

**Navigating the inbetween space:  
how First in Family students transition into  
and through undergraduate study**

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## Abstract

This interpretivist study explores the experiences of First in Family students as they journey through their first and second year of university at a post-1992 institution. It seeks to understand their experiences through the use of verbal and visual methods (photo elicitation and photovoice) which were analysed using thematic analysis techniques. Eight first-year students studying three undergraduate degree courses participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews across their first and second year. During the sessions they were asked to choose printed photographs from a set of cards to discuss and also to select images they had taken themselves to represent their experience of student life. These images and photographs were used as the basis of the discussions.

Although set in the context of the Widening Participation (WP) agenda, the focus is specifically on First in Family students and their unique experience of transitioning through university. Whilst the conceptual framework draws on Bourdieusian concepts of habitus/field and social and cultural capital, this study draws on aspects of sociological and psychological theory to explain the experiences of the participants. It sheds new light on the transition process undergone by this under-researched group of students, utilizing theories of resilience, place attachment and liminality to explain the findings.

Most current research into transition focuses on access to university and the first year. These findings offer an alternative perspective on transition by presenting it as a process which takes place over a longer period. This research adds to our understanding of the transition process by shining a light on previously unexplored turning points, such as the importance of transferring the locus of home (a process I have termed 'homification') and the role this plays in creating a sense of engagement. This study deepens our understanding of how First in Family students exhibit resilience in their successful navigation of this period. This study suggests how universities can use an understanding of transition to more effectively support support the student homification process through the provision of physical and social spaces which nurture and support student transition.

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## Glossary

BME/BAME	Black and Minority Ethnic / Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
FiF	First in Family
FGS	First-generation Status
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
LE	London Economics
LPN	Low Participation Neighbourhood
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
SES	Socio-economic status
SUN	Southern Universities Network
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UKDS	UK Data Service
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
UCU	University and College Union
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening Participation

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I dedicate this project to my daughter Milly who always astounds me with her own resilience.

Finally to my Dad, who taught me more than he ever realised. I know how proud you would be.

*It is a most peculiar sadness, leaving for the first time. It is  
an ending of something you have  
always known.*

*You knew this time approached but never acknowledged  
how big the shift would be.  
For some there is fear, anxiety, sadness*

*But it seems to me that on the whole it is not right to mourn.  
Because in the morning  
- after that first night alone –  
doors open.*

*Windows too.*

*Unfamiliar territory shapes itself into a curious new home. Different  
from the one you left. Real  
nonetheless.*

*Eventually this world you didn't know  
how to enter becomes your life. The only things  
you lacked were the tools to unlock it  
And now  
day by day  
you equip yourself.*

*You learn how to live it  
You love to live it.*

(Extract from Hiraeth, Thornton, K. in Quinlan 2016)



## Chapter 1      Introduction

This chapter outlines the background and context to this study, explaining my choice of topic and how the project developed. This study was informed by my personal perspective partly as a First in Family student to attend university, and also by my current binary role as both PhD student and academic staff member. My own situation means I have personally experienced the process of navigating the higher education system both in the past and currently, and as both a student and a staff member. I am therefore by definition both insider and outsider, and this brings a multiple viewpoint to my work. Alongside this I am the parent of a daughter about to start her undergraduate degree in September 2020 so I add another perspective, that of a parent. The standpoint of 'informed parent' has also given me insight into the information and guidance I can provide, information which I lacked as an undergraduate student and which my participants were not in a position to gain from their parents. My own position as student, teacher, parent and citizen is a reminder of the multiplicity of potentially conflicting perspectives many of us have on higher education which contributes to the complexity of higher education policy and our views on the role of universities in society.

Clearly my embeddedness in the research was a position of potential conflict and bias. As an interpretivist researcher I made no claims to objectivity and it was important to locate myself within the research and reflect on my role as co-creator (Crotty 1998). It was therefore essential to bracket my assumptions and introduce measures to ensure that the research was data-led, that it was the data which informed my research rather than my own preconceptions as student, teacher and parent. Although interpretivist researchers are subjective in their role as co-creators of knowledge, the approach to the data must be objective (Mack 2010) and in this study I acknowledge my own position within it and also the measures I took to increase objectivity and reduce bias (Chapter 3).

This chapter starts by defining the parameters of the research, the choice of First in Family students as the population (1.1.1), Solent University as the locus (1.1.2) and first and second year undergraduates as the defining frame (1.1.3). This section also provides contextual information on the Widening Participation agenda (1.2), the issue of non-completion or attrition (1.3) and the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic (1.4). Finally the research question and supplementary questions are listed (1.5).

## 1.1 Background to the study

This study investigates the experience of First in Family students and the transition process they undergo as they navigate their way through the first and second year of undergraduate study. It is a small-scale interpretivist study which explored the experience of eight students through their first and second year on creative media undergraduate courses at Solent University in the period 2017-2018. The study attempted to capture the student voice through the use of oral and visual methods (as will be explained in Chapter 3).

### 1.1.1 First in Family

First in Family (FiF) students are a particular group designated as under-represented or disadvantaged in the Widening Participation typology, but unlike other groups in this classification they have been largely over-looked in both the literature and policy. First in Family can be problematic both to define and to classify. Definitions vary: in most countries, the definition of First in Family students are those whose parents and grandparents have not gone beyond compulsory education (this is the definition used in this research study). However in the United States – where the term ‘first-generation status’ or FGS is more commonly used – the dependents of those who have some college education such as an Associate’s degree are still classified as FGS. Some definitions exclude students with immediate family members in higher education (such as siblings) whereas others do not (O’Shea 2015). The definition given by the UK Data Service is “those students who attend university to study for a degree, but whose [step] mother or [step] father have not.” (UKDS 2020). There are some problems with this definition – it does not consider grandparents, nor does it specify what ‘attending university to study for a degree’ covers (if parents have started university but dropped out, or who have attended university for a different qualification, are they First in Family or not?) The UKDS focus seems to be on attending university rather than the end result, however this is at odds with the classification suggested by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) who focus on qualification achieved rather than attendance. The UCAS application form includes the following question:

*“Do any of your parents, step-parents or guardians have any higher education qualifications, such as a degree, diploma or certificate of higher education?”*

Yes/No/Don’t know/Prefer not to say”

(UCAS 2020)

Unlike the UK Data Service definition which specifies “attend[ing] university to study for a degree”, this question excludes university attendance and only focuses on outcomes. According to this criteria, the offspring of parents who had achieved the most basic higher education qualification (the HE Certificate) via home or online study would still not be considered First in Family. This overlooks the role of university experience which is equally important when considering the benefits accrued through parental higher education.

Another issue with regards to extrapolating data is that responses to this question are often incomplete with a high proportion of respondents either replying ‘Don’t know’ or ‘Prefer not to say’. This could be the result of lack of knowledge, confusion over the wording (e.g. ‘certificate of higher education’) or a concern over the ramifications of answering. Table 1.1 below gives the data on parental education for 2014-19, as published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). When calculating percentages, HESA excludes the Unknown category; Table 1.2 gives the actual numbers and Table 1.3 shows the real percentages:

Table 1.1 – Percentage of UK domiciled full-time HE undergraduate student enrolments by parental education (academic years 2014/15 to 2018/19)

Country of domicile

All

Country of HE provider

All

First year marker

First year

Level of study

First degree

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Parental education					
Yes	48%	48%	48%	48%	48%
No	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%
Don't know	8%	7%	7%	7%	7%
Unknown					

Table 1.2 – Number of UK domiciled full-time HE undergraduate student enrolments by parental education (academic years 2014/15 to 2018/19)

Country of domicile

All

Country of HE provider

All

First year marker

First year

Level of study

First degree

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Parental education					
Yes	175,230	179,590	184,340	186,345	187,485
No	165,280	171,360	172,860	171,845	172,755
Don't know	27,610	25,920	26,840	27,445	27,350
Unknown	30,980	34,445	33,520	32,335	33,205

Table 1.3 – Levels of parental education (adjusted percentages)

Parental education 2018/19	Number	Percentage
Yes	187,485	44.6%
No	172,755	41%
Don't know	27,350	6.4%
Unknown	33,205	7.9%

With relatively consistent response rates across the period, this gives approximately 15% of respondents who are either unwilling or unable to answer the question. This makes it problematic to assess the national picture for First in Family students.

HESA does not use First in Family as a Widening Participation category so other than the information shown above, it is not possible to extrapolate data on areas such as non-continuation rates or degree classifications. First in Family are often subsumed into other categories such as low socio-economic status (SES) or low-participation neighbourhoods (LPN<sup>1</sup>) however this can be misleading. Evidence shows that First in Family students are more likely to come from lower-income households (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013, Henderson et al. 2019); there is a correlation between First in Family students and Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN<sup>2</sup>). LPN tend to be geographical areas with higher levels of deprivation, populated with a higher proportion of adults in lower-paid jobs and of

<sup>1</sup> LPN are those in Quintile 1 or lowest participation levels on the POLAR scale. POLAR, or the Participation of Local Areas, is the measure developed by HEFCE to identify disadvantaged geographic areas in the UK. POLAR assigns postcodes to quintiles depending on the proportion of 18 year olds who enter higher education, and is seen as the most reliable measure of social status. The country is divided into 5 quintiles with 1 being the lowest (i.e. lowest rate of participation in higher education) and 5 being the highest.

low socio-economic status. Because proportionately fewer adults attend higher education, young people from LPN are more likely to be First in Family and to lack adult role models with experience of higher education. They are also more likely to be subject to the same financial drawbacks as other students from low SES, including the need to work longer hours in part-time paid employment. However not all First in Family students come from Low Participation Neighbourhoods and it is important not to over-generalise (as the mass expansion of higher education in the UK occurred in the 1990s, only students starting university since 2010 will have parents who might have benefited from this initiative). Of the eight participants in this study, the majority came from economically deprived backgrounds and received little financial support (see [Table 3.6](#)) but one student came from a more comfortably off background.

Despite the variance in financial backgrounds, First in Family should still be used as a measure of disadvantage. Research has shown that First in Family students are more likely to be educationally disadvantaged compared to students who have recourse to family members and role models with experience of university life and procedures (Luzecky et al. 2011, Luzecky et al. 2017). They share common challenges and barriers to transition such as lack of understanding of higher education, lack of alignment between their cultural and social capital and that of the university (Reay 2004, Reay et al. 2010) and “lower parental human capital” (Adamecz-Völgyi et al. 2019: 3). The data shows that being First in Family is a barrier to participation and graduation “over and above other sources of disadvantage” (Adamecz-Völgyi et al. 2019: 3) and First in Family students are more likely to drop out of their studies in the first year of university (Ishitani 2006; Henderson et al. 2019). Indeed the disadvantage encountered by First in Family students has led the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) to call for the abolition of first year tuition fees for First in Family students (Day et al. 2019). Furthermore, research points to the positive effect of parental education on children’s schooling outcomes in many ways. Levels of parental higher education has a substantial impact on children’s schooling and university participation (Chevalier 2004; Tramonte and Willms 2009). On the other hand, First in Family status can also be seen as an advantage in terms of upward educational mobility and aspiration and is potentially a key factor in institutional strategies to widen participation through contextualised admission processes. Students in this study indicated that parental aspiration could be both a motivating factor and a pressure.

Parental education has a significant impact on students’ transition into higher education, yet research which focuses specifically on First in Family students is limited (Thomas and Quinn 2007). Much of the research into non-traditional students has focused on class, looking at issues of cultural capital and working-class identity such as the work of Diane Reay who has investigated the

experiences of working class students in higher education with particular focus on habitus (Reay 2001; Reay 2004; Reay 2012; Reay et al. 2001; Reay et al. 2009; Crozier and Reay 2008). Although the body of research into First in Family students has increased in the last decade, it is still often seen as part of a larger social grouping. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that cultural barriers existed at every stage, from the decision to stay in post-compulsory education, through to which institution to attend and course to study, and Reay's work on institutional habitus suggests there is still a disparity in type of institution applied for (Reay et al. 2001; Reay et al. 2009). First in Family students without family members with experience of higher education can have limited access to sources of help and advice and this can frustrate their ambition to study at university because:

“they lack an understanding of the rules – both written and unwritten – that will enable these aspirations to be realised, largely through having no access to the informal advice and support available to those from a background where going to university is taken for granted.”  
(Clarke 2017: 19)

In other words they can lack cultural capital specific to higher education and Ward et al. (2012) believe that this lack of cultural capital leaves them without a clear sense of what they must do to succeed and can be a precursor to lower academic achievement.

If a young person has no-one in the family or social circle who has been to university, they are less likely to go themselves (Clarke 2017). This has been described as a lack of social capital which can be a barrier to success in higher education. Bourdieu described social capital as:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”  
(Bourdieu 1986: 243)

or to use a common parlance ‘it’s not what you know it’s who you know’. First in Family students who do not have family members or friends who have attended higher education will often lack the educational social capital of their more privileged peers. Clearly this is not always the case as First in Family students come from a variety of backgrounds, however there is a higher propensity for First in Family students to come from more disadvantaged areas and therefore lack the cultural and social capital of their more advantaged peers.

“The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected”  
(Bourdieu 1986: 245).

First in Family students have attracted more attention in the last decade and the body of literature has grown since the publication of Thomas and Quinn in 2007. In Australia considerable work has been carried out by O’Shea, Delahunty, Luzecky and other researchers into the experience of First in

Family students from a variety of backgrounds, including mature students and female students (O'Shea 2014; O'Shea 2015; O'Shea et al. 2016; Lizeckyj et al. 2017). In the UK the focus has been more on issues of class and race, however early work by Thomas (2013) has led to an increase in research into First in Family students (Yorke 2016, Hunt et al. 2018), the US (Ward et al. 2012; Mehta et al. 2017) and Germany (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). Much of the research has focused on the barriers encountered by First in Family students and often refers to Bourdieusian frameworks of cultural and social capital which First in Family students are perceived to lack (Thomas 2013; O'Shea 2015). However First in Family is often still combined with social class and is rarely prioritised at a research or policy level. The majority of research in this area is small-scale and qualitative, like this study, and is generalisable from a conceptual perspective (Yorke 2016). It is the premise of this study that this is a group under-represented in UK research who are being marginalised by a system which is quick to recruit them, but slow to understand and support their particular needs.

### 1.1.2 Solent University

I chose to locate my research at my own institution, Solent University. Solent is a post-1992 institution located in the heart of the city of Southampton and with a higher than average proportion of non-traditional entrants: in 2016-17 it was ranked 26<sup>th</sup> out of 107 institutions for percentage of participants from low-participation neighbourhoods and 28<sup>th</sup> for entrants from state school (Solent 2019). In 2018/19 Solent exceeded benchmark figures for entrants from state school and Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) – see Table 1.4. Choosing an institution with a relatively high proportion of WP students made it easier to recruit a sufficient number of participants from related course areas. Moreover this study was not considering issues of institutional habitus which would have been an additional factor with higher status or Russell Group institutions (Reay et al. 2001; Waller et al. 2017).

