education as doing so would not incur debt or require them to pay tuition fees. Whilst Master's and doctoral loans are available to students wanting to study at postgraduate level in Wales<sup>25</sup>, only three out of the 10 postgraduate students in this study had decided to pursue postgraduate higher education, at Master's level, and had taken loans to do so. This was in contrast to the data from the undergraduate participants, besides Lena as outlined in section 7.3.2 above, who were accepting of the fact that they would be in debt as a result of studying at university. For the postgraduates, there was more caution expressed in relation to finance and the role that money played in their consideration of whether to enter or continue in higher education (sometimes after a period of financial security in the workforce). However, although debt-aversion was a factor in decision-making *pre* postgraduate studies, once students were on these higher education journeys changes in circumstances and the realities of managing on a low income became apparent. As aforementioned, Eiriol found it too difficult to manage financially without using credit to get by day to day.

How do you manage the money side of things – uni, the kids – balancing everything?  
(Sam)

It is hard. I thought I would be ok, I thought I had worked it all out before [enrolling]. But you know sometimes I just forget and beat myself up “Why can't you manage?” “Why are you using the [credit] card again?” One Christmas I didn't even have money for presents for the kids. I felt so shit. My friends helped me that year. Then I remember “No, you're not shit, you're doing your best and it's the situation that is

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<sup>25</sup> Postgraduate Master's loans and Postgraduate Doctoral loans from Student Finance Wales are available to students ordinarily resident in Wales.

shit.” I just need it to work out and be worth it. (Eiriol - PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

Looking specifically at the English context and drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of the concept, Harris, Vigurs and Jones (2021) position debt for students in higher education as a form of symbolic violence in which students themselves become responsible for their own indebtedness due to participating in this bargain:

“symbolic violence is pertinent to England’s loan system because student-borrowers willingly enter into a contract with their state-lenders to gain qualifications that they often regard as prerequisite for their career advancement or personal growth” (Harris, Vigurs and Jones 2021, p.133).

They conclude that students have little choice to reject this contract with the state due to the overwhelming acceptance within society that indebtedness is a requirement, a legitimate sacrifice therefore, for personal advancement through higher education participation. This sense of acceptance was present in all of my participants’ accounts, and no participants questioned the cost of university or intimated that the system could be structured in a different way financially to allow fairer access and inclusion (apart from Zoe, see section 7.3.3.1). To some extent, the participants displayed a sense of pride in the sacrifices they were making, akin to a rite of passage, and their accounts provided powerful personal narratives in which higher education gains were to be earned through sacrifice, linking to themes of achieving social mobility after adversity. Eiriol’s letter from her future-self detailed how her hope that the higher education journey would lead to a positive change in her circumstances sustained her commitment to the journey and helped her manage all the difficulties she was facing in the present day:

Things are easier now. The barriers from money have finally come down, or rather you scaled them. I wouldn’t be here now living this life if it wasn’t for all the work you put in. I’m grateful to you.

You got your PhD, of course you did. It was always yours to work for and what you carried during those four years was immense. I remember clearly the point you’re at right now, between hopeful and totally hopeless, but you are near the end. Everything that feels so out of reach, is now in our hands.

(Eiriol's letter from her future-self)

### *7.3.2.2 Financial uncertainty*

Nikki, Danny, Eiriol and Francesca spoke of making significant changes in their personal lives and finances in order to enter or continue in higher education, balancing family and personal commitments with the desire to undertake further study. A few mature participants spoke of having relocated for their courses and not being able to put down roots in long-term housing during their higher education journeys, in contrast to the security they had experienced prior to relocating. One, Nikki, had moved two hundred miles to one of the few universities which offered her course. She was a single-parent with a primary-school aged child renting out her mortgaged flat in her hometown to help keep afloat during her Master's course. Nikki was reluctant to sell and set-down roots in her new town as she believed she would not be able to get a mortgage on a new property because of her recent change to student status, low-income, and zero-hours contract work. Nikki was experiencing financial difficulties during her time at university and during our second interview she mentioned that she had been thinking about selling her property, but not to fund another property: instead, she was considering using the equity to pay her tuition fees and living costs for the two years that remained on her part-time Master's course.

I'm worried in my head all the time about finance during the three years...like I've got a flat back in [hometown]. I'm even thinking of selling that to pay for the next two years. Because I don't know how I'm gonna do it otherwise. (Nikki – Master's student in health and single disabled mother aged 30-39)

A chronic illness exacerbated matters as Nikki could no longer rely on being able to work enough hours on the side of her studies to keep her head above water financially. Her plan was to make it through the next two years and secure employment related to her studies once her course was finished. Nikki's hope was that she would be able to overcome the sacrifice in the short term and have improved employment prospects with a job with a good wage that reflected her increased qualifications, skills, and knowledge, building on notions of human capital and social mobility as explored in sections 3.2.2.1 and 3.3.2. However, thoughts as to whether this would come to fruition were a significant concern of Nikki's and were affecting her mental health. This resonates with other studies that explore the negative

psychological impact of money-related stress and anxiety in working-class student experiences in higher education, such as those by Moore et al. (2021) and Dabrowski et al. (2025).

Similarly, Danny had relocated to attend a university undergraduate course that was over 100 miles away from other commitments in his hometown. He had chosen his university based on the expertise of an academic in his department who specialised in the work Danny wanted to go into in the future. He was travelling between the two places, paying rent in both and funding his travel and accommodation through savings he had built up by working long-hours as a delivery driver and living frugally. Danny's decision to attend university was a long-term plan formulated over several years. He had not fully relocated as, due to a difficult start to his undergraduate course (section 6.3) he was nervous about whether he would make it to the end of the first year of his studies and continue into year two. Danny wanted to keep his options open and maintain a strong link to his pre-university life, even if this meant paying a hefty financial cost which he had to work hard to fund.

I know we touched on this last time and [you have] a mixture of funding... We talked of that being a worry to you, of being able to last financially for three years? (Sam)

Now I think I will be able to because of the summer months, I'll work through it, build up the funds, come back then for the academic side. (Danny)

And with this sort of job [delivery driving] you can dip in and out of it? (Sam)

Yeah with places like Amazon...[you] could make a phone call now and start tomorrow. (Danny – undergraduate student in social sciences aged 40-49)

Before going to university, Danny had been homeless and spent time living in a van: he did not feel able to give up the security of the rental property he had in his hometown after getting back on his feet given that his ventures into higher education, to him, felt uncertain and insecure. Danny felt more assured and therefore able to engage with his studies by embarking on this dual arrangement and working intensely during the holiday periods. However, his final comments at the end of the second interview were whether he would return for the second year of his course after the summer break, as year one had been so

difficult for him. Spiralling costs, isolation, and a crisis of confidence in his own abilities had taken a huge toll on his desire to continue on with his long-term plan.

Pete was another of the students in my study who was navigating money-concerns.

Although Pete had been better-off since starting university than he had been before (due to having taken out an undergraduate loan) when his second interview took place he had started to struggle financially because of an unexpected bill which his normal cashflow could not cover. Living semi-rurally, the car that he depended on was broken and he was facing a large repair bill to get it back on the road. Pete was very worried about his finances during the second interview and was anxiously awaiting his next student finance payment, not due for a couple of months, despite this not being enough to cover both living costs and the large car bill. Pete explained that without his car, he did not know how he was going to commute to university and continue his studies. He did not have a safety net to fall back on and did not approach the university's hardship fund, thinking that a car repair would not be deemed eligible. Pete's view that his own lack of willpower and discipline would be what would hold him back in attaining his degree (section 5.2.2.2) overlooked wider structural factors related to money and security that were a part of the challenges he faced in his higher education journey.

### 7.3.3 "What can unis do?"

Discussions with participants explored their perspectives on the role that institutions play, or might play, in supporting working-class students once they are engaged in, as has been evidenced, often difficult higher education journeys. Specific mention was made to support schemes and low-level interventions as well as short-term financial support, such as hardship funds, which institutions administer to students in times of crisis. These discussions yielded varied perspectives amongst the participants. Most students had not considered this before my interviews with them, with only Jules, Eiriol, Manon, and Seren expressing how they felt that universities ought to not only collect data on the socio-economic status of all their students, but that they should also actively support working-class students during their time at university given the structural disadvantages they face. A distinction was noted by some participants between institutional approaches and commitment to *attracting* working-class students, and to subsequently *retaining* them. Kel, Manon, Seren, and Eiriol all spoke of being aware of initiatives within their institutions targeted at low socio-economic

background young people, such as those either in high school studying for GCSEs (KS4), or post-16 young people either in high school and studying for A-levels (KS5) or in further education college. Participants mentioned various initiatives to attract these young people, such as diversity schemes, summer schools, and day visits to university campuses. Both Manon and Kel had children who, as they were from low socio-economic households, had attended these sorts of initiatives as part of their own higher education journeys. In addition, three of the participants had been on widening access programmes themselves (Danny, Lena, and Pete).

During the interviews participants were asked how well they thought institutions knew their students, or *could* know them, if they were to then provide effective support during higher education journeys. Whilst all participants noted they were used to providing protected characteristics monitoring data to higher education providers and accepted the need to track this data for equality purposes, there was ambivalence from the majority of participants regarding an institution's ability to monitor social class data as part of routine data collection practices. Participants struggled to articulate what this might look like in practice, reflecting on the complexity and subjectivity of class definitions, as well as social class not being a legally recognised protected characteristic. Discussions with participants covered how institutions might define social class - the criteria they would need to identify - and the challenges associated with setting any definitional framework, such as whether students would feel the chosen criteria reflected their own definitions of their classed identities. The most reliable measures which participants spoke of as being potential criteria were related to economic capital and the resources which students may or may not have access to, ideas which are in line with the data that institutions already collect at application and enrolment stage.

Eiriol was forthright in her opinion about the role which higher education institutions play, and could play, in being more inclusive, stating that she believed universities should do more to support working-class students while they are enrolled. Seren also voiced frustration that institutions focused their attention on recruiting working-class students but did not support them more during their higher education journeys.

There's lots of monitoring when you apply to uni for race, gender, those sorts of things, but not necessarily for class or background [...] Do you think that this is

something that unis could focus on? Should they know more about the background of their students' socio-economic status...is it irrelevant? (Sam)

What can unis do? It's a tricky one because it is relevant in some ways because you want to ensure that people [have] the same opportunity. Then, is it just a tick box exercise like, "oh, yeah, we've taken this many students from this postcode area of deprivation"? Do they genuinely mean it? And even if they do take them on, are they actually going to give them support and the extra things that they wouldn't get from their family? So it is important and in an ideal world they [universities] would then go and give those students their guidance and support if they want it. (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

Seren expanded on her point about universities providing ongoing support post-enrolment by suggesting that, in her elite university, there was disregard for the teaching and developmental side of a student's university experience.

How are they able to know their students? If it's a big uni, a big [academic] school do they have the capacity or does it come down to an individual lecturer to take an interest? (Sam)

It would be really hard for them to know unless they invested in having structures and staff in place to really understand who everybody is. I'd go to lectures and there would be 200 [students]. They didn't know who I was. In undergrad you get your [personal] tutor but they just mark your essays, and it's "see you later". When I was in my third year I signed up to do mentoring of first years but then they would never turn up. I think there's definitely a role [for universities] to play to boost confidence and not make it so competitive. I don't think [Seren's institution] are very good. I think they are far too concerned about the REF<sup>26</sup>. (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

The reflections Seren offered in relation to her own journey, coupled with her disappointing mentoring experience, indicate that she may herself have liked the opportunity to be mentored as a first-year undergraduate student, and assumed that others would too. It is

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<sup>26</sup> The REF is the [Research Excellence Framework](#), the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.

not possible to tell from Seren's data whether this was a scheme specifically aimed at particular types of students, such as those deemed by the university to be disadvantaged, or open to all. Besides Seren, Manon was the only other student who mentioned having an awareness of any ongoing support schemes (social mornings) in her university department, although she noted that she had not attended any and that this scheme was not specifically targeted at working-class students. Similar small-scale schemes have been noted in previous research, such as Mannay and Ward's (2022) social intervention the "Coffee Club" at two Welsh universities, in which they highlight how a lack of institutional support and subsequent informal running of the Club could undermine the longevity of such schemes (see also Mannay and Timperley 2025).

#### *7.3.3.1 Financial support*

Financial difficulties can severely impact the higher education experiences of working-class students and whilst most institutions have some form of centralised services which provide financial advice and hardship funds, from my research it was apparent that these were not utilised by the participants, despite many of them reporting financial difficulties to me: four participants had considered using university financial support schemes when they had faced hardship but none of them had ended up applying for this support from their institutions. Kel described being put off accessing the financial hardship fund at her institution as it required having a meeting with university support workers and providing these officials with access to her bank account to "prove" she was experiencing hardship. Kel spoke of this feeling very intrusive, and of not wanting to be judged, preferring instead to find other ways to manage during difficult periods. Wagner et al.'s (2021) qualitative study with students who were experiencing financial stress and did access institutional hardship funds was more positive than the findings in my study. Wagner et al. (2021) found that, although the experience of money difficulties of course caused stress and anxiety, students who accessed institutional hardship schemes reported positive experiences which enabled them to remain engaged in their studies (due to the stress being alleviated) but, perhaps more unexpectedly, that being supported by their institution fostered a deepening sense of belonging within the university environment amongst the students in their study.

In this study, Zoe felt that universities were constrained in the more fundamental ways that they could financially support working-class students. She noted that some courses were

supported with bursaries, while others were not “which creates inequality” amongst students, however she also noted these were often tied to courses which are part-funded externally such as nursing and teaching. Zoe recognised that student loan amounts are set externally but argued that individual institutions could still explore ways to assist students who were struggling and provide more support to those who were in financial difficulties while at university, such as reviewing their tuition fees and “providing more grants” to help students in difficulty.

#### 7.4 Hope and Uncertainty, the Higher Education Experience Conclusion

The findings of this chapter illustrate that the lived, everyday experiences of working-class students within higher education are multi-layered and complex. This chapter has explored participants’ understandings of and beliefs in social mobility and meritocracy and has highlighted how participants navigate their higher education experiences, attending to research question one, two, and three from this study:

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, higher education institutional narratives of social mobility?

How might working-class students’ journeys through higher education be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?

This chapter has explored the dual discourses of social mobility and meritocracy which have dominated educational policy-making since the 1950s. Participant understandings of these concepts varied markedly, but it was evident across all of the accounts that higher education journeys, indeed all educational experiences, are created and lived within the confines of institutional environments which are not designed with working-class students in mind or suitably adapted, and which therefore present challenging educational experiences. Social mobility, whilst presented by institutions as being a leading aspiration and motivating factor for working-class student journeys into higher education, was more subtly desired and nuanced in the participant accounts. Although understandings varied, all participants were accepting of social mobility narratives in educational discourse, and it was evident that the

dominance of this central concept in educational policymaking still holds firm. Despite evidence that shows social mobility is stalling and socio-economic disadvantage is growing (Luchinskaya and Dickinson 2019), exacerbated by the “myth of graduate employability” (Tholen and Brown 2017) and credential inflation (Wakeling and Laurison 2017), participants were still invested in their belief in social mobility, and it remains an important factor in the motivations behind higher education journeys.

Whilst the majority of participants expressed a desire for upward mobility, this was predominantly in relation to securing advancements in economic capital, through developing increased human capital, more so than other purported notions of social mobility transformation connected to social and cultural capital. Participants spoke of investing in themselves through education in the hope that, predominantly, financial social mobility gains post-university would be realised. These hopes sustained participants through often difficult journeys and, due to strong beliefs in the notion of meritocracy being displayed by the majority of participants. Whilst personal transformation was also desired, and was undoubtedly occurring for the participants, there was a reluctance by a minority to embrace social mobility and move away from working-class backgrounds, with complex notions of changes to classed identities and feeling ‘caught-between’ classes, as reflected in other studies (Cunliffe 2008; Reay 2017; Baxter and Britton 2001). This was further compounded by uncertainty as to whether social mobility would indeed be realised, a pernicious fear that was exacerbated by participants’ belief in notions of meritocracy that frame success and failure as personal traits which operate independently of the myriad circumstantial and structural barriers facing working-class students in the higher education field.

The working-class students in this study negotiated higher education environments with little or no guidance due to lacking the habitus, social, and cultural capital needed to allay the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of their institutional field. Participants navigated these environments by developing, to varying extents, a sense of belonging which was tied to the creation of learner identities, as reflected in the work of Chapman (2014). However, these strategies were at times tenuous and insufficient in offsetting feelings of inadequacy, particularly in relation to academic ability and deep-seated fears over being an imposter without the right to a seat at the higher education table. Meritocratic messaging, from the

family unit as well as educational gatekeepers contributed to these participant concerns and were ingrained at all stages of higher education journeys, despite 'successes' being experienced by participants along the way.

A defining feature of the higher education journey was the role which money played as both a facilitator and a barrier to accessing and remaining engaged in further study. The majority of participants were unable to manage financially without working alongside their studies and money concerns, financial insecurity, and debt were commonly reported with some participants noting adverse effects on their mental health from money worries, as observed in other studies of working-class students navigating higher education, such as Moore et al. (2021) and Dabrowski et al. (2025). Although money was a source of hope for participants - primarily in the form of hoped for future gains - and provided security and stability for some participants it was also responsible for uncertainty and stress, causing instability and a lack of security for others.

Despite highlighting numerous challenges during their higher education journeys, very few participants spoke of accessing support from their institutions, be that hardship funds, pastoral initiatives or centralised services, in contrast to previous research (Wagner et al. 2021). Participants in this study did not feel that universities were aware of the challenges facing working-class students and how best to support them. This was partly due to the perspective that institutions have not integrated social class EDI monitoring criteria into their systems in order to better understand the composition and needs of their diverse student bodies. Although participants shared their thoughts on how universities could broaden existing EDI monitoring to include social class, numerous drawbacks were cited as to whether this would, or could, be effective. This raises questions for institutions as to how they could broaden their monitoring criteria for working-class students once they have embarked on higher education journeys, akin to the emphasis placed on capturing widening access data and trends pre-enrolment. Although there are challenges with implementing social class monitoring in institutions, as noted by the participants, effective monitoring systems could provide institutions with data that informs anti-discrimination policy and practice. As outlined in section 2.3.2, to comply with the Equality Act institutions monitor EDI data for all of the protected characteristics and use this guide their Strategic Equality Plans, a process which could be adapted to include social class monitoring and the

development of equality objectives to combat class-based bias and discrimination. As noted in the participant accounts, few students engaged with existing support schemes and as such it could be argued that this presents an opportunity for institutions to reconsider how best they can design initiatives which are appropriate and aid working-class students once they have embarked on higher education journeys. Participants in this study provided examples of such initiatives and schemes that could be more targeted which, with institutional commitment, might offer more effective support to working-class students as they navigate higher education. Building on the findings within this chapter, the following chapter will explore how the structural barriers and disadvantage presented here can be understood through a lens of bias and discrimination. Chapter 8 also explores the role that positive positioning of working-classed identities can play in countering these persistent narratives.

## Chapter 8: “That’s just how it is” But does it need to be? Overcoming classism for inclusivity

### 8.1 Introduction

Building on the findings presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, in this final empirical chapter I explore bias and discrimination in higher education, as well as positive positionings of classed identities by learners and higher education institutions. In this chapter I consider two main themes, namely (i) classism, and (ii) valuing classed identities, and explore commonalities and divergences in the participant accounts. To understand how working-class student higher education journeys can be viewed through a lens of bias and discrimination, I asked participants about their views on class-based bias and whether they felt that inferior treatment on the basis of social-class was discriminatory. Utilising the literature introduced in Chapter 3, I explore how some participants perceived class disadvantage to be a structural inequality and questioned the role that universities play in perpetuating this inequality. The discussions I had with participants about how social class might instead be positioned as an asset via a ‘student contribution’ framework are presented as well, moving away from the concept of a student deficit model and into positive framings – for participants as well as institutions - of the various capitals which working-class students hold and bring with them to the higher education field.

The themes explored in this chapter connect to aspects of research questions three and four.

How might working-class students’ journeys through higher education be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?

Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

As this study is not a test of the legislative equalities framework, the term ‘classism’, defined in section 3.2.1, is used as an umbrella-term within this chapter in relation to both implicit and explicit bias as well as to discrimination with distinctions noted where necessary. As delineated by Smith et al. (2016, p.129) utilising the work of Lott and Bullock (2007), this chapter covers *institutional classism* – “through which social institutions function to

perpetuate the deprivation and low status of poor people” – and *interpersonal classism* – “characterized by prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination”.

## 8.2 “Your dad works for my dad”: Classism in higher education

Despite the legislative framework of the Equalities Act 2010 and the protections provided via anti-discrimination policies, strategies and initiatives within higher education

“discrimination, or differences in treatment toward individuals based on their membership in a certain social group, remains a persistent problem in our society” (Campbell and Brauer 2021, p.756). As noted in section 2.2.2 the Equality Act 2010 defines discrimination as direct, indirect, harassment, and victimisation on the basis of any (or a combination) of the nine protected characteristics, as well as discrimination arising from a disability and a failure to make reasonable adjustments. Although the Act does not feature a protected characteristic related to social class, the socio-economic duty (SED) that was included<sup>27</sup> obliges public bodies “...when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise functions, [to] have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage” (Equality Act 2010). However, social class disadvantage remains a pervasive issue for working-class students in higher education settings, not only in their relationships and experiences with peers, but from the impact of the structures, practices and policies in institutions that have not sufficiently evolved to tackle class-based inequalities.

The participants in my study presented significantly varied perspectives and understandings of class-based bias and discrimination within society and higher education and this section highlights their experiences of classism, microaggressions, and exclusion within higher education journeys, and explores why class inclusivity - despite decades of interventions and evidence - remains out of reach.

### 8.2.1 Naming classism

Whilst all participants spoke of being familiar with bias and discrimination in relation to the established and legally-protected nine characteristics, when it came to social class perspectives were much more nuanced. All participants noted that they believed that

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<sup>27</sup> The SED was enacted in Wales in 2021 and in 2018 in Scotland. At the time of writing, it has not been enacted in England.

people carry biases with them in everyday life and whilst the majority felt that holding or expressing negative attitudes and behaviours towards working-class people could be considered biased, a minority - Lena, Zoe, and Josie - spoke of not having considered class-based bias before I discussed it with them during the interviews, with Lena stating “I hadn’t really thought of it like that before”.

Eight of the remaining participants felt that class bias does exist but expressed reluctance to call unfavourable treatment on the basis of social class discriminatory: whilst these participants acknowledged that there are inequalities between the working- and middle-classes, they did not feel that classism was comparable with other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism. These participants were clear in their rejection of those other forms of discrimination but there was ambivalence in stating that unfavourable class-based treatment, whether direct or indirect, meets a similar threshold.

Although several of these participants, including Pete, Danny, Francesca, and Kel spoke of being aware of class-based disadvantage and had indeed experienced this in their own lives, they did not feel that this was structural, instead explaining disadvantage as somewhat inevitable and “that’s just how it is” (Francesca). These participants were of the view that biases based on class are found within interpersonal interactions, and are therefore *person-to-person*, noting that class “stereotyping” (Pete) was an inevitable part of life which was unlikely to cause harm in the same way that other, acknowledged, forms of discrimination do. It is possible that the invisibility of class-based discrimination on a societal scale, as explored in Chapter 3, made it difficult for these participants to acknowledge or contend that classism is found in the structures and institutions of society (Naidoo 2021). As Beagan (2005) notes, the prevalence of ‘everyday-classism’ and subtleties in the presentation of class discrimination can make this bias difficult to recognise, comprehend, and accept - a viewpoint which may have been present in the perspectives of these students as they were aware of instances of inferior treatment but accepting of it.

All participants understood that working-class students entering higher education can undoubtedly find it challenging, but several expressed beliefs that experiencing difficulties and undergoing some form of personal sacrifice was required for rewards to be rightfully *earned*. In turn, this acceptance can be seen as legitimising the status quo of the higher education field. The notion that systems of education are heavily suited to middle-class

students who possess the 'correct' cultural and social capital (Maclean 2022; Walkerdine 2021; Reay 2018), although representative of structural disadvantage and discrimination, is one which the majority of the participants (n=11) struggled with. The remaining five participants - Manon, Jules, Eiriol, Seren, and Ally - strongly felt that not only did classism exist, but that social class bias and discrimination manifested beyond personal interactions and was also found within institutional structures and practices, as the excerpt from Eiriol indicates.

What about bias and discrimination on the basis of social class? Is that something you have thought about before? (Sam)

Of course! I haven't just thought about it, I've seen it. I've felt it. (Eiriol)

From other people? (Sam)

Yeah from other people. But you have to think, why? Why can people behave like that? Because it is accepted. It is allowed. Society thinks it is bad to be poor, uneducated - you're worth less. Not that working-class people are those things, I'm just saying the stereotypes. (Eiriol)

Do you think this can make it difficult for working-class students at uni? (Sam)

Of course! It isn't an accident that half of us struggle and the other half don't. Well, not even half is it? I can see it more easily now, when I was younger I thought too much [about] what others think of me. Now I know it's not my fault. Obviously someone like me isn't supposed to be there [university], I wasn't meant to go into that type of world, that's why it's been so hard and still is. It isn't for someone like me is it? To me, the system is rigged. And that can't be accidental. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

### 8.2.2 "Jokes and banter": Experiences of classism

Most participants were aware that negative terminology was sometimes used to describe the working-classes and felt this could be stigmatizing and prejudicial, but only four participants mentioned overt examples that affected them or their family members directly. Eiriol spoke of feeling protective of her mum while she was growing up, being the only family in their village living in council housing and surviving on benefits. Eiriol observed that

because of this they “stood out” and recalled that her mum had once been called “a scrounger”, a memory which was evidently upsetting and one which Eiriol, with hindsight, articulated as classist, in keeping with Tyler’s (2008, p.18) work on the “vilification of young white working-class mothers [and] how the ‘chav mum’ is produced through disgust reactions”. At the time this instance of painful and pejorative language contributed to Eiriol’s sense of shame of her working-class background and of having what she called “the poverty badge”, experiences which partly motivated Eiriol’s desire to pursue work and, later in her life, higher education. Pete also reflected on childhood experiences and how his grammar school peers had stigmatized him for his working-class background, noting how they “tried to bully me because of it”. Pete viewed this as “stereotyping”, in keeping with Lott’s (2002) view of cognitive distancing and disgust directed by middle-class people towards the working-classes. However, from the interview data generated, these experiences did not seem to have had the same far-reaching negative effects on Pete as Eiriol’s experiences had on her.

Within the higher education field, a few participants mentioned having experienced incidents of classism during their higher education journeys. These were characterised as “microaggressions” by the participants, “statements that denigrate, insult, or disrespect people with nondominant social class identities” (Cook and O’Hara 2020, p. 516).

Microaggressions is a term more commonly associated with race and racism (Sue et al. 2007) - of which the Equality Act 2010 affords protections on the basis of race as a protected characteristic - but which has begun to expand in relevance to any marginalised group in society. The framing of classist behaviours as microaggressions is reflected in Smith et al. (2016, p. 130) who contend in their study of class that “applying the microaggressions framework to examples taken from research, literature, and popular culture [...] demonstrated how social class-based indignities can be embedded within everyday life and common language”.

Three participants, Seren, Eiriol, and Manon, described everyday-classism instances in higher education settings from university peers that were commonly presented, and defended, as “jokes and banter” (Seren) about poverty or those in manual or low-skilled work. In one example, Seren recalled experiences which she categorised as microaggressions during her time at an elite institution when she was an undergraduate. Being from a nearby working-

class area, Seren found herself in a minority at her chosen university amongst students who had travelled from across the UK to study there, noting how she learned that many of those on her course had been privately educated. Seren tried to make friends with these new peers but in contrast to them she spoke with a strong regional accent, a class signifier which singled-her out for microaggressions (Crew 2020; Loughran 2018).

Seren discussed how she was the target of recurring jokes. The other students mocked her accent, despite it being in keeping with the location of the university which they had opted to study at, placing Seren as an outsider based on her working-class status with the middle-class students legitimately occupying the field (Crozier et al. 2016) which Seren had entered. Seren reflected that she had not “realised how working-class” she was until being cast as ‘other’ by these new peers, reminiscent of Holt and Griffin’s (2005) qualitative study into constructions of “working-class others” amongst young people. Even Seren’s boyfriend at the time participated in these microaggressions, which negatively affected her confidence. Seren recalled being aware of feeling uncomfortable about the “teasing and banter” but explained she had not qualified these instances as bias or classism at the time, only doing several years later with the benefit of hindsight and a fuller understanding of inequalities.

Recalling her undergraduate experiences, Seren described herself as “playing along and playing up to the jokes”, having thought she and the other students were becoming friends and that this was part of bonding. However, Seren realised how they themselves were never the joke, only she was, and how comments were always based on aspects of *her* classed identity and cultural and social capitals. The behaviours of Seren’s peers can be related to Cook and O’Hara’s (2020, p.157) small qualitative study of doctoral students in a US higher education institution, which proposed that microaggressions based on social class “may endure because they preserve homeostasis [...] people rarely seek to understand their privilege, power, and status, and how these factors might be used to oppress others, particularly via the systems of which people are a part”. In the same study Cook and O’Hara noted that acknowledgement would remove the middle-classes’ ability to maintain their power-base and the status quo, a longstanding observation also reflected in the work of Sue (2010) and Smith and Redington (2010). Seren explained how she initially tolerated the incidents in order to fit in: she had been given a role to play and was permitted to be part of the group as long as she maintained that role.

I would just join in with [it]. That was my survival mechanism...I would just join in and be like, sure I'll say that from Gavin and Stacey<sup>28</sup> again and laugh, and things like that. Looking back now, it's really harsh, I feel sad about it. I look back and my vocabulary wasn't very good. Everyone else would have all these cool words that they were coming out with and pronouncing things as they should be said. I didn't have the same language. And when I joined in, they'd mimic me and say to me: "By pronouncing it how you say it: that wasn't what we just said." (Seren – PhD student in social sciences aged 20-29)

After some time, Seren connected with a group of old friends she had grown up with in her hometown, who were also working-class and studying at the same university. She spoke of feeling much more comfortable and "herself" in their company, where there was no need to adopt a different persona or minimise/maximise elements of her classed identity. As explored in earlier chapters, Seren's experience highlights how strategies to modify the self are employed by working-class students in higher education in order to fit-in with others in this new field. In Seren's case, she accentuated aspects of her classed identity, thinking she was developing trust and becoming an accepted member of the middle-class friendship group, but also felt uncomfortable with the derogatory performance this required. With the group of middle-class students, Seren had implicitly understood that by not accentuating elements of her classed identity for their amusement, she risked being rejected by them. However, she came to realise she was never truly accepted by them either.

Pressures to accept inferior treatment were also noted in Bradley's (2017) research which highlighted how students can feel judged in negative social interactions and are consequently at risk of dropping out. Although Seren spoke of feeling judged and hurt from this experience, she did not mention this gave rise to any considerations of dropping out. Instead, she employed a different strategy, one which was available to her by connecting with other working-class students were studying at the same elite institution. By switching friendship groups Seren found a way to navigate her new environment whilst retaining her own authenticity, evidently an important factor shown in Seren's relief that she could be

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<sup>28</sup> A TV show featuring Welsh working-class characters.

“herself”, and an important consideration for several of the working-class participants in this study which resonates with previous research (see Bettencourt 2020).

Besides microaggressions, Seren described more overt instances of classism that she witnessed, and unwittingly participated in, most notably during inter-university sports matches which were promoted at her elite institution and featured big sell-out social events. The participating universities were unevenly weighted in the socio-economic demographics of their student bodies, with this longstanding inequity being played out on the sports field and amongst the student spectators. Seren spoke of attending one sporting event between her elite institution and a different university. She recalled joining in with the chants she had picked up on the day, not initially realising they were classist towards the opposing students, with “Your dad works for my dad” and “[Seren’s elite institution] was your first choice” being the main chants. Seren explained that the chants were ingrained in the structure of the day and that everyone seemed to know them.

The implication in these chants being, firstly, that the students at the elite institution came from middle- to upper- class families who, as the ruling classes and business owners, employed the working-class families of those studying at the other institution and, secondly, that students at the other institution would have tried, but failed, to get a place at the elite institution and had to instead settle for the less favourable (and by implication, easier to get into) institution. Through her desire to develop a sense of belonging, Seren was initially keen to learn the chants as “everyone knew them” but then became shocked and stopped when she realised the underlying messages. This was particularly jarring to Seren as her hometown was adjacent to the other institution. This example shows how the othering of working-class students, which previous research have found to be pervasive in society (Jones 2020; Tyler 2008; Holt and Griffin 2005), plays out through stereotyping, pejorative language, and negative depictions within higher education spaces and culture.

#### *8.2.2.1 Exclusion: is inclusivity that hard?*

As well as Seren, Manon and Eiriol also recounted experiences which they deemed to be classist during their time at university. Manon recalled how during her undergraduate degree at an elite institution she had tried to make friends with “middle-class course mates, but they all had money”. Manon described this as not being a bias of her own – she was

keen to be friends - but noted this meant she was excluded from many of their social activities as she could not afford to join in. Manon mentioned how these students did not want to frequent the Student's Union bar, a place which she described as "cheap and cheerful, cheap pints. What's not to like?" as instead they preferred going to the local city which incurred a hefty outlay.

That's a taxi there and back, meal in a restaurant, pay for a club, then bloody drinks all night. I did it once and it nearly bankrupted me. I said "come on, let's just go down the [Student's] Union" and they looked at me with such a look and like one said, I'm not kidding, "why on earth would we go there, it's a dive and full of chavs". I thought "fuck, that's me" (Manon - PhD student in social sciences and mother aged 30-39)

Like Seren, in time Manon moved away from her middle-class peers and towards others who she described as "more like me, you know, they had to be more careful with money too". Manon felt that the biases of the middle-class group, and their willingness to voice them, were reflective of wider perspectives in society and a general acceptability of class-based discrimination. Manon's account also suggests that her middle-class peers did not think of Manon as a 'chav', "an ubiquitous term of abuse for the white poor" (Tyler 2008, p.17), a point which reflects a finding in the study of Smith et al. (2016, p.144) whereby assumptions of middle-classness – in this case Manon's perceived middle-classness by these peers – "reflects a mainstream life in which poor and working-class people are absent". Manon's description that she "thought" her realisation rather than challenged the others over the use of the term is in keeping with her operating class hybridity in order to find a 'fit' in the higher education field. Like Seren, Manon decided to seek out different friendships which would not compromise her classed identity.

In another example from Manon, she explained how she had wanted to join a university sports club which was affiliated to the Student's Union but was unable to because of the substantial membership fee, training session fees, cost of the kit and frequency of training which clashed with her part-time evening work. Manon spoke of being very disappointed at the time, noting that she had been looking forward to the social side of university life and

was excited about the sports club from seeing information at the freshers' week<sup>29</sup>. During our interview when Manon reflected on these memories, she described both experiences as exclusions based on her working-class status. Manon spoke of wishing that universities were more proactive in reducing differences between their students, and she felt they had a role to play in ensuring all aspects of university life are accessible to the diverse range of individuals who make up their student body. This was echoed in Jules's account, with her noting how higher education institutions do not adapt and instead allow inequalities to remain.

The inclusion and exclusion comes in different ways. Unis shouldn't just be about getting the numbers in, getting them [working-class students] through the door – it's about community, is that community inclusive? What is the experience like for them [working-class students] when they are physically on the ground? If you can't socialise 'cos you can't afford to join the club, that's a divide" (Jules – Master's student in humanities and disabled aged 50+)

Manon compared her own experience of economic capital exclusion to exclusions on the basis of legally protected characteristics, indicating how biases extend beyond personal interactions and are facilitated or replicated in the structures of institutions (Hurst 2010). Manon also noted that advancements in other areas of inequalities highlighted how acceptable it is within higher education environments to still exclude on the basis of economic capital.

We wouldn't say "Oh you can't go to the [sports] club because you're disabled. Or Asian. Or a woman" would we? Like, I know it's money – I didn't have the money and some people have got money and some haven't - but it can't be right that some stuff which the uni supports and advertises is off-limits based on whether you've [got] money or not. (Manon – PhD student in social sciences mother aged 30-39)

Eiriol also recalled an experience when she felt she was at a clear disadvantage in university life due to her working-class status and, like Manon, highlighted her institution's role in this. As part of her Master's course, Eiriol and her peers were offered short-term unpaid

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<sup>29</sup> Freshers' week is a week of orientation and social events for new university students that takes place on campuses just before the academic term begins

internships connected to their studies. Eiriol mentioned how several of her peers were able to take up these offers but she was unable to because she was raising her children as a single mum and so worked alongside studying, a barrier for working-class students commonly cited in other research (McNamee et al. 2025: Martin 2015), which demonstrate how internships facilitate the advancement of middle-class students over working-class ones (Stuber 2011). Eiriol could not stop or reduce her working hours and was therefore unable to commit to the hours required for the internship, or to finance it. Eiriol felt she could adapt and do a part-time placement, but the academic staff told her that part-time internships “weren’t a thing”.

Did they [the university staff] offer alternatives? (Sam)

No, they just said if I couldn’t do the proper internship then they would let me go and get another one if I could find it myself. But these uni placements were good – they connected you to people, people you might work with after [university]. You could put on your CV that you’d worked at [internship organisation]. You know, I was really gutted about that as I was good at what I was doing and I would’ve learnt a lot that could’ve helped me. Other people did well. They didn’t have kids. They didn’t have to work in the days. (Eiriol)

What do you think the uni could have been done differently, looking back now?  
(Sam)

Now, I just think “What was that about?!” [laughs] It would have been so easy to adapt things and be inclusive. It is totally normal that [if] you have a family, you work. Why was I like the odd one out? Why couldn’t they [internship organisation] do part-time? It’s like uni couldn’t even think to adapt things, like they didn’t even notice the impact this would have, so tuned out to it. And yet *I was grateful* they would let me sort my own thing out. I’m bolshier now, then I just went along with what they said and...I just thought, well this sucks. Now I would stand my ground and say “This isn’t right, people like me are missing out. I’m at a disadvantage compared to the others [course mates]”. I wouldn’t stand for it now. (Eiriol - PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49)

Eiriol’s perception that her university “didn’t even notice the impact” and were “tuned out” is in keeping with Beagan’s (2005) work on everyday classism, played out in the practices of

the institution. This was expanded upon in Eiriol's account through her explanation that even expenses incurred during the university internships were not reimbursed, and so it would also have cost her travel money to be able to take up the opportunity. Eiriol did not mention this to her department and did not recall any help or support being offered from the university to fund expenses associated with internships, stating "I didn't see the point of asking for help – I couldn't do it anyway. Plus there wasn't any help. Well, no-one said there was". Eiriol's inequitable experience of internships aligns with other studies that show how these placements advantage middle-class students over working-class ones and enable them to 'get-ahead' in the labour market (Wright and Mulvey 2021; Abrahams 2017; Bathmaker et al. 2013).

In Eiriol's example, the presumption on the part of the university that all students would be able to take up an equally offered opportunity is reflective of limitations in equalities rhetoric, which creates the structure for EDI frameworks in higher education but also in other organisations, practices, and policy in wider society. Equality of opportunity, an important and fundamental principle in equalities discourse, has become a central focus of organisational policy-making, but this approach masks inequity and problematizes the individual: it simply fails to acknowledge that the playing field is not level and individuals do not have access to the same capitals, such as economic, cultural, or social (Minow 2021). In doing so, the student deficit framework is upheld and reinforced (Mallman 2017) which in turn contributes to disingenuous discourse about the difficulty of enacting inclusivity (O'Shea et al. 2016). The focus on equality of opportunity in many institutions can be at the expense of more nuanced and tailored approaches being developed to address inequalities, leading to practices which appear to be equitable but which may instead disadvantage one group/individual compared to another, more acutely felt in instances where identity intersects, such as Eiriol's combined characteristics of being a working-class single mother.

### 8.3 "They're lucky to have us": Valuing classed identities

Working-class students have long been expected to conform and assimilate into the middle-class spaces of higher education institutions, shedding 'working-classness' in order to evolve as legitimate learners in these environments (hooks 2000; Crozier et al 2016). Whilst this pervasive rhetoric was understood by the participants in my study, eight of them also expressed how they perceived their working-class experiences, knowledge and skills to be

assets that should be valued by institutions as legitimate contributions that can enrich higher education spaces. Discussions with participants therefore explored the extent to which they considered their classed identities and capitals as positive attributes within a learning context which perpetuates narratives of working-class student deficit.

Opportunities for institutions to capitalise on these assets presented some hopeful yet frustrated participant accounts of missed opportunities on the part of institutions to embrace diversity and move into positive framings of the class differences found within student bodies. Discussions with participants also explored how institutions have promoted student contribution models in other EDI priority areas and consequently whether these advancements might similarly provide the template to bring about overdue change related to social class inequalities (Smith et al. 2016; Hurtado et al. 2008).

### 8.3.1 “You can’t teach that lived experience”: Social class as an asset

Participants presented varied perspectives about the extent to which they viewed social class as an asset, to themselves as individuals in terms of their own capitals, as well as to their institutions (Martin 2015). Eight participants were in agreement with the notion that social class *could* be considered an asset, but they did not place a great deal of importance on this. Zoe, Lena, and George said that they did not have a lot to offer institutions per se on the basis of their working-class backgrounds, with Lena noting “I don’t see how I bring anything. I’m there to develop myself”.

These participants felt fortunate and grateful to have the chance of studying in higher education, and highlighted how they expected that gaining higher qualifications would provide them with opportunities and choices they would not otherwise have in relation to human capital and social mobility. This is reflective of Loveday’s work (2015, p.583) which highlights how higher education providers “save the working-class subject from themselves and their lives” through personal transformation, newly acquired capitals and social mobility. Loveday (ibid) frames this as working-class students being “indebted to their educators, who oversee such a transformation”. This ‘indebtedness’ demonstrates a power imbalance and inequality between working-class students and their university educators, with universities being the providers of knowledge, opportunity and legitimate capitals, and students the passive receivers. My findings reflect this in relation to the eight participants who did not place much, if any, value on their own social class status contribution to the higher

education field, within a context of structures that instead favour the capitals associated with middle-classness and implore working-class students to escape from their social class (Reay 2017) rather than rise with it (Maclean 2022).

A common theme in the accounts was of participants believing that they lacked the 'right' cultural, social, and economic capital, with this being a motivator for higher education journeys that promised to lift them out of these perceived deficits. Grenfell and James (1998) highlight how, within the concept of field, individuals and institutions exist in relation to each other, with structures formed and reproduced through structural interactions. This theme is reflected in Reay's (2017) revisiting of Bernstein's (1971) argument that education must reflect all social groupings in order to be equitable and socially just, ensuring that the skills, pedagogy, and values within educational spaces are comprised with understandings of the culture that working-class learners bring to these environments and, which Reay notes (p.161) "as [Bernstein] pointed out, we do no less for the middle-class child".

In contrast, eight other participants articulated that as working-class students, they contributed positively to their higher education environments, despite not always feeling that these contributions were recognised or valued by institutions. Danny and Bex had grown up with a strong work ethic, and both reported having perseverance and determination which they applied in many different areas of their lives, including remaining engaged in higher education despite challenges. Other participants, including Manon, Jules, Eiriol, Ally, and Kel said that their classed identities specifically, alongside intersections with other characteristics particularly gender, were an asset to them as individuals, but also to the higher education institutions where they studied. They noted that they held egalitarian values and felt they were compassionate and empathetic, qualities they attributed to having experienced hardship and adversity. These accounts of classed contributions resonate with the findings of Smith et al.'s (2016, p.148) research whereby the working-class participants in their study "reflected upon aspects of their social class backgrounds that, in contrast to the societal stereotypes, were of great value to them, including their family's work ethic and strong ties to community".

Kel believed her working-class background was an asset during her higher education journey. At the point of our interviews, Kel was coming to the end of her degree in a medical school and was on a work placement within a hospital whilst also attending university and

submitting assignments. Kel was self-assured about the advantages that being from a working-class background afforded her in the work placement. Kel explained that a lot of the patients she treated at work presented with conditions resulting from long-term health issues, something which she attributed to class inequalities. Kel felt that her working-class identity, which she recognised as being in common with these patients, gave her an advantage and enabled her to find common ground and connect with patients in a way that she would not if she were middle-class. When discussing whether she felt pressure to modify aspects of her classed identity within the university and workplace - most notably her regional accent and vocabulary, reflecting Grenfell and James' (1998) linguistic habitus, Kel was resolute in her refusal to do so.

I said to my supervisor, I don't speak like that. So the families of the patients that we are looking after, they want honest, clear words. They don't care, you know [for] fancy words. They just need to know the truth, yeah? And these people are working-class, on benefits and that's who you're talking to about [health] conditions. They don't appreciate anything but straight talking. (Kel - undergraduate student in medical studies and mother aged 30-39)

Kel highlighted an example from when she herself was a patient citing how she felt that medical professionals, such as health visitors, lacked relatable experience and how this was noticeable to her as a young working-class mother. Kel explained that she wanted to retain aspects of her classed identity that she felt enabled her to connect with the working-class patients she worked with (outlined in 5.2.2). However, Kel also emphasised that although she valued her language and classed identity and felt this was an asset, this was unappreciated by her hospital colleagues and academic tutors and she was left walking a line of assertiveness and confidence in her own approach, whilst also attempting to fulfil the workplace and academic requirements of her medical training. Kel's positive positioning of her working-class identity, such as through her acceptance of her linguistic habitus and ability to relate to her working-class patients, is reflective of Bourdieu's stance that language is differentially valued and dependent upon the values found within distinct fields. As Bourdieu (1986, p.646) surmises, "No one acquires a language [...] without acquiring a relation to language". Kel understood this as she recognised that the language and style of communication that she was able to draw on when speaking with patients was an asset in

those social interactions. Kel placed value on her way of speaking as a tool which enabled her to ensure that patients would comprehend the medical information she was conveying to them.

For Kel, the aim of clear communication was realised through her ability to communicate effectively with patients and their families and build rapport through their shared relation to language, an asset she attributed to her classed identity. Nonetheless, Kel recognised disadvantages which she also had to navigate. She knew her language skills were beneficial when dealing directly with patients and families at the hospital in the linguistic field of her workplace. However, this very same aspect of her identity was deemed a disadvantage in the linguistic field of academia and was something which she had been told she needed to change by the academics who taught her, stating that she had been advised by academics to alter her written work and adopt the expected, accepted, and authorised style of language for *that* field.

It's one of the feedbacks that I have on my essays, use more fancy academic terminology, don't speak like that. Then I feel like I'm putting on airs and graces. (Kel - undergraduate student in medical studies and mother aged 30-39)

This is reflective of Grenfell and James' (1998) linguistic market, whereby language can be viewed as a product, akin to those found in a marketplace, and the value of linguistic capital is set according to dominant norms dictated by prestige and authority. Although academic writing is required of all students, whether working- or middle-class, Kel expressed frustration with the academic side of her higher education journey and the requirement to adapt this aspect of herself which she considered to be an asset. Kel's experience of learning to write academically echoes the accounts of Eiriol and Danny and shows how requirements in higher education journeys seemed, by some participants, to de-value working-class students' classed identities, whilst others, like Danny, were keen to assimilate.

Similarly to Kel, Manon spoke strongly of the value which she felt she brought to her institution as a working-class mother with a long work history and personal experience related to the field that she was studying. When asked to describe what she contributed, Manon focused on her cultural capital.

It is realism - having that experience of being in touch on the ground. So the theory and practice they align for me. From my point of view my background and experience growing up with next to nothing comes together with the academic side. I bring that into the classroom, to the other students, the academics. I am the research topic. I'm from a different background so you might not expect me [to be] there but I have a lot to give – I'm already giving it. My contribution enriches things, I bring more depth (Manon - PhD student in social sciences mother aged 30-3)

Manon's certainty in her working-class attributes, alongside other participants who expressed this same confidence in the assets found within their classed identities align with the findings of Beagan's (2005) qualitative study of working-class students in a Canadian medical school. Beagan highlights how working-class capitals are unappreciated, maintaining that:

“working-class students do not lack social and cultural capital. Rather the social networks, habits, values, expertise and ways of being that are valued in working-class settings are actively devalued within the middle-class norms of medical school [...] rather than asking these students to change in order to fit in, it is up to the institution to accommodate their diversity.” (Beagan 2005, p.783).

Participant accounts from my study are further reflected in previous research, such as Bettencourt's (2021) study on belonging and diversity which found that the working-class students rarely felt valued by their institutions for their capitals and contributions.

Despite overtures of deficit and inadequacy running through all of the participant accounts, collectively they presented a rich tapestry that showcased how, alongside struggle, strength and resilience were also to be found in higher education journeys. Although often framed within narratives of adversity, the participant accounts also demonstrated many positive attributes which these participants relied upon to embark on and stay engaged with higher education journeys as working-class students, most notably resilience. Resilience was evident in the strategising, resourcefulness and negotiation which these participants demonstrated in order to cope with challenging situations and circumstances. Participants such as Nikki, Kel, and Danny all highlighted how their difficulties – such as poverty and homelessness – had helped them to develop strong mindsets and perseverance which they

felt were useful assets to them during difficult times in their higher education journeys. Eiriol and Manon also discussed how their experiences motivated them in their choice of subject, with both having chosen to study in caring and compassionate areas across education, medicine, and social sciences. As Danny noted “I want to help people that are like I was. By studying I can set up the things I want to. I don’t want anyone to experience what I did” in relation to a period in his life when he was homeless.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that, in my findings, the development of resilience in the lives of these working-class students was a key asset that supported them in managing their higher education journeys, it is imperative to not fetishise the cultivation of resilience in working-class student narratives and ground deficit framework discussions at the feet of working-class students (Chung et al. 2017). Doing so unfairly places a false responsibility onto these students and contributes to damaging student deficit rhetoric purporting personal failure when resilience is deemed to be ‘lacking’ or undeveloped. Furthermore, problematising the cultivation of resilience as a student-responsibility risks absolving the higher education sector of tackling structural disadvantages that working-class students face and which create the conditions in which these students struggle to succeed.

### 8.3.2 Institutional (missed) opportunities

Of the eight participants who felt their social class was an asset, four (Jules, Nikki, Eiriol, and Manon) spoke of feeling that institutions were missing out on harnessing the diversity which they, and other working-class students, brought to the higher education field. Although Kel spoke of feeling her university did not value her linguistic habitus (section 8.3.1) she reported some positive encounters when dealing with her academic school and was one of only two participants who was able to provide an overt example of a time when a university placed value on differences in identity. Kel described attending an open day and speaking to university staff about the course she was interested in. Kel was unsure whether these were academics connected to the course itself, or widening access staff, but reported feeling very encouraged by them, highlighting how “I was sceptical, but they were very, very inclusive”. Kel told them she had not finished education due to having children while young, noting how she had concerns about the costs of studying. The staff were supportive and encouraged her to apply for a place with Kel noting “They said I’d be great, they needed more people like me with life experience and some reality”.

Manon also reported positive interactions in an example related to her daughter who had participated in a widening access scheme run by an elite institution, however this soured when her daughter was offered a position and became part of the mainstream student body.

They [institution] were amazing with all the prep and the visits and the summer school and [Manon's daughter] just felt so welcomed. She came away buzzing "Mam, maybe I can go there". And she did. It was amazing, she got a place. But bloody hell it was awful – like night and day once she was there. That scheme was fab, and I thought that's how it would be when she went. But all that just fell away. She was on her own like. No support, no transition. She was too far away, I didn't know, and she struggled. She came home. It's fine, she went to another place [university], she's happy now, it's a better fit. But like, it made me realise – they say they want you but when you get there they don't. Was [Manon's daughter] just a postcode to them, ticking a box? (Manon PhD student in social sciences mother aged 30-3)

Although Manon was in the middle of her own higher education journey and earning a good salary, this was shared amongst her wider family and was not of a level whereby she could support her daughter through university. Manon still lived in the area which she herself had grown up in, an area categorised by policymakers as deprived. Manon's reference to box ticking and postcodes was in relation to her view that her daughter may have been selected by the elite institution in order to meet a diversity target for underrepresented, disadvantaged students. Manon did not feel that the university was culturally set up to embrace the diversity of different students when they actually arrived to study, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Her daughter's struggles echoed some of Manon's own experiences as an undergraduate, as well as her current higher education journey. Eiriol's account expanded on this sentiment, and she aligned the positive progress which institutions have made in EDI areas related to some protected characteristics to a lack of progress in others, noting the impact this has on those who are not visibly "championed".

There was a time like when people had to pretend to not be what they are, I mean like gay right? Or play down their race, their different backgrounds you know. They were expected to blend in. Things are different now – I'm not saying those people don't face discrimination and unfair treatment, course they do and it shouldn't be like that. But unis definitely embrace some differences now in ways they didn't used

to. They wanna show how diverse they are in some areas, but what about others? There is loads of positive stuff about some communities, but not about others. Why? Why can't all the differences be talked about [and] championed? I still see shame about being poor...I don't hear people being honest about their backgrounds, what they're going through. There isn't the same positively. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49)

Eiriol's frustration is reflected in other studies (see Smith et al. 2016) and highlights how when seeking to build more inclusive communities higher education institutions have focused on certain inequalities over others in their EDI prioritisation. As Smith et al. (2016, p.131) note "some aspects of identity, however, receive relatively little attention within initiatives, and social class has been one of these", a sentiment on which Hurtado et al. (2008) were petitioning for change nearly two decades ago.

Manon was one of a minority of participants, alongside Jules, Nikki, and Eiriol, who held strong views on how institutions miss out by overlooking classed identities, to the detriment of the universities themselves as well as current, and prospective, working-class students.

I may not be a white middle-class man but look at what I offer. And it goes unnoticed, even by the academics with the best intentions. The system doesn't want to embrace what it has. Is the university set up to enable me to thrive? Obviously I am getting through it, but that doesn't mean it's because of uni – it is in spite of them. Did the university make it harder? Yeah, absolutely...and I'm not sure that they consciously did that. I think it's systemic. They don't know how to treat difference. How to deal with adults coming into education if they've had none [no education], people who have caring responsibilities, and jobs. (Manon - PhD student in social sciences and mother aged 30-39)

Like Manon, Eiriol was forthright in her view that universities do not recognise or harness the value that working-class students bring to the higher education environment. In one of our interviews, she expressed strong frustration in how attributes are unseen by institutions, commenting on how she and a few of the other working-class students on her course had defied the odds to be at university and studying for PhDs.

We should be we should be the goddamn rockstars of that university, because we are excelling outside of any kind of expectations. They're lucky to have us. You know, there's actual tangible research that demonstrates why we shouldn't be doing what we're doing, and we're still doing it, and we're smashing it. That takes grit, and determination and a strong work ethic. I put my all into this even though I have a million things to juggle. And yet like, you know, we're not looked at as successful. It's not noticed. That view remains. (Eiriol – PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49)

These perspectives reflect the findings of Smith et al. (2016, p.148) regarding their study of working-class students who “expressed their wish for greater awareness and appreciation of the positive aspects of working-class heritage, along with fostering appreciation for working-class members of the campus community”. Bettencourt’s (2021) expansion of this sentiment in her qualitative study of belonging also aligns with my findings, with Bettencourt noting a tension between how working-class students’ see their contributions as an asset - to themselves as well as to higher education institutions - and their perception that institutions do not. This devaluing is further exacerbated by the cultural dominance of middle-class students within the higher education field, and the reinforcement of middle-class capitals through the structures and practices of institutions (Bettencourt 2021; Hurst 2010). However, the findings from my study indicate that it is possible, and very much desired by these working-class participants, for institutions to look beyond stereotypical framings of student deficit and instead position working-class contributions within a positive, values-based student contribution framework.

#### *8.3.2.1 “You get the best out of people when they can be their whole selves”*

When I asked these four participants how institutions could show they value working-class identities a range of suggestions were offered. These included diversifying the taught curricula and drawing on research from a range of varied, intersectional sources (Eiriol) as well as practical support such as mentoring opportunities not only *for* working class students but conducted *by* them (Manon), and representation through diverse promotional materials (Nikki), ideas supported in other studies (Smith et al. 2016; Ancis et al. 2000). For example, Jules highlighted how important role models had been to her when applying to university,

but she found these outside of her institution and did not feel diverse role models were visible or even present during her time at university.

I think the universities want to do better. I think that nowadays they can't say that they don't want to do better. They're not rarefied institutions anymore. Not that long ago very rarely did you get a university education. It's not like that now but it doesn't feel that unis [have] really moved on that far. I think for me it's about role models, visibility. I mean, if you see a person then you're optimistic because you look at them, and they're like you...they [institutions] need to improve that (Jules – Master's student in humanities and disabled aged 50+)

Representation was also a theme espoused by Manon who spoke of wanting institutions to move away from their focused messaging directed at traditional undergraduate students and expand this to include the diversity of students they actually have in their student bodies.

It is the university's role to deal with all of us and if they want people like us to thrive in this system. I wholeheartedly believe we need a system which [is] more nuanced and has representatives of all the communities that we come from you know, and are still living in. We're not all young, kid-free, on our uni stuff full-time. If you're outside that mould you think you're the odd one out. It feels like unis have two faces – the outward glossy one and then the reality. (Manon - PhD student in social sciences mother aged 30-39).

Like Manon, Nikki spoke of institutions needing to do more but spoke of wanting them to be proactive and explicit in their messaging about valuing all students based on the differences they hold.

Do you think unis are missing out? (Sam)

Yeah definitely. (Nikki)

What could they do about this? (Sam)

If they put it out there that people with different experiences are highly valued, that they have different skills and experiences which they can bring to the course and that is valued. They need to say it, show it. (Nikki -Master's student in health and single disabled mother aged 30-39)

Unlike Nikki, Eiriol felt that institutions did build some diversity messaging into their promotional recruitment practices, linking to Manon's point above about an "outward glossy" face, reminiscent of Warikoo's (2016) framing of this, in Bettencourt's (2021, p.777), as "an espoused commitment to diversity at the institutional level". Eiriol reflected that these attempts at representation were however not specific enough to differences in classed identities "it could be better – it never seems focused on a person's social class". Eiriol felt that institutions focused their EDI priorities and efforts more in the *recruitment* of diverse students "which isn't great anyway in terms of diversity obviously" than they did in supporting them once they had embarked on their higher education journeys and were enrolled students, highlighting how she felt that resources needed to be put into working with and supporting working-class students more once they were part of the institution. This point is reflective of Walkerdine's (2021) searing frustration in how the widening access agenda effectively absolves institutions of tackling longstanding class inequalities to bring about systemic change, rendering pervasive classism invisible to the institutional eye.

"It is therefore difficult to understand this access agenda as little more than 'window dressing' that can be glowingly presented on university websites while failing to even engage with existing class discrimination within institutions." (Walkerdine 2021, p.65.)

As Eiriol went on to note, a shift in focus to supporting working-class students could bring about significant change to individuals as they navigate their higher education journeys.

Research tells us you get the best out of people when they can be their whole selves. You know talking now is making me realise what a difference it makes when you feel like you are accepted, in whatever place you know - uni, work - and you are supported to be your best. Like, literally the very real difference it makes, yeah? You aren't always apologising for who you are, what your shortcomings are, what you don't know. Yeah, if I could see a change it would be that. For it to be much more explicit that you are fine exactly as you are, already. More than fine, and we [institutions] want to tap into that, we think that's worth something (Eiriol PhD student in social sciences and single mother aged 40-49).

The wishes of these four participants to be accepted “exactly as you are” by institutions may appear to be in contrast with desires for social mobility and transformation, as explored in section 7.2. However, it is important to note that Manon, Eiriol, and Nikki were all participants who framed social mobility as primarily leading to economic gains for themselves and their families, utilising human capital developed through higher education journeys as a route to achieve this. Whilst Jules spoke of being motivated to engage in higher education by a desire to expand her cultural capital (and “prove wrong” negative messaging from childhood regarding her academic abilities), and Manon and Eiriol reported being personally fulfilled by education, none of these four participants expressed negativity in their own views of their classed identities, other than reporting attempts by others to denigrate them (section 8.2.2). Their complaint that institutions did not value their broad range of skills, experience, and knowledge displayed a frustration with the status quo of the higher education landscape and the expectation on them of assimilation, reflected in other research (hooks 2000; Hurst 2010).

Significantly, discussions which explored what change would look like in practice and how participants would know if institutions were valuing working-class identities on par with their middle-class peers, went beyond practical examples of evolved EDI priorities and schemes. Eiriol, Manon, Jules, and Nikki all expressed that the main difference would be one that is *felt*. Jules spoke often of “community” and this was echoed by Manon’s use of “inclusive culture” and Eiriol’s “acceptance”. The accounts indicate that there is scope for institutions to move away from framing working-class students within a deficit model and towards a student contribution framework, bringing richness to the higher education field and potentially leading to more positive higher education journeys.

#### 8.4 That’s just how it is” But does it need to be? Overcoming classism for inclusivity Conclusion

As outlined in section 2.2.2, within this study, notions of discrimination have been aligned with the definitions found within the Equality Act 2010. As such, the study has explored how, against this legislative backdrop, bias and discrimination are defined and understood subjectively by the participants. This framing provides important context for exploring the participants’ perspectives and experiences of class-based bias and discrimination in this chapter, and how these manifest in higher education journeys. The value that participants

place on their own classed identities, to the benefit of themselves as well as to institutions, was also explored in the accounts alongside the extent to which participants felt that institutions recognised and harnessed the class diversity and contributions which these working-class students brought to the higher education field. Together these findings and the analysis attend to research questions three and four in my study.

How might working-class students' journeys through higher education be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?

Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

It was evident from speaking to participants that their understanding of class bias and discrimination was nuanced and that, whilst accounts generally acknowledged that class-based bias existed, half of the participants did not perceive classism as being discriminatory, nor did they feel it held the same depth of negative impact as disadvantage on the basis of the legally recognised nine protected characteristics. Although several participants reported having experienced class-based stereotyping, disadvantage and everyday-classism (Beagan 2005), either interpersonally or through structural inequalities, passivity and acceptance of such treatment was observed in their accounts, coupled with implicit pressures to assimilate and 'fit' (hooks 2001) rendered classism invisible to some. Previous work, such as that of Maclean (2022), Walkerdine (2021) and Reay (2018) highlight how systems of education, as institutions which are designed for middle-class students who possess the 'correct' cultural and social capital, represent and perpetuate structural disadvantage and discrimination - a finding reflected in my own study, with two thirds of participants presenting perspectives which aligned with these framings.

However, a minority of participants spoke of overt classism in their higher education journeys in the form of microaggressions, derogatory language and stereotyping, and othering by middle-class peers, aligning with earlier studies (Jones 2020; Holt and Griffin 2005), particularly Tyler's (2008) work on disgust reactions and vilification of the poor. Classist structural practices were highlighted by a couple of participants, and it was apparent that these contributed to a sense of exclusion, which required these participants to negotiate and create alternative pathways during their journeys. These accounts indicate

how the full offer of higher education is not available to all, and that a lack of access to resources, particularly financial capital, can be a significantly limiting factor in the higher education journeys of some working-class students.

These participants expressed frustration with institutions that they perceived permitted, facilitated, and perpetuated class-based inequities and they spoke of a lack of inclusivity and adjustments, questioning the commitment of institutions to tackling inequality and discrimination, often presenting as everyday-classism, at the institutional level. Whilst inclusivity is espoused by institutions, these accounts show the limitations of such rhetoric when not accompanied by meaningful inclusion practices (O'Shea et al. 2016). These examples further demonstrate that classism does not operate within a vacuum but is facilitated through a higher education field that not only favours middle-class capitals and habitus but reproduces them through structural biases. Reay's (2017) reflections on Bernstein's (1971) plea for social inclusion that justly represents working-class students alongside their middle-class peers demonstrates a lack of significant progress in this area, despite several decades of awareness and interventions. Although developments have been seen, such as the creation of EDI frameworks which aim to promote egalitarianism, a minority of the participant accounts demonstrated how a focus on equality over equity can contribute to exclusion (Minow 2021) and, consequently, to perpetuating notions of deficit towards working-class students (Mallman 2017; Chung et al. 2017).

When it came to participants valuing their own classed identities and contribution to the higher education field, perspectives were varied. Half of the participants indicated they did not perceive their classed identities and capitals to be assets within higher education, whilst the other half expressed confidence in the contribution they made to their institutions as working-class students. A minority of participants spoke of clear examples of the benefits they brought to the higher education field, reflecting assets highlighted in other studies, such as Smith et al. (2016). Attributes were framed as assets and ranged from having a strong work ethic, perseverance, and determination to being compassionate members of the higher education community who add realness and depth to higher education spaces. The positive framings of classed identities and contributions by participants were evident *despite* pervasive discourse which negatively positions them in deficit, lacking the appropriate capitals which the higher education field demands. These positive framings of

classed capitals indicate there is potential for institutions to harness such attributes and to move away from notions of a student deficit model and into a student contribution framework. Yet it was evident that these participants were left frustrated by their institutions' lack of recognition of their class-based assets and attributes. This minority of participants expressed a strong desire for institutions to include their assets and capitals in meaningful ways and to expand their focus from recruitment-driven diversification into better visible representation and support initiatives that would provide more equitable higher education experiences for working-class students.

In the next chapter, Conclusions, recommendations and final reflections, I bring together the findings from these four empirical chapters and outline how my study has attended to the four research questions which I set out in sections 1.3 and 3.5.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions, recommendations and final reflections

### 9.1 Introduction

Having explored the higher education journeys of the working-class students in this study, this chapter draws out the main findings in relation to each research question, situating the research within wider academic and policy discussions. The core focus of this study has been to understand the journeys of working-class students within higher education, exploring their higher education experiences as non-traditional students within environments that do not recognise class-based bias and discrimination as part of equalities agendas, nor recognise the capitals and contributions which working-class students bring to the field.

This chapter brings together the discussions and findings of the previous chapters to reflect upon the key contributions of my research to both higher education and equalities discourse. This is a small-scale qualitative study and while I am mindful to not overstate the generalisability of the findings, my research offers important insights for practitioners and scholars who seek to better understand social class within the context of equalities in higher education, and the opportunities there are for the alignment of these two discourses.

Limitations of the study, first noted in 4.4.6, are also revisited in this chapter, and with these limitations in mind, section 9.4 offers recommendations for future research that would provide greater insight and depth to the areas which I have explored in this study. Section 9.5 sets out recommendations for policy and practice drawn from the key findings of the study. Lastly, at the end of this chapter, I share some final reflections in relation to the research process and the topic.

### 9.2 Addressing the research questions

In this section, I summarise the main findings of my study in relation to each of the four research questions and in doing so highlight where my findings converge and diverge from the wider academic literature.

#### 9.2.1 Research question 1

To what extent do narratives of social class and social mobility feature in the perceptions, experiences and future aspirations of working-class students in higher education?

This research question was attended to in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. It was evident in my study that dominant narratives of social mobility (Pearce 2011; Lawler and Payne 2018; Littler 2018) are bound up in classed identities and formed a central aspect of the higher education journeys of the working-class students in this study. As my findings indicate, mobility narratives are highly salient, they act as motivations for entry into higher education, structure experiences within it, and frame future aspirations. Yet, these narratives are located within a context of uncertainty for working-class students whose habitus and capitals are not supported within the institutionally valued capitals of the higher education field. As such, although narratives of social class and upward mobility were present in working-class student participants' understandings of the self as well as imagined futures and aspirations, they were present in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The findings show that intersecting aspects of identity, particularly class and gender, formed and reproduced through societal expectations and norms – within families, in home life, and in educational spaces, impact on working-class student journeys. Several of the accounts from the women in this study, especially the mothers, indicate constrained choices and a delicate balancing act to ensure that performative gender roles within the home are not disrupted by educational journeys, reflective of Skeggs's (1997) notion of respectability and the demands on women to be successful homemakers and mothers.

The findings indicate that social mobility is both a promise and a pressure for working-class students, a hoped-for route to economic security which also provokes ambivalence about changes to classed identities and feelings of inauthenticity. Whilst some working-class students in this study desired social mobility, particularly the financial gains associated with upward mobility for themselves as well as for wider family, aligning with previous research (Lehmann 2019), others reject the dominant discourse which seeks to position working-class students as desiring to move away from their backgrounds, contrary to dominant messaging within the sector.

My findings indicate that class signifiers and the strategies used to classify class status are constantly shifting, rendering traditionally accepted classifications, such as Goldthorpe's National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification - embedded in the frameworks of class schemas in higher education policymaking - lacking in nuance and relevance. Within these constraints, working-class students nevertheless attempted to define their own classed

identities and those of others to find their place and 'fit' within higher education fields. Despite many decades of investment aimed at encouraging non-traditional student engagement, my findings support others such as, Voicu (2011) and Luke and Luke (1999) who have documented the demands on working-class students to adapt and find their place within middle-class educational spaces for decades.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic violence is still present in the higher education journeys of working-class students, with dominant middle-class capitals devaluing those of the working-classes within educational spaces. My findings demonstrated that this structural dominance was internalised by the working-class students participating in my study, engendering deep-seated fears of being an imposter, with low confidence undermining the formulation of legitimate learner identities (hooks 2000; Crozier et al 2016). Working-class students are therefore seen to strategise within higher education spaces in order to navigate these challenges, with a reliance on hybridity and revealing and/or concealing aspects of classed identities in order to create and maintain a sense of belonging in the higher education field.

### 9.2.2 Research question 2

In what ways do these perceptions and experiences overlap with, and diverge from, higher education institutional narratives of social mobility?

This research question was attended to in Chapters 6 and 7. As demonstrated in the sections examining the policy context, flagship widening access schemes such as the Seren Academy, Reaching Wider, and The Brilliant Club all promise opportunity and mobility for working-class students and have been heavily invested in by institutions and successive government administrations. My findings demonstrate that participant perceptions of social mobility overlap with institutional narratives in as much as both treat higher education as a means to advance, with widening access and inclusion initiatives being viewed as presenting equal pathways to opportunity (Cunningham and Samson 2021). This is reflective of institutional messaging that invokes human capital theory and was seen to appeal to some of the participants in this study who were concerned with investing in themselves to secure higher mobility gains, lending support to other studies which demonstrate how affluence and security are motivations for higher education journeys (Lehmann 2019). Additionally, institutional messaging was felt to contribute to dominant meritocratic norms, with the

notion that a select few students can undertake mobility journeys to rise up out of their class and have institutions save them from themselves (Budd 2017).

Whilst there is convergence in how both institutions and working-class students believe education can advance access to opportunities and ‘just’ rewards, participant narratives diverge from those purported by higher education institutions when it comes to the lived experience of higher education journeys for working-class students. As my findings demonstrate, widening access rhetoric and meritocratic norms gloss over structural class-based inequalities within higher education fields and overlook the risk and costs of participation which face working-class students. Whilst these institutional narratives prioritise positive framings of social mobility and educational journeys – which emphasise equality of opportunity in access and engagement - participants in my study experienced inequity and selective inclusion once their journeys had started. The participants’ accounts demonstrate the persistent challenges and adaptations made by working-class students during higher education journeys in order to ‘fit in’. This can be interpreted as a form of symbolic violence which enables middle-class capitals and habitus to determine the structural power relations at play in middle-class educational spaces. Such experiences are hidden by institutional narratives and are therefore reflective of Bettencourt’s (2021) critique of institutional framings of diversity as representing a hollow commitment, effectively acting as just glossy window-dressing (Walkerdine 2021). This further indicates a lack of systemic change within higher education institutions in relation to effectively working to address class-based inequalities and in providing equitable experiences that value the contributions and capitals which working-class students bring to educational spaces.

The divergence in the lived experiences of the working-class students in my study and institutional messaging presents a challenge to the dominance of social mobility narratives, found not only within tertiary education discourse, but also government policymaking. This raises questions for higher education institutions regarding their continued marketisation of such narratives which, as demonstrated through this study and the wider literature, do not guarantee social mobility gains and rewards. The “myth of graduate employability” (Tholen and Brown 2017, p.14) and credential inflation as graduates seek out ever increasing academic qualifications in a bid to secure upward mobility (Wakeling and Laurison 2017) undermines these narratives, not only for working-class students, but for the higher

education sector itself. For institutions, there is jeopardy in continuing to maintain this status quo. As graduate outcomes continue to stagnate and social mobility gains are not realised for successive cohorts of working-class students (Luchinskaya and Dickinson 2019), the central foundation of increased opportunities for all through improved access to education and rewards is at risk of unravelling (Brown 2003). For institutions the higher education social mobility dream is in danger of being exposed, with the pervasive positioning that education saves the working-classes from themselves (Loveday 2015) revealed as a fallacy.

### 9.2.3 Research question 3

How might working-class students' journeys through higher education be understood through the lens of class bias and discrimination?

This research question was attended to in Chapters 7 and 8. My findings have shown that working-class students encounter biases within journeys along a continuum, from classist language and microaggressions (Cook and O'Hara 2020; Sue et al. 2007) directed by middle-class peers, to structural forms of exclusion facilitated and perpetuated by higher education institutions and aligned to the concept of symbolic violence. However, many participants were reluctant to name their experiences as discriminatory, either due to the invisibility of classism (Schubert 2008) and prevalence of everyday-classism (Beagan 2005) or a belief that class-based bias is not as significant and impactful as other forms of discrimination.

Underplaying the significance of classed biases is reflected in institutional EDI rhetoric that treats bias as 'unconscious' (Vela et al. 2022) rather than overt and structural discrimination, obscuring power dynamics and responsibility while leaving structural barriers intact (Walkerdine 2021). When viewed through the lens of the Equality Act 2010's definitions of forms of discrimination and evaluated in the context of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic violence, it is clear that higher education journeys feature biased practices and educational spaces which working-class students are obliged to navigate.

As my reviews of the policy context and literature highlight, legal frameworks do not afford social class the same status as legally recognised protected characteristics (Benn 2020), thus weakening the impetus on institutions to tackle longstanding institutional biases and inequalities which have been shown to still impact working-class experiences in higher

education. Costly widening access initiatives which, besides centralised schemes institutions have discretion over the design and funding of (Evans et al. 2019), raise questions over consistency in approaches across Wales in addressing access and engagement inequalities. In addition, these schemes have been shown to have little material effect on decreasing disadvantage (James 2018; Harrison and Waller 2018; Cunningham and Samson 2021), with potential alignment between widening access agendas and institutional EDI priorities overlooked due to silo framings of both within government and higher education policymaking.

#### 9.2.4 Research question 4

Do working-class students feel that higher education institutions recognise their lived experiences and capitals?

This research question was attended to in Chapter 8. In my research, while some participants expressed how they themselves did not view class-based capitals as valuable within the higher education field, others were forthright regarding the contributions they felt they made during their journeys. This imbalance in perspectives is unsurprising given working-class students attend educational spaces which frame them as being in deficit (Bletsas and Michell 2014) and lacking the habitus and capitals demanded by the field (Grenfell and James 1998; Reay 2017). This is further exacerbated by the pervading context of meritocratic and social mobility discourse which reinforces dominant notions that only ‘bright’ and ‘talented’ working-class students can access higher education fields and are therefore afforded an escape from their fate through higher education journeys and upward mobility (Budd 2017).

My study has demonstrated that working-class students do not feel that higher education institutions acknowledge or place value on their classed contributions, and it was evident that recognition and the harnessing of working-class lived experiences and capitals within higher education spaces are opportunities missed by institutions. Instead, the higher education sector still privileges middle-class capitals, meaning that working-class assets remain outside the scope of recognition and instead require reframing to be seen as valuable. Although higher education institutions have evolved and adapted when it comes to the legally recognised protected characteristics, moving into positive framings of these (intersectional) identities and prominence through overt EDI priorities and initiatives - such

as the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters - similar shifts have not been seen with social class. The invisibility of classism (Morley 2021) and prevalence of symbolic violence (Schubert 2008) within higher education spaces can therefore be argued to have obscured recognition of positive contributions which working-class students bring with them to higher education fields.

### 9.3 Key contributions of the study

As Chapters 2 and 3 evidenced, it is well known and established that working-class students fare less well than middle-class peers within higher education spaces. Although institutions in Wales appear to be committed to redressing class inequalities and, alongside successive governments, have invested heavily in widening access schemes to support the engagement of non-traditional students in higher education, it remains the case that class-based disadvantage endures (Walkerdine 2021).

My study sought to extend discussions of class disadvantage and widening access to take account of another socially just cause within higher education, that of the equalities and anti-discrimination agenda. Although intrinsically connected due to their mutual concern with inequality, in higher education discourse and policymaking these two strands of discussion sit separately, resulting in disconnected strategic responses and segregated practice within institutions. Statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010 provide the framework for higher education institutions to make concerted efforts in tackling discrimination, albeit with limitations (as noted in section 2.3.2), whilst widening access Fee and Access Plans (outlined in section 2.2.1) hold institutions to account regarding their commitment to widening the access of higher education to non-traditional students. However, as I have further evidenced in this thesis, the failure to recognise social class as a protected characteristic and afford it that legal status releases higher education institutions from the requirement to tackle the fundamental, systemic disadvantages that face working-class students within the sector.

My study suggests that equalities discourse itself needs to be more inclusive and foreground social class in the discussion of equalities. Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence was particularly useful for conceptually aligning such disadvantage with anti-discrimination arguments. A key tenet of equalities legislation is to minimise, and ultimately eradicate, less favourable treatment on the basis of one or more of the legally protected characteristics.

This aim also appears to be reflected in the policy concerns which drive widening access priorities. However, unlike the shift which has been seen in equalities discourse and policymaking, discussions about class inequality in higher education remain problematised at the level of individuals rather than structures, with student deficit framings still dominating discussions about class and responses in higher education.

Positive contribution frameworks are already in place for protected characteristics such as race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation, with practices which assumed assimilation and overlooked diversity now becoming scarcer. That is not to say that bias and discrimination based on these characteristics does not occur within higher education spaces, or that some characteristics are prioritised over others, but the framings of these characteristics have positively evolved since the Equality Act 2010 came into force. Building on my findings, further exploration of student contribution models which positively position working-class attributes (see 9.4) could contribute to more equitable higher education spaces for working class students. As my study has demonstrated, there is richness to be harnessed in working-class identities and experiences, although these are currently unvalued and overlooked.

My research has sought to highlight the damaging personal cost of class-biased spaces and interactions which affect working-class students in their educational journeys. The negative impacts of classed inequalities have, of course, been well documented in the previous literature as discussed in Chapter 3, and my study illustrates that these inequalities are pervasive. However, through aligning systemic class-based disadvantage as a concern for equalities and anti-discrimination scholars and policymakers, I have contributed to this field through broadening current thinking and moving discussions into a strategic framing where there is legal recourse for challenging inequitable policy and practice. This is an avenue that is currently absent from discussions around class in policy and practice, and one that is often muted within the academic literature (for exceptions see Walkerdine 2021).

#### 9.4 Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

This section reflects on some of the limitations of this study and offers recommendations for future research.

As noted in Chapter 4 (section 4.4.6) there were some limitations in the sample of students who elected to participate in my study. For example, only a small number of these students had participated in widening access schemes (n=3) and a small number of men (n=3) participated in my study. Although my research questions paid close attention to the role of widening access as an institutional approach to diversifying representation within the student body, as non-traditional students all of my participants could speak to institutional narratives of inclusion and participation. Therefore, this limitation was managed during the study.

The gender balance of participants does constitute a recommendation for potential future research. The narratives from the men in my study featured in the analysis and contributed to all four findings chapters and therefore to answering to my research questions. These findings indicated that intersectional gendered differences are produced in higher educational journeys. Most notably these were identified in relation to educational expectations from family units and coalesced around traditional, stereotypical gendered divisions in work and caregiving, such as responsibilities regarding parenthood. Both Danny and Pete, and to a lesser extent George, spoke of dominant masculine norms which had, in their formative years, affected their educational choices. Each perceived clear expectations that they should enter the labour market and earn an income rather than continuing to study. Additionally, both Danny and Pete had chosen to study subjects within humanities and the arts and these subjects were perceived as contrary to their family's habitus, with gendered expectations regarding masculine identities link STEM subjects to masculinity and the arts and humanities considered feminine. The gendered norms which the women in my study described have been presented in detail in the empirical chapters, further contributing to and supporting male participants' accounts. However, due to unequal representation of men in this sample, it could be worthwhile to focus on the intersectional gendered experiences of working-class (mature) men and their higher education journeys in future research.

A further limitation in the sample and another potential area for further research is the lack of representation from higher education institution staff in my study. Although I did not set out to speak with institutions, focusing instead on the lived experiences of class within higher education journeys and class-based bias from the perspectives of working-class

students themselves, further research which specifically explores institutional perspectives would enrich this area of research. In particular, I recommend that future studies seek the voices of institutional practitioners who are tasked with formulating policy and practice across both widening access and equalities portfolios within institutions. Greater insight is needed about the impact of the PSED and the enactment of the socio-economic duty. Too little is currently known about the extent to which these duties have, if at all, positively impacted the lived experiences of working-class students in Wales. Such research could build on the foundations laid in this study, specifically in relation to the alignment of classed inclusion activities with equalities discourse in higher education institutions, with a view to further exploring what potential there may be to integrate social class more fundamentally into the Equality Act 2010 through the socio-economic duty. Such insights could support higher education institutions to improve their targeting of interventions and initiatives and could also provide funders and regulators with improved targets and measures for monitoring institutional progress in reducing systemic disadvantage for working-class students.

As my study has highlighted, there is richness in class diversity and working-class students contribute a wealth of experience, capitals, and attributes to the higher education field. However, as my study has evidenced these positive assets are not always recognised by working-class students themselves and remain overlooked and unacknowledged by institutions. Further research with both working-class students and higher education practitioners to understand and formalise working-class contributions could deepen existing knowledge in this area. Such research also has the potential to assist institutions in moving beyond deficit framings of student working-classness and into student contributions frameworks. Further research should seek to draw examples from changes within other inequalities discourses that have already been subject to positive reframings within higher educational spaces, such as positive representations, schemes, and initiatives which focus on the protected characteristics of race, sexual orientation, and disability.

### 9.5 Recommendation for policy and practice

Two recommendations arise from my study for policy and practice. Firstly, my study highlighted limitations within equalities discourse and EDI frameworks and questioned the emphasis on equality of opportunity within higher education policymaking, potentially at

the expense of more nuanced understandings of inequity and its impact. Although equality of opportunity is a key value within the UK, it appears to be misconstrued when applied in practice. This has enabled inequitable and exclusionary practices to develop, despite an overarching commitment to egalitarian principles within higher education institutions. Policy practitioners could therefore look to expand and update the language of equalities discourse, schemes, and initiatives to move the focus away from equality and on to equity. Doing so could engender a subtle yet important shift in understanding the multilayered and complex barriers which affect working-class students within higher education fields and may foster more inclusive learning spaces for future generations.

Secondly, within a context of a massified system of higher education that does not deliver for students, it is timely for institutions to pause and rethink the extent to which their commitment to social mobility is meaningful. As this study has demonstrated, social mobility narratives drive institutional policymaking when it comes to non-traditional disadvantaged students, including those from working class-backgrounds. However, the long-standing lack of social mobility gains and the fragility of individual higher education journeys indicate that the higher education system, and institutional policymaking, requires change. It would therefore be worthwhile for the pervasive rhetoric which drives the commitment to these societal norms to be re-examined and to take account of the changing face of the higher education landscape, not only at institutional level but also within the broader political sphere.

## 9.6 Final reflections

In this closing section of my thesis, I would like to offer some final reflections of my own about the research process and the topic.

Doctoral study is undoubtedly arduous and propels the postgraduate research student into uncertain territory filled with unknowns. Undertaking a PhD was a personally enriching process but one which was beset by personal challenges which at times overshadowed the formation and maintenance of my own learner identity. However, through conducting this research I found my own higher education journey as a working-class student reflected in the narratives of the accounts of my participants. As such, I learned a great deal not only

about the topic but also about my own experiences of social mobility, education, and class-based bias.

At times during my research the parallels with my own experiences and those of my participants surprised me. I felt an affinity with many of the experiences, hopes, and fears which were relayed to me. On reflection, I find it bewildering that I might have expected anything less as an insider researcher, but I had not anticipated the extent to which my own understandings of my classed identity would be subject to exploration and challenge as part of this research journey. This was an unexpected exploration which I am immensely grateful for: a sense of confusion and 'incompleteness' in changes to my own social class identity had created some distance between me, wider family, and my working-class roots. This research has allowed me to better understand my own experiences and make sense of my own classed contributions to the different spaces which I inhabit, be it within higher education, my workplace, or in my personal life.

Managing my emotional relationship to the research and to my participants was an area of responsibility that was always in my mind as a researcher, particularly one who was a partial insider. Despite the mitigations which I put in place, which enabled me to engage ethically with my participants, the personal response I felt to many of the participant accounts remained challenging. Through my participants' accounts and their retelling of painful experiences connected to poverty, exclusion, and fear, I have been able to explore an alternative side of the social mobility dream which persistently dominates public discourse. In the years when my research ideas were taking shape, I had not anticipated the extent to which positive framings of working-class identities would come to form part of my study. Now, it seems inevitable that conversations about upward social mobility and changes to classed identities must focus on questions of *why*, and *what* is at risk of being lost under the guise of self-improvement.

Lastly, although I have noted several limitations with the Equality Act 2010, particularly the limited powers of the EHRC and the unknown contribution of the socio-economic duty, I believe the best route for finally tackling class-based inequalities for working-class students in Wales is through the legislative framework. For too long class disadvantage has been allowed to fester within higher education and absorbed as a personal failing by working-class students. Aligning class inclusivity and the equalities agenda would demonstrate a

significant commitment to challenging class bias and discrimination, a long overdue change that would provide significant benefits to working-class students in higher education, as well as society more broadly. My study indicates that such a change is an essential requirement for the formation of a socially just society, a society which the political discourse in Wales purports to both be and become.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant profiles

**Ally** was about to embark on PhD study in Natural Sciences, having just completed a Master's after a long period out of education. Ally was the only member of her immediate and extended family to go to university but being a single mum for much of her child's early-life meant she had struggled to fulfil her ambitions and make the best use of her undergraduate qualification. Ally was in a new phase of life, having very supportive employers and a partner who encouraged her to pursue her academic interests. Ally's wider family struggled with health issues and poverty which meant Ally often had to take time out of her studies to provide support to the wider-family network.

**Bex** was in the final year of her undergraduate degree in Social Sciences. She had gone straight into higher education after leaving further education college and was the first in her family to study for a degree. Bex was career focused and wanted the degree to lead to a job in global equalities work. She had a supportive family network and had worked throughout her time in higher education in low-skilled manual roles. Bex was keen to be socially mobile and equated this with increased security: of particular importance to Bex was the ability to own her own home at some point in the future, multiple house moves in the rental sector when she was growing up having left a negative mark on her. Bex was hopeful that becoming more highly-qualified would provide her with this transformation.

**Danny** had grown up in a working-class family and had taken over running the successful family business as soon as his compulsory education finished. Danny's family did not place much value on education and he had no strong academic ambitions until he reached middle-age. After a spell of homelessness and hardship, Danny was motivated to apply to university and completed a Foundation Degree online before embarking on an undergraduate course in Humanities. Danny had partially relocated for his studies but was finding the on-campus undergraduate university experience unexpectedly challenging and isolating: the difficulties he experienced in his first year had left him wondering whether he would continue in higher education at all.

**Eiriol** was a single mum studying for a PhD in a Social Sciences discipline, having returned to studying after completing a Master's degree several years earlier when her children were very young. She was raised in a council house and financial insecurity had been a feature throughout her childhood and adult life. Eiriol was working a variety of professional yet tenuously contracted part-time jobs in an effort to make ends meet. She was clearly ambitious and hoped the research degree would open up career avenues that would challenge her intellectually as well as provide much longed-for financial stability for her children.

**Francesca** was a mature single mum nearing the end of her PhD in Health Studies. Financial pressure and difficulties in her personal life were undermining Francesca's ability to complete her thesis, and she was deciding whether or not to withdraw from her studies. Francesca had been a shy but able child and was encouraged by family to continue with education beyond A-levels. She was struggling to secure stable employment despite a long work history and qualifications: although she personally valued education, Francesca was finding it difficult to see what impact her improved educational experience was making to everyday life for her and her son, and was doubtful whether the significant investment of time would lead to better financial security.

**George** was an international student on a scholarship to pursue a Master's and PhD in Geography. He was adjusting to life as a new father, his child having been born in his home country shortly before he relocated to Wales for the postgraduate course. George had self-taught parents who lacked qualifications but had encouraged his academic talents when he was young. He had grown up in a rural community that held expectations for young people to stay local and become farmers or work in the regional factories. Part of his motivation for studying was to provide financial stability, opportunities, and a level of comfort for his new baby and the baby's mother who he was separated from. George had turned down a secure job to undertake the Master's and PhD, hoping it would lead to more security in the long-run, a gamble which he was worried would not pay off.

**Josie** was retired and part way through a Master's degree in Social Sciences. She had never married nor had children and had grown up in a rural working-class area. Although Josie wasn't expected to go to university, her parents were supportive of her academic talent and after graduating in her early 20s she had a long work-life in office-based roles at prominent and elite education providers which, despite giving Josie social mobility through financial

stability, did not stretch her. In later life she had decided to return to her academic interests and undertake a postgraduate course for the pleasure of learning.

**Jules** was part way through her Master's degree in Humanities, studying via distance-learning with a provider that was able to accommodate her disability needs. Jules had grown up without any academic ambitions, and received no encouragement from school or home to continue in education beyond compulsory schooling. As a young girl she had had a love for learning but didn't revisit education until her late 40s, by which time she had a supportive partner and friends who she had seen enter higher education later in life. Jules was balancing working full time with her Master's degree, not being able to afford to give up work to study. Feeling that her learning journey was not over, Jules was hopeful to remain in education and continue on to a PhD.

**Kel** was nearing the end of her undergraduate studies in a Medical School. She was a mother of five, having been a teenager when she had her first child. Kel had experienced homelessness and had left school as soon as she could after GCSEs. Without the encouragement of family or teachers, Kel assumed she was not academic and for the next couple of decades concentrated on raising her family. Inspired by one of her children entering higher education, Kel applied and won a place on a highly competitive degree programme in which she had subsequently excelled.

**Lena** was an international student on a short-term widening access course. Her husband was high-achieving and she had relocated to Wales to support a career-move of his. Lena was degree educated in her home country but could not make use of her qualification in Wales and found herself having to start from scratch. Lena was raised by a father who had grown up in poverty without qualifications. She was very aware of the opportunities education provided and had grown up with a strong work ethic from her father, having been raised in a household with a working-class background. As an adult, Lena's continued education was a route to preserving her own identity and creating a level of independence from her husband that meant she could develop opportunities for herself in Wales.

**Manon** was studying for a PhD in Social Sciences and had been a high-achieving child: the only one in her family to attend university (until her mother went in later life), she had excelled in her subsequent career. Manon had children and was working in a demanding job alongside

her studies. Her family had experience of poverty, addiction, and the criminal justice system, and Manon's continued academic abilities had marked her out from the wider-family network. Despite struggling to manage work, study, and home life, Manon felt pressure to finish the PhD, acutely aware that her family were invested in her higher education journey and the rewards the PhD would likely bring.

**Mel** had recently left a long career in the NHS and was in the first year of her undergraduate degree in the Arts. Mel did not feel able to continue working in healthcare due to stressful conditions and a lack of progression, and instead wanted to retrain in a new career. She was a single mum and keen to return to study to pursue interest areas which had been on hold for much of her life.

**Nikki** had worked in education all of her life and was degree educated. Health issues in recent years meant she was no longer able to work full-time, leading her to pursue a part-time Master's degree in Education alongside part-time working. Nikki was a single mum with a young child and had relocated across-country for her course, her area of interest being niche. Without the support of a wider-family network, Nikki was hopeful the career change and new qualification would create better work opportunities, and ultimately financial stability, for herself and her child.

**Pete** was a mature student midway through an undergraduate degree in the Arts. In his youth, Pete had been an excellent pupil, winning a place at the best grammar school in his region. This experience made Pete acutely aware of social class differences between himself and other pupils. Having worked all his life in the creative industries Pete had been plagued by health issues which made him re-evaluate his life and he choose to return to education. Student loans provided Pete with a level of income and financial security that he had been lacking when simultaneously working and trying to manage his health issues, however rises in living costs were undermining Pete's ability to focus on his studies and remain hopeful about future opportunities.

**Seren** was nearing the end of her PhD studies in Social Sciences. Her parents had lived in the same small town all their lives and worked in manual roles but encouraged Seren to pursue her education. After following in her sister's footsteps and completing an undergraduate degree she found herself working in a sector where postgraduate qualifications were the

norm, and considered a way 'to get on'. Seren was encouraged by colleagues to embark on a Master's and then a PhD but was herself ambivalent about the impact this qualification would have on her life. She was aware of being in a minority in her hometown due to her educational qualifications, but still felt very connected to her family and her roots.

**Zoe** was approaching the end of her Master's degree in Business, having opted back into study to improve her career prospects. A mature student, Zoe was as single mum with children who were becoming more independent. This meant she was able to take up more responsibility at work and commit to her studies at the same time. Encouraged to pursue her academic interests by family members when she was young, she studied for a course in a field which she was then unable to secure work in. Zoe felt she had in the past been constrained by low-pay and low-skilled work, but her impending qualification gave her the confidence to seek out better paid managerial roles, which she hoped would lead to improved financial security for her children.



## PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR NEW STUDY!

### Are you from a working-class background and studying in Higher Education in Wales?

If so, I am inviting you to participate in a new research project about working-class students at university. My research aims to understand your everyday experiences as you travel through university life, and to explore your aspirations and hopes for the future. I am undertaking this research as part of my PhD in Social Sciences at Cardiff University.

#### How does it work?

Participants will take part in two interviews with me lasting 1-2hrs, approximately 4 weeks apart. These interviews will be on Zoom, the telephone or face-to-face in a public location of your choice, depending on your preference. You will also be asked to complete some interesting creative tasks: for interview one this will be a timeline, and for interview two this will be a letter from your imagined future-self. Guidance will be given to assist you.

#### Are you eligible?

I am looking for participants who:

- Are studying at a university in Wales (either on-campus or distance learning)
- Self-identify as being from a working-class background

#### About me..



I am a PhD student at Cardiff University and I am conducting this research for my thesis. Most of my work and previous study is in the field of inequality: I spent many years working with refugees and asylum seekers in Devon and South Wales, and since 2014 I have worked in diversity and inclusion in Higher Education. Being from a working-class background myself, I am really keen to know more about the experiences and aspirations of working class students at university.

You can find out more about my research via this link <https://walesdtp.ac.uk/profile/mcalister-wilson-samantha/>

**To sign up, ask questions, or find out more about the study or eligibility criteria please contact me, Sam McAlister-Wilson, on [McAlister-WilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:McAlister-WilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk)**

## Appendix C: Research information sheet



Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences

### **Research Information Sheet**

I would like to invite you to take part in a new research project looking at the experiences of working-class students in higher education (HE). This information sheet explains why the research is being done and what is involved in taking part. Please read the following information carefully. If you have any questions, please ask.

#### **Why is the research being conducted?**

The aim of this research is to explore the lived, everyday experiences of working-class students at university.

My research aims to understand students' everyday experiences and to explore student aspirations and hopes for the future as working-class graduates.

I am undertaking this research as part of my PhD in Social Sciences at Cardiff University.

#### **What does participation involve?**

You will be asked to take part in two interviews with me, approximately four weeks apart that will last about one – two hours each depending your availability and the nature of the discussion. Interviews will be conducted remotely on Zoom, or on the telephone, or face-to-face in a public location of your choice (depending on your preference) and will be recorded in order for me to transcribe the conversation and use it in my research findings.

Around the same time as each interview takes place you will be asked to complete a creative task – these are optional: for interview one this will be a timeline, and for interview two this will be a letter from / to your 'imagined' future-self. Guidance will be given to you.

#### **What will happen to the information from the interview?**

I will audio-record the interview and produce a written record of what is said. This will not contain any information that identifies you or any other people, and I will give you a pseudonym for confidentiality.

Any other work created by you (such as the timeline and letter) will remain your property but I will ask to have a copy to use in my work, and possibly in published works or presentations at conferences. Providing a copy is optional. Please do not use anything in the work you create which may identify you, however if this is unavoidable for some reason, all identifying information will be removed before it is shared.

All data will be stored securely, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Only my supervisors, Dr. Dawn Mannay and Professor David James, and I will have access to the files. These will

be securely stored for five years after the research has taken place in line with Cardiff University's data retention regulations.

I will analyse the information and use this as the basis for my PhD thesis. This may include use of non-identifiable extracts from the interviews. In the future, results from this project may also be used in published works and presentations at conferences.

### **Confidentiality and safeguarding**

I will not repeat anything that is said in the interviews, unless an incident where someone's wellbeing is seriously at risk or where significant harm has already occurred. In this case my supervisors and I would follow the safeguarding procedures of Cardiff University. If this happens, we will first discuss it with you as appropriate.

After the interview if you experience any upset as a result of the subject matter discussed, please contact me. Before we start the interviews, I will ensure you are aware of student support services at your institution.

The research has been given ethical approval by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. Taking part is voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to participate within three weeks of reading this information. If you are happy to take part in the project, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

### **Can I decide to withdraw from the study later on?**

You are free to withdraw at any time, up until the point I write up my findings, without giving a reason. If you withdraw before I write up my findings, I will not use the information I have collected from you, and I will remove your contributions from my thesis.

### **Contact details**

**If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, please feel free to contact me or either of my supervisors using the following details:**

**Sam McAlister-Wilson**

PhD Student conducting the research

[McAlister-WilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:McAlister-WilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk)

**Dr Dawn Mannay**

Supervisor

[MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk)

**Professor David James**

Supervisor

[JamesDR2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:JamesDR2@cardiff.ac.uk)

**If you are happy to take part in the research, please sign the consent form.**

## Consent Form

Sam McAlister-Wilson

PhD Researcher (School of Social Sciences)

[Mcalister-wilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:Mcalister-wilsonSJ@cardiff.ac.uk)



After reading the Research Information Sheet in full, if you would like to participate in the project please complete the information below.

Please state YES or NO for each of the following:

|                                                                                                                          |          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| I have read the Research Information Sheet                                                                               | YES / NO |
| The Researcher has explained the project to me                                                                           | YES / NO |
| I understand what the project is about                                                                                   | YES / NO |
| I understand what will be done with information I provide and create                                                     | YES/ NO  |
| I agree that work which I create as part of the project (the creative tasks) can be used in published work in the future | YES/ NO  |
| I have asked any questions that I want to ask                                                                            | YES / NO |
| I understand that taking part is voluntary                                                                               | YES / NO |
| I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time, for any reason                                            | YES / NO |
| <u>I agree to take part in the project</u>                                                                               | YES / NO |

I would like to be interviewed (please place 'x' next to one preference):

- On Zoom/Teams
- Face to face (in person)
- On the telephone

Signature:

Name:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Researcher's name:

Date:

## Appendix E: Interview topic guide

### Interview questions

Questions below for use in both interviews. Interviews are semi-structured and will follow a discussion so it is unlikely that all questions will be asked, but all of the topic areas will be covered.

**Part 1:** Discussion about the creative tasks (if participants produced prior to interviews)

**Part 2: Social class:** background, upbringing, understanding of social class

**Part 3: HE:** journey through HE, motivations, aspirations

**Part 4: Social mobility and meritocracy:** perceptions, meritocracy

**Part 5: Stigma, bias, and discrimination:** barriers, micro-aggressions, language/banter

**Part 6: Positive identities:** role models, positive qualities, role of HEIs

### Ice-breakers

1. Introductions
2. Thanks for taking part
3. What are you studying, what year are you in? (general only at this stage)

### Part 1

Discussion about the creative tasks produced before the interview

1. Can you tell me about your timeline (interview 1) / letter from imagined future self? (interview 2)

Questions to lead on from here: why did you create what you did, what does it represent, what does it mean to you, why is this important, and so on depending on what is raised in the conversation. Weave into discussion for the sections outlined below.

### Part 2: Social class

1. Where did you grow up? What was the area like?
2. How would you describe your home life when you were younger?
3. Were you aware of social class when you were growing up?
4. When you think of 'working-class', what does that mean to you?
5. At university, are you aware of people's social class – friends, academics, coursemates?
6. How do you know what social class someone is from, can you tell?
7. Are you aware of your working-class background in different settings/with different people – university, social situations?
8. Do you think that social class impacts what an individual has access to/can or can't achieve/how they are perceived?
9. Does social class matter? Is it relevant?
10. Do you ever feel at a disadvantage because of your working-class background?

### Part 3: HE

1. Was education important for you growing up/for your family/in your peer group?
2. How did you do at school when you were younger?
3. Did you think you'd go to university?
4. Did anyone else in your family go to university?
5. What made you decide to study at university?
6. Did you have the grades/qualifications you needed to get onto your course?
7. What do your family and friends think of you going to university? Are they supportive?
8. What are you studying? Why did you choose that?
9. Have you got commitments outside of uni like a job or family to look after? If so, how do you manage it?
10. How have you found university so far?
11. What is your relationship like with your tutors/lecturers?
12. Did you apply to other unis, or were you certain this is where you wanted to go? (if so, why)
13. Did you go through clearing or was this your first choice uni/one of your choices?
14. How does your experience here compare with what you'd imagined?
15. Did you get any ideas about university from social media, uni adverts, open day visits before you came? (if so, is the reality what you expected?)
16. Do you think it is important to build networks while you're at university?
17. Have you been able to take up opportunities like internships, travel abroad while at university?
18. What do you want to get out of coming to university?
19. What are you aiming to do after your course is finished?
20. How will coming to university help you achieve this? Can you think of any barriers that might prevent you achieving this?
21. Is degree classification important to you?/Is it important what mark you get?
22. Are you aiming for a certain grade? Do you think you'll achieve it?
23. What do you think it will take to be successful in your course/what does success mean to you?

#### **Part 4: Social mobility and meritocracy**

1. What did you want to be/do when you grew up?
2. Did you think that would be achievable? Why?
3. Do you know what your parents' / guardians' expectations or hopes were for you as an adult?
4. When you think of social mobility, what comes to mind?
5. Do you think social mobility is possible? Why?
6. What's needed to make social mobility happen? Can it happen to anyone?
7. Is education a way to change your social class?
8. Do you think people do well on merit/those who work hard get on?
9. Do you feel anything is possible if you work hard for it?
10. What do you think of people moving between social classes? How would such a shift be apparent?

11. Do you think you have experienced social mobility? / Is social mobility an ambition of yours?
12. If your social class changes/has changed, will you lose anything?
13. Do you think social mobility is inevitable? Is it typical that people want to be upwardly socially mobile? Why?
14. Do you ever feel 'out of step' with your social class? Do you feel you 'belong'?
15. Can you achieve what you want in the future, and still be working-class?
16. Are you concerned you won't achieve what you want?
17. What social class do you feel like you are nowadays?

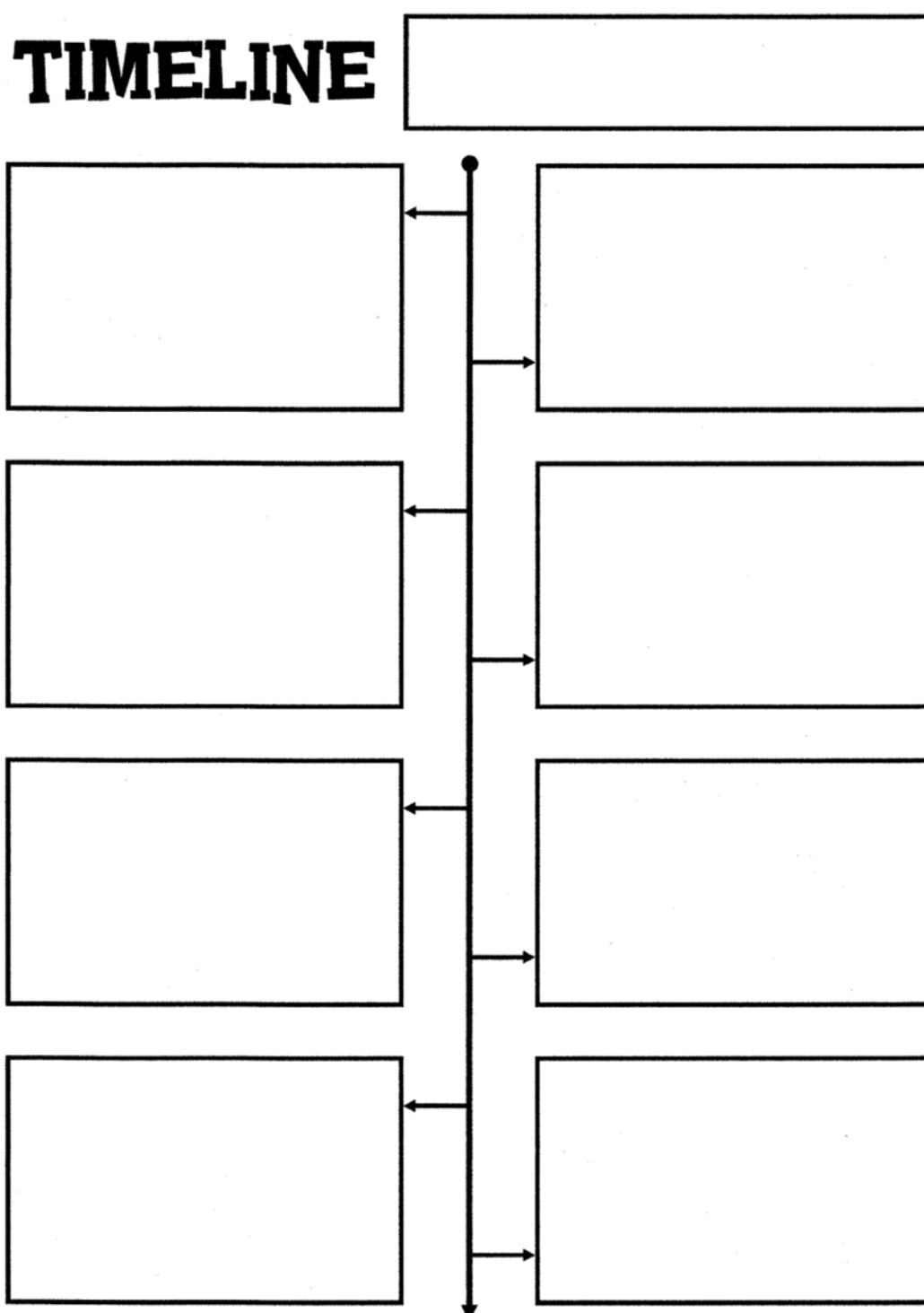
#### **Part 5: Stigma, bias, discrimination**

1. Do you feel like you belong at your university?
2. Have you felt your working class background is relevant since you've been at university?
3. Have you been held back at university because of your working-class background – have you had the resources, money and support you need to settle in and do well?
4. Have you felt like an outsider or stigmatised at university because of your social class? Or have you witnessed this with others?
5. How have those from a different social class reacted to your working-class background?
6. Do you feel the need to disguise your working-class background in some situations? If so why?
7. Have you heard any derogatory language used to describe people from working-class backgrounds? Can you give examples if so?
8. Do you think this type of language is biased / stereotypical / discriminatory? Is it 'banter'?
9. Do you think you have experienced biased / stereotypical treatment or language at university because of your social class?
10. Do you think social class affects students' opportunities, and ability to succeed in their course? Why?
11. Do you think you would have had a different experience at university if you were middle class? If so, in what ways?
12. Do you think universities ought to be aware of students' different social class backgrounds and potential barriers?
13. Do you think there is enough support for working-class students when they get to university? Could institutions do more? If so, what sorts of things?
14. Has uni made any 'adjustments' for you to help you attend/stay engaged with your course?
15. What can universities do to make working-class students feel like they belong at university / do they do anything / should they do anything?

#### **Part 6: Positive identities**

1. Do you feel proud of being from a working-class background? If not, what would help to make you feel proud?

2. What do you think being from a working-class background gives you? What qualities?
3. Have your experiences of being from a working-class background helped you at university?
4. Do you think university recognises the different social class backgrounds which students are from?
5. Have you used your working-class background to your advantage at university?
6. Do you see working-class role models at university?
7. Do you think what you're taught on your course comes from a diverse range of perspectives/do you think it reflects who you are and you can relate to it?



## Appendix G: Example of a participant timeline

### 2009

- Gained my GCSEs and started college to do my A Levels. Subjects were English Lang and Lit, History, Law and Sociology. I hadn't done Sociology or Law at GCSE as they weren't available in my school but I was really interested in them after attending an open evening. I dropped English Lang and Lit after the first year.

### 2010-11

- Completed my A Levels with AAB. I really enjoyed Sociology and I felt this was my strongest subject so ended up deciding to apply to do it at university; did not have a clue what career I could have out of it and no-one around me really did either. My lecturer was very supportive (and partly why I enjoyed Sociology so much) but only really encouraged me to do teaching which I was not interested in.
- I applied to do Sociology at [redacted], [redacted], [redacted] and [redacted]. [redacted] was my first choice and I ended up going there. I'd been offered a place in [redacted] which was ranked higher for Sociology than [redacted] but my decision was based around my older sister attending [redacted] for her degree which she loved and closeness to home. Didn't really know what an elite uni was, I was guided more by experiences and enjoyment of uni rather than academic/career thoughts.
- Me and my sister are first generation university educated, my parents are extremely supportive but not sure how much they knew about university so guidance/advice was limited. It very much felt like because you're academically good you'd go to uni and there was no other option but actual advice was limited.

### 2011-14

- Completed my degree in Sociology in 2014 with a 2:1.
- Throughout my time at university I was aware that I was from a different background to a lot of my peers. In one lecture once the lecturer asked what sort of school everyone had attended, must have been around 100 of us there and about 10 of us had attended a state school.
- I was mocked a lot for my accent which I think comes across as quite 'common' and some made fun of where I grew up. At the time I laughed along but reflecting back it fed into some insecurities. I wouldn't accept it now.
- As I was finishing my degree, I did a [redacted] placement and my supervisor encouraged me to apply to do the 1+3 Master's and PhD or generally postgraduate education. I however didn't think it was an option as there wasn't much funding at that point so I'd have to pay for fees, I have savings but they're

*really precious to me as I know my family would never be able to give me that sort of money again in the future for a house deposit.*

### **2014-19**

- After completing my undergraduate degree I had several jobs, some in the social science field and some not. Whilst I'm really grateful and lucky for the experiences I've had and people I've met, I've felt most comfortable in non-academic jobs.*
- After starting a research job in late 2018, I soon realised I was the only member of the team without a Master's or PhD. I saw a funded MPhil was being advertised so I applied and was accepted. This was then upgraded to PhD.*

### **2019-present**

- Currently in final stages of PhD.*
- I was worried I'd face similar issues as in my undergraduate but it's been the opposite. Though I still have awareness that my background is different to some of my cohort. I do however feel I gelled particularly well with two other students from a working class background, one said to me once they thought some would look at them as a "scruffy person from the valleys"*
- Over time I have become more and more proud of my background, whilst I did not grow up in real hardship or poverty, I have definitely felt somewhat disadvantaged to middle class students.*

Appendix H: Example of a participant letter

To my future self,

Hello, I hope things are good in the future what did you end up doing? I hope you were able to progress further in university or you got a job that you're interested in. I hope you learnt that you should be happy in what you're doing not just make a decision which means you will be comfortable in terms of money.

This letter is three years on so did you make ~~yourself~~ yourself proud and get a first? When you started university you did never think that would happen but that shows how hard working and determined you are - you can do it!

How about that integrated PhD & Masters you saw did you apply? I hope you did and you didn't ~~stop~~ let yourself stop it - I know it's hard imagining yourself do that but you're capable of even just applying it's all a learning experience.

Anyway, final year started off hard but you did so well I hope you continue to push yourself in the future, take new opportunities and don't hold yourself back when it's scary!

past self ♥