The Lived Experience of University Students from Low-income Backgrounds: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Academic Resilience

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Bournemouth University

May 2018

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the phenomenon of academic resilience through the lived experience of low-income university students in UK Higher Education (HE). According to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), significant resources are devoted to enhancing the retention and success of groups that fall within the scope of widening participation (WP) initiatives, to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from HE have the opportunity to do so (OFFA 2017). Students from low-income backgrounds are considered high-risk for underachievement and attrition, but little is known about why these students are often successful despite multiple challenges. The phenomenon of resilience, understood as the "overcoming of stress and adversity" or "good outcomes despite risk experiences" (Masten 2001), can offer a positive psychology perspective on this phenomenon.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) interprets how people make sense of major life experiences through in-depth qualitative analysis (Smith et al. 2009), although much resilience research to date is quantitative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven second year students with lowest-household incomes (OFFA threshold <£25,000 per annum (p/a). The perceptions and reflections of these students were explored using IPA, allowing insight into individuals' "lifeworlds". Individual accounts were interpreted to produce participant themes, before a cross-case analysis explored the convergence and divergence between accounts.

Three superordinate themes from cross-case analysis were identified. "Facticity and positive social orientation" identifies how participants viewed adversity as a meaningful opportunity for growth. "Living authentically amongst others" explored how participants used insight about their strengths and weaknesses to negotiate their way through the new social world of university. "Building social confidence" identified ways in which participants became tougher and gained support from others. Most had developed strong academic identities characterised by goal-focused behaviour, enjoyment of competition with peers and the presence of positive relationships with at least one tutor.

The findings offer an alternative, insider perspective on academic resilience to that presented in the existing literature. Analysis suggests that a key strategy for universities may be enabling students' social relationships through informal and formal strategies such as peer-learning programmes. Subject-related and professional values can also be promoted through teaching and learning activities which enhance engagement and belonging. Staff should deepen their understanding of coping strategies developed by resilient students, particularly those with learning difficulties, recognising them as mechanisms for enhancing success.

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List of Figures and Tables

Acknowledgements

Author's Declaration

Please note the following parts of this thesis have been presented elsewhere;

1) Literature Review: Psychological Resilience and Academic Resilience- published in:

Gauntlett, L., 2016. Academic resilience in non-traditional university students: a critical review of the literature. *In:* Crișan, M.-M. and Costea, R. A., eds. *Beliefs and behaviours in education and culture : cultural determinants and education.* Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 22 - 31.

2) Methodology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis- published in:

Gauntlett, L., Bickle, E., Thomas, G., Collins, B., Heaslip, V. and Eccles, S., 2017. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: a means of exploring aspiration and resilience amongst Widening Participation students. *Widening participation and lifelong learning*,19 (2), 63 - 86.

3) Discussion: Academic Resilience Ecosystem- presented at:

Gauntlett, L., 2017. Understanding the lived experience of university students from low-income backgrounds using an eco-system model of academic resilience. 19th April 2018. *In: Succeeding with non-traditional learners in HE.* University of Liverpool.

Chapter 1   **Introduction**

1.1 The topic area

Resilience as a term has attracted much interest in contemporary research and practice. At the time this research study commenced, it was confined to early childhood studies of trauma and abuse. Now, resilience and its constructs have been co-opted across different domains of education, social work and the environment. These specific areas of research remain in their infancy in relation to understanding what it means to be, for example, "academically resilient". In recent years, resilience seems to have captured the popular imagination, with the emergence of many self-help books, programmes and research, critiquing and extending understanding of the phenomenon (Reivich and Shatté 2002; Siebert 2009).

Initially, the concept was applied to positive psychological outcomes, despite stressors (Werner and Smith 1982; Rutter 1987; Garmezy 1991). It has since been developed to reflect different applications such as individual, family or community resilience. One of the most widely accepted definitions is:

> *"the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability or development"* (Masten 2015, p.10).

This newer "functional" understanding embraces the multi-dimensional nature of influencers and a less narrow construction of positive outcomes. However, there are competing theories which draw on the social contexts of interactions between individuals and their environments and how they access the resources necessary for coping (Ungar et al. 2017).

Resilience as a term has a fluid history. For some psychometric researchers resilience is understood as a personal trait; it allows an individualised description of a personality type that allows individuals to bounce back from adversity (Ungar 2003, 2010; Bottrell and Armstrong 2012). Alternative and arguably more useful conceptions of resilience establish it as involving a

dynamic, complex interplay of risk factors and protective processes (Masten et al. 1999; Masten 2001; Masten et al. 2003; Masten 2014; Adamson and Arevalo 2017).

There are several key concepts associated with resilience which have originated from attempts to operationalise the phenomenon, for purposes of study and intervention to promote good outcomes for vulnerable groups (Masten 2014). The term "adversity" is used throughout to denote acute difficulties such as catastrophic life events or incidents of abuse, or most relevant for this thesis, chronic disadvantage, such as poverty.

Resilience research is concerned in the main, with the study of influencers of positive outcomes. "Risk" is the term used to describe the chance of adverse experiences translating to negative outcomes for individuals or groups. Counterpart to risk are "protective" factors or processes. These are known or believed to enhance the individual's chances of improved functioning or outcome, in the face of adversity. Protective factors can be seen to moderate the impact of risk (Masten 2015).

Economic hardship is well-recognised as a significant adversity; and as such, growing up in a low-income family yet succeeding in higher education is considered a positive outcome for this group (Rutter 1999; Wilson-Strydom 2017). Morales and Trotman define academic resilience as success:

> *"despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same backgrounds from succeeding"* (Morales and Trotman 2004, p.8).

Students from such backgrounds typically experience a greater disadvantage in terms of their education, career prospects and social mobility (Atkins and Ebdon 2014).Issues of differential success and retention for such students are the focus of widening participation (WP) in the UK, as the government agenda to redress inequalities in higher education (HE).

The WP landscape is in flux; at the time that the research commenced the bulk of activity and policy was around widening access. The terms "widening

participation" and "widening access" should be clarified here. The two are not synonymous; '"widening access" refers to encouraging the application and participation of students from groups that are currently underrepresented at university. "Widening participation" is more broadly concerned with participation and the experience of HE from admissions through to postgraduate studies and employment (Tonks and Farr 2003).

The shift of concern in WP research and practice to this lifecycle model recognises that increasing access is futile without ensuring greater equality of opportunity once students have enrolled at university and as they continue to postgraduate study and employment. As educators and WP practitioners actively seek out strategies for supporting the success of their non-traditional learners, the findings and implications of this thesis may offer increased relevance and support.

The impetus behind WP initiatives is two-fold; to include both a moral and economic imperative to increase social mobility. Developing the potential talents of UK citizens is considered necessary if the nation is to compete in a changing global market. Education remains perhaps the most important factor in determining the type of employment people enter and determining their social position (Easterbrook et al. 2016). Higher education is seen as one way of escaping the "poverty trap", giving people from disadvantaged groups a way to improve their situation (Trevithick 2003). Widening participation and access policies aim to increase opportunities for lower socioeconomic groups to access and succeed in HE, allowing individuals to reach their full potential.

1.2 Research interest

As a teacher, I have felt encouraged when coaching students through university admissions to support them in their successes. Working as a WP progression officer, I have monitored and supported the progression of students from diverse backgrounds; low-income students, students from low participation in HE neighbourhoods and care leavers. As a researcher, I have

stood outside of the experiences of these students, with whom I have had no prior relationship and striven to empathise and understand their journeys, with a view to producing work that is meaningful and useful to others concerned with widening participation.

Hearing the voices of low-income or low socioeconomic status students within higher education was a key motivation for the study. Both interest in resilience and concern with issues of widening participation research arose from different aspects of my personal experience. A huge part of this research is the stories of the participants who were involved. In telling their story, I am also sharing some of my own story; as a teacher, WP practitioner and researcher, but also someone who is concerned with social mobility and equality of opportunity.

This personal experience can be described as "foreknowledge", i.e. the pre-existing beliefs, values and understandings I bring to the project. As a child of middle-class well-educated parents, there was an expectation in my household that my siblings and I would work hard and achieve well academically. My desire to attend university was supported and facilitated by my parents and college tutors. At this time, I had little awareness of the inequalities in access and success experienced by other students, nor a sense of my own privilege. Both have since become apparent to me.

A key aspect of this change in awareness and interest in social justice and mobility has in fact been my educational background in philosophy and psychology, which has facilitated my interest in exploring success in students in ways linked to social and psychological constructs. Perhaps the biggest influence has been my roles as an A-level teacher and personal tutor. I have had the privilege of assisting scores of students from all backgrounds to prepare and apply for university entry and these experiences enabled me to form relationships with HE colleagues, whilst developing an interest in the WP agenda. Occupying a role as a WP progression officer within an HEI has meant a strong focus on promoting the engagement and attainment of students from target groups.

My experience has led to a deeper concern with making the voices of these students heard, in a way that illuminates their strengths and assets rather than categorising them as a specific but undifferentiated, homogeneous group from a support services' perspective. These considerations leave us asking how university students from low-income backgrounds experience academic resilience and considering how their understanding of resilience compares to that offered in the existing literature. Are the existing conceptualisations of academic resilience accurate and suitable for use in practice to enhance student success? What can a qualitative approach to studying resilience add to our understanding of academic resilience that the extant quantitative research has not already provided?

The thesis attempts to address these gaps and to proffer useful insight into developing research-informed resilience development programmes for all students, including those from WP target groups. It seeks to inform the beliefs and practice of teaching and support staff at universities, as well as those working as WP policy-makers and practitioners by proposing a new model of academic resilience.

1.3 Organisation of the thesis

To guide the reader, this chapter will conclude by presenting the structure of the thesis. Following on from this introduction, Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature on resilience with a focus on academic resilience. In doing so, it offers several conceptual understandings of resilience and current evidence regarding resilience in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It then considers the current context of widening participation in the UK and ways in which this relates to the project. New terms regarding both resilience and widening participation are introduced here and definitions of these are provided r in the glossary. Having established the gaps in our understanding, the chapter concludes with the aims and objectives of this thesis.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the study, locating it within the qualitative tradition. The philosophical underpinnings and objectives of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis are discussed. It describes the research methods used for data collection and presents the rationale for selecting semi-structured interviews. The in-depth method for analysis is articulated here also. It includes exemplars of transcript analysis using the IPA method developed by Jonathan Smith (1996). Ethical considerations and practical issues around recruitment and sampling are detailed, alongside an exploration of issues of validity in the research. It concludes with a reflective section explaining the researcher's own perspective and acknowledging its influence on the study.

The findings of the semi-structured interviews described in the previous chapter are then presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four focuses on the individual voices of participants and presents an interpretation of their accounts on a case-by-case basis, identifying and summarising separate participant themes. Chapter Five draws these accounts together in a cross-case analysis as a detailed exploration and interpretation of convergence and divergence across individual cases, which produces superordinate themes of academic resilience. Reflexive passages are contained in both these chapters in recognition of the researcher's foreknowledge in the hermeneutic enquiry as essential to an interpretative phenomenological approach. These are signified throughout by the use of italics.

Chapter Six discusses the findings of the cross-case analysis within the context of the existing evidence base and policy context. It identifies new understandings of resilience and indicates where these may diverge from existing knowledge to offer a novel contribution. This chapter also presents a rationale for why a new approach is needed to the study and promotion of academic resilience in HE students. It then offers a revised model: the ecosystem model of academic resilience. Limitations of the study are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Seven outlines implications from the discussion for universities, policy-makers, WP practitioners, teaching and support staff. This section also makes recommendations for further research, followed by a conclusion to the thesis.

1.4 Summary

This chapter began by outlining perspectives on resilience, with a focus on contested definitions and how it has been explored within the quantitative tradition. It highlighted its multidimensional nature and contested its definitions as well as identifying its benefits as a way of understanding student success by exploring experiences of resilience using qualitative methodologies. This emphasises the importance of finding meaning in the accounts of those who have direct experience of the phenomenon, and how these voices can shape widening participation policy and practice. Finally, the overall structure of the thesis was described in order to guide the reader.

Chapter 2   **Literature Review**

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the concept of resilience and how it is used within psychology and education. It critically appraises the body of research specifically concerned with academic resilience. In doing so it examines the contribution and limitations of the literature concerning the experience of disadvantaged students at undergraduate level. Problems with how resilience is understood and measured are identified and explored.

The second half of this chapter offers an overview of the national and local context of widening participation in the UK, in relation to undergraduate retention and success. It outlines salient historical initiatives and illuminates current issues for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. This provides the necessary background to low-income students' interactions with institutions in order to better consider how they make sense of the HE experience.

The final section of this chapter draws together issues of concern from both the literature regarding academic resilience and widening participation. Exploring the concepts in this way allows for a greater understanding of the frameworks within which low-income, resilient students participate in HE. It sets out the proposed study's aims and objectives in addressing gaps in current knowledge.

2.2 Psychological resilience

2.2.1 *Origins of the concept*

"Resilience" is a term used across a range of contexts and applications from engineering to the environment. It is often explored in divergent and contradictory ways. Theories of resilience in the psycho-social domain emerged from the positive psychology paradigm. "Positive psychology" is a movement concerned with the study of "authentic happiness" (Seligman et al.

2009); the positive emotions, personality traits, institutions or features thereof which contribute to living a happy, fulfilled life (Peterson et al. 2008). It is a strength-based movement rather than a deficit-focused one. As such, it is an important counterpart to models of psychopathology in mental health since it focuses on understanding and promoting well-being.

Formative work on resilience thus comes from researchers concerned with how individuals overcome adversity and are able to thrive against the odds. Psychologist Norman Garmezy studied the epidemiology of schizophrenia and identified "protective factors" that moderate risk and could predict mental illness resilience in children (Garmezy 1974). The notions of "risk" and "protection" are fundamental to understanding how resilience has been defined and measured in past and ongoing research. These concepts are explored in-depth in Section 2.3.3 "Risk and protective factors in academic resilience".

Childhood resilience studies began in the mid-20th century when it was recognised that certain individuals were able to cope and survive in the face of adverse conditions (Masten and Osofsky 2010), and that there might be something to be learned from the ability to overcome adversity. Notable studies of resilience include the longitudinal efforts of Michael Rutter (1987; 1999; 2007), who tracked the outcomes of neglected Romanian adoptees. Despite enduring conditions of deeply inadequate sustenance and care, most of those children adopted into families from orphanages were found to have made good developmental and physical progress, when followed up at the ages of four and six. This radically contradicted the prevalent thinking on early childhood difficulties that chronic adversity or acute trauma such as maternal deprivation could disadvantage individuals for life and inhibit normal emotional and cognitive functioning (Bowlby 1944; Harlow 1958).

Rather than understanding resilience as a magical quality that renders some individuals invulnerable to adverse life events, it was considered an "ordinary" phenomenon brought about by a combination of both internal factors and external processes (Masten 2001). Since resilience can be

ongoingconsidered a universal capacity (Benard 2004), various frameworks and measurement tools have emerged for working out how to enhance and promote good outcomes. These are briefly explored in the next section and discussed in relation to the domain of academic resilience in Section 2.3.

2.2.2 *Adversity, risk and protective factors*

The type of adversity explored in resilience research is diverse. Studies of acute adversity include looking at populations who have endured natural disasters such as famine, the sudden death of a parent or a life-changing illness/ accident. Chronic disadvantage research includes exposure to childhood abuse/ neglect, poverty, discrimination, mental illness and physical disability. It has been defined as:

> *"the experience of life events and circumstances which may combine to threaten or challenge healthy development"* (Daniel et al. 2011, p.105).

In the context of resilience, "risk" denotes the likelihood of such adversity having a negative impact on well-being, either in the short or long-term. Yet, positive adaptation is possible, despite adversity. "Protective factors" or "protective processes" encompass experience that reduces the negative influence of adversity and can reliably predict resilience in individuals. In the resilience literature these are typically categorised as: 1) dispositional / individual, 2) familial, or 3) extra-familial/ environmental context characteristics (Garmezy 1991; Masten 2011). This triarchic framework forms the basis of much resilience research (Luthar and Zigler 1991; Cowen et al. 1997; Masten and Coatsworth 1998; Wyman et al. 1999) and can be viewed in Figure 1.
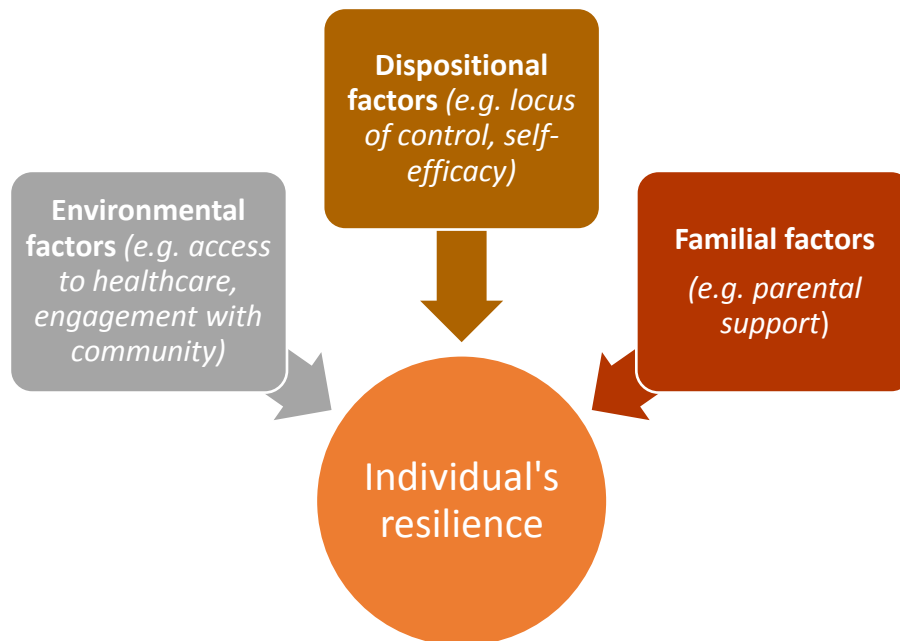
Figure 1:   Triad of Protective Factors, amended from Garmezy (1991)

"Protective" factors or processes are those which enhance the functioning of an individual with experience of significant adversity (Luthar and Zigler 1991). As a result, functioning is better than would be expected if these factors were not present (Masten et al. 1990). The plethora of childhood resilience studies offers multiple predictors and models for positive outcomes. The one presented by Benard (2004) is a good example, as it offers a broad categorisation of the multiple dispositional factors which are thought to influence resilience across different contexts. The following four key factors: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose are identified as personal strengths (see Table 1).

Social competence can be broken down into inter-related qualities such as caring, communicativeness, empathy and a sense of humour. These qualities are essential to forming and sustaining social relationships. Problem-solving skills can be thought of in both social and cognitive ways; they are the ability to reflect on problems and engage in abstract reasoning. Benard (2004)

notes that creative thinking and flexibility in the use of resources are crucial skills for problem-solving. Autonomy is understood as perceiving control over one's environment and independent thinking; this can involve separating oneself from negative social circumstances. Lastly, the sense of purpose relates to the goals and aspirations of an individual, as well as their willingness to persist to achieve said goals.

Social competence	Problem solving	Autonomy	Sense of purpose
Communication	Planning	Internal Locus of Control	Achievement motivation
Empathy	Resourcefulness	Self-efficacy	Hope
Forgiveness	Critical thinking	Self-awareness	Spirituality

Table 1: Personal strengths of resilience

Adapted from (Benard 2004, p.14)

As well as individual characteristics, research consistently points to the crucial role of positive parenting as a mediator for adversity. So-called "familial factors" have been studied extensively in early childhood research and have produced useful programmes for early intervention. Parents and caregivers with better education, a more positive self-concept and better mental health had more responsive parenting attitudes and nurturing involvement with their children (Wyman et al. 1999). Bonding and close relationships to parents/ family have also been found to be key protective factors, indicated by the consistent presence of parents at key times (e.g. before and after school, meals, bedtime), and emotional closeness (Arthur et al. 2002).

The picture concerning wider environmental protective factors is far less well-established and understood than that relating to individual and familial

influencers. Peer-related protective factors have a buffering effect on the risk of engaging in delinquent and problem behaviours such as substance abuse in children and adolescents (Osgood et al. 2013). A report produced by the Development Services Group (DSG) for the US Family and Youth Services Bureau found that resilience is enhanced amongst those who have close relationships with peers engaging in pro-social behaviours, with good records of academic achievement and who have close relationships with their parents (DSG 2013).

Protective factors associated with the social environment exist primarily in schools and neighbourhoods where students may tap into the expertise of teachers or administrators and supportive relationships with peers in order to foster resilience (Garmezy 1991; Olsson et al. 2003). Schools which expect, and reward prosocial student behaviour and involvement can be said to have a positive influence. The role of extra-curricular activities, low staff turnover and setting of clear standards for behaviour and achievement are also recognised protective factors (Arthur et al. 2002; Hawkins 2009). In addition, the presence of available, supporting and caring adults in the community (outside of the family e.g. mentors, neighbours, sports coaches) has been consistently found to buffer the negative impact of adversity. Furthermore, living in non-disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are safe and cohesive may also offer a degree of protection (Arthur et al. 2002; DSG 2013).

In summation, the majority of research into protective factors focuses on individual characteristics, with some more limited recognition of the role of familial and environmental influences. This is highly problematic since prevention or resiliency- building programmes that are directed towards both at-risk individuals and their environments produce longer-lasting effects than those which ignore contextual factors (Weissberg et al. 1991; Stewart et al. 1997).

The next section examines ways in which resilience is measured in individuals, with a corresponding focus on personality variables and personal beliefs and behaviours thought to influence resilience and positive outcomes.

2.2.3 *Quantitative measures of resilience*

Studies of resilience in different populations are typically quantitative, having emerged from a nomothetic tradition (Masten et al. 1990; Garmezy 1991; Cicchetti and Garmezy 1993).They involve the complex task of operationalising variables that constitute risk, identifying salient protective factors as well as determining what constitutes positive outcomes for individuals (Windle 2011; Allen et al. 2014; Edwards et al. 2016). This type of research has predictive value, for practitioners working with clinical populations who can seek to maximise protective factors and identify those at greatest risk.

Within research, resilience is measured through clusters of inter-related personal qualities, using validated scales such as the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale or CD-RISC (Connor and Davidson 2003) and the Wagnild-Young Resilience Scale or WY-RS (Wagnild and Young 1993).

The CD-RISC is a 25-point psychometric self-report which measures degrees of resilience (low, medium and high) as the ability to cope with stress and challenges and is often used to predict or assess resilience-building (Connor and Davidson 2003). Its creators understand resilience as the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity influenced by one's own attempts at adaptation (Connor and Davidson 2003). They have moved away from a trait model of resiliency in designing a scale to measure successful coping ability, be it as a way to quantify resilience or in order to measure treatment response. A five-point Likert scale is used ("not true at all" to "true nearly all the time"). Participant scores can range from 0-100, with higher scores indicating a higher level of resilience.

The WY-RS is similarly structured and administered, with items focused on purpose, perseverance, self-reliance, equanimity, and authenticity which its creators consider to be the core characteristics of resilience (Wagnild and Young 1993). Originally it was developed from an earlier qualitative study with a sample of older women who had adapted successfully following a

major life event. It essentially measures two factors: personal competence and acceptance of self and life. The advantage of the WY-RS is its flexibility; it has good reliability and validity for use with populations that differ in age and ethnicity (Ahern et al. 2006). Other notable tools measuring similar characteristics and utilising attitudinal statements include the Resilience Scale for Adults (Friborg et al. 2003) and the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al. 2008).

The CD-RISC and WY-RS are popular tools for resilience research, given their high ratings of validity and reliability. The CD-RISC for example has a very high test-retest reliability of 0.65- 0.80 (Edwards et al. 2016). However, these measurement tools offer a generalised construct of resilience. This brings into question their relevance for understanding resilience across different times and domains of functioning (Cassidy 2016). Whilst the creators of both these tools identify with the process model of resilience rather than the trait model, the influence of social factors, institutions and cultural practices are downplayed or omitted.

2.2.4 *Qualitative resilience research*

Within resilience research, there is a recent uptake in qualitative methodology. This is due in part to the aforementioned recognition of various social, cultural and institutional practices that shape well-being and resilience (Bottrell and Armstrong 2012; Ungar 2012; Ungar and Liebenberg 2013).

These complex, intertwined mechanisms lend themselves to exploratory methods. Some qualitative researchers of resilience propose redefining the construct, in order to acknowledge how the institutions of family, friends, school and community influence the individual.

An important voice in this area comes from Michael Ungar, co-founder of the Resilience Research Centre. A proponent of incorporating qualitative and mixed methods research into the study of resilience, Ungar identifies several issues with the current direction of quantitative measurement of protective and risk factors, namely, that qualitative methods may be best suited to

exploratory understanding of as yet unidentified protective processes, relevant to the lived experience of individuals (Ungar 2003). The thick description offered by qualitative methodologies can enhance understanding of specific contexts by adding power to the quiet voices of those experiencing positive outcomes. Importantly, research using qualitative methodologies can hold researchers and other outsiders to account for biased standpoints by questioning assumptions regarding deficit-based beliefs about marginalised groups and critically appraising hegemonically-identified positive outcomes (Ungar 2003; Ungar 2012).

For example, contributions to the understanding of resilience within marginalised communities have been provided by qualitative research. Investigating Australian Aboriginal children's resilience using interviews and thematic analysis has indicated the importance of empowerment and cultural pride in building resilience (Young et al. 2017). Such research foregrounds the situated, unique ways in which individuals and groups experience resilience, in ways that standardised measures may fail to capture.

In this sense, well-being and positive outcomes must be seen as somewhat subjective; what may look like average or even deficient functioning to an outsider might be considered a positive outcome for members of certain communities (or vice versa). Explorations using qualitative methodologies thus uncovers people's meanings of resilience which are often deeply-buried, because as Bourdieu suggests, *"what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying"* (1977, p.167).

There are several other major recent studies of international participatory research addressing childhood resilience; some of which use novel methods of data collection and analysis. The "day-in-the-life" filming of very young children and adolescents in adverse circumstances across Canada, Italy, Peru, Thailand and the UK explored resilience through everyday cultural practices (Cameron et al. 2007; Theron et al. 2011; Cameron et al. 2014). Iterative reviewing of visual data with project participants has led to the growing interest in emergent themes including use of humour, security and

striving and thriving in traditional culture. These salient processes are not explored in the extant literature on resilience, which focuses heavily on individual characteristics and standardised measurements of resilience and its associated factors. Thus, there is a strong argument for the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative research in furthering the understanding of resilience through nuanced, contextualised research (Ungar 2012).

2.2.5 *Contemporary usage*

There is still ambiguity in common usage of the term resilience; it is employed variously to describe a specific personality trait, a process, or an outcome (Ahern et al. 2008). Resilience is frequently a shorthand description for a better than expected outcome given a particular set of circumstances. This is a common-sense description which offers an overview or interpretation of events connecting adverse circumstances to a positive or better than anticipated result.

Importantly, the experience and successful management of adversity is a requirement for demonstrating resilience. As Rutter explains:

> "*protection resides, not in the evasion of the risk, but in successful engagement with it*" (1987, p.186).

In this way, the outcome definition of resilience may certainly be compatible with other interpretations, but may not sufficiently explain how individuals "bounce back". The remainder of this section will focus more closely on the way in which resilience is studied and conceptualised in the extant literature.

Specifically, there are issues around usage of the term "resilience" as either a phenomenon or a construct. In the former, resilience is an outcome; an observable behaviour by an individual or individuals as a result of adversity. In the latter, resilience as a construct has explanatory power as a quality or trait which resides within a person (Windle 2011).

These two opposing views presented in the construct resilience literature define resilience as either a single personality trait or cluster of traits (Block and Kremen 1996) or as a phenomenon involving the experience of adversity moderated by certain personal, interpersonal and protective factors and dynamic processes, producing a more positive than anticipated outcome for the individual (Luthar et al. 2000).

It is difficult to understate the significance of this distinction. On one hand, researchers conceptualise resilience as a personality attribute, also known as "ego resiliency" in the literature. It reflects individual traits such as hardiness, resourcefulness and flexibility of functioning, all of which enable self-regulation in difficult situations. It assumes these unique differences may be naturally present in individuals and can account for differences in outcomes between people; despite having experienced similar adversities (Block and Kremen 1996). The advantage of this conceptualisation is that it accounts for those significant differences or unusually positive outcomes demonstrated by certain individuals, as levels of resilience may vary greatly between people (Waugh et al. 2008). Viewing the phenomenon in this manner also assumes that resilience is essentially quantifiable, and likely suited to psychometric measurement.

However, there are issues with this definition in terms of exactly what constitutes a resilient trait. For example, dispositional traits such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and locus of control may be influential factors capable of enabling resilience (Rutter 2006). However, the research directly linking these concepts to resilience is limited and thus differences between these traits and resilience are arguably semantic. Research about self-efficacy, for example has shown that a positive sense of self-efficacy can lead to greater perseverance in tasks despite setbacks (Bandura and Schunk 1981).While self-efficacy is not explicitly described as resilience, it involves similar processes and constructs and the two are often seen as linked. Some constructs commonly thought to be associated with resilience can be found in Table 2.

However, defining the term resilience in this narrow way may ignore important underlying processes. Many factors that researchers agree influence resilience remain outside of one's control and are difficult to directly influence; for example the level of exposure to risk factors (Rutter 2006). Yet research shows that through positive personal relationships, task accomplishment and successful management of "turning points", change is possible (Rutter 1987; Rutter 2006; Rutter 2007).

High self-esteem, for example, is associated with emotionally stable, extroverted, and conscientious individuals and is also related to reduced risk-taking and improved educational achievement (Orth and Robins 2014). However, any causal link between high self-esteem alone and positive educational outcomes has been deemed improbable in recent research and is more likely an indicator of other protective variables such as social interactions and life events that affect the individual (Vohs and Baumeister 2016).

Furthermore, viewing resilience as a singular or cluster of traits largely discounts the potential impact of the external environment. The opposing "phenomenon" or "process" view of resilience views it as a dynamic interaction between dispositional, interpersonal and environmental factors; a more sophisticated, but quite complex approach. Hence, much research which goes beyond the study of ego resiliency is concerned with the complex interplay of risk and protective factors (Werner 1989; Luthar et al. 2000).

Work in this area from Roisman (2005) views resilience as a family of loosely connected phenomena involving positive adaptation in the context of adversity. Thus, resilience is not "in the person" and not a list of individual attributes which co-vary with resilient outcomes (Roisman 2005). Researchers are concerned with which external factors foster the development of positive outcomes in those exposed to adversity, including family dynamics, cultural expectations and educational experiences.

The strength of this approach is that it recognises resilience as a distinct phenomenon, instead of conflating it with other established personality traits. It identifies influences on resilience and positive outcomes, rather than assuming the deterministic approach of ego resiliency theory. In this sense it presents a more optimistic and operational definition in terms of understanding ways to enhance and promote resilience in those with experience of adversity.

Term	Definition	Examples of research
Grit	Perseverance towards and sustained interest in long-term goals	(Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Quinn 2009)
Academic buoyancy	Students' ability to successfully deal with typical educational challenges (e.g. exam pressure, competing deadlines)	(Martin and Marsh 2008)
Self-efficacy	Belief in one's own ability to succeed in certain situations and its influence on an individual's motivation and success	(Bandura 1977; Bandura and Schunk 1981; Bandura 1982)

Table 2:   Key constructs associated with resilience

In summary of this debate, studies of resilience do suggest that it may be context-dependent as opposed to a fixed trait that individuals innately possess (Rutter 2006). One individual can exhibit resilience in a particular instance of adversity but less so in another (Masten 2001; Rutter 2006). In this way the process description may be more context-sensitive and thus useful. For example, prior exposure to adversity can also act as either a

protective or risk factor (Rutter 1987). This suggests a more nuanced understanding of resilience and its influencers is needed.

An additional issue within the current literature is that the study of resilience has focused on "at-risk" children. A systematic review of resilience research by Windle (2011) found that resilience research has been primarily undertaken with children and adolescents, rather than adults. Evidence suggests that the context of adversities differs according to population (Windle 2011). Therefore, questions remain about the extent to which emergent models of resilience can be accurately applied to adult populations, as well as across different aspects of development and well-being (Pangallo et al. 2014). There is value in research on resilience at different points in human development, since resilience can be achieved at any point in the lifecycle (Masten et al. 1999). Therefore additional work on at-risk individuals' achievement of positive outcomes in adulthood is essential (Rutter 1993; Luthar et al. 2000).

Resilience is now widely understood in psychosocial literature as a phenomenon that exists in a space between a person, their environment and outcome. Whilst the variety of internal and external factors are recognised in part through the range of items on resilience scales, there is relatively little known about how the interplay of a person's attitudes, emotions and values fit together with their experience of the social world. What remains unclear is how the known risk and protective factors identified in the current literature relate to individuals' lived experiences and whether they can be judged meaningful and sufficient for ongoing research into resilience.

As presented in the previous section, such research into resilience in children aims to understand the processes that account for "good outcomes", i.e. normal or above average achievement across behavioural, social, academic, and developmental domains (Masten 2001). Resilience research has begun to move increasingly towards understanding resilience in a domain-specific sense and introducing new tools and techniques to measure and understand the phenomenon across a range of functions. Resilience does not translate

into positive functioning across all important areas (Luthar and Zigler 1991; Cicchetti and Garmezy 1993). So, evidence of uneven functioning across domains (e.g. where an individual may achieve family cohesion but poor educational results) acts as a call for specificity in the study of resilience. There is scope here for greater precision in the terminology used in the literature (Luthar et al. 2000).

Whilst child and adolescent academic resilience has been well-documented, including in the domain of educational outcomes, the same cannot be said of those facing adversity in HE. The following literature review presents the findings and analysis of a selection of studies into academic resilience in students from low-income backgrounds at HE. In doing so, it clarifies the existing knowledge base to which the studies contribute. It identifies the main problems and gaps in knowledge in addition to issues with methodological approaches in the study of academic resilience.

2.3 Academic resilience

2.3.1 *Search strategy*

An EBSCO search of a range of databases (including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, HEER and PsycINFO) was conducted for literature using the key concepts of resilience and non-traditional students. Related alternative terms are listed in Table 3, along with corresponding Boolean commands.

Search Strategy	
Key concepts	Alternative terms
Academic resilience	"academic resilien*" resilien*
University students	universit* undergraduate* "higher education" college
Low-income	disadvantage* "working*class" "low socio*economic" poor "low*income" "under*represented" "under*privileged"
Full search: ("academic resilien*" OR resilien*) AND (universit* OR undergraduate* OR "higher education" OR college) AND (disadvantage* OR "working*class" OR "low socio*economic" OR poor OR "low*income" OR "under*represented" OR "under*privileged" NOT ecology* NOT environment*)	

Table 3:   Academic resilience literature search terms

Papers concerned with the experiences of resilience in low-income groups within higher education were included. Research that focused on individuals from under-represented groups such as those from neighbourhoods in which relatively few people enter higher education, students from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, students who have been in care, parent students, students with disabilities and young adult carers were also considered for inclusion. This was because these groups are also disproportionately more likely to be from low-income backgrounds and have experienced adversity. Abstracts were screened for relevance in these instances.

Research which focused on building resilient organisations (e.g. creating financially or environmentally resilient schools) was excluded. Also excluded were studies regarding resilience in teaching staff.

Backwards and forwards citation-searching was also carried out to ensure all relevant papers were considered for inclusion.

After assessing for relevance, 44 peer-reviewed journal articles were reviewed in full-text (see Figure 2) and a thematic approach to reviewing and presenting the literature was taken.

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Papers identified through       │
│ database (n=135) searching      │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Duplicates removed (n=122)      │
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┌─────────────────────────────────┐       ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Removed after title and         │       │ Further papers identified       │
│ abstract screening (n=63)       │       │ through forward/ backward       │
│                                 │       │ citation search (n=4)           │
└─────────────────────────────────┘       └─────────────────────────────────┘
              │
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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Removed after full-text         │
│ screening using inclusion/      │
│ exclusion criteria (n=19)       │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
              │
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│ Eligible papers for inclusion   │
│ (n=44)                          │
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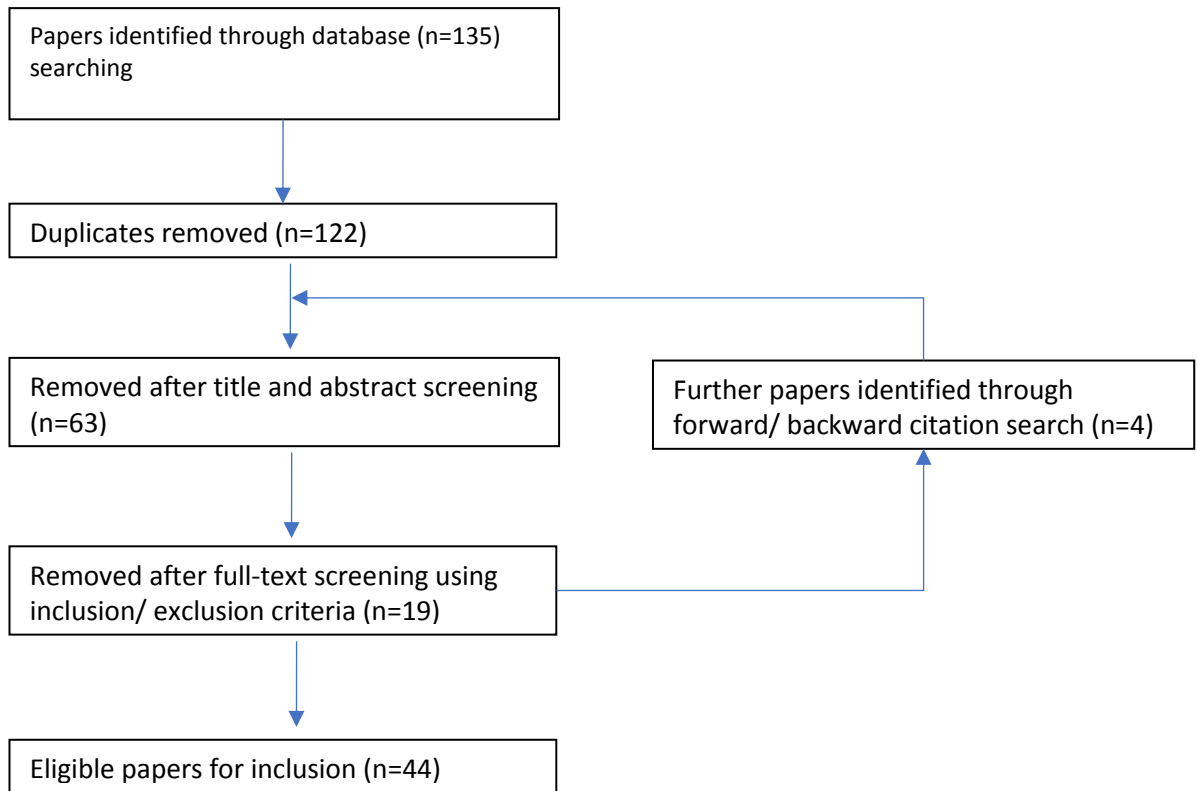
Figure 2:   Stages of literature search and review

2.3.2 *Defining academic resilience*

Academic resilience forms one domain of an individual's overall functioning. It is used in one sense to mean achieving educational success despite challenges that prevent others with similar experiences from succeeding (Morales 2008c; Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010). This understanding aligns with the outcome definition outlined earlier in this chapter. Academic resilience can also be described as:

> "*a capacity to overcome acute and/or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student's educational development*" (Martin and Marsh 2008, p.488).

This alternative conceptualisation, presenting academic resilience as a process model, is more useful in discussing ways of understanding and enhancing student success.

The studies reviewed addressed student transition, retention and success of a wide range of non-traditional groups at HE. These included students from BME backgrounds (Montgomery et al. 2000; Morales 2008c; Wexler et al. 2009; Cavazos Jr et al. 2010; Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013; Morgan Consoli et al. 2015; Zulu and Munro 2017), care-leavers (Hines et al. 2005; Cotton et al. 2017), mature students (Munro and Pooley 2009; Brewer 2010) , working-class, low-income and those students who are first in their immediate families to attend university; otherwise known as 'first-generation HE entrants' (Stuber 2011; Lehmann 2014; Wilson-Strydom 2017), all with experience of economic disadvantage.

These prior experiences of traumatic or chronic adversity (low socioeconomic status, disabled student status or ethnic minority status) are regarded as potential prerequisites for resilience (Morales 2008c; Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Morales 2010). According to these researchers, these life experiences increase risk to good academic outcome because they can be barriers to initial access, with links to higher rates of attrition and lower degree attainment. However, there is little agreement or exploration about the extent of interplay between these factors and how they influence resilience and success amongst different groups.

Poverty poses a significant threat to academic achievement (Kanevsky et al. 2008); yet some individuals have the capacity to overcome the barriers of poverty and succeed. Thus, those from the lowest income families can reasonably be considered to be subject to adversity and therefore positive educational outcomes for these individuals indicate resilience. The nature of this disadvantage and the impact it has on educational attainment is explored later in Section 2.4 of this chapter.

2.3.3 *Risk and protective factors in academic resilience*

Overall, the main protective factors identified by studies on academic resilience in this review were largely dispositional or familial. Individual attributes such as internal locus of control (Morales 2008c; Cavazos Jr et al.

2010; Morales 2010) and self-efficacy (Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013) consistently emerged as important protective factors related to academic success in under-represented groups (see Table 4). Whilst findings from research used validated measures across large samples, they often lacked explanatory power about the context and interaction of factors.

Protective factors	e.g. studies
Friendship/ social support	(Montgomery et al. 2000; Banyard and Cantor 2004; Alexakos et al. 2011; Morgan Consoli et al. 2015; Cotton et al. 2017)
Internal locus of control	(Tett 2004; Kanevsky et al. 2008; Brewer 2010)
Ability to make experiences meaningful	(Banyard and Cantor 2004; Wilson-Strydom 2017; Zulu and Munro 2017)
Availability and support of tutors	(Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Cotton et al. 2017)
Goal-setting behaviours	(Hines et al. 2005; Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Morales 2010; Morales 2011; Wilson-Strydom 2017)
Parental support/ significant adult relationship	(Hines et al. 2005; Morales 2010; Herbers et al. 2011; Herbers et al. 2012; Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013; Cotton et al. 2017)
Financial security	(Stuber 2011; Cotton et al. 2017)
High self-esteem & self-efficacy	(Kanevsky et al. 2008; Brewer 2010; Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013)

Table 4:   Protective factors in academic resilience from literature search

Several studies included in this review did recognise some familial attributes such as parental engagement and family cohesion as contributing to student success (Herbers et al. 2011; Morales 2011). However, there is conflicting evidence as to the most influential external factors. In some research, family support and role modelling had a significant influence (Cavazos Jr. et al. 2010; Morales 2010), whereas in others a sense of belonging to the educational environment was shown to be of the highest importance (Gonzalez and Padilla 1997). This is perhaps, a further example of the difficulties involved in isolating individual protective factors as predictors of success. Problems with conflicting evidence of the influence of different factors are arguably the result of discounting the value of capturing first-hand participant accounts.

Significantly, the transition to HE for most young people is the time at which they move away from the family home. The support of the family is less physical and immediate for those who move away to attend HE. One study examining the role of friendship as a protective factor interviewed a group of African American college entrants to explore the role of "fictive kinship" in their physics class (Alexakos et al. 2011). Hermeneutic analysis identified this kinship as an important mediator of perseverance and success. This study was one of the few found in the literature that employed interpretative analysis to explore the experience of student life for under-represented student groups. Although the study was small in scope, researchers were able to gain a deep understanding of how different aspects of the students' everyday worlds interacted to enhance or impede their success.

Overall, there was comparatively little exploration of environmental or institutional factors found in the academic resilience literature. The use of pedagogies and the impact of the learning environment were often referenced as potential areas for further investigation (Morales 2010). So, whilst analysis of protective factors should take into account dispositional and familial status, it should also consider the institutions and structures that work in conjunction with these factors to enhance academic resilience.

The likelihood is that a combination of familial and school or university factors are most effective in supporting academic achievement, particularly during the period of transition from a previous course of study (Gutman and Midgley 2000). However, extant research has yet to explore the lived experience of university students with experience of disadvantage whose accounts may illuminate meaningful interplay of these structures and processes.

Much research into academic resilience is reliant on the protective and risk factors identified by previous quantitative studies and psychometric scales. Cavazos Jr. et al.'s study of poor Latino undergraduates is one such example (2010a). As part of this qualitative research, students were interviewed and found to have high levels of intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control and self-efficacy. Thus, the potential contribution of such research is limited to the extent that its findings are "bounded" by variables that are already well-defined by the nomothetic tradition.

Likewise, a recent paper by (Cotton et al. 2017) presents useful findings about student retention by exploring contextual factors such as interpersonal relationships, extra-curricular commitment and support networks. The mixed methods approach uses a resilience framework as a guide for interpreting participants' experience, yet the structured approach misses opportunities to explore the students' own perceptions of their successes, adversities and protective processes.

Narrative work by O'Connor (2002) and Morales (2010) on ethnic minority students in the USA were among the few studies which sought to connect protective factors to individual perceptions of risk, adversity and opportunity. Whilst they offer insights into the "chemistry" of resilience processes, they are embedded in their own nation's history of race and immigration and thus speak to a distinct cultural narrative.

Nonetheless, research focused on issues of class and socioeconomic status can offer some insight into complex processes and the significance of cultural context in academic resilience despite the findings not being generalisable.

One qualitative study (Montgomery et al. 2000) explored the role of "enculturation" with 14 Native American undergraduates. Findings indicated the importance of internalised resiliency characteristics and ways of learning as students began to develop an academic identity. A significant role for robust student support systems for minority students was also found to enhance positive student outcomes.

There is increasing attention being given towards the adversity experienced by White working-class students and their educational achievement. Stuber (2011) used Grounded Theory to compare the academic integration and disengagement of 28 White working-class students. Analysis explored the personal impact for these students of living at home to study and undertaking high-levels of part-time working in negotiating successful transitions.

Both of these studies used divergent groups of participants and were able to present useful exploratory findings. Most importantly, they point towards a differential impact of risk over time and between individuals; and reinforce the notion that protective factors, both geographical and cultural, must be considered.

2.3.4 *Quantitative measures of academic resilience*

As explored earlier, there are a number of generalised scales measuring resilience. Indeed, virtually all the studies in this review of non-traditional entrants to higher education used such measures. As the study of academic or educational resilience is fairly new, it has been proposed that developing quantitative measures for this context-specific form of resilience could offer a more useful insight into predicting academic success (Colp and Nordstokke 2014).

One early attempt at this comes from Martin and Marsh (2006), who tested a standardised six-item measure in which students responded with levels of agreement to statements such as *"I believe I'm mentally tough when it comes to exams"* and *"I'm good at dealing with setbacks at school"*. This self-report scale is brief, but specific to educational beliefs. On its own, the tool is basic

and ignores the influence of family, peers, teachers, and school/ university which are crucial to both general resilience (Masten and Coatsworth 1998) and to academic resilience specifically (Finn and Rock 1997).

More recently, (Cassidy 2015) developed the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) as an alternative to existing measures of resilience that were focused on generalised attitudes around states and moods. It uses vignettes describing hypothetical adverse academic events (e.g. assessment failure) to which respondents must self-report levels of agreement (on a five-point Likert scale) with 30 statements. It uses vignettes to prompt students to respond to 30 statements, three of which include:

- I would try to think of new solutions
- I would seek help from my tutors
- I would seek encouragement from my family and friends

As a multidimensional measure it assesses aspects of resilience: perseverance; reflecting and adaptive-help-seeking; and emotional response.

Whilst validity and reliability measures for this scale look promising (Cassidy 2015), it has yet to be widely adopted in studies of academic resilience. Furthermore, whilst it moves beyond the over-simplistic conceptualisation of resilience as a unidimensional construct, it explicitly aligns itself with a focus on the individual's thoughts, beliefs and motivations with little recognition for the influence of others.

Whilst the development of this scale is a useful response to the limited solutions offered by other generalised measures, it still retains a strong focus on personal attributes and dispositional factors. Each statement on the 30-item scale begins with 'I', placing the student at the centre of the academic dilemma. Of all the statements, only three make explicit reference to tutors; of these, only the one cited above references the influence of friends and family.

Whilst the ARS-30 is a more useful context-specific measure and more comprehensive than its forerunners, it still retains the key assumption that the

individual's thoughts, feelings and enduring characteristics are the sole determinants of academic resilience. In doing so, it imports the model typical of other quantitative resilience scales and risks as well as over-simplifying the phenomenon. As with generalised scales such as the CD-RISC, the ARS-30 imposes pre-existing constructs of risk and protective factors in quantitative research, rather than exploring the lived experience for individuals.

Quantitative measures in academic resilience research can offer insight into specific risk and protective factors but may fail to capture a more holistic picture of student success. Furthermore, they rely on pre-defined judgements from the researcher about what constitutes risk, protective factors, positive outcomes and adversity. These may or may not be meaningful or relevant to the lived experience of students who come from low-income backgrounds.

2.3.5 *Implications for the current study*

Research into academic resilience has moved towards viewing protective factors as existing both in context and "in concert" with one another (Morales 2010, p.166). This essentially involves a rejection of early constructs of resilience as a fixed trait equivalent to invulnerability. It also recognises the dynamic interaction of protective factors and processes originally outlined by (Garmezy 1991). However, research specifically focusing on academic resilience is limited and this is even truer of research with HE students.

Consequently, quantifying resilience purely through psychometric measures may over-simplify the phenomenon of academic resilience and the student experience. Employing qualitative methodology could enrich knowledge of protective processes and develop resilience frameworks for intervention efforts relating to the prediction and facilitation of academic success (Ungar 2003). This is because the academic resilience of non-traditional students in UK HE is relatively under-researched, leaving a gap for exploratory investigations into the experience of these students. As Ungar (2003) argues, these resilient individuals are those from whom we may have the most to learn, yet may be amongst the "quietest voices" due to their non-traditional

status. Used strategically, qualitative academic resilience research can both enrich and improve the interpretation of quantitative data.

Furthermore, existing studies of protective factors have focused primarily on dispositional and familial accounts, with our understanding of the interplay of institutional factors remaining unexplored territory. This is particularly true of studies looking at post-compulsory education as research around the experience of non-traditional students has tended to concentrate on emergent achievement differentials at an earlier stage. A tendency to give more weight to dispositional factors in facilitating academic success ignores the core responsibility of the university; to provide opportunity and challenge for all students at HE. Thus, a focus on academic resilience which also includes an exploration of the teaching and learning context might lead to improvements for disadvantaged university students at risk of underachievement or withdrawal.

What has emerged from this review is a significant gap in the literature around the methodology that has tended to be used to explore researcher-driven concepts, rather than drawing on the lived experience of individuals. Much existing resilience theory and studies of academic resilience emerge from the positivist tradition, in that they employ methodology designed to identify and predict resilience through correlating risk and protective factors with outcomes. However, a move towards post-positivist thinking and more specifically adopting a constructivist epistemology can offer contextualised, rich and multiple perspectives on the phenomenon of academic resilience.

2.3.6 *Summary*

This literature review of research into resilience describes the shift from studying academic success through a risk or vulnerability perspective towards a process model. It considers some major studies of academic resilience in order to clarify key concepts. It also evaluates both UK and international research on non-traditional students to weigh up evidence of protective factors and identify gaps in the existing literature.

2.4 Widening participation policy and research

The following section presents the picture of widening participation in the United Kingdom (UK). In doing so, it explores government policy and research regarding issues of success and retention, with a focus on students from low-income households. Changing attitudes towards enhancing equality of opportunity for these students are discussed in order to highlight changes from deficit-thinking towards strength-based approaches. Contemporary initiatives and issues of concern for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers are also explored.

2.4.1 *Social mobility and equality of opportunity*

A key strategic aim for the UK government is to create:

> *"a system which delivers equality of opportunity and fairness and in which a person's age, ethnicity, gender, disability and/or social background present no barriers to them accessing and succeeding in higher education and beyond"*(Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.8).

The objectives of this mission are to develop participation in, success at and progression from HE as a way of fostering social mobility and enhancing equality of opportunity.

Education plays a key role in social mobility, enabling those with appropriate qualifications to move into employment. Persistent gaps in attainment and completion rates for students from disadvantaged backgrounds that cannot be explained by entry profiles mean an examination of the barriers and challenges to these groups is essential (Atkins and Ebdon 2014). Among these are issues around arrangements for student finance, participation in part-time employment and the role of integration, belonging and habitus for entrants.

2.4.2 *Impact of changes to student finance on low-income students*

Since 1998 university entrants began to receive loans and grants to help meet the increasing costs required to fund the university sector. These have gradually increased and moved towards a loan-based model, along with the introduction of tuition fees. The objective of these latest changes from the 2015 Conservative budget has been the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' (BIS) commitment to:

> *"maintaining the UK's world class education system while living within its means and reducing the national debt"* (BIS 2015, p.5).

Whilst HE is still meant to be accessible to all, in reality it is accessed through the private contributions of each individual student. Current policy from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) recognises that obtaining a degree is an important investment, as on average graduates earn considerably more than those without a degree qualification (HEFCE 2015). The move towards increased tuition fees and full loans for living costs is heralded as the means to keep HE on a sustainable footing, with a greater share of the cost of HE moving away from the taxpayer and towards the student (BIS 2015).

Thus, the financial situation with regard to funding the cost of universities is ever-changing. As of the academic year 2017/18, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported that undergraduate students in the UK are expected to pay fees of up to £9,250 per annum in England and Northern Ireland, and up to £9,000 per annum in Wales. Full, non-means-tested loans are available to these students to cover the full tuition amount whilst means-tested bursaries of a maximum £11,002 are available, depending on the study location and study mode (UCAS 2018). Additionally, as identified by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2017), many HEIs offer a range of scholarships and bursaries to support students from widening participation backgrounds.

The introduction of tuition fees and abolition of maintenance grants makes these the biggest changes to student finance since 2012. Graduates repay student loans once their earnings exceed the threshold level, which is currently frozen at >£21,000 for post 2012 graduates until 2021. The loans system is intended to avoid the upfront costs of attending HE and deterring potential students.

However, a recent House of Commons Briefing Paper noted that:

> *"when fully implemented they [these changes] will mean more money is loaned, both per student and overall, and increase the amount that is repaid by middle and lower earning graduates. Average debt for those finishing university is expected to be more than £40,000 and, because of the decision to end grants, highest for students from the poorest families at around £53,000"* (Bolton 2018, p.3).

These changes are still bedding in, yet indications from previous reforms (such as the 2012 tuition fee rise) are that they are not deterring applicants, with Universities UK (UUK) reporting:

> *"no evidence to suggest that the student funding reforms have deterred students from applying to university"* (UUK 2015, p.4).

Whilst this may be true of access to HE across all socioeconomic groups, there seem to be hidden costs to the success of students from disadvantaged groups once on course. For example, as a consequence of student finance reforms, greater numbers of disadvantaged students than ever before are leaving university with large student debt and struggling to support themselves during the course of their studies (UUK 2015). Many argue that the maintenance loan figures are not in line with the rising cost of living. For example, the National Union of Students (NUS) estimated that the average student (living away from home but outside of London) needs to find £7,819 on average every academic year to cover the shortfall between expenditure and income from loans and funding (NUS/Unipol 2012). There are increasing concerns from charities about how students are able to manage finances, with increases in the use of food banks, payday loans and employment (NUS/Unipol 2012).

2.4.3 *Impact of part-time employment on low-income students*

Recent statistics have shown little to no difference between socioeconomic groups in uptake of part-time employment, with around 52% of students working during the academic year. However, 30% of these students work over 15 hours per week in addition to their studies, with respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being more likely to work longer hours than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (BIS 2014). Mature students and students from minority ethnic backgrounds were also found to work longer than young and White respondents.

The qualitative study "*Working while studying: a follow up to the Student Income and Expenditure Survey*" (BIS 2013) highlighted the effect of high levels of part-time work for these groups. It showed that those students working long hours reported exhaustion and a negative impact on the quality of academic work (BIS 2013). Furthermore, increased term-time working has been shown to correlate negatively with degree outcomes (Humphrey 2006; Kulm and Cramer 2006).

As a result, there should be real interest in the impact of student finance arrangements on equality of opportunity once students have commenced programmes of study. Rather than focusing on figures suggesting low-income student HE enrolments are steadily increasing, attention should be paid to the way in which these changes disadvantage them throughout the lifecycle. There remain significant gaps in retention and success for these students, which persist beyond undergraduate studies to postgraduate study uptake, employment and earnings.

Taking maintenance grants as a proxy for low-income household membership, graduate employment rates ranged from 59.7% among the most disadvantaged qualifiers to 67.4% among the least disadvantaged qualifiers (BIS 2015). These differences persist when followed up 2 years after graduation. This has ramifications beyond understanding social class divides however, as evidence also shows that individuals from ethnic minority

households were also more likely to live in a low-income household and thus experience disproportionate disadvantage in rates of employment post-graduation.

Not only are overall rates of employment significantly worse for those from low-income households, but the type of employment gained by graduates is also related to their socioeconomic status. Lower rates of professional employment amongst disadvantaged students persist across their early careers. Six months after leaving HE, 67% of young graduates with parents in the lowest six occupation groups are working in professional or managerial level jobs compared to 73% for young graduates with parents in the highest three occupation groups. This gap has doubled from three percentage points for 2008/09 graduates to six percentage points for 2012/13 graduates (BIS 2015). Other studies have found a delay in differences in employment outcomes. For example, three years after graduation Macmillan and Vignoles (2013) found that graduates whose parents had higher status occupations and those from high levels of HE participation were more likely to be working in high-status occupations.

Arguably then, there is a conflict between the UK policy objectives of creating a sustainable HE system while also enabling equality of opportunity. Current student finance arrangements do not appear to be widening the gap in access from disadvantaged groups. However, notable discrepancies around access remain, and the impact of these changes may also be creating challenges for students further down the line. Ensuring equal opportunity for students to persist and succeed on course is now more important than ever, given the barriers the lowest-income students face in surviving and thriving once enrolled.

2.4.4 *"Widening participation" and related key bodies*

Before moving on to an examination of the gaps in retention and success, the national picture regarding UK widening participation should be introduced.

"Widening participation" is a term used to encompass strategy and activity around improving access to HE, and success and retention within HE from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. While interest in WP is not unique to the UK, here it is a huge component of government policy, which strives to create equality of opportunity for those who are less likely to attend university than others. These WP target groups were identified by OFFA (2017) as shown in Table 5.

OFFA widening participation target groups
people from lower socioeconomic groups or from neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low
people from low-income backgrounds (currently, we define "low-income" as up to £42,875 per year household income)
some ethnic groups or sub-groups, including White males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds
disabled people
mature and part-time learners
care leavers
carers
people estranged from their families
people from gypsy and Traveller communities
refugees
students with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties and/or who are on the autism spectrum
children from military families

Table 5:   WP target groups (OFFA 2017)

These groups are sometimes described as "target groups" because access agreements drawn up by HEIs will aim resources at improving their access, retention and/ or success. Different HEIs will target different groups, depending on their existing performance indicators, and the particular nature of their institutions (e.g. recruiting/ selective, course offer, tuition fee levels,

typical demographics/ qualifications on entry (QoE) of applicants). Furthermore, the target groups identified by OFFA (2017) are subject to change in line with current trends in participation and achievement. One group not specified in the table above is students who are the first in their immediate families to attend HE. There are strong links here between students from low-income backgrounds and low socioeconomic groups and first in family to attend HE. For example, Thayer (2000) examined the relationship between level of educational attainment and family income over several decades. Students from lower income backgrounds were found to be far less likely than those in higher income brackets to earn an undergraduate degree by the age of 24 (Thayer 2000). So, whilst first in family to attend HE is not an explicit criterion, it is a well-used marker for disadvantage in WP research and practice, with accepted links to income and social class.

The term "widening participation" must be distinguished from simply expanding or increasing enrolment in HE. Historically, WP initiatives and research have concentrated on widening access; but this is now changing and is discussed more fully in Section 2.4.7 of this chapter which outlines the student lifecycle approach. The term also denotes the activity that goes on in terms of outreach work with school and colleges to increase aspiration and progression to university. This may include long-term partnerships with schools, early interventions to improve standards of English and maths, or summer school projects to encourage HE applications.

As well as encouraging enrolment at HE, widening participation also denotes engagement with under-represented students already on course to enhance their chances for success and retention. Typical activities include mentoring, enhanced financial support and access to support services. Planning, implementation and monitoring of outreach work are variously conducted by specialist WP teams within each HEI, across local or national networks, or by WP champions situated across university faculties, usually documented in each institution's Access Agreement.

Various institutions in the UK have responsibilities relating to the strategic planning around WP objectives, oversight of HEIs in terms of admissions and reporting on WP figures and influence on WP activities and outreach. Some of these bodies are UK-wide, whilst others operate only in one of the four countries of the UK. The picture concerning student finance, HE funding and low-income success and retention varies across the UK; for this reason, this review takes England as its focus.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) currently funds and regulates Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in England. HEFCE monitor and are committed to increasing the number and variety of students accessing HE (HEFCE 2018). The body was involved in administering the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) which ran from 2012-2016 and aimed to help individual students from low-income backgrounds as they entered higher education. It currently manages funding for The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) service. This is a collaborative project which helps HEIs in England track student participants from outreach activities in schools and colleges, right through to their achievement in higher education. HEFCE will cease to exist in April 2018, after which time the newly-established Office for Students (OfS) will assume the majority of its remit, with the exception of research oversight (delegated to UK Research and Innovation).

OFFA was set up in England under the Higher Education Act 2004 as an independent public body with the aim of ensuring that individuals were not deterred from entering HE by the introduction of tuition fees. It is also set to merge with the HEFCE to form the OfS in 2018. OFFA ensures that HEIs are taking steps to increase participation by under-represented groups through the monitoring and evaluation of each institution's Access Agreement. These agreements are reviewed annually and typically reference performance indicators for participation of various groups, provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). From this data the agreements establish plans to safeguard and promote the objectives of widening

participation, in particular for low-income groups, usually through financial support and outreach work (OFFA 2017).

HESA is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about HE in the UK and releases statistical information and publications. In relation to WP, its main role is offering comparative data on the performance of HEIs in relation to widening participation objectives, such as entry/ completion rates for various target groups.

As well as these major regulatory agencies, there are many smaller national and local organisations and networks involved in widening participation research, outreach and advocacy throughout England and the wider UK. A list of governmental and non-governmental bodies involved in widening participation referred to in this section is provided in the Glossary.

2.4.5 *Socioeconomic impact of non-completion and underachievement*

> *"If we want to see social progress and economic prosperity in an increasingly competitive global market, the principle we should, as a country, aim for is to ensure that all those who have the ability, aptitude and potential to benefit from a university education have a fair chance to do so"* Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013, p.2).

As discussed above, non-completion and underachievement are of serious moral concern in terms of enabling individuals to access equal education and employment opportunities. But it also has financial implications for institutions, families, employers and the wider economy. Many graduate professions, postgraduate courses and training require "good degrees"; that is, an upper second class degree (2:1), or higher. A student who leaves their course prior to completion or with lower than expected qualifications will have diminished lifetime earnings compared to those who have graduated.

Attrition also contributes to a loss of tuition fees payable to HEIs. Perhaps most significant is the loss of human capital as the potential these highly skilled individuals could offer the workforce. In this way, disparities in

outcomes for students with low socioeconomic status represents the failure of universities to achieve their mission around realising student potential, which is essential from both a social and economic perspective. On the contrary, the HE system is less oriented towards social mobility and in this way reinforces generational trends in income (Haveman and Smeeding 2006). The context of large income-related gaps both in access to and success in HE along with rises in tuition fees and the cost of living in the UK is concerning (Corlett and Clarke 2017).

The National Strategy for Access and Student Success (Atkins and Ebdon 2014) holds that participation in higher education is essential for innovation and competitiveness in the global economy. Encouraging more students to engage in HE and enhancing non-traditional student outcomes will benefit the wider economy through:

> *"creating jobs, helping businesses prosper by providing them with highly qualified and skilled staff, and stimulating long-term economic growth"* (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.7).

At community level, HE positively impacts on social cohesion and citizenship, as graduates have been shown to have greater engagement with their communities (Atkins and Ebdon 2014). The picture of economic and social benefits to individuals and the nation from widening participation to HE requires further exploration. This is in part due to the diversity of the groups constituting non-traditional or under-represented participants, which makes identifying and measuring the benefits of widening participation challenging.

However, a review of available evidence suggests that the social and economic experiences and outcomes of target groups significantly differs from those of most traditional students. Non-traditional students receive reduced economic and social benefits, and these often depend on the status of the HEI attended. This suggests there should be greater pressure on the most prestigious universities to ensure fair access and opportunities for success on course (Adnett and Slack 2007).

There are complications in understanding the full picture of social and economic benefits of WP at both the individual and national level. Key differences in completion rates and degree classification between traditional and non-traditional students make econometric studies of the overall benefit of WP difficult to measure (Adnett and Slack 2007; Adnett 2015). Likewise, Adnett and Slack (2007) also identify that attempting to isolate the economic and social benefits from widening participation is a difficult task.

Furthermore, overt focus on the wider social and economic benefits somewhat detract from the personal growth opportunity HE affords students. Research into the student experience has found that many students perceive "going away to university" as synonymous with freedom, autonomy, and independence (Holdsworth 2009). This widening of social and academic horizons at the transition point to adulthood has intrinsic value to the development of individuals; a point not captured by the socioeconomic perspective.

Notwithstanding these issues, the global knowledge-based economy has come to mean consistently high economic returns for investment in HE (Jones and Romer 2010). The White Paper "*Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: a Strategy for Social Mobility*" (HM Government 2011) brought concern with low social mobility to the forefront. Blanden et al. (2007) found that an individual's earnings were increasingly linked to parental income over time, indicating a fall in social mobility in the UK; this sets the nation apart from others in Europe. The Sutton Trust (2010) estimate that by raising UK educational attainment in low achievers to the levels recorded in Finland, the most socially mobile of its European neighbours, would boost the economy by up to £140 billion per annum, or approximately 4% GDP.

2.4.6 *Policy and autonomy of HEIs in relation to WP*

Overall participation in HE has steadily increased since the award of university status to polytechnics in 1992 under the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992. Widening participation was addressed as a concern by

the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) in 1997 when, despite increases in the overall student population, there remained significant numbers of students from minority groups who were under-represented in HE. Arguably one of the most influential papers to shape the WP initiative, the Dearing Report, helped the New Labour government under Tony Blair put "education, education and education" on the national agenda (NCIHE 1997). HEIs have since been required to demonstrate their commitment in terms of strategic planning to monitor and review progress towards widening participation.

One of the overarching projects funded by the HEFCE post-Dearing was a project called "AimHigher", introduced in 2001. Its primary objective was to support HEIs in developing their outreach offer, focused mainly on widening access. More than £500 million was spent on AimHigher access initiatives between 2004-2008 on mentoring, summer schools and campus visits. Discontinued by the UK Coalition Government in 2011, participation and progression from under-represented groups was found to have increased (NFER 2001; HEFCE 2006). However, it has been difficult to explicitly identify a causal link between these trends and the work of AimHigher (Doyle and Griffin 2012) and the programme was wound up after this time.

As part of substantial changes to HE funding and student finance in 2012, the HE tuition fee cap was raised. HEIs which wanted to charge above £6,000 per year were required to show how additional fee income would be directed towards making progress in widening participation and fair access through Access Agreements with OFFA. Whilst OFFA has the power to impose sanctions on institutions up to and including withdrawing the right of the university to charge fees of >£6,000 p/a, it does not sanction universities and colleges when they are failing to meet their own targets (OFFA 2017).

Universities are now required to undertake outreach activities themselves as part of their access agreements, and numerous new local, regional and national partnerships and collaborations have sprung up to try to fill the gap left by AimHigher. Understandably, the scope, structure and success of each

is as diverse as the oversight of WP work within institutions themselves. Indeed, a review by Burke (2012) found that WP practitioners often work on the periphery of HEIs outside of academic faculties and departments, devising access agreements and implementing outreach work and evaluation.

2.4.7 *The student life-cycle approach*

More recently, WP policy has adopted a more far-reaching approach to widening participation that has majorly affected practice in universities. Focus on the student "lifecycle" places greater emphasis on success, retention and progression rather than solely on access. This term is used in various ways, but most commonly refers to the stages of a person's journey into and beyond HE. Each stage of pre-application, application, undergraduate study, postgraduate study, and employment can be considered part of this lifecycle.

In current Access Agreement guidance to FE and HE providers, OFFA (2017) advises that the full benefits of higher education cannot be accessed simply through enrolment in HE, but later through successful outcomes. This reflects the core realisation that:

> *"access is only meaningful if, after entering university or college, those students go on to complete their courses, get a degree grade that reflects their true potential, and progress to a good job or further study"* (OFFA 2017, p.8).

Thus, there has been a redirecting of resources towards understanding and addressing gaps in attainment and retention between non-traditional and traditional students within universities. Ensuring equality of opportunity for students across the lifecycle forms the backbone of participation strategies and is explicitly referenced in HEI's Access Agreements. The next section presents more detail on the nature of these gaps in retention and success for students from low-income backgrounds.

2.4.8 *Current trends in retention and success*

Participation rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have continued to increase in the UK, with greater numbers than ever coming from state schools, socioeconomic groups 4-7 and low-participation at HE neighbourhoods (HESA 2017). Nonetheless, inequalities in access, success and retention between the most advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the UK persist (OFFA 2017); hence the need for work across the education section to address these inequalities. Despite increased awareness of widening participation across the student lifecycle, progress that has been made in terms of increased entry rates from under-represented groups is not translating into equal success in higher education.

It is important in this section to note the variety of measures used in statistical analysis of retention and outcome figures. The group of greatest concern to this study is students from low-income backgrounds. However, familial income is difficult to calculate and track against individual students, and for this reason measures such as low socioeconomic classification (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) groups 4-8) or Participation Of Local Areas (POLAR) in HE neighbourhood are used. One issue with socioeconomic classification is that self-reporting of parental occupation is typically low and often inaccurate.

There are also considerable challenges to the validity of the POLAR system of classification as it has been used as a proxy for economic disadvantage. POLAR3 (or the updated system of classification, POLAR4) map neighbourhoods and grade each by young participation at HE. Low Participation in HE Neighbourhoods (LPN) are at the lower end of the 1-5 scale. Whilst it has been found to correlate with other measures of disadvantage, this finding is not always consistent across wards. For example, there are several wards with high young HE participation rates but by other measures of disadvantage (e.g. crime or health) are better off than those wards with average young HE participation rates. The lack of perfect equivalency here is a reminder that POLAR captures a specific form of

disadvantage: educational disadvantage relating to participation in higher education (Harrison and McCaig 2015).

Nonetheless, much important research has been conducted using various measures of economic disadvantage. So, whilst neither low NS-SECs or LPNs are ideal proxies for low-income backgrounds, evidence suggests there are substantial links between the factors which render such research still useful.

Students from the lowest-income households are at highest risk of attrition, usually during the first year of their studies (OFFA 2017). Those from areas of low participation were more likely to no longer be in HE after their first year than those from areas of high participation, even when gender, age and QoE are taken into account (HEFCE 2013b). This is still the case whether this group is defined in terms of income or location-based measures (OFFA 2014).

For those who do complete their undergraduate studies, there are still noticeable and persistent differences in successful outcomes between the most and least advantaged. Students from low socioeconomic groups are more likely to be working part-time and living at home (HEFCE 2009). They are also less likely than those from middle-higher earner households to get a first or 2:1 qualification (HEFCE 2009). These findings are especially significant as it means that even if those from under-represented groups achieve similar level 3 scores (e.g. A-level or BTEC grades) to other students, then there is no inherent tendency towards lower performance, but rather they are facing disadvantages whilst at university.

A large-scale review called *"Higher education and beyond: outcomes from full-time first degree study"* (HEFCE 2013a) examined degree outcomes of young full-time students starting degree courses in 2006-07. The report identifies four possible outcomes: 1) achieving a degree 2) achieving a first or upper second-class degree 3) achieving a degree and continuing to employment and further study and 4) achieving a degree and continuing to

graduate employment or further study. Across all four outcomes the pattern was consistent. Those students from the highest participation in HE neighbourhoods (quintile 5) had the highest percentage of the cohort achieving the outcomes, whilst those from quintile 1 areas had the lowest percentage achieving the outcomes.

As shown, the resultant effects of degree-level attainment gaps on the probability of undertaking postgraduate study and obtaining graduate-level employment are large (Machin et al. 2013). Even when other factors are controlled for (subject choice, QoE), students from low-income backgrounds or low NS-SEC groups are also less likely to secure a good job after graduation or undertake postgraduate study (OFFA 2017).

A recent publication sums up the challenge when it recommends that:

> *"universities and colleges need to understand more about the causes of differential outcomes, and work to support all students to achieve to their full potential"* (OFFA 2017, p.8).

Having here presented the scale of the challenge, the next two sections consider existing and accepted understandings of why these differences in retention and success exist and persist.

2.4.9 *Theories of student attrition and retention*

As argued earlier, the study of persistence and withdrawal is vital for the prosperity of HEIs in that it may help maintain and enhance rates of retention. Reasons behind student retention are complex and involve inter-related factors relating to individuals and their environments. Importantly, it is an area of research in which theory can influence practice, particularly in the sense of increasing social mobility, equality of opportunity and the development of human capital (Atkins and Ebdon 2014; Adnett 2015).

A variety of terms are used to provide explanations of why students remain on course or leave before completion. Negative ones like 'academic failure', 'dropout' and 'attrition' contrast with positive ones like 'retain' and 'persist'.

One of the best known and still widely accepted models is the explanation of retention offered by Tinto (1975), which places integration at the heart of a student's propensity to remain and persist on course. Students bring their own set of pre-entry attributes to HE, including their own family and individual characteristics, as well as prior educational experience.

Integration is understood in two senses; academic and social. Over time the two interact and the resulting process may lead to a greater or lesser likelihood of retention. On the one hand, good grades, adopting academic norms and values as well a strong student identity are factors which support academic integration (Tinto 1975; Pascarella et al. 1986). Alongside this, feeling comforted and accepted by friends and the experience of personal contact with academic staff bolster social integration.

Pre-entry attributes and subsequent experiences of integration were considered predictors for positive responses to educational environments including rates of persistence. Later, this model was developed further to include consideration of commitments external to the institution, as well as the student's intentions around completion. It was proposed that:

> *"the stronger the individual's level of social and academic integration, the greater his or her subsequent commitment to the institution and to the goal of college graduation"* (Pascarella et al. 1986, pp.155-156).

(Thomas 2002) extends this work and suggests further spheres of integration: economic (around student finance), support (e.g. counselling or academic support) and democratic (e.g. students' union).

For students from groups under-represented at university, Tinto's focus on pre-entry factors may have heightened relevance in determining the likelihood of retention. As Thomas (2002) suggests, Bourdieu's theory of habitus can help illuminate the interaction with the experiences of students, for example from working-class backgrounds. The disposition of each student is shaped by their family and social background, and when they transition to university they bring with them the norms and practices associated with their

class background or "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977). This serves to structure subsequent education experiences, which will in turn influence further experiences such as postgraduate study and employment (Thomas 2002).

A student's habitus is embedded in their everyday lives, in the beliefs, behaviours and language of a person. In parallel, institutions such as universities have their own norms and practices, known as *"institutional habitus"* (McDonough and Antonio 1996; Reay 1998; Reay et al. 2001). The nature of institutional habitus is dominated by the controlling class who possess cultural capital and their status and power are maintained and legitimised through institutions such as universities. As such, the education system can be viewed as culturally-biased because of the language, culture and resources which favour middle-class, White students (Reay et al. 2001; Thomas 2002).

What this means for students from under-represented groups at university is a sense of alienation as opposed to integration. The differences between low-income students' habitus and that of the institution results in an incongruence, where the tacit knowledge, values and practices of these students are not valued. The result is a lack of integration on various levels, as the student does not fit in (Thomas 2002) and a corresponding risk to those students' chances of retention and success. This theory is supported by research with participants from working-class backgrounds attending an elite university, who despite their status as students at the institution still perceived it as an *"alien place"* (Tett 2004, p.256).

There has been considerable interest in exploring the concepts of habitus and cultural capital for understanding academic achievement (or lack thereof) and social mobility. One example is Burnell's research (2015) with ten mature, working-class HE students which supported the influence of habitus on the student experience. It also recognises that the nature of this influence could vary tremendously between students, as evidenced by some participants experiencing persistent self-doubt and alienation, whilst others adopted positive new academic identities. Furthermore, habitus was found to

change to accommodate new practices in ways that were deep and capable themselves of being socially reproduced (Burnell 2015). Such changes can occur through *"habitus clash"* (Bowl 2003) or modification and incorporation of one's existing habitus (Reay et al. 2009).

The theories of retention or non-completion briefly presented here contribute to our understanding of the complex processes at play throughout the student lifecycle. However, there are important issues to consider when applying these constructs to our understanding of success and retention issues for students from WP backgrounds.

Firstly, habitus perhaps can be seen as "*permeable and responsive"* (Reay 2004, p.434); there is no fixed, unchangeable quality to our norms and values. Bourdieu (1993) is often criticised for being vague in explaining the role of habitus in the reproduction of power; yet this indeterminate quality of habitus is something he recognised himself. This may be to do with the levels of habitus, which at once possess a degree of uniformity (e.g. at the level of social class) and a degree of idiosyncrasy (e.g. at the level of the individual). This means that the habitus of students from low-income families, working-class backgrounds and/ or first-generation entrants to HE does not determine underachievement and failure, although it may help explain the reproduction of social inequalities before, during and after participation at HE.

Moreover, the Bourdieusian constructs used by Thomas and others best serve educational research when they are closely tied to empirical work. Struggling with questions around why students from different backgrounds persist and thrive at university whilst others do not requires becoming *"immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality"* (Bourdieu 1993, p.271). This means a move towards evaluating the ways in which individuals adapt and respond to the contexts in which they find themselves (Reay 2004).

2.4.10 *Theories of academic underachievement in low socioeconomic and low-income families*

Going beyond theories of retention and non-completion, explanations of how students from low-income or low socioeconomic backgrounds come to achieve worse educational outcomes than their peers are needed. A recent House of Commons Education Committee (HCEC) paper (2014) explored White, working-class educational underachievement and identified a number of salient family/ home, school and the wider social factors pertaining to these differentials.

One persistent idea which can be seen in the aforementioned report is that children from disadvantaged families hold lower educational aspirations (HCEC 2014). This is at odds with other research (Doyle and Griffin 2012) which suggests that low aspirations are not likely to be the cause of lower attainment, and in fact found very little difference in aspiration level across all social groups. It was argued instead that the difference between those from richer or poorer backgrounds was the strength of conviction around being able to achieve their goals. This finding is supported elsewhere in the literature around self-efficacy and academic success (see Section 2.3).

Social capital is also a highly relevant construct in explaining underachievement (Field and Spence 2000) because high aspirations without appropriate social resources (such as family networks or work connections) means that turning motivation into attainment can be challenging.

Likewise, the concepts of cultural capital and habitus become relevant again in considering conflict experienced by working-class students between the cultures of their families/friends and their universities. Some researchers suggest that the way in which first-generation students negotiate these conflicts may influence their ultimate success (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). Achieving the right "fit" between their own habitus and that of their university has been noted as a priority for students (Ball et al. 2002). Lack of perceived relevance of curriculum has also been found to be a factor in

disengagement with education, particularly with White working-class boys (Reay et al. 2009), which may also point to a "mismatch".

In terms of economic capital, there is a wealth of evidence indicating that the financial limitations of students from low-income families may encourage them to study at local institutions and live at home. The actual number of full-time students who live at home and commute to HE more than doubled from 8% in the mid-1980s to 20% in the mid-2000s (Jackson et al. 2005). A disproportionate number of these students originated from low-income backgrounds. This means that less consideration was given by these students to the status of the institution even though it is an important determining factor in subsequent employability in higher and professional occupations (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). It may also mean fewer opportunities for students to engage in activities which aid transition and success (Moore et al. 2013).

University choice in the age of marketisation is of great interest to researchers, who have identified substantive class differences in ways of choosing. Parental involvement in decisions around their offspring's student journey is influenced by their socioeconomic backgrounds; understandably, not all parents are equally informed and engaged in these processes. For example, Ball et al. (2002) detailed the characteristics of "embedded or contingent" choosers in terms of capital that young people bring to the decision to enter HE. Alternatively, Pugsley (2018, p.143) distinguishes between families "thrusting, trusting and trying". So, HE expansion continues to disproportionately benefit young people from richer families, by way of their relative levels of retention and success (Blanden and Machin 2004).

The focus of most of this section has considered policy and research which problematises the retention and attainment gaps between rich and poor students. Whilst identifying problems and barriers for target groups might seem to be a common-sense approach, it may not be the best. Viewing WP issues through a deficit lens risks emphasising helplessness and failure amongst these individuals. These students and their families are perceived

as lacking the cultural, social and economic resources needed to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and meritocratic system (Smit 2012). At worst, the deficit approach to understanding issues around widening participation:

> *"perpetuates stereotypes, alienates students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success."* (Smit 2012, p.369).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored both the concept of academic resilience and the current widening participation context and concerns with students from low-income backgrounds. It has critically appraised the extant resilience literature and methodologies, led by psychometric testing. A case has been made for correspondingly extending our understanding of the phenomenon through qualitative methods.

Resilience has been presented as having emerged from a positive psychology paradigm (Seligman 2009; Ungar 2012). To this end it must be seen both as a strength-based approach to understanding successful adaption, but also as an area dominated by quantitative measurement of risk and protective factors. Of these factors, there has traditionally been a great depth of exploration into individual characteristics, with some consideration for parental or wider familial factors. Some headway is being made towards incorporating a deeper understanding of the socio-ecological factors and the role they play in an individual's resilience. It has been proposed that there is considerable scope for a greater contextualisation of resilience through exploring the individual's lifeworld.

Furthermore, much of our understanding of resilience comes from studies of young children; empirical studies of domain-specific resilience are relatively new. As new methods for quantifying academic resilience are under development, there is an urgent need for qualitative research which can explore the essence of the phenomenon. This should be closely linked to the

specific context of concern; that of academically-resilient students from low-income backgrounds.

At present, considerable public and private funds are dedicated to addressing inequalities in the UK HE system which is linked to improving social mobility and equality of opportunity. Relevant policy objectives outlined in the current National Strategy for Access and Student Success (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.10) are to:

- *"narrow the gap between the retention rates of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged.*
- *improve outcomes for different student groups by addressing the unexplained differentials in attainment."*

Dominant thinking in HE has been argued in this chapter to favour a deficit, rather than strength-based approach to WP. It attempts to understand the gaps and challenges detailed throughout this chapter by framing low-income students and their families of origin as somehow lacking. Concentrating on the inadequacies and aiming to fix them through WP initiatives with this ethos at its core minimises the wider inequalities faced by these students.

Most importantly, this model ignores the useful lessons that can be learned from studying those from less privileged backgrounds who overcome their lack of advantage and indeed their experiences of adversity to secure access and success in HE. Building an understanding of what it is like to be a student who has exhibited academic resilience constitutes a valuable undertaking.

Firstly, it can offer empirical evidence in illuminating contextualised protective factors and processes experienced by students; and avoid the arbitrary selection of variables. It may offer up previously unacknowledged skills and strategies used by students to enable academic success.

Secondly it can also bring a new perspective on existing theories around the extent to which social and cultural capital can be superseded. Currently, the perspective of students from low-income families receives little consideration

in the discourse surrounding academic resilience. Listening to the experiences of this HE student minority may go beyond a researcher-defined understanding of academic resilience to provide a much richer interpretation.

2.6 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research project is to explore how university students from low-income backgrounds experience academic resilience. In doing so, it will examine how such experiences and interpretations differ from current understandings of academic resilience presented in the literature. The study will consider what the experiences of academic resilience can tell us about current WP policy and practice.

Thus, the objectives of this project are:

1. To uncover the meaning of the lived experience of resilience of university students from low-income backgrounds

2. To use IPA as a novel research method for capturing "quiet voices" which contribute to a deeper understanding of success and resilience

3. To make recommendations for existing WP policy, practice and research methods using findings from the current research, to better understand and improve success and retention amongst low-income students.

Chapter 3 **Methodology**

3.1 Introduction

Approaching the current enquiry has required consideration of underlying assumptions about knowledge claims. This chapter outlines the philosophical approach of the study, in relation to the overall aims and objectives. It then continues to explain the rationale for selecting IPA and the way in which data was collected and analysed in this study.

3.1.1 *Employing a qualitative methodology*

The underlying research philosophy of this study consists of the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher. In exploring the research questions, the assumption is that it may not be possible, nor even desirable to separate the participant or researcher from the world. There is no presumed objective reality to the phenomenon of academic resilience; indeed, the thoughts and systems of meaning belonging to the participant, researcher and reader of this work are all part of the construction.

Specific to resilience research, qualitative approaches are *"well-suited to the discovery of unnamed protective processes"* (Ungar 2003, p.85). As explored in the literature review section of this report, greater trustworthiness about participants' lived experiences of adversity and success may be achieved through capturing thick description. This contrasts with existing numerical measurements of variables thought to be associated with resilience, such as the CD-RISC (Connor and Davidson 2003). This distinction underpins the objectives of the current research to explore resilience in a way that goes beyond its present status as a second-order, "top-down" construct.

A constructivist epistemology constitutes the underlying philosophy of this research. This view is one of multiple perspectives of meaning regarding the experience of students and an ontological rejection that there is one objective reality regarding the nature and meaning of resilience (Morgan and Smircich

1980). Meanings and personal "truths" are expressed through the individual's thoughts and feelings about their experiences and can be understood within their specific social and historical contexts. For instance, an individual who demonstrates success in one domain may remain vulnerable to challenging forces in other aspects of their well-being (Masten 2009). As such, reliance on causal models and hypothesis-testing associated with quantitative approaches risks producing predetermined or biased findings (Ungar 2003).

This research explores the phenomenon of academic resilience through the lived experience of low-income HE students. Thus, a qualitative approach has been taken to uncover the meaning of these lived experiences and to capture the unheard voices. These can then contribute to an understanding of resilience and to impact WP policy, practice and research methods in ways that improve success and retention amongst low-income students.

3.1.2 *Choosing amongst approaches*

There are numerous approaches within qualitative research from which to choose. Selecting amongst them involves establishing the requirements of the research problem, the personal stance of the researcher and the audience for whom they write (Creswell 2013). An initial contender as a methodological approach to the present research was grounded theory. This approach would have generated an explanation of the factors and processes of resilience through generating, testing and refining a theory.

However, enquiries using grounded theory may attempt to limit or even omit background reading of the academic literature (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1998). This approach would have been highly problematic given the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of the topic area. Through initial reading around student success and academic resilience, there appeared to be much greater potential in developing a strategy for enquiry which involved exploring tensions and limitations in the existing literature.

The aims of this study directed the choice of methodology towards a deeper understanding which focused on exploring both the shared and divergent

experiences of low-income students. The opportunity to draw out cross-case interpretations as well as finding meaning in individual accounts was prioritised over the type of theory building and testing grounded theory would have required throughout the project.

A narrative enquiry or life history approach was also considered. The data collection techniques associated with this approach were appealing in that they might offer insight into the development of individuals across their learning journeys; yet doubt was raised about the potential for achieving sufficient depth of interpretation of the social and emotional aspects of their experience. The nature of the analysis and presentation of findings in this type of study as a "storyline" (Creswell 2013) was felt by the researcher to yield a less compelling outcome, which might fail to address the objectives around influencing current research methods, policy and practice within WP.

Generally speaking, phenomenological approaches aim to capture the lived experience of people in their everyday lives, without reducing these to identifiable variables or controlling the context in which they are being explored (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). In contrast with other qualitative approaches, phenomenology is concerned with meaning and how meaning arises through experience. Phenomenological methodologies allow for an exploration of students' experiences of adversity and overcoming, with particular focus on description, relationships and interpretation rather than causality.

Several different albeit similar types of phenomenological enquiry exist. Phenomenology is rooted in a distinct philosophical tradition, and as a method of enquiry can be broadly split into descriptive and interpretative approaches. Descriptive phenomenology is heavily influenced by the work of Husserl (1970), and in practice is concerned with achieving transcendental subjectivity through attempts to resist influencing the object of study (Langdridge 2007). In contrast, interpretative phenomenology gives explicit recognition to the role of the researcher in the co-construction of phenomena of concern (Smith et al. 2009). The researcher's "foreknowledge" is an

essential and recognised part of the interpretative process and is made transparent to the readership of the work.

Thus, the decision to use an interpretative phenomenological methodology was made as it offered a greater opportunity to engage with mainstream psychological concepts, such as resilience (Langdridge 2007; Smith et al. 2009). It also better addressed the research's aims and objectives, by offering the opportunity to employ IPA. IPA is a relatively novel approach to researching issues in WP, but frequently used in health and social care research (Gauntlett et al. 2017).

3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is both a philosophical framework and method of enquiry, based on particular aspects of phenomenology and hermeneutics (see Figure 3). IPA was introduced by Jonathan Smith in the seminal paper *"Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology"* (Smith 1996), as an alternative approach to quantitative and established qualitative methodologies used in psychology which prioritised the need for deep interpretation of participant accounts. The method has become widely accepted within certain fields of psychology such as health research, and has undergone further refinement (Smith et al. 2009; Eatough 2012).
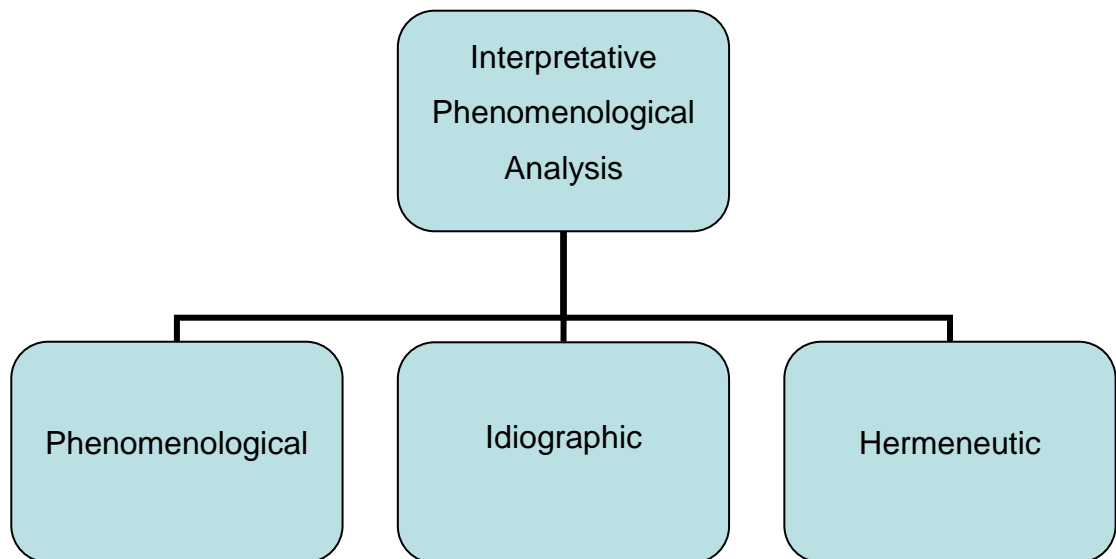
Figure 3 :   Key aspects of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

3.2.1 *IPA as phenomenological*

IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring and capturing the lived experience of a specified phenomenon (Smith 2004). It involves the detailed consideration of participants' lifeworlds; i.e. their experiences of a particular phenomenon and how they have made sense of and given meaning to these experiences (Smith 2004). The goal of IPA research is not

to produce an objective record of the event itself, but to explore a personal conception of the phenomenon at hand, in line with the original thinking of Husserl (1970).

3.2.2 *IPA as hermeneutic*

Whilst exploring the individual's personal experiences of their world is a goal of IPA, access to this is also dependent on the researcher's own conceptions. This is because of the epistemological stance assumed by IPA, that what we may discover about the world is based on social interaction which constructs knowledge. This principle makes IPA distinct from descriptive phenomenology which advocates bracketing. 'Bracketing' is a term used to denote the putting aside of one's existing assumptions and beliefs relating to a phenomenon. Giorgi (1985, p.91) defines this procedure as a *"suspension of presumptive judgement".* Foreknowledge in IPA is regarded as the tools people have that enable them to make sense of their own worlds, as well as the experience of others (Smith et al. 2009). Sense-making necessitates interpretative activity; hence, Heidegger's theory of hermeneutics in phenomenology is a touchstone of IPA (1962). To be, means to be in the world; individual or dispositional processes are of diminished importance because individuals are inextricably related to others and the world (Heidegger 1962). Thus, reflective processes in IPA take on a new aspect, one that is particularly temporal, social, and situated. Smith et al. (2009) describe this as the "double hermeneutic" wherein the researcher must try to make sense of the experience that the participant has tried to share with them, in a way that also makes sense.

3.2.3 *IPA as idiographic*

IPA assumes a strongly idiographic approach. To some extent, a detailed analysis of the individual case becomes the end in itself or may involve a limited number of other similarly detailed analyses (Smith and Osborn 2015). This means looking closely at what the experience is like for the one person, appreciating the way in which the person makes sense of what is happening

or has happened to them. Thus, IPA aims to explore in depth the experience of each individual, then detail the similarities and differences between small numbers of participants, finally offering any general claims that present themselves through the analysis (Smith and Osborn 2015). This sits in contrast with an approach such as grounded theory which explicitly seeks to establish claims for the broader population. Instead, IPA examines divergence and convergence in smaller samples, which enhances the validity of findings, thereby increasing their impact and importance (Yardley 2008). Whilst results may have limited generalisability, they have transferability in that they may tell the reader something that is interesting, important or useful about the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009, p.183).

3.3 Rationale for choosing IPA

The rationale for using this methodology is that it engages qualitative, experiential research with mainstream psychology. Thus, the lived experience of university students from low-income backgrounds can be viewed against the background of models and measures of psychological resilience which have emerged from positive psychology (see discussion of this in Chapter Two).Qualitative research can reveal the role of resilience in academic success (Ungar 2003; Rutter 2012), whilst avoiding the arbitrariness associated with the selection of resilience outcomes, risk factors and protective factors that quantitative analysis would entail.

Phenomenology is an appropriate choice because in coming to university, the everyday flow of lived experience acquires a special significance for the individual. They become a student. It is an important occasion and what Dilthey (1976) would describe as *"an experience"* rather than just experience. Attending university and becoming a student is a linked series of discrete experiences (application, enrolment, attending induction, attending classes, performing independent study, submitting assignments, using support services, participating in seminars and tutorials). Thus, it can be considered a comprehensive unit of experience (Dilthey 1976). Key events such as application, interview or acceptance that precede attending university may

come to be viewed as part of the experience, despite being separated in time. The major significance of the phenomenon means that the person who is subject to the experience is likely to have reflected on the events and considered how they think and feel about their time as an undergraduate. These experiences can be explored from the horizons of understanding we each experience; what Heidegger (1962) calls "the lifeworld" or Dilthey's "nexus of life" (1976). The experience of being a student is one that can only ever be understood as lived; all the interactions, objects and people which accompany it take place amongst the dynamic backdrop of the individual's world.

IPA has been chosen specifically because it is consistent with the epistemological stance of the research question; the focus on understanding and interpretation of people's experiences and the meaning they carry (Smith et al. 2009). Although predominantly used in psychology and health research, IPA lends itself to educational research; in particular this study because of its links with the psychosocial construct of resilience. Combining descriptive and interpretative accounts would allow analysis of the cognitive and affective elements of students' experience. There are a limited number of IPA studies in education, and these tend to focus on aspects such as student health concerns and the experience of undergraduates with disabilities (Conroy and de Visser 2013; Denovan and Macaskill 2013). However, IPA as a methodology remains a relatively novel approach to exploring the student experience, particularly in relation to widening participation (Gauntlett et al. 2017).

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics is considered here more as a process than a product. In a reductionist sense, ethical approval was a product sought through the formal mechanisms of the university. Yet consideration of ethics was more of an ongoing activity that stretched from the conception of the research right through to publication. The well-being and dignity of the participants was paramount to the researcher, as someone familiar with working with young

people, rather than considered as a minimum requirement for ethics paperwork. Thus, engaging ethically with the research was a continuous process of reflection.

A request for ethical approval was submitted to the Bournemouth University's Science, Technology and Health Ethics Panel in mid-May 2015, eight months into the project. Subject to minor alterations outlined below, obtaining ethical permission was straightforward, and was granted in June 2015.

In exploring the students' experiences, potentially sensitive topics such as family and prior educational experiences naturally arose. Risks of emotional distress were minimised through clearly briefing the participants as to the nature and purpose of the research within the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1), as well as on the day of interview. The Participant Information Sheet also outlined participants' rights and issues of data protection. Participants were notified in advance that their interviews would be audio-recorded, and their consent was obtained for this purpose. They were offered written and verbal reminders of their right to withdraw, and details of sources of support available to them.

Participants had the right to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after their interview was completed. They were informed of the intended outcome of the research as a PhD thesis with the possibility of publication within academic journals. Formal written consent (Appendix 2) was obtained from each participant prior to participation to ensure they had given full and free permission to take part in the study and agreed to audio recording.

Recordings remained in the researcher's possession on a password protected device and were destroyed following transcription. Transcripts were not kept for longer than necessary past the completion of the researcher's studies at the University and shared with the supervisory team. Transcript excerpts were anonymised before appearing in the thesis and publications resulting from the research. Any information disclosed by participants who

could personally identify them (e.g. references to named staff) was omitted or changed. Likewise, references were made to the participant's broad area of study rather than the precise title of their degree.

3.5 Sample

3.5.1 *Sample size*

Consistent with most qualitative approaches to data collection, sampling was not carried out on a probabilistic basis. Following recommendations by Smith et al. (2009) and Langdridge (2007), the study employed a sample of around eight students. Rather than attempting to achieve representativeness of this population, *"a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant"* is sought to bring the most relevant material to light (Smith and Osborn 2015, p.56).

One reason for this is that the data collected was intended to represent a perspective on a phenomenon, not a population of students. Adopting this approach meant the sample was sufficient to allow meaningful points of comparison and contrast between participants; reflecting the commitment to detail and depth of exploration without the risk of "drowning in data" (Langdridge 2007; Smith et al. 2009). Even given limitless time to conduct research, the philosophical stance of the approach still rejects the nomothetic dominance common to quantitative research. Thus, the small sample size reflects a commitment to the methodological approach which is an essential indicator of good quality IPA (Smith et al. 2009).

3.5.2 *Recruitment strategy*

Selection of participants was purposive; they volunteered for the study and were confirmed to be from lowest-income households (below £25,000 per annum). Whilst adopting any specific threshold may be problematic, setting a maximum income level was required to ensure some homogeneity within the sample. At the time the research was carried out, incomes of <£25,000 were specified by OFFA to be the "lowest income" households. Other specific

inclusion criteria were that participants were considered young entrants (aged 21 or below at the start of their course)and were UK-domiciled. One reason for this was that including students of such a wide range of ages and different cultures was likely to create a highly diverse sample which might make comparative analysis at best difficult, and at worst, superficial. The proposed sample, however, was intended to allow for analysis of convergence and divergence at a good level of detail (Smith et al. 2009). As such, findings that emerged from the research sample had the potential to be transferable.

Initially, the recruitment strategy involved undergraduate participants being identified and referred through the University's GROW@BU Student Engagement Team (SET). This team consists of recent Bournemouth University graduates who offer advice and guidance to current students about a range of student support issues, including academic concerns, accommodation, finance, health and well-being. One-to-one interactions with students are recorded, and student details, including WP status are accessible to the team. By asking the team to directly approach students who met the study criteria on behalf of the project, they acted as gatekeepers of students' confidential information. In line with ethics, the team contacted students directly to protect their personal details; volunteers then contacted the researcher to maintain privacy.

However, after reviewing engagement data, the SET found the "pool" contained too few current students to enable direct contact. Instead of recruiting any participants this way, the SET officer contacted all second-year students via internal email instead. The participant invitation outlined essential criteria for participation as coming from the lowest-income background, from a low NS-SEC group (4-8), or first in family to attend university. The additional criteria were added to encourage students to respond who might not be certain of their exact family income status. In this event, this could be confirmed with the GROW@BU SET prior to interview.

GROW@BU also offered a £10 Amazon voucher to compensate individuals for their time.

There were several unexpected issues with obtaining participants. Although ethical approval was granted in the summer, recruitment was planned for the start of the new academic year, so students would physically be present on campus and to make arranging interview times more straightforward. Recruitment commenced mid-November 2015 and fifteen expressions of interest were received from students within the first week. Some of these volunteers were excluded because they were mature students, and in one case that they did not meet the low-income criteria. Following first contact, participants were issued consent forms and information sheets to provide them with additional detail of the study. Of those issued further study information, eight participants agreed to be interviewed between one and two weeks after agreeing to take part.

3.6 Study Design

3.6.1 *Choice of semi-structured interview*

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were chosen as the data collection tool, as they invite participants to offer rich, detailed descriptions of their experience (Smith et al. 2009). The semi-structured interview is described as the exemplary method of data collection in IPA (Smith and Osborn 2015), but it is by no means the only technique. In this instance, the use of 1:1 interviewing was preferable to focus groups because of the narrative nature of participant's accounts and the need to understand who they were and how they came to be where they were at that time. It also facilitated rapport which was essential to exploring the personal challenges and successes students face. Maintaining some broad structure allowed the researcher to establish both commonality and contrast between the experiences of different participants.

3.6.2 *Interview schedule*

The interview guide included a small number of broad topics, formed around the research questions (Appendix 3). In order to place participants' voices at the centre of the interviews, the interactions were led to a large extent by participants. The process was designed to allow freedom and reflexivity (Smith and Osborn 2015), so participants could discuss issues of personal significance to them, but the researcher could also invite them to reflect more deeply on these experiences. Following the approach advocated by Smith et al. (2009), it became a conversation with a purpose, where research questions were not approached directly, but "sideways". It was also intended that the broad nature of the questions and prompts should allow a good degree of flexibility in enabling the researcher to capture the uniqueness of individual voices (Langdridge 2007).

A decision was made not to conduct a formal pilot interview prior to data collection. Whilst pilot interviews are often a useful tool in preparing for a full-scale study, the flexibility and simplicity of this interview schedule meant a complete run through was not essential. Questions did not require further development in order to 'lead' participants in a specific direction. This is important in phenomenological research as it aims it capture the student's lived experience in whatever this may mean to them. Instead, the schedule was shared amongst the supervisory team, an independent researcher in the field of WP, and a student and staff member of the GROW@BU team. Feedback on clarity and comprehensiveness was gathered and used to refine the schedule.

3.6.3 *Advantages and disadvantages*

There were distinct disadvantages to this method for the research at hand. Although a set of interview topics was formulated prior to interview, it was an iterative process wherein questions and probes were modified during each interaction. As Smith and Osborn (2015) argue, novel avenues are often the most valuable and enlightening dimensions of the investigation, and as such

the interview structure must allow for great flexibility. Thus, each interview was unique and faithful to the context of the individual's descriptions of experience, but potentially more difficult to compare at later stages of analysis and interpretation. The flexible nature of the technique reduced researcher control over the situation and took longer to analyse as important details and ideas were, particularly in some cases "buried" (Smith and Osborn 2015).

3.7 Interview Process

3.7.1 *Recruitment of participants*

Interview times were arranged for a total of eight participants. Of these, seven took place as planned; one student did not attend due to illness nor respond to a subsequent proposal to reschedule. Interestingly, three of the participants were from the same course, or courses with significant overlap. Their experience of teaching and learning at the university was therefore potentially more similar than that of the other participants. Whilst it could be coincidental that these students were undertaking similar courses, it could also be that they were known to one another or had a tutor in common who had encouraged them to take part. This is speculative however, as none of the students mentioned knowing anyone else who was participating or made any named reference to one another.

An overview of the biographical details of the participants is located in Table 6.All participants were White British and first in their families to come to university[1]. The participants were aged between 19-22 years old at the time of interview. Four of the seven participants were female and all but one was in their second year of HE study[2]. Three of the seven participants declared a learning difficulty or disability, with one participant also having a diagnosed mental health disorder. All participants belonged to NS-SEC 6-8, with three

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[1]One participant, Damien was first-generation entrant to HE in his immediate family. He later disclosed at interview his great-grandfather had been a university professor.

[2] Jess was repeating her first year of study at the time of interview.

coming from households of long-term unemployment. Participants had completed a mix of Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and A-level courses, with one participant having entered HE through an Access to HE course. Only one participant came from a two-parent household. Participants came from a mixture of POLAR3 neighbourhoods, with three participants previously residing in the lowest ('1') classification. Four of the participants were also engaged in part-time employment.

Name	Age/ gender	Year of study	POLAR3 postcode	NS-SEC/ main earner occupation	Family background	Learning difficulties/ disabilities	Highest qualifications on entry (QoE)	Part-time employment
Damien	20 M	2	5	6 School caretaker	Single parent family, two older siblings	- Dyspraxia - Dyslexia	Level 3 Extended Diploma (DDD)	Y- freelance media
Gino	20 M	2	1	7 Cashier	Single parent family, two siblings	No	A-levels (BBC)	Y- shop assistant
Lee	19 M	2	5	8 Long-term unemployed	Single parent family, younger sibling	No	A-levels (BCC)	N
Grace	22 F	2	2	6 Hairdresser	Single parent family, no siblings	- Dyspraxia - Dyscalculia - Dyslexia	Access to HE	Y- café waitress
Isla	19 F	2	5	6 Teaching assistant	Single parent family, one younger sibling	No	BTEC (DMM)	N
Jess	20 F	1	1	8 Long-term unemployed	Two parent family, one younger sibling	No	A-levels (BCDE)	Y- office cleaner
Kat	20 F	2	1	8 Long-term unemployed	Single parent family, one older sibling	- Dyslexia - Auditory Processing Disorder - Bipolar Disorder	BTEC (DDD)	N

Table 6: Summary of participants' details

3.7.2 *Timing and location*

Interviews took place during the last two weeks of November 2015. Interviews lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour 50 minutes; the typical length was around 1 hour 20 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room positioned within a central location on campus. The room was selected for proximity to other staff in case support was needed for the researcher or participant. It was checked for any hazards prior to each interview. Participants each had several email exchanges with the researcher prior to meeting in person. In building further rapport, participants were welcomed and introduced to the researcher. They were also invited to ask questions of the researcher before beginning the interview itself.

3.7.3 *Reflections on the interviews*

In most interviews, conversation began quite readily as participants began with answering an open-ended question about how they came to be students at the university. This opening question quite often set up the content for the remainder of the interview, with participants later making references to what they had initially identified as central to their journeys as students. Some strong dispositional qualities were also mentioned across several interviews; individuals identified as being self-disciplined and determined. There was far less discussion by participants of the impact and experience of teaching and learning in their courses than anticipated. However, participants did identify some pedagogic strategies and activities that they perceived as contributory to their development and achievement. In the main, participants strongly focused on experiences that reflected their interaction with others: tutors, family members, friends and course mates.

One issue with the interview guide arose in the second interview when the participant was asked to explain what the term "resilience" meant to them. This participant and several subsequent ones could not readily define the term. This seemed to be a technical difficulty with language, so the question was modified to include a standard definition from the literature which was offered to all participants for them to consider and discuss. An example of how this was approached in interview is given in Table 7.

I: Got myself together and gone in yeah, I sat next to a few girls and just followed them round all day. I just kept thinking about what my friends at home were doing and stuff and that I just didn't think it was for me at all.

R: But things sound like they have changed since then. It's great that you've told me about that, as I wanted to ask you about your understanding of resilience…?

I: Not heard… what's that?

R: Means different things to different people, some might say it's when you have a difficult adverse experience but despite that might have a good outcome in the end, or don't but you stick with it...or maybe it is how people just overcome challenges and bounce back. Sort of no one single answer maybe…

I: So, like being a bit tough? I do feel like I suppose I am still quite shy. But I'm 100% less shy than I was!! [laughs]. *Like when I started and that I think I speak to people a lot more.*

Table 7:   Extract from interview with Isla

In this extract from Isla's interview, she has already led into the exploration of resilience somewhat by her discussion of early challenges at university. As the researcher asks to explore the meaning of resilience for her, Isla is not familiar with the term. Offering multiple possible interpretations which may be equally valid, the researcher is interrupted by Isla's own idea. For her, it relates to toughness. Crucially this idea of "toughness" had appeared before the question on resilience as Isla speaks of having to "just get myself together" in a difficult situation. It recurs throughout Isla's account as she explores her growing confidence at university. The exchange presented here was typical of all participants who were unsure of the term. Thus, whilst there was risk in asking participants directly about the term resilience, it seems unlikely given their responses and the wider context of each interview to have directed them towards a specific answer that deviated from their true experience.

Researcher notes from the interviews revealed that participants talked a lot about the presence and influence of family in their lives, and how this had influenced their student experience. Several participants were from single-parent families and had been raised mostly by their mothers; this played a prominent role in discussions of coping with challenges during their first year at university. This was an unexpected direction for these interviews to take; but in the spirit of phenomenological enquiry it was imperative to let the conversations take this direction.

3.8 Data analysis

Smith et al. (2009) recommend a distinctive process for engaging in systematic analysis of data, with focus on how the participant makes sense of their experience. Analysis moves from what is particular towards what is shared between participant accounts', and thus from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith et al. 2009). Each participant's data is therefore analysed in its entirety before other accounts are considered. The approach to analysis follows that suggested by Smith et al. (2009) which consists of six steps:

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Initial noting
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes
5. Moving on to the next case
6. Looking for patterns across cases

The application of and variation from this procedure during analysis will be discussed, as well as issues of quality such as validity, reliability and corresponding constructs for qualitative research, after first attending to the process of transcription.

3.8.1 *Transcription*

Each interview recording was transcribed by the researcher personally. Interview recordings were listened to once in their entirety before transcription began, to become familiar with the data. This was also a key opportunity to engage reflection by writing in the research diary the first, pressing thoughts linking the participants' words to the research question or pre-existing knowledge.

The initial transcription contained all words, pauses, laughter and stutters to offer maximum possible context. If part of the conversation was inaudible, then [inaudible] was used. All the participants were given pseudonyms to respect their status as human individuals, whilst maintaining their right to confidentiality. Some recordings also included the real names of other students, support staff or lecturers; these were also changed to pseudonyms during transcription in order to maintain confidentiality.

After transcription of content was complete and "cleaned" in the manner described above, it was then formatted in a way to allow for the auditable steps of analysis to be conducted (Appendix 4). This analysis-ready page follows a standard IPA format (Smith et al. 2009): landscape, line-numbered with space to the right of the transcript for initial noting (step two), and to the left for emergent themes (step three).

3.8.2 *Stages of analysis*

The first step consisted of reading and re-reading the text. In this case, it entailed reading participant interview transcripts and noting initial points of interest as step two. This included primarily descriptive comments about language, but also some interpretative, questioning remarks about what the content revealed about the participants' understanding. From these initial notes, the researcher moved towards developing emergent themes (step three), whilst focused on retaining relevant data from transcripts (Smith et al. 2009).

Next, an initial process of theme clustering occurred; this essentially linked the emergent themes with superordinate themes for the individual participant (step four). A clear relationship was established between the emergent and superordinate themes. Once analysis had been completed to this level, other cases were considered using the same steps (moving on to the next case: step five).

Both stages (four and five) required in-depth and rigorous interpretation, as well as casting and re-grouping of themes. This was a challenge given the sheer volume of emergent themes and notes from each transcript. Several techniques derived from the work of Smith et al. (2009) were used to search for connections across themes and between participants and a small selection of key strategies is presented in Table 8. Photographs of some of these methods and examples of the resulting groupings can be found in Appendix 5. An overview of the processes of analysis can be found in Appendices 6 and 7.

Technique	Description
Abstraction	Putting "like with like" to create a superordinate theme
Contextualisation	Constellations of themes around a particular life event or key moment for the individual
Polarisation	Clustering by oppositional relationships- e.g. positive and negative emotions around the same experience
Subsumption	Emergent theme is highly significant/ recurrent and "lifted" to the status of superordinate

Table 8: Techniques used to search for themes (adapted from Smith et al. 2009, p. 96-99)

The final step, step six of this process, involved identification of connections between cases, whilst modifying or re-framing existing themes drawn from each case (Smith et al. 2009). A representation of this process is detailed in Appendix 8. Here the advantage of a small, relatively homogenous sample became evident, in that it allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of variability. From this extended process of coding and analysis, a narrative emerged consisting of a detailed interpretation of the phenomenon of resilience, supported by extracts of individual participants' accounts. The outcome of this was a cross-case analysis which highlights both similarities and differences (Smith et al. 2009; Smith and Osborn 2015).

3.8.3 *Advantages and disadvantages*

One advantage of using IPA is that the rigorous processes of coding and interpretation are well-described in the methodological literature. However, a challenge remains: whilst examples of analysis are clearly illustrated across a number and variety of studies, flexibility and originality must take precedence in both data collection and analysis (Smith and Osborn 2015). So, whilst guidance for analysis remains clear, the researcher has attempted to pursue novel, complex lines of enquiry most faithful to the original aims and methodology.

Aside from consideration of the prescriptive qualities of the analytical method, IPA was essentially preferable for this research as it better addressed the research question than a purely descriptive phenomenological account. Whilst description illuminates little understood aspects of an individual's experience, interpretation was used to examine contextual features and influences such as gender, culture, disability or the wellbeing of participants as they have experienced the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009). This created its own set of challenges around capturing both the descriptive and interpretative accounts which is explored later throughout the process of data analysis and discussion.

3.9 Reflexivity

The epistemological position of IPA requires qualitative researchers to "own" their own perspectives (Elliott et al. 1999). For this reason, this section will use first person narrative, to clarify my position as researcher and my commitment to transparency, essential to the hermeneutic aspect.

3.9.1 *Researcher foreknowledge*

The way in which the design of the study, data collection and analysis were carried out were bounded by my existing knowledge, beliefs and professional experience. Unlike other forms of phenomenological enquiry, there is no recommendation within IPA to engage in processes of bracketing discussed

earlier in this chapter. Likewise, "epoché", or the act of suspending judgement about aspects of experience that are hidden does not form part of the analytical process (Smith et al. 2009).Whilst there is no requirement for insider knowledge, there is no such thing as too much or too little prior experience. However, the foreknowledge which exists does require exploration and reflection as part of the process of researcher reflexivity (Smith et al. 2009).

My interpretative framework has been influenced by the experience I have had as a teacher of students aged 16-19 years, and my role as UCAS advisor to those in my tutor group. It has also been shaped by my own experiences of applying to and studying at university. More recently, my role as a project officer in widening participation at HE has also changed my beliefs and ideas about working with young people and undergraduates from disadvantaged backgrounds.

One motivation for this research was to move away from a focus on barriers faced by students from widening participation backgrounds. I was interested to hear instead about how challenges had been overcome and students' own understandings and feelings around success. I expected from speaking to former A-level students as well as current first-year undergraduates that the first few weeks of university might be a "make or break" experience for some. Homesickness and struggles to fit in academically and socially were anticipated. My work in widening participation projects drew me towards the belief that financial security might also be important to students' resilience.

3.9.2 *Reflective techniques*

To document the research journey and explore the influence of my preconceptions and experiences on the process, I kept an ongoing journal. It contains my reflections about the problems I encountered, questions I considered, and ideas that needed further research or consideration. This is complimented by field notes and notes from supervisory discussions which helped me to make decisions throughout the project. Reflexivity can be

viewed as a spectrum, or as different layers (Smith et al. 2009). Accordingly, some of my recorded reflections were fairly basic and involved minimal awareness of the impact of foreknowledge; others were deliberately controlled reflection and formal analysis of the content of my earlier, more immediate impressions.

As part of the design of the research I was concerned that the interview guide should contain clear, unambiguous questions that should steer participants towards discussing relevant experiences. My experience of working with young people made me question whether they would understand terminology such as "resilience", and how I would deal with this in vivo. It was discussed at length within my supervisory team whether it might somehow contaminate participants' accounts by being too directive. Eventually, this was navigated through introducing the concept later in the interview at what felt like an appropriate stage. For instance, most participants began by describing challenges, barriers and achievements they had experienced before coming to university. When participants shared these stories, it felt natural to acknowledge what they had meant to them and to delve deeper into their meaning as accounts of resilience. This is also referred to later in Chapters Five and Six.

I decided that more probing questions should emerge during the interviews in (order to *"unfold"* (Smith et al. 2009, p.68), to encourage disclosure of each participant's story rather than generic description. Whilst preparing the interview guide I was imagining what I expected students to think and say in response to my questions. I was conscious that I wanted to hear what they were saying however, and to understand their experience required me to re-examine the "taken for granted" that I perhaps expected.

One strategy I employed was trying to reflect the participant's own tone and language when probing statements further. This was part of the process of entering disequilibrium for me as researcher, as a state of imbalance resulting in the adoption or modification of my beliefs. The participants were the experts and I was hoping to enter their world, or at least their world as

> *Completed first interview today with Jess. I was really struck by how confident she is/ was about her choice to retake her year. I kept thinking- I would have gone home! All that way, sticking it out for another year by myself- could I have done the same? She was so resolved and unshaken in her belief it was the right thing to do. I think about my own students, the ones who stuck through the A-level even when it was touch and go whether they would achieve a grade or not. How they told me they wanted to prove others wrong. There was more to it than the grade, there was the perseverance; maybe it was really about what they can prove to themselves.*

Table 9:   Extract from research diary

they presented it to me. Some of my reflections on what I learned are captured in this extract from my research diary (Table 9).

3.9.3 *The sensitive balance*

Embarking on the interviewing process I anticipated many challenges, such as remembering which topics to return to throughout participant-led discussion. I was also concerned with balancing the needs of the participants and their well-being, ensuring that they did not become upset about sensitive issues, but also being willing to gently probe answers for more detail if needed. Having worked with students on pastoral issues previously, I was conscious that some experiences might be too personal and that if they expressed worries or asked for help, how I could direct them to external sources of support.

During interviews, I experienced an ongoing internal conversation with myself in which I considered how responses related to my questions, about whether I was building and maintaining rapport throughout or rushing participants or jumping ahead. Listening to the recording of my first interview prior to meeting the next participant pushed me to consider this further. On reflection, I decided to allow participants longer to answer questions, and to ask more relevant probes to direct them back towards their original lines of thought in places. For example, in the transcript extract below, the participant Gino is given time to detail what he means, as can be seen from the numerous pauses as he chooses his next words. I was interested in his feeling that he needed to be independent. Rather than interrupting, I waited until he came to a natural finish, then probed further to prompt him to reflect on what it meant for him in particular to become independent. This yields a richer description from Gino as he comes back to contrasting himself with others, his former school life, how he depicts the experience to others (his mother) and identifies himself as a "first-timer" in terms of his new freedom (Table 10).

G: Yeah it just kind of showed me in my experience that I did the right thing. Not running in straight away, this is not the kind of thing I want to throw away, looking at it now, now I'm here this chance…

R: What makes you say that about this opportunity?

G: It's such a big deal going to uni and having the qualification, it's not just something everyone does like an A-level college course. It's something you do yourself; no one is forcing you to do. No one's forcing you to go to uni, no one's forcing you to do this. It's that one step, that first step you take where….'cause when you get to sixth form they say oh you're more independent now… but this is on another level! You've got no teachers saying 'do you know what you are doing' you know? Everyone for themselves I say. You can't just say like 'I'm not going today because none of my friends are'. You're paying for this, it's pretty much everyone's first time leaving home you know, and I just don't understand why people want to just waste it. It just makes me beside myself why people want to do that!

R: Ok so interested in that idea about independence you mentioned there? Tell me about how that works for you?

I: So yeah, you haven't just got like… when you are at school and you don't understand you put your hand up. Like it's only like that in seminar here, but in lecture you go in take notes get out. So, you gotta like kind of take it on yourself to sit there, listen…there's so many people in lectures that mess around. Like you're paying for this, what are you doing? But it's not just uni itself, you've got all the responsibilities at home. Doesn't sound like a lot but for a first timer, like I say to my mum I've gotta do this and she's like welcome to my world, but I'm like yeah but…

Table 10: Extract from interview with Gino

3.9.4 *Looking forward*

Reflexivity is embedded within the data analysis phase where the hermeneutic process thickens in complexity. My formal, reflective phenomenological analysis of the transcripts adds a further layer of reflection to the material as part of the double hermeneutic (Smith et al. 2009); offering a subjective interpretation of the subjective accounts of participants which is influenced both by our collective foreknowledge and the dynamic of the research interaction. Moving through the cross-case analysis I was reminded how such foreknowledge and my own beliefs were continually evolving through ongoing immersion in WP literature, the HE environment and policy changes. Each discussion with colleagues, supervisors or other students were potential influencers; although the data had been collected, it was not "static" as such. Thus, my reflexive account extends beyond the next chapters on findings into the discussion and implications sections where, as researcher/ teacher/ practitioner I remain a stakeholder in understanding the phenomenon of academic resilience. Later, this journey is resumed in Chapter Six where an overall evaluation and summary of my reflective journey is presented.

3.10 Quality in IPA research

Qualitative research is subject to thorough consideration of quality, but requires different forms of assessment than quantitative methods. Thus, terminology within this qualitative research moves away from traditional use of positivist criteria such as reliability, validity and generalisability (Finlay 2006). Nonetheless, carrying out an assessment of quality is essential for enquiries using IPA, as all interpretation contains implicit claims to authority (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Smith et al. (2009) refer to Yardley's criteria for judging the essential qualities of all qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance (Yardley 2000). Some of these correspond to certain constructs from within quantitative research, as discussed below. A final evaluation of the quality of

this study and the limitations of the approach are explored in detail in Chapter Six.

3.10.1 *Sensitivity to context*

Sensitivity to context within this study has been addressed through awareness of relevant literature in the fields of resilience research, WP research, policy and practice, as well as relevant texts on methodology. Whilst existing theory and empirical work can influence the interpretation of data, there needs to be evidence that any analysis is faithful and close to the data itself (Yardley 2000). This was explored through sharing examples of quotations and analysis with supervisors, presenting work to WP practitioners and researchers, as well as HE staff. Later in the study, discussion of results and reflexive summaries took place, in order to consider the influence of the researcher on participant's accounts in terms of age, gender and perceived role in the research interaction. This ensures a depth of hermeneutic interpretation which is imperative for good quality IPA research.

3.10.2 *Commitment and rigour*

Commitment and rigour have been addressed through intensive study of the methodological guidance on conducting an IPA study. Attempts to engage in-depth with the phenomenon of academic resilience have been made through the idiographic nature of the study, with its purposive, homogenous sample. A rigorous process of reading analysis and interpretation has been completed, to delve beyond descriptive accounts into detailed comparison of individual cases which will elucidate the phenomenon of resilience. Analysis has been shared at different stages with the supervisory team from initial noting and coding of emergent themes, individual and cross-case themes and analysis. This has meant the process of analysis has been carefully documented and undergone cycles of reflection following discussion with others.

3.10.3 *Transparency and coherence*

The resulting narrative of the results presents the readership with a carefully constructed account of the phenomenon of resilience in low-income students, but one that is grounded in details of their own words (Yardley 2000; Lucy 2008). The transparency of the method is evidenced in this study through an auditable trail of decisions. For example, the development of the interview guide was responsive to the input of the supervisory team, other WP researchers and my own reflections.

IPA cautions strongly against member checking and use of inter-judge reliability (Smith et al. 2009). This is because efforts to pursue replicability or inter-judge reliability jeopardise the epistemological commitment to producing interpretative accounts of experience, consistent with the aims of IPA. The inherent subjectivity of IPA and nature of the double hermeneutic mean that no two individuals coding the same transcripts are likely to precisely replicate one another's analysis. However, sharing coding procedures, themes and participant quotes with the supervisory team provided the researcher with insight and motivation to ensure interpretation is logical and transparent.

Whilst Smith (2011b) draws on Yardley's (2000) criteria, he also proposes further specific guidance for assessing quality in IPA. Studies should subscribe to the theoretical principles of IPA (take a phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic approach) and sufficiently transparent to enable the reader to see what was done and contain coherent, plausible and interesting analysis. The next two chapters of this thesis present the findings in such a way as to demonstrate the commitment to the core theoretical principles, whilst allowing the reader to delve into both specific and general accounts.

For example, Smith (2011a) suggests the minimum number of participants (3 - 4) who should be able to represent each superordinate theme. This quality recommendation guided the formation of the cross-case analysis, to establish a density of evidence. Whilst there is no claim to generalisability in the

present research, it is expected that a proportion of the themes which emerge will be transferable across cases. This reveals a tension within IPA that is not easily resolved; prioritising the idiographic nature of the enquiry whilst discarding themes which may appear in only one account. Within this research, some preference has been given to shared experience of academic resilience throughout the superordinate themes, balanced with individual analysis of themes via the interpretative accounts of each case.

3.10.4 *Impact and importance*

As Yardley (2000) emphasises, it is insufficient to develop a sensitive, coherent analysis which has no impact on the belief or behaviour of others. The findings of this research have been disseminated through the publication of peer-reviewed journal articles, conferences and other events, to contribute to the wider body of work enhancing the academic success and retention of under-represented groups (see Section 7.2). The final chapter (Chapter Seven) of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the impact and importance of this research.

Research findings will also be used to inform and influence WP practice in relation to encouraging success and retention amongst students from low-income backgrounds. The application of research findings in policy and practice will much depend on the themes which emerge from the data. However, it is anticipated that findings might influence WP practice through improving interventions intended to support and engage students. For example, this might involve disseminating findings via institutional or WP networks and committees with the aim of developing a greater understanding of the experience of low-income students which may foster processes of academic resilience.

3.11 Summary

Chamberlain (2000) cautions against "methodolatry", that is, excessive adherence to prescriptive methods which risk sacrificing fidelity to data. No

methodology has standalone integrity; the key to success in IPA is organisation, flexibility and sensibility. This requires considering the third hermeneutic level, the readership (Smith et al. 2009). IPA offers a balance between clear guidelines and steps for conducting research, while emphasising a commitment to openness and originality.

This chapter has described the rationale behind the participant sample and recruitment strategy in researching the phenomenon of resilience using IPA. It has also detailed the approach to data collection and analysis and accompanying issues of ethics and quality.

Chapter 4   **Findings Part A: Individual Analysis**

4.1 Introduction

This section presents findings from individual cases; the biographical details can be viewed in Table 6 (Section 3.7.1). This stage of analysis is the outcome of step four in IPA: *"exploring connections across emergent themes"* (Smith et al. 2009), which were derived from the initial noting stage of analysis. The process for the incorporation of emergent themes into more meaningful "participant themes" can be viewed (Table 8 and Appendix 5) using techniques detailed in the previous chapter at Section 3.8. Participant themes are also referred to as "subordinate themes" within the IPA literature. This distinguishes them from superordinate themes, themselves the result of cross-case analysis.

Participant quotes are presented throughout using " " and for reference purposes include transcript line numbers following each quotation.

4.2 Participant themes: Isla

4.2.1 *Biography*

Isla is a 19-year-old female in the second year of a Business degree, the first in her immediate family to come to university. She studied BTEC at college prior to HE entry and comes from a POLAR3 level 5 neighbourhood for HE participation in Southern England. With one younger sibling still at home, Isla is from a single-parent household and her mother works as a Learning Support Assistant. She describes her mother as encouraging her to apply to university and speaks of a very close relationship between the two of them. Fitting in socially is central to Isla's HE experiences, as she left behind housemates from the first year to move in with course mates during her second year. After a difficult and emotional start to university in which she considered withdrawing in the first few weeks, Isla persevered and is currently in her second year and enjoying her course. Isla did not declare any

additional learning needs and did not have a part-time job. The three individual themes for Isla were: "changing social world", "conversion experience" and "engaging with confidence amongst peers".

4.2.2 *Isla theme 1: Changing social world*

The theme of a changing social world brings together Isla's fluctuating relationships with her peers both at home and at university. Within different times and contexts, these relationships can be pain-inducing, uplifting and even key to her persisting on the course.

Isla describes herself as lost without her friends, and repeatedly states how invaluable they have been since she enrolled at university. This speaks to the level at which she sees her own ability to cope as dependent on those around her. She makes several references to struggling to make friends or to fit in at university, echoing earlier experiences from changing social groups at school *"I didn't not like them, but I knew they weren't my friends"* (50) *"I feel like I'm not good at making other friends"* (132). She explicitly recognises that moving on from people is awkward and even painful at times, though she frames it as character-building and as an expression of choice about part of what she wants from the university experience:

> *"Then that's when a lot of my confidence grew, like I'm in this group now"* (274)

Certain friendships form an immensely positive aspect of Isla's experience as a student. She repeatedly describes individuals who lift her up and support her through difficult times. In being accepted by others, she is finding her own way of being and practising self-acceptance. Isla values feeling supported in her course as well, as she describes her experience of mentoring from students in the year above:

> *"instead of the tutor saying it, from someone who's actually done it as the student you think, well if they can do it, I can do it, no one's telling you to do it, they've actually been through it I did like that"* (670).

The role of supportive relationships features heavily in Isla's description of the turning point during her first year. Isla explains she has "*found my friends*" (361), in particular a significant friend "Daisy", and likewise also found security about her place and function within the wider community of HE:

> R: *"So, what made you stay?"*

> I: *"Probably more the social side- finding Daisy and a little friend group I found here. I like them more than my ones at home. There's so many people here, I'm still meeting new ones all the time, I think wondering what everyone else is doing… like if I had gone that path to drop out it's like leaving a family or… because the work's not going to change, and I always thought that was ok but I think if I was seeing my friends at uni having fun on Facebook and meeting up I'd be really jealous. I'd still want to be part of it. I think when I realised I really liked everyone and found my friends that was the main thing really. If I hadn't found people I really truly liked I wouldn't have come back, at all."* (361).

To Isla, the social aspect of the course was crucial: without it, her reflections on her experiences (both positive and negative) revolve around her interactions and relationships with others.

There is an enthusiasm about relating to mentors, but one that is tempered with autonomous choosing of friends and a growing confidence, to go her own way and make her own decisions:

> *"Last year I just copied a lot of what I'd already been taught which was probably really not great. But no, I do… I think a lot of people felt like that though really, obviously with school and that you never get set something that you haven't been taught. If you do, everyone's hands going up- "we haven't even been taught that!" And this year we have to go look for stuff ourselves…"* (635).

Here Isla expresses a distinction between the old self, who, like her peers liked to be explicitly 'taught', in contrast with her need to now develop independent thinking and skills.

4.2.3 *Isla theme 2: Conversion experience*

The conversion experience for Isla is captured by her transformation in attitude towards life at university from one of negative feelings to a much more positive perspective. Using the analogy of religious conversion, Isla can be seen to have an intense period of questioning and doubting, followed by several realisations which prompt her to adopt a new set of beliefs and values.

Early in the interview, Isla recounts her first day at university. It is an emotion-laden account in which she is on her own and trying (with difficulty) to physically navigate her way to an induction lecture. Her literal description of being late, lost and alone encapsulate her wider experience at that time. Isla is metaphorically out of her depth:

> *"It was really scary going into a lecture hall. I'd never really seen one before… it was so embarrassing I just sat there crying and stuff"* (61).

The depth of initial disengagement from the experience is exposed when she returns to that time:

> *"One thing I did think was that if I on purposively fail, then my mum's not going to make me come back"* (320).

These fleeting thoughts of self-sabotage reveal a fascinating escapist ideation. Isla is at once caught between negative, fearful emotions and by the desire to do the right thing (i.e. to not disappoint her mother). Fantasising about deliberate academic failure here is an expression of the uncertainty created by the simultaneous pressures of needing to walk her own path and still wanting to meet the expectations of others.

Isla's pursuit of confidence and finding her own way at HE go hand in hand. She expresses this clearly as she says developing socially is "*probably more [significant] than what I've actually learned at uni*" (137). The enhancement of her interpersonal skills such as independent thinking, managing confrontation and making new friends are more meaningful to her than more tangible gains

in subject knowledge. She names these her "*life skills*" and calls coming to university her "*big experience*" (92). The extent of her conversion becomes clear: *"but now I love it more than anything, especially now, I love it this year"* (94). Isla's student experience to her is a major life event; along with this come a new set of values.

She seeks validation and approval from her peers and tutors. These new individuals have replaced others in her social world (her mother and old school friends) as part of a process of personal development. Caring what others think of her and the need to feel respected reflect her own sense of belonging in the environment and investment in her discipline. This is her opportunity to take as:

> *"You only get one chance- I need to do the best I can, or I'll be upset with myself"* (356).

There is now a sense the conversion is complete. Wanting to achieve well in her degree is now an internalised goal, and no longer the external pressure of wanting to please her mother. Similarly, the failure which once seemed so enticing now seems unthinkable:

> *"I feel that if I dropped out that would be…no! I would feel like I can't fail!"* (520).

Isla has come to a resolution in her struggle; she readily embraces the making of her own life, one that is connected to but discrete from the choices and values of others.

4.2.4   *Isla theme 3: Engaging with confidence amongst peers*

This theme explores Isla's assertiveness and confidence and how it is situated in her social world. During her time at university, Isla has gained awareness of these, allowing competitive engagement to become essential to her student experience. Rivalry with her peers is framed positively; it motivates her and creates aspirations to achieve. In describing what the process of applying for university was like for her, Isla is initially passive about her future. She lacked assertiveness, and attributes her application to

pressure from her mother and her peers. Coming to university for Isla was something to please others *"so to make her happy I still did it"* (17).

Isla feels her shyness and lack of self-confidence have impacted her social and academic life. She uses metaphors such as "*toughening up"* (146) and language around "*becoming brave"* (195) in reflecting on her need to develop into an independent person. For her, the ideas of succeeding and being a confident individual treading their own path are inextricably linked. She gives an example about how she feels sitting on her own in the library:

> *"I'd sit in the library by myself now, whereas before I don't think I ever would have done that. Like people looking at you and being like "what's she doing by herself?" but now it's ok. And like I can raise my opinions more and say what I think"* (240).

In this instance Isla can be seen as previously feeling self-conscious working alone in the library. The pre-existing connotations of this for her would be that she is a loner; she has no friends or that being seen in the company of others affords some kind of protection from the judgement of others. Now there is a shift in confidence, where she seems to care less about what others' opinions of her might be, and more about feeling comfortable in her own company and making her own choices.

The growth in confidence is seen across both social and academic dimensions, which for Isla are particularly intertwined. Prior to coming to HE, she felt she *"wouldn't be able to do it, I didn't see myself as academic enough"* (310), yet with her growing confidence she has surprised herself with her abilities to make friends and to achieve highly on her course. Isla details her thinking the moment she received her first-year results *"god I didn't actually fail! I felt like 'I can actually do this work"* (327). Her positive self-talk suggests an internalisation of increased self-esteem and motivation.

Over the course of her first year, Isla consciously decides to behave more confidently, forcing herself to be sociable. Isla admits that she is still quite shy, "*but 100% less shy than I was"* (122); she recognises the determination

to act more confidently has become a more internalised change in herself; she feels she is toughening up:

> *"I've also learned to speak up for myself…I learned to be tougher and stick up for myself... that has been such a main thing for me"* (145).

This sense of finding her voice is crucial, as Isla sees confidence as an essential (though elusive) personal quality.

Here Isla goes from a sense of not caring about her performance, and perceiving herself as less academically able than her peers to seeking competition:

> *"When I got into it, started to love uni, doing work with groups of friends all together…I guess it became competitive because they were doing well. Then I could do it too and I was like, woo hoo!"* (335).

This is a surprise gain for her; it reflects her feeling strong enough to compete. The public sharing of academic performance is enact by which Isla can judge the strength of her own achievements, always within the context of how others are doing. The notion that academic success is now a significant topic of discussion suggests a displacement of alternative focus or change in priorities.

This is also bolstered by interactions with her tutors. Key experiences, often outside the formal learning environment foster her sense of belonging and make Isla feel part of a grown-up world. It gives her confidence to be herself without fear of humiliation:

> *"You can go to them… even if I've got a stupid question I feel confident- it's like asking a friend"* (557).

For Isla this is especially important, given her concern for what others think of her and because of her growing pride in her academic abilities.

4.3 Participant themes: Damien

4.3.1 *Biography*

Damien is a 20-year-old male in the second year of his Computing course. He completed a Level 3 Extended Diploma before entering HE and his current home address is in a POLAR3 level 5 neighbourhood for HE participation in Southern England. He has two older brothers and describes himself as first in his family to come to university, though he does reference an older relative who was a university professor. His parents are divorced and prior to moving away from home to come to university he was living with his mother who is a school caretaker. Damien has dyspraxia and dyslexia and used his experiences to inform discussion of learning styles and inclusive learning. He has been heavily involved with student representative work, at college as well as through the university. Damien was part of the NUS and a mentor at a local school, also doing paid freelance work relating to his course. He is passionate about his course and career development. The three individual themes for this participant were: "making trouble", "knowing myself" and "setting myself apart from others".

4.3.2 *Damien theme 1: Making trouble*

"Making trouble" is a phrase used by Damien which refers more broadly to change. He problematizes the concept of change in his life; he feels he has to act for himself and others to improve attitudes towards individuals with learning difficulties. Damien also "makes trouble" for himself; seeing it as a way of moving forward and overcoming challenges to his own success.

His anger and frustration at the limitations traditional forms of pedagogy place on him are clear: *"the way we are taught is tick box"* (674). Damien <u>can</u> and <u>does</u> want to learn which contrasts with beliefs he perceives others to have about dyslexic students. He advocates for himself and other students with learning difficulties, such as in working in the NUS and acting as a

student governor for his college. Damien remains committed to these roles at university and they are an important outlet for his feelings:

> *"after college after I'd had that option to actually voice my opinion quite strongly about ways of learning that weren't right for everyone, I feel like I then stood up and did the NUS stuff, I can now voice my opinion in lectures if I don't agree with what we are expected to do"* (134 - 138).

It is essential to Damien that he is heard. He introduces his interest in teaching and learning very early in the interview during his description of his journey to HE, emphasising its centrality.

Damien captures the essence of his own beliefs about the need for change when he says:

> *"A famous poet described himself as a troublemaker. Without troublemakers you can't have change. Even if it's good for a while, you need change and someone to influence and implement. That's essential on my course… I'm the troublemaker by the way* [laughs]*"* (660 - 663).

This reveals Damien's perception of himself and his role in making changes; that questioning the way in which things are usually done is important. He looks internally to change as well; he thinks about what he needs to do to adapt and survive. This requires time and effort, and "working on" yourself; a process versus outcome experience in which Damien reflects on critical questions *"what skills do you have?" How have you developed them?"* (212-213). This is part of his attitude towards making trouble and change <u>for himself</u>, as when he considers postgraduate study *"I kinda want to go on and see if I can push the boundaries"* (916).

Change is at times a challenging process for Damien. He describes his struggle to make ends meet in the first year:

> *"I spent so much money in my first year I shouldn't have. I learned a lot finance-wise. I've almost cut my spending to a third now"* (299 - 302).

The change involves learning from mistakes and training himself and extends to his academic work: *"when we come to university getting that sense of self-learning is weird"* (545 - 546). His use of "we" reinforces a feeling that the experience of changing to an independent learner is a shared one with other students. This is evidenced elsewhere through his advocacy for other students. Nonetheless he persists and frames these first-year challenges as a way of *"cutting through the bad bits...figure out what works and doesn't work"* (688). Damien has made trouble for himself by not accepting things as they are and challenging existing systems. He has done soon behalf of others as well, risking negative reactions from those in authority as a vehicle for transforming life chances.

4.3.3 *Damien theme 2: Knowing myself*

This theme is about how Damien establishes his core values. As part of this he frames his own story, taking ownership of his future and casting himself as a professional.

Damien's fundamental concern is succeeding on his course. The centrality of his studies is a common thread throughout discussions of his social world, personal interests and stories he recounts about his life. For example, when he states that his parents do not explicitly show interest or pride in his decision to pursue higher education:

> I: *"How do you feel about that?"*
>
> D: *"I think it must affect me psychologically, but it's ok because as long as I'm doing work and what's important to me that's fine"* (444 - 445).

Damien's desire to pursue HE is a greater driving force than the need to please his parents. He sees those who stand in the way of his right to education as obstacles. In relation to his peers he remarks:

> *"I have a few friends...they can out of pocket afford it [university]. If you are here to joke around, fuck off!* [laughs] *get out of my way!"* (164 - 165).

For Damien, attending university is a precious opportunity; one not easily come by. It has involved sacrificing both the approval of his parents and material comforts. Rather than being jealous of his wealthier friends, there is a frustration and anger about wasting the opportunities higher education offers; a transgression of his core values.

Damien projects a professional identity:

> *"I think of it more as a job. I enjoy the people I work with, mostly… um and it's like my boss is my lecturer"* (182 -183).

These professional values seem to embody the ethics, practices and norms of his chosen discipline of computing. Thus, the university experience is similar to a workplace experience. The idea of 'barely passing' is abhorrent to him; he adheres to strict, self-imposed routines to complete work efficiently and to a high standard.

Damien describes himself as working obsessively at times:

> *"Whether that's a healthy perspective on it is another question entirely…so I don't have a social life. At home I'm working, I go to sleep I use my computer I go to university"* (238 - 240).

Describing his bedroom computer equipment, he states he has *"two monitors that like, blot out the room"* (315); an apt metaphor for how his work eclipses his social life and leisure time. Damien's intense work ethic reflects a personal, emergent understanding of his subject area of computing and his perceived place within it- centred on cutting-edge technological tools and programmes. The order and structure to his work might reflect strategies Damien has adopted to cope with the demands of his course alongside his learning difficulties.

Alongside this understanding comes a new construction of the self, adapted to the university environment. Early on in his transition he describes using home almost as a secure base. His recounting of selecting a university presents a tension between wanting to remain close to what is familiar and the need to make a good choice (to enable academic and future career

success). At this point he is aware of his own hesitation in embracing independence.

Elsewhere this is framed more as a challenge he has set himself:

> *"I knew I was going to get into this university. I didn't put any more options [on UCAS form] I knew I had to get here and get my grades"* (174 - 176).

More than anything, these contrasting explanations indicate a reframing of what has gone before. Damien has moved out of home to attend university though remained within a commutable distance to home; here he reclaims the choice of location as an independent decision.

Damien speaks openly about having dyslexia and what it is like for him. He is active in mentoring students from a local school with similar learning difficulties. Damien expresses surprise and pleasure at how attitudes towards these students have improved in recent years, as well as how confident the students seem about their abilities *"they seem positive about everything and know how to get around it"* (740). Navigating disability in this way reflects Damien's own experiences, which he refers to using positive language *"tools to learn differently"* (747). He focuses on advantages he has:

> *"dyslexics… can normally visualise 3D objects much better than your average person"* (756 - 757).

Damien views his dyslexia as having very little negative influence on his chances of success at university, using it instead to positively advocate for himself and others.

4.3.4 *Damien theme 3: Setting myself apart from others*

The final participant theme "setting myself apart from others" encapsulates how Damien positions himself with regards to others in his social world. This includes the lessons learned from others' experiences, a "wanting to do better than others", as well as perceived gains and losses from his relationships.

Others appear as cautionary tales in Damien's account of his experiences, as seen in the previous theme. At times, other students on his course are positioned as distractions or obstacles, reflecting his commitment to his own goal of achieving on course. Closer to home, his brother offers a contrast which perhaps also serves to validate his life choices:

> *"He still lives at home. When it came to me it was a bit different. I've seen both my brothers' experience and I just wanted to get out and go for it, y'know?"* (404 - 406).

Damien consciously chooses a different path one that involves putting a physical and emotional distance between himself and his family.

Again, Damien contrasts himself with time-wasters, including two of his friends who *"mucked about, didn't focus"* (328). The outcome for these individuals was repeating the year; their experience acts a parable of the unproductive compared with the positive role models identified by Damien who are driven, mature and have life experience. His judgements about people as either enablers or obstacles are black and white, for example as he describes experiences of group work:

> *"It wasn't a bother first year, but second year I'm not arguing with the lecturer. This is who I'm working with- 'no he or she can't come into the group because they don't work, and that's why they can't come in"* (619 - 621).

Damien's attitude in this passage shows how he prioritises his commitment to succeed over social niceties.

This idea of "weighing people up" recurs in Damien's poignant descriptions of how he gets on with his family. He faces a lack of understanding from both parents in terms of the content and actual value of his course. Damien is aware that their level of encouragement and interest is different to that of his peers' families: *"it's shrugged shoulders from them"* (432), *"it's weird as a lot of parents are supporting and like "yeah" but it's fine"* (440 - 441). His language and tone seem unemotional, perhaps as having a relatively

uninvolved or unaware family is less of a threat to his values in contrast with flaky, lazy peers.

Damien speaks of recently discovering that his great grandfather was a well-known university professor. He relates a recent exchange with his mum about it, saying:

> *"I laughed at her and said "oh I don't know where you come from mum" and laughing about it. But it was a clarification actually, like there is an academic in my family"* (908 - 910).

In this memory, Damien seems to identify more closely with this unknown academic than his mother, as it 'clarifies' what abilities are potentially available to him. It may validate or help him make sense of his choice to study at HE. Conversely, this might also bring him a closer connection to his family, as he identifies within it a role model with whom he can identify.

Competition is a key concept and motivator for Damien with his brothers and with his course mates, and one that is characteristic of his discipline as he explains:

> *"I've said to everybody in our lecture "look around you. You are in competition for that one job out there… knowing my industry"* (584 - 586).

He talks prescriptively when sharing his understanding of the nature of the industry in which he wants to work:

> *"My mindset has changed…to get a job and push forward with it you really have to be the best"* (210 - 211).

The message has been internalised; competition, relevancy and keeping abreast of new developments are what he will be judged on, and so are measures by which he judges himself and others, even lecturing staff.

4.4 Participant themes: Gino

4.4.1 *Biography*

Gino is a 20-year-old male in his second year at university studying Media. He previously studied A-levels and retook his Maths GCSE in order to gain entry to HE. He is from a deprived area in Southern England (POLAR3 LPN 1) and was the first in his family to come to university. Gino began the interview by describing the lack of opportunity in his local area, as well as his experiences of frequently moving schools. Gino and his siblings were raised by their mother on her own, following the unexpected death of their father when Gino was five years old. His maternal aunt also passed away, which had greatly affected him. His mother now works as a cashier after many years as a stay-at-home parent. Gino described struggling to get along with his blended family, in particular with his stepfather who had rejected him for being gay. Gino took a gap year to work and spend time with friends and family between college and university. He now works part-time as a cashier in a shop alongside his studies. Gino stated he had no additional learning needs. The three individual themes for this participant were: "positive engagement with others", "converting loss of loved ones" and "achieving my goals".

4.4.2 *Gino theme 1: Positive engagement with others*

This theme incorporates how Gino positions himself towards others in ways that are beneficial for his well-being. It reflects the optimistic quality of his narrative; learning from others' mistakes, surrounding himself with people who support him and engaging effectively with course tutors.

Gino looks for spaces and paths which keep him clear of distractions, aligning himself with others who will help him focus:

> *"I was motivated and doing well and passing and made some friends on the right track"* (54 - 55).

This reflects a value judgement on his part; focusing on academic study and achieving well is important to him. The counter to this is his fear and disgust at misused resources and opportunities, which he sees around him and intensify his own focus:

> *"It's pretty much everyone's first time leaving home, you know, and I just don't understand why people would want to waste it. It just makes me beside myself why people would want to do that!"* (319 - 321).

Gino values those around him who share his positivity about study and more generally, life. He avoids those he describes as having negative energy. Gino describes himself as being in a bubble, into which he refuses to allow negative or inauthentic people. This personal, imaginary space is a place where people he trusts and admires (for being wise, hard-working and optimistic) are permitted, and will deny entry to those who threaten negativity or *"pull me down"* (955). This bubble can be construed as a physical space, as he details meeting nice people in his halls of residence:

> *"Really relieving, because that was my biggest worry about getting into halls or course was having someone I really, really hate"* (630 - 632).

This specific concern may be linked to already having endured a substantial amount of time in his childhood with negative, threatening energy in his "bubble" in the form of his stepfather (see theme 2: Converting loss of loved ones).

Positive influences include friends and course mates with whom Gino identifies and mutually supports:

> *"If we've got a deadline whatever it's like a pick up. We are all in the same boat. We might stress a bit until it's done but we calm each other down and help each other…We're pitching in our own knowledge"* (382 - 387).

The boat metaphor captures the essence of Gino's experience, with tumultuous conditions such as challenging assignments and exams, the

search for calmer waters and the "pitching in"- the crew on the boat who work to their strengths to keep afloat.

Gino also seeks rewarding engagement with his course tutors. He admires tutors he perceives as authentic, energetic and generous, and these relationships build his confidence.

> *"It shook up my expectations, my view on what tutors are actually willing to do. She helped me so much it's made me much more confident for the next essay. Like I can do it myself now and not panic"* (491 - 493).

For Gino, equal value is attributed to the emotional support and practical advice from the tutor.

4.4.3 *Gino theme 2: Converting loss of loved ones*

Converting loss of loved ones is an important theme for Gino as he talks candidly about deaths within his immediate family and the effect this has had on him. This theme recognises the experience of parental loss and the personal nature of grief. It also illuminates the subsequent coping strategies Gino has employed to become stronger in the wake of his loss.

Gino has several experiences of close family members dying. When speaking of his aunt's sudden death, he says:

> "*I was in some sort of limbo thing where I didn't feel like it was happening"* (251).

This contrasts with feelings about his father's death:

> *"I was five… I understood what was happening, but I was really young…it just goes over kids' heads sometimes"* (246 - 247).

He finds it difficult to express or even recall much around the time his father passed away. As a young man he feels more "hit" by the more recent death of his aunt with whom he was close. After his father passed, he and his mother became extremely close *"I idolise my mum. My entire life she's been both my parents"* (884).

Another major life event resulting in loss for Gino has been his mother's on/off relationship with his stepfather and the introduction of step-siblings into his life. His step-sister is described as *"so up herself and rude, she'd play my mum against me"* (830), whilst the ensuing, frequent arguments between his mum and step-father were a great source of stress for him. Gino's mother eventually "sides" with his stepfather after a long period of separation during which she was finally honest about his step-father's homophobia. As an openly gay man, his mother or "best friend" as he described her is perceived as choosing his step-father over him:

> *"and when she told me I said, "what did you say to him after that?" and she said, "I said nothing" and I was like, thanks mum"* (860 - 861).

Gino retells his struggle to understand his mother's choice and what this meant for their relationship:

> *"My mum was like "right that's it I'm going to move back to [name of university town]" and be back with my sisters, be back with my son…I couldn't wait … then I went home for a couple days, and she had a ring on her finger and they were back together. That hurt. That really, really hurt me and when I came back to uni after that…I couldn't move or get out of bed. I felt so small and put back. I didn't feel like anyone's first choice, I felt like I didn't matter"* (872 - 882).

This passage captures Gino's initial relief at having his mum back, bringing her into his positive bubble (his life at university) free from the homophobic attitude of his step-father. The ring on his mother's finger is almost a symbol of his step-father's victory, and his mother's choice. Gino's reaction of hurt and utter rejection is magnified by his intense relationship with his mother, his only living parent and best friend.

He describes supporting others who have experienced losing parents and feels it has helped him to mature quickly. For Gino, using his traumatic experiences to help others is important:

> *"I feel that's beneficial for others because then it's not so much like everyone's dwelling in this pit, and I'm just that person who can pull them out"* (993 - 995).

The analogy of the hole of despair Gino describes and his ability to pull others out of it reflects his broader disposition- a projected optimism and willingness to support and be supported by others.

The impact of the loss of close relatives and the way Gino has coped seems to have influenced his strategies for coping with the perceived loss of his mother as well.

> *"I've tried to do something about it, but I can't get her out kicking and screaming I've got to let her get on with it. Because then it's affecting me. And I think that's where my confidence with my degree has come from"* (897 - 898).

The ability to let go of the pain and to accept what he is unable to change seem to protect Gino. He explains how he has established ground rules for minimal contact; within this attitude of acceptance is both an empathic love but also an unwillingness to invite or enact further negative emotions.

4.4.4 *Gino theme 3: Achieving my goals*

For Gino, achieving goals is about building confidence, "toughening up" and knowing his own wants and needs. There is a strong sense of finding himself in this theme as he takes ownership of mistakes and develops a reflexive attitude as he strives for a successful experience at university.

Gino displays passivity towards his university application *"my college made us apply, I felt I was forced to go rather than wanting to go"* (146 -147). There is a sense that it is something that happened to him, rather than him actively identifying and pursuing the course as a goal. Evident throughout is Gino's initial lack of self-esteem around his academic work; he identifies himself as an underachiever at school *"I didn't think I was going to pass, no point applying for halls or anything"*(161 - 162). The incongruence between his beliefs about himself on one hand *"growing up I had zero confidence, none at*

all" (577) and his achievements on the other hand lead him to be surprised and pleased about his own abilities *"I was actually passing!"* (50).

His confidence has begun to build; he feels safe and deserving of the respect of his peers and tutors when he encourages himself:

> *"So when I got here I just thought "I'm going to make something of this, you know. And if I can't understand something, I'm just going to say it"* (583 - 585).

This quote shows his assertiveness in speaking out about matters that concern him. It is a further instance of him locating himself amongst others. Likewise, Gino's status as the first in his family to attend university is important to his self-esteem. Gino has become eager now to advance and go beyond, and constructs himself as a proud and committed student:

> *"It's such a big deal going to uni and having the qualification, it's not just something everyone else does like an A-level college course. It's something you do for yourself; no one is forcing you to"* (309 - 310).

There is a conflict here between feeling at first forced to apply to university, and a sense of self-determination in which the choice to remain and succeed is freely and willingly chosen by Gino.

A large part of this transformation can be characterised as a process of "toughening up". To him this means being aware of the safety net yet rejecting it when feeling confident to move forward on his own. This is especially evident when Gino describes what it is like for him to live independently, *"the next big step"* (345 - 346). It seems important to Gino that he is in control of his emotions; for example, when talking about falling out with his mother as *"a big kick in the face"*(934) he concludes: *"I couldn't let it pull me down as such"* (940). Similarly, Gino recalls his experience of resitting his maths GCSE after failing as: *"it's my own fault, I'm just no good at maths as numbers aren't my forte! [laughs]"* (106-107), which he describes as awful, but necessary in order to gain entry to university. Being tough is

thus a commitment to overcoming barriers, but also in owning failures and being open to new responsibilities.

What drives Gino is <u>knowing</u> what he wants. He describes a key event for him that was a turning point which sparked a career aspiration which would allow him to pursue a love for music. At a residential university outreach programme, he had a chance to do a workshop in his subject area*:*

> *"Yeah and I loved it and we did a radio work shop and it was brilliant. Loved it and that was the kind of thing that made me want to do it"* (71 - 72).

For Gino, this opportunity linked his lifelong love of music (and inability to play a musical instrument), a concrete career goal (radio production) and a pathway for achieving that goal (university degree). His enthusiasm and repetition of the word "love" reflect the lightbulb moment, the ignition point for Gino in terms of what he could achieve.

4.5 Participant themes: Grace

4.5.1 *Biography*

Grace is a 22-year-old female on her second year of a Social Science course. She has dyspraxia, dyscalculia and dyslexia. Grace is the first in her family to come to university; her mother is a hairdresser and she never met her father. She has a BTEC in Animal Management and initially wanted to be a vet. However, her grades were insufficient, so she instead completed an Access to HE course. Grace is from a neighbouring town in a POLAR3 2 neighbourhood but lives on campus in shared accommodation. She is aware of the limited opportunities faced by those in her neighbourhood and draws comparisons between her experience of the working world and the privilege of middle class students around her. Grace worked throughout her education; firstly at a highly selective independent school in the kitchen before leaving education to manage a pub. Now at university, she also works part-time in a cafe as a waitress. The three individual themes for this participant were: "self-knowledge as a resource", "the social world" and "the battle of becoming".

4.5.2 *Grace theme 1: Self-knowledge as a resource*

Grace is perceptive about differences in terms of social status, monetary resources and learning needs between herself and others. She is reflective about her own strengths, weaknesses and goals and can direct change from within.

Grace's stories about growing up show an awareness of the inequalities that exist in her world:

> *"before I came to university I was living in [name of town]. But not the (snaps fingers) area… it's quite… the worse bit of [name of town] …like the more close*[sic] *to the top of the hill you were, the more working-class, the more difficult child you were at school. Whereas as you went lower down the hill…basically it is a huge hill about a mile and a half long, you've got [name of other area] at the base of the hill where the rich, million-pound houses are"* (17 - 23).

She sees the divide between rich and poor, herself and the students of the elite independent boys' school in which she worked part-time:

> *"I was there for such a long time, I sort of ended up growing up with some of them even though we weren't really allowed to talk to them"* (64 - 65).

She is conscious of her own lack of advantage, which she recognises as outside of her control. In one example, she describes talking to the boarders after an incident of theft in the dorm, marvelling at the boy's cavalier attitude:

> *"I went into work the next day and you'd be thinking…if my laptop got stolen I'd be so annoyed and worried about paying for another one. And they're like "no it's alright, Mum's just ordered like, latest Apple Mac", I'm like….."a £800 laptop and you aren't even crying over it?"* (77 - 82).

What is most significant about Grace's discussion of being different is that it is couched in a knowledge of herself. In talking about what it is like for her to be a student with dyslexia, she says:

> *"I know what it is now, I want to say something and I just (pauses) and it's gone"* (600).

At the heart of her approach to university, Grace also has high expectations of herself and knows that she takes comfort in working hard:

> *"despite of the fact of the deadlines and everything I love it. It is so me and it doesn't just make me happy, it makes me* [pause] *content"* (326 - 328).

The satisfaction hard work brings for Grace is a source of deep fulfilment. There are contradictions in her account however, as she talks about the massive shock of the second year and declaring with a laugh that she "hates it".

Grace draws on her own internal resources such as diligence, optimism and fortitude to direct positive change in her life. In speaking about her dyslexia diagnosis:

> *'now I know there is actually something wrong I can actually approach and fix it. Now if there's anything wrong I never shy away from it. I'm like 'let's sort it out'* (624 - 627).

Specific elements of change for Grace include becoming more attentive to others; she emphasises the need for her to talk less and listen more several times. In a sense, it seems she strives to balance her at times forceful "bolshie" approach with a more patient, receptive one.

4.5.3 *Grace theme 2: The social world*

This theme is about how Grace relates to others in her social world. She values meaningful relationships and identifies key people from whom she receives support; friends, family and tutors. Grace also assumes a mothering role in relation to her fellow students and mentees.

Grace speaks of meaningful connections with her family who are overwhelmingly supportive. She fondly recalls her mother's crying from happiness the day Grace moved into halls, reflecting the pride and relief they both felt about the transition. Grace has many positive social influences, seeing her friends as extended family.

> *"I'm much closer to people who are my mum's friends who basically helped me and brought me up when my mum was really struggling"* (425 - 426).

This reveals Grace's understanding of what it was like for her mum as a young single parent, and what she truly values in friends/ family- being there for each other in times of need. Her current boyfriend shares her commitment to university study:

> *"He's been the biggest support. Anytime I've felt not great or lacked confidence he's there to say, "you can do it"* (366 - 368).

Support from key people is crucial to her success at university; this includes the support of her tutors, whom she praises for their responsiveness and commitment.

Specific to her university life, Grace has adopted a motherly role amongst her peers. She views herself as being more mature than her peers and as having greater life experience. Grace says of her friends: *"they nicknamed me Mama G because they are my sprogs"* (200) and sees herself as being "on call" to offer help and advice when they need it. Whilst her description here is light-hearted, Grace's admiration for strong, caring women is evident. Her own relationship with her mother is warm and supportive, which she describes as being *"ridiculously close"* (383) and reflects the "us against the world" attitude she and her mother share. It gives merit to a special relationship whilst recognising that this is not an experience everyone shares. When Grace speaks about her mother's battle for child support from her father, she uses language such as "fought", "struggle" and "weed out" in admiration of her mother's fortitude and will to survive.

Grace seeks more formalised avenues for coaching and supporting others, such as through mentoring. For her, it is a deeply rewarding opportunity and one in which she can continue to learn about herself and improve:

> *"So, when they are writing essays and I tell them, break it down, section A, B and C… then I realise I'm hearing this from my lecturers, break it down. And I get what they meant and why they were telling me."* (856 - 859).

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4.5.4 *Grace theme 3: The battle of becoming*

The struggle to become herself and achieve her goals is central to Grace's experience. She separates herself from the past and finds different ways of confronting barriers in her life. For Grace, being tough and determined are essential ways to approach and conquer adversity.

Grace tells of what it is like to confront barriers. Her former employers made it difficult for her to return to education:

> *"They hated the fact that I was going back into education. And they wouldn't even be able to keep me on as part-time. No- you are either here or you aren't. I was like, ok I'll go elsewhere then; I need the money!"* (113 - 117).

For Grace, this was a difficult decision as she felt a strong moral obligation to remain working for the employers who had previously encouraged her development over several years. Her determination to achieve her own goals and sense that she had nothing to lose helped her to confront this obstacle.

Part of her difficulty in overcoming struggles come from times at which Grace has felt she does not want to make trouble. A key event for Grace early in her time at university was transferring from her original course to a different one within the same faculty. Several times she refers to it as a nightmare:

> *"at one point, I was going to my other university lectures as well as my course, I don't know how but I did both"* (718 - 720).

Grace clearly found this a demanding and confusing experience; she was frustrated at not being able to complete her transfer but assumed responsibility for both options.

At other times she feels held back by others on her course, and by those who:

> *"Don't want to put the extra work in…people have backed out because they are too hungover or too tired. But I'm still here. I still come"* (799 - 805).

This passage reflects her values in relation to her academic work; she is the constant, whilst others may be unreliable. To her, extra work is the norm; it is what she expects.

Grace's experiences have been maddening in situations where she lacks a voice or is not understood even by those close to her:

> *"He [boyfriend] was like "it's really not that bad" and I went, "no… you don't get it, I am that bad". He's going "I'm only trying to be helpful". But no, if someone recognises its bad, then they can help me. If they don't acknowledge it, I'll miss the support I need so shhh!"* (634 - 648).

This reveals the compromise for Grace between acknowledging her challenges (and their permanency) and seeing the benefits of her diagnosis (access to help).

One part of the battle to become her true self is the need to separate herself from her past. Her former working life made her "semi-happy" suggesting a lack of fulfilment and actualisation afforded by her new path. She delineates "the old world" and "the new me". It is important for Grace to make sense of what has happened to her and her position in the past. Through rejecting the old way of life, the "cycle" as she calls it, she is outgrowing her youth. She proclaims:

> *"I would never go back- the thought of running a pub for the rest of my life makes me want to cry!"* (139 -141).

Thus, she makes "better" choices and in some cases, redeems lost opportunities *"it's taking me back to what I could have been when I was 18"* (961).

Overcoming barriers and leaving the former life behind requires toughness from Grace. Her own hardiness was developed in full-time employment:

> *"Some people think pub work isn't relevant to lots of things, but it toughens you up, makes you into a tank. You get resilient to that abuse from other people, from all walks of life. Immune to tiredness, to hunger to anger, it makes you tough to so many things, the emotions that threaten to overtake you"* (816 - 820).

Use of military terminology such as "tank" provides a metaphor for a physically and emotionally demanding student experience, which is rigorous and at times repetitive. She deflected the difficult, negative behaviour of customers in her working life; now she faces up to what she terms the oppression and submergence of fresher's party culture. This toughness continues to be refined at university; Grace feels she still needs some elements of her "training", such as self-discipline, but "evened out" as she puts it, less *"mean angry miss bossy boots…that tank storming around"* (948 - 954).

4.6 Participant themes: Jess

4.6.1 *Biography*

Jess is a 20-year-old female repeating her first year of a Social Science degree and the first of her family to study at HE. Before coming to university, she lived in a large town in the north of England within a HESA Low Participation Neighbourhood (POLAR3 LPN1) with her mother, father and younger sister. She studied A-levels prior to entry and was retaking her first year of university as a result of academic failure. During her year intermitting and re-sitting a failed unit she worked full-time as a cleaner. Jess continues to work in the same occupation part-time to support herself at university. Her mother has been a stay at home parent since Jess was little; her father is an unemployed gas engineer with a history of alcoholism. Jess talked with enthusiasm about her subject area, family and social life and also spoke about what it was like to be a "Northerner" in a southern university. Older members of Jess's family strongly disapproved of her moving away to study at HE. Jess declared no additional learning needs. The four individual themes for this participant were: "separating from others", "reframing my story", "finding my place" and "casting the professional self".

4.6.2 *Jess theme 1: Separating from others*

Others can be perceived as threats to success for Jess. She separates herself from this and uses different strategies to manage change in her life.

For Jess, coming to university was a form of escape from the deprivation of her community which is characterised by:

> *"Lots of people on benefits, lots of drug use, people getting stabbed that sort of thing"* (31 - 32).

Jess equates university with a way of separating from the limits of her old life. This presents a conflict with her family, who have experienced a cycle of disadvantage; unemployment, poverty, alcoholism and lack of education. Her grandmother is cast as particularly resistant to Jess's attempts to "get out" or chose another way of life. Jess recounts her grandmother trying to dissuade her from applying to study, staying in Yorkshire and finding unskilled work. Jess reveals later that her grandparents had the same attitude towards her mother's education; they prevented Jess's mother from continuing in post-compulsory education. This seems to strengthen both her resolve to leave and her personal understanding of what it means to go against your family and seek a different path for oneself.

Likewise, Jess speaks about her father's addiction and long-term unemployment in similar terms. She is accepting of his condition and behaviour though unwilling to discuss it in much depth, expressing guilt for leaving her family to deal with his issues. For Jess, it seems better to focus on getting out:

> *'Where I'm from you have to really focus on something if you want to get it; otherwise you get dragged down and stuck'* (127 - 129).

There is an implication here that Jess realised the need to go against the grain in order to create opportunity for herself, instead of remaining at risk of underachieving.

This process of separating herself from her roots has been fraught. As well as incurring a certain level of distrust and rejection by key people such as her grandparents, she has faced practical and social challenges in her new environment. She describes the separation from the past in terms of friendships as *"two worlds; my uni friends and home friends"* (240). This makes university an even bigger gamble than it might be for others. She continues to struggle financially and is unable to take part fully in course enrichment activities as she supports herself through many hours of part-time work. Jess has heard about the visiting speaker activities associated with her programme and recognises their value:

> *"Often times when people have been coming in I'm working like evening time and then you also have to pay so…they've had people come in and they've had lecturers here talk about their own work that they're doing which is pretty cool, quite interesting. They also organise trips to like, where, is it Corfe Castle…"*
>
> *R: "Yeah, in Dorset yeah?"*
>
> *J: "Yeah that's right they went there the other week, but it was on a Saturday and I was working."* (630 - 640).

There is no outrage at missing out; rather Jess accepts she is not able to partake in the way others are. Although she is forbearing of this, it represents another separation from others, one that is not of her own choosing:

> *"When people are like "ohh let's go out" and I say: "I can't I've got to work" they're like "blah blah". In my first-year people were like "why have you got a job?" and I was like "well if I don't have a job then I can't live". Like my family can't give me any money because they haven't got any. So, if I don't go out and I don't work and make my own money then I literally can't live. People are quite surprised at that"* (255 - 260).

These differences are further accentuated in the attitudes Jess experiences from fellow students because of her Yorkshire heritage, explored in the next section.

4.6.3 *Jess theme 2: Reframing my story*

The theme of reframing relates to Jess's experience of reclaiming her identity. It involves accepting mistakes in the past and finding ways to overcome ongoing struggles.

Jess has experienced negative stereotyping from her peers at a southern university for coming from the North.

> *"I think that people expect because I'm from Yorkshire…they don't expect me to do well. Like they don't expect me to be very clever. Like my first assignment at Uni I got 75% in it and many people failed it and people were genuinely surprised because I did well"* (90 - 95).

She details the shocked faces, raised eyebrows and body language of her peers which make others' perceptions evident to her. There is satisfaction from knowing she has defied such negative expectations and judgements rather than feeling defeated by them.

She expresses what it is like to be part of a "Northern" family and the expectations that come with that. In talking about how her family have expected her to maintain tradition by living and finding work locally she says:

> *"It's a different generation, they are very northern it's a very northern thing to do* [laughs]*"* (147-149).

This is Jess giving her own representation or stereotype of what it means to be Northern: the stubbornness and pride; the expectation of being content with one's lot in life.

Later on, at an interview day at a Russell Group university with her mother, she recounts getting to meet an eminent professional in her field:

> *"The reason I got chatting to him was we were all at this buffet and we ended up just sat next to him and she [Mum] just started chatting to him because she's from Yorkshire, so that's just what she does* [laughs] *she just talks to everybody…"* (856 - 860).

Here Jess offers a positive reframing of what it means to be Northern. There is a warmth and friendliness; the understanding that her mother can and would approach anyone in the room without feeling intimidated by a person of high standing.

Jess incorporates her mistakes and her understanding of them in talking about her life. In failing to pass one particular assessment in the first year, she was left with the choice of resitting the year or withdrawing from her programme altogether. Getting the news was a shock to her, but she was determined not to return to her hometown for the year or withdraw. In describing this experience, she expresses a mixture of frustration (mainly with herself) but mostly it served to affirm her commitment to her course and gave her time to think about how she could improve:

> *"It was good. It was such a long year, such a long year especially seeing everyone I knew at Uni as well complaining about assignments and I had nothing to do… it was really, really annoying but I kind just thought when I go back I'm definitely going to do even better I'm not going to slip with anything. I do think in my first year I did try, but I could have tried a lot harder, so it gave me a year to think about how it could be better, how I could do it better."* (354 - 362).

Thus, the experience of academic failure becomes an opportunity for growth; Jess describes herself as feeling "like a different person" now.

In another example of a setback, Jess expresses deep disappointment in her A-level grades and missing out on her place at a prestigious university. Instead of shaking her determination to undertake a degree, she rebounds quickly. As soon as she decides to take up her insurance offer, she describes thinking "whatever". Jess has not missed out by not attending her first choice; it is as if the university has missed out on gaining her as a student.

As well as accepting her mistakes, Jess readily sees silver linings. This is evident in her descriptions of the income divide between her family and others, which mean she cannot afford to travel home often and has to work a

part-time job. Jess's perception is that sacrifice is necessary to achieve her goals:

> *"Oh, I can't see my family sometimes… and then in a few years be able to have a degree and my career than be stuck in a town where I'm not going to do anything with my life just pound on doors or something. I definitely think it's worthwhile, yeah"* (280 - 284).

4.6.4 *Jess theme 3: Finding my place amongst peers*

This theme is about how Jess locates herself in her social world. In acknowledging the role others play for her, she gets to know herself and to establish her own values.

Jess seeks new relationships and to build and maintain a support system for herself. She has enjoyed support from tutors during her resit year and feels comforted that staff take an interest in her well-being. She praises her programme leader for making students his top priority; this seems to contribute to her own sense of worth; she feels the tutors seem to want to get to know students. There is also a shared love of the subject which is important to Jess's experience. She speaks enthusiastically about having bonded with academic staff over knowing, visiting and excavating at sites of interest. These shared points of experience cement a feeling of belonging and identity as a student of the discipline; it is evident when Jess talks about specific research and says, "*this may not mean anything to you* [the researcher]"(450), she is identifying herself with other archaeologists, and as distinct from outsiders to the subject.

She positions herself as established and belonging, for example in relation to being a student in the new intake:

> *"they look at me and they think "who are you? What are you doing here?" And I think "I've been here longer than all of you! You should all know who I am"* [laughs] (384 - 386).

The centrality of "belonging" is important in terms of status. Jess had made contact with a researcher in her field and was given some unpublished

papers, which she was able to discuss in a lecture. She describes how it made her feel:

> *"It was really cool, I kind started thinking "oh god I can actually do this, and I can get in with these people, this is going to be something that I can actually achieve!"* (883 - 885).

These individual experiences reinforce Jess's belief in her own abilities and validate her position within her subject area.

In parallel with these processes, Jess is coming to understand herself. She shows some awareness of her abilities prior to applying to university, expressing that she felt capable of something "more academic". As well as identifying her strengths, Jess also seems to be benefitting from finding out what she finds difficult or uninspiring. Talking about a specific activity she says:

> *"Some people just go mad for it, I'm just not bothered, I understand it's great, good skill, I've learned a lot from it and do feel better doing it, but oh it's not for me. I want to be in a lab, looking at things."* (602 - 605).

This requires using her own initiative in order to find a direction; she has attempted new tasks, completed them, and on reflection decided that they are not what she is suited to do. Jess appears open to these new experiences, and as always looks for some positives. It seems as though she understands that it is just as important to discover what is not for her as to discover what is.

4.6.5 *Jess theme 4: Casting the professional self*

This theme is an exploration of how Jess exhibits professional attributes. She sees her course in a similar way to formal employment and has immersed herself in the "workplace" of university.

Jess's use of language conveys how she shares a passion for the course with "colleagues"- other students and staff within her subject area. Jess likes to work without distraction at times, for example, in the silent study area of

the library. She jokes that it is embarrassing how much time she spends there; her description of the modern, professional atmosphere of university is a stark contrast with that of her old school *"absolutely awful, mismatched and just horrible and nobody cares"* (682 - 683). The building and facilities are more than just functional for Jess; they reflect the shared sentiment that others around her care about maintaining a professional environment in which learning has value.

Moreover, Jess has developed a sense of her subject beyond the academic world and listens to lecturers' advice to think and look beyond the course.

> *"I've started thinking more on a professional basis outside of uni…instead of just thinking I want to go to lectures to learn things I'm now thinking of changing options to more practical things where I can actually go out and get a job"* (299 - 303).

Jess's words here reveal she is making more strategic decisions and taking ownership of her future career.

The concept of enjoying oneself at study or work is one to which Jess frequently returns. It is key to her understanding of what makes a good job and makes sense of the ongoing sacrifices she is making in studying for her degree. It is what makes her experience as a student more than just a practical exchange (fees, study, and qualification) and is emblematic of deep emotional and intellectual significance. She describes her experience of an interesting lecture:

> *"at the end [of lecture] they put up "oh these are all papers that are good" and I just like to print them off and flip through them in the evening and think oh that looks like it'd be good to read I like that- it doesn't feel like revision. I feel like I'm learning but without learning if that makes sense, because it is so enjoyable."* (508 - 514).

In this extract, Jess identifies the optional reading she chose to undertake. Learning without learning- there is effort, concentration and challenge, yet there is no resentment or wish to be doing something else or cut corners. There is intrinsic pleasure in teaching herself about her subject and

stretching her own understanding of a particular topic. She sums it up more succinctly when she describes being given a lot of work to do as a "good feeling"; an opportunity to develop her own potential and master difficult tasks.

4.7 Participant themes: Kat

4.7.1 *Biography*

Kat is a 20-year-old female in the second year of a Social Science course and the first person in her family to come to HE. She is dyslexic and has auditory processing disorder. She is from a POLAR3 LPN 1 area and her parents (now divorced) are both long-term unemployed. Kat studied BTEC prior to entry in her Cornish hometown. She was a young carer for her father for several years after he was injured in a motorbike accident which lead to school absenteeism. Kat had a difficult childhood involving experiences of physical abuse by her father and boyfriend, homelessness and substance misuse. She also has a recent diagnosis of bipolar disorder, made during a difficult period of her first year. Kat is under the care of the local mental health service and has written a partly autobiographical novel about her experiences. Kat has made a strong start to her second year and expresses pride and enthusiasm about persevering with study. The four individual themes for this participant were: "child-parent dynamics", "giving and receiving from others", "impact of abuse" and "surviving and thriving".

4.7.2 *Kat theme 1: Child-parent dynamics*

The theme of child-parent dynamics is about the way in which Kat positions herself in caring, mature, parental roles. It also reflects her desire to be parented and to earn approval from other parent-like figures.

Kat experienced greater independence than most from a young age and became used to doing things for herself. In one description she says:

> *"If I'd had to learn to change my nappy myself I would have…it was really like that"* (257 - 259).

This is a running joke in Kat's family, and one that she laughs at whilst at the same time reinforcing the early expectations placed upon her by others.

In another facet of this unusual dynamic, she explains about her experience as a young carer following her father's accident. Her graphic accounts which we might expect to frighten a young child are instead recounted as a matter of fact:

> *"My dad had all these wounds, it was on me. I had to skip a lot of school to stay home and look after him"* (293 - 294).

These childhood experiences and the assumed role of parent/carer were her normality. For Kat this seems to be confirmed as she describes the lack of thanks or outward appreciation her father showed towards her during this time; she was doing what was expected of her.

Kat assumes the role of the parent in parts of her account. She explains her close relationship with a single mother on the course:

> *"She trusts me with her kids- like 'look after* [name of child] *for five minutes' and that"* (977 - 78).

The way in which these minor details are embedded in her description of their friendship reveal what she perceives to be a normal, equitable relationship. This is not unlike the one her own mother has with her close female friends, characterised by looking out for each other and co-parenting one another's children.

She also shows motherly concern for other students on her course. Out on a course practical she narrates her inner thoughts:

> *"The chalk reflects the sun so I'm keeping my eye on people- have they got sun cream? Water? Have they eaten?"* (1034 - 1035).

Kat is not just looking after herself and having fun; there is a sense of caring responsibility for others around her.

In other descriptions of her experience, Kat expresses feeling indebted to her mother; there is a tension here as the roles of child-parent are restored. Paradoxically she wants to be parented. Describing the nature of her relationship with "Karen", her close friend and a mature student, Kat says:

> *"She understands mental health, knows my triggers…if we go into a situation where there's a trigger, she's pulling me straight back out"* (997 - 1001).

Thus, her need has manifested itself in other relationships, where the power relation is like that of child-parent.

4.7.3 *Kat theme 2: Giving and receiving from others*

Kat seeks meaningful, rewarding relationships with others that are characterised by practical and emotional support. Despite her lack of material resources, Kat perceives herself as rich in family and friends. Her first Christmas away at university she did not have the funds to travel home, so her mother's friend surprised her with a ticket:

> *"Mum wanted to make Christmas and do good; but we just didn't have the money. We didn't… everything goes through the roof at Christmas, we had to have the heating on that week it was so cold, and the cats would just freeze. All the money was going on the meter. And it was just like, ok no Christmas but how kind for my mum's friend to help me out…"* (847 - 853).

The material disadvantage faced by Kat and her family is contrasted with appreciation for the generosity of their friends; hence she makes this act of kindness into the "moral" of the story.

For Kat, bonding with lecturers creates a sense of belonging.

> *"I look up* [from within the hole] *the lecturer's there and he fell over nearly fell in and I was like "don't you fucking dare!" We were all laughing, you couldn't have that somewhere else"* (1055 - 1057).

These unique, spontaneous interactions constitute the memories that make up Kat's time at university. They are "breakthrough" moments which foster a sense of belonging and engagement that make her keen to persist.

Equally, helping others is a priority for Kat, both amongst her friends and family and on the course. She gives what she can. For her mother, she longs to provide her with a good standard of living and luxuries she has missed out on as a single mother living in poverty:

> *"I hope to get a job that pays a lot and I will give her everything she wants. She wants a car, she'll have a car"* (1174 - 1175).

She wants to acknowledge and reward her mother's sacrifice and talks of small ways she is already trying to show her thanks. These acts bring her happiness and make her endeavours and own struggles seem worthwhile.

4.7.4 *Kat theme 3: Impact of abuse*

This theme relates to Kat's experience of two abusive relationships; with her father and with her boyfriend. It explores what it was like for Kat to live through this abuse, as well as abuse "fall-out" and her subsequent efforts to move on in new, healthier relationships.

Kat's childhood was marked by some tumultuous periods in which she experienced both verbal and physical abuse from her father. Kat acknowledges these experiences as having a deep and lasting effect on her. She describes her father as a threat and as explosive: *"my dad just went mental, like a volcanic eruption, mental"* (345 - 355).Later, she experiences deep and hurtful rejection as he moves out and wants nothing more to do with her, her mother and brother. Her father is a recurring threat to her well-being and their estrangement demarcates her old and new life.

There is a further negative impact in the form of loss; she describes a long period of sofa-surfing with her mother and brother following her parents' separation. The impact of this shakes her confidence and contributes to an already chaotic childhood home life. She describes her struggles to cope with the menacing presence of her father and the impact of her physically abusive boyfriend which lead to self-destructive behaviours:

> *"I ended up drinking a lot and sleeping around a lot. I found something I didn't have to have feelings for; I could just go and get relief out of"* (429 - 431).

In this extract Kat's desire to escape painful feelings is evident, and she eventually finds a more constructive outlet for her feelings in the form of writing:

> *"it was a book about a girl who had all these personalities, feelings and emotions, but each personality was different. And those, each one was how I like felt at different times like how I felt when the abusive boyfriend became involved, and the parents fighting was involved… it did help out… let my feelings out about it and was done"* (397 - 404).

This passage highlights the cathartic power of writing about her experiences, the confrontation and conquering of the battles on all fronts she faced in her early life. The book seems to have enabled her to "be done" and achieve a conclusion to that part of her life.

Kat's earlier hatred towards her father has now mellowed into grudging acceptance since his new partner became involved. She still views him as a threat to her well-being however, as seen in her reluctance to introduce him to her new boyfriend. These two key relationships, her father and her new boyfriend can be seen to represent two periods of her life; the new world being one she wants to protect from contamination from her toxic, unpredictable father.

Her relationship with her current boyfriend is portrayed as one of mutual love and support, in which she shares the power and retains her independence. In her own eyes, she has become deserving of love and can see herself as a survivor of abuse. Kat describes one turning point on her recovery journey:

> *"First day of college it was literally like who am I going to be now? What am I going to do? And I thought, I'm just going to be truthful now, about who I am"* (406 - 408).

4.7.5 *Kat theme 4: Surviving and thriving*

"Surviving and thriving" link together key qualities Kat exhibits in her life as a student. These include her focus on personal goals, developing confidence, perseverance and self-acceptance.

This account reveals a strong sense of academic pride. Her course is her priority and she is developing her own strategies to keep her on target for success. This involves separating some of her more serious issues from university life. This enables her to set goals and work towards achieving positive academic outcomes.

Perseverance and toughness are evident in Kat's description of her challenges, some of which she faces repeatedly.

> *"What's the point giving up halfway through? So, I went back,*
> *and I thought, I'm going to do it"* (933 - 934).

Being dyslexic for Kat is challenging because of the style of learning and assessment at university. Yet she is compelled to persist to make her mother's efforts worthwhile, and to achieve academic success for herself. Kat describes managing her learning difficulties through finding allies: meeting and relating to others with dyslexia and being open about what she finds difficult. She is aware that she is unusual in several respects, but at the same time feels that some of her challenges are a shared experience:

> *"I came to university and so many people were like "I'm dyslexic*
> *and I have this and that" and I was like "oh I'm the normal one!*
> *Oh!" It was that difference to come to university and look*
> *normal- because there's thousands of students here and so*
> *many with disabilities"* (180 - 184).

The transition to university is a challenge that feels personal for Kat. She feels that she is developing strategies to help her survive on her own. She talks about the feeling she gets when taking classes versus engaging with therapy:

> *"The moment I walk into uni it's work, it's all about uni. When I go to the mental health clinic it's like my life, my problems. I just want it separate"* (1148 - 1150).

The separation of these two selves, student and patient, seems to be an important feature of her identity, as well as a way of coping.

Kat expresses surprise at herself for her achievements since coming to university, such as persevering to the second year:

> *"Never thought I'd make it to my second year… or have the feeling of me going by myself, without that feeling of someone kicking me up the arse to go"* (967 - 969).

Defying the expectations of others and herself is an affirmation of her commitment to study and belief in herself. Kat describes what returning to university at the start of her second year was like:

> *"Even my mum had never seen so much motivation in myself- I was like, "yeah, I'm off, bye!" She was like "I didn't even need to make you go back; you're doing this yourself". Without that kick from mum in the first year; that would have been it for me. She gave me that first step I needed, then I walked the rest of the way, and that's why I came back"* (944 - 949).

This imagery is like that of a child learning to walk; her mother is initially the central mover, guiding her for the first steps. Gradually Kat becomes able to and motivated to move herself.

4.8 Participant themes: Lee

4.8.1 *Biography*

Lee is a 19-year-old male in his second year of studying Sport having completed A-levels prior to entry. He has one younger sibling and is the first in his immediate family to come to university. Whilst Lee comes from a POLAR3 level 5 neighbourhood for participation in outer London, he is from a single-parent household and his mother is long-term unemployed. Lee felt that coming to university was a logical step for him; he described his family as supportive of his choice. He felt that coming to HE was a steep learning

curve and his course has required him to develop confidence and a professional attitude. Lee has no additional learning needs and does not have a part-time job at present. The two individual themes for this participant were: "push and pull of others" and "coaching myself".

4.8.2 *Lee theme 1: Push and pull of others*

This theme is concerned with the way in which others including friends, family and tutors influence Lee. Lee is supported by those around him, but he also compares himself to others and seeks to break free from them.

Lee sees his family as an important source of support. When introducing how he came to be a student, their feelings towards his choice of university are included in his decision-making:

> *"My family liked the sound of it too- not too far from home, but far enough I wouldn't be going back too often"* [laughs] (21 - 22).

His family home is there to return to as and when he needs it, but he has a measured independence from them, so he can establish his own life. Lee is keen to please his family:

> *"At the end of this whole process, if I do get a degree it will make my family proud. It will give me more opportunities like they didn't have, and it makes me want to strive on"* (123 -124).

There is a sense his parents perform the role of validating his choices up until coming to university, but this is less evident as he describes his time since beginning his course.

There is a tension between Lee's reliance on his parents and his experience of 'flying the nest'. His parents' influence on his decision-making is still welcome, yet he also recognises the importance of his burgeoning independence: "*this year I haven't been home yet so far which I'm proud of*" [laughs](101-102). His pride comes from not needing or succumbing to the need to be in his familiar home space, and the period of absence or separation from the family home serves as a marker of this achievement.

There is a conflict; the home is at once a desirable, safe place to be but going there is something he deliberately denies himself:

> *"it was weird not being there to watch TV, talk all the time as its gone on it has gotten easier, we value the time over summer"* (214 - 215).

The relationship between Lee and his mother is evolving. Lee describes their relationship as very close since his father left the family home. Whilst his family recognise that university is more common now, they have no direct experience of it themselves and thus Lee has the combined challenge of establishing himself as a young person at university, without insider knowledge from his parents:

> *"They see it as a valuable life experience and said this will increase your confidence…being chucked in at the deep end. If you can make it through, you'll be a better person because of it"* (224 - 227).

Another tension emerges as both Lee and his mother manage their changing roles. Whilst his mother acknowledges his new independence, there is some regression when he returns home. Lee finds it kind, but frustrating to be babied; it is clear he struggles with relinquishing markers of his independence, such as going out late or cooking for himself. These boundaries and practices are still under negotiation.

Lee's new support system comes in the form of his housemates. The experience of coming away to university is one shared by some of his friends from home also. "*We are all in a similar boat*" (80) he says, referring to the feelings of anxiety and worry they have all experienced around leaving home for the first time. Lee normalises his experience and takes comfort in knowing he can share his feelings and worries with others who can empathise. Understandably then he places such friendships at the centre of his experience, describing his social life as *"vital"* (348).

Finally, Lee's peers feature in his account as opportunities for evaluating and motivating himself. He considers how he measures up to others: *"there are*

people far more confident in my groups than I am, and they can be… quite loud" (163 -164).

Lee expresses concern about others interpreting work briefs differently from him; at one point this used to worry him. With growing confidence, he determines:

> *"But now I think they [lecturers] allow for that, different interpretations and putting your own stamp on it, so I'm more able to do that"* (448 - 450).

Lee now allows himself to be different and equally important to others.

4.8.3   *Lee theme 2: Coaching myself*

The theme of "coaching myself" is about how Lee listens to himself and develops strategies and confidence to achieve specific targets. Confidence is a personal trait central to Lee's experience as a student. He explores other strengths and weaknesses and uses different coping techniques to understand and visualise his goals.

Understanding himself involves Lee evaluating the positive and negative ways in which he can meet challenges as a student. He recognises the need to be "strong" in the face of difficulties; this is what resilience means to him. It requires drive and perseverance:

> *"Being strong despite facing lots of difficulties and sort of having a lot of motivation to continue"* (63 - 64).

His perseverance to gain entry to university is a strength of which he seems aware:

> *"I see it really as what's the point in me doing my A-levels and personal statement and going to all that effort for me to just drop out at the first sign of something going wrong"* (120 -121).

The language of "dropping out" has negative connotations; certainly, for Lee it would represent a waste of effort and personal failure on his part which he has sought to avoid.

With this key motivator in mind, Lee frequently links persevering and succeeding at his studies to the personal quality of confidence. In parts of his account of student life, Lee describes himself as lacking in self-confidence and self-belief (178-179). For Lee, lacking confidence means being anxious, *"nervous"* and *"on the spot in front of a few people"*(399).He construes this as a weakness and a barrier to achieving his goals.

Doing well at university for Lee means being tough and enduring new and intimidating situations. In one example, Lee describes undertaking a group presentation. It can be seen that working with others is challenging for Lee as a self-proclaimed introvert: *"I'm quiet and I had to grit my teeth and practise as much as I could"* (164). Lee's desire to perform as well as others in the group and *"be as good as I could be"* (166) shows how highly he values meaningful participation and meeting his own potential. He puts aside his anxieties and worries about how others will perceive him and perseveres with practising.

Lee has strong ideas about needing to be competitive as a student and in the industry in which he intends to work:

> *"I want to push myself and I'd rather set myself apart from other people"* (286 - 287).

The strategy of competitive engagement seems to be linked to Lee's understanding of the demands of his field. He also recognises the need for flexibility, as he talks about his experience of seeking a good placement:

> *"My parents have said if you* [I] *work near London or Hertfordshire I can stay with them, which would be beneficial, no rent and cheaper. But at the end of the day if I can't I'll go work somewhere else. The placement will be a valuable experience and set me apart from those who haven't got that industry experience, so I see that as really important"* (251 - 257).

In this passage, Lee's growing investment in his course and commitment to getting the most he can from it is weighed up against his wanting to remain in the "safety zone", supported by his family.

Lee thinks things through in terms of looking at possible outcomes; he frequently refers to imagining or picturing scenarios for himself such as being successful or what others can achieve. The use of the visual sense may be a strategy for decision-making and establishing concrete objectives. The concrete is important to Lee; it helps him feel he is making tangible progress. This is well-illustrated in his discussion of a recent learning task:

> *"This morning we went through an exam paper individually. Looked at it, then all together our lecturer sort of like wrote it all on the board and we all contributed our bits and pieces. It felt like there was a real purpose."* (422 - 425).

The role of vision shapes Lee's expectations of himself. He has imagined himself getting through his second (current) year as well as doing well in his degree *"there's not much point being here"* (283). Thus, his goals and expectations are central to his motivation. Grades are markers of success; a mediocre performance would not be acceptable. This is emphasised as he describes his feeling at underachieving in the first year:

> *"I did ok in the end, it would have been nice to…ah… I just missed out on a 2:1 that would have been nice to get a 2:1. But at the end of the day, I know if I work harder this year then I can achieve that hopefully"* (46 - 49).

This makes clear his expectations and goals, i.e. to achieve a 2:1. His confidence is expressed in positive terms, but then tempered somewhat by the use of "hopefully". This goal is important to Lee and it has emotional as well as academic significance.

4.9 Summary

This chapter has presented findings from the analysis of each of the seven individual participants' experiences of academic resilience. The following chapter offers a synthesised interpretation of the cross-case analysis of the phenomenon.

Chapter 5 Findings Part B: Cross-case analysis of themes across participants

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the superordinate themes from the cross-case analysis. In doing so, it brings out the convergence and divergence of individual participants' accounts that build an interpretation of the experience of academic resilience. This is one of the key strengths of IPA as a method of enquiry, at it opens up the higher order qualities that are shared in the experience of the phenomenon which are embodied within individual, idiosyncratic instances (Smith et al. 2009).

Once individual case analysis was complete, all the individual participant themes were collated in a table. In many cases, the original transcripts were reviewed in order to verify the titles and descriptors of each theme. This step was necessary to preserve the participants' meaning and researcher interpretation. Once themes were extracted from their original, individual context caution was exercised to ensure over-generalisation did not occur. Practically, this involved checking by placing key participant quotes side by side to consider similarities and differences.

As explained in Chapter Three, this final stage of analysis drew on a range of techniques. A re-application of some of the techniques outlined in Table 8 (Appendices 5 and 8) was used to group these individual themes into superordinate themes. For example, the approach of 'polarising' was used to develop themes such as confidence, whilst the method of 'contextualising' opened up interpretations of shared experience between participants, such as the first days at university. Multiple techniques were used across theme groupings which produced a number of different versions of superordinate themes.

Ultimately, a final set of superordinate themes was developed, named and detailed in constituent sub-themes, as features of academic resilience. Three

superordinate themes were developed from the analysis and from each of these there were three subthemes each:

- Superordinate theme 1: The experience of facticity and positive social orientation
    - Subtheme: Accepting difficulty
    - Subtheme: Making adversity meaningful
    - Subtheme: Personal growth within social contexts
- Superordinate theme 2: 'Living authentically amongst others'
    - Subtheme: Importance of core values
    - Subtheme: Knowing myself
    - Subtheme: Being myself around others
- Superordinate theme 3: Building social confidence and resolve: strategies for coping and achieving
    - Subtheme: Aligning self with others for support
    - Subtheme: Toughness and competition
    - Subtheme: The professional environment

5.2 Superordinate theme 1: Experience of facticity and positive social orientation

This theme is about participants recognising the impact of past circumstances and ongoing challenges, without letting them negatively impact their aspirations or self-esteem. The term 'facticity' is used here to mean the acceptance of one's circumstances and past, within the context of considering what is possible for one's present and future when supported by others. In this superordinate theme, personal growth as a response to adversity is a significant element of resilience. This theme consists of:

- Superordinate theme 1: The experience of facticity and positive social orientation
    - Subtheme: Accepting difficulty
    - Subtheme: Making adversity meaningful
    - Subtheme: Personal growth within social contexts

An overview of the participants' experience of this theme is shown in Table 11.

Superordinate theme: Facticity and positive social orientation			
Participant	Subtheme: Accepting difficulty	Subtheme: Making adversity meaningful	Subtheme: Personal growth within social contexts
Damien	x		x
Gino	x	x	
Grace	x	x	x
Isla	x	x	
Jess			x
Kat	x	x	x
Lee	x		x

Table 11: Appearance of superordinate theme "Facticity and positive social orientation"

5.2.1 *Subtheme 1a: Accepting difficulty*

There is considerable variance between participants' perceived experience of past difficulties. For some, difficulties of significance include catastrophic life events such as the sudden death or traumatic injury of a family member. Gino is one example of this, in which his loss and grief have become normal to him. Assimilating the traumatic experience here can be seen as a self-righting mechanism:

> *"Certain days I feel low about it all, but that happens when you lose a family member"* (Gino, 105).

Kat also acted as a carer for her father after an accident left him incapacitated. Her mother had to go out to work, leaving Kat to care for him:

> *"at primary school, I missed a lot of that. I had to stay home, make sure his wounds were changed every day"* (Kat 294 - 295).

For both participants, there is additional adversity on top of their family's economic difficulties, one that is unexpected and upsetting. There are differences in circumstances; Kat's experience was highly disruptive to her schooling and potentially isolating; Gino, on the other hand, reports being well-supported by school and immediate family during this adversity. There is a key interplay of factors here that perhaps mitigates or worsens the impact of additional adversity. For these two participants there are interesting parallels later with coping strategies: Kat on the one hand, who is determined to remain fiercely independent and Gino, who surrounds himself with positive, supportive friends.

For others, confronting adversity can even extend towards proactively anticipating challenges:

> *"My background, no money, no nothing, rural…but here I am, if I'm offered the chance, the opportunity- I take it. It's hard to explain change. It needs to happen, for good or bad"* (Damien, 680 - 682).

Other participants feel that they have not faced many challenges before becoming undergraduates. To Lee, for example, adapting to coming to university is his challenge:

> *"I didn't hardly know anyone who'd been to university before I came so that was a very different experience. I had no idea what to expect. I was anxious and very worried"* (Lee, 69 - 73).

There is a shared sense of anxiety and upheaval amongst some participants at this time of "not knowing". The participants' accounts reveal that as first-generation students, not having familiar others with whom to seek reassurance and understanding adds a unique sense of isolation and uncertainty, which compounds the challenge. First-generation participants in

this study could be seen as negotiating university systems with some difficulty on their own; for example, as Jess tried to establish whether or not she had actually failed her first year, or in Grace's personal efforts trying to manage the bureaucracy of transferring degree programmes. In both cases, participants successfully negotiated these challenges without parental input, including managing periods of stress (Grace doubling up on lectures and assignments; Jess managing to re-sit and re-enrol on her course).

At the same time, entry to the student life and experiencing the new challenges that come with it seem to act as a trigger for change. For example, parents like Damien's are depicted in his account as neither supportive nor unsupportive of his decision to pursue a degree. In his words they *"shrug"* and *"don't understand"*, unlike the parents of other people he knows (436, 440). Thus, most participants sought other sources of support, such as close friends and course mates. This behaviour can be seen for example in his descriptions of sitting in the lounge in his shared house, working on laptops and taking turns making dinner.

Typical experiences of low-income families included second-hand uniform, missing out on school trips or pocket money. Participants' attitudes towards material disadvantage were typically matter-of-fact:

> *"I never had a go at mum for it, I just kind of understood, I've never been one of those children, I think she brought me up correctly"* (Grace, 486 - 489).

In this extract, the participant is deeply aware of being less fortunate than her peers. She reveals the attitude that there is no shame in being straightforward about your means, but that there is in being ungrateful. This theme recurs with regards to expenses at university. Jess recounts missing out on enriching course activities (such as hearing visiting speakers) because of work commitments and cost. Other participants are concerned with this also, but prioritise course-related expenses over other spending; for example, on going out and socialising. Participants are keenly aware other students do not have to budget so carefully. There is some divergence within this theme

between participants, some of whom could be seen as still coming to terms with adversity.

5.2.1.1 Experience of learning difficulties

A recurrent issue for those participants affected by learning difficulties was how they experienced a sense of acceptance of their differences. Learning difficulties and disabilities were found to add another dimension of adversity for some of the participants. Kat in one example is explicit about what it feels like to be dyslexic and have auditory processing disorder:

> *"Auditory processing affects lectures more. Um because I find it very hard to sit in a lecture and listen if the information doesn't go in straight away, doesn't process properly. So, I'm trying to listen and then trying to make notes, it's literally mission impossible"* (Kat, 156 -159).

Yet at the same time, her description of what it feels like is paired up with her explanation of personal coping strategies about committing to independent reading and accepting that the information is not going to "go in" during the lecture itself.

Kat's struggle to have her difficulties understood and formally recognised was upsetting for her. Now at university she considers herself to be normal and no longer feels stigma; she is willing to share her diagnosis and needs with others. This also reverberates throughout Damien's account as he contrasts the barriers he faced at school dealing with dyslexia to those of his mentees, who enjoy a more positive, inclusive learning experience.

Central to Damien's account of his dyslexia and dyspraxia are the importance of connecting with other people with learning difficulties. Whilst Kat has established alliances with other dyslexic students, Damien speaks more generally of being dyslexic as a shared experience. To Damien, having dyslexia offers some perceptual advantages that he has sought to learn about and to share with his mentees. This reflects his own beliefs about his learning difficulty, which may go beyond acceptance towards giving his

adversity meaning. This idea is developed further in the last subtheme of this section: "Personal growth within social contexts".

By contrast, Grace's experience is marked by an ongoing struggle with accepting her differences:

> *"But still when I'm struggling now, I do sometimes think 'argh, I wish I wasn't dyslexic' or whatever, because my life would be so much easier!"* (Grace, 608 - 611).

This is a feeling of wanting things to be different, or to have some respite from her difficulties, which shows some departure from other accounts, as well as her own positive stance on other challenges she has experienced. There is also an implicit suggestion in her words that somehow studying is easier for those without learning difficulties; thus Grace, unlike some of the other participants, experiences a feeling of difference and disadvantage.

There is some contradiction within her account as Grace reclaims and re-defines what it means to be dyslexic:

> *"the recognition is important, so now I am not just thinking I'm stupid, I'm incapable. I'm dyslexic, dyspraxic and dyscalculic"* (Grace, 642 - 643).

Overall, she sees the significance of her life given the context of her previous experiences as characterised by good fortune; so, it may be that Grace is a participant still coming to accept her challenges. Alternatively, it may be that what acceptance looks like for Grace is acknowledging that she may always experience frustration about her difficulties at times.

Clearly, the trajectories of diagnosis and support varied between participants and this continues to influence their ways of coping and succeeding. Whilst the participants' life experiences are varied, there is a commonality of experience for these individuals around the need to recognise their difficulties. This is accompanied by an acknowledgement that their experiences are part of who they are, but not that they necessarily limit what they are able to do. In some cases, participants seek to separate themselves

from the troubles of the past. In others by contrast, the trauma of the past is a useful, meaningful experience to be drawn upon, as explored in the next subtheme.

5.2.2 *Subtheme 1b: Making adversity meaningful*

A key shared aspect of the experience of adversity for several participants was the ways in which they found their difficulties had meaning. This "meaning" was not externally attributed by others, but instead emerged from reasoning about their challenges and past experiences.

In one example, the strength and perspective on his own struggles translate to other areas of Gino's life, where he refuses to let the small things get on top of him. His outlook when talking about the passing of his aunt:

> *"I missed a lot of sixth form but I kind of turned that negative energy into, kind of you know, into positives. My determination to like, she was really ill, she had cancer and everything it's kind of that thing where you have to appreciate your own life and I wanted to make the most of it."* (Gino, 252 - 257).

Often participants gave meaning to events by expressing them with a positive, at times humorous spin. Grace describes what it is like to grow up on an estate side-by-side with much wealthier families:

> *"I was the lucky one I guess because I lived in a proper working-class benefit street area, but I could see the million, two million-pound houses from my window"* (Grace, 24 - 25).

Her perspective on this is that she is the lucky one; whilst she is keenly aware of her own disadvantages, she is anything but resentful. In other accounts, discussion of experiences of setbacks are frequently coupled with redemptive statements. For example, in having to re-sit a year, Jess felt "lucky" as it enabled her to re-enrol on an updated version of her BSc which was more aligned to her interests.

Current challenges now faced by these participants at university involve managing these negative feelings about disadvantage or adversity and perceive meaning or purpose in their struggles. Isla describes her difficult first

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year as *"the worst and best year of my life"* (Isla, 99) and having to *"make an effort with people"* (Isla, 132), even when this meant forcing herself out of her comfort zone. These examples are asserted confidently, implying a level of prior reflection and assessment of her own developing needs and abilities. This reflective attitude is apparent as she reframes her start to university:

> *"I think it got to after Christmas and I just loved it. Like I made my real friends and that was just the main thing for me. Because I do like the course and stuff, but I think that was more like just me being homesick and I think. I don't know why, but if I didn't come to uni I'd still have to get over that at some point, if that makes sense?"* (Isla, 83 - 88).

This contrasts with previous description where Isla expressed hatred and negativity towards her start at university in which she wanted to withdraw entirely:

> *"After 24 hours I rang my mum and I was like "I hate it" and so after like a week I came home, and I was like "I hate it, it's just not for me"* (Isla, 53 - 54).

She later recasts these feelings as symptoms of mere *"homesickness"* (Isla, 86). In rethinking and retelling these events, the meaning of her struggle has changed for Isla. The misery of her struggle was a necessary, inevitable hurdle to overcome for her to gain independence and find a purpose. Reforming of friendship groups and improving her study skills are all necessary and important to fully access the opportunities HE presents. This was a common thread amongst the individual accounts as the emotional experience of moving away from home and the familiar become a meaningful and important step. For these participants, successful transition to university is considered a success in itself.

Another important way in which several participants found meaning in their experiences of adversity was through helping others. This was discussed frequently in terms of informal friendships between struggling students, as well as formal internal and external mentoring. In one example, Kat describes mentoring new students in the university's Peer-Assisted Learning programme (PAL):

> *"Because of what's happened to me…everything has given me the confidence to help others… All I want to do is help students who have struggled in their first year, or with their home life"* (Kat, 894 - 900).

This need to "give back" to others may offer Kat and others an enduring sense of purpose and a way to make sense of difficult experiences. In other participants, it seems to offer affirmation of the choice to become a student despite struggles such as finance and learning difficulties. Mentoring was perceived as a great opportunity by participants; all those who had mentoring roles felt the experiences were meaningful. Through sharing one's own experience with others, the participants were able to gain a better understanding of themselves.

For some this offered opportunities to reflect on the metacognitive aspects of their student experience by thinking about the way in which they learn. But rather than being an entirely personal venture, mentoring is another instance where interactions within and across different year groups (guided by tutors), facilitated participants' success. Grace explains the essentially social nature of teaching and learning:

> *G: "Ok so PAL, that's been a successful experience for me. I'm learning… you know when someone's giving me advice and 80% of the time you don't listen…"*
>
> *R: "[laughs] Yeah"*
>
> *G: "But then you find yourself giving this advice about being a student back to someone else…and you go, oh this is what you meant!* (Grace, 846 - 854).

Likewise, Damien also engages in mentoring both internal to the university and in outreach with local schools. He describes the dual purpose he finds in supporting and encouraging other dyslexic students whilst sharing his love and knowledge of his discipline. When asked what it means to him to be a mentor, he says:

> *"Giving something to them and giving something back I didn't have in school. I've learned this, I'll pass it on to you and they*

can give the same back to someone else in future again"
(Damien, 772 - 774).

Thus, his efforts to share his difficult experiences and the strategies he has learned for coping take on a significance when he can see others benefitting from them. This is important for several participants who engage in mentoring; negative, challenging experiences or failures can be seen to have positive aspects when they are reflected upon and shared with others.

5.2.3 *Subtheme 1c: Personal growth within social contexts*

For these participants, there was a deeper level of acceptance and positivity about their lives and what was possible for them. In one case, it was as though the boundaries of endurance had stretched that participant's capacity for coping and thriving. This is what is meant by "personal growth"; a kind of change that comes from within, resulting from reflection.

One aspect of personal growth within a social context is the sense of blossoming independence for the participants. For some, this growth means taking on adult responsibilities and status as an independent learner. This is a process involving a *"spectrum of emotions"* (Lee, 336). For these participants, undertaking a degree at university away from home is a mixture of excitement, anxiety, uncertainty and enjoyment. It is an experience set within a time of radical change for the participants who must negotiate new environments, social groups and academic challenge. There is a sense in which this transition is unavoidable; even if participants had withdrawn from studies they would likely have to face separation from family at some point. On the other hand, these life changes are situated within the academic domain, specifically the context and culture of UK HE, and this is reflected powerfully in each account.

With reflection on the early challenges of the first year of university, the participants begin to look forward to greater independence and self-determination. Lee, for example is *"in the process of becoming independent"* (Lee, 231 - 232) after the sharp shock of leaving home and having to manage

most aspects of his daily life on his own. It is clear he sees this as an ongoing development, not something that is yet complete *"I'm sure these skills will increase more before I leave"* (Lee, 244).

Participants are clearly in different places in terms of their journey towards becoming independent adults. Others who have moved far away from home or have had to grow up quickly in chaotic households or separated families are further along this journey. Yet they still seek to express and gain satisfaction from independence:

> *"When I get my first job, I'll know I've done it myself that I can deal with my disabilities myself and not have others helping me all the time"* (Kat, 211 - 213).

As well as being able to look after themselves practically, another emergent aspect of personal growth is the way in which participants reclaim themselves from others' negative perceptions. For example, Jess describes how her grandparents have over time warmed to the idea of her moving away to study. Thus the growth Jess experiences is bound up with both her old and new social worlds with the expectations and constraints of family as well as those of university peers, friends and tutors.

In addition to this reconciliation, Jess's mother has decided to return to education to gain a degree in animal management. Her mother has always been supportive of Jess, though unable to assist her much practically on her course. Jess's decision to break from tradition has:

> *"inspired my mum to do an online university course because she saw me do it"* (Jess, 164 -165).

She links her mother's life choices to her own; there is a sense that Jess is creating her own new cycle of opportunity. She has strengthened the resolve and self-belief of her mother through her decision to enrol at university. This is an important part of Jess's developing a new, strong sense of herself, away from her old world.

5.3 Superordinate theme 2: Living authentically amongst others

This theme is about how participants know their own strengths and weaknesses as people and students, wanting to follow their dreams and to be themselves and establishing personal values. This theme consists of:

- Superordinate theme 2: Living authentically amongst others
    - o Subtheme: Importance of core values
    - o Subtheme: Knowing myself
    - o Subtheme: Being myself around others

An overview of the participants' experience of this theme is shown in Table 12.

	Superordinate theme: Living authentically amongst others		
Participant	Subtheme: importance of core values	Subtheme: knowing my strengths and weaknesses	Subtheme: being myself around others
Damien	x		x
Gino	x	x	x
Grace		x	x
Isla	x	x	
Jess	x	x	
Kat			x
Lee	x	x	x

Table 12: Appearance of superordinate theme "Living authentically amongst others"

5.3.1 *Subtheme 2a: Importance of core values*

The accounts of what it was like to be a student from a low-income background consistently explored how participants considered certain behaviours and beliefs to be good or worthy. There is a strong link here between what the participants value (the opportunities of HE, hard work, competing and trying their hardest) and the sorts of goals they set for themselves (high grades, doing better than peers, persisting to the end of their course). These attitudes may emerge because participants from these

backgrounds may recognise HE not as an opportunity to socialise and enjoy being a student, but rather as a means by which to improve their lives.

There was a shared belief amongst participants that their life opportunities were limited within their former environments; whether it be low-participation in HE neighbourhoods, or within families or friendship groups with different aspirations. In contrast, amongst their peers at university, higher education is now openly valued and as Jess spells out:

> *"I'm going to university. I'm going to do something better with my life"* (Jess, 76).

As well as holding the overarching, shared ambition of obtaining a degree, participants also express similar ideas about what it is to be a good student. For example, external pressure is generally viewed as enjoyable and an important motivator. They describe the thrill of getting assignments back and finding out how they and others have performed. This may link to the expectations each participant sets of themselves, that they should always try their best, and accordingly often see academic grading as important external validation of personal efforts.

Importantly, personal goals are rooted in the culture of their course and emerge alongside those of their peers. The values and corresponding targets participants hold are set within the social context; in some cases, this can be influenced by teaching staff and peers. In talking about how he likes to keep on top of new developments in technology, Damien says:

> *D: "our business lecturer, first thing he says in the morning is "what's happened in the industry" and we all share news we've seen. Everyone needs to be up-to-date with the news. Who's bought who, where's this going?"*
>
> *R: "How do you feel about that activity?"*
>
> *D: "It's fantastic, it's great. It shows who's paying attention to what"* (Damien, 508 - 515).

For several participants, there is a deeper expression of the value given to the student experience. For example, Isla states that this experience is

"something that I'm never, ever going to get again" (Isla, 710), which for her means it is a precious opportunity not to be wasted. The value she places on personal growth through the wider experience of being at university reflects a development-orientation. For Isla, achieving high grades is only part of a bigger experience that is establishing values such as determination in the face of adversity.

5.3.2 *Subtheme 2b: Knowing myself*

Some participants in this study were confident and extroverted, others were more reserved and considered. Some described themselves as single-minded and determined, others were creative, less defined or even called themselves lazy. What most had in common, however, was the ability to identify their own key behaviours and thoughts and reflected upon how these served them as students. The participants' perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses are viewed in the light of their core values; how they match up to their ideal selves both as students and as people in a wider context (for example as family members or employees).

From personal observations of themselves, individuals were able to establish what it was about them that constituted strengths and weaknesses. Much like the previous theme about facticity in which individuals come to accept their life circumstances, this concept of self-knowledge is also about self-acceptance. In one example, Grace recognises her own specific strengths and disadvantages when working in a group with other students:

> *"I need to work on that, or take things less personally or accept that that way of being is just me and I have to cope with it"* (Grace, 190 -192).

Likewise, Gino's awareness of his learning preferences is clear:

> *"I'm a visual learner, I need to see it rather than just talking. I need it in front of me, I need a demonstration"* (Gino, 506 - 508).

This emphasis on 'need' shows a depth of understanding of the self; why things do or do not work for him, as well as a clearly identified goal. In this case, Gino evaluates what he can do and what he needs in relation to the learning task at hand.

One of the reasons this self-understanding seems to be part of the phenomenon of resilience may be linked to the willingness to then change and develop the self. As Jess explains after failing her statistics unit, she engages reflectively with the experience of failure and lack of revision:

> *"…and coming back this year I feel such a different person. I spent the whole year thinking how I could be better and how you know, this isn't an opportunity that everybody gets, you know, I need to focus harder on it, so I don't have to re-sit something and do this in the future. I knew the reason I was in the situation was my own fault; it was my own fault I should have got four questions out of 10! But when I re-sat it I got 10 out of 10- I did pretty well."* (Jess, 362 - 371).

Exploring her understanding of what happened has involved her owning her own mistake, and thus re-establishing higher personal expectations.

This striking honesty is evident in other accounts, such as Lee's as he confronts his own fears and weaknesses as a student. He describes being "terrified" of finding a work placement on his own, which would involve contacting professional organisations, promoting himself and facing rejection:

> *"I shoved it out of my mind about placement the whole first year. But I'm feeling more confident now; I'm prioritising the right things"* (Lee, 279).

Instead of repressing fears or ignoring difficulties, Lee values the need for challenge to bolster his confidence and achieve his goals; he has a *desire* to change in line with his values and beliefs. Like other participants, there is a sense from Lee that this self-discovery and change is a work in progress. He speaks in the present tense, situating himself as currently within the experience. Kat is similarly open-minded about change and the willingness to engage with an evolving sense of self:

> *"[I get] a better feeling from other people's achievements rather than my own. It's odd, weird, people have said maybe I should become a lecturer from it. Maybe if I get joy out of other people's academic progress maybe that's what I should do"* (Kat, 918 - 921).

Here Kat engages with the process of understanding herself via conversations with others. Through establishing what her strengths and passions are through this dialogue she reveals a desire to identify a place for herself in the world.

5.3.3 *Subtheme 2c: Being myself around others*

Following on from acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses is the commitment individuals showed towards following their own directions. As students this manifested itself in different sorts of ways in relation to their social worlds. For example, one recurring story amongst the participants was that other students acted as cautionary tales. In one instance Gino says of a friend:

> *"She was going out all the time, like the first month she was £700 overdrawn. She went crazy.* (Gino, 286 - 287).

These 'counterpoint' individuals were seen as not sharing the same core values as the resilient participants (seeking out hard work, not wanting to waste resources, determination).

A less typical example illustrating this sub-theme, is of difficult conversations in which the individual finds that their wants and needs conflict with those of others. Isla made a decision in her second year to live closer to her campus, which meant leaving her original housemates, resulting in bad feelings:

> *"Sometimes I'm quite glad I did have those arguments. I don't speak to them anymore and it's no loss to me. It made me much more brave* [sic] *I suppose"* (Isla, 196).

This experience signifies a sea change for Isla; she can make her own decisions, vocalise them and deal with the consequences. She is testing out and managing conflict with others and seeing a change in herself as a result.

This translates to other experiences in the academic sphere; for example, within one group project Isla explains:

> *"I have to speak out and say what I think. I can't just sit back…at first I sat back and let everyone else talk, and now I say what I think"* (Isla, 251).

Part of this seems to come from a feeling of being valued amongst her classmates, as though her opinion is likely to be listened to and respected. There is a sense that Isla perceives herself to have some control in these situations, that she can and should be heard.

Other experiences of committing to authenticity are more personal and relate to specific adversity. Kat has chosen to show more of her true self to others. This comes with an acceptance of her illness:

> *"I'm 19 now though, I've come to accept it, accept it all. It has formed who I am today…it's probably given me the sass I have today"* (Kat, 231 - 233).

This ability to admit to her weaknesses, her past and willingness to present herself as she is to others creates authentic confidence in Kat. She exposes her vulnerabilities to those she meets at university. Whilst this might sound risky, for Kat there seems to be greater danger in hiding her past and current struggles; there is strength in accepting herself and letting herself be seen by others just as she is.

Essential to her outlook is the stories Grace tells about who she is. She frames her experience of coming from a low-income background positively. For instance, she is grateful to her mother for being straightforward with her about financial issues. She seems to have taken on the same practical approach to living within her means. Grace validates her mothers' approach, asserting that her mother raised her correctly.

Authenticity for some participants requires taking the initiative and making personal changes. This is an essential element of Grace's university

experience. Dealing with change is challenging and involves self-control and reflection:

> *"I now have this own self-policy, I will like let anyone who wants to make a point first then put my point in"* (Grace, 297 - 298).

Thus, the participant here balances the needs of others with her own need to be heard.

Similarly, Damien's attitude towards overcoming adversity hinges on giving voice to his opinions and beliefs. On a public platform he asserts that "*you must advocate for yourself*" (Damien, 230). This indicates a confidence in oneself but is embedded in an account of working in the NUS in which he is a voice for others- an authentic voice of the students.

The way in which participants approach "being true to themselves" is a process that may be fraught with tension, as their new ways of being conflict with the values and life courses of others. This is a discovery of a new world for some, in which their perspectives on who they are and where they have come from are evolving. As Isla expresses:

> *"I was the only one out of any of my friends at home to come to uni last year. To be honest every single one of them just went straight into work. I think I like that I've like made my own life if that makes sense there's a world outside of where I live back home"* (Isla, 510 - 519).

The distinction between the ways of being for Isla and other participants between old school friends from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the pathway they have chosen for themselves is part of a meaningful shift in identity. In Isla's case, the world outside is one she has willingly sought access to: it is represented in her account; she has chosen something different and self-made. In this way, the lack of opportunity experienced by participants from these backgrounds becomes a protective factor, through the way it is interpreted- perceptions of independence and self-efficacy as one "makes it on their own" enhances the motivation and esteem needed to persevere.

5.4 Superordinate theme 3: Building social confidence and resolve: strategies for coping and achieving

This theme is about aligning with or separating from others, being tough or competitive, acting assertively or relying on others for support, coaching oneself, assuming professional roles. This theme consists of:

- Superordinate theme 3: Building social confidence and resolve: strategies for coping and achieving
  - o Subtheme: Aligning self with others for support
  - o Subtheme: Toughness and competition
  - o Subtheme: The professional environment

An overview of the participants' experience of this theme is shown in Table 13.

Superordinate theme: Building social confidence			
Participant	Subtheme: aligning self with others for support	Subtheme: toughness and competition	Subtheme: the professional environment
Damien	x	x	x
Gino	x	x	
Grace	x	x	
Isla	x	x	
Jess	x		x
Kat	x	x	
Lee	x	x	x

Table 13: Appearance of superordinate theme "Building social confidence"

5.4.1   *Subtheme 3a: Aligning self with others for support*

Key supporters and social networks were found to be a crucial part of resilient students' experiences of university. In this study, all participants explored how they align themselves with others to feel supported in some way. Other people perform many functions for the participants. For instance, they can help facilitate positive change for the individual:

> *"I just felt like I had to make a change in the second year. I needed someone to focus with"* (Damien, 362 - 363).

Damien recognises that he needs to surround himself with others who share his core values at their shared home. Pursuing his goals is an explicitly social activity; he builds his team of allies and they share objectives and setbacks.

This idea of being in the 'same boat' as others recurs frequently in the participants' accounts. Gino feels a collective positivity when working with his fellow students: *'bam, we're doing this'* (Gino, 716) and:

> *"You kind of feed off each other's knowledge… you bounce off each other, each other's energy"* (Gino, 703 - 705).

These analogies bring out the synergy and symbiosis of the participants' experiences; there is something greater and more satisfying to be achieved working with peers, be it in parallel or cooperatively.

For those first-generation entrants to higher education, relationships with those already engaged with higher education take on a heightened importance. Lee explicitly divides his friends from home and those from university, who have different emotional functions for him. Damien is similar; he describes an annual social event with friends from home (non-students) as an isolated event "for old time's sake", in contrast with the close working relationships he maintains daily with his university course mates.

Alternatively, Jess continues to value relationships with friends and family, though these are seen in a different light since she has become a student. She speaks of bonding with her mother over coursework and checking her assignments for her. Jess almost considers her a fellow student; they support each other in study and to her this new facet of their relationship *"makes up for grandma and grandad being a bit funny"* (Jess, 189). Thus, the support she receives from her mother as a student has a compensatory effect for the negativity of her grandparents.

In some instances, there is evidence of critical evaluation of what friendships offer the participants. Assessing a person's values is a fundamental part of how Damien in particular relates to others on course. Here there is a sense that the other group members can perform a function for him:

"Where do we start? Who's going to do what? I learnt a lot like who to look out for, who to work with" (Damien, 643).

Likewise, Isla seems to increasingly seek out individuals with greater life experience. She shows a greater ability to recognise and draw on the wisdom in others, as when she spoke about her course mate "Dan":

"I suppose like even times when you think you can't do your work he's just supportive and is just like... he has words of wisdom. That's what I'm trying to say like he's a wise sort of person" (Isla, 500).

The significance of these friendships is extended further as Isla makes more sophisticated judgements about others; she identifies and aligns herself with role models who share her values. For Isla, a sense of belonging is key to her persistence. Her experience of succeeding at university is one of finding her place amongst other people. However, a contrasting aspect of Damien's experience is how he is able to stand up to others and challenge the status quo at HE.

So, in a subtler way, "others" can also hold up a mirror to the participants that gives them an important perspective. The stories participants tell about those significant others often reveal how the social dynamic leads to greater self-understanding and self-confidence. For example, Lee then recalls returning home and having family remark on changes in himself:

"they have said to me they see me as more confident…I don't always see it in myself, but that's interesting I guess not seeing them for a while" (Lee, 194 - 197).

His family continue to perform important functions for Lee; validating his personal growth and giving him opportunities for self-reflection.

Kat also describes the feeling of surprising others; of defying their expectations:

"Lots of people were actually really surprised to see me come back in January. A lot of people on my course thought that I was gone, that that was it for me" (Kat, 928 - 929).

This also provides the sense that Kat has a greater understanding of her changing self (becoming tough, determined and committed to her goals) when seeing herself through the eyes of others.

Other participants experienced social support from within the university. This is more formal and directly academic in nature than the participants' intricate networks of peers. Anxieties about the quality of Gino's work and how to approach assignments were assuaged in his encounters with tutors:

> *"The lecturer was great, offered loads of tutorials. I think I had four lots of one-to-ones where she answered any questions. I was really freaking out …so she was amazing"* (Gino, 481 - 484).

For Gino, the stability and availability of the tutor was reassuring. He goes on however, to describe withdrawing from needing an intense level of support later on in the course. Having developed knowledge of how assessments work with good tutor guidance, Gino feels more confident in directing himself through projects. Here the support given by an individual lecturer has an ongoing power and presence in his perception and attitude towards his work.

Conversely, Jess's way of dealing with struggles is at times isolationist. She describes working to complete her A-levels during a period of illness: *"kinda locked myself in my room"* (Jess, 293) to ward off distractions and focus on what she wants to achieve, regardless of others. Later this strategy emerges in her choice to come so far away from home to university:

> *"I'm 250 miles from home, I can't pop off home for the weekend, I've not got the money to go anywhere else and I think that's quite good I've put myself in that position and I have to go out and talk to people and get to know the area"* (Jess, 398 - 401).

Jess has deliberately left herself without a safety net; she has jumped in at the deep end knowing that to return home or seek comfort from her family would be a distraction to her goal (achieving a degree) and admitting defeat (at achieving her goal independently).

5.4.2 *Subtheme 3b: Toughness and competition*

Within this subtheme there is some of the greatest divergence amongst participants. Some, such as Isla, Kat and Lee, consider themselves shy and lacking in confidence. Others like Grace and Damien are outspoken about their experiences and goals. However, there is a shared sense that in order to succeed as students, they all draw upon an inner toughness and push to become confident and competitive.

For instance, Isla reflects on a difficult event in her first year in which she was being bullied by her housemates online:

> *"They wrote Facebook statuses about me, it was horrible. And I had to live in that house and I just wanted to cry all the time. I obviously didn't want them to see that I was upset about it, so I like…confronted them rather than not say anything. You can't write a Facebook status about me from next door!"* (Isla, 189 - 193).

In this excerpt Isla does not want her housemates to see her vulnerability; as loathe as she is to do so, she confronts them, rather than show weakness. This is part of the toughening up or becoming brave and changing the way she is outwardly perceived to protect herself.

Similarly, Grace refers to her own middle name which means "warrior" and she draws on this as a point of pride. Her warrior identity enables her to compete and commit to new goals. It is important for Grace to try her best, no matter what:

> *"If I'm really focused on something I'll put every ounce of energy, passion and enthusiasm into it. This has got to be good; this had got to be great it's got to have every ounce of positiveness* [sic] *put into it to make it sound good. Regardless if it's an essay, anything, yeah"* (Grace, 311 - 315).

If she has committed to something, it becomes her focus and thus success at essay-writing in this example is a reflection on her as a person.

Lee manages challenges as a student in different ways. He sets himself high standards for tasks*:*

> *"I like to work hard and ensure I've given the task all I could do really. I don't want to come out of something and think I could have done better… to think that I could have tried better. I know I might not be particularly good at something, but if I've tried my best it's ok."* (Lee, 152 -154).

In this excerpt, Lee uses positive self-talk, a method which several of the participants use to encourage themselves when faced with challenges. Part of this strategy involves incentivising themselves for working hard or persisting, such as being able to call home or take a rest. Other times it was more abstract, as the quote above from Lee shows. It reveals how participants think about internal progress and how they measure up against their own expectations or beliefs about what they can achieve.

Whilst Lee uses internal expectations and self-coaching strategies to cope, several of the other students engage in healthy competition with peers or identify peers as important sources of support. Like her fellow course mates, Isla finds herself suddenly *"bothered"* (Isla, 344) by her grades; *"it's an important conversation now"* (Isla, 346). They strive to be the first to discover new information and skills:

> *"To get good sources, everyone's like, how did you find this out? And then I can say I did it like this or I looked at this. It gives it more…if we all just got taught it everyone would know the same stuff…so it's quite fun to find your own stuff"* (Isla, 633 - 637).

Isla reveals here feelings of wanting to set herself apart from or above others in her achievements. Developing academic skills such as in the research task she describes are given greater importance within a social context; in fact, this context facilitates and deepens her level of engagement. It reveals an interesting contradiction experienced by most of the participants, but one that is especially true for Isla: the need to fit in and find friends at university, versus the searching for one's own path.

5.4.3 *Subtheme 3c: The professional environment*

The concept of the self being cast as a professional emerged in some cases. Participants' descriptions and interpretations in these accounts took on a quality that was less student-like, and rather more fitting within a work environment.

Damien, for example, takes great pride in explaining *"if you aren't productive, you aren't moving forward"* (Damien, 345); the notion of making progress and keeping up-to-date are key professional values in his discipline. This recurs as he recounts a confrontation with a lecturer whose teaching material appeared to be obsolete, infuriating Damien:

> *"Yeah, like you know your stuff, that's fine, but don't pretend.
> It's not ten years ago!"* (Damien, 497 - 498).

Such frustrations echo his -own deeper concerns about being left behind and needing to be at the cutting edge of what is happening in industry.

Amongst participants, it is worth noting that there was variation across what might be considered professional attitudes in respect of different disciplines. In the excerpt above, Damien's priorities reflect the concerns of the technology industry. In contrast, Lee's focus on goal-setting and confidence-building are understandably more specific to his domain of sports studies. Despite these subject-based differences, participants shared an understanding of their respective subjects or industries which was reflected in their values and attitudes towards their courses.

As in other themes, this was embedded within a social context. Like-minded peers including course mates and academic staff take on the role of professional colleagues. The participants recognise ambition in others; one of the things Jess seems to like most about university is being surrounded by people who are *"academically invested"* (Jess, 55). Being amongst others who share their interests and attitude towards study is an adjustment; it is a change from previous environments where academic aptitude had lower

value. Commitment to study and achieve amongst peers was a recurring issue of importance amongst the participants in this study.

This is highly significant for Jess and other participants who have attended schools with below average progression to HE. As she recalls:

> *"When I actually started it was a big change. Like lectures- it's an hour talking at you- whereas at my college it wasn't done like that because people wouldn't listen!"* (Jess, 648 - 649).

Students explored several instances in which informal opportunities to engage with lecturers as professional colleagues had great influence, such as site work, field trips and interviews. These interactions bolstered a sense of togetherness, common purpose and belonging within a professional community.

Working towards a degree continues to raise challenging questions for participants such as Jess:

> *"I want to get all the skills and then go out into the world and be like what's next? How do I make it?"* (Jess, 771 - 772).

Some of these participants have assimilated messages regarding professional routes relating to their discipline, with many already casting an eye towards postgraduate opportunities and careers.

5.5 Systematic variations

There were differences across themes between participants along some social strata, namely gender, mental health issues and learning difficulties. Although this study does not claim to represent the diverse student body attending the university, the possible influence of these factors within the superordinate themes is considered here.

5.5.1 *Gender*
The gender of participants presented a significant dimension of the academic resilience revealed in this study. Superordinate theme 3: "Building social

confidence and resolve" explored the changing social relationships of participants. Overall there seemed to be greater tension experienced by females in withdrawing from previous friendships and embarking on new ones. For example, Isla struggled throughout her first year with homesickness. She also negotiated difficult housemate relations: "*I had to live in that house and I just wanted to cry all the time*" (Isla, 189 -190), before finding a group which she fit in to: "*I feel like I became part of that other group then that's when a lot of my confidence grew*" (Isla, 264 - 275). These tensions were also experienced by Jess and Kat, who expressed how leaving home had caused tension; both their stories focused on the challenges of establishing new networks of support in their new environments.

By contrast, males in the study appeared to face fewer social challenges. For example, Lee reflected on changes to his friendship group with little emotion:

> *"I'm with different friends this year but quite a few of us, it's nice. Sort of split into two, in total there's eight of us. Yeah it's good"* (Lee, 29 - 31).

Thus the struggles involved in subtheme 3c: "Aligning with others for support" was more apparent for females than males. This may have related to the interviewer being female, which may have meant female participants felt more comfortable discussing emotional topics than their male counterparts. Alternatively, female participants may have attached more emotional significance to establishing or withdrawing from relationships because of their gender.

Findings presented in subtheme 3c: "The professional environment" related primarily to two of the three male participants in the study but only one of the four female participants. Two male participants, Damien and Lee were more focused on career prospects and identified particular roles in their industries they aspired to have after graduation. Jess was the only female to outline her

aspirations in the interview which gave a looser indication of her area of interest than the males participants. Whilst there was greater specificity amongst male participants in terms of their career expectations, there was little variation between male and female participants' commitment to conducting themselves as professionals amongst work colleagues, lab partners and other students and staff. Irrespective of their gender, participants valued teamwork, use of initiative and the ability to meet deadlines.

On the other hand, there appeared to be little evidence of systematic variation across superordinate theme 1: "Facticity and positive social orientation". Participants of both genders experienced acceptance of difficulty, making adversity meaningful and enacting personal growth. In the accounts these subthemes were most often linked to socio-economic disadvantage or learning difficulties rather than gender. For example, participants of both genders identified their experiences as first in family to attend HE as challenging (Lee and Damien) and of growing up without material resources as challenges (Kat):

> *"When we were young we moved house a lot... renting properties, rent goes up; money goes up, got to move on. Can't afford it"* (Kat, 268 - 277).

Similarly in superordinate theme 2 "Living authentically amongst others" there was much convergence in the accounts across both males and females. In subtheme 2a "Importance of core values", participants all identified hard work, perseverance, and making the most of their opportunities as students as key. There was also a shared sense between males like Gino and Lee and females like Kat and Isla that making their families proud or contributing financially to their families was important. There was no systematic variation between participants on the basis of gender in regard to subthemes 2b: "Knowing myself" and 2c: "Being myself around others". For example both

Kat and Damien demonstrated similar attitudes towards being open about who they were. They also shared the desire to share their identities and experiences with others in meaningful ways, through writing, mentoring and friendships.

5.5.2 *Learning difficulties*

"Facticity and positive social orientation" (superordinate theme 1) featured prominently in the accounts of all participants with learning difficulties: Grace, Damien and Kat. All three participants were open about the challenges their difficulties presented in the course of their studies. Damien and Kat showed a high level of acceptance. Damien embraced being dyslexic, identifying advantages around spatial perception and seeing problems in different ways. Grace showed frustration at times with her challenges, but was accepting to the extent that she knew her strategies for coping were successful.

> *"Now I am not just thinking I'm stupid, I'm incapable... All I can do about it is work hard and use the support that this university provides for me"* (Grace, 642 - 645).

Participants with learning difficulties also made their experiences meaningful in their accounts using them as an opportunity for personal growth (for example through internal peer mentoring and in the case of Damien, mentoring school students with learning difficulties). In comparison, the other four participants also showed acceptance of adversity and a search for meaning. However, this tended to be less focused on giving back in the ways described above.

Superordinate theme 2: "Living authentically amongst others" had a special significance for some participants with learning difficulties and/or mental health issues (Gino, Grace and Kat). Their accounts reflected a past adversity in terms of the academic challenges presented by such difficulties. There were unique aspects to their accounts which set them apart from those without learning difficulties around self-knowledge; knowing what strategies

worked for them in terms of academic study. Compared to the other participants, there was a greater level of openness and relief at making their challenges known amongst peers in the HE context where learning difficulties were less stigmatised and better understood.

The third superordinate theme "Building social confidence and resolve" was especially evident in the accounts of participants with learning difficulties. Often the toughness participants felt they required stemmed from the challenges of their dyslexia or dyspraxia, within the pressurised academic environment. For example, Grace's describes written work as taking much longer for her than other students, and that her only option was to persevere using her own strategies. In contrast, the emphasis on toughness for this theme for other participants without learning difficulties was linked more to issues such as developing social groups or independent study skills.

5.5.3 *Mental health issues*

Kat was the only participant in this study to declare a mental health issue. So whilst her experience is singular in this respect, there were some contrasts of note across themes.

"Living authentically amongst others"(superordinate theme 2) was an important theme within Kat's account. However, this was evident in her attitude towards her learning difficulties and her experiences of abuse, about which she had written a book. In her account there was a sense of Kat still coming to terms with her relatively recent diagnosis; however, it was also apparent that she was still adjusting to accepting her mental health issues and being open with others about them. For Kat, this aspect of herself was compartmentalised to an extent as she accessed services outside of the university for treatment and support. In this way, this superordinate theme resonated less with Kat in terms of her experience of mental illness than it did with other participants.

In theme 1: "Facticity and positive social orientation" Kat was also defiant of other's limiting beliefs about her ability to continue at university resulting in her persevering to prove them wrong. For Kat, living with mental health problems and history of abuse presented a significant choice about whether to accept herself and be open with others in a way that was different from other participants without such experience. Kat's mental health issues, learning difficulties and history of abuse interacted in ways that made her story quite different from that of other participants in this study. Her individual themes reflect this: the parent-child dynamic in her relationships and being seen as a survivor make her story highly divergent from the others.

Finally, in superordinate theme 3: "Building social confidence and resolve" Kat shared her experience of returning after the difficult first year, demonstrating toughness to her peers and tutors. This was a strong contrast with other participants in the study who were striving to be best on course or establish satisfying careers. At the time of interview, the priority across the first year of university for Kat had been to survive rather than thrive.

5.6 Reflections on analysis

There is a struggle in moving from the individual case to the cross-case analysis. This is partly because of my desire to privilege the individual stories of participants and the meaning they hold within idiosyncratic contexts. There has also been a challenge in considering how each analysis in turn has shaped the forestructure of my understanding of this phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009). I have felt a greater empathic awareness of the participants' experiences and a willingness to see beyond my pre-existing conceptions of what makes a student "successful".

The process of identifying suitable terms for themes across this section of analysis has also been challenging. There is a balance in trying to find meaningful words (without being overly obscure) that capture the essence of

the experience which participants share. Here I acknowledge how my background in philosophy and psychology has guided my titles for superordinate themes (e.g. "facticity" and "cognitive-behavioural strategies"). I have consciously striven to let the interpretative account be driven by the participants' own words and reflections, establishing the names of themes as a secondary exercise. This has been difficult at times, as I have tried to let the social aspects of each dimension of resilience shine through.

5.7 Summary

This chapter has explored the superordinate themes that were found in this analysis. It has supported each key finding about academic resilience with support from participant interviews. Throughout, this interpretation has presented differences and similarities in the lived experience of participants which together offer the essence of the phenomenon to the reader. The next chapter seeks to consider the findings from individual and cross-case analysis in the context of extant resilience and WP research, theory and practice.

Chapter 6　**Discussion**

6.1　Introduction

This chapter begins by revisiting the reasons for the research, the study's initial aims and objectives as well as existing perspectives on resilience in other published research. Having presented these, the findings of the current study are discussed.

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate how this research project contributes to the understanding of academic resilience in students from low-income backgrounds. The findings of this study illuminate an insider perspective of academic resilience, one that is situated within the particular context of individuals from a low-income background and a specific university. Here, each finding is compared to the wider extant literature about academic resilience. The chapter outlines the unique contribution this study makes to enriching both conceptual understandings of academic resilience and the lived experience of students.

One of the major findings of this research is that participants used a range of individual attributes and interpersonal skills to pursue goals and keep motivated. There were distinctive ways in which low-income, first-generation students experience motivation, such as through visualisation, positive self-talk and career focus. This relates to some of the existing literature on resilient students, for example, Wilson-Strydom (2017), and highlights differences between how low-income students and middle-income students each experience goals and motivation.

Another key finding is that the experience of academic identity and self-esteem are essential to the phenomenon of academic resilience. The conflict and adaptation experienced by students is explored in terms of existing theories of capital and research on attainment.

The social dimension of the participants' experience is striking compared to the focus of existing literature. The social world of the student can be seen as fundamental to academic resilience. This contrasts with the prevailing focus on dispositional qualities seen in the psychological resilience literature. Those "quiet voices" of the academically resilient minority illuminate and challenge the biased beliefs about student success held by policy-makers, academic staff and even WP practitioners.

Finally, the findings bring into question the value and usefulness of constructs of resilience and explore its current neo-liberal misuse. The potential utility of an academic resilience framework informed by qualitative research is proposed towards the end of this chapter.

Each of the findings considered in this section have important, practical implications for university staff which are presented in Chapter Seven. With greater understanding of the mechanisms of these different protective processes, staff and practitioners may be better placed to support students from low-income backgrounds.

6.2 Aims and Objectives

The original aims and objectives of this study were inspired by a desire to find out what one particular university could do to support WP students. There is much evidence of inequality in HE access, success and retention, with increased focus on what happens to students from low-income backgrounds after enrolment (see Chapter Two). These concerns are reflected both in WP policy and practice, which seek to promote equality of opportunity within HE in terms of attainment, satisfaction and retention of students from such backgrounds.

Academic resilience is a concept that has been used to both explain why some students do persevere and achieve well at university despite adversity and to predict and enhance their chances of doing so. The literature in this

area to date has typically focused on internal characteristics using quantitative means, with diminished regard for the interplay of social and familial factors. In doing so the context and meaning of academic resilience for students with first-hand experience is, as demonstrated in the current work, somewhat muted.

The study aimed to explore how university students from low-income backgrounds experience academic resilience. The research objectives were:

1. To uncover the meaning of the lived experience of resilience of university students from low-income backgrounds
2. To use IPA as a novel research method for capturing "quiet voices" which contribute to a deeper understanding of success and resilience
3. To make recommendations for existing WP policy, practice and research methods using findings from the current research in order to better understand and improve success and retention amongst low-income students

The objective of exploring participants' lived experience was achieved, although interestingly, there was a much greater focus on the social dimensions of belonging and motivation than was anticipated.

This research has explored the relatively new field of academic resilience, privileging the voices of those at the heart of the phenomenon; the students themselves. These perspectives have been described and interpreted to draw out commonalities in and differences between experiences of the phenomenon. Exploring resilience as a lived experience offers a strength-based, novel approach which builds a deeper understanding of protective processes in retention and success. In the next section the role of these insider voices is reviewed, before offering a substantive discussion of this study's findings in the wider research and policy context.

6.3 Value of "resilient voices"

Review of the literature into academic resilience, as detailed in Chapter Two, exposed the deeply held perspectives that individual resilience can be measured and consequently the likelihood of adaption can be predicted. This propensity towards quantifying and generalising such experiences is dominating new areas of resilience study, in domain-specific fields such as academic resilience (Luthar et al. 2000; Martin and Marsh 2009).

However, there are competing theoretical positions on new directions for resilience. Socio-ecological approaches assume that resilience can only be genuinely understood from within the individual's specific family, social and community context (Ungar 2012; Ungar 2016). By their nature, those individuals or groups with experience of adversity may also be minorities; this is true to some extent within the present research study concerned with under-represented, non-traditional students.

ongoing However, it seems context is everything. Large-scale resilience surveys tend to isolate variables such as poor secondary school performance as a generic risk factor for students with experience of adversity (Martin and Marsh 2006; Ahmed and Julius 2015).However, in this study, the experience of escaping negative school culture was found to be a source of great motivation (see participant themes for Jess in Chapter Four). The ongoing contrast between the school and HE experience acted as a lesson in overcoming adversity. Rather than having the wholly negative impact that the current literature suggests, these experiences fostered empowerment, self-efficacy and a sense that university was a 'better fit' than school.

Whilst the National Strategy for Access and Student Success does recommend addressing differential degree attainment for students with different characteristics;, it is not explicit about how the full range of students' perspectives would contribute to this. In terms of WP practice, the onus is thus on HEIs to design, implement and monitor programmes that target retention and success for underrepresented groups. The risk here is that

academic resilience becomes a buzzword in this sector and may encourage resilience-building programmes with little evidence-base. Smith-Osborne (2007) surmises that the temptation to (mis)apply such research and practices to normal life events leads to inconsistencies and misappropriation of terms and allows the contribution of theory and evidence-base for practitioners to remain unclear. There is much wider evidence of this trend, as resilience discourse is a core theme across popular self-help and coaching book markets (Reivich and Shatté 2002; Siebert 2009).

As targeted WP programmes are funded by access agreement money (and therefore by the students themselves) there is a strong moral imperative to ensure that these interventions are based on creditworthy models and empirical research which makes them useful to the students. In order to achieve this, the voices of students, particularly those who are under-represented, need to be heard and understood.

6.4 Academic resilience as a social phenomenon

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that resilience for the participants was experienced as an essentially social phenomenon. That is, the majority, if not all of the processes and factors enabling perseverance and thriving at HE, had a social dimension. This ranged from the indirect influence of parents when considering withdrawal to the explicit importance of sustained interactions with tutors and authentic peers.

There is resonance between the current study and the earlier work of Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986) whose ecological framework for human development stresses person-context interrelatedness. Bronfenbrenner's beliefs state that human beings develop according to their environment (1977). Additionally, the individual's ecosystem can be viewed not only in terms of the microsystem (immediate relationships with family, school and neighbourhood), but outwards through various subsystems to the cultural values, laws and historical context (Bronfenbrenner 1986).

However, the social context of resilience is not always evident within the existing literature on resilience. In making the social dimension explicit, this section touches on findings from virtually every theme from the analysis, but most extensively "Aligning self with others for support" (Section 6.1.1) and "Making adversity meaningful" (Section 5.2.2). Implications of the social nature of resilience for widening participation practice are considered in Chapter Seven.

6.4.1 *Friendship and belonging*

A key superordinate theme across participants for this study was the importance of others in supporting success and retention, whether it be friends from home, romantic partners, new course-mates or housemates. These relationships acted as protective processes for enhancing academic resilience as they fostered belonging at the university as well as providing emotional encouragement.

Friends and family play a part in providing informal support for HE students, which means they also have a role in supporting retention. This finding was true of the current study, as participants who had seriously considered dropping out consulted with family members and friends outside of the university. There is little research looking at family and friends as sources of advice on academic matters, although McCary et al. (2011) report it as a "surprising" finding, given the volume of signposting to personal tutors or support services that is typical of student induction programmes. Other research by Foster et al. (2011) agreed with the findings of this research that social support was usually cited as the main reason to stay for those considering withdrawal; it was generally more crucial than institutional support.

Peer support from within the university is a better-acknowledged area. However, studies such as Harding and Thompson (2011) identified supportive peers who are able to "pool expertise" to attempt challenging

assignments and teach one another. There was some evidence of the importance of such friendship groups in the findings of this study; for example, in relation to Gino's positive depiction of the energy and successes of working with his like-minded peers to tackle challenging assignments.

Friendships between students on the same course have been shown to play a protective role in the students' adjustment and development in the classroom (Masten and Coatsworth 1998) and mitigate coping amongst stereotyped groups (Inzlicht et al. 2006). Thus, extant literature supports the idea that friendships are crucial protective factors in enhancing academic resilience, being frequently identified as the basis for "belonging" which so often predicts retention (Thomas 2012; Thomas 2013).The notion of belonging is one that has been explored in literature around student transition to HE. Broadfoot describes this as:

> *"the human side of higher education … finding friends, feeling confident, and above all feeling part of your course of study and the institution"* (Broadfoot 2012, p.1).

The themes of belonging and role of peers were prominent in all the participants' accounts in this study, supporting Broadfoot's assertion. Evidence from the Higher Education Academy's "What Works?" Programme also supports this, identifying:

> *"The academic sphere as the key site for nurturing engagement of the sort that engenders a sense of belonging"* (Moore et al. 2013, p.57).

What this means is that while relationships with peers were found to be important for student success, this was most crucial when those peers were part of the subject cohort, supported by strong staff/student relationships and personal tutoring. For example, participants such as Damien, Lee and Jess were increasingly aligning themselves more with university peers. In their accounts, they had identified positive allies to work and enjoy student life with, whilst older friendships from non-university peers took a diminished role.

Other evidence (Lane and Wilkinson 2011) confirms that high levels of social integration helped student retention. Studies with students from non-traditional backgrounds have revealed that strong social networks help develop confidence and aid transition for these individuals (Andrews and Clark 2011; Foster et al. 2011; Morey et al. 2011).

Likewise, Alexakos et al. (2011) found that friendships or "fictive kinships" built a wider sense of belonging and investment in one's own academic success. Importantly, this may have implications for how students from different backgrounds define success, as this was found to have a collective meaning for groups which identified with one another. Correspondingly,

> *"individual perseverance and the collective perseverance of their group were seen to be part of that success"* (Alexakos et al. 2011).

Studies such as those by Alexakos et al. (2011) are corroborated by the findings of the current study. For example, Kat spoke about one friendship with another student facing similar challenges and disadvantages at university; her friend Daisy who was a mature student, and single mother with dyslexia. As the two worked together, their shared coping with the challenges of exams reinforced both their emotional bond and capacity to persevere. As Ungar (2012) suggests, the importance of positive social relationships between peers on course should not be underestimated. Findings of this study from Damien and his friends show how students can create a community of shared values, efforts and success both on course and in their home. These are examples of the so-called "social ecologies" which facilitate resilience (Ungar 2012; Wilson-Strydom 2017).

Interestingly, it has also been demonstrated that students with positive peer support were more likely to utilise the knowledge of their peers above advice and guidance from academic staff (Harding and Thompson 2011). In this study, one example included Kat, who drew on the support of her (student) boyfriend and other university friends in writing assignments and preparing for assessments. Contrary to expectations, processes of peer facilitation

were associated with better retention and success outcomes, as well as enhanced student satisfaction. However, the 'What Works' programme (Thomas 2013) concluded that HEIs more generally struggled to find effective ways of tapping into this important "resource". This is important as there are potential ways for tutors and WP practitioners to enhance these processes; for example through peer assisted learning initiatives. Fuller recommendations around this are presented in Chapter Seven.

There is growing interest in supporting transition to HE for at-risk students through technology (Andrews et al. 2012). Typically, this might involve cohort groups gathering via social media, or formal institution-led forums to bring entrants together pre-enrolment and beyond. Gino's experience of this can be interpreted as a positive early factor in supporting transition; he used it as a way to identify hard-working, committed course-mates and to similarly position himself as ambitious in terms of his aspirations for the course.

Conversely, there was a sense in which some participants seemed to cope best when physically surrounded by those they perceived as "allies". Examples of this are Kat venturing to find her separate room for extra time in the exam with her friend, Damien sitting down to group dinners in the lounge with his friend-workmates and Isla's tearful entrance to her inaugural lecture as a result of her perceived isolation from others. The findings of this study corroborate cautionary messages from extant literature (Youde 2018) around blended learning; that technology should fit in with, not replace opportunities for physical, face-to-face interaction.

In summary, high levels of positive peer relationships have consistently been found in the wider resilience literature to protect against adversity (Criss et al. 2002; Alvord and Grados 2005; Rutter 2007). Just having one best friendship has been shown to correlate positively with young people's adjustment across various domains of functioning (Hartup and Stevens 1997). This was certainly the case for several participants in this study who identified meaningful friendships with another individual who they felt had "pulled them through" early transitions or crises.

The findings of the study in this sense resound with the enduring determination in resilience theory that supportive social relationships act as protective processes, through which self-esteem and self-efficacy are promoted (Werner and Smith 1982). However, it should be recognised that relationships with peers (both on course and at home) have their own sensitivities and functions. On the one hand, perceived skivers or underachievers may validate the individual's sense of their own purpose and value placed on the opportunities HE affords. On the other hand, more committed students may act as role models, especially to those from similar backgrounds. This was true of several participants in the current study and is consistent with the theory of how vicarious self-efficacy can be developed (Bandura 1982).

So, whilst important, friendships are not universally protective. There may also be divides between friendship groups as students renegotiate the relevance of others following transition; particularly for those students who are unique amongst their school friends in progressing to university. As Stuber (2011) established in researching the experiences of White working-class entrants, strong friendships with other HE students facilitated integration and belonging, whilst persisting with friendships with those "left at home" often contributed to feelings of difference and isolation (Stuber 2011). Thus, from a sociological perspective, these students may suffer from straddling separate friendship cultures (Pascarella et al. 1986; London 1992) where family and previous friends are not engaged with or may even obstruct the student's HE journeys whilst being alienated from emerging new peer groups on campus.

Psychologically, there may be challenges to the student's individual perception of identity, making them question whether they belong or can achieve (Bean and Eaton 2000; Stuber 2011). This resonates with the current study, as findings from this thesis identify friendships from home (and to a lesser extent family relationships) as becoming more marginalised for students in terms of the time, emotional investment and also credence given

to outside voices. In the theme "Aligning self with others for support" (Section 6.1.1), the construction of participants' accounts highlights the changing value given to different friendships. Damien for example identifies the reduced time he spends with friends at home. To this end, friendships as such cannot be universally labelled as protective factors in academic resilience.

The Higher Education Retention and Engagement (HERE) project (Foster et al. 2011) found that academic reasons were the primary cause of student withdrawal, but that social reasons were the main reasons for persistence. Given the findings in this present study around the essential social nature of resilience, it is difficult to overstate the significance of supportive friends and family in facilitating academic resilience. However, such networks must be viewed as intimate and personal to individuals. The university cannot replace or compensate for these but perhaps strive for ways to support positive networks and foster opportunities for students to form friendships. This impacts upon the ways in which staff teach and facilitate student learning at university in order to encourage social connectedness.

6.4.2 Relationships with tutors

In the present study, students repeatedly discussed the meaning of their interactions and relationships with their tutors. A key element for these students was that they felt "known" to the staff member; the tutor had shown what they perceived to be a genuine interest in their well-being and progress. This meant that the students' input in the learning environment was understood as having value. It also gave them a sense that they were cared about as people outside of their role as students. They could discuss their families, employment and shared interests with tutors, engage with them and "have a laugh". Fostering this sense of belonging is a vital and often undervalued skill which may influence retention and success of under-represented groups (Thomas 2012). In one sense it may also be considered under threat, as the pressure for academics to publish and attract research income may reduce their ability to invest in relationships with students.

Resilience research has long pointed to the role of supportive relationships with adults as being a key protective factor for positive outcomes. For example, teachers within both school and HE act as a pathway to academic resilience (Lynch and Cicchetti 1992; Hines et al. 2005). In studies developing specific academic resilience frameworks, experience of personal tutors who are approachable and supportive are considered protective factors whilst those perceived as uncaring or unsupportive were identified as risk factors (Cotton et al. 2017). Students reported feeling valued by tutors who were available to talk about non-academic issues and found it enhanced their ability to cope. By showing an interest in the individual as a whole person, tutors have been shown to facilitate their adaptation to and integration into university life of non-traditional students (Caruana et al. 2011; Cotton et al. 2017).

Thus, several of the participants in this study were able to form solid relationships with tutors that should be considered "protective" in enhancing their academic resilience. This interaction was absolutely critical for Jess in forming her sense of belonging. Whilst she interrupted her studies, she was also supported by a tutor who encouraged her to return and helped with references for work. For Jess, her relationship with this academic bolstered her sense of belonging and self-esteem. Someone believed in her ability to persist and succeed; but not necessarily in a specific way. From this tutor there came a deeper acceptance of what a student like Jess could bring to the course. This non-conformity to the student ideal and how it is approached by university staff is considered further in Section 6.7.2 "The ideal student".

The findings from the current study support some existing theories around why students from non-traditional backgrounds persist and succeed. Thomas (2012) identifies that attitudes and approaches of university are key to creating a culture in which all students are valued *"irrespective of diversity and difference"* (Thomas 2012, p.33) and can foster academic confidence. Recommendations from other sources emphasise that student-centeredness and sensitivity to diversity should be at the heart of pedagogy (Hockings et al.

2008). This is not to suggest that staff are not sensitive to difference, but rather that in practice there may be a mismatch between intention and outcome for students. In other words, teachers may speak with the knowledge, language and values of their professional cultures; some of which may be alien to the student audience.

Important also was the mediating role played by another of Jess's tutors. She had and continues to face stigma around her Northern, working-class roots which she feels are regularly exposed through her accent. Jess also faced significant, multiple and chronic adversities: a first-generation HE entrant from a POLAR LPN 1 neighbourhood, with unemployed/ working-class parents and a family history of addiction and mental illness as well as personal experience of academic failure. For these reasons, she could be considered to be one of the more vulnerable students involved in the study.

However, there may be some personality characteristics that Jess possessed that helped her to counterbalance these challenges. In another piece of research, Morales (2008) identified social skills or personality traits as important strengths for resilient students. In his longitudinal study of Latino students attending elite universities, he found likeability was essential for some resilient students to get ahead. In his longitudinal study, Morales explored a parallel case of "Ricardo" and his ability to effectively "utilise" valuable others:

> *"More than most, Ricardo has exploited his charm and affability to ingratiate himself to others and allow them to help him. Significant teachers, professors, and the church pastor have all invested in him and assisted him with his goals."* (Morales 2008c, p.241).

There are strong parallels between Morales' case study of Ricardo and Jess's experience. She too identifies herself as a people person. Werner and Smith (1982) also recognised this as a feature of some "invulnerable" personalities in the early resilience literature. Whilst likeability may reduce vulnerability, this perhaps overstates and isolates this as a protective factor. The findings of this study suggest a subtler role for personality traits, couched

in the wider context of the individual's social circumstances. In other words, it may be easier for students like Jess and Ricardo to maximise their social resources as in tandem with attitudes of confidence and likeability, but only in settings like university which enable social mobility.

Essentially, what Jess lacked in existing social capital upon arrival at university she was able to compensate for through cultivating networks and support from key individuals, using her interpersonal skills. For instance, her charismatic, well-researched and lively discussions about archaeological sites made her stand out to tutors. She describes several who were willing to offer additional support to her in terms of time, resources and contacts to facilitate work experience, access to unpublished research and acting as referees for employment.

This can also be seen with students who were more confident and vocal with others; such as Damien or Grace with their endeavours to build industry contacts, volunteer both on and off-site for the university and seek freelance opportunities. In this way, academics, support staff and industry mentors can be seen to take on a special importance for students from low-income or working-class backgrounds who do not typically arrive with knowledge of the rules of the HE "game" or have the friends and family who are invested in them to provide guidance (Morales 2008; Reay et 2009).

In the current study, those students who did not explore relationships with university staff in their interviews, the picture is different. Rather than frame staff as unhelpful or aloof, or exhibit an explicit reluctance to engage with them, there was simply an absence of personal relationships. For example, when considering whether or not to drop out, Isla did not consult with her personal tutor or support staff. She came home to her mother and together they worked out whether she would owe her fees for the year if she withdrew. There is a large body of evidence suggesting that working-class, first-generation and low-income students are less likely to ask for help, develop informal mentoring relationships or engage with authority figures in academic contexts (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Calarco 2011; Holland 2015; Jack

2016). These differences in access or willingness to access such resources that constitute an important means to cultural capital may perpetuate disadvantage. Universities need to find better ways to support low-income students and their families with advice and guidance to reduce attrition; some of these are explored in Chapter Seven.

Furthermore, as a study of academic resilience, the focus of data collection was around strengths in these students. There may well have been negative relationships with staff that were not discussed during the interviews in this current study. In other research, Wilson-Strydom (2017) in analysing accounts of disadvantaged South African undergraduates found that specific teachers were frequently identified as either social enablers or constraints to academic resilience. This suggests that the quality of the relationship runs both ways and thus can also pose a risk to successful outcomes. So, whilst this was not found in the current research, in making recommendations, the quality of tutor-student relationships could be better explored to assess the impact on student success.

These findings, in the context of current WP research, also raise vital questions about the value of central support services within the university. These can be important for some students, although evidence suggests they are not accessed by the majority and, indeed, those students who may need them the most are probably those least likely to take them up (Thomas 2012). Feedback from academic and support staff at a university in one study confirmed an

> *"unsaid institutional expectation that undergraduates should reach out if they want help"* (Jack 2016, p.6).

When analysing the accounts of participants, resistant attitudes towards accessing student services were recurrent. This confirms the "double disadvantage" (Weber 1978; Anderson 1999; Jack 2016) faced by those students less inclined to cultivate the sorts of supportive, nurturing and protective relationships with staff as Jess and Damien describe. There may well be risks in moving towards centralised forms of support; universities

should consider whether such systems might have a negative effect on those students most in need.

6.4.3 *Giving something back*

An important theme that emerged across many participants was that resilience involved making something meaningful come from personal experience of adversity. One way of achieving this amongst participants was through "giving something back"; sharing personal knowledge, skills or resources with others who might benefit. This theme is explored throughout the superordinate theme "Experience of facticity and positive social orientation" (Section 5.2).

A notable formal way in which this was experienced by participants was through peer mentoring within the university. It was described by the three participants who identified themselves as mentors as rewarding, primarily because it enabled them to share what they had learned, see how far they had come on their own journeys, and even reinforce some constructive learning strategies.

Peer mentoring was explored throughout analysis of the findings and was interpreted to represent a level of belonging and identity as a HE student at the university that went beyond finding a friendship group or enjoying one's course. The students were ambassadors for their course, subject and in cases of external mentoring, the university. It enabled a process of reflection for these individuals on successes and areas for development; in supporting others to reach their goals the mentors continued to support themselves. This may have facilitated academic self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as the sense of belonging.

There is consistent evidence to suggest that new students and, in particular, first-generation entrants benefit from supportive engagement with fellow students (Andrews and Clark 2011). Peer mentoring can help to nurture a sense of integration and belonging within HE (Sanders and Higham 2012). It has been shown through numerous studies to be an invaluable intervention

during transition to HE and throughout the first year; especially when peer mentors as a cohort represent a diverse student body (Morales 2011; Andrews et al. 2012; Thomas 2013; Tallentire 2016).

Peer support schemes may represent an important source of support and engagement for students (Thomas 2011).Andrews and Clark (2011) identified that this was an increasing feature of universities' WP activity with 340 mentoring programmes recognised across the UK's 159 HEIs. The 'What Works' programmes found the growing prevalence of peer mentoring programmes to be a critical intervention (Thomas 2012). There is variability in the focus of different programmes, with some concentrating on socialisation, motivation and signposting to student support. Others are more strongly concentrated on developing academic skills and learning (Longfellow et al. 2008; Colvin and Ashman 2010; Andrews et al. 2012).

In this study, peer-to-peer support represented a real success for those who engaged with the programme as mentors. It was extended further in some cases for those students engaged in mentoring or coaching outside of the structures of the university. These experiences added an additional layer of gravitas; as ambassadors of the university, for their subject, and also as a representation of resilience.

A number of advantages from peer mentoring have been identified (Thomas 2012). One review found benefits ranging from

> *"enhanced, transferable employability skills (including communication and presentation skills) to the opportunity to put something back into university life"* (Andrews and Clark 2011, p.17).

It is also likely that engagement in peer mentoring programmes has a positive impact on attrition (Andrews et al. 2012) but it is less clear whether there is any causal link for mentees. However, in the light of theory foregrounding the importance of belonging, habitus and engagement in retention (Tinto 1975; Tinto 2006; Thomas 2012; Lehmann 2014), findings

from this study suggest it is likely to have a protective effect for student mentors also.

In addition, participants in this study such as Jess, Kat, Damien and Grace all reflected on opportunities they had sought out to "give back" prior to joining HE and interpretation of their accounts reveal the protective benefits. For Damien this involved working with the NUS to advocate for inclusive curriculum changes. This sparked a pattern of involvement and empowerment for him, as he became course rep at university, a PAL mentor and an external mentor. There was a confidence that came from representing others, particularly those with a minority voice.

In terms of resilience research, there is some tentative evidence that supports the significance of "giving back" for those who have overcome adversity. Morales (2010) in his exploratory work following up resilient Latinos/ Latinas from low socioeconomic groups found this to be a salient theme. For the student "Ricardo" mentioned in the previous section, engagement in mentoring was identified as crucial to his academic belonging and success. Other cases within this study reflected that a key motivator for them in persevering to achieve a degree had been their desire to give back to their own community.

Other research suggests less formalised ideas, where students want to complete their degrees successfully in order to make a difference to the community or broader society, although this may be ill-defined (Wilson-Strydom 2017). Both Kat and Damien embody this general feeling when they reflect on their respective personal issues of mental health and disability. Generally, the wider literature and particularly quantitative studies of academic resilience contain little reference to these sources of motivation experienced by students from low-income backgrounds; yet they were emotive and significant factors for several of the participants in this study.

Amongst participants in this study, more intimate intentions to "give back" were found to be meaningful. These were often to certain members of the

family; for example, to help support ageing single parents. Kat's allegiance to her mother was a strong theme throughout her account; she had firm ideas about ways in which she would contribute financially towards her mother's lifestyle and well-being. This was a significant motivator for her to persevere and do well at university and beyond.

6.5 Goals and motivation

Motivation and goals are well-recognised as a key component of academic resilience and "hardiness" (Dweck and Leggett 1988; Elliott and Dweck 1988; Grant and Dweck 2003). The role of internal beliefs and self-talk is explored first in this section.

6.5.1 *Incentivisation, visualisation and positive self-talk*

This section reflects a wealth of internal characteristics exhibited by the students which are discussed in the superordinate theme "Living authentically amongst others" (Section 5.3). Specifically, sub-themes of "The importance of core values" (Section 5.3.1) and "Being myself around others" (Section 5.3.3) are explored here as a key part to how participants motivated themselves.

The internal voices students used enhanced their abilities to deal with challenges and overcome adversity relating to their backgrounds. Within this study, many incidences of positive self-talk were observed wherein participants give encouragement to themselves. This seemed to be a particularly important strategy at crunch points; when there was exam pressure, discord between friends or external family pressure. Lee exemplifies this when he strategizes incentives to complete challenging assignments. In contrast, Grace helps herself to cope with academic pressure by considering the alternative to attaining a degree; returning to a job she previously hated.

These are two examples of the internal thought processes of students that are struggling with normal academic challenges but using reasoning and

"incentivisation" (e.g. getting to visit home or avoiding dissatisfying employment) to help them cope. In the literature on academic motivation, this specific type of self-regulation or self-talk is referred to as "extrinsic"; because the individual is reminding themselves of the importance of getting a good grade or some other extrinsic reward/ punishment avoidance (Wolters 2003). Montgomery et al. (2000) also found frequent instances of self-talk in interviewing minority ethnic undergraduates. Such self-talk was found to "*strengthen personal goals*" (Montgomery et al. 2000, p.390) and in some instances included conventional wisdom that was characteristic of the students' individual cultures.

In this study it was found that students most frequently visualised positive extrinsic outcomes for themselves as ways of coping and motivating themselves through setbacks. There are other recognised types of positive self-talk, however. These include efficacy enhancement self-talk (e.g. "This is hard, but I am capable of doing this") and mastery self-talk (e.g. "if I keep practising this one day it will seem easy"). These alternative internal voices were not heard in participants' accounts during this study, possibly because this was not the focus of the participants' interview.

Research generally supports the idea that positive self-talk can influence academic motivation (Wang et al. 2017a). Indeed, there is consistent evidence to show the positive functions of extrinsic self-talk (such as that expressed by Lee in this study) in terms of effort, metacognition, and grades (Wolters 1999; Schwinger and Stiensmeier-Pelster 2012).

Currently, little is known about the role of self-talk in academic resilience in students with experience of economic disadvantage. However, a recent study by Wang et al. (2017a) comparing various types of self-talk in students found that even though the extrinsic sort of self-talk was the most frequent, it was found to yield the fewest benefits. Studying a large cohort of Chinese students, extrinsic self-talk was established as effective in improving behaviours and short-term academic attainment, but had a weaker

relationship with long-term attainment, academic risk-taking and retention than efficacy or mastery self-talk.

Caution is needed when comparing the findings of Wang et al. (2017a) with UK undergraduates, as the research participants were high-schoolers with a cultural background characterised by high parental expectation and competitiveness. Likewise, most of the research in the area of self-talk, motivation and academic resilience is not specifically concerned with HE students who have been identified as low-income. However, enhancing the power of self-talk may support low-income students such as those in this UK study, who regularly employ it to help cope with academic demands. For example, other research from (Wang et al. 2017b) shows the potential for adopting pedagogic methods which encourage students to practice self-talk during tasks to enhance their performance.

6.5.2 *Motivation through others*

In this section the link between the students' social worlds, motivation and resilience is explored. For this reason, this section straddles themes from both the cross-case and individual analysis, the most prominent superordinate theme being "Building social confidence" (Section 5.4) and "Being myself around others" (Section 5.3.3).

6.5.2.1 *Making family proud*

As presented in the findings of this study, participants were motivated to do well at university and concerned with not dropping-out for reasons relating to their family. There was real concern amongst some participants who had considered withdrawal about the potential emotional and financial impact this would have on their families. Isla for example spoke about the cost to her single mother of providing her with kitchen equipment for halls, and how disappointed she might be to have wasted the money. Likewise, Kat was keen to achieve well at university to enable her to enter well-paid employment and support her mother; a way of repaying her for her sacrifices and redressing their disadvantages as a family.

The family dynamic of the majority of the participants in this study involved single mothers having assumed the main caregiver role. All participants, with the exception of Damien, described themselves as having a very close relationship with their mothers, and this was framed as a key protective factor in those cases. The mothers of these students acted as advisors, coaches and cheerleaders; even though in the cases of Lee and Isla it was evident the relationships were maturing as participants had become young adults with greater independence. Perhaps also important was the admiration from participants towards their mothers, whom in various cases had dealt with homelessness, poverty, addiction, mental illness, domestic abuse, divorce or death of a spouse.

The experiences of participants' mothers are particularly significant in a culture that often demonises single motherhood. One multiple exploratory case study of poor black female students established a similar finding through use of conversation analysis (Zulu and Munro 2017). Paternal absence (and related socioeconomic effects) fostered a resilient academic identity construction and was openly communicated as an opportunity for academic achievement. In both this research and that by Zulu and Munro (2017), participants conveyed a positive interpretation of experiencing absent fathers. They looked upon it as a motivator to achieve well to enable them to emotionally or financially "repay" their mothers in some way; whilst simultaneously viewing the absence of their other parent as a challenge that had been overcome. So rather than yielding a negative identity or outcome, the voices of the two women in Zulu and Munro's (2017) study and the participants in this study present an important and perhaps surprising finding regarding the experience of growing up in poor, female single parent households.

Parental and wider family expectations affected participants' attitudes towards achieving and remaining. This seemed to be because participants were motivated to fulfil certain roles. For example, Damien and Gino were both perceived by their families as bright, capable and the "one" sibling who

would apply to HE and achieve an undergraduate degree. These ingrained expectations can be viewed as part of each individual's habitus (Bourdieu 1977; Lehmann 2014); it was accepted by both young men and may also have had implications for their own self-belief.

One participant, Jess, had a complex relationship with her family members in respect of her choice to embark on her HE journey. Jess's greatest challenge however had been intermitting a year and restarting her degree due to academic failure. Her sustained commitment to remain hundreds of miles from her family and not return to the fold may seem surprising. One interpretation of this might be that she was motivated to persevere to prove her doubting family members wrong. It is clear, however, that Jess believed it was the right thing for her to do and she had the full support of her mother during this time.

There may be a distinction here in class values between those students in this study, from primarily working-class backgrounds and the majority of students attending university (i.e. from middle-class backgrounds). Whilst it is likely that there is a weight of parental expectation, there is a qualitative distinction between the two groups, with those students from low-income backgrounds having greater concern for the financial impact of withdrawal or underachievement (Lehmann 2009; Stuber 2011; Lehmann 2014), which may lead to fewer or worse employment opportunities than students with greater material advantage (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Lehmann 2014). This was certainly true of both Isla and Damien. When discussing dropping-out or risk of failing how this would limit their financial futures was a serious concern. Furthermore, students from low-income backgrounds may be motivated to achieve as a means of enabling social mobility for themselves and their families (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Morales 2008a; Lehmann 2014). This was seen in the accounts of Jess and Lee who were keen to achieve above and beyond their own social class.

6.5.2.2 Competition

Competition was an important theme which emerged from analysis of several of the participant's accounts. This has not previously been well-explored in the literature around retention and success, nor in bolstering academic resilience.

In the participants' experiences, competition was embedded in teaching and learning activities, but also featured as an informal motivation mechanism. Damien speaks enthusiastically about tasks in the classroom which are time-constrained and enable students to compete. This theme is also prevalent in terms of fostering a culture of professional values: competition helps motivate students in this way. Competition and "going the extra mile" become internalised messages; for example, in student's attitudes towards work experience or future careers. This is explored further in Section 6.6.2 "Professional values".

In terms of actual attainment, some participants in this study were explicitly concerned with how their performance compared to others. Isla describes these concerns amongst her course mates as *"an important conversation"* (Isla, 346). Thus, competition may work to motivate students who strive to set themselves above the average. Elements of competition supported by academic staff were described as positive, motivation-enhancing features of pedagogy in two of these students from low-income backgrounds. This is in contrast with other research findings which note concerns with working-class students who fail to be engaged by pedagogical practices. For example, Burke et al. (2013, p.4) highlighted:

> *"a disjuncture between the pedagogic intentions of academic staff and how students experience these pedagogies".*

Conversely, the potential costs may incur an atmosphere of peer rivalry. There may be a risk of disengagement from students unwilling or unable to compete. Theory in this area suggests that supporting student motivation is perhaps best directed towards learning, task mastery, and effort(Maehr and

Midgley 1991), over and above relative performance and competition. Ability gaps or perceived ability gaps between students might actually weaken effort and motivation for some competitors (Hanus and Fox 2015). This echoes Isla's sentiments from above about the importance of forms of self-talk and the sustainability of competition as extrinsic goals. Doing better than others might be perceived by these students to be a significant motivator; it just may not be the best or only one.

Furthermore, there are tensions here between the close peer networks utilised by the participants in this study and gamified modes of teaching and learning. The positive energies experienced by Damien and Gino for example, in collaborating with their peers form significant daily features of their lives as students. If pedagogic practice has too strong a focus on motivating students through competition it may be at a cost to these resilience-enhancing relationships.

Again, research into the effects of competition on academic motivation is not typically explored in terms of class-based differences. Could competition serve a different function for students from lower-income backgrounds? Does it facilitate resilience for them? Importantly there may be limitations to the application of competition as a motivational technique as well. Hanus and Fox (2015) found that gamification of the classroom may actually lead to lower test scores and motivation. "Gamification" refers to the practice of introducing elements of games to non-game settings, such as the workplace or classroom. For example, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) recommend that social competition and incentivisation are introduced as elements to enhance engagement and outcomes (HEA 2017).

Creating mental "leader boards" may serve high performing students well but could increase feelings of isolation and low self-worth in students who do not perform well. Thus, focusing on elements of social comparison and competition may be better confined to groups that are confident with material (as opposed to learning new material). Conditions under which gamification can enhance student performance could be identified. Interestingly, one of

the students most motivated and engaged with competition on course was studying computer gaming. It might be that some subjects, or students of certain subjects, may respond more positively to competition as a motivator.

The significance of competition was not a theme seen in all participants' accounts. Whilst participants did not specifically identify issues with competitiveness on course, there are concerns that gamification pedagogies may be detrimental to the academic self-esteem of some students. This idea is supported by empirical research from Bedard and Fischer (2017) which indicated that competition may not be the optimal mechanism for increasing motivation, at least for those who already perceive themselves as low ability. This is supported by theory and research into academic motivation wherein "performance" goals have often been linked to lower academic attainment than focus on "learning" goals, which enable students to seek out challenging learning experiences for themselves (Elliott and Dweck 1988; Grant and Dweck 2003).

Similarly, in her case study of a resilient mature student, Brewer (2010)found that a key protective factor was that the student was able to monitor her progress not against the success of others, but against her own previous work. Thus, the role played by competition in relation to academic resilience appears to be a complex one. On one hand it may serve to heighten engagement and motivation when one is competing against oneself. For those students with high levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy, competition with others may also be enjoyable. However, for others, it may be harmful in detracting from the commitment and intrinsic enjoyment of HE study as it may influence the sense of belonging to a supportive peer group. Until the differences in response to competition and gamification in educational contexts are better understood, these methods should be carefully implemented and monitored (Hanus and Fox 2015).

6.5.2.3 Role models and paths to avoid

Peer support was discussed earlier in this chapter at Section 1.4.1 "Friendship and belonging". Here is it considered in the light of motivation to persist and achieve. Meaningful experiences with others who acted as role models for students were important to the students' academic resilience in this study. Students reflected on the influence of mature students on their courses; describing them as figures of admiration (Kat) and givers of good advice (Grace). The adversities and successes endured by these role models offered practical guidance to the students, but in a broader sense inspired the participants and encouraged them to persevere.

Role modelling was also seen within formalised programmes to motivate undergraduates in this research. The multi-fold benefits of participating in peer mentoring were a key finding in this study. Peer mentoring is typically defined as:

> *"reciprocal peer support and learning whereby a peer mentor helps to enhance and promote the overall university experience of either an individual student, or group of fellow students"* (Andrews and Clark 2011, p.4).

Typically, peer mentors are further into their studies than mentees, so they are able to use their insights to help new students transition successfully to HE. In their review of the effectiveness and prevalence of peer mentoring schemes, Andrews and Clark (2011) identify key benefits for non-traditional students. Amongst these reported were: improved confidence in communication skills and feeling more able to take up academic opportunities and access support services. This worked as mentors acted as:

> *"accessible and informal alternatives to approaching a formal lecturer, seek advice on study techniques, and discuss how to approach ways of learning at HE"* (Andrews and Clark 2011, p.51).

In this way, peer mentoring has been shown to facilitate personal growth as an important aspect of resilience.

In other words, mentoring can be considered to have a protective effect on students with experience of adversity, such as those from low-income backgrounds who may struggle with belonging and academic confidence, and lack the cultural capital possessed by their middle-class counterparts. Indeed, several students spoke highly of their engagement with peer mentoring. Isla reflects that because her mentor had experienced some of the challenges she herself was facing, their advice was more meaningful and helpful than that of a tutor.

There is potential here for mentoring to become a form of networking for students, developing social capital which is especially crucial for low-income, working-class and first-generation to HE entrants (Stebleton and Soria 2013). Existing research into the positive effects of peer mentoring has considered the experience of particular groups of non-traditional HE learners. For example, in one study by Morales (2008b) large percentages of African American and Hispanic high schoolers identified mentors as significant protective factors. Although there is some extant research in this area (Morales 2008a; Zulu and Munro 2017), little is known about the impact of diversity in peer mentoring schemes with regard to low-income, first-generation or working-class students. As 'giving back' was a prominent theme amongst participants in this study, peer mentoring must be recognised as an increasingly crucial tool for facilitating supportive social networks for these students. Also, unlike other forms of social support such as friendship groups, it is explicitly within the remit of HEI providers.

Specifically, participants in this study focused on how mentoring gave them a sense of belonging and belief in themselves. These feelings were enhanced when students' perceived peer mentors as having personal investment in them as individuals, and being involved across different course activities, not just in scheduled mentoring sessions. Again, the personal, informal opportunities for engagement held the most meaning. This supports the established link between feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy and how

these self-concepts enable individuals to cope with life challenges (Rutter 1987).

Findings about peer mentoring in this study support extant theory and research indicating its overall benefits (Andrews and Clark 2011). Peer mentoring programs have been demonstrated to be effective in enhancing the success of first-generation students in particular (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Strayhorn and Terrell 2010; Wilson and Arendale 2011). However, in order for mentoring relationships to be successful, there must be consensus on the roles and responsibilities of each party. Extant research indicates that this is crucial for promoting self-efficacy and preventing breakdown in communication between mentees and mentors (Hall et al. 2008).

Perhaps more importantly, the transition into these programmes where students from low-income backgrounds themselves have become mentors solidified an allegiance with the university subject of study and the overall student identity experienced by mentors. The idea that these students had become expert, had something to share and give back was highly significant. Becoming mentors is a process that held benefits for participants in this research, as explored earlier in Section 6.4.3 "Giving something back".

In contrast, a key theme from this study was the influence of "wayward" peers. This was a virtually universal finding amongst the students. Often, the student had experienced a close personal friendship with a peer (usually another university student) who had experienced a significant failure in terms of academic well-being. This might be an actual failure (dropping-out, significant underachievement), failure to manage the independence required for student life (excessive drinking, frivolous spending of student loan payments) or a perceived failure to appreciate the opportunities offered by the university (not listening in lectures, tardiness, lack of effort or aspiration).

The literature typically identifies the influence of hard-working, aspirational course mates as a protective factor, enhancing positive outcomes for vulnerable individuals (Arthur et al. 2002; DSG 2013). This is assumed to be

because peer-related protective factors have a buffering effect on the risk of engaging in delinquent and problem behaviours (Osgood et al. 2013).

However, in this study the so-called "failing friends" acted as cautionary tales for the participants (Section 5.3.3). Rather than joining them in behaviours that put them at risk of underachievement or dropping out, the students used them to solidify their own personal commitments to succeed. Gino, for example, identified problematic school friends as *"distractions"* (Gino, 52) from whom he wanted to distance himself; comparing them now to finding friends at university who were *"on the right track"* (Gino, 54).

In some cases, participants experienced emotive responses to their friends' behaviours which revealed the value they placed on the opportunities offered by a university education. This was particularly evident when there were perceived class differences between the friends, as participants in this study felt wealthier students were more free to waste time or money.

Thus these "anti"-role models served an important dual function and had a potential protective effect of reinforcing the academic values of the student whilst offering a roadmap detailed with the pitfalls of low motivation or hedonistic behaviour. The finding stands at odds with large-scale studies of protective factors for resilience. There are however some exploratory qualitative studies which present similar conclusions. One describes the accounts given by first generation in HE students in which:

> *"individualistic notions of personal motivation, grit, and pluckiness are evoked to explain what sets them apart from those they consider less driven or talented and who "waste" their lives back in the old working-class environment"* (Lehmann 2014, p.12).

Whilst referring to cautionary tales of those friends left behind in their old communities, there is clearly some congruence with the findings of the study presented here. Lehmann (2009) also hints at some of the tensions or "hidden injuries" of class experienced by some students in HE, which are explored in greater detail later (Section 6.7 and 6.8). These findings on the

nature and function of peer relationships are perhaps another example of how qualitative enquiry can help illuminate the complex interaction of factors influencing academic resilience.

6.5.3 *Career focus*

Aspirations towards employment and further study were found to be related to motivation. There is considerable research interest around aspiration amongst groups relevant to the WP agenda, with similar policy and practice efforts targeted as raising the aspirations of low-income, working-class or students from LPNs (Gauntlett et al. 2017). Whilst there may be doubt concerning the assumption that disadvantaged young people necessarily hold lower aspirations for themselves, there is some evidence that suggests a link between aspiration and academic success. Thus, this section reviews the findings specifically in relation to career aspirations and academic resilience in the context of WP policy and research.

Participants showed a range of different attitudes towards progression after HE. Some, like Lee and Grace, were clear about the grades they needed, or which areas of their course they wanted to develop in the most to move into their chosen career. There are conflicting theories and empirical research about the importance of career goals for the motivation and resilience of HE students, as well as debate over how students from different backgrounds may conceptualise such career aspirations.

For Damien, his university course was a means to an end; it was work, it was training. There was little that made it a holistic experience for him; this sits at odds with theories of retention and success such as those proposed by Tinto (1975, 2006) or Bourdieu (1977). Likewise, Lee was specific about the grade he would consider suitable for progressing in his career and talked directly about the importance of strategically choosing his work placement for the purposes of progression.

These findings may be explained in part by recent debate over the increasing marketisation of HE degrees and how students, in paying tuition fees, expect

a return for their investment; i.e. a good, well-paid career. There have also been research findings suggesting that students from lower socioeconomic groups are more inclined to treat HE as a form of vocational training and less as an overall life experience (Lehmann 2009). These explanations may account for Damien and to some extent Lee's experiences. On the other hand, it could be argued that the very nature of their particular courses (Computing and Sport, respectively) encourages a stronger sense of strategic thinking about career progression.

In contrast, there was certainly a sense from Jess, Kat and Gino's perspectives that there had been transformative change. This was bound up with findings illuminating their self-awareness; perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses which allow them to excel. All career-focused with solid understandings of their career trajectories, these participants used this as motivation to aim for a "good degree" that would enable progression.

In another study using a qualitative interview, the experiences of working-class students at a large, research-intensive university were explored (Stuber 2011). The focus was on those participants who became integrated and achieved academic success. The results demonstrated the transformative effect of attending HE for the participants who felt they had moved away from their old selves and families into a more desirable, better realm of opportunity.

So, there is a sense in which by attending university and using these career goals as motivators, students from low-income backgrounds are changing in terms of their habitus. This may be outright rejection of the old in the case of Jess, or as a subtler modification as in the case of Lee and Damien. For all students in this study, enrolment at university was perceived as an achievement in itself, as part of a greater project to better oneself or give back to their families or communities.

In Bourdieusian terms, there is greater congruence between habitus and field; the individual accepts the challenge of the "game" and begins to

negotiate their way through as they learn the rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.199). As students from working-class, low-income and first-generation at HE backgrounds, the participants use their career aspirations as a motivator and guide for navigating success and seeking new ways to understand the "rules". How well students succeed in this is closely linked to the protective processes and strategies identified in their study as facilitators for resilience.

One thing that is clear is that students in this study were at various stages of negotiating their transitions to university, and likewise, still making decisions about career progression.

6.6 Role of student and discipline-based identities

Individuals transitioning to university study can be described as assuming new identities as students, even as early as having been accepted on course. How each individual adapts to the challenges of the new responsibilities and opportunities of this life-change are considered here in the light of Erikson's theory of life crises (Erikson 1994b) and the work of Arnett (2000; 2007; 2016) on emerging adulthood. There is also exploration of how participants in this study identified as students in a subject or discipline specific way, and the significance of this for academic resilience.

6.6.1 *Transition to HE as a life crisis*

One superordinate theme found in this study was "Living authentically amongst others" (Section 5.3). The theme presented an interpretation of how individuals conceptualised their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to their social contexts and how they defined their personal ambitions and had begun to establish values within their peer groups. These processes of identity formation in academically resilient students have similarities to the strength-based psychological theories of lifespan development.

In particular, the psychosocial development theory outlined by Erikson (1994a) could be integrated with these findings to further examine how

resilience is experienced by students with experience of adversity. The theory pinpoints the life stage of adolescence (variously described by Erikson (1994a) and others as between 13-20 years of age) as a turning point for identity formation. Like other life stages, it can be recognised through predictable features and changes leading to a crisis-resolution, prior to transition to the next life stage. Arnett identifies a more specific period between adolescence and adulthood which he terms "emerging adulthood". *"Distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations"* (Arnett 2000, p.469), this time of transition is marked by a freedom of choice and expression in learning, work and love.

The "identity crisis" of late adolescence is about how the emerging sense of self as adult is explored, past experiences are drawn together with future ambitions and new pathways are explored (e.g. occupational, educational, romantic). This period of experimentation is typified by conflict with parents or other forms of authority which until this time were the main source of the young person's values and practices (Erikson 1994b). Examples of this from the findings include struggles with managing domestic and financial responsibilities typical of adulthood; and how these were gradually given over by parents to the students as in the case of both Damien and Lee. Lee explored his reluctance to relinquish such freedom once it had been won; reminding his mother that he was the adult now. Others had already achieved a significant level of independence either through leaving home early and entering employment such as Gino and Grace, who asserted a strong sense of identity in terms of who they were (positive, energetic, tough).

Erikson argues that what emerges from the identity crisis is a firmer sense of personal identity, where one "fits" in the world and awareness of self (1994a; 1994b). Difficulties in negotiating this stage can lead to negative identity formation, characterised by rejection of wider societal norms and resulting in delinquent or maladaptive behaviours. Whilst these were not exhibited by the participants themselves (although they appear frequently in "cautionary tales"

from others e.g. Section 5.3), there was evidence of their negotiation in students with the highest levels of adversity. Kat for example describes a short period in her early adolescence characterised by risky sexual behaviour, self-harm and alcohol abuse, behaviours which she had largely navigated herself away from to establish a more positive self-concept.

Erikson's lifespan model (1994a) is useful in this study in conceptualising the phenomenon of resilience and more specifically, positive adaption. Whilst deficit perspectives on attrition and academic underachievement would consider a positive outcome to be "not failing" or "not dropping out", a resilience perspective emphasises the achievement of retention and success. Masten calls these "age-salient developmental tasks"; the success at the life stage of adolescence is achieving the key developmental challenge of transitioning through identity crisis (Masten 2014). There was evidence of conflict and tension as the attachment to families, home and familiarity were loosening. As time progressed, participants in this study had settled into the responsibility and freedoms that university life afforded them. In this way, participants in this study can be seen to be successfully negotiating the end crisis of the adolescent stage and, as such, increasing the likelihood of future competence across the lifespan (Erikson 1994a; Masten 2014).

However, the theoretical position of Arnett (2007) perhaps better reflects the experiences of participants in this study of academic resilience, who in a modern cultural context are some way off the responsibilities of marriage, careers and parenthood which would have confronted young adults at the time Erikson (1994a) developed his lifespan theory. Amongst the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood include identity explorations (asking the question "who am I?"), instability and possibilities/ optimism (Arnett 2007). In the present study, negotiation of emerging adulthood is evident amongst participants who sought to change friendship groups, change other's beliefs about themselves and were striving for confidence. Likewise, "instability" is a resonant feature of this stage for participants such as Jess and Kat, who both successfully managed challenges around leaving

home, managing academic life and their own well-being as well as demonstrating persistence in the context of uncertainty.

Recent work by Arnett (2016) looked at social class differences between young people in their experience of emerging adulthood. In relation to the positivity and optimism as a feature of this stage, it was found that those from lower socioeconomic groups reported higher levels of depression and financial struggle in this period. All the participants in the study presented here were from lower-social classes so a similar comparison is not possible. However, there were significant concerns and efforts to manage personal finances whilst at university (for example Damien, Gino and Grace) in comparison with wealthier university friends. This finding confirms Arnett's assertion that although emerging adulthood is one stage, there are many paths through it (Arnett 2016).

Nonetheless, managing the transition to university and adapting to a new identity as a student can be seen as a successful outcome in itself (Heaslip et al. 2015). Although the participants of this study experience resilience within academia, there is a sense in which they may have had similar emotions, challenges and successes elsewhere. For example, Isla and Lee both identify as having undergone a major change and separation from their families, as a result of which they feel more independent. Changing relationships with parents can be viewed as characteristic of the life crisis in adolescence in general.

However, there are limitations to the theory of lifespan development, mainly because Erikson's (1994a; 1994b) work is underpinned by White, Euro-American centric, middle-class societal values and developmental norms. This limits the utility of the theory for application to more diverse social classes and cultures (Smith and Osborn 2015). However, it can have probabilistic as opposed to prescriptive use in considering the extent to which the interpretations of participants' resilience are applicable beyond the university context. There could conceivably be findings from this study which are relevant to this stage of life for young people more generally. Secondly, it

also points to the potential for a broader conception of student success, as positive outcomes for young people actually may be greater than simple attainment and competition levels. This idea is explored later in Section 6.7.2.

Finally, it should also be considered that whilst an important juncture in the student journey and certainly a test of resilience, transition to HE does not constitute the only site of success/ failure or persistence/ withdrawal. Whilst most attrition does occur in the first year of study, students continue to leave their studies later in their degree courses (Quinn 2010). This dynamic, reworking of the self does not end after the first year of study, as students can be seen to navigate this *"transformation of being"* (Barnett 2007, p.38) throughout their time at university. This was consistent with some of the participants' experiences. Some like Damien and Jess felt that the transition to becoming students was behind them, whilst others such as Gino, Lee and Isla still spoke of this as a work in progress, anticipating further academic gains in skills, independence and confidence.

6.6.2 *Professional values*

This section explores how findings about how "professionalism" within course culture facilitates academic resilience for students from low-income backgrounds. This section refers mainly to the subtheme of "The professional environment" (Section 5.4.3), but also to individual participant themes in some instances.

In describing experiences relating to their courses, participants brought to light the importance of professional attributes. In some cases, these were internalised and "lived" by students. In other ways, they were explicitly noted to the researcher. In both presentations, professionalism was interpreted to be integral to student success. Values or practices associated with the profession or discipline were seen by students as advantageous, in terms of competitiveness and in achieving goals set by themselves. Subject-based examples of these included committing oneself to lab hours and memorising protocols (Jess), establishing external industry contacts through networking

events (Damien), and keeping abreast of new developments through trade publications or subject journal reading (Gino and Isla).

There were also more general attitudes towards treating HE study as work, with emphasis on punctuality, working well within a team, presenting one's best work and putting aside personal issues when working at university. Key social features of the "workplace" were found in analysis of team dynamics, depictions of informal student working groups, mentoring, NUS and course rep duties and instances of team-building with teaching staff or PAL leaders (who were likened to senior colleagues).

There is a sense in which the "framing" of the self as a professional within their respective fields could be interpreted as an internalisation or adoption of the habitus of the discipline. This marks a deeper change for students as they are able to identify and belong within their subject areas and courses. Previously "hidden" aspects of the curriculum or HEI "game" more generally may become accessible to students from low-income backgrounds.

This is significant in the light of Bourdieu's depiction of habitus, which can be understood as the individual's standing in the "game" or their *"feel for the game"* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p.64). Disadvantaged participants such as those in this study are able to adapt their habitus through perseverance, success and positive feedback. As acknowledged earlier, their habitus can change on the basis of an individual's ongoing interactions and experiences (DiMaggio 1979; Reay 2004; Gaddis 2013).

If habitus is taken as the disposition of an individual, which helps organise perception of the world around them (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), interpretation of participants' accounts in this study indicate potential for habitus change as a result of participating in HE. Although these participants enter HE with different social assets to their middle-class, wealthier counterparts, they are successfully acquiring the culture of their different disciplines. This is the lived reality to which they are being socialised; not superficial relaying of expectations, but cognitive, affective

and behavioural patterns consistent with internalised values, linked to their status as students and students of particular subjects.

There is little extant research into the part played by "professional values" in promoting resilience, though the importance of belonging and motivation for HE students are well-established factors in retention and success (Thomas 2002; Thomas 2011; Thomas 2012). There is however considerable interest in the study and enhancement of academic grit and perseverance from disciplines that are considered rigorous, emotionally taxing and academically challenging; such as teaching, nursing and medicine (Dunn et al. 2008; Beltman et al. 2011). These subjects are better researched partly due to concerns over attrition rates and changing public funding for training professionals in these areas.

There is limited research about the experience of students from low-income backgrounds specifically. However, there is some evidence suggesting self-efficacy and self-esteem play an important role in moderating habitus transformation (Gaddis 2013) and this is explored further in the following section.

6.6.3 *Academic self-esteem and self-efficacy*

Discussion in this section draws on various findings contained within the superordinate theme of "Building social confidence" (Section 5.4). As in other resilience literature, the term 'confidence' is used here interchangeably with 'self-efficacy' (Luthar 2006; Martin and Marsh 2006; Martin and Marsh 2008). The impact of self-esteem and self-efficacy has been investigated extensively as part of general resilience research (Rutter 1987) and they are often considered key protective factors, correlating with positive outcomes. Self-esteem in this study is understood as a person's own approval or liking of themselves in relation to themselves as students (Smith et al. 2014). In this sense, it consists of an emotional judgement, whereas self-efficacy here refers to the individual's beliefs about their own ability to succeed academically (Bandura 1977; Bandura and Schunk 1981; Bandura 1982).

The two concepts are closely related, with self-esteem influencing self-efficacy. First-generation HE entrants have reported lower levels of academic self-efficacy than their peers (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). Amongst both traditional and non-traditional students, Cassidy (2015) has found that academic self-efficacy is correlated with and may even predict academic resilience. Amongst participants in this study, a sense of collective academic esteem was found as the students such as Damien and Gino perceived themselves as part of informal working groups of their peers.

The recurring theme of being in the same boat as others academically also brings to light the importance of self-esteem as an important protective process, set within a social context. Gino's positivity regarding the energy he feels when working collectively enabled him to complete assignments, pushing him through times when he felt like giving up.

However, one of the key processes for these students in establishing academic self-esteem was positioning themselves amongst peers with whom they fit in, were accepted and who supported their values. The ability to establish such relationships acted as protective processes for resilience, meaning the participants were able to persist through the typical challenges of HE: giving group presentations, speaking up in class or taking on roles as mentors.

These types of activity reflect a fuller engagement with HE in a way which enhances personal growth (see Chapter Five, subtheme 'Personal growth within social contexts'). They may also help students to focus less on performance goals (such as obtaining a specific grade) and more on learning goals (such as developing and embedding transferable skills). Isla and Lee both discuss improving formal academic skills around literature searching and presenting work.

For Lee, feeling confident is central to his self-efficacy. This has important implications for his academic performance as he moves between speaking about confidence generally and how confident he feels about his course, for

example, through delivering presentations or during group work. In contrast, when Isla arrived at university she experienced low confidence, which affected her ability to participate and engage with her course. Yet for both Lee and Isla, these experiences reflect a shared sense of being "a fish out of water"; similar to the findings of Crozier and Reay (2010).

Prior educational experience emerged as an important factor in the resilience of participants from low-income backgrounds in this study. Jess felt she had escaped the rundown secondary school environment where her fellow students and teachers had low academic and career aspirations; in contrast to the positivity and motivation of HE staff and students. Others such as Kat, and Gino were keen to leave behind chaotic school lives marked by spells of absenteeism or institutional changes and find a stable, positive group of friends which supported their learning. Grace however viewed herself as privileged, having avoided attending secondary school in a deprived neighbourhood by gaining a place at an outstanding grammar school. This is corroborated by other research with disadvantaged students, which has found that both negative and positive school experiences impacted students' abilities to thrive within higher education (Brewer 2010). For instance, Wilson-Strydom (2017) in researching academic resilience in low-income South African undergraduates postulates a binary distinction between 'enablers' and 'constraints'. These are personal, social and environmental influences which "support or hinder both the development and practical expression of resilience" (Wilson-Strydom 2017, p.388). School experiences, even negative ones were found to be overwhelmingly "enabling"; that is, making later academic success possible.

Compared to the findings of this study, it does seem unlikely that there is a strict correlation between positive or negative school experiences and academic resilience. This perhaps surprising conclusion may be explained by the multitude of factors which enable students to use prior circumstances to motivate or disadvantage them. For example, in the case of Gino, poor school experience (absenteeism, poor choice of friendship groups, frequent

changes of institution) was mediated by his social experiences. He assumed the social role of the 'bright' sibling in his family and strengthened his motivation to attain his qualifications by avoiding bad influences. Consciously contrasting his previous school experience with university, he sought out and aligned himself with aspirational, academically-minded friends even before enrolment by using social media.

Once again, it was clear from the analysis that participants projected varying levels of self-esteem. Lee described himself as not particularly academic. He reflected that this had helped inform his course and institution choice; a vocational type programme at a post-1992 university. On the one hand Lee may have accurately assessed his strengths and weaknesses and chosen a course which matched his ability. In this sense, Lee knows what he is good at and focuses effort and resources on this, e.g. gaining practical experience and a decent enough grade to pursue his vocation. This self-awareness enables his success. On the other hand, however his perception of his ability could reflect low academic self-esteem which is partly a product of his social class membership, prior experiences with schooling or more generally the negative impact of childhood adversity.

There is some research indicating differences in academic self-esteem and academic self-efficacy between students from WP target groups and those from traditional groups. Research by Crozier and Reay (2009) found that HE students' identities as learners were influenced by several different factors, including previous experiences at school, the current university experience as well as personal social circumstances which may all shape academic self-esteem. Case study research has revealed that concerns about fitting in amongst low-income, working-class students primarily relate to low academic self-esteem and avoiding challenges. "Aiming low" in terms of not taking academic risks may reinforce patterns of underachievement from earlier schooling that are:

> *"grounded in a lack of academic confidence and a tenuous sense of being 'a good learner"* (Reay et al. 2010, p.120).

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Other fragilities in terms of learner confidence were evident in students with additional learning needs or dyslexia such as Grace and Kat. There is mixed evidence regarding the role of learner confidence, self-efficacy and academic achievement for students with specific learning difficulties. Self-efficacy is thought to play a primary role in predicting academic achievement (Klassen 2002; Lackaye et al. 2006). It has also been found that students with learning difficulties are more likely to overestimate their efficacy but also more likely to persist and work harder at difficult tasks (Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2003; Pietsch et al. 2003). This picture is complex; it is likely that the range and severity of adversities facing students with learning difficulties, as well as demographic and HEI variables influence levels of self-efficacy and achievement in ways that are difficult to disentangle (Lackaye et al. 2006). Essentially, it seems highly likely that self-efficacy plays an important role in academic resilience, and that learning difficulties represent a potential additional adversity for some students from low-income backgrounds.

The participants with additional learning needs in this study were all cognisant of the impact their learning difficulties had on their levels of effort and motivation. They all described strategies they employed to manage learning difficulties in academic challenges; which were often related to utilising others to support them (for example through proof-reading or ALS access). One similarity amongst the participants with additional learning needs is that they all had a good awareness of the ways in which they were struggling or succeeding as students. It was important to note that as well as relying on others in strategic ways, students also saw themselves as "one amongst many". In other words, stigma attached to their difficulties were now viewed more as differences, because they were encouraged by the university to access ways around them (scribes, extra time, software, learning assistants and financial support). Most importantly, participants in this study with additional learning needs did not feel stigmatised at university, as opposed to experiences in prior schooling.

For some, like Damien, learning difficulties were an intrinsic and even positive aspect of his learner identity. University was offering him a way to enhance resilience through mentoring other students with disabilities. This provided him with a primary role in ensuring prior adversity was meaningful, and that helping others with learning difficulties succeed became an opportunity for personal growth.

In contrast, there was evidence that participants including Gino, Grace and Kat struggled with academic tasks which they perceived as easy for others. Although several participants identified themselves as having additional learning needs, each had fairly low usage of the institution's learning support service.

Whilst the primary focus of this study has not been to explore resilience in students with learning difficulties, such differences have been a significant aspect of academic resilience for some of the participants in this study. As extant theory and the findings of this study suggest, belief about the academic self are rooted in the emotional history and past educational experiences of the student. Thus, the role of self-efficacy in those with learning difficulties may have special relevance to their subsequent academic success. The attitudes held by students in this study towards factors which enhance or impede their success therefore offer a unique insight. The findings reveal how individuals facing multiple disadvantage, use both informal strategies and formal services in different ways and with varying degrees of success. In Chapter Seven the implications of these findings for how HEIs deliver additional learning support and enable students with additional needs to build supportive social networks are elaborated.

6.7 Top-down concepts of success

6.7.1 *Academic achievement*

Throughout the literature, there is an underlying assumption about what student success looks like. It typically refers to normative expectations about

persisting until degree completion and attaining a degree classification that is in line with a students' past academic performance. For example, the Office for Students (OfS) strategy states that one of its main objectives is to ensure success and progression for all students:

> *"To close the gaps between different types of students when it comes to continuing studies, gaining a good degree, and finding employment"* (OfS 2018).

So, the term "success" is frequently used and becomes a proxy for good degree attainment. This is a top-down notion of success, controlled and directed by individuals and organisations rather than the students themselves. The term 'good degree' itself denotes a 2:1 or above, and may act as a gateway graduate employment and postgraduate study (Smith and White 2015).

However, some resilience theorists such as Ungar (2012) have challenged the notion of what a positive outcome looks like. What does student success really mean, and can it really look the same for all? Because of the hegemonic nature of the pursuit of equality of opportunity, policymakers suppose success should look the same for everyone (Atkins and Ebdon 2014). A more radical and nuanced approach to this might propose that definitions of success can emerge from and be different between individuals themselves.

The personal conceptualisation of success is one issue that has emerged from the findings of this research: understandings of success for the participants were not fixed but were subject to revision and were open to interpretation. Success is in the eye of the beholder; with government regulators, HEIs, staff, students or their families perhaps having different expectations.

To give an example, for the institution, success can be quantified through completion rates and academic achievement. For each student, it may manifest as individual successes in assignments, specific personal attainment goals such as returning to study after a difficult year, or a bare

pass on a challenging unit, good references from work experience and establishing industry contacts. There is variation between students from different backgrounds, and different subjects. For example, successes for Lee after the first year included not needing to go home as often and a noticeable improvement in confidence. For others this looked like just "hanging in there" (Grace), returning after a failed or difficult year (Jess; Gino; Kat) or making better choices about friendship groups (Isla; Damien).

Developing a broader notion of student success can help acknowledge diversity within the student body and the multiple perspectives on what can be gained from studying for a degree. Sanders and Higham (2012) suggest that extending the scope and definition of success to include personal or learner-defined perspectives can be useful in challenging existing conceptions and bias. This stands in contrast to HE policy and practice which specifically targets students from non-traditional backgrounds in comparing their successes to traditional entrants.

Several researchers point to the uneven distribution of "confidence and entitlement" that impact on learner success (Crozier and Reay 2005; Cotton et al. 2017) between students from different backgrounds. This is thought to be transmitted through generations as part of cultural capital. Evidence suggests that those with middle-class, university-educated parents have greater sense of entitlement regarding access to education, along with more clearly defined aspirations about attainment and progression (Wilson-Strydom 2017). Conversely, families of some students in this study, having a son or daughter who had applied and been accepted to an HEI of any standing was perceived as a significant success. Participants in this study themselves perceived higher education as a privilege not to be wasted, much less an entitlement.

This is not to deny that degree attainment and completion are likely to be some of the most widely acknowledged goals for all students to achieve. However, it should be recognised that students enter HE for many reasons. Even the same goals (e.g. achieving a 2:1 or above) might be held as a

success for different reasons. It might mean entry to postgraduate course, training opportunity or graduate employment minimum qualification. It might be held in relation to a student's own personal belief about what is achievable for them, or what a tutor once told them about what constitutes a good degree. There are as many forms of success for these students as there are reasons they wish to achieve each kind.

Likewise, early withdrawal can be seen as the "*antithesis of success*"(Moore et al. 2013, p.47). This presupposes that dropping out is always the wrong choice and subscribes to the deficit model. Although differences in retention rates between different socioeconomic groups are problematised by policymakers and institutions, for individuals, non-completion may even represent a rational decision (Quinn 2010).

Exploratory research, offering qualitative insight into academic resilience, offers a richer, more complex picture of success. In such studies, students define aspiration and success in terms of leaving behind bad neighbourhoods with high unemployment, being different from their peers, or showing others around them that academic achievement is possible (Brewer 2010; Morales 2010; Wilson-Strydom 2017). Focusing solely on parity of attainment ignores the lived experience of these students and what can be learned from their individual academic and personal successes. Adopting a narrow perspective on success may have unintentional and undesirable implications for students from low-income backgrounds. This is because it determines the objectives of interventions to promote success; falling back towards addressing deficit in performance rather than utilising strengths to understand the wider ecologies of success (Ungar 2010).

6.7.2 *The ideal student*

An important consideration in academic resilience is commonplace understandings of what is an "ideal" student. An underlying assumption of programmes designed to support students from WP target groups is that they

should be helped to access the same opportunities and aspire to similar outcomes as the majority of HE students.

There are tensions between the goals of widened access, increased success and progression for various groups under the WP agenda and the current institutional culture of HEIs. As Read et al. (2003) identify, the need for undergraduates to transform into independent learners is problematic for many; and may be most difficult for those from the lowest socioeconomic groups. In this research an interplay of societal beliefs, messages from parents as well as the student's own perceptions of valuable internal characteristics typify the "ideal" HE student.

As outlined in the literature review section of this thesis, funding changes for HEIs mean increased pressure on resources and a "valorisation" of an ideal student, the one who can succeed in the shortest time with low demands on institutional resources (Read et al. 2003). Blackmore (1997, 2001) attributes the development of this ideal to a shift from "fat" to "lean-and-mean" pedagogies characterised by diminished teacher-student contact. This ideal is potentially damaging, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds who, as found in this study, may benefit most from the protective effects of positive tutor interaction and experience "riskier" transitions to HE than traditional students (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Clayton et al. 2009).

The ideal, independent student is also noticeably devoid of any caring responsibilities, financial hardship or access needs (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003), in contrast to the students' experiences in this study. This poses a problem for designing and implementing ways of enabling academic resilience for anyone other than the student who is, from this perspective, fully accountable for their own success.

However, as this section has highlighted, the experiences, habitus and protective factors of an individual form the social ecology of their lifeworld. The values and strategies of students from low-income backgrounds cannot

be assumed to be the same as middle-class "ideals" taken for granted by academic staff or peers from more privileged backgrounds. There is evidence to suggest that HE students generally have absorbed neo-liberal ideals of individual responsibility for attainment (Pimlott-Wilson 2015) which may conflict in some cases with their own experience and values. As some other research with White low-income/ working-class students has shown, this can affect individuals in different ways. In in-depth interviews with 28 working-class undergraduates, Stuber (2011) found some experienced persistent and debilitating marginality, whilst others overcame this, transforming such feelings into motivation for social change.

Likewise, findings from this study suggest that the participants are still in the process of negotiating what they want from university and how to achieve their goals. Some research (Tett 2004; Reay et al. 2009, 2010; Lehmann 2014) suggests that the way in which students manage these understandings may differ by social class. In terms of self-confidence and learner identities, Crozier and Reay (2008) describe how middle-class entrants are more self-assured and feel entitled to the opportunities of HE, whereas working-class students have more "fragile" identities as students. Class-based entitlement has been found in other research looking at individuals' life histories which revealed links between class and entitlement to higher level study (Stuart et al. 2011).

Students from low-income backgrounds can be considered outsiders of the discourses of academia. They may lack familiarity with the values and habitus of the majority of university staff and middle-class students (Reay et al. 2010). The real risk of resilience-based interventions targeting retention and success for these groups is that they may presume a typology of an ideal student outlined above, which differs from the students' more authentic conceptions.

This presents both challenges and opportunity for HEIs looking to attract and retain students. HEIs primarily standardise expectations for success for both functional purposes. For example, the Department for Education and Skills

(DfES) advise that data on student performance and some elements of the National Student Survey (NSS) form part of the Teaching Excellence Framework assessment (DfES 2017). League tables which include research scores or NSS results rank HEIs as a whole or by subject and may be used by individuals making application decisions (HEFCE 2017).

So, whilst standardised markers of success are an essential part of an HEI's reporting and evaluation, they are not the best or only means by which institutions should understand student success. A real commitment to ensuring that students from all backgrounds have an equal chance to succeed and progress from university requires giving those under-represented students a real voice. Conducting qualitative research with these groups presents a key opportunity to contribute to the evidence-base of what works in terms of success and retention for non-traditional learners.

However, the contribution to be made by qualitative enquiry is still underestimated within national widening participation strategy. In some areas including access to and progression from HE, the National Strategy for Access and Student Success recommends the use of qualitative data alongside analysis of statistics to:

> *"provide a richer picture and allow particular foci, for example,*
> *on students with different entry qualifications or entering*
> *different types of institution"* (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.99).

Current guidelines for monitoring and developing retention and success neglect the contribution of qualitative research and run the risk of treating the university experience for some students as some unknowable, "black box" phenomenon.

6.7.3 *The blame game*

This thesis challenges over-reliance on individual characteristics which de-contextualise responsibility for positive outcomes. The current work clearly identifies resilience as an essentially social experience. It raises a question about our existing understandings of widening participation and academic

resilience in low-income students: should these students be considered "at-risk", or are they put at-risk by the culture of higher education in the UK?

As a result of neo-liberal thinking about resilience constructs, individual agency is perhaps incorrectly presumed to be more influential than structural inequalities (Wilson-Strydom 2017). In doing so, institutions may absolve themselves of responsibility to an extent. Through using qualitative methodologies such as IPA, insider perspectives on resilience have challenged hegemonic constructs which seek to blame individuals for their normative successes or failures. This critique of HEIs and government policy suggests a move to "responsibilize" students as part of a neo-liberal agenda (Garrett 2015). This makes them accountable for their own success with diminished regard for addressing inherent disadvantages within the HE system, or wider structural inequalities in society (Lehmann 2014).

This notion of responsibilizing marginalised individuals through resilience-building initiatives has received criticism from other quarters, notably Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2005) and Hart et al (2016). Parallels can be drawn between the work of Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2005) on helping professions and WP initiatives. For professionals to concentrate solely on individuals or individual families without challenging larger social problems is limiting and ignores the wider environments in which vulnerable people live.

Rather than focusing on enabling personal transformations, research from the social justice approach adopted by these researchers includes socially-transformative elements, such as tackling prejudice, discrimination and stigma (Hart et al. 2016). This approach is highly compatible in the light of the ecological model of academic resilience proposed in this current study and has direct implications for WP policy and practice (see Chapter 7).

Furthermore, deficit thinking about groups of students who are typically under-represented at university may lead to expenditure on programmes which, in essence, are seeking to fix individual differences. Attempting to fix these students' perceived inadequacies limits the effectiveness of such

interventions, as they only address secondary problems (Moore et al. 2013). This occurs partly because resilience interventions are typically based on traditional psychological understandings of resilience with the aim of developing "resilient" characteristics or behaviours in people, or to prevent risk factors from occurring (Masten 2001; Black and Lobo 2008). A concerning issue then becomes the shift from also responsibilizing HE teaching staff and WP practitioners, through resilience-focused pedagogy, induction and other student development programmes. Implications and recommendations around this issue are outlined in Chapter Seven.

6.8 "Responsibilization" and academic resilience

This section moves from the findings of this study and literature around success and retention in students from low-income backgrounds towards a critique of the neo-liberal construction of resilience and consideration of the construct's implications for non-traditional students. This requires a refocus on the nature of adversity for these HE students and a new direction for academic resilience research and practice.

This sentiment may hold true for the relatively new domain of academic resilience. Each individual's history though marked by adversity must be seen as a part of a wider ecology of resilience. The current National Strategy for Access and Success (Atkins and Ebdon 2014) notes that HEIs must consider the total student journey: preparation for application, enrolment and studying, to course completion, postgraduate study and employment. Findings of this research and the wider literature indicate that journeys from adversity to resilience represent a continuous interaction between the young person and the environment, as well as the interplay of stressful and protective elements within it.

The argument here is that academic resilience is a phenomenon in itself, and is more than simply positive adjustment, grit or perseverance. As a distinct construct it is helpful in offering a framework for thinking about student success in a way that focuses on the assets and how they are utilised by

students in ways that go far beyond deficit thinking. Stripped back to its origins in early psychosocial research, resilience specifies:

> *"The achievement of positive adjustment in the face of significant adversity…* [it] *encapsulates the view that adaptation can occur through trajectories that defy "normative" expectations"* (Luthar et al. 2000).

Academic resilience offers a modality for not only incorporating but privileging the voices of non-traditional students and their pathways to success. As this research enquiry has shown, resilience needs recasting and recrafting (Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014) as an alternative to similar but more individualistic or superficial constructs. Exploring protective processes and risk factors for students can avoid the neo-liberal "responsibilization" and instead can offer a socially-located basis for the phenomenon (Garrett 2015; Wilson-Strydom 2017). In supporting HE student success and retention, this will be through evidence-based interventions sensitive to the individual, social, institutional and economic complexities of the students' lifeworld. This continues to represent an optimistic, strength-based approach to conceptualising resilience.

One promising avenue can be found in whole-school approaches to resilience and well-being. There is some research exploring this idea of moving away from responsibilizing individuals and their families towards involving the entire school community (e.g. Hodder et al. 2011; Hart and Heaver 2012, Fazel et al. 2014; Ungar et al. 2014; Hart 2016; Theron 2016). For example, Hodder et al (2011) demonstrated success in increasing resilience and protective factors in young people at high social disadvantage through a three-year school-based programme covering a range of aspects salient to the experience of academic resilience by participants in this study. These included school action planning/ monitoring, staff training, peer support programmes, advisory committees and curriculum development geared towards enhancing student communication, connectedness, empathy and self-awareness. However, in the context of the findings of the current study it is essential that such programmes remain culturally and contextually

relevant; acknowledging challenges faced by low-income students who move away from home, struggle financially and have experience of multiple adversity.

6.9 Re-casting academic resilience

In this section a new model of academic resilience is proposed. It is less actor-centred and considers structural forces. It is intended that grounding student success and retention in resilience theory and related processes can guide the development of more effective WP policy and programmes for these individuals. Although IPA is not typically used to make generalisations, the model presented here is designed to demonstrate the similarities and differences between individuals across the realms of their experience of resilience. This remains in keeping with the research philosophy, and offers an insight into the transferability of experience.

The model presented here is termed the "ecosystem" in reference to the social ecologies of resilience that have been uncovered and explored in the findings of this study. The model is presented in Figure 4 and is designed to illustrate the interplay or concert of processes from various dimensions of the individual's lifeworld. There is also a worked example of this model (Figure 5), illustrating how it can be used as a framework for mapping personal eco-systems of resilience. The inclusion of risk and protective processes is presented within the worked example. However, this is with the acknowledgement that no particular experience or process can be universally determined to enable or inhibit resilience; what creates difficulties for one student may serve as a motivator for another.
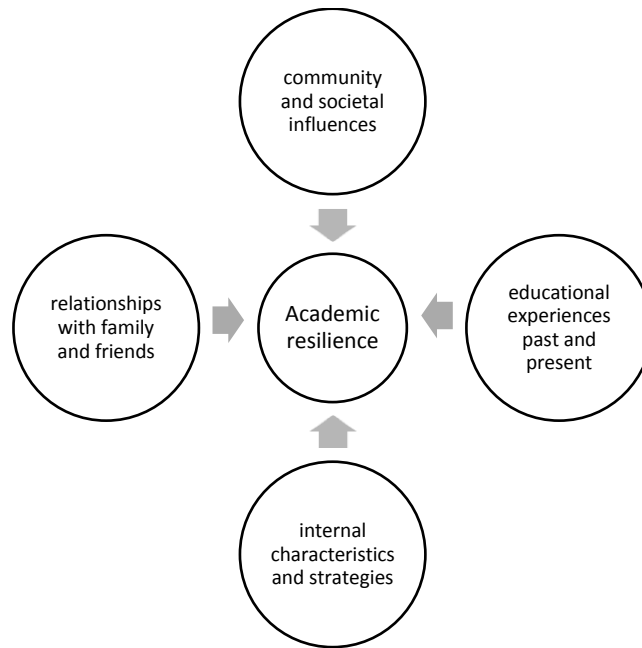
Figure 4:   Academic resilience eco-system

Firstly, we can consider the internal characteristics of the student: their individual disposition with regard to self-efficacy, esteem, confidence as well as strategies for coping with challenge. These would include both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, leading to different outcomes. Internal characteristics are highly specific to the individual. They incorporate but are not limited to stable psychological personality traits. Importantly, this aspect of the ecosystem is represented as in flux, i.e. influencing and influenced by the other dimensions. The advantage of this model can be seen in Figure 5; where the contrast between adaptive strategies for coping (a cathartic, autobiographical writing achievement) give meaning and strength to Kat, in contrast with risk factors (her stubborn independence and reluctance to seek external support for learning difficulties).
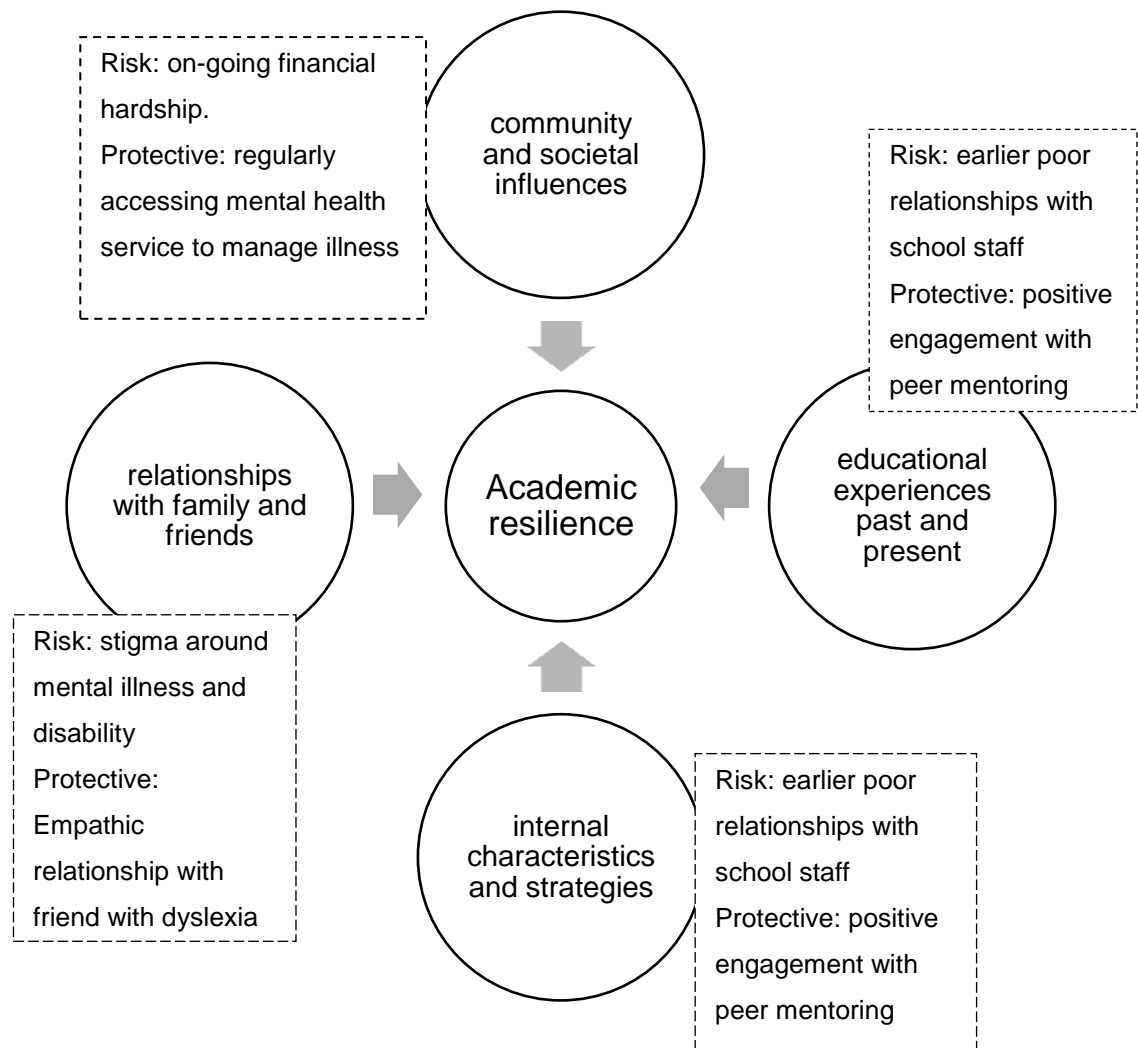
Figure 5:   Worked example of academic resilience ecosystem for participant "Kat"

As well as being a key finding of this study, the framing of individual, internal factors as one aspect of a more complex system is supported in emergent resilience literature. Ungar, for example argues that contextual factors have a stronger influence on responses to adversity than individual factors (2012). So, whilst individual agency plays an important role in managing adversity, the "social ecologies" of resilience, including culture and relationships, should be given equal if not greater consideration.

The findings of this study reveal the protective role of friendships and family relationships, both at home and away at university. These are represented in the model in such a way as to demonstrate their links with internal

characteristics, in supporting the development of self-belief, for example. They overlap with internal coping strategies here, as shown in the worked example of the model for the case of "Kat". Her alliance with one particular university friend with similar learning difficulties was interpreted as a social enabler. Relying on this friendship helped Kat to cope with critical points, such as assessments.

The third element of the model is the influence of past and current educational experiences. This includes a huge range of factors, including the student's relationship with teachers and support staff, curricular challenges, entry to the university and their perception of how well they feel they fit on course. For several students in this study it would also consist of the influence of peer mentoring as a protective process; both as a mentor and mentee. Again, the links with social relationships can emerge in "concert" with one another. This enables or impedes success; as parents encourage academic engagement and persistence, or cautionary tales from failing peers act as motivation.

Community and societal influences constitute the fourth dimension of the academic resilience ecosystem. These may capture larger, systemic issues like economic status, class habitus and the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which students grow up. For Jess this included ongoing money troubles as she struggled to afford living costs of university without parental support. Negative factors caused her worry and upset, but also created opportunities for compensatory support from the members of her wider social network, who would provide her with ad hoc resources such as train tickets home. Thus, risk and protective factors were found to be intertwined. Jess also draws on services such as her mental health team to support her in remaining well and as part of her wellness, continuing her studies.

The model presented here has similarities and difference with both Garmezy's triad of resilience (see Figure 1) and Bronfenbrenner's framework (1977; 1979), as considered earlier in this thesis. Three of the original

protective dimensions proposed by Garmezy (1991) are included in this model; namely individual, familial and environmental. However, the academic resilience ecosystem also considers educational experiences as separate influencing factors. Moreover, this ecosystem also views each dimension as having the potential to enable or constrain resilience processes, as in the capabilities-based work of Wilson-Strydom (2017). Whilst the ecosystem also bears similarities to Bronfenbrenner's work on the five subsystems of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979), it make significant provision for the role of internal characteristics and strategies which were so central to the accounts of participants in this academic resilience study.

This model enables the capture of "lives as they are lived", particularly amongst minority voices in the sphere of HE; students from low-income backgrounds. It has transferability to other groups with experience of adversity and may be well-suited to those for whom "box-ready" risk and protective factors fail to adequately express their experiences.

6.10 Assessment of quality in the study

This study was undertaken to explore the lived experiences of students from low-income backgrounds. it did not seek to be generalisable nor to obtain findings that were valid in a quantitative sense. Evaluation of the credibility and quality of this research is carried out using the five core principles considered in Section 3.10 (Yardley 2000; Yardley 2008), alongside additional considerations for IPA research proposed by Jonathan Smith and others (Smith et al. 2009).

The first of these to be considered is "sensitivity to context". It is demonstrated here in the presentation of "vertical generalisation"; examination of the taken for granted conceptualisations and understandings of resilience, protective processes and risk factors, and what is meant by student success. The findings have been explored and drawn together in the context of the research findings linking the particular to the abstract and to the work of others. This includes endeavour to reach deep into both the data

and extant theory, drawing together explanations and ideas from sociological and psychological perspectives, as well as commonly-held, everyday understandings from WP policy and practice.

Furthermore, the research has privileged the voice of the participants and in doing so, foregrounded consideration of the socio-cultural and socioeconomic contexts of each student. These voices have been retained throughout the cross-case analysis and are evident in the shaping of an academic resilience framework that is fundamentally sensitive to context (see Figure 4).

The role of reflexivity in this study should be recognised here as it has been considered throughout. A research diary containing my thoughts, reflections, worries and assumptions has been kept throughout my journey. Parts of it which illuminate the process and offer insight into my own foreknowledge and "horizon of understanding" (Gadamer 1975) has influenced and shaped this research. What is presented within this thesis, whilst only a relatively brief part of the reflective story, is my attempt to offer a window on my own dimensions of the interpretative enquiry.

The context of adversity and risk for students from groups which may be considered vulnerable arguably increase the importance of considering reflexivity. Critical reflection on one's own perspective and foreknowledge as researcher is necessary for avoiding presenting the phenomenon in a way that reveals the researcher's viewpoint rather than hearing that of the participants (Langdridge 2007). As such, reflexivity has remained an ongoing feature of the study (Willig 2013), which has been revisited through-out the write-up.

In considering reflexivity in this study, I have looked at ways in which my own observations will have affected my interactions with participants and interpretations of data. As discussed earlier in Table 9, I was moved and impressed as Jess retold her experience of failing and returning after her first year. This occurred also in Kat's interview; undoubtedly, I expressed interest

and admiration in the perseverance of both these participants. My personal understanding of the vulnerabilities of young people away from home for the first time, coupled with financial, academic and mental health struggles were a key dimension of this. This stemmed from years of teaching experience, and my tone of voice and choice of words may have offered encouragement for participants to focus on perseverance as a salient aspect of resilience.

Considering the impact of my foreknowledge on the interview experiences allowed me to be conscious of the significance I gave this in my interpretative accounts. There were a number of such experiences; another example being that all but one participant was raised by their mothers in single parent households. This albeit unexpected fact initially struck me as not particularly significant. It had simple explanatory power in terms of why the participants came to be classified as low-income (reliant on a single income). However, it also grew to have special significance for participants as the strength and closeness of the maternal bond formed a keystone in the students' success. Insights like these required deep reflection on my own family life; the value most participants placed on making their mothers proud and even offering financial security was different from my own concerns and required some thought and uncovering to place these relationships as central to the academic resilience ecosystem.

During the interview process I was conscious that participants may reveal their stories in different ways once they had encountered me in person. For example, participants could have viewed my role as a representative of the university. This shifts the power in the participant-researcher relationship and so I initiated interviews by explaining my role as a third party; as a student funded by the university rather than a staff member. Other aspects such as my gender may have influenced the dynamic; for instance I considered that it may have been easier for female participants to share vulnerabilities with me. However, after the interviews it struck me that most male participants had also discussed highly sensitive topics such as grief, sexuality and homesickness.

Commitment and rigour have guided the course of this study through literature review, study design, data collection and analysis as well as the process of examining the findings in the context of empirical and theoretical understandings of resilience. In-depth engagement with the findings of this study has located them within what is already known about this phenomenon, and lead to new insights and recommendations about what has been uncovered. Sharing analysis with supervisors has challenged interpretation and thematic organisation (see Table 14). There was also a commitment during the analysis phase to look for so-called *"negative cases "*defined by Katz (2015, p.134) as *"evidence contradicting a current explanation"* and creates reactivity and flexibility in the enquiry. The rigorous search for such cases challenged the developing viewpoint of the phenomenon in the analysis in order to build coherence between experiences and themes.

In terms of transparency and coherence, a carefully constructed account of academic resilience has been presented here. Throughout it is grounded in the words of the student participants, in an attempt to *"get close to the thing in itself"* (Smith et al. 2009, p.183). The completeness and faithfulness of this analysis has been undertaken through multiple levels and techniques for drawing out interpretations and scrutinised by colleagues and supervisors. Sharing coding procedures and analysis has given insight and direction in producing an account that is clear and logical. An example of this in practice can be viewed in Table 14.

> *Original researcher analysis for participant 'Damien':*
>
> There is a pathological quality to his obsessive working which he recognises in part 'whether that's a healthy perspective on it is another question entirely…so I don't have a social life. At home I'm working, I go to sleep I use my computer I go to university' (238- 240).
>
> *Supervisor comment:*
>
> Strong words – are they borne out by the evidence presented?
>
> The order and structure could perhaps reflect strategies that he has adopted to deal with his dyslexia/dyspraxia?
>
> *Researcher reflection:*
>
> Damien's work ethic is frequently referenced throughout his account, but what is my evidence that it verges on being unhealthy? Is this my judgement or a joke he has made about himself? This needs to be explored further as I return to the transcript.
>
> Interesting observation about the potential for this to be a coping strategy- there are other linking themes here around how the participant speaks about his disability.

Table 14: Extract from supervisory correspondence during review of analysis

With regard to impact and importance, the findings of the literature review, the novel contribution offered by IPA as an approach to studying academic resilience and the findings and recommendations of this study have been disseminated through relevant journals and conferences (see Appendix 9-12). In the final chapter of the thesis, the implications of the research are made clear for various stakeholders.

6.11 Limitations of the study

In some ways, the strengths of this study can also be considered its weaknesses. The depth of the study allowed for a fine-grained interpretation of participants' accounts of their journeys to HE, but also into the minutiae of

everyday interactions within the university setting or at home with families. It meant the study was selective in terms of the backgrounds of individuals; studying a limited number across a small range of subjects hailing from one institution. It could be that the culture of a more elite HEI or within different disciplines might have illuminated the phenomenon of academic resilience in different ways.

A similar limitation relates to the ethnic backgrounds of the participants who are all White students. Achieving a representative sample of participants was not the intention of the researcher because of the idiographic nature of the study, and due to the predominance of White British students at the institution was not unexpected. However, it must be acknowledged that the dimension of ethnicity is not explored in terms of the ecology of academic resilience. It may be that non-White students from low-income backgrounds could have presented different individual themes as well as new aspects of convergence/ divergence in terms of the cross-case themes. This is especially relevant in terms of the influence of intersectionality; considering how the mix of ethnicity, gender, disability and social class pose challenges and opportunities in terms of resilience. Future research could explore the implications of multiple disadvantages amongst students in terms of their experiences of academic resilience.

A multi-perspectival approach to data collection was considered but ultimately rejected. This allowed the researcher to maintain focus on the student participants as the pivot point of academic resilience. In this way, placing the student at the centre of the range of protective and risk factors as well as their own conceptualisations of success was sufficient to present a complete picture of the phenomenon. Adding to this with the viewpoints of other salient individuals (tutors, teachers, parents, support staff or peers) would change the focus of the research question and potentially undermine the construction of academic resilience for these students.

The model of resilience presented here was developed from the semi-structured interviews with participants, and my own analysis and

interpretation of their accounts, in the light of the extant body of literature into retention, success and academic resilience. It should be recognised that other explanations or different models could be offered by different researchers with similar research questions. It remains, however, that this study and its findings have been presented to WP practitioners, university lecturers and support staff through publication, posters and conference talks (see Appendices 9 and 10). In doing so, it was laid open to scrutiny, questioning and critique by colleagues across the fields of academic resilience, widening participation, qualitative research and in particular, IPA.

6.12 Conclusion

This research has found academic resilience to be a complex, multi-layered phenomenon which emerges from the interaction of an individual's internal characteristics, past history and social world. Findings from this study have shown that contrary to the neo-liberal discourse, resilience is fundamentally social and involves risk and protective factors in the areas of internal characteristics, educational experience, and the relationships between a person, their families, friends, communities and society at large. Thus, a new socio-ecological model of resilience is necessary for understanding academic resilience.

Academic resilience offers a useful framework for understanding the success and retention in undergraduates from low-income backgrounds. It represents a positive psychology perspective focusing on the strengths these students possess and valuable insights into how they develop and draw on assets and resources, in contrast with deficit-discourse approaches around inequality.

However, understanding positive adaption should focus more on the social environment and less on currently used constructs, measurement and programmes of academic resilience concerned with quantitative measurement and internal characteristics of individuals. This shift in focus is essential for policy-makers as they commit to better understanding the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds once they have entered

HE. Understanding retention, success and progression for low-income students means hearing the voices of those students themselves. It also requires developing strategy and recommendations to guide HEIs in addressing the structural disadvantages which form a core dimension of the academic resilience eco-system model.

Findings can also inform pedagogical practice and student support by HE staff and WP practitioners. Effective teaching learning activities should enhance the positive social influences and opportunities for developing self-efficacy, belonging and academic confidence in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Likewise, researchers of academic resilience and WP must be cognisant of the social ecology of resilience as presented earlier; and challenge existing measures and assessing programmes of resilience-building which view individual students as sole agents of their own success or failure.

Chapter 7   **Implications and conclusions**

7.1 Introduction

This chapter contains implications and recommendations based on the findings of the study. These are presented in different sections relevant to a range of stakeholders which includes policy-makers, HEIs and their staff, WP practitioners and researchers and students. It concludes by outlining future directions for research into academic resilience. They are presented in acknowledgement that the results of this research are drawn from a small-scale study at one institution.

7.2 Policy makers

As seen in the ecosystem model of academic resilience, wider structural forces play an intrinsic role. National policy around widening participation is an important element which contributes to the risk and protective factors influencing student outcomes. There are difficulties with disentangling what Foskett calls the:

> *"nature of the policy, the policy process and the connection between policy as text, policy in action and the real world of individual decision-making"* (Foskett 2011, p.21).

At the micro-level, processes of resilience and individual decision-making are accounted for by this study and the model offers a certain level of transferability to students from low-income and other non-traditional backgrounds.

However, more needs to be said about the ways in which policy addresses retention and success for these groups. This study's findings are corroborated by other nationwide research initiatives which recommend enhancing HE experiences which by:

> *"supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; knowledge, confidence and identity as successful*

*HE learners; and an HE experience that is relevant to students'
interests and future goals"* (Thomas 2013, pp.14-15).

It supports other new research in this area in proposing these recommendations be incorporated in national policy and advice, such as that given to helping HEIs develop access agreements.

Essential to this is the recommendation that the variety of experiences such as those heard in this study are given a platform within the WP discourse. As academically resilient individuals, they offer invaluable insight into the assets and protective factors that enable success; and must not be ignored at the expense of vulnerability and deficit discourse. There is also a more radical proposal to broaden conceptions of student success to ones that are situated beyond White, middle-class definitions of attainment and completion. This means recognising and celebrating different conceptions of success for the diverse range of learners which HE serves.

One way to address this might be through ensuring a broader understanding of success and facilitators of resilience for non-traditional students. Within the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a more nuanced view of student experience could be considered through presentation of case studies of academically resilient students or institutional examples of 'what works' in widening participation. Encouraging more diverse evidencing of teaching excellence could motivate universities to enhance support for a wider range of students.

Finally, wider social initiatives can identify and boost assets and resources which enhance success much earlier in young peoples' lives. Findings from the resilience evidence base such as those from this study should be used to inform government policy. Without addressing fundamental concerns such as the impact of living in low-participation HE neighbourhoods in families with low-income and/or low socioeconomic status, measures to improve educational outcomes are short-sighted. Policy should call for research and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions to boost positive outcomes for young people that enhance resilience across the lifespan (Titterton and

Taylor 2017). This would help address OFFA's aim to promote competence and reduce gaps in achievement and retention in HE.

7.3 The University

This section is concerned with the implications of the research for the university's ethos, policy and practices. The conceptualisation of academic resilience offered in the ecosystem model indicates that the dominant culture of the institution itself plays a role in enhancing or impeding the academic resilience of its students. Whilst this may be expressed largely within the realm of educational experience (with teaching and support staff at the frontline) the HEI is recognised as the key driver for change.

The experience of academic resilience and related risk and protective processes identified in this study raises questions about the management of pedagogy and student services. Teaching and learning committees can be instructed to consider how pedagogic practice amongst staff can be developed to be inclusive and universally beneficial. For example, working groups may be tasked with trialling and reviewing learning activities that support peer-to-peer learning. As part of the institution's commitment to strengthen student success for those from low-income backgrounds, strategic plans should explicitly seek to facilitate students as agents of their own success. In practice this would require departmental or faculty champions to identify and disseminate examples of good teaching practice which support the development of student self-efficacy.

One recommendation is that, wherever possible, the university seeks to not sacrifice recognition of the diverse strengths and assets students from all walks of life bring to their studies at the cost of remedial programmes addressing deficit. A greater spectrum of success should be celebrated and rewarded, whilst academic services should be well-funded to support students with additional needs in ways that enhance students' feelings of belonging and self-efficacy. Students in this study did not access services such as counselling, hardship funding or ALS to a great extent. Whilst

provision of services is generally good, they are often centralised and may offer too generic a level of support, leading to a loss of awareness and responsibility for disadvantaged students. Thus, better integration within subject areas and course spaces may increase the sense of belonging and normalcy for students who wish to access them. Funding could be directed towards targeted provision and support spaces that are located within subject areas. This may both heighten their protective utility and be a more effective use of costly resources.

Staff development and training based on the proposed ecosystem model of academic resilience would also enhance understanding of the complexities of success and retention for these groups and help challenge accepted ideas about what makes an "ideal student". The HEI must lead on making explicit the value of non-traditional students in HE, whilst recognising the ongoing challenges presented by the structural inequalities they face. This can open dialogue about the impact of the hidden curriculum and give a greater voice to existing university programmes such as course rep systems, teaching and learning committees or students' union, co-creating a *"dignity of difference"*(Sacks 2002, p.45). Doubtless this is a challenge that will require "re-normalisation"; a change in policies and practices designed to shift the institutional culture to one more embracing of student diversity (Pitman et al. 2017).

In terms of supporting research and innovation in this area, the university should also play a key role. By funding action-based research into WP success and retention initiatives for students from low-income or other non-traditional backgrounds it can ensure the quality of empirically-based resilience building programmes. The overall commitment to cultural change within institutions will require planning, implementation and review of improvement to the student experience, but managers must lead on ensuring the quality of inclusive learning.

7.4 HE teachers and support staff

The findings of this study focus closely on the main arena of the participants' lifeworld: their day-to-day lives at university. As such, peers, teaching and support staff are the supporting cast for acts of resilience. This corroborates other research suggesting that learning, teaching and assessment practices impact significantly on student engagement and enjoyment (Crozier et al. 2008; Burke et al. 2013).

One recommendation is that teacher and support staff should embrace an understanding of resilience that reflects and challenges their own pre-conceptions of what constitutes an "ideal student". This would facilitate a move towards strength-based approaches and new practices of co-creation with students from diverse backgrounds. Currently, the findings of this study are being shared across different HEIs through groups of academic staff looking to enhance student success in ways that are grounded in the resilience literature.

Further action-based research in this area is recommended. One exploratory study from Stephens et al. (2014) hints at the promise of this approach. By using a "difference-education intervention" teachers opened a dialogue with students about structural inequality, learning differences and constructs of success which lead to improved attainment. Engaging in learning activities that broach how individuals face adversity can get students and staff thinking about potential academic challenges and share collective knowledge about ways of coping and finding support. In this way, the many ecosystems of academic resilience can become normalised as adversity can become recognised as meaningful, reducing shame and stigma.

Another implication of this study is that there are key opportunities within transition activities to be viewed on a continuum that stretches from pre-entry, through to the first year and beyond. Models of stretched induction or induction in collaboration with students can be considered here. Rather than adopting a generic, one size fits all approach to induction across the

university which ends after the first term, faculty resources can be better targeted with support becoming more relevant to the students' needs.

For instance, teaching staff and students can identify key points during the year where students may benefit from more intensive support or guidance. Course representatives may be able to bring forward ideas to support students who are at greater risk of isolation and loss of confidence during these times. Staff can incorporate revision skills workshops, help create study groups or subject specific support (e.g. 1:1 appointments for statistics or referencing with subject librarians, area technical staff, student mentors or course tutors as appropriate).

Throughout the first year, teachers and support staff should make explicit expectations, helping to develop academic skills within programmes. This can build social and cultural capital whilst fostering a sense of belonging that reduces the impact of the hidden curriculum and enhances pathways to resilience. Here particularly the input of current students from low-income backgrounds should be used to inform best practice.

This is what Kift (2010) terms "transition pedagogy". Specifically, learning and teaching activities should enable students to apply prior knowledge to new learning throughout transition. Setting of personal goals should be made explicit through discussion; though not necessarily in a competitive classroom context. This requires a commitment for empathic, sustained interaction with individual students from personal tutors. The recommendation is that staff should seek to foster opportunities to create personal yet professional relationships with all students that respects and shows understanding of their resilience ecosystems.

Throughout this research, positive interactions with staff and peers within the same year or years above and below were found to have a strong protective influence on student success and it is recommended that whilst focused on first year transition, these may be extended to later stages of study. These

could be targeted at specific junctures such as dissertation-writing or work placement where coaches or mentors are made available.

Teaching staff should also seek to maximise less formal opportunities for regular peer to peer support such as study groups and cross-year working. This can be facilitated by utilising group study rooms in the library, or within faculty-based group spaces. Staff can help students navigate booking processes and arrange for students from different academic years to collaborate on tasks. These strategies can promote protective processes of socialisation by helping form friendship groups wherein students themselves can support each other in understanding expectations and developing academic confidence.

Industry networking events can also be incorporated into academic calendars. These can be hosted on site, with different year groups working together to identify sponsors, attendees and speakers, as well as showcasing their own work. To maximise the opportunities for students and make the most of the work involved, events like these should be a regular feature and embedded in the course syllabus (e.g. the work presented or arising from the events should form part of the assessment). Where such events are not feasible or appropriate to the course, other industry/ subject visits or external mentoring should be a regular feature. If possible, these should be timetabled for students and free of charge, to avoid disadvantaging those students with part-time work, family commitments or low-income.

Careful attention should be paid to repertoires of teaching and learning methods and their suitability. Early focus on graduate attributes can support student motivation and help ground discipline-based identities. Problem-based learning activities for example may be useful in encouraging successful group work that create feelings of energy, purpose and flow for all students. Those which encourage competition between students or strictly performance-based comparisons should be implemented with caution. Activities which encourage students to identify and set their own goals in

ways that let them measure their own progress against themselves better enhance feelings of self-efficacy and success.

Staff may be unaware that students from low-income backgrounds and other WP target groups are amongst the least likely to engage in extra-curricular activities that might act as protective processes. This may be for a range of reasons including work, family or financial pressures which affect non-traditional students disproportionately. Awareness of the differential impact of these factors should form part of ongoing staff development.

There are further considerations here to encourage greater parity of access and overcome barriers. Staff may not know which students are low-income or from other WP target groups. However, they can support the academic resilience of these students through creatively incorporating social activities into study schedules and encouraging participation in peer mentoring. Other practical support might include funding (or directing students towards funding) the cost of activities such as field trips, work placement and industry networking opportunities. Signposting students towards well-regulated, part-time employment through the university itself may also mitigate against conflicts between work and academic life.

7.5 Widening participation practitioners

Following on from the recommendations for HE staff are implications for WP practitioners. It should be recognised here that in some cases, individuals take on the dual role of researcher-practitioner. Where this is not the case, WP practice should be led by sound, empirical findings from such research. In the case of this study, it was found that the social relationships both internal and external to the academic sphere are some of the strongest forces moderating resilience and this understanding should be at the heart of good WP practice.

Thus, alongside the aforementioned need for institutional transformation, interventions should also be moving away from deficit or blame models.

Uncritical adoption of resilience-building programmes should be avoided. However, there are opportunities for designing and developing interventions which promote academic resilience within the social, academic and cultural contexts of the student.

Programmes should (formally or informally) help students to recognise and develop their own coping strategies that can help mitigate transition to HE and subsequent normal academic challenges. They should feature empowering practices for students from low-income backgrounds and other WP target groups, demonstrating ways to build networks of support and consider how and when to approach tutors, staff and services for support.

As the findings of this study show, one key way to encourage the protective processes of belonging and academic confidence is through mentor-type programmes. Resources should be devoted to developing and monitoring an innovative range of high-quality peer-to-peer support or coaching programmes within the university, with link schools and community groups as well as within industry. In particular, mentoring younger students or students from similar backgrounds may be most empowering for those HE students from low-income backgrounds as a strategic route to promoting meaning-making from adversity and personal growth.

Key adult contacts outside of the family can increase self-esteem and increase social capital for first-generation, low-income HE students. Thus, WP practitioners can work to establish single points of contact and create established relationships with students from target groups as they move from pre-entry to progression stages of the student journey. These key individuals can also facilitate wider networks of contacts amongst academic staff, involving them closely in WP activity to begin building belonging and discipline-based identities. Work experience days within departments, industry or summer scholarships where students take on roles as colleagues are recommended as ways to strengthen positive outcomes.

Throughout this study, the importance of the students' families, especially parents have become evident. These are often some of the most challenging and as a result, most overlooked sources of support for students. Practitioners can lead in this area to make information accessible to families and to create opportunities to build positive relationships with parents, particularly those with little to no experience of HE. Within the bounds of maintaining confidentiality and dignity for these students there can and should be opportunities for students to engage in progression activities with the involvement of their families, as well as separate resources and guidance for parents that are both accessible and meaningful.

7.6 Widening participation researchers

There are several recommendations for researchers working in WP that have emerged from this study. The usefulness of qualitative study of academic resilience has been presented in this thesis and IPA or a similar methodology could be used to investigate the experience of other target groups at risk of attrition or for whom there is a persistent attainment gap e.g. students from particular ethnic minority backgrounds or mature students. Qualitative approaches may also be highly suited to exploring the lived experience of academic resilience with care leavers, a group with high exposure to adversity for whom progression to and from HE is relatively rare.

With reference to the ecosystem model of academic resilience, a better appreciation of the multidimensional nature of protective processes could inform future research directions. There is evidence from this study that using a strength-based perspective on understanding issues of success and retention can bring to light surprising and novel findings. Decontextualizing individuals from the contours and "concert" of their family, educational experience and communities should be avoided by such research.

Likewise, growing concern with the student lifecycle within the field of WP policy and practice directs research towards not just access and success but also progression from HE to postgraduate study, training and employment. A

longitudinal study of HE student progression could offer insight into the longevity of positive outcomes for academically resilient students from WP backgrounds. Using the ecosystem model, the various dimensions of resilience can be explored over time to illuminate the processes involved in successful progression and social mobility.

7.7 HE students from low-income backgrounds

This study has explored the phenomenon of academic resilience in a small number of low-income students. Although specific to personal context, analysis of these accounts can offer some general recommendations for students from similar backgrounds.

The internal characteristics and strategies of students are key; engaging in critical reflection on past struggles and successes can facilitate overcoming. For example, thinking about what worked at school or college, or what aspects of academic or personal life remain difficult can help students to identify and implement their own coping strategies. Drawing on past experience of resilience may strengthen resolve and future coping.

Due to the social context of academic resilience, developing strong social networks is recommended. This can be difficult in new unfamiliar environments. Engaging in course-related groups, be it for social activities or study support is advisable to foster a sense of belonging and relationships with people who share similar values and interests. Taking part in mentoring programmes run by the institution or links within industry is also likely to help build confidence and feel rewarding. Reaching out for support to HE staff is also important, particularly at times when students are considering withdrawal.

It is also recommended that students consider themselves as force in shaping the future of HEIs. There are many ways of engaging in structural change to improve support for students from low-income backgrounds, from participation in internal surveys or the National Student Survey to assuming

roles as course representatives or as student unions members. Active engagement in governance and being part of the student voice may enable feelings of self-efficacy as well as affecting practical changes to pedagogy and resourcing which facilitate academic resilience.

7.8 Future research into academic resilience

The phenomenon of academic resilience is not currently well-understood but is attracting growing research interest. Extant literature has developed and utilised quantitative measurements of academic resilience, however the usefulness and validity of these is questionable given the complexity and unpredictability of the phenomenon.

This study has presented themes around belonging, peer and teacher relationships and student confidence and identity as crucial protective processes within ecosystems of resilience. The model offered in this study and its larger findings present an opportunity to enhance the validity of quantitative scales and the investigations which utilise them. Such measurement tools have a place in resilience research, alongside mixed methods or qualitative approaches which enhance operationalisation of academic resilience through the lived experience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There is also a need for researchers in this area to work with definitions of resilience that are based in the research evidence and extant theory. There is an increased propensity in the literature for conflation with the associated concepts of academic grit, buoyancy or self-efficacy. Whilst conceptually linked, these constructs lack the dimension of adversity prerequisite for resilience. Thus, the term "academic resilience" should be preserved for those individuals demonstrating positive outcomes despite significant adversities, to avoid diluting the important contribution of resilience research.

Furthermore, there is a call to researchers to review those programmes in use for academic resilience-building, to assess the extent to which they are

based on sound empirical evidence. In other words, practical application of academic resilience precepts must be tested for efficacy across diverse student groups at HE, and findings used to further inform and develop theoretical understandings.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARS-30	Academic Resilience Scale
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BIS	Department for Business, Information and Skills
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
CD-RISC	Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DSG	Development Services Group
GROW@BU	Goal/ Reality/ Option/ Will (programme at Bournemouth University)
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HERE	Higher Education Retention and Engagement project
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LPN	Low Participation (in higher education) Neighbourhood
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
OfS	Office for Students
QoE	Qualifications on Entry
SET	Student Engagement Team
SMPC	Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UK	United Kingdom
UUK	Universities United Kingdom
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

WY-RS   Wagnild-Young Resilience Scale

WP   Widening Participation

Appendix 1:   Participant Information Sheet

Full title of project: The Experience of Academic Resilience in Low-income Students of Higher Education

Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the project?

This part of the study is to try and understand more about the experiences of university students who come from households with income of below £25,000. We are interested in learning about what influences how successful these students are at university, and how this knowledge can be applied to further the success of these students in future.

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part in this study in order to share your experiences of previous education, how you came to apply to university, and what your experience of university has been so far. The aim of the research is to identify factors that relate to academic success in people from lower income backgrounds (defined as household income totalling under £25,000 per year). By learning more about what makes individuals from low-income backgrounds successful as students, we hope to further enhance

opportunities for these students in future. Seven other students have been chosen to take part in interviews.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw up to two weeks after the interview. You do not have to give a reason. Withdrawing from the study or deciding not to participate will have no adverse effect on your education or time at BU.

What do I have to do?/ what will happen to me if I take part?

The interview will be carried out on campus in a location that is convenient to you. The interview will be 1:1 with me (Lizzie Gauntlett), a postgraduate researcher in education. It will be semi-structured and is likely to take 1- 1.5 hours. It is intended as a chance for you to describe your experiences of coming to university and talk about how you are finding your current course of study. The interview will be tape recorded, and later transcribed into text form. Recordings of interviews will be deleted upon transcription. The audio recording will be transcribed by me, and not shared with anyone else. The final research project will be available for you to view online at BU.

As part of the results, some of your own words may be quoted within the text. This will be anonymised, to prevent you from being personally identified.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

In the interview we will discuss your educational experiences past and present, and what you feel has helped you in being successful as a student. This is likely to include talking about your background, friends and family. I would not anticipate that the questions will make you feel distressed. However, should you not wish to answer any particular question(s) however,

you are free to decline. If you feel uncomfortable, you are free to end the interview at any point. If you are affected by any issues raised during the interview, details of further support are given below.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will help inform education practice and help support student success in future.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?/ What will happen to the results of the research project?

All the information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. The results of the research will be included in my PhD thesis, and may also be used for publication purposes in academic journals.

Who is organising/funding the research?

This research is funded by Bournemouth University.

Contacts for further information

Name, position and contact details of researcher: Lizzie Gauntlett, Postgraduate Researcher HSC, R313 Tel: 07792956354, E-mail: i7642194@bournemouth.ac.uk or egauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk

Name, position and contact details of supervisor (the researcher is a student): Bethan Collins (supervisor), Royal London House, R107, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, BH1 3LT, Tel: 01202 961390, E-mail: bcollins@bournemouth.ac.uk

In the event of a complaint, the point of contact is: Vanora Hundley, Deputy Dean - Research And Professional Practice, Royal London House R118, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, BH1 3LT. Tel: 01202 965206, E-mail:vhundley@bournemouth.ac.uk

If you have been affected by any of the topics discussed in the interview, there are a number of sources of support on campus which offer advice and guidance:

1) ask@BU offer a one-stop drop-in style service for students and can advise or direct you towards a full range of support, including financial advice, counselling, disability and additional learning support. They are located on the ground floor of Poole House at Talbot Campus and on the 1st floor of Bournemouth House at Lansdowne. Alternatively, they can be reached on: 01202 969696.

2) The BU Chaplaincy is based at Talbot House, Talbot Campus and offers pastoral support to staff:

Bill Merrington (Chaplain) *Tel:* 01202 965383 or 07894 598915

3) SUBU also offer free, independent and confidential advice on issues such as:

- Housing, finance and debt
- Academic appeals and procedures
- Consumer, legal matters and complaints

Advice centres are based at SUBU centres at both campuses. Alternatively contacted by phone on 01202 965779/8, by text on 07501 622462 or email subuadvice@bournemouth.ac.uk.

You may keep this copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for reading.

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Full title of project: The Experience of Academic Resilience in Low-income Students of Higher Education

Name, position and contact details of researcher: Lizzie Gauntlett, Postgraduate Researcher HSC, R313 Tel: 07792956354, E-mail: i7642194@bournemouth.ac.uk or egauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk

Name, position and contact details of supervisor (if the researcher is a student): Bethan Collins (supervisor), Royal London House, R107, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, BH1 3LT, Tel: 01202 961390, E-mail: bcollins@bournemouth.ac.uk

In the event of a complaint, the point of contact is: Vanora Hundley, Deputy Dean - Research And Professional Practice, Royal London House R118, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, BH1 3LT. Tel: 01202 965206, E-mail:vhundley@bournemouth.ac.uk

I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to two weeks after my interview has taken place, without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question(s), I am free to decline.	
I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	
I agree to take part in the above research project.	

_____   _____

_____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____

_____

Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the participant information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 3:   Interview Guide

(Part 1) Experience of academic resilience and success
Tell me a bit about how you came to be studying at university.

What does 'academic resilience' mean to you?

   Probe: Let participant tell me what they understand concept to be

Tell me about your experiences of academic resilience.

   Probe: Ask them to relate some experiences since starting university or
         prior to this

(Part 2)**Influences on experience of resilience**

What personal qualities help you in your studies?

What forms of support do you get from friends or family?

**Please describe your experiences of teaching and learning at
university.**

   Probe: i.e. Role of tutors/ learning activities/ other students/ support
services used

**What are your experiences of other aspects of the university which
have been important for you?**

(Part 3) **Additional Information**

**Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience of as a
student, or about academic resilience?**

**Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions that you would like
to ask me?**

Appendix 4:   Example of transcript analysis (respondent "Kat")

Emergent themes	Original transcript	Exploratory comments
	R: Lots of people were actually really surprised to see me come back in January. A lot of people on my course thought that I was gone, that that was it for me. My mum told me to go back; I listen	*'lots' of people: feeling that the majority are on the outside or* *lack understanding?* Returning to study- a key event

Appendix 4:   Example of transcript analysis (respondent "Kat")

Emergent themes | **Original transcript** | **Exploratory comments**

Original transcript (lines 927–955):

R: Lots of people were actually really surprised to see me come back in January. A lot of people on my course thought that I was gone, that that was it for me. My mum told me to go back; I listen to my mum and respect her more than anyone. She was married to my dad for how many years, how did she deal with that? She is a wise woman. She told me to wait out that first year, until the end. What's the point giving up halfway through? So I went back I thought, I'm going to do it. That first seminar in January I could see them going 'we never thought you'd come back'. People even like, said it to me…we didn't think…even my programme leader was surprised I was back. My head of department thought I was going…that that was it for me. But I listened to what my mum said and I'm happy I did. I survived my second semester and even enjoyed it, a little bit more even though it was still a bit of a struggle. But when that finished, and the diagnosis was finished and I started my treatment and got the support I needed it was like right, ok. This is nice had a good summer, worked and then I was like…I'm ready for second year! Even my mum had never seen so much motivation in myself- I was like, yeah I'm off, bye! She was like I didn't even need to make you go back; you're doing this yourself, without that kick from mum in the first year; that would have been it for me. She gave me that first step I needed, then I walked the rest of the way, and that's why I came back. Because of my mum I want her to be proud, I want her to see I've stayed and I've done it. That she hadn't had to give up all this stuff for me to be in Uni for nothing…at the same time I like learning. I like the second year units this year more they are more 'me', more…sciencey. I like that… I like that already. And yeah, it's just, I'm really enjoying second year. Normally at this time I've

Emergent themes (line range):
- Defying others' expectations (929–931)
- Determined to persevere (935–936)
- Struggling and survival (939–940)
- Mum as support (946)
- Seeking parental approval (948–949)

Exploratory comments:

'lots' of people: feeling that the majority are on the outside or lack understanding?
Returning to study- a key event
Being doubted by others
Mum believes in me- a key relationship
Image of the strong and wise mother who is revered
Seeing it through and not wanting to waste chance- being determined

What does she think about it herself and who's expectations is she defying here?

Defying others' expectations
Fluency breaks up- reflecting other's disbelief perhaps
Continuing is framed as survival- repetition of term from earlier

Things starting to come together here- what was it like to move from diagnosis to treatment? Positive emotions about overcoming challenges

Self-motivation- has it been internalised?

Metaphor of the infant walking
Sense of pride/ parental approval and standing on own- key values
What is it like to feel this wanting to do well?

Sacrifice can't all be for nothing- it has meaning and is important

Positive expectations, looking forward she has identified what will be enjoyable and the future seems bright

| Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
	956 been like I want to go home. But now I think oh it'll be fine I can 957 wait till Christmas.	No longer homesick This is a positive change- to feel ok on her own away from home
	958 I: Yeah.	
Surprising self	959 R: Yeah never thought I'd have that feeling. That feeling where I 960 wasn't even missing home that much. Like never thought that 961 feeling would ever come.	Repeats 'never have that feeling'- at one point it wasn't conceivable to feel this way
	962 I: This time last year?	
Internal motivation	963 R: Never thought I'd make it to my second year… or have the 964 feeling of me going by myself, without that feeling of someone 965 kicking me up the arse to go.	Sea change in motivation to be at HE- from being pushed by others to pulling self along (external to internal)
	966 I: How did you feel when people were all surprised to see you back 967 then?	Perhaps has misunderstood question as goes on to describe meaning for others?
As acting parent	968 R: Well surprised, but they were happy. Like we had this dig… 969 there was this one woman, a mature student I became close to on 970 it. Met her parents and kids and she wanted me to come back. She 971 was surprised, but happy because then she wasn't on her own. She 972 had me. She trusts me with her kids. Like 'look after Paige for 5 973 minutes' and that. She likes that I'm back; she is surprised but 974 happy because now she has her friend to go through Uni with.	Satisfaction at 'surprising' others- doesn't seem embarrassed but rather proud of overcoming difficulties of past year Being trusted to look after children- KA in the guardian/ carer role once again
	975 I: The rest of the time, hopefully?	Admiration for female role model
	976 R: Yeah. I love her to pieces; she's such a nice woman, young 977 mum. Has a 16 year and a 9 year old two beautiful kids brought up 978 very well…and she's done a good job.	Aspiration being expressed here? Echoes of mother's experience, a reflection of her- love for her
	979		Earlier misunderstanding brings out important person- KA seems to want to explore the meaning of this person

Key to comments
Normal text: descriptive
Italicised text: linguistic
Underlined text: conceptual

285

Appendix 5:

Techniques for grouping emergent themes

(example of participant themes for Isla)
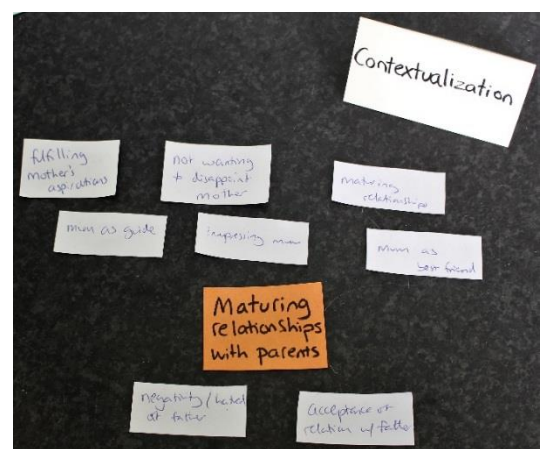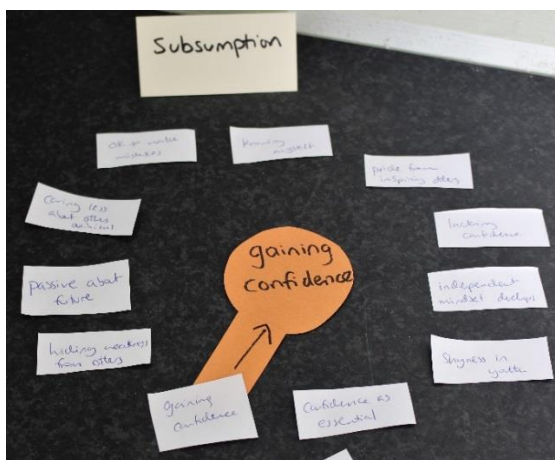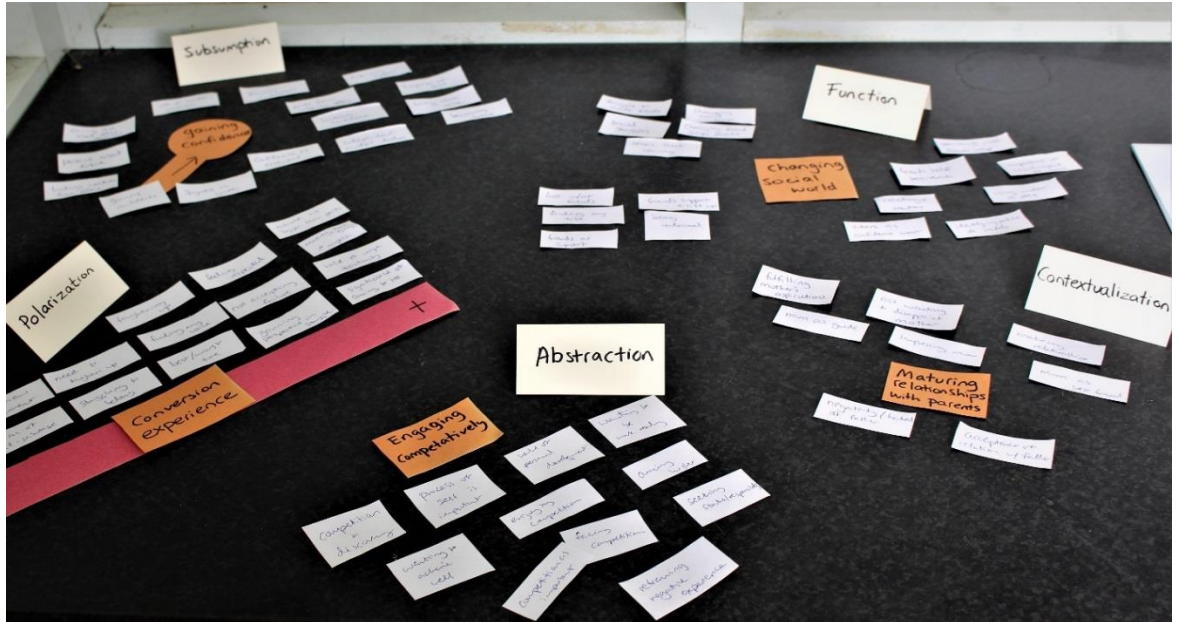
Appendix 6:   **Steps of analysis- Individual Participant to Cross-case analysis**

Step 6: cross-case analysis

Step 4: participant themes

Step 3: emergent themes

Step 2: intial noting

Step 1: transcribing, reading and rereading

audio recording of participant interview

Participant themes

Participant themes

Superordinate themes

Participant themes

Participant themes

Step 5: Moving between cases
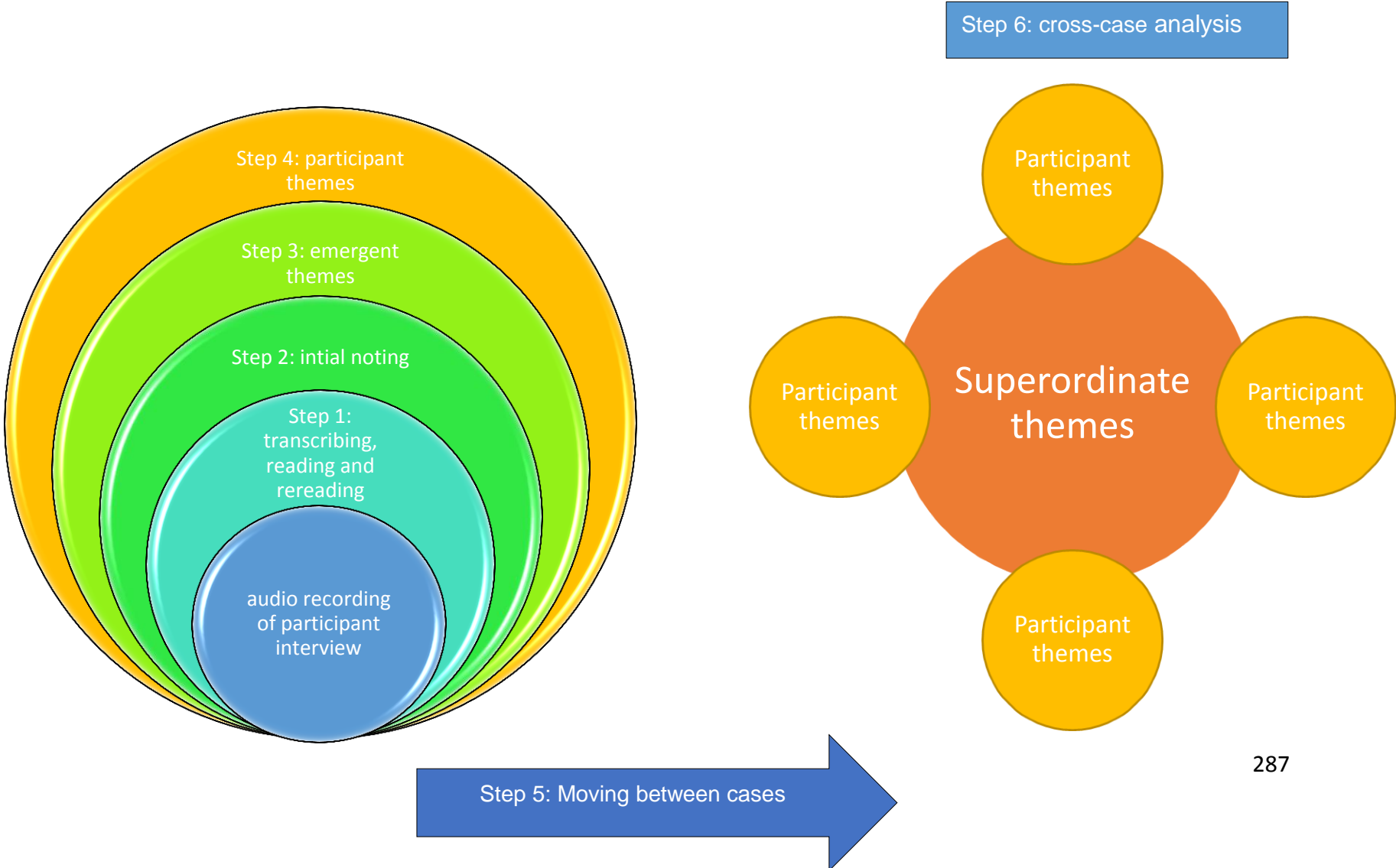
Appendix 7: Flowchart procedure for analysis

order of individual cases

Jess | Damien | Lee | Isla | Gino | Grace | Kat

listen to audio

transcription

Step 1: read/reread

Step 2: intial noting

Step 3: develop emergent themes

Step 4: creating participant themes

Step 5: move on to next cases- repeat steps 1-4

Step 6: Cross-case analysis, -- -> superordinate themes
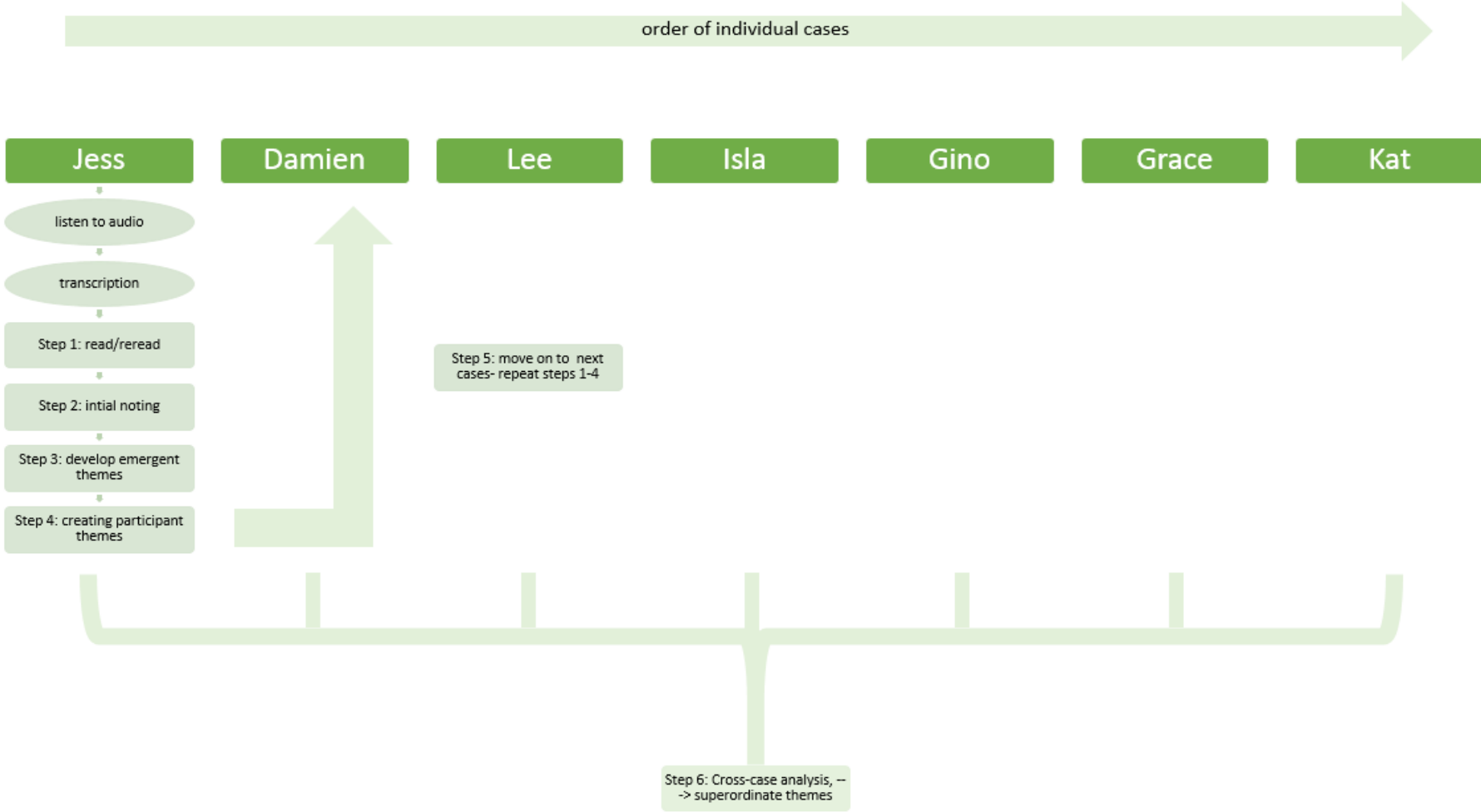
Appendix 8:   Documenting cross-case analysis

Top to bottom:
1) Chart of participant themes for individuals
2) Clustering of themes into superordinate groups
3) Detail of one superordinate theme during development

Appendix 9: Publication list

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Gauntlett, L., Bickle, E., Thomas, G., Collins, B., Heaslip, V. and Eccles, S., 2017. Interpretative phenomenological analysis: a means of exploring aspiration and resilience amongst Widening Participation students. *Widening participation and lifelong learning*,19 (2), 63 - 86.

Gauntlett, L., 2016. Academic Resilience in non-traditional university students: a critical review of the literature. *In:* Crișan, M.-M. and Costea, R. A., eds. *Beliefs and behaviours in education and culture : cultural determinants and education.* Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 22 -31.

Conference presentations

Gauntlett, L., 2017. Understanding the Lived Experience of University Students from Low-income Backgrounds using an Eco-system model of Academic Resilience. 19th April 2018. *In: Succeeding with Non-Traditional Learners in HE.* University of Liverpool.

Gauntlett, L. and Bickle, E., 2016. A novel approach to researching the student experience across the higher education lifecycle: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore "widening participation" students' aspiration and academic resilience. *In: HE: Transforming lives through life-wide learning?* 27- 28 April 2016, Milton Keynes: Open University.

Gauntlett, L., 2015. Academic resilience in non-traditional university students: a critical review of the literature. *In: Beliefs, behaviours in education and culture.* 25 - 27 June 2015, Timisoara, Romania: University of West Timisoara.

Appendix 10: Conference presentation of findings

Presented on 19th April 2018. In: Succeeding with Non-Traditional Learners in HE. University of Liverpool.

Recasting resilience in students from low-income backgrounds- a social ecology model of success

Lizzie Gauntlett, Bournemouth University, egauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Vanessa Heaslip & Dr Maggie Hutchings (Bournemouth University), Dr Bethan Collins (University of Liverpool)

Background
In UK higher education (HE):

- students from low-income backgrounds are major target group for widening participation (WP) activity (OFFA 2017)
- Focus on attrition/ under-achievement eclipses understanding of resilience and success in this group

Aim

- Explore the phenomenon of academic resilience through the lived experience of low-income university students using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
- Consider implications for WP practitioners and university staff

Method

- Semi-structured interviews
- Seven second year students
- Lowest-household households (OFFA threshold <£25,000 p/a)

Explored the lived experience of participants; the 'quiet voices' of resilience (Ungar 2003; 2012).

Accounts were analysed individually and before a creating a cross-case interpretation of the phenomenon (Smith et al 2009).

Findings
Three main themes were developed:

- **Facticity and positive orientation:** past circumstances and on-going challenges as personal growth opportunities: *'because of what's happened to me...everything has given me the confidence to help others'* ('Kat')

- **Self-knowledge and authentic living:** managing own strengths and weaknesses, pursuing own path: *'I think I like that I've like made my own life...there's a world outside of where I live back home'* ('Isla')

- **Confidence and resolve:** being tough, using social support, adopting a professional persona: *'I want to get all the skills and then go out into the world and be like what's next? How do I make it?'* ('Jess')

Discussion & Implications

- Protective processes for these students were deeply embedded within social and familial contexts.

- A new social ecology model is proposed (see figure 1)

Figure 1: Social ecology model of academic resilience

For HE staff, WP researchers and practitioners:

- Deepen understandings of barriers, coping strategies and supportive processes experienced by students

- Support and evaluate peer-to-peer learning/ mentoring

- Critical review of evidence-base of academic resilience-building programmes

- Pedagogy should recognise diverse strengths and assets students from all walks of life bring

- Facilitate self-efficacy and social support, e.g. integrate student services within faculty areas

References

OFFA, 2017. Fair access to higher education in England: key facts and biggest issues. www.offa.org.uk/press/quick-facts/
Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M., 2009. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. SAGE Publications.
Ungar, M., 2003. Qualitative contributions to resilience research. *Qualitative social work*, 2 (1), 85-102.
Ungar, M., 2012. Social ecologies and their contribution to resilience. *The social ecology of resilience*. Springer, 13-31.

Appendix 11: Journal article on methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A means of exploring aspiration and resilience amongst Widening Participation students

Lizzie Gauntlett, Bournemouth University, email: egauntlett@bournemouth.ac.uk

Ed Bickle, Bournemouth University, email: ebickle@bournemouth.ac.uk

Gail Thomas, Bournemouth University, email: gthomas@bournemouth.ac.uk

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Sue Eccles, Bournemouth University, email: seccles@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

As the Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England priorities now extend across widened access to success, both the aspirations of young people from widening participation (WP) backgrounds and their existing or developing resilience as students are of concern to Higher Education institutions. In this paper, these positive psychology concepts of aspiration and resilience are used in two different studies each seeking to move away from the prevalent discourse of deficit. This paper thus offers the joint perspective of two researchers exploring the phenomena of a) aspiration in students from low participation neighbourhoods and b) resilience in students from low-income backgrounds. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is utilised by both to offer a credible, insightful research approach which may enable educators, researchers and policy-makers to appreciate the nature and significance of WP students' experiences in a previously unseen way, thus enabling effective interventions and methods of

support. Through in-depth exploration of the cognitions and emotions of young people from WP backgrounds, the researchers discuss how listening to individual stories can provide rich data that may enhance future support for students. Important methodological challenges and the implications of applying IPA to both studies are debated; including use of language to convey meaning, the role of researcher reflexivity and the difficulties in achieving a truly interpretative account of the phenomenon. Whilst often a challenging methodology, IPA can provide rich, contextualised accounts which contribute to the limited extant qualitative literature on WP student aspiration and resilience.

Keywords

Widening Participation, Qualitative Research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Researcher Experience, Aspiration, Resilience

Introduction

The need to widen participation within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has become a major social policy over the last twenty years. This is likely to remain the case for some time, with the 2016 Higher Education (HE) White Paper (Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice) having reaffirmed the fact that it *'will put providers' performance in achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged students at the heart of the TEF' (DBIS 2016, p.49)*, whilst also requiring HE institutions to have an approved Access and Participation Agreement (or a short statement demonstrating their commitment to widening participation (WP)) should they wish to apply for the Teaching Excellence Framework.

The 2016 White Paper also re-emphasised the lifecycle approach to WP to ensure institutions focus support on WP students to help them achieve their

potential as well as focusing on access (DBIS 2016). This was opposed to earlier definitions of WP that were concerned with focusing solely on admission to HE (HEFCE 2006). This approach has placed a greater emphasis on institutions to establish evidence-based practice in relation to WP and for understanding the lived experiences of WP students across the student lifecycle.

Funding for both PhD studentships outlined in this paper come from Bournemouth University's (BU) Fair Access Agreement (a document agreed by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), that sets out the universities fee limits and access measures it will put in place[3]), underpinning their institutional obligation to develop empirical evidence around maximising access to and success within HE of learners from underrepresented groups.

The studentships are supported by the Fair Access Research team and are designed to enable BU to understand what is helpful and unhelpful in their approach to WP outreach and what promotes the success of under-represented groups while in the university with the aim not only to contribute to the evidence base but also to enhance policy and practice to support access and student success. Both studies aim to do this by enhancing our understanding of the lived experience of WP students, whilst adopting a positive psychology model, as opposed to a deficit-focused one that places the 'blame' for lower levels of HE participation and success on the learner. In this sense, both studies seek to answer the question: By adopting a phenomenological perspective and by listening to individual stories, how can future interventions and support for WP students in accessing and success within HE be enhanced?

The first of these studies is concerned with access to HE. As part of the drive to widen participation, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced in March 2016, that from academic year 2016-17 a new

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[3] See https://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/

national collaborative outreach programme would be rolled out, specifically focusing activity in areas of the country where HE participation is particularly low. This has re-emphasised the need for HEIs to provide effective, targeted outreach programmes to raise the aspirations of young people living in a 'Low Participation Neighbourhood' (LPN), in other words, areas that have lower than average HE progression rates for young people[4] to aspire to HE (as well as under-represented groups such as lower socioeconomic groups and care leavers). This is despite LPN being a measure of relative rather than absolute disadvantage (UUK 2016), with Harrison and McCaig (2015) suggesting that more families defined as disadvantaged actually live outside of LPN's than inside.

The focus on aspiration appears to be based on the belief that aspirations are a key precursor to future attainment and life outcomes (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008) and are highly correlated with background (Harris 2010). This can be set within a wider movement from a policy of expectation, where the onus is on the state to ensure citizens received equal outcomes (Sellar et al. 2011) to the development of an aspirational state, with the aspirational citizen '*eager to take on greater responsibility for themselves and the well-being of their communities*' (Raco 2009, p.436).

However, there is evidence to suggest that the aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds are not as low as implied in policy. Archer *et al.*(2014), for example, found that the aspirations of young people were generally comparable across all social-class backgrounds. Similarly, in their study of young people in disadvantaged settings Kintrea *et al.*(2015) found high levels of aspiration, whilst Turok *et al.* (2009) also challenge the idea that there is a poverty of aspiration amongst young disadvantaged people. This has led to a number of studies suggesting that rather than low aspirations, the real issue is what Appaduarai (2004) describes as the capacity to aspire, in other words, a lack of opportunity and conditions for aspirations to be realised

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[4] A full definition is available at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/defs.

(Baker et al. 2014). It is therefore this capacity to aspire (rather than aspiration per se) that needs to be strengthened.

Although aspiration-raising is a key concept within WP policy and practice, there is a lack of research within the field that seeks to gain a fuller understanding of not only the aspirations of a key WP target group but how these aspirations are shaped by everyday lived experience.

The second of these studies is concerned with the experience of resilience in undergraduate students from low-income backgrounds. In UK HE, research is now needed to understand issues beyond simple access to HE but rather across the whole student 'lifecycle' (Atkins and Ebdon 2014), and there is an established interest in exploring issues of retention and success within particular disadvantaged groups (Reay et al. 2009). Of note are students from lower socioeconomic groups or those with low-income who are at higher risk of underachievement and attrition. OFFA have identified students from low-income backgrounds as both under-represented and disadvantaged within HE (OFFA 2016). Thus, there is a need to better understand experiences of those specifically from households with income below the £25,000 per annum threshold. Additionally, the first year of undergraduate study has the highest rate of attrition, with non-continuation being most notable amongst non-traditional learners (OFFA 2016).

For example, the recent *National Strategy on Access and Student Success* set out the following aims:

> a. Improve student retention, reducing the number of students who withdraw early from higher education;
>
> b. Narrow the gap between the retention rates of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged;
>
> c. Improve outcomes for different student groups by addressing the unexplained differentials in attainment.
>
> (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.12)

Part of the National Strategy also involved developing the knowledge, expertise and good practice that addresses non-continuation and disparities in attainment (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.66). However, the Strategy used language of deficit, concentrating on students' failures to complete and identifying narrow measures of attainment as its core concerns. The risk inherent in this approach is the replication of extant research which tells much about reasons for failure or underachievement, without directly illuminating how individuals overcome barriers and are supported to engage and succeed in the wider sense. Why is it that some students succeed despite multiple challenges? Why do some show great resilience and yet others may struggle or drop out? By applying a positive psychology model to the phenomenon of low-income student success we can approach an understanding of academic resilience, including its relationship to success and achievement.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Since the individuals of most interest to WP researchers and practitioners are those who are often least heard; both researchers were inclined towards qualitative methodologies. Specific research questions looked at individual's experiences and sought to get close to the participant's inner world and required a phenomenological approach. Furthermore, as the concepts of both aspiration and resilience stem from positive psychology, a rationale for choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis(IPA) emerged.

IPA is a qualitative methodology introduced in 1996 by Jonathan Smith in the seminal paper *'Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology'* as an alternative approach to quantitative and established qualitative methodologies used in psychology which prioritised the need for deep interpretation of participant accounts. In its most basic form, IPA is interested

in examining how people make sense of major life experiences (Smith et al. 2009). The method has achieved widespread acceptance within certain fields of psychology such as health research, and has undergone further refinement by Smith, and others (Smith et al. 2009; (Eatough 2012).

Now, use of IPA has expanded into wider areas of psychology including educational research (Joseph and Southcott 2013; Thurston 2014; Rizwan and Williams 2015). Rizwan and Williams, for example, used IPA to examine the experiences of young Pakistani girls in primary schools and found their identities were interwoven between experiences at school and their wider lives; including their home environment and community culture. Using IPA to research educational experiences is thus useful in exploring the interplay of many internal and external processes, situated in the context of individual's experiences.

This is particularly pertinent to understanding more about individual WP students' experiences across the lifecycle, where IPA as an approach is under-utilised. In one piece of WP research (Elmi-Glennan 2013), a group of six mature students were interviewed about their initial decisions to participate in HE and their ongoing student experience using semi-structured interviews with auto-driven photo elicitation (APE). The resulting analysis brought forth understanding of the ways in which relational social processes can act as motivations and barriers to learning. Studies of this design, whilst limited in their scope, demonstrate the advantages IPA can offer in exploring WP students' unseen experiences in greater depth.

By using IPA and by examining the lived world of a group of young people living in LPNs, and by understanding what meanings and perceptions they place on these experiences will help to understand their aspirations and how they are shaped as they progress through their school lives towards adulthood. Obtaining these insights will allow for a deeper account of individual experience to emerge (Willig 2013). It will also move away from

more traditional studies that see aspiration as a measurable variable. This approach acknowledges a shift in the subject matter, with a movement away from a concern as to the nature of aspiration per se to the actual participants and their experiences and understanding (Larkin et al. 2006).

Similarly, a critical review of resilience literature suggests that qualitative research could further enrich our understanding of student success and retention. Given the lack of in-depth research considering the experience of resilience in under-represented groups in UK HE, the aim of the current study is to explore the phenomenon of academic resilience through the lived experience of low-income HE students. Listening to these experiences will provide rich, qualitative data to elucidate complex, situated processes. It will give volume to those 'quiet voices'; those young people who have overcome adversity, have gained entry to and are persisting at HE study. IPA has been chosen in order to gain insights into how particular individuals make sense of their own experience as students. The primary research question for this research is: *'How do university students from low-income backgrounds experience academic resilience?'*

Theoretical underpinnings and rationale for use

As both a philosophical framework and method of analysis, IPA is based on particular aspects of phenomenology and hermeneutics (*see Figure 1*). Its essential features are discussed here, along with the advantages and challenges they present for the two studies.

Figure 1: Essential features of IPA
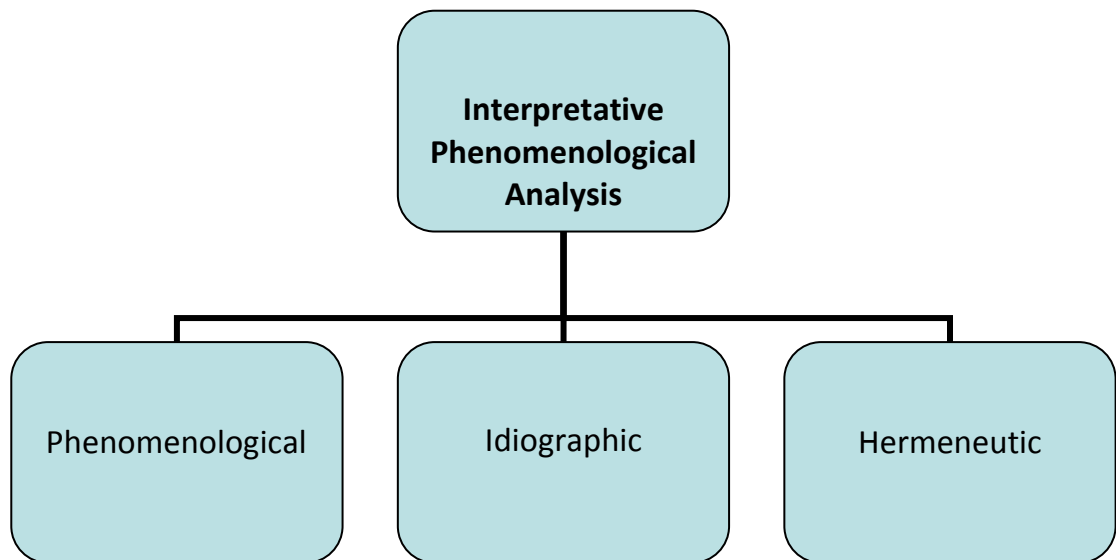
Phenomenological

IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring and capturing the lived experience of a specified phenomenon (Smith 2004). It involves the detailed consideration of participants' 'lifeworlds'; the subjective and direct experience of one's physical surroundings and direct activities (Husserl 1970). This includes participants' experiences of a particular phenomenon, how they have made sense of and given meaning to these experiences (Smith 2004). The goal of IPA research is not to produce an objective record of the event itself, but to explore a personal conception of a particular phenomenon, in line with the original thinking of Husserl (1970).

As in the case of the student success study; a phenomenological methodology allows exploration of students' experiences of adversity and overcoming, focusing on description, relationships and interpretation rather than causality. This signifies a move away from traditional quantitative resilience research which seeks to identify and measure the impact of

variables on quantifiable resilience levels (Ungar 2003), in a way that oversimplifies the experiences of students.

This poses considerable challenges for the IPA researcher; in developing broad objectives (what can a project using this methodology can and cannot achieve?), the data collection strategy and materials (will interview questions be overly directive? Will interviews or focus groups best capture the experience in question?) as well as in analysis and discussion (has interpretative analysis or descriptive analysis been achieved? Does the narrative stray into the territory of causal explanation?).

Idiographic

Much of the way in which young people's aspirations have been portrayed in WP policy can be said to be nomothetic, that is, generalised claims can be made at a group or population level about the aspirations of particular groups of young people. Likewise, with resilience research, risk and protective factors are typically quantified, with psychometric scales used to measure resilience within populations. IPA is however associated with an idiographic approach that whilst not deliberately avoiding making generalisations, seeks a different approach that locates them within the particular (Smith et al. 2009). Idiographic approaches are primarily concerned with the unique experiences of individuals, rather than establishing general rules. Whilst nomothetic studies can only make probabilistic claims about participants, within an idiographic study it is more possible to be able to make more specific claims about participants as analysis is embedded within individuals' accounts (Smith and Eatough 2012). In other words, an IPA study focuses on deeper level reflections of a few as opposed to the general insights of many (Charlick et al. 2015).

An idiographic approach also assumes a viewpoint where the individual is an active interpreter of their subjective world, rather than a passive recipient. This means in this viewpoint there is no objective reality or objective truth (Lyons and Coyle 2007). The advantage of this approach being that it enables the researcher to question what does the experience mean to *this* person and what sense does *this* person make of what is happening to them (Smith et al. 2009). An illustration of this from the student success study comes when comparing students sharing their experiences of difficult times during their first year:

> *Student One: "The constant challenge, the flow of work has kept me going. Some of my course mates are like, 'no I can't deal with it, I just need a break' and I think: 'No, I need it to help me keep going'."*

> *Student Two: "I believe that university is an independent study…if I go into a job I'll never have one on one support, so I need to learn now how to survive on my own. So I'm here, educating myself to be independent."*

In the first quote, the student identifies the pace of work as an external driver; it is challenging but it keeps him going. In contrast, the second quote comes from a student expressing her own values and beliefs about the purpose of the university experience; the transferable skill she believes she is developing serves as an internal motivator. Thus, taking this idiographic approach allows such individual voices and experiences to be heard.

Hermeneutic

'Hermeneutic' within IPA can be defined as a method of interpretation. Whilst exploring the individual's personal experiences of their world is a goal of IPA, access to experiences of others is dependent also on the researcher's own

conceptions. This principle makes IPA distinct from other forms of qualitative enquiry. 'Foreknowledge' is a term used in IPA which refers to the tools we each have that enable us to make sense of our own worlds, as well as the experience of others (Smith et al. 2009). Sense-making necessitates interpretative activity; hence Heidegger's theory of hermeneutics in phenomenology is a touchstone of IPA (Heidegger 1927). To be means to be in the world; individual or dispositional processes are of diminished importance because individuals are inextricably related to others and the world. Thus, reflective processes in IPA take on a new aspect, one that is particularly temporal, social, and situated. Smith *et al.*(2009) describe this as the 'double hermeneutic' wherein the researcher must try to make sense of the experience that the participant has tried to share with them, in a way that makes sense.

The major advantage of an interpretative methodology is it gives explicit recognition to the role of the researcher in the co-construction of phenomenon of concern, in a way that grounded theory, for example, does not. In terms of the student success project, coming to university means that the everyday flow of lived experience acquires a special significance for the individual. It is an important occasion and what Dilthey (1976) would describe as '*an* experience' rather than just experience. The 'student experience' can be understood as a linked series of discrete experiences (application, enrolment, induction, attending classes, independent study, socialising, submitting assignments, using support services, participating in seminars and tutorials) which form a comprehensive unit of experience (Dilthey 1976). Indeed, particular events preceding the university experience may come to be viewed as part of the experience, despite being separated in time.

The advantage of using IPA here is that it allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon in a non-linear fashion. The major significance of the phenomenon means that the person who is subject to the experience are likely to have reflected on the events; considered how they think and feel

about their time as an undergraduate student. Academic resilience as a phenomenon occurs in the space between a person, their environment and outcome, thus an interpretative approach is an advantage. Yet a key challenge here is how the IPA researcher can achieve a faithful interpretation of each participant's account, whilst also asking questions such as 'what assumptions underpin this account?' (Braun and Clarke 2013). These tensions will be explored further as we move on to discuss the approach to data analysis.

Sampling in IPA research

Whilst there is not an agreed sample size within IPA studies, the sample should be small enough to enable an idiographic analysis (Van Parys et al. 2014). In the access to HE study, this involved recruiting five participants from a Year 9 cohort who were all living in areas defined as an LPN. Similarly, in the student success study, a purposive sample of seven second-year undergraduates from low-income backgrounds who offered a specific perspective on the phenomenon of resilience were recruited.

Data collection approaches

Semi-structured individual interviews were used within both studies as the predominant approach to data collection. This is in line with the preferred means by which to gather date within an IPA study, due to the fact that interviews can be suited to in-depth personal discussion where participants are given space to think, speak and be heard (Smith et al. 2009). This allowed a greater personal construct of the participant to take place, given that each participant in an interview will define the situation in a particular way (Cohen and Manion 1991). Within the access to HE study, to explore the dynamic nature of aspiration, as well as the need to build rapport with participants, each participant partakes in four phases of data collection,

starting with an initial focus group, followed by three individual semi-structured interviews.

One of the key challenges of using interviews with an IPA study, however, is the fact that the process of an interview sees the use of 'talk', or language, as the way in which participants communicate their experiences. Willig (2013) suggests that this presupposes that the use of language provides participants with a suitable tool with which to share their experiences. Within the access to HE study, some participants, for example, found it hard to articulate their experiences or opinions within the first individual interview, responding with short answers, leaving long pauses or responding with 'don't know'. In an interview with Sophie[5], for example, she discusses the conflict between being expected to think like an adult when she sees herself as barely a teenager. This suggests possible issues with the expectations on participants that they have thought about and are able to articulate responses to some of the questions asked of them.

> *We're kind of just expected to always like think about what we're going to do when we're older … rather than just like your 14 years old, you're still a child, you don't have to think about all these crazy things. They just expect us to like act like adults even though we're barely teenagers*

It may be important therefore that researchers using IPA recognise that participants may need processes other than 'talk' to be able to describe their experiences. Smith (2004) suggests that when using IPA with children, the approach may need to be adapted to give the researcher a stronger role in guiding participants.To address this issue, in follow up interviews more projective techniques, which can be described as '*a category of exercises that provoke imagination and creativity*' (Mariampolski 2001, p.206)are being deployed. In the second set of interviews, a completion technique is used

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[5] Name changed.

where participants were presented with a number of picture cards which all contained the start of a sentence. Participants select a card of their choice and complete the sentence. This then formed a basis for further discussion. This approach is particularly useful in allowing participants to take greater ownership of the discussions whilst at the same time enabling aspects of their everyday lived experiences to emerge.

It should be acknowledged that if alternative methods are adopted, they should still enable the research questions to be answered, are sensitive to ethical issues and are able to be undertaken within the necessary timescales (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010).

Creating dynamic analysis: advantages and challenges

There is no single, prescribed method for dealing with data in a study using IPA. The approach is better described as focusing on each participant's attempts to make sense of their experiences; a flexible process or cycle that is both iterative and inductive (Smith et al. 2009). Nonetheless, Smith and others offer a rough procedural guide to the novice IPA researcher. Here we briefly outline the guide, alongside its implementation for an excerpt of transcript from the student success study.

Firstly, the transcript material is typically read and re-read to develop a familiarity with the data which places the participant at the centre of analysis. In the case of the student success research, this has involved constructing an overview of the structure of the encounter and narrative. Whilst this initially presents as a kind of life story narrative, as a constructive process it allows the thoughts and feelings of the individual to begin to surface.

Initial notes or exploratory comments are made. Smith *et al.*(2009) advocate keeping an 'open mind'; a free textual analysis involving exploratory questioning should take place. The aim for both researchers in these projects

at this stage has been to achieve a detailed and comprehensive set of notes on the data. This necessitates both a descriptive and phenomenological account, which makes explicit about that which is important to the participant; what they mean or what things are like for them. A worked example can be seen in Table 1, which includes comments on the participant's use of language and context of their concerns. Descriptive notes highlight important objects and events, whilst figures of speech and emotional responses of researcher or interviewee are also noted. Specific linguistic features (pauses, pronouns, metaphors) and conceptual points (such as questions or repetitions) are also considered significant.

Table 1: Data analysis example from student success study

Emergent themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory comments
Sense of identity tied to location Having/ not having opportunity	Participant: Another bonus is that this uni is quite far from where I'm from. So it's meant I get more opportunities and it's just a better area to live in for a while. Interviewer: So there's not so much opportunity where you are from then? P: No, no	Introduces self in relation to place Temporary status of being a student Significance of physical distance from previous environment Short, definite answer given

Socio-economic environment	I: How would you describe it?	Awareness of previous environment- was this always perceived this way by P has it become influenced by the new?
Achieving some more/ different	P: There's lots of people on benefits, drug abuse, people getting stabbed. That kind of thing. So unless you want to be a grafter- plumber, builder that kinda thing y'know, something like that… I just felt I could do something more academic and I actually wanted the opportunity to do something like that. And I'm getting better grades here than I thought I would!	Value judgement being made here about academic vs 'grafting' what does this mean to me as well as a WP researcher?
		What are the P's expectations of herself? Where have these come from?
	I: Tell me what that's like for you.	Sense of achievement and positivity about grades- as a former teacher
Contrasting opportunities	P: Yeah I'm getting a lot of firsts which is great. I like how well I'm doing so yeah…I think compared it's just that complete lack of opportunity to do something in general.	'Complete lack'/ 'in general'- applied to education and work contexts only?
	I: What's changed, what's different for you?	
Motivations of others	P: I like the environment at [university]. You've got people here who are actually interested in what they are doing, they aren't going to college because mum says they have to or because otherwise they have to get a job or go on the dole or whatever. Those people, they just don't care where they are going. There's a lot of teachers or lecturers you know supporting those people and then those who want it don't get that help. So coming down here where people are academically invested- it's a lot better environment.	The environment as determined by its inhabitants and their attitudes?
		What does this P think about the attitudes of other to education?
Influence of staff- student dynamic		Language here implies self and other, distinguishing this student, her behaviour and motivation
	I: How does that make you feel, being around…	What kind of investment? P is perhaps committing to a future, an outcome for herself
Influence of peers	P: I'm not used to it! My first year was a massive shock. In lectures, people are actually interested, no one messing around and fighting and swearing and stuff. It took a while to adjust to, but coming here to [university] has helped me so much. A massive amount.	'Where I'm from', never called 'home'. In contrast, her institution is specified by name- significant?
Adjusting to environment/ influence of environment		Sense of unfairness about the system
		'Massive'- repetition emphasises the change/ differences

One challenge during this process is to consider and record how the analysis is informed by the researcher's own pre-understandings and their new understandings as the analysis move beyond superficial and descriptive. This is the essence of the hermeneutic, dynamic methodology. In the example of the student success study, reflections of this nature are expressed within the initial transcript notes and explored further with the researcher's reflexive journal to assist with later stages of interpretation.

One mark of quality in the data analysis component of an IPA enquiry is the extent to which participant's accounts are considered individually; as they happened within the context of the person's own specific circumstances, attitudes and previous experiences. Thus, the next stage of analysis undertaken by researchers is to transform notes into emerging themes through fragmenting and reorganising the material (*see Table 1*). Many potential initial themes may be rejected, combined or developed through the process of looking for relationships and connections between themes or 'clustering' (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). The outcome of this in-depth process is a final list comprised of a number of superordinate themes and subthemes from within each case, which are later used in cross-case analysis and described in narrative form.

In these later stages of analysis, there is a tension between the commitment of the researcher to a flexible, innovative approach and the process of writing up. How does one produce a creative, dynamic account? Additionally, the subjectivity that is inherent in the process is subject to scrutiny and should be systematic and rigorous in its application (Smith et al. 2009). Issues around quality and validity and their relevance to the two projects under consideration are explored elsewhere in this paper.

Ethical challenges within IPA

Whilst correct ethical practice is of paramount importance within any research study, the nature of phenomenological studies with the desire to enter the 'lifeworld' of participants places an increased emphasis on following correct and sensitive ethical procedures, particularly as the research may have certain effects on participants (such as discomfort and anxiety) (Van Manen 2007). At the heart of this is a duty of care as a researcher to ensure the physical and emotional safety of participants, particularly when, as in both studies, participants may share information that could be emotionally intense

to reveal (Finlay and Evans 2009). Despite both studies having robust processes in place to try and anticipate any ethical issues, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) suggest, ethical issues may arise throughout the research process. During a session within the access to HE study, for example, one participant became extremely emotionally upset after sharing a personal story. A number of pre-planned procedures were then applied. This included an immediate ending of the session, withdrawal of the participant from the study, pastoral support for the young person and de-brief with the relevant staff member within the school.

This serves as a timely reminder to those who seek to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of young people from WP backgrounds. As researchers we should always be aware that many young people may live complex lives and have experienced deeply emotional events in their lives. At times this emotion may spill over into the research process. Despite this warning, researchers should not be put off in using more interpretative approaches to data collection given the new perspectives it may be able to offer.

Issues of quality and validity

Qualitative research is subject to thorough consideration of quality but requires different forms of measurement than quantitative methods. Thus, terminology within this qualitative research moves away from traditional use of positivist criteria such as reliability, validity and generalisability (Finlay 2006). Nonetheless, carrying out an assessment of quality is essential for enquiries using IPA, as all interpretation contains implicit claims to authority (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Smith and colleagues refer to Yardley's criteria for judging the essential qualities of all qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance. Some of these correspond to particular constructs from within quantitative research, as discussed below.

Sensitivity to context within the student success study is addressed through awareness of relevant literature in the fields of resilience research, WP research, policy and practice, as well as relevant texts on methodology. Whilst existing theory and empirical work can influence the interpretation of data, there needs to be evidence that any analysis is faithful and close to the data itself (Yardley 2000). This is explored through sharing examples of quotations and analysis with supervisors, and later in the study through discussion of results and reflexive summaries, which also consider the influence of the researcher on participant's accounts in terms of age, gender and perceived role in the research interaction. This will ensure a level of hermeneutic interpretation imperative for good quality IPA research.

Commitment and rigour are addressed by both researchers through intensive study of the methodological guidance on conducting an IPA study. Attempts to engage in-depth with the phenomena of aspiration and resilience are made through the idiographic nature of both studies, with their purposive, homogenous samples. A rigorous process of reading, analysis and interpretation occurs (as described earlier), in order to delve beyond descriptive accounts into detailed comparisons of individual cases which will elucidate each phenomenon.

The resulting narrative of the results presents the readership with a carefully constructed account of aspiration and the phenomenon of resilience in low-income students, but one that is grounded in details of their own words (Yardley 2000; 2008). The transparency of the method is evidenced in this study through an auditable trail of decisions. For example, the development of the interview guide is responsive to the input of the supervisory team, other WP researchers and the researchers' own reflections.

IPA cautions strongly against member checking and use of inter-judge reliability (Smith et al. 2009), which some may feel undermine the quality of

results it can produce. However, efforts to pursue replicability or inter-judge reliability would overlook the epistemological commitment to producing interpretative accounts of experience consistent with the aims of the methodology. This is because of the inherent subjectivity of IPA; no two individuals coding the same transcripts are likely to precisely replicate one another's analysis. However, sharing coding procedures, themes and participant quotes with the supervisory team provides the researcher with insight and motivation to ensure interpretation is logical and transparent to the reader.

In terms of impact and importance, Yardley (2000) argues that the decisive criteria by which any research should be judged is impact and utility (see Smith (2011) for specific criteria for judging an IPA paper). The findings of both studies will be disseminated in relevant journals and at relevant conferences. Both studies will offer a dual role in terms of impact. Firstly, both studies offer a novel, challenging way of looking at the phenomena of aspiration and resilience that aim to open up new theoretical ways of understanding the lives of WP students. This will provide original contributions to knowledge with WP research. Secondly, the studies will also offer methodological perspectives as to how IPA may be applied to future WP research.

Reflexivity

As IPA accepts that the analytic process is influenced by the interpretative framework of the researcher and its interaction with the accounts of participants (Arroll and Senior 2008), it follows that IPA studies recognise and acknowledge the role of researcher reflexivity. Indeed, unlike other forms of qualitative enquiry, IPA explicitly recognises data analysis as subjective and makes this transparent to the reader, avoiding attempts to 'bracket' or exclude this element.

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Fook and Gardner (2007) see reflexivity as the ability to recognise that all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research. To be reflexive we need to be aware of the many and varied ways in which we might create, or at least influence, the type of knowledge we use. This may involve exploring and developing areas such as power, control and inequalities, gender and age differences and involves critical self-reflection as well as an understanding of how the researchers background, assumptions, values, feelings and so on may impact on the research process (Finlay and Evans 2009).

Within a WP context, reflexivity can be said to be particularly pertinent given that WP research will often involve studying groups who may be vulnerable or under-represented and/or under-researched. By being reflexive the researcher can avoid the danger of misrepresenting the people being studied so as not to construct a subject or topic that reflects their own position as opposed to the actual participants (Langdridge 2007). Because of this, reflexivity should be seen as an ongoing process and can be revisited a number of times within the same study (Willig 2013). This involves, for example, adopting a reflexive attitude in developing the questions for the interviews, acknowledging the possible impact on the research of using semi-structured interviews, as well as being reflexive within the data analysis and write up stages. As Langdridge (2007) argues, to demonstrate that the researcher has taken reflexivity seriously an effort must be made to engage the reader in this process. In doing so, the researcher can also demonstrate how they have remained true to the theoretical underpinnings of IPA.

In the access to HE study the researchers' interpretative framework has been influenced, for example, by a number of years' experience in conducting WP research and their own transition to HE as a first-generation student. By reflecting on previous experience the researcher has sought to minimise (as far as reasonably possible) some of the challenges and difficulties in conducting research within a school environment. This includes the

interpretation by participants that the research constitutes 'school work'(Kellett and Ding 2004) and the need for the researcher to not be treated as a teacher (Hill 2006). All sessions have been conducted in a meeting room rather than a classroom to try and create a distance between participant's normal school setting and the research. Participants were also reminded that the sessions were not a lesson or a test and there were no right or wrong responses. Additionally, no school staff were present in any sessions. Previous experience suggests that the presence of staff can be restrictive and can potentially have an effect on the validity of the research (Greig et al. 2007). This is because of the possible effect on the adult-child power balance as well as the inability of the researcher to ask particular questions (especially around their school lives) for fear of embarrassing participants.

Conclusion

By offering the joint perspectives of two researchers using IPA in WP research, this article has discussed the possibilities and opportunities that IPA offers WP research. As with all phenomenological research, IPA is interested in exploring the world as directly and subjectively experienced by the individual, producing 'insider' meanings of what the lived experience feels like for the participants involved (Finlay 2014). With very little current use of IPA within WP research, this approach signifies a move away from more traditional approaches that may, for example, produce nomothetic claims of young people's aspirations or at times oversimplify the experiences of students.

By adopting a hermeneutic perspective, where there is more emphasis placed on interpretation over description (Langdridge 2007), and given the complexities of the phenomena of aspiration and academic resilience, may enable a deeper level of insight to emerge. Similarly, the idiographic nature of IPA that sees participants as representing a perspective rather than a

population (Smith et al. 2009) may allow more individualised perspectives of aspiration and academic resilience to emerge.

Applying IPA within a WP context is not without challenges. Willig (2013) provides a number of general concerns with IPA. Within the access to HE study, one of the key challenges has been the use of language and the assumption that this allows participants (particularly given their age) to convey their experiences in a manner that will allow for a phenomenological analysis. The article has provided information as to how the researcher has sought to overcome this. Likewise, in researching resilience, moving beyond a purely descriptive narrative of a student's first year experiences has been difficult. Discussing the sheer number of changes which happen in young people's lives during this period is time-consuming. Thus, transcript material is the product of lengthy encounters in which the researcher has probed key experiences and relationships in order to pursue and explore meaning.

Going forward, by examining the lived world of WP students and understanding what meanings and perceptions they place on experiences, should enable researchers to understand these experiences in new, subtle and different ways that can make a difference to the lived world of ourselves and others (Langdridge 2007). As Eatough and Smith (2008) suggest, IPA research can be appropriate in examining transformative experiences that bring about change to participants. This may be particularly pertinent to WP research, where young people may be considering, entering or indeed thriving in the world of HE, a world that may be unfamiliar to themselves and their families but a world that brings about transformative and fundamental changes to their lives.

Therefore, the findings of both studies should be of interest to others who are interested in the lived experiences of WP students and understanding how the individualised nature of these experiences may in turn break down some of the assumptions and stereotypes made about WP students.

Understanding the stories of WP students can help HEIs to understand how they can become more accessible and supportive to non-traditional students, whilst taking into account individual differences, rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' approach.

We also hope that we will encourage fellow researchers to consider the use of phenomenological approaches as part of a mixed-methods approach to WP research.

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Appendix 12: Journal article of literature review

Academic Resilience in Non-traditional University Students: a Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract

'Resilience' is a term that has significant meaning within developmental psychology (Rutter 2006; Windle 2011; Masten 2014). It has also come into recent usage within studies of the students' experience of university (Caruana et al 2011). Undergraduate success is facilitated by academic resilience, which is further enhanced or impeded by risk or protective factors (Allan et al. 2014). This paper sets out to critically review studies of academic resilience in educational contexts with a focus on students who come from non-traditional backgrounds and who are under-represented in United Kingdom universities. In the UK, significant resources are allocated to enhancing the success and retention of groups that fall within the scope of widening participation initiatives. The paper proposes that further qualitative research can enrich our understanding of the protective processes that enhance student success in these groups, through a positive resilience framework.

Introduction

Adverse experiences affect each and every one of us. If sufficiently grave or prolonged they can be associated with negative outcomes across the different domains of our lives; work, relationships, education, our physical and mental health. In this paper the primary concern is the effect of chronic adverse events or disadvantaged circumstances such as poverty and its relationship to success in the academic domain. Such adversity has been associated with low academic achievement (Lacour and Tissington 2011). Yet despite this, the majority of individuals exposed to such circumstances manage function normally and are able to avoid a negative outcome in this area (Herbers et al. 2014; Rutter 2013). The moderating process or trait underlying this phenomenon is known as 'resilience'; and here we are concerned with how it develops and is facilitated in individuals who progress to study at university.

Historical constructs of resilience

'Resilience' is a term that has been used across a range of contexts and applications, often in divergent and contradictory ways. Reid and Botterill (2013) note that the term originates from within the disciplines of mathematics and physics. Synonymous with 'elasticity', it describes the capacity of an object or material to recoil or rebound. The term has since taken hold across different disciplines such as ecology, psychology, medicine, social work and human science.

Outside of the world of formal and natural science, resilience has also captured the attention of social scientists. It has significant meaning within the fields of child development, psychology and, more recently, physiological stress literature (Windle 2011). Early explorations resilience and its associated ideas can be traced back to work on human development by Erik Erikson (Svetina 2014). Erikson asserted that psychosocial crises driven by internal conflicts occur throughout one's lifecycle. A 'crisis' was a critical period of existence associated with uncertainty and threat, but ultimately driving personal development and progression to subsequent life stages. Risk and adversity in Erikson's view were essential factors in successfully managing crisis points in the development of an individual's identity (Svetina 2014).

Whilst Erikson did not speak explicitly about resilience in individuals, his portrayal of the role of crisis in personality development influenced later researchers. Indeed, the concepts of risk and adversity are common to contemporary definitions of resilience. Formative work in this area was conducted by psychologist Norman Garmezy. Rejecting the rigid nature-nurture dichotomy, Garmezy (1974) studied the epidemiology of schizophrenia and identified 'protective factors' which moderated the influence of risk and could predict resilience in children to mental illness. The notions of 'risk' and 'protection' are essential to understanding how resilience is defined and measured in modern studies.

Childhood resilience studies began mid-20th century when it was recognised that certain individuals were able to cope and survive in the face of adverse conditions (Masten and Osofsky 2010). Researchers began to recognise that whilst much was known about maladaptive behaviour, there was little was known about how positive outcome were achieved (Ahern et al. 2008). Ann Masten, a student and later colleague of Garmezy, is considered by many to be one of the most important theorists in the field of resilience science. In describing the 'ordinary magic' of resilience, (Masten 2001) she offers a basic definition of resilience as *'a class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development'.* Masten argues that research in this area aims to understand the processes that account for these good outcomes. Rather than understanding resilience as a magical quality that renders some individuals invulnerable to adverse life events, it considered an 'ordinary' phenomenon brought about by a combination of both internal factors and external processes (Masten 2001). Research thus involves the complex tasks of operationalising variables that constitute risk, identifying salient protective factors and determining what constitutes positive outcomes for individuals.

Contemporary psychosocial approaches

Current conceptions of resilience can be contrasted with Erikson's early work on psychosocial crises in two key respects (Svetina 2014). Firstly, psychosocial resilience research focuses on specific instances of adversity such as traumatic events, which are caused by external factors, rather than the internal conflicts

suggested by Erikson. Examples of this work include the English and Romanian Adoptees Study, who considered the impact of early maternal deprivation on developmental outcomes of young orphans (Rutter 1987). Secondly, the types of adversity which interest resilience researchers are by their nature exceptional or rare and thus attention is paid to non-normative populations (Masten 2011). Research of this nature includes the study of children that are considered 'at-risk' because of a genetic predisposition towards mental illness or those suffering PTSD.

Many factors that researchers agree influence resilience remain outside of one's control; for example the level of exposure to risk factors (Rutter 2006). More attention has since been given to the dispositional qualities of self-esteem and self-efficacy as influential factors capable of enabling resilience. These can be achieved through positive personal relationships, task accomplishment and successful management of 'turning points' (Rutter 2006). As such, research and practice now focus on ways to assess and promote resilience, through the maximisation of protective factors and strategies to facilitate coping internal mechanisms.

Tensions in resilience research

There is controversy as to whether resilience can be described as a fixed personality trait, a process, or an outcome (Ahern et al. 2008). Arguably, resilience is now widely understood as an occurrence that happens in a space between a person, their environment and outcome. As such, resilience may be seen now as *'the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten its stability, viability or development'* (Masten 2014).

Studies of resilience do support the idea of context-dependency as opposed to a fixed trait that individuals innately possess (Rutter 2006). One individual can exhibit resilience in a particular time of adversity but less so in another (Masten 2001; Rutter 2006). Prior exposure to adversity can also act as either a protective or risk factor (Rutter 1987). Importantly, it is not possible to exhibit resilience without the experience and successful management of adversity. As Rutter (1987, 318) explains, *'protection in this case resides, not in the evasion of the risk, but in successful engagement with it'.*

Furthermore, the focus of resilience research has been on at-risk children. Systematic reviews of resilience research have found that far more resilience research has been undertaken with children and adolescents, and less so with older adults (Windle 2011). Evidence suggests that the context of adversities differs according to population (Windle 2011). Therefore questions remain about the extent to which emergent models of resilience can be accurately applied to normative populations, as well as across different domains of functioning (Pangallo et al. 2014).

Background: Widening Participation at Higher Education

The scope of this literature review is shaped by the UK's 'Widening Participation' initiative. Widening participation is a significant aspect of UK government higher education (HE) policy, linked to the former Labour government's target to increase young participation in HE by 2010. It is also a current strategic objective of the Higher Education funding Council for England (HEFCE), the public funding body for English universities. In UK HE, the term 'widening participation' refers to efforts to improve the levels of participation of disadvantaged groups at university. Disadvantaged groups are primarily identified by the UK Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as those facing financial barriers to undergraduate study.

In order to safeguard access to education for groups that are traditionally under-represented at university undergraduate level, OFFA and HEFCE identify specific target groups. Primarily, these are lower income students, defined as those with household incomes below the threshold for eligibility for a partial state maintenance grant. Other under-represented groups include students from lower socioeconomic groups (classified as National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification groups 4-8) and those from neighbourhoods in which relatively few people enter higher education, students from some ethnic groups or sub-groups, students who have been in foster care and those students with disabilities (Atkins and Ebdon 2014).

As well as ensuring parity of access, there is concern about retaining students and ensuring good academic progress within these groups (Reay et al. 2010). Household income and social class act as a significant barrier to post-compulsory educational success. For example, as well as being less likely to go to prestigious universities, working-class young people are also less likely to be awarded a high

degree classification. This attainment gap is significant, with two-thirds of those with professional parents received firsts or upper seconds, but only half of those with unskilled parents (Hills 2010). Those from state school backgrounds are similarly under-represented at elite universities (Hills 2010). As such, a major concern for universities and government bodies alike is that widening access to higher education is not translating into corresponding improvements in retention and success for under-represented groups.

Until relatively recently, research on this group has focused on comparatively worse retention and achievement rates, drawing on a deficit model that identifies certain groups as requiring additional support (Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013; Allan et al. 2014). Crozier et al. (2008) have also suggested that despite interventions that have attempted to broaden access to university, working-class young people are persistently regarded as problematic learners, and potential drop-outs.

However, those working-class young people who are determined to succeed have been shown to demonstrate great resilience and commitment, despite the structural inequalities they face. By applying a positive psychology model to the phenomenon of student success, we can approach an understanding of how resilience processes are enhanced and facilitate academic achievement.

Aim: This paper describes the shift from studying achievement through a risk or vulnerability perspective towards a process model. It reviews some major studies of academic resilience in order to clarify key concepts. It considers both UK and international research on under-represented and non-traditional undergraduates to evaluate evidence of protective factors and identify gaps in the existing literature.

Method: An EBSCO search of a range of databases (including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, HEER and PsycINFO) was conducted for literature using the Boolean phrases ('educational resilien*' or 'academic resilien*') AND (school, or college, or students, or education or university or undergraduate). These search queries were taken from keywords identified in relevant papers. After assessing for relevance, thirty-four peer reviewed journal articles and two monographs were then reviewed in full-text.

Findings: There are multiple and competing definitions of academic resilience. Most of the literature included studies which employed quantitative methodology to identify risk and protective factors and examine interactions between resilience and other trait measures. Several studies focused on examining the experience of resilience in terms of student success for particularly vulnerable groups and the vast majority of studies were conducted with participants from outside of the UK.

Defining academic 'resilience'

Academic resilience forms one domain of an individual's overall functioning. It can be understood as the level of educational success despite challenges that prevent others with similar experiences succeeding (Morales 2008; Cavazos et al. 2010). Prior experiences of traumatic or chronic adversity (low socioeconomic status, disabled student status or ethnic minority status) were all seen as potential prerequisites (e.g. Morales 2008). This is because they act as risk factors academic outcome. They can be barriers to initial access, with links to higher rates of attrition and lower degree attainment.

Alternatively, it has been explored as a concept encompassing traditional undergraduates who achieve within stressful disciplines such as medicine and social work (e.g. Beauvais et al. 2014). The culture and demands of these courses act as the 'adversity' that students must contend with in order to do well in their studies. However, this conceptualisation risks conflating complex, dynamic process with the traits of self-esteem or emotional intelligence. Such studies lack the necessary contextual depth for a holistic understanding of academic resilience. They instead measure resilience through clusters of inter-related personal qualities, using validated scales such as CD-RISC and the WY-RS (e.g. Allan et al. 2014; Beauvais et al. 2014).

The use of psychometrics in academic resilience research can offer insight into specific risk and protective factors but may fail to capture a more holistic picture of student success. Using a qualitative approach to researching academic resilience may be more fruitful in two ways. Firstly, it can avoid the arbitrary selection of variables which may be considered risk or protective factors. Secondly, it could also provide a richer description of the non-traditional student experience. As Ungar

(2003, 85) argues, these resilient individuals are those from whom we may have the most to learn yet may be amongst the 'quietest voices' due to their non-traditional status.

Evidence of protective factors

As we have seen, positive adaption despite adversity is possible. 'Protective factors' or 'protective processes' encompass experience that reduces the negative influence of adversity and can reliably predict resilience in individuals. In the resilience literature these are typically categorised as: 1) dispositional/ individual, 2) familial, or 3) extra-familial/ environmental context characteristics (Masten 2011, Garmezy 1991). In the context of academic resilience, environmental characteristics include bonds to pro social adults outside the family (e.g. teachers, pastors), connections to pro social organisations and attending effective schools.

The main protective factors identified by studies in this review were largely dispositional or familial. Drawing on Garmezy's characteristic triad (see figure 1), individual attributes such as internal locus of control (Morales 2008; Cavazos et al. 2010) and self-efficacy (Cavazos et al. 2010; Eunyoung and Hargrove 2013) consistently emerged as important protective factors related to academic success in under-represented groups. Whilst findings used validated measures across large samples, they often lacked explanatory power about the context and interaction of factors.
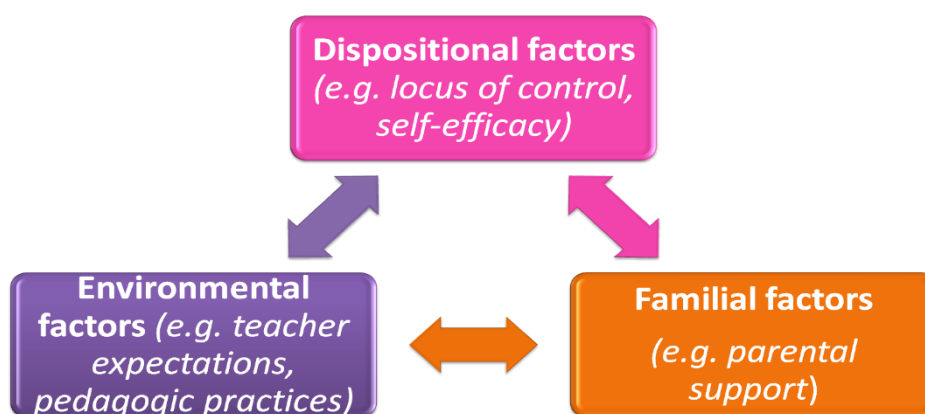

Figure 1: *Triad of Resilience Factors; adapted for academic resilience (amended from Garmezy 1991)*

Several studies included in this review did recognise some familial attributes such as parental engagement and family cohesion as contributing to student success (Morales 2008, Herbers et al. 2011). There is conflicting evidence as to the most influential external factors. In some research family support and role modelling had a significant role, whereas in others a sense of belonging to the educational environment was shown to be of highest importance (Gonzalez and Padilla 1997). This is perhaps a further example of the difficulties involved in isolating individual protective factors as predictors of success.

Overall there was comparatively little exploration of environmental or institutional factors found in the literature. The use of pedagogies and impact of the learning environment were often referenced as potential areas for further investigation (Morales 2008). So whilst analysis of protective factors should take into account dispositional and familial status, it should also consider the institutions and structures that work in conjunction with these factors to enhance academic resilience. The likelihood is that a combination of familial and school or university factors are most effective in supporting academic achievement, particularly during the period of transition from a previous course of study (Gutman and Midgley 1999).

Of the few articles in the review involving UK undergraduates, most involved care-leavers or distance learners (e.g. Mallon 2007); and drew on small samples with less common vulnerabilities such as childhood abuse and teen pregnancy. O'Connor (2002) and Morales (2008) narrative work on ethnic minority students in the USA were among the few studies which sought to connect protective factors to individual perceptions of risk, adversity and opportunity. Whilst they offer insights into the 'chemistry' of resilience processes, they are embedded in their own nation's history of race and immigration and thus speak to a distinct cultural narrative.

Implications for further research

Research into academic resilience has moved towards viewing protective factors as existing both in context and 'in concert' with one another (Morales 2008). This essentially involves a rejection of the historical construct of resilience as a fixed trait equivalent to invulnerability. It also recognises the dynamic interaction of protective factors and processes originally outlined by Garmezy (1991).

Consequently, quantifying resilience purely through psychometric measures may over-simplify the phenomenon of academic resilience and student success. Employing qualitative methodology could enrich our knowledge of protective processes and develop resilience frameworks for intervention efforts relating to the prediction and facilitation of academic success (Ungar 2003). This is because academic resilience in non-traditional students in UK HE is relatively under-researched, leaving a gap for exploratory investigations into the experience of these students.

Furthermore, existing studies of protective factors have focused primarily on dispositional and familial accounts, with our understanding of the interplay of institutional factors remaining new territory. This is particularly true of studies looking at post-compulsory education, as research around the experience of non-traditional students has tended to concentrate on emergent achievement differentials at an earlier stage. A tendency to give more weight to dispositional factors in facilitating academic success ignores the core responsibility of the university; to provide opportunity and challenge for all students at HE. Thus, a focus on academic resilience which includes an exploration of the teaching and learning context might lead to improvements for non-traditional university students at risk of underachievement or withdrawal.

Conclusion

Widening participation involves a long-term process of cultural change. In order to achieve its aims of facilitating access and success to non-traditional students, those involved in university education need to consider and adapt approaches to teaching and learning. This literature review has highlighted the importance of a network of protective factors which may influence the resilience of students and their educational outcomes. Further research is needed to identify which aspects of UK HE learning environments can be enhanced to act as protective mechanisms for students who have faced or continue to face adversity.

Developing insight into how academic resilience develops can allow for the subsequent prediction of resilience itself. It also allows for the possibility of

developing strategies to support those at risk of low academic resilience. Interventions that meet the needs of non-traditional students can focus on increasing resilience in these individuals, to successful educational outcomes at HE, despite prior or ongoing adversity.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Adversity	Negative experiences that cause major disturbances in the lives or development of individuals
Protective Factor	A moderator of risk or adversity which means the individual does better than would be expected under the circumstances
Risk Factor	A factor which increases the likelihood negative outcomes in an individual