Table 1.4 – Proportion of full-time undergraduate students from state school and LPN

	2018/19		2017/18	
	<b>Solent</b>	<b>Location adjusted benchmark</b>	<b>Solent</b>	<b>Location adjusted benchmark</b>
State school entrants	96.6%	94%	97.3%	94.4%
LPN entrants	17.1%	14%	14.5%	13.9%

Source: HESA 2019

Solent describes itself as “a proud champion of widening participation” and its commitment to fair access and inclusivity is set out in its Access and Participation Plan: “Widening participation is at the core of what we do and we are proud of our commitment to diversity and inclusivity” (Solent 2019:1). Although First in Family students are not identified as a specific focus for the institution, it does have a high proportion of entrants from this group: “We attract and support a diverse student body and over 70% of our students are First in Family to access higher education” (Solent 2020: 3). In Solent’s *Access and participation plan 2019-20* (Solent 2019), the University focused on the following underrepresented groups: LPN students, students with low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, BME students, care leavers, mature students and disabled students (First in Family students are not a strategic priority even though they are specifically mentioned in the plan) (Solent 2019; Solent 2020). Table 1.4 demonstrates that Solent continues to recruit a high proportion of LPN students and those from state schools, above benchmark figures for both categories. However the *Access and Participation plan 2020/1 to 2024/5* (Solent 2020) identifies inequality gaps in Access for young undergraduate first degree entrants from disadvantaged areas (using both LPN and IMD<sup>3</sup> measures). The proportion of 18-year-old entrants from POLAR4 quintile 1 at Solent (14.1%) was significantly lower than in the population (18.1%) in 2017-18 and the gap had been significant for most years between 2013 and 2018 (Solent 2020). With regard to IMD measures, the gap was significant with a proportion of 8.5% of entrants from IMD Quintile 1 areas compared to 22.5% in the population. This led to strategic priorities centred around closing these gaps (to reduce the IMD quintile 1 gap from 13.5% to 7.5% within five years and to 0% in ten years, and to reduce the gap between POLAR4 Quintile 1 students from 4% to 0% in five years). These objectives are to be met through an Outreach programme aimed at Key Stages 2-5 (Solent 2020). Solent has set specific priorities around outreach to IMD Q1 and Q2 students and POLAR4 Q1 students. Solent also operates as part of the Southern Universities Network to plan collaborative targets and share best practice.

First in Family students are rarely identified as a specific group within institutional strategic priorities, and this is also the case at Solent. As with most institutions, First in Family students are not identified as a discrete group within the University’s Access and Participation Plans but are subsumed within the category of WP or non-traditional entrants (evidence shows there is some overlap between First in Family and LPN students; Henderson et al. 2019). With a high proportion of First in Family students and strategic priorities focused on closing the access and attainment gap for LPN students, Solent was therefore an appropriate choice of higher education provider for this

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<sup>3</sup> Index of Multiple Deprivation, the official measure of relative deprivation for neighbourhoods in England with five quintiles, where Quintile 1 represents the most deprived areas.



research. I also focused on students from creative media courses (Advertising, Film/TV and Photography). It was not within the remit of this research to look at variations in the transition processes of students on different types of courses or from differing institutions. This is an area which has been covered very effectively in the Paired Peers project (Bathmaker et al. 2016) and is an area which warrants further research in relation to First in Family students, however it was outside the remit of this project. I chose to focus on creative media students as there was a common element of creativity in the courses they had chosen and I felt this would provide some element of commonality in the type of students who enrolled on them.

### 1.1.3 Development of the project

From a personal perspective, the idea for this study originated in a focus group with Widening Participation students conducted in 2014 as part of my dissertation for a MA in Education. The group consisted of undergraduate students who came from under-represented backgrounds – students from low participation neighbourhoods and those who were First in Family. The students described feeling isolated and unable to seek advice from parents and friends when they encountered problems at university (Campbell 2014). Some of them had considered dropping out and felt they had no-one to turn to, particularly in their first year as undergraduates. Lara<sup>4</sup> was a first-generation student from a low participation neighbourhood who felt she was “already set up to fail” because of her background (Campbell 2014: 15). She had dropped out of university once previously feeling that she ‘didn’t belong’ and described continuing feelings of alienation throughout her second year; no-one amongst her family or friends had considered university and she received very little help or support. It was only in Lara’s third year that she started to feel settled and supported by her friendship networks – she ultimately graduated with a 2:1 and now runs her own successful business (Campbell 2014). Lara’s words struck a chord with me partly on a personal level as a fellow first-generation student, but also as a lecturer with a pastoral role and a concern for my students. What propelled me into this doctoral study was my concern over how many other students had similar feelings to Lara, found themselves ill-equipped to manage their transition to higher education but had not been able to access support. I felt that First in Family students like Lara warranted further research to understand their experience during the period of transition into and through their undergraduate courses with a view to identifying their needs and being able to provide more effective and focused support.

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<sup>4</sup> Not her real name

As stated, First in Family students are not widely recognised in the literature and, as with much of the research on WP students, that which does exist focuses on how they access higher education and their experiences in the first term or semester<sup>5</sup>. Tinto (1993) and others have pointed out that first year students are at greatest risk of attrition however there is much less research into attrition amongst continuing years (Willcoxson et al. 2011) yet attrition continues throughout the second year, albeit at a lower rate. My experience as a researcher and lecturer led me to believe that the transition through first and second year is crucial and this is a period of considerable change in the social, emotional and psychological lives of the student. I set out to understand more about this journey of transition, to explore the key elements in the process and identify the factors which enable some First in Family students to successfully navigate their transition. The ultimate aim of this project is to understand how First in Family students transition with a view to being better able to advise universities on how to support them through the process. This research project therefore focuses on First in Family undergraduate students and follows their journey from their initial weeks in university through to the end of their second year, looking at how they experience this period of change and transformation.

For most young undergraduate students, going to university is the first time they leave home and can be a time of intense homesickness which can lead to depression, anxiety and withdrawal behaviour as evidenced by research conducted into American university students (Thurber and Walton 2012). It is perhaps not surprising that attrition or dropout rates are proportionately higher in the first year (Willcoxson et al. 2011; HESA 2018) when students are transitioning in many areas: students who survive to the end of the second year are less likely to drop out of their studies. Definitions of 'retention' vary, as evidenced by an international comparison of student retention in higher education commissioned by the National Audit Office (van Stolk et al. 2007). The study investigated retention in Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United States and found that at that time there were no agreed definitions or calculations of retention and completion rates; in Ireland and the US there was no systematic recording of retention data at all. In the Netherlands 'retention' refers to students who remain in HE after the first two years of study, whereas Australia defines attrition as those students who drop out after the first year of HE. In the UK, HESA defines non-continuation as the number of students who drop out within their first year of higher education (excluding the first 50 days of their course) or second year for part-time students (HESA 2020c). The Netherlands definition reflects the fact that some students do drop out during their second year of undergraduate study. The focus on first year in Australia and the UK is linked to the emphasis in the

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<sup>5</sup> this focus on the first term is reflected in policy: the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) sets the point of 50 days after commencement in order to track 'non-continuation rates'.

research on transition *into* higher education (Thomas 2013; Gale and Parker 2014a) as opposed to transition *through* higher education. For this study I wanted to investigate how students navigate their way through university, what turning points they encounter, and what process of transition they undergo, and therefore my focus was on students in Years 1 and 2 of undergraduate study.

Although originally focusing on barriers to transition, I altered my deficit view (Thomas and Quinn 2007) and adopted a more objective, less value-driven attitude as the research progressed. Morales and Trotman (2004) point out that the majority of the literature focuses on student failure (Garmezy 1991; Reay et al. 2001) which has led to a number of authors calling for a shift in focus away from the academic failure of students from under-represented backgrounds and towards a focus on success (Garmezy 1991; Werner and Smith 1992). Looking at students who succeed can help others at-risk; in this study, investigating the experiences of students who successfully negotiate the transition period of first and second year could help us to understand and support those who may find it more challenging. A focus on success despite the presence of factors which can often lead to failure can help us to provide more valuable and meaningful support strategies. There is also the perspective of the students themselves who do not always appreciate the labels bestowed on them. A participant in a research project focusing on students from disadvantaged backgrounds pointed out “every word you lot use starts with ‘dis’. She meant terms such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘disaffected’ and ‘disengaged’” (McManus 2006: 74). I did not want my research to be rooted in a ‘dis’ perspective, but to reflect the reality of the experience of my participants, both positive and negative. I realigned my orientation and started to view background in terms of ‘luggage’ rather than hurdles – it may come in different forms but one form is not necessarily more effective than another. This led me to adopt a more student-centred approach and utilise research methods which would background my assumptions and foreground the student voice. This was partly a means of increasing the reflexivity of my work – as a First in Family university student myself, it was important that I found ways to minimize the effect of my own previous experience and attitudes and ensure that my findings were rooted in the data I collected, not skewed by my own assumptions. In putting the microphone and the camera in the hands of my participants and adopting an inductive approach (see Chapter 3), I discovered findings which I had not anticipated at the outset: students saw being First in Family as a strength as well as a weakness, giving them a drive and a motivation which they might not have otherwise possessed, and their experiences in overcoming barriers to access higher education increased their resilience. This study therefore became an exploration of how First in Family undergraduate students construct their own transition from arrival through first and second year and how they told their own stories.

## **1.2 Context – the Widening Participation agenda**

First in Family students form part of the group designated ‘under-represented’ in higher education and therefore form part of the broader social groupings supported by the Widening Participation (WP) agenda. This section will outline the background and history of WP legislation and policy and the implications for research into First in Family students. The WP agenda is rooted in the concept that the education system has been instrumental in the perpetuation of social inequality throughout the world. Although ‘Widening Participation’ is a term coined in the UK, equity in education is a worldwide issue as reflected in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, which recognise the need for “inclusive and equitable quality education for all” (United Nations 2020). In the UK our focus has been on class-based and race inequalities (for example White Working Class Boys and BAME students are both prioritised by the WP agenda) whereas other countries have slightly different perspectives, for example in the United States there is more of a focus on racial inequalities whereas in France the over-riding concern is disparity within a hierarchical and complex higher education system with the highly privileged and wealthy ‘grandes écoles’ at the top. From a philosophical and conceptual perspective, theorists over the decades have been highlighting the power of education on the one hand to ensure the perpetuation of class privilege from generation to generation, but also the potential to be a springboard to social mobility. Writers such as Paulo Freire in Brazil and Pierre Bourdieu in France have challenged the social inequalities sustained by the education system (Freire 1996; Bourdieu 1973, 2003). Joe Kincheloe takes issue with the reductionist, top-down education system in the United States and the “myth of a level playing field” (Kincheloe 2012: 35) while Diane Reay has consistently highlighted the reality of working-class students in schools and universities (Reay 2001, Reay et al. 2010).

The debate around widening participation and social justice must be set within the context of the ongoing discussion about the role of the university in the twenty-first century. Historian and critic Stefan Collini points to the modern-day preoccupation with the triumvirate of funding, impact and access which dominate political and media discourse but which are in fact “clumsy articulations of aspects of social attitudes to which politicians find it expedient to appeal” (Collini 2012: 17). Collini points to the fundamental changes in the higher education system of 50 years ago compared to that of today, including the shift in conceptualization from ‘public good’ to ‘private good’ and the movement in the stance of Government from partner to adversary concomitant with the reduction of public subsidization and the increase of student fees and diverse funding streams (Collini 2012). His argument with the focus on funding, impact and access is the way in which the value of

universities has been reduced to the utilitarian factor of economic growth and they are justified purely in economic terms. The policy debate over UK higher education is preoccupied with economy to a greater degree than seen in other western countries and the numerous funding reforms outlined in Section 1.2.3 have been justified in terms of the need to increase productivity and/or accountability (Palumbo 2012). Collini fears that the increased focus on accountability and the plethora of government-imposed regulation on funding, governance and assessment has led to universities becoming more like commercial enterprises than centres of learning and that their social role of knowledge generation and dissemination is being increasingly overlooked (Collini 2017). Collini's critics argue that his polemic is an elitist pleading for dispensation for accountability and that in rejecting the focus on economic measures he offers no alternative solution (Palumbo 2012; Alexander 2012).

However he is not alone in calling for a political will to counter the "tendentious dogmatism of market individualism" (Collini 2011: 45; Docherty 2011) and to make the case for higher education as a public provision of benefits that are not limited to financial prosperity. In a report produced in 2020 by the Higher Education Policy Institute, they call for fundamental changes to funding in the sector to "fulfil the vision of higher education as a force for social good" (Day et al. 2020: 5), a vision closely aligned to that of Collini. The HEPI report also positions the HE sector as a potential source of healing, helping the nation to grapple with the deep social divides caused by Brexit. This is a far cry from the vision of higher education as a commercialized sector with the aim of providing increased salaries for the fortunate beneficiaries. This poses the question at the heart of government policy regarding the role of universities in contemporary society. There is no doubt about the multiplicity of perspectives on higher education, from students, parents, society, government, academics and HE management. For students it can be perceived as the means to a more secure and profitable career whilst, for those from middle-class backgrounds, also an enjoyable rite of passage (Bathmaker et al. 2016). For parents it is a way of investing in their children's future while for society it is the means of improving national economic prosperity and enabling social mobility. Think-tanks such as HEPI also envisage a more deep-rooted social role for higher education, as an enabler of social unity. Many academics espouse the view of HE as an intellectual pursuit in its own right, as advocated by Collini, while for HE managers the institution can represent a commercial entity to be run at a profit. For the government the higher education sector is a cost and a benefit, and government's relationship with the sector is turbulent and fractured. Politically higher education can be seen as the manifestation of a push for social justice, while much of the research explored in chapter 2 shows that this is often far from the reality.

The question of ‘value’ is an important one to students and their families, particularly those from under-represented groups where higher education is not perceived as a natural rite of passage. As the costs to the individual of a degree education rise, resulting in debts of up to £60,000 for a student on a three-year degree according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Britton et al. 2020), so the question of value becomes ever more paramount. The common discourse around the advantage of higher education is usually couched in economic terms – i.e. the increase in net lifetime earnings after taxes, student loans and loss of earnings are taken into account. In February 2020 a report commissioned by the Department for Education and the IFS calculated the degree premium to be £130,000 for men and £100,000 for women (Britton et al. 2020). This single-minded focus on economic return takes no account of intellectual enrichment, increased health, happiness and job satisfaction, cultural capital, etc. Collini makes the point that the case for universities cannot be purely economic and that higher education should be a “public good” not just a private benefit (Collini 2012). Indeed the IFS report claims that one in five students would have been better off if they had not gone to university, with negative financial returns cited for those studying the creative arts (this can be a problem for students such as the participants in this project who want to study for creative degrees. The participants in this study referred to negative family reactions to spending time and money studying for a degree with ‘no proper job’ at the end of it). This begs the question of the future of creative arts degrees and the sector itself<sup>6</sup> if the value of higher education is only couched in terms of individual financial reward.

The IFS report contains a headline finding showing that the discounted difference in lifetime earnings between graduates and non-graduates takes account of “differences in characteristics between those who do and do not attend HE” (Britton et al. 2020: 7). These ‘differences in characteristics’ are not specified, but the assumption underlying this statement points to the weaknesses of the broad brush approach inherent in HE policy which ignores the granularity of the individual student experience. This research goes some way to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of a group of students who do attend HE, but who come from a background where this is not the norm, in order to highlight and understand the factors which contribute to their individual experience. The question of student access and student experience is part of a much wider debate about the role and function of universities, a debate which will be reinvigorated in a post-Covid world of online teaching and social distancing.

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<sup>6</sup> There has been discontent for some time about the underfunding of the UK arts sector. At the present moment post-Covid19, the sector is on the point of collapse with no sign of theatres and live performance being allowed to recommence and comparatively little funding compared to other EU nations.

### 1.2.1 Digital commoditization v. third spaces

The conversation around the marketisation and consumerization of higher education has rumbled on for decades with vociferous arguments on both sides of the debate, such as David Noble's diatribe on the increasing commoditization of higher education in 1998. Noble railed against what he saw as the "regressive trend" towards automation in higher education (i.e. the move towards online provision), a process which he considers coercive as it was engineered by university administration and forced on teachers and students. Writing in 1998, Noble argued that recent events in two North American institutions heralded the dawn of a new and regressive era in American higher education, that of commercialization. Noble's arguments are somewhat reductive inasmuch as the technological transformation enabled by the digital revolution is seen as 'bad' as opposed to traditional face-to-face methods which are 'good' (in contrast to the alternative conceptualization of the transformative potential for *third spaces* such as that proposed by Potter and McDougall 2017). Similarly, the binary discourse of classroom and boardroom is portrayed as combative – good v. bad, integrity v. dishonesty, knowledge v. commercial interests. He appears to see no positive benefits inherent in technological advances but instead is mistrustful and suspicious: "technology is but a vehicle and a disarming disguise" (*ibid*).

At the time that Noble was writing, the UK had just elected the New Labour government and the UKHE market was about to witness the "deluge" of education policies that would follow (Walford 2005: 4). Unlike the US public universities which are largely decentralized and administered by individual states, UK HEIs are centrally controlled by a government regulatory body (since 2018 the Office for Students – OfS, previously the Higher Education Funding Council for England – HEFCE). Instances such as that cited by Noble whereby consortia of private sector companies, often directed by senior university management, are invited to make substantial contributions to online course development in return for direct sponsorship opportunities are rare in the UK. However, the trend towards the commercialisation of UKHE cannot be denied. The introduction of tuition fees which turned students into 'consumers' has led inexorably to a commoditisation of education and a focus on ROI.

Noble points to the change in perception of the function of universities from sites of intellectual activity to repositories of intellectual capital and hence intellectual property (Noble 1998). His arguments pre-empt the question posed by Collini in 2012, "What are universities for?" and both writers argue that we are witnessing a nefarious shift from centres of learning with public good at their heart to commercial enterprises concerned with individual profit and marketisation. Noble

views automation (or the move towards online education) as the second stage of the transformation of higher education, namely the “commoditization of instruction” (Noble 1998) whereby teaching itself is transformed into proprietary products with contested ownership and labour market implications.

Noble’s arguments have particular resonance at this current moment. The impact of Covid-19 has led to severe restrictions on face-to-face teaching and a requirement for much if not all learning and teaching in universities to be provided online. According to Noble, in 1998 most students were resistant to online teaching as evidenced by their rejection of online tuition proposals: “students want the genuine face-to-face education they paid for, not a cyber-counterfeit” (Noble 1998). In 2020 we are far more accustomed to operating in a digital world and lecture capture software such as Panopto is commonly and widely used. However students still reject the replacement of face-to-face tuition with purely online teaching, no matter how advanced the technology, as demonstrated by the recent petition to parliament to reimburse student tuition fees for online study (which received over 350,000 signatures but was rejected in June 2020; Petitions UKGP 2020a) and a new petition calling on universities to partially refund tuition fees for 2020/21 because “the quality of online lectures is not equal to face-to-face lectures” (Petitions UKGP 2020b). At the time of writing this petition has received over 220,000 signatures.

Noble points to the implications for students who are forced to become consumers of hardware, software and content as a condition of getting their education whether or not they can afford to pay (Noble 1998) and asks the question “Can all students equally afford this capital-intensive education?” This is a concern highlighted in a recent report by the Sutton Trust into the impact of Covid-19 on social mobility, in which the author considers the move to online teaching and assessment and points to the potential disadvantage faced by students who may not have access to suitable resources (e.g. an adequate computer, sufficient internet connection or suitable space to work in). The report concludes that although more information is needed, it is likely that these issues will have the most detrimental impact on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Montacute 2020).

An alternative view of the digital learning environment is that proposed by Potter and McDougall (2017) who conceptualise the digital world as a *third space* which provides the opportunity for a more inclusive form of pedagogy. In the current environment where universities have been forced to convert much of their traditional face-to-face teaching to online, the potential for a “technology-enhanced, fluid digital *third space* context in which people’s voice can be heard and knowledge can



be co-constructed” (Potter and McDougall 2017: 4) provides an alternative discourse to Noble’s views (1998). Potter and McDougall acknowledge their vision for a positive, enabling *third space* is still at odds with the conservative epistemology common in most traditional learning environments which is characterized by a resistance to digital integration, however they envisage the digital environment as an important component in increasing equity and social justice in pedagogical practice. For example, they cite research conducted by Gutierrez who set out use the concept of a third space in order to develop a more culturally sensitive literacy pedagogy (Gutierrez 2008 in Potter and McDougall 2017). She used the third space as way to consider the setting of student and how their personal, social and contextual situations could be incorporated into a more emancipatory educational experience. Her research into migrant students at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) demonstrated that learning in the third space can counter traditional binaries of home and school and take into account contextual factors. Unlike the view put forward by Mills, researchers such as Potter and McDougall show how digital spaces can be used as a new and inclusive way of learning which puts the cultural and social environment of the students at the heart, rather than trying to transpose traditional transmissive teaching practices into an online format. This has important repercussions in the current educational environment where Covid-19 restrictions have forced universities to translate much of their traditional face-to-face teaching into an online provision, and in particular for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These opposing arguments reveal to what extent the arena of online education is contested. The recent petitions by 2020 university students reflects their view of themselves as consumers buying a substandard service (i.e. online provision) and this is in line with Noble’s arguments. Potter and McDougall (2017) put forward a very different argument where digital spaces are seen not as reductive, but as an opportunity to combat some of the traditional exclusive practices which could marginalize groups such as those from First in Family backgrounds and a way to transform the online classroom into a more inclusive and emancipatory space. The implications of a move to online education with respect to support structures, engagement and transition are of particular relevance to this study. How can universities foster engagement and support students in their transition process through a purely online environment? This is a challenge facing all institutions at the current time and there are no simple solutions. All students attending university in 2020-21 are encountering unimagined experiences and charting new territories. It remains to be seen whether the impact will be greater on those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack the economic resources and educational capital enjoyed by their more advantaged peers.

Exploring the place of higher education in today's world is particularly important in understanding the experience of students from backgrounds where higher education is not the norm. When university education is not a given, young people and their families may be more likely to question the value of a university degree and to be anxious about debt levels, rather than perceiving it as a 'rite of passage'. If policy discourses are couched purely in fiscal terms then students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their parents are more likely to see university as a financial decision requiring an established ROI, a view which negates many of the benefits postulated by Collini, Docherty and the like. The Covid-19 pandemic and the changes it will bring to the face of higher education are likely to increase these anxieties as students start to question the tuition fees they are paying for a fully or partly online education.

### 1.2.2 Legislation

In order to understand the current state of higher education it is important to track the legislation and policy initiatives which have shaped the current system. The inception of the WP agenda was the Dearing Report in 1997 which shone the light on much of the social inequality in higher education (NCIHE 1997). The new Labour government committed to redressing the inequity prevalent in the UK education system and in 1999 Prime Minister Tony Blair committed to a target of 50% of young adults going into higher education by 2010 (Guardian 1999). The *Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998* (UKPGA 2018) enabled universities to charge means-tested tuition fees of up to £1000 (although tuition was still free for students from lower-income families). This was followed by the White Paper *The future of higher education* (DfES 2003) setting out the government's commitment to improve social justice by providing access to higher education:

"Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background."  
(DfES 2003: 67)

The White Paper set out a number of financial incentives for students from lower income families (such as grants) and introduced the requirement for higher education institutions to produce annual Access agreements which set out how they proposed to improve access and support progression for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. In 2004 the *Higher Education Act 2004* created the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to promote and protect fair access to higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, including the remit to approve Access agreements in return for permission to charge higher fees.

Successive governments continued to reiterate their commitment to fair access but numerous changes in policy and practice took place in the intervening years. Under the Coalition government of 2010-15 the focus was on Widening Participation and Fair Access. The 2011 Browne Review of funding and student finance recommended the removal of the cap on higher education tuition fees and the provision of extra support for students from lower income families (BIS 2010). This led to the 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011) which created a new framework for Widening Participation and Fair Access and introduced the National Scholarship Programme which supported students from low-income backgrounds with financial bursaries (the scheme ran from 2012-2015). However despite these policy implementations, data showed that the social divide continued in higher education and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were still less likely to participate in higher education (HESA 2019a). In 2014 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and OFFA published a shared document, the *National strategy for access and student success in higher education* (BIS 2014). The vision for this strategy was “that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed” (BIS 2014: 8).

Despite legal and policy initiatives in the intervening years, the equal opportunities proposed by Blair in 1999 were still not being achieved. HEFCE and OFFA stressed the importance of a focus on the whole ‘student lifecycle’ rather than just the point of access, stating that a central theme of their strategy was

“supporting students not only as they access higher education, but also on their journey through and beyond it using evidenced approaches to retention and student success”  
(BIS 2014: 45)

This was important as it recognised that much of the previous activity and policy directives had been aimed at recruitment which left students unsupported through the rest of their education. This issue had been previously highlighted in the research:

“non-traditional students must be supported all the way through to completion, rather than concentrating resources only at the point of entry”  
(Archer et al. 2003: 198)

Research conducted by HEFCE showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to successfully complete their studies (see Section 1.2.4). The neoliberalist focus on individual responsibility meant that the Widening Participation agenda was potentially increasing rather than reducing social equity. By encouraging and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to higher education, failing to provide adequate support to help them succeed, then explaining their lack of success in terms of individual inability, policymakers and institutions were in effect setting them up to fail then blaming them for their failure. In voicing the need to support WP

students throughout the student lifecycle, the *National Strategy* was recognising the wider social issues which contributed to the continued attainment gap.

The Conservative governments of 2015 onwards continued their predecessors' commitment to social mobility and saw Widening Participation as a key contributory factor. In 2015 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published a Green Paper consultation document *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS 2015) which proposed the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework designed to "deliver better value for money" (p.7) and this was followed in 2016 by the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* which set out the Government's objective to "double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009" (BIS 2016:15). The driving force behind the policy was not merely a desire to create a more equitable society. The benefits of higher education are often explained in terms of individual financial incentive (i.e. individuals will be able to achieve better-remunerated careers with a degree), there is also an impetus rooted in perceived wider social and economic benefits. These three areas of advantage were set out in 2014 by HEFCE and OFFA:

"Higher education benefits everyone. It helps individuals to unlock their potential, it is one of the best pathways to achieving a rewarding career and it contributes significantly to physical and mental wellbeing. It also benefits the wider economy – creating jobs, helping businesses prosper by providing them with highly qualified and skilled staff, and stimulating long-term economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness in the global economy. Higher education has also been shown to have a positive impact on social cohesion and the development of active, committed citizens: for example, graduates are likely to be more engaged with their communities".

(BIS 2014: 7)

These policy moves reflect a change in the way government conceptualised higher education and the increasing shift towards the embedding of market-orientation in higher education. They also witness the government's conception of the undergraduate student as:

"individual entrepreneurs, transacting their way through higher education, preparing themselves for high-earning success in the global field of market competition" (Kelly et al. 2017)

This neoliberalist construction of the engaged, knowledgeable student as unit of systemic growth assumes a level of understanding and ability to negotiate the higher education system which sat uncomfortably with the social justice agenda of widening participation.

The struggle to introduce more equitable practices in higher education continued. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) introduced in the *Success as a Knowledge Economy* includes a focus on retention and formalizes the transparency duty which requires higher education providers to publish data on the backgrounds of their applicants. A Department for Education Green Paper published in

September 2016 suggested that institutions charging higher tuition fees should “establish a new school in the state system...or sponsor an academy in the state system” (DfE 2016: 18) – a proposal which was met with a mixed reaction from universities. The proposal was not a success and in 2018 only 60 institutions were sponsoring or supporting state schools (Connell-Smith and Hubble 2018).

In 2017 the Government passed the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* (UKPGA 2017). This Act created a new public body to replace the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) - the Office for Students (OfS). In creating the OfS the government sought to regulate the higher education market, promote competition between universities, increase student choice and promote equality of opportunity:

“The OfS will have a duty to promote equality of opportunity This will mean looking beyond getting students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university - they will also be charged with making sure that providers are doing all they can to support the students throughout their course, helping to tackle drop-out rates and support disadvantaged students into employment.”  
(DfE 2017)

The whirligig of higher education legislation is reflective not only of successive governments with differing political viewpoints attempting to stamp their mark on the system, but also government uncertainty as to what higher education is and what its purpose should be. In monetizing higher education through the introduction of student fees, the over-riding discourse has couched the benefits of university education in purely economic terms leading to an emphasis on commercial policies, ROIs, and statistical data. The explosion of higher education heralded by Blair in 1999 was couched in terms of redressing social inequities but there was also the financial imperative of funding higher education through student fees rather than government finance.

When the ‘New Labour’ government came into power in 1997 their manifesto declared that:

“Education will be our number one priority, and we will increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure”  
(Labour Party 1997: 5)

What followed has been described as a “deluge” of education policies (Walford 2005: 4), crafted while in opposition by then Party Leader Tony Blair and Shadow Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, and rapidly enacted post-election. With regard to higher education, the apparent aim was to increase fairness and social mobility by widening participation to higher education to those groups traditionally under-represented, though some have perhaps cynically portrayed their intention to be more concerned with making the Party more popular and electable. In 2001 the Party produced their Manifesto for a second term (Labour Party 2001) which focused more specifically on reforms to further and higher education and the call for 50% of all young people

under 30 having higher education experience. The Party had a clear commitment to expand the number of people in higher education and increase social equality through widening access. The government also desired a greater emphasis on teaching quality and a move towards funding of higher education through the introduction of top-up fees and a reduction on reliance on the state. This controversial programme resulted in the *Higher Education Act 2004*. There has been much debate over the contradictions inherent in the policies enacted by Blair's government (Walford 2005; Heath et al. 2013) for example the contradiction between reducing inequality and improving opportunities for the disadvantaged groups in society, coupled with the increasing marketisation inherent in the introduction of fees and the growing localisation of institutions. The tussle between marketisation on the one hand and social justice on the other has contributed to the dichotomy at the heart of UK HE legislation and is reflected in the shifting landscape of policy. In an assessment of the impact of the policies introduced by the New Labour government, Heath et al. (2013) conclude that a 'modest success' can be claimed, particularly with respect to narrowing the inequalities in post-compulsory education, but a near impossibility in assessing the over-claiming made by both Labour and Conservative governments due to the poor quality and lack of consistency in statistical data.

### 1.2.3 Policy

The last two decades has seen considerable change in policy on Widening Participation and Fair Access with policy advisory groups and regulations being created and replaced under subsequent government and departmental changes. There are three key issues which have been at the forefront of higher education policy in the last two decades, affordability, access and accountability (Heller 2013). The new approach to higher education participation following the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) was implemented through the *Aimhigher* initiative which ran from 2004-2011 with the aim of increasing the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who apply for and enter higher education (DfES 2004). The initiative achieved some success in encouraging students from under-represented groups to consider and apply for higher education, however it was focused on recruitment and not the student lifecycle and support for it dwindled. The Aimhigher programme received a budget of £136 million in 2004 but this had reduced to £78 million by the time it was scrapped in 2011 (THE 2010); estimates suggest it cost close to £1 billion (Harrison 2012). It was ostensibly abolished due to under-performance, however it has been argued that its closure owed more to:

“the government's confusion over whose participation was to be widened and a failure to translate the policy aim into coherent and operationalisable policy goals” (Harrison 2012: 58)

reflecting the ongoing lack of clear policy direction at the heart of government in terms of Widening Participation. It was also subject to drastic budget cuts under the new administration and a tension in the Coalition government over widening participation between the dual discourse of meritocracy and social justice. Aimhigher was a programme that brought particular benefit to those students who might not have otherwise considered university as a viable option because higher education was not common in their family or social background, such as First in Family students. After its abolition in 2011, Aimhigher was replaced by a similar slimmed-down national scheme the *National Networks for Collaborative Outreach* (NNCO) in 2015 which ran for only two years before being subsumed into the *UniConnect* programme under the Office for Students in 2017. Although the UniConnect programme continues to operate, and there are pockets of successful outreach initiatives, there seems to be a lack of consistent national policy and support. Again this reflects the confusion and lack of consistency in regards to Widening Participation. The need to raise aspirations and provide assistance to under-represented groups is recognized, but the support at the heart of government and the will to effectively fund an integrated national programme is fluctuating.

In a similar way the *Access Agreements* which had been introduced in 2003 as a means to ensure higher education institutions were compelled to produce realizable strategies to promote fair access were replaced with *Access and Participation Plans* in December 2018, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was replaced with the Office for Students (OfS) in 2017, and the role of regulating the Agreements passed from the Director of the Office for Fair Access to the Director for Fair Access and Participation (OfS 2018). The *Student Opportunity Fund*, which distributed funds to higher education institutions according to their number of students who fall into the groups designated as 'disadvantaged' by HESA, was replaced by the *National Collaborative Outreach Programme* (NCOP) in 2017. The *Social Mobility Commission* (SMC) – originally the *Child Poverty Commission* 2010, then the *Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission* 2011, and finally the *Social Mobility Commission* in 2015 – is an independent statutory body sponsored by the Department for Education to advise on social mobility<sup>7</sup>. The SMC is not to be confused with the *Social Mobility Advisory Group* which was set up by Universities UK in 2015 at the request of the Minister of State for Universities and Science to provide advice to government and support for universities to improve access and success for disadvantaged and under-represented groups. The landscape is shifting and confusing, which does nothing to increase the consistency required if policy is to be effective. The element which is often overlooked at policy level is the impact on the student themselves. Policy changes do not just exist in

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<sup>7</sup> Following the resignation of the Chair and all three Commissioners in 2017, the Commons Education Committee recommended that it be renamed the Social Justice Commission in March 2018. The Government rejected the recommendation and the SMC was relaunched in May 2018.

White Papers, they each have a human story attached. The lack of consistency and constantly shifting goalposts has a negative effect on those whom the policies are designed to help. One of the participants in this study described the personal impact of policy changes:

*“Well, I did Level 2 [of a BTEC], okay, I was eighteen at that time. And then I went onto Level 3, the first year was fine and then the second year of Level 3, I must’ve turned 20, is when my funding stopped because the government changed, the funding policy is a mess.”*

(Cara, Interview 1)

In a recent report produced by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), the higher education independent think tank <sup>8</sup>has called for fundamental changes to the university system. They support the view that the higher education sector has lost its way and that it cannot fulfil its role as a force for social good without a fundamental rethink of funding strategies and relationship with government. They call for the establishment of a National Skills Council for England, an increase in funding for regional partnerships and a long-term financial commitment to NCOP. Unusually for policy initiatives, HEPI recognizes the particular needs of First in Family students and singles them out for additional support, calling for the abolition of first year tuition fees for all first-generation students (Day et al. 2019).

These constant shifts in focus and direction reflect a confusion at the heart of government Widening Participation policy. The recognition of the need to implement changes in higher education to improve social mobility has not changed, however the strategies to achieve this have been affected by shifting priorities, political agendas and conceptual discourses. In 2014 HEFCE and OFFA made a clear and direct plea for consistency of approach:

*“We call on the Government to work for parliamentary consensus to achieve a stable policy and funding base which supports widening participation as an integral part of the changes taking place in higher education” (BIS 2014: 3);*

unfortunately this has not transpired. This has arguably contributed to the ongoing narrative of social inequality which continues to exist within higher education. All too often policy has been short-term due to a focus on a political agenda when what is needed are long-term initiatives to address the underlying social issues. Social inequality cannot be addressed overnight nor even within a government’s four-year timeframe, and the confusion caused by shifting directions and agendas leads to a focus on short-term gains rather than long-term change. In the words of Waller et al.,

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<sup>8</sup> A think tank is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a body of experts providing advice and ideas on specific political or economic problems”. Think tanks may lean ideologically to the left or right, but they are legally prevented from acting in favour of any particular party. There are a number of education think tanks influencing policy in the UK and they are often identified with particular positions on the political spectrum such as the Centre for Social Justice (right) and the Fabian Society (left). Their main output is the dissemination of research and policy. The Higher Education Policy Institute makes a clear claim to be independent of any political leaning.



piling ‘soft’ policy initiatives on top of a selective system which is still class-based and only paying lip service to meritocracy is “akin to ‘putting a Band Aid on a bullet hole’ (to paraphrase Taylor Swift)” (2017: 8). The constant iterations of legislation and policy outlined in this section reveal the mixed messages at the centre of the discourse around higher education, but also the manner in which policy is generated at a distance from the actual student experience. This study has set out to enhance policy generation through a focus on the actual lives and experiences of students, and the constantly evolving conditions they face.

#### 1.2.4 Policy Evaluation

One of the challenges in implementing a consistent and effective approach to policy has been the lack of substantive and robust evaluation of initiatives. A review into widening participation research conducted in 2006 concluded that there was a lack of robust research to establish what actually works to widen participation (Gorard 2006). The Aimhigher programme, established in 2004 to improve access to higher education and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), came under fire to produce more effective and standardised reporting of the evaluation of interventions to justify its multi-million pound budget. Further research into the effectiveness of the Aimhigher programme was commissioned and led to the conclusion that the reports provided by the partners showed “an association between learner participation and improved outcomes rather than conclusive evidence of impact” (NFER 2010). The Aimhigher programme was subsequently scrapped in 2011. The demand for more effective evaluation of initiatives continued. In a report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation the authors refer to “a proliferation of ‘hopeful’ or innovative approaches” (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012: 3) towards attainment-raising which are largely supported by anecdotal rather than research evidence. They conclude that “much policy development and practice has been done without the benefit of robust evidence” (*ibid* p.3). One of the challenges to any attempt at rigorous evaluation was the lack of standardised format which led each institution to initiate and evaluate its own outreach activities. In research carried out by Wardrop et al. (2016) the authors analysed the access agreements approved by OFFA from 2014-2017 and concluded that while there was an increase in references to research, this was predominantly carried out to justify spending on financial support and was often “not as robust as it could be” (p.12). They point to a lack of infrastructure to connect rigorous research with widening participation activity and policy.

In an essay commissioned by the Higher Education Policy Initiative (HEPI) in 2017, senior academic David Woolley clarifies the conundrum faced by the Aimhigher programme: how could 45 Aimhigher

partners producing different plans and evaluations with no standardised format contribute to a national strategy? (Woolley 2017). Woolley was writing six years after the abolition of Aimhigher and the introduction of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) but argues that the same problem persists. In place of 45 Aimhigher partners there were 198 individual institutions, each producing their own widening participation plans and evaluation procedures, each with their own methodologies and levels of expertise. As he points out, “we are attempting to build a national evidence base by implementing local strategies” (Woolley 2017) and calls for a national evaluation and research unit to be established.

In 2017 the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) called for universities to increase investment in outreach activities, but also to ensure that all expenditure was informed by evidence and effectively evaluated (OFFA 2017). The picture has changed since the research conducted by Wardop et al. in 2016. Under the new Access and Participation Plans introduced in 2019, HEIs are required to provide evidence of the effectiveness of intervention programmes in a standardised format. However the national evaluation and research unit recommended by Woolley has yet to be established, and there is yet to be a national research programme to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives implemented by individual institutions.

#### 1.2.5 Access and Participation plans

In 2004 the Higher Education Act introduced the requirement for all HEIs wanting to charge higher tuition fees to produce an Access agreement setting out their plans to encourage and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups. Now titled Access and participations plans, these are approved by the Department for Education and overseen by the Office for Students. Universities and colleges have been required to produce an annual Access and participation plan outlining the measures they will take to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to “access, succeed in and progress from higher education” (OfS 2018). Increasingly, universities are now producing five-year rather than annual plans (e.g. Solent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Southampton all have Access and Participation Plans covering the period 2020-21 to 2024-25). There has been a growing requirement for these to include robust evaluation strategies to indicate the effectiveness of proposed and implemented interventions. Solent University is a member of the Southern Universities Network (SUN) which consists of six partners: the Universities of Winchester, Southampton and Portsmouth, Bournemouth University, and the Arts University Bournemouth who act as partners for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP). Bournemouth is a key comparator institution to Solent

due to its geographical location and its status as a post-1992 institution which specializes in similar areas such as creative, media and business courses. Although a Russell Group university, Southampton is also a comparator institution due to its location in the same city. Each university within the Network sets its own targets alongside the collaborative network targets.

In Solent's Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 (Solent 2020) the institution declares its intention to close all inequality gaps through the introduction of a contextual admissions pilot initiating a reduced academic offer and support package for targeted groups from LPN backgrounds (IMD Quintile 1 & 2; POLAR4 Quintile 1; see Footnote <sup>3</sup> and <sup>1</sup> respectively for an explanation of IMD and POLAR terminology). Performance is assessed according to three criteria: Access (the proportion of students entering Solent); Success (the proportion of students graduating from Solent/graduating with 'good Honours' degrees) and Progression (the proportion of students going on to employment or further study). Performance is therefore only measured according to 'getting in' to university and 'getting on' after university; there is no measurement of transition through university. Bournemouth University on the other hand divides the 'Success' criteria into two areas: 'Non-continuation' and 'Attainment' thereby equating success with transition through higher education rather than just the end result.

All three institutions identify students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) as a focus for access and participation activities; Solent University and the University of Southampton use both POLAR4 and IMD classifications while Bournemouth University only uses POLAR4. Table 1.5 shows the targets set out by each institution in their respective Access and Participation Plan 20-21 to 24-25 with regard to POLAR4/IMD students:

Table 1.5 – Targets 2020-21 to 2024-25

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Baseline data</b>	<b>Target 2024_25</b>
Solent University <sup>1</sup> Access	To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from IMD Quintile 1 (Q1).	Reduce the gap between the proportion of IMD Q1 entrants and IMD Q1 18 year olds in the population from 13.5% to 7.5% in 5 years and to 0 after 10 years	13.5%	7.5%  (0 by 2029_30)
Solent University Access	To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from POLAR 4, Q1.	Reduce the gap between the proportion of POLAR 4 Q1 entrants and POLAR 4 Q1 18 year olds in the population from 4% to 0 in 5 years.	4%	0
Bournemouth University <sup>2</sup> Access	To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods.	Ratio in entry rates for POLAR4 quintile 5: quintile 1 students	2.89	2.26
Bournemouth University Success	To reduce the non-continuation gap for students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods	Percentage difference in non-continuation rates between POLAR4 quintile 5 and quintile 1 students	1.9%	0%
University of Southampton <sup>3</sup> Access	To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from under-represented groups (IMD Q1)	Reduce the gaps in IMD Q1 18 years olds at UoS vs in the population from 15.9% to 10% by 2024/25	15.9%	10%
University of Southampton Access	To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from under-represented groups (POLAR4 Q1)	Ratio in entry rates for POLAR4 quintile 5 to quintile 1 students Reduce gap to 3 to 1 by 2024-25	5.2 to 1	3 to 1
University of Portsmouth Access	To reduce the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups	Reduce the ratio in entry rates for POLAR4 quintile 5 and quintile 1 students at the University of Portsmouth	1.8 to 1	1.5 to 1
University of Portsmouth Success	To reduce the attainment gap for POLAR4 Quintile 1 students	Percentage difference in degree attainment (1st and 2:1) between POLAR4 Quintile 1 and Quintile 5 students.	3% attainment gap	1%

<sup>1</sup> Solent University Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25.

[https://apis.officeforstudents.org.uk/accessplansdownloads/2024/SolentUniversity\\_APP\\_2020-21\\_V1\\_10006022.pdf](https://apis.officeforstudents.org.uk/accessplansdownloads/2024/SolentUniversity_APP_2020-21_V1_10006022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Bournemouth University Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25.

[https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/BournemouthUniversity\\_APP\\_2020-21\\_V1\\_10000824.pdf](https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/BournemouthUniversity_APP_2020-21_V1_10000824.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> University of Southampton Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25.

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/~assets/doc/University%20of%20Southampton%20Access%20and%20Participation%20Plan%202020-21%20-%202024-25.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> University of Portsmouth Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25.

[https://apis.officeforstudents.org.uk/accessplansdownloads/2024/UniversityOfPortsmouth\\_APP\\_2020-21\\_V1\\_10007155.pdf](https://apis.officeforstudents.org.uk/accessplansdownloads/2024/UniversityOfPortsmouth_APP_2020-21_V1_10007155.pdf)

The table shows that all four universities have set access targets to reduce the participation gap between the most and least represented groups, whether this is measured using the POLAR 4 or the IMD scale. This is expressed either through proportion of applications compared to proportion of individuals in the population (i.e. Solent and Southampton) or by ratio of Quintile 1 to Quintile 5 entrants (Bournemouth, Southampton and Portsmouth). The table also reveals that the majority of targets are set within the area of Access (i.e. the number of entrants) with only one of the eight targets referring to continuation (i.e. Bournemouth University/Success).

Solent University has a 13.5% gap between the proportion of entrants from IMD Quintile 1 and the proportion of IMD Q1 18 year-olds in the population; their target is to reduce this to 7.5% by 2024-25 and to 0 by 2029-30. Southampton University shows a slightly higher percentage gap at 15.9% which they aim to reduce to 10% by 2024-25. It is difficult to compare the POLAR 4 data as Solent expresses this in terms of percentage participation gap (i.e a 4% gap between the proportion of entrants from POLAR4 Q1 compared to the proportion of POLAR4 Q1 18 year-olds in the population) whereas the other three universities set out their targets in terms of ratio of POLAR4 Q1 entrants : POLAR4 Q5 entrants. The baseline (target) ratio is 2.89 (2.6) : 1 for Bournemouth, 1.8 (1.5) : 1 for Portsmouth and 5.2 (3) : 1 for Southampton. However all four institutions reveal there is a gap between the number of entrants from more deprived areas compared to those from areas with more economic advantage.

All four institutions have set key strategic priorities around closing the participation gap between students from low participation neighbourhoods. Their strategic measures focus around three key areas:

1. Outreach programmes (e.g. Southampton University's *Learn with US* and Bournemouth University's *Access BU*). These centre around raising aspiration and attainment through targeted interventions with identified groups in the local area. Interventions can include residential visits, workshops, placements, workshadowing, information and guidance.
2. Bursaries for students from identified under-represented groups
3. Contextual admissions. These vary from somewhat vague statements about allowing adjusted offers to students with recognized characteristics (University of Southampton) to a very clear commitment to a contextual admissions pilot set out by Solent University which incorporates a reduced academic offer of 8 points lower for groups from POLAR4 and IMD Q 1 and a support package including cash, a Transition Day and banked hours for mentors/academic tutors and additional support (Solent 2020). Bournemouth University's *Access BU* policy aimed at students from non-traditional backgrounds is clearly published on the website and marketing materials. The University of Portsmouth, which had no significant gap in participation between the most and least deprived areas, has no specific contextual admissions policies and focuses its efforts on bursaries and continued outreach activities.

In a study of 52 published HEI strategy documents, Baxter (2019) outlines five key challenges for universities to address when developing their strategies; a key factor is the need to rely on evidence-based decision making. Baxter argues that strategy is about change and therefore should make clear what is currently being done that needs to improve and what is not currently being done that needs to commence. He also argues that there needs to be a move from diagnostic analysis to predictive analysis and finally to prescriptive analytics.

### **1.3 Non-completion**

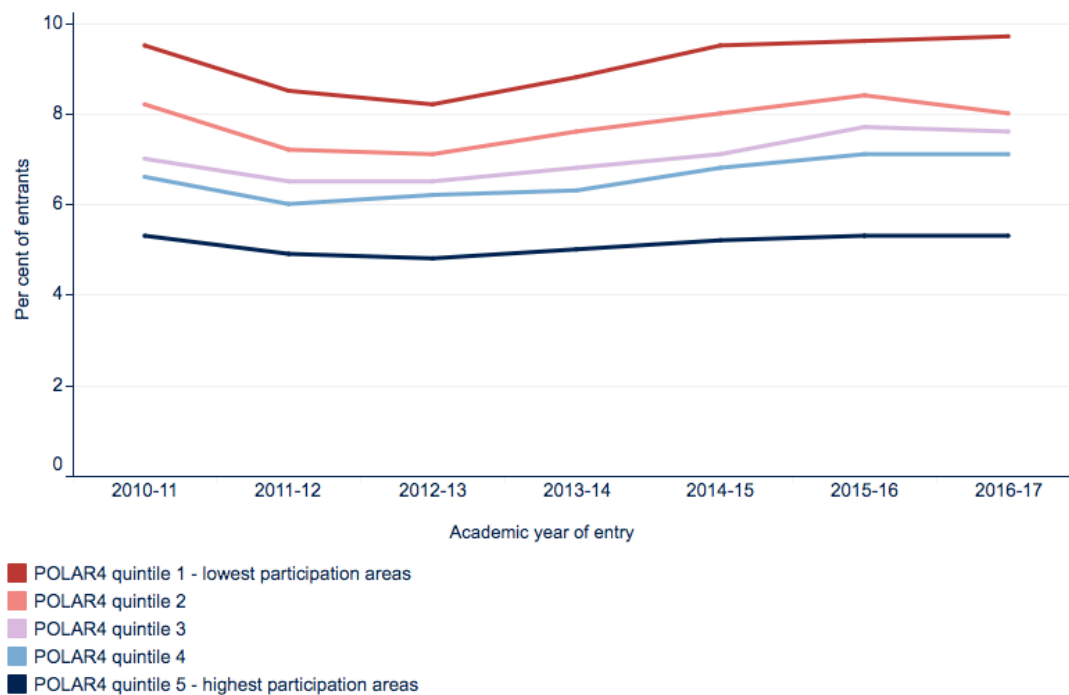
The basic principle underlying government strategy over the last two decades is that all those with the potential to achieve at higher education should have the opportunity to do so and is founded on the concept that equal access and diversity not only benefits individuals in terms of better health and wellbeing (Baum et al. 2010) but is vital to social mobility and the national economy. However the statistics have shown that despite success in increasing access among disadvantaged and non-traditional students, there is a persistent attainment differential (HESA 2020a). In 2015 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reported that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to drop out of their studies and less likely to get a good degree result, irrespective of prior educational attainment (HEFCE 2015a; HEFCE 2015b), a result which was

described as symptomatic of the “lingering disadvantage” that prevents people from under-represented groups from reaching their full potential (Ebdon 2015). Despite policy interventions and outreach programmes in the intervening years, this differential was still evident in data reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in March 2019 (HESA 2019a; Gov.uk 2019) and a recent report from the Office for Students (OfS) shows that students from the lowest participation areas (based on POLAR4) have the lowest continuation rates (OfS 2020d – see Tables 1.5 and 1.6) and the lowest probability of achieving a first or upper second class degree (OfS 2020e – see Table 1.7):

“Evidence shows that gaps in continuation and attainment at higher education persist for underrepresented groups of students, even when taking into account a student’s entry grades or qualifications”  
(OfS 2020f)

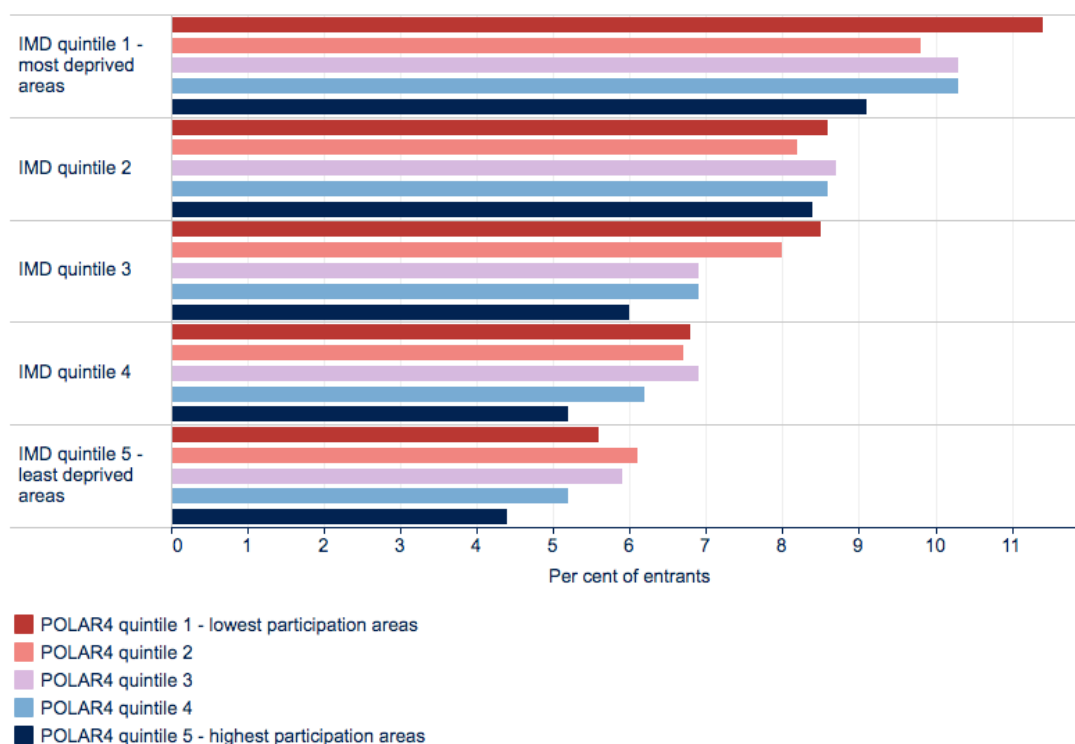
When comparing data on continuation and attainment rates, it must be born in mind that there is no specific data for First in Family students. This category tends to be elided with social class, even though this is not necessarily the case. The Office for Students - and before its inception HEFCE - used a measure of neighbourhood participation in higher education to represent educational disadvantage, and these figures have been used here as an approximation of First in Family students. However it must be remembered that this is necessarily a broad brush approach and gives a general rather than specific context. Table 1.6 shows a comparison of non-continuation rates of students based on level of Educational disadvantage as measured by neighbourhood participation levels (POLAR4). Rates are shown to be consistently higher amongst students from Quintile 1 (the lowest participation areas) throughout the period. Table 1.7 shows non-continuation rates in 2016-17 by Educational disadvantage (POLAR4) and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), again demonstrating that students from the most deprived areas have the highest levels of non-continuation rates.

Table 1.6 - Non continuation rates over time by Educational disadvantage (POLAR4)



Source: OfS (2020d)

Table 1.7 – Non-continuation rate in 2016-17 by Educational disadvantage (POLAR4) and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)



Source: OfS (2020d)



Table 1.8 shows that graduates from the lowest participation areas (POLAR4, Quintile 1) are 10 per cent less likely to achieve a First or Upper Second Class degree than those from Quintile 5.

Table 1.8 – Graduates achieving First or upper second class degree by Educational disadvantage (POLAR4)

Level of participation (POLAR4)	Graduates (%)
Quintile 1 (lowest participation areas)	73
Quintile 2	76
Quintile 3	78
Quintile 4	79
Quintile 5	83

*Source: OfS 2020e*

The Widening Participation agenda has been successful in terms of the recruitment of students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds, but there is still a discrepancy in terms of retention and success rates:

“retention rates and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved over the period... In higher education, it will take more than 80 years before the participation gap between students from disadvantaged and more advantaged areas closes”

(Social Mobility Commission 2017: 8)

In the *Access and Participation Plan* which all HE providers are required to publish, institutions must set out how they will improve “equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education” (OfS 2018). The new system aims to eliminate the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups (which was 30.9% in 2017-18) and eliminate the gap in non-continuation between the most and least represented groups which has reduced very little since 2014-15 (OfS 2020a). Although as mentioned earlier First in Family students are not the same as those from least represented areas, they are more likely to come from under-represented areas.

Table 1.9 shows how Solent compares to the UK average for non-continuation rates of students from the lowest participation areas compared to all other areas. The data gives the non-continuation rate of UK domiciled full-time young undergraduate entrants from 2014-2018 divided into those from areas of lowest participation (quintile 1 on the POLAR 4 scale) and those from all other areas (quintiles 2-5). The figures reveal that students from low participation neighbourhoods have been

consistently more likely to drop out within the first year of university with little difference in the figures from 2014 to 2018. Figures for Solent University have also been given, showing that the university had a higher than average non-continuation rate across all quintiles from 2014 to 2017. However in 2017-18, following the publication of the Access and Participation Plan, the non-continuation rate for quintile 1 students dropped substantially.

Table 1.9 - Non-continuation rates of full-time young undergraduates following year of entry:

Academic year of entry	UK Quintile 1 (lowest participation) (POLAR 4) % no longer in HE	<i>Solent Quintile 1 (POLAR4)</i> % no longer in HE	UK Quintiles 2-5 (POLAR 4) % no longer in HE	<i>Solent Quintile 2-5 (POLAR4)</i> % no longer in HE
2017/18	9.2	7.6	6.5	8.7
2016/17	9.2	11.6	6.3	8.6
2015/16	9.0	10.7	6.3	8.5
2014/15*	9.0	11.5	6.1	8.6

Source: HESA 2020a: *Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators 2018/19*

HESA data employs several variables which could be used as a measure of disadvantage, including a measure of parental education.

Research studies have consistently revealed that non-completion is a persistent issue amongst students from non-traditional backgrounds (Rubin 2012) which is confirmed by the HESA data shown above. Although the gap in non-completion rates between most and least represented groups is not large, it is persistent enough to persuade the OfS to make elimination of the differential one of their key objectives (OfS 2020a). Barriers to success for non-traditional students have variously been identified as a lack of cultural capital (Reay 2004; Basit 2014), a lack of “preparedness” for higher education (Wilcox et al. 2005; Crozier et al. 2010), and a lack of adequate support:

“getting students in and leaving them to it does not work for those who have no prior experience of university”  
(Crozier et al. 2010: 176)

According to the *Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education* (RANLHE) report into retention and dropout of non-traditional students across Europe, successive UK government policy has learnt little from the research produced in the field and still focuses too heavily on recruiting WP students rather than understanding the barriers they face. The conclusions echo the earlier view of Archer and Leathwood (2003) who proposed a ‘transformative’ approach to widening participation and emphasised the need for HE systems and practices to change to meet the needs of students from under-represented groups, rather than expecting the students to change in

order to fit in with an outmoded and elitist system of higher education (RANLHE 2015). In 2017/18 the non-continuation rate of UK-domiciled young undergraduate entrants was 6.8% which is a slight increase on previous years (HESA 2020a). Attrition costs the university sector millions of pounds every year in lost tuition fees alone and can have a lifelong impact on the students themselves due to a lack of degree-level education, yet despite the many calls for action the problem continues.

#### **1.4 COVID-19 and the impact on the HE sector**

Prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, that Secretary of State for Education had already announced cuts to university budgets which would affect funding used to support students from non-traditional backgrounds. In January 2020 the recurrent teaching grant for the financial year 2020-21 was cut by £58 million, reducing the money available for the Office for Student (OfS) to distribute to higher education providers in the teaching years 2019/20 and 2020/21. On publishing their response to the cuts, the OfS announced that one of the money-saving measures would be the reduction of funding for student access and success by £16.4 million from £332 million to £316 million, a reduction of 4.8% (OfS 2020c). Funding for UniConnect (formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme) has been maintained but the £16 million saving represents a 6.8% reduction to the student premiums to support successful outcomes for both full-time and part-time students (OfS 2020b; OfS 2020c). At the time the cuts were announced, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the UK economy and in particular the higher education sector could not have been envisaged; the OfS response, published in March 2020, makes reference to the 'exceptional steps' higher education providers are having to take at the current time and the implications for their financial security (OfS 2020c).

On 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020 the Office for Budget Responsibility predicted a 35% drop in UK gross domestic product (GDP) between April and June 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, with education the sector which will be hardest hit with a predicted 90% fall in output (OBR 2020; Table 1.10).

Table 1.10 - OBR Predicted output losses by sector

Office for Budget Responsibility Coronavirus Reference Scenario  
Output losses by sector in the second quarter of 2020

Sector	Per cent	
	Weight in whole economy added	Effect on output relative to baseline
Education	5.8	-90
Accommodation and food services	2.8	-85
Construction	6.1	-70
Other services	3.5	-60
Manufacturing	10.2	-55
Wholesale, retail and motor trades	10.5	-50
Information and communication	6.6	-45
Professional, scientific and technical activities	7.6	-40
Administrative and support activities	5.1	-40
Transport and storage	4.2	-35
Mining, energy and water supply	3.4	-20
Real estate	14.0	-20
Public administration and defence	4.9	-20
Financial and insurance services	7.2	-5
Agriculture	0.7	0
Human health and social activities	7.5	50
<b>Whole economy</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>-35</b>

Source: OBR 2020

This was shortly followed by the publication of an independent research study carried out by London Economics, a specialist economics and policy consultancy, for the University and College Union (UCU) into the potential economic and societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education sector (LE 2020). The report predicts a £2.5 billion funding black hole for UK universities, based on a forecast of 111,000 fewer UK and 121,000 fewer international first year students taking up places in UK universities in September 2020 (see Table 1.11). Without substantial government support, this would result in an estimated 30,000 university job losses, 32,000 jobs at risk in the larger economy, and an economic cost to the country of £6 billion. According to the London Economics analysis, three-quarters of UK universities would be left in a critical financial position (Table 1.12).

Table 1.11 – Estimated impact of the pandemic on first-year student enrolments in 2020-21 (London Economics)<sup>9</sup>

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Total	% diff (to baseline)
# of HEIs	2	38	67	18	125	-
<b>Total across all HEIs</b>						
UK	-1,775	-32,725	-63,820	-12,820	-111,140	-16%
EU	-1,025	-13,310	-11,815	-2,260	-28,410	-47%
Non-EU	-2,595	-56,560	-31,115	-2,075	-92,345	-47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>-5,395</b>	<b>-102,595</b>	<b>-106,750</b>	<b>-17,155</b>	<b>-231,895</b>	<b>-24%</b>
<b>Average per HEI</b>						
UK	-885	-860	-955	-710	-890	-16%
EU	-510	-350	-175	-130	-225	-47%
Non-EU	-1,295	-1,490	-465	-115	-740	-47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>-2,690</b>	<b>-2,700</b>	<b>-1,595</b>	<b>-955</b>	<b>-1,845</b>	<b>-24%</b>

Note: All numbers are rounded to the nearest 5.

Source: LE 2020: 12

Table 1.12 – Estimated impact of the pandemic on HEI income 2020-21 (London Economics)

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Total	% diff (to baseline)
# of HEIs	2	38	67	18	125	-
<b>Total across all HEIs</b>						
Tuition fees	(£82m)	(£1,336m)	(£809m)	(£108m)	(£2,334m)	-13%
Teaching grants	(£2m)	(£65m)	(£64m)	(£6m)	(£137m)	-7%
Other income	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>(£85m)</b>	<b>(£1,400m)</b>	<b>(£872m)</b>	<b>(£114m)</b>	<b>(£2,472m)</b>	<b>-7%</b>
<b>Average per HEI</b>						
Tuition fees	(£41m)	(£35m)	(£12m)	(£6m)	(£19m)	-13%
Teaching grants	(£1m)	(£2m)	(£1m)	(£0m)	(£1m)	-7%
Other income	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>(£42m)</b>	<b>(£37m)</b>	<b>(£13m)</b>	<b>(£6m)</b>	<b>(£20m)</b>	<b>-7%</b>

Note: All numbers are rounded to the nearest £m.

Source: LE 2020: 13

<sup>9</sup> The report uses Boliver (2015) to classify UK higher education institutions into four clusters according to research activity, measures of perceived teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity and socioeconomic student mix: Cluster 1 – Oxford and Cambridge; Cluster 2 – mainly pre-1992 universities including the remaining Russell Group institutions; Cluster 3 - remaining post-1992 universities apart from those in Cluster 4; Cluster 4 – 18 institutions differentiated according to their relatively lower levels of research activity, economic resources and academic selectivity. Solent University is classified as Cluster 4.

UCU general secretary Jo Grady described the report's findings as "alarming" and said:

"It is vital that the government underwrites funding lost from the fall in student numbers. These are unprecedented times and without urgent guarantees, our universities will be greatly damaged at just the time they are needed most" (UCU 2020)

In April 2020 Universities UK<sup>10</sup> presented a package of proposals to the government to ensure the stability of the sector (UUK 2020). These included financial measures such as doubling research funding, access to emergency loans, multi-year commitment to financial support for institutions particularly hard hit, a cap on undergraduate recruitment and measures to support retention and progression, "particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who will suffer from prolonged absence from more traditional support" (UUK 2020: 4). The document made it clear the potential impact on the sector:

"Without government support some universities would face financial failure, others would come close to financial failure and be forced to reduce provision. Some will be in places where they are the only local higher education provider with damaging impact on the local community and economy. Many of those institutions most affected have higher levels of external borrowing, lower levels of cash reserves, and higher proportions of BAME students." (UUK 2020: 2)

Ultimately the government rejected the bid for financial support. Some measures have been put in place, including allowing universities to charge full tuition fees during lockdown, bringing forward tuition fee payments to help universities manage financial risks over the autumn, and permitting universities to recruit more students (an increase of up to 5% above 2020/21 forecasts for full-time undergraduate domestic students) (Gov.uk 2020). However the London Economics report warns that this increase will merely shift the financial impact onto less wealthy institutions (LE 2020). The former universities minister Chris Skidmore commented that the government's proposal

"ultimately does not account for potential huge loss of income due to the reduction in international students. This black hole needs to be filled as this is creating the ripple effect across the sector" (Guardian 2020)

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education providers and the sector as a whole will be significant, but the impact on current and potential students is equally significant. University applicants have faced months of uncertainty with exam cancellations, a new system to determine grades, and a lack of clarity over whether universities will be able to reopen in September 2020. They must make important decisions about their future without face-to-face support from school or friends. Emotionally and psychologically this has been a time of enormous disruption with months of not seeing friends and partners, all the usual rite-of-passage celebrations cancelled, and

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<sup>10</sup> Universities UK is the collective voice of 137 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution. [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk)

families potentially facing economic uncertainty together with the pressures of lockdown. For current students they have had to deal with delivery moving to online, changes to assessment procedures and financial insecurity due to a loss of part-time earnings combined with the economic impact of the lockdown.

In May 2020 the Sutton Trust<sup>11</sup> carried out a survey into the impact of COVID-19 on university access and student finance (Montacute and Holt-White 2020). With schools closing and public exams being cancelled, a new grading system was put into place based on teacher assessments combined with predicted and mock exam grades. However the report points to research that shows that the abilities of disadvantaged students are often underestimated in teacher assessments and that predicted grades made by teacher assessment often underpredict high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wyness 2017 in Montacute and Holt-White 2020). The authors conclude that there are concerns that the new grading system could

“similarly detriment students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with knock-on impacts for their progression to university” (Montacute and Holt-White 2020: 1)

They also suggest that university applicants are likely to need more support than ever to navigate the process, given the uncertainty of the current times. Applicants making decisions about universities are missing out on much of the support and advice they would normally receive such as university open days and offer-holder days as well as face-to-face support in school.

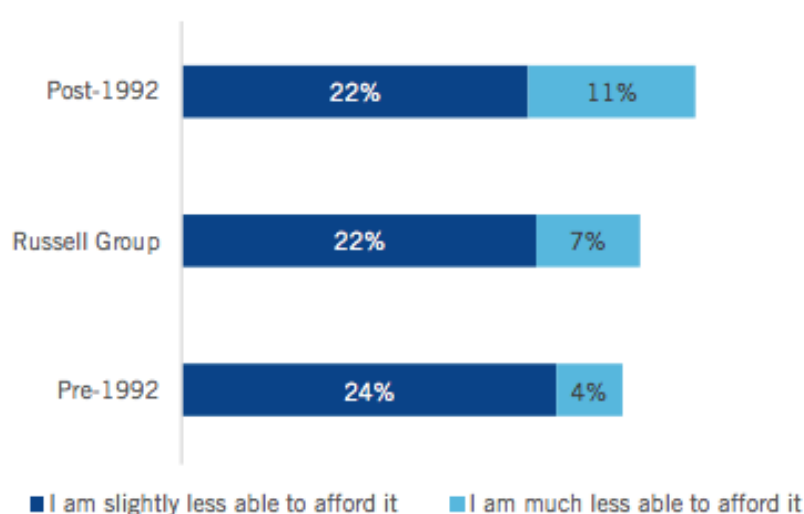
This will have a particular impact on First in Family students. They are less likely to be able to turn to family members for advice unless they have siblings at university and with schools closed, it may be more difficult to ask teachers for advice. The media reports conflicting stories as circumstances and policy changes day to day. On top of this, First in Family applicants and their families may be under financial pressure due to the pandemic. Combined with uncertainty about the financial stability of universities themselves and doubt regarding the feasibility of a return to classes in September, many students are changing their minds about where to go and even about whether to go to university at all. The Sutton Trust survey reported that almost one-fifth of UK students want to delay starting an undergraduate degree given the current uncertainties. Some 19% of UK applicants said they had changed their mind or had yet to decide about going on to higher education in autumn, of which 4% said they had definitely decided not to go. Working class students were more likely to have changed their mind and were more likely to be worried about the negative impact of COVID-19 on their chance of getting into their first-choice institution.

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<sup>11</sup> The Sutton Trust is a non-profit organisation which champions social mobility through programmes, research and policy influence. [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)

The pandemic is also impacting students currently studying at university. One third of the survey respondents reported they are less able to afford their studies due to the pandemic, with those outside Russell Group institutions more likely to have such financial concerns (see Table 1.13). While most students will have seen a reduction in their part-time earnings, those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have parental support to fall back on and more likely to rely on part-time earning for essential living costs. Many students rely on the summer break to earn money to supplement their incomes in the next academic year, and with many family incomes reduced due to the pandemic, this could be a time of real financial hardship.

Table 1.13 – Impact of coronavirus on affordability to study, by institution



Source: Montacute and Holt-White 2020: 7

At the time of writing the future of the sector looks very uncertain. That the pandemic will have a major impact on the sector, individual providers and students themselves is irrefutable. Some institutions may well struggle to survive, and many prospective students may well decide to either defer their studies or not go to university at all. When the new academic year does finally commence, it will undoubtedly be a very different experience with social distancing rules still in place, and very possibly with much of the teaching delivered online. This will make it more difficult for students to engage with the institutions, make new social networks and undergo a transition process. This will be a challenging time for all concerned, which makes research studies of this nature all the more prescient. The more we understand about the transition process undergone by students, the more we can help and support them through that process.

The current coronavirus pandemic is likely to have a considerable impact on the higher education market (see Section 1.4). Recruitment has been hit with large numbers of students choosing to defer their studies or not to attend university at all (Montacute and Holt-White 2020). With one of the



highest death rates in Europe, many international students are likely to be cautious about studying in the UK and travel restrictions will further impede international recruitment. Although lockdown in the UK is currently being eased, social distancing rules mean that universities do not know whether they can open in September or whether classes must be run online. The financial burden of lower recruitment numbers will put universities under even more pressure to ensure student engagement and avoid attrition in what will be a very different landscape of student experience. According to research conducted by the Sutton Trust, those most affected by the pandemic and its fallout are likely to be Widening Participation students or students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Montacute and Holt-White 2020) and it has become imperative that universities and higher education institutions do everything in their power to aid the transition process for new and continuing students. Research conducted by the Resolution Foundation in May 2020 predicts that the economic effect of coronavirus will be most severe on the young, with graduates 13 per cent less likely to be in employment three years after graduating and those with mid level qualifications (some higher education or A level equivalent) 27 per cent less likely; the ‘scarring’ of young people’s employment prospects will be apparent even years down the line when the direct economic impact of the crisis has abated (Henehan 2020). A degree education is not a ‘magic pill’ that will guarantee future economic security, however it is more important than ever to provide the support to allow students to continue their studies to successful completion, both for their future economic stability and that of the sector. Although the pandemic did not appear until the writing up of this research, it has made the research findings every more pertinent to universities and students alike in the current climate.

### **1.5    *Research question***

This section has given the background to the study, why I identified First in Family students as the focus of the research, and the reasons for my choice of first and second year undergraduate students at Solent University. It has also explained the focus of my research, seeking to understand how First in Family students navigate their transition through their first two years of study and what factors may impact on their experiences. The study set out to investigate the journeys undergone by a small group of First in Family students and consider what factors influenced their progress. One of the intended outcomes is to make recommendations about how institutions can support students through this transition process.

Most research projects of this nature would have an over-riding research question with a series of objectives or sub-questions. However this project was deliberately left open-ended with only one

research question. I felt that asking a series of sub questions would drive the direction of the research by pre-deciding the areas of importance and the temptation would be to ask questions in order to answer my research questions. In my study I wanted the participants to bring forward the topics that were important to them and my methodology was designed with this in mind. This research therefore focused on a single Research Question:

**RQ: How do First in Family students transition  
into and through their first and second years of higher education?**

## Chapter 2      Literature Review

This chapter explores the main areas of theoretical debate which underpin this study and seeks to position the research within the field. Higher education research is a vast and growing field and the area of widening participation has attracted a significant amount of work. The turbulent policy contexts witnessed in the UK have provoked and precipitated an enormous amount of research into the reality of the student experience in higher education for those who are marginalized by reason of class, race, gender and social context. Over the last two decades leading researchers in the field such as Diane Reay, Louise Archer and Liz Thomas have changed the landscape of higher education through their studies into the experiences of disadvantaged students. Two notable longitudinal projects are the Social Class and Widening Participation in Higher Education Project, a mixed-methods three-year study conducted with students and non-students at London Metropolitan University from 1998-2001 (Archer et al. 2002) and the more recent Paired Peers project carried out at the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England from 2010-2013 and 2014-2017 (Bathmaker et al. 2016) which adopted the novel approach of pairing students by class and subject area from two very different higher education institutions. Both these projects provided a wealth of insight into the experiences of higher education students from under-represented backgrounds. Although a very different and much more small-scale study, this project has adopted a similar methodology to the Paired Peers project in using the student voice to provide contextual data.

Much of the research into widening participation draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu in terms of his conceptions of habitus, field and agency, and social and cultural capital (for example Archer et al. 2003; Reay 2004; Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Bathmaker et al. 2013; Reay 2015). Originally it was intended that the theoretical framework of this project would be Bourdieusian, drawing on theories of habitus, social and cultural capital together with a consideration of alternative capitals such as Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Framework (see Section 2.4). However my methodological approach was to foreground the student voice by allowing participants to highlight areas of importance through the use of visual and oral methods (see Chapter 3); the result was that themes were introduced through participants' narrative and photographs which I had not anticipated, leading to a shift in focus. The Bourdieusian framework was still relevant to this study, indeed it would be difficult to analyse the experiences of First in Family students without some consideration of habitus, field and capitals, and these topics are addressed here (Section 2.4), however this should not be considered a Bourdieusian study. The areas introduced through the data collection necessitated a return to the literature in order to investigate the themes which were touched upon.

For example, it soon became clear that the topic of 'home' and the transference of home was very important to a number of the participants, being represented through both their words and photographs. Home was a theme which was brought up across participants and interview stages, and the changing nature and role of 'home' was one which had significance to the participants (see Section 4.2 and Section 5.3). This was not a topic I had envisaged before starting my research, but led me to revisit my conceptual framework to consider the role 'home' played in the transition process, and thus the literature surrounding the concept of home is explored in this chapter (Section 2.3). Other topics which were introduced by the participants included the role of friendship in their transition (Section 4.3) and the impact money had on the process (Section 4.5). The literature related to friendship and capitals is explored in Section 2.2.6 and Section 2.4 respectively.

First in Family students fall within the classification of 'disadvantaged' according to the Widening Participation agenda, however during the course of this research it became apparent that focusing exclusively on disadvantage misrepresented the reality of these students' lives. The participants perceived benefits in their backgrounds, partly through the increase in drive and determination which is brought about when obstacles have to be overcome, which led me to a consideration of the role played by resilience in their experience. This project became much more about the journey students took as they underwent the transition process from their arrival through their first two years of study, rather than a focus solely on barriers. The concept of transition therefore became an important theme in the research, both the process of transition (Section 2.2) and factors which influenced the process. In summary, key concepts which will be addressed in this literature review are resilience (Section 2.1), transitions (Section 2.2), home (Section 2.3) and capitals (Section 2.4).

## **2.1 Resilience**

### **2.1.1 Background**

The study of resilience, which is concerned with how individuals overcome the odds and thrive despite adversity, has been co-opted from the field of psychology as an object of analysis in various policy areas including higher education. Resilience has been put forward as an explanatory factor in the performance of those who succeed in higher education despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. However when set in the context of the neoliberalist agenda underlying much of the current UK HE policy, there is a view that resilience has been mobilised as a means of situating the capacity to successfully or unsuccessfully engage with higher education within an individualised or

‘consumer’ frame, thereby drawing a veil over any systemic and policy weaknesses which allow the continued differential of achievement to continue. Much as a neoliberalist agenda situates failure as the responsibility of the individual irrespective of social environment, so it can be argued that resilience has been used to obstruct a sociological understanding of disadvantage in higher education by replacing it with an individual psychological explanation. Resilience has been used in this study to shed light on conceptions of motivation and drive which were voiced by participants. This section explains the psychological origins of the term and then goes on to apply it to the higher education context.

A pioneer of the field of resilience is the psychologist Norman Garmezy who studied the effects of schizophrenia on family-life and identified ‘protective factors’ which helped children achieve positive life outcomes despite the disadvantage of parental schizophrenia (Garmezy 1974). Early research into resilience focused on the ability of some children to survive despite adversity and included the work of Rutter who carried out longitudinal studies into Romanian adopted orphans who adapted well and made good developmental progress despite considerable lack of care and deprivation in their early years (Rutter 1987; 1999). As Gauntlett (2018) points out, these attributes of individual resilience despite early adversity contradicted the widely-respected views of child development propounded by John Bowlby and others who argued that maternal deprivation in the early years of childhood would be likely to lead to lifetime disadvantage (Bowlby 1944).

The study of resilience moved beyond its origins in child psychology and expanded to include specific areas of research such as academic resilience. In a multi-disciplinary exploration of academic resilience in modern America, Morales and Trotman (2004) explain academic resilience as the phenomenon of at-risk students achieving exceptional educational outcomes given the level of disadvantage or stress which exist within their individual, family or community field. Their focus is particularly on the academic resilience exhibited by students from ethnic minority and low SES backgrounds. The study of academic resiliency investigates the contributory factors which enable some individuals to surpass educational expectations where others cannot. There are different interpretations of what denotes ‘academic achievement’ but the importance lies less in the end result and more in the process: “it is the journey which indicates resiliency, and not necessarily the particular result” (Morales and Trotman 2004: 17) which reflects the conceptualisation of resilience as a developmental progression. This concept has particular relevance for this study as it is the journey which is under investigation, and the factors which contribute to the resilience exhibited by the participants as they navigate the transition process.

Resilience, or the ability of individuals to adapt in a positive way despite encountering significant adversity in life (Luthar et al. 2000), consists of three key elements: **‘disadvantage’** (which can take various forms); **‘risk’** (the likelihood of disadvantage having a negative impact on the outcomes of the individual) and **‘protective factors’** (the experiences which reduce the negative influence and enable the individual to surpass expectations of outcome). The disadvantage experienced by First in Family students can vary according to their background, but the correlation between First in Family and low-participation neighbourhoods suggests that First in Family students are more likely to come from families and social circles where higher education is less common, where population SES status is lower and where economic disadvantage is more prevalent. First in Family students can also experience disadvantage in terms of lack of parental educational capital, peer pressure and alienation, lack of financial support at university resulting in long hours in part-time jobs, and other disadvantage associated with areas of financial deprivation (such as the factors highlighted in Table 2.1), many of which were encountered by the participants in this study. The risk factor was the likelihood of these disadvantages having a negative impact on their educational outcomes. The protective factors which enabled them to achieve despite adversity and surpass expectations were investigated in this study.

From early conceptions of a fixed attribute, subsequent theories argued that resilience was a developmental progression (Werner and Smith 1982; Masten and Garmezy 1985; Luthar et al. 2000), a mechanism that modifies the individual’s response to risk (Morales and Trotman 2004). In recent years the focus has shifted from factors to processes, seeking to understand how protective factors contribute to successful outcomes, and has also progressed from examining the influence of single variables on single outcomes to conducting multivariate investigations (Cowen et al. 1997; Luthar 2003). This necessitates a shift in perspective from an individualised psychological view to an acknowledgement of the impact of social factors. Moving away from the neoliberalist discourse of the “myth of individual achievement” (McLaren 2012:11) which casts a lack of educational success as a reflection of personal inadequacy rather than systemic failures, the conception of resilience as a result of external factors and processes shifts the lens back onto the social and political context. Thus when investigating the academic resilience exhibited by students from disadvantaged backgrounds including First in Family students, consideration must be given to the multiple factors which potentially contribute to their successful outcomes. In this study the protective elements brought forward by the participants included dispositional, familial and environmental factors, all of which played a vital part in their transition process. Without considering the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of their experience, the tendency would be to provide solutions which were restricted to one element of their experience instead of addressing the whole.

### 2.1.2 Protective factors

Early conceptions of resilience were rooted in trait theory, viewing resilience as a fixed attribute or personality trait. However Garmezy (1991) pointed out the vital importance of identifying the protective factors which enable some individuals to break out of “cycles of disadvantage” where others cannot (p.421). He identified the triadic model which proposes three areas of protective factors: family, disposition and environment (Garmezy 1991 – see Figure 2.1). In the early research these protective factors were conceptualised as personal qualities such as independence or self-esteem (Masten and Garmezy 1985) however subsequent studies broadened this definition in recognition that external factors contributed to resilience.

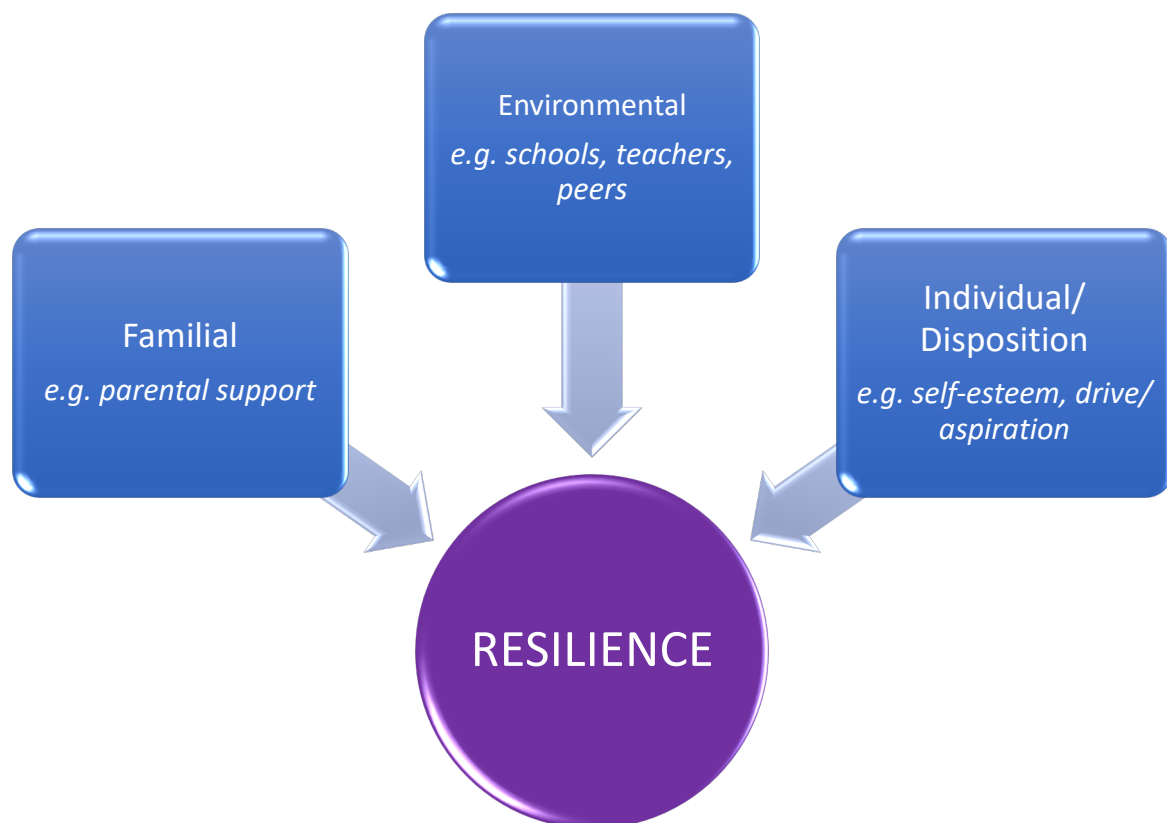


Fig 2.1 - The triadic model of Protective Factors

*Adapted from Garmezy 1991; Masten and Garmezy 1995*

These protective factors reduce the risk of the individual such that they exceed the expected outcomes of those who experience similar disadvantage.

“Protective factors moderate the effects of individual vulnerability or environmental hazards so the adaptational trajectory is more positive than would be the case if the protective factor were not operational”  
(Masten et al. 1990: 426)

Table 2.1 breaks down each of the areas of protective factors to show the individual elements which have particular relevance to this study. The combination of personal drive or aspiration (which figured strongly in the narratives of participants in this study) and the interplay between individual and social/personal/familial factors resonates with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, agency and field. Just as habitus exists in relation to field and agency, so aspiration cannot be seen in isolation from contributory social and familial factors. Resilience is the response of the individual to the interactions between themselves, their social context, and the opportunities and risks they encounter (Werner and Smith 1992). The challenge model suggests a compensatory or cumulative effect between these areas: those individuals who lack protective factors from family or the wider social environment often thrive despite this lack through an increase in dispositional factors such as drive and aspiration. This is not something which appears in the literature but is explored in the data. Although resilience was not a term used by the participants in this study, they referred to 'drive' and 'motivation' which they felt made them different, set them apart from their peers and enabled them to achieve. I have used resilience as a way of conceptualising this sense of 'difference' and determination.

One aspect which could usefully be added to this table is that of self-theories. Yorke and Knight (2004) draw on the substantial research carried out by Carol Dweck into self-theories and perceptions of intelligence. Dweck (1999; Dweck et al. 2011) demonstrated how students' self-theories and conceptions of intelligence can impact on their learning behaviour and ability to tackle tasks and problems. Dweck found that those with what she termed an 'entity' belief (i.e. that individuals have a fixed quotient of intelligence which stays unchanged throughout life) were resistant to development and tended to see setbacks such as poor marks as evidence of a lack of ability (Dweck et al. 2011). Walton and Cohen (2011) found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to struggle with a sense of belonging and ability and to interpret bad marks as a sign they were not able or 'clever' enough for university. Those with an incremental outlook viewed intelligence as a facility which could grow and develop through study.

Yorke and Knight (2004) prefer the terms 'fixed' and 'malleable' but draw on Dweck's work to explain how learners with a fixed position tend to judge in advance whether a task is something they can succeed at or not, and tend to be less persistent at tasks which they feel will be too hard. Those from a malleable position conceive of intelligence as a skill which increases and develops as learning takes place. They are more likely to adopt learning rather than performance goals and see challenges as opportunities for development rather than tests which they will either pass or fail. Students from a malleable/incremental position tend to be more versatile and have a far more



resilient approach to learning, which makes them more successful as learners. This can usefully be considered a dispositional protective factor in relation to academic resilience. In research conducted by Yorke and Knight (2014), they found that between 25 and 30% of both undergraduate students and academic staff tended towards a fixed rather than malleable view of intelligence which led them to call for a far greater focus on the impact of self-theories.

Table 2.1 – Elements of Protective Factors

Individual/Disposition	Familial	Environment
Autonomy	Good relationship with at least one parent	Schools
Internal locus of control	Shared values	Teachers
Self esteem	Parental values and beliefs	Mentors
Social skills		Community
Sense of purpose (Drive/aspiration)		Peers
Self-theories		

(Adapted from Garmezy 1985; Luther and Zigler 1991; Gauntlett 2018)

### 2.1.3 Garmezy's models of resilience

Theories of resilience address the interplay between adversity/stress, personal attributes and adaptation. For First in Family students, the importance is to understand how elements of the 'characteristic triad' (individual/familial/environmental) can interact to encourage a positive adaptation to the stress or adversity of transitioning from home to student life. Garmezy et al. (1984) developed three models to reflect differing conceptions of this interaction. The **compensatory model** is the simplest: stress lowers competence but personal attributes can counteract or compensate for this outcome (a simple linear model). In the case of First in Family students, the barriers to transition would lower competence but their personal attributes would compensate for this, leading to a successful transition process. The **protective factor model** portrays an interactive relationship between stress and personal attributes with respect to adaptation. When positive personal attributes (or protective factors) are in evidence, then adaptation will be less negatively affected by variations in stress. Conversely negative personal attributes or vulnerabilities are more susceptible to high stress factors. According to this model, if a First in Family student had protective factors in evidence, then they would be less likely to be adversely affected by the stress/adversity of transition. Conversely if they had negative attributes or vulnerabilities they would be more at risk and less likely to effect a successful transition. Finally the **challenge model** proposes

a curvilinear relationship between stress and competence whereby stress is seen as a potential enhancer of competence, providing it is not excessive (Garmezy et al. 1984; Luthar and Zigler 1991). According to this model, a First in Family student (subject) transitioning in higher education (stress) will have their competence enhanced by the experience. The challenge model suggests that, providing there are protective factors in evidence, the stress elements of their experience will actually cause them to become more resilient.

The challenge model hypothesises that resilience causes a person not simply to thrive *despite* adversity, but rather *because* of it (McCord 1994). It has also been argued that protective processes which counter the negative impact of risk are only set in motion when adverse risk factors are present (Rutter 1987). This is a concept which is highly relevant to Widening Participation and First in Family students. It suggests that overcoming adversity in order to access and succeed in higher education – whether that adversity be in terms of financial hardship, lack of role models, lack of understanding or support from family or friends, or myriad other factors – can become an attribute, protective factor or indeed capital in its own right. The concept of adversity having an incremental effect on competence is explored in Seidman and Pedersen (2003) who investigate the interplay of risk, vulnerability, protection and competence amongst adolescents from financially deprived backgrounds. They argue that multiple risk/vulnerability factors make it more likely that an individual will experience negative developmental outcomes – for example the risk factors stemming from poverty such as low parental education, poorly-resourced schools and dangerous neighbourhoods. Seidman and Pedersen are concerned with identifying the processes by which positive adaptation occurs despite adverse conditions. However unlike previous research, they stipulate that individuals should be examined across multiple rather than single social contexts in order to examine phenomena from both dynamic and holistic perspectives. If competence is understood to be the way in which an individual interacts with his or her environment then this can be perceived as a transactional process between people and their social contexts. As individuals operate within multiple contexts, they argue that the research should not focus on a single social context (such as academic achievement) but rather on the patterns of behaviour across multiple social contexts, a process they refer to as ‘contextual competence’:

“competence can best be understood as multivariate *and* as manifested differently in relationship to different social contexts, like peer groups, schools, athletics and religion”  
(Seidman and Pedersen 2003: 321)

First in Family students are subject to multiple risk factors and operate in multiple social contexts. For example the participants in this study were exposed to various vulnerability factors linked to their First in Family status; across the entire cohort these could include economic deprivation, low-

participation neighbourhoods and schools, lack of support from teachers, peers or family, anxiety and lack of information around student debt, requirement to work many hours part-time during term-time, lack of information about university study, life, etc. In seeking to understand the effect of these multiple risk factors and the protective processes which enabled them to successfully navigate their way through them, it was important to take a holistic view of their various social contexts, such as university friends, home friends, family, classroom peers, teaching staff, work environment, etc. By gaining an understanding of their psycho-social processes and behaviours in multiple social contexts I could build up a more holistic picture of their contextual competences and investigate what protective processes acted as a buffer to the adverse risk factors they encountered.

#### 2.1.4 The concept of resilience in this study

Theories of academic resilience have been used in this study to identify and understand the protective factors which are operational in the lives of the participants and which act as a mechanism to reduce the vulnerability or stress factors caused by their First in Family status. Resilience lies in the way in which individuals deal with stressful situations and the protective mechanisms that come into force at critical turning points and modify their response (Rutter 1987; Winfield 1991). According to Gauntlett (2018), the concept of academic resilience has been used to both explain why some students overcome adversity and to also predict and improve their chances of doing so. Her research offers an alternative approach to the conceptualisation of resilience as an individual trait and as with Seidman and Pedersen (2003) suggests that academic resilience can be viewed as essentially a social phenomenon, born out of relationships with family, friends and tutors (Gauntlett 2018). For the participants in this study, the 'adversity' or 'risk' element took various forms depending on their individual circumstances but there were elements common to First in Family students. Their positive adaptation was evidenced by their success in accessing higher education - particularly for those participants whose peer groups had not – and their success in negotiating the transition process. Resilience theory was utilised to conceptualise the protective factors which helped them to adapt positively in their transition process.

## 2.2 Transitions

### 2.2.1 Definitions and Frameworks

Although the concept of transition into and beyond higher education has attracted much attention from both a policy and research perspective, the process of transition *within* higher education is under-researched: “no formal conceptual frameworks focused specifically on transitions within higher education are known to exist” (Trigwell 2017: 106). One of the challenges is the lack of a clearly articulated definition or conceptualisation of transition (Gale and Parker 2014a). Moreover, much of the body of research is centred on the ‘what’ of transition rather than they ‘how’ or the ‘why’ (O’Donnell et al. 2016;) and the focus is generally on the problems and challenges encountered by students, thereby creating a deficit model (Hope 2017).

Hussey and Smith define transition as:

“a significant change in a student’s life, self-concept and learning: a shift from one state of understanding, development and maturity to another” (2010: 156)

The focus here is on the individual, however other conceptualisations reflect the viewpoint that transition cannot be seen as purely individual or contextual but rather as a product of both (Seidman and Pedersen 2003; Gauntlett 2018). An alternative definition from a social psychology school is:

“change being brought about or influenced by some external or social situation, which has the power to shift our understandings of ourselves” (Crafter and Maunder 2012: 10)

This was apparent in the participants in this study where the transition to higher education caused some individuals to see themselves in a different light and develop a new identity. For one participant in particular, this was a deliberate and conscious process of using his move to university as a way of changing his identity (as will be explored in Chapter 4). Parkes proposed the term *psychosocial transition*, which he defined as a change that necessitates

“the abandonment of one set of assumptions and the development of a fresh set to enable the individual to cope with the new altered life space” (1971: 103)

Ecclestone et al. (2010) outline four theories of transition within the literature:

1. institutional transition – the individual makes the transition from one educational context to another and the responsibility for success or failure lies with the individual
2. within-individual transition – the social and contextual aspects of transition are taken into account and responsibility is more widely distributed (Briggs et al. 2012);

3. **transition as a process of being and becoming** – incorporating milestones or turning points (O'Shea 2013; Palmer et al. 2009);
4. transition as a permanent human state

In this study the third model of transition was adopted as the underlying conceptualisation. The process of transition undergone by the participants was one of being and becoming as they evolved and navigated the process over their two years of university. The research explored this process and identified the milestones or turning points during the journey.

A framework focused specifically on transition within the context of higher education is provided by Gale and Parker (2014a – see Table 2.2). They identify three conceptions of transition within the research literature, each leading to different policies and strategies for supporting students. They label these:

1. transition as induction ( $T_1$ ) – first few weeks
2. transition as development ( $T_2$ ) – ongoing process
3. transition as becoming ( $T_3$ ) – whole of life

Much of the published research is located within the first of these models where transition is seen as occurring over a discrete period of time at the start of a student's educational journey, namely the induction period. This has led to a focus of institutional policy on activities provided for students prior to arrival and in the first weeks of the semester. The induction model frames transition as a difficult stage to be managed through institutional policy; the institution is seen to be responsible for the transition process and student agency is reduced to motivation and willingness to take part in the opportunities provided. This model assumes that students lack competence or knowledge and it is the responsibility of the institution to provide them (O'Donnell et al. 2016).

Table 2.2 – A Typology of student transition into higher education

Conceptions of student transition	Transition metaphors	Types of transitional change: From one to another	Transition dynamics	Illustrative transition activities / emphases / systems
Transition as Induction (T <sub>1</sub> )	Pathway; Journey; Milestones	Inculcation: sequentially defined periods of adjustment  From one institutional and/or disciplinary context to another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating institutional norms and procedures</li> <li>• Linear, chronological, progressive movement</li> <li>• Relatively fixed structures and systems</li> <li>• Crisis as culture shock (contextual familiarity)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation/familiarisation with campus (facilities etc.) and significant staff</li> <li>• 'Just-in-time' information re procedures, curriculum content, assessment requirements</li> <li>• First year seminars</li> <li>• 'Transition pedagogy'</li> </ul>
Transition as Development (T <sub>2</sub> )	Trajectory; Life stage	Transformation: qualitatively distinct stages of maturation  From one student and/or career identity to another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating socio-cultural norms and expectations</li> <li>• Linear, cumulative, non-reversible movement</li> <li>• Discrete, singular, consecutive identities</li> <li>• Crisis as critical incident (identity forming)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring programs</li> <li>• Service learning and field placements</li> <li>• Career and research culture development activities/emphasis</li> <li>• Championing narratives of student and career trajectories by successful students and staff</li> </ul>
Transition as Becoming (T <sub>3</sub> )	Whole of life; Rhizomatic	Fluctuation: perpetual series of fragmented movements  Lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating multiple narratives and subjectivities</li> <li>• Rhizomatic, zigzag, spiral movement</li> <li>• Flexible systems/fluid (ephemeral) identities</li> <li>• Crisis as neither period-/stage-specific or necessarily problematic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible student study modes, including removal of distinction between full- and part-time study and min./max. course loads</li> <li>• Flexible student study pathways, including multiple opportunities to change course and enter, withdraw and return to study throughout life</li> <li>• Pedagogy that integrates learning support within the curriculum</li> <li>• Curriculum that reflects and affirms marginalised student histories and subjectivities</li> </ul>

(Gale and Parker 2014: 17)

The second theory, transition as development, constructs transition as a process whereby identity is formed and developed and echoes Ecclestone et al.'s construction of transition as a process of being and becoming as learners create a new identity as higher education students (Briggs et al. 2012). Both these models assume a linear process but unlike T<sub>1</sub> the focus here is not on time as a parameter but rather stages of individual development. Gale and Parker (2014a) suggest that the fundamental difference between T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> lies in their different psychological orientations: the former is rooted in organisational psychology and the latter in developmental or social psychology. A number of researchers point to the process of transforming self identity as part of transition, a "renegotiation of the self" (Hope 2017: 73) or a challenge to the student's existing view of themselves and their place in the world: "transition is a time of identity re-shaping" (Krause and Coates 2008: 500). This highlights one of the challenges in discussing transition from either a psychological or a social perspective because the process of transition is one of interplay between an individual and his or her social environment. The transformation of self identity can be seen as a psychological process but one that does not take place in isolation but rather through a subtle interaction with an individual's social context. The participant who described themselves as becoming a different person and not liking who they would have been (see Section 4.4.1) underwent a transformation of self identity because of their situatedness within higher education and their interaction with others as a result of their location at university. Winnicott argued that all learning is a kind of transition because it leads to development (Winnicott 1964). Both T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> interpretations perceive transition as a

‘problem’ which needs to be solved; where they differ is in their assumptions about how this should happen. The induction model proposes that the problem should be addressed at an institutional level whereas the developmental model focuses more on the individual. However both induction and development conceptions focus on institutional needs and how students can be helped to adapt in order to meet those needs.

Ecclestone’s third conceptualisation (transition as a process of being and becoming) links with the T<sub>2</sub> model and has appeared in the literature around students’ transition. Winnicott describes how independence is a gradual process of transition:

“Basic to all this is the idea of *individual dependence*, dependence being at first near-absolute and changing gradually and in an ordered way to relative dependence and towards independence. Independence does not become absolute, and the individual seen as an autonomous unit is, in fact, never independent of environment, though there are ways by which in maturity the individual may *feel* free and independent, as much as makes for happiness and for a sense of having a personal identity. By means of cross-identifications the sharp line between the me and the not-me is blurred”.

(Winnicott 1986:151)

Bathmaker et al. (2016) refers to the way in which university can be a bridging process between youth and adult, a rite of passage in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Victor Turner’s work on liminality and rites of passage describes the transition between culturally recognised states of maturation which are frequently marked with ceremonies which symbolically recognise the often painful process of achieving adulthood (Turner 1969). In *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, Winnicott points to the role played by school in supporting the child as they transition from one stage to another, giving the individual ‘breathing space’ for personal development (Winnicott 1964: 192). University has developed over time to support and facilitate the transition between home and the outside world, between childhood and independence, and that transition necessitates a certain level of renunciation of the past.

The third model, transition as becoming, essentially views transition as a semi-permanent aspect of modern life and in this way links to Ecclestone et al.’s (2010) fourth conceptualisation. Here the focus shifts and attention is drawn to:

“the need for higher education institutions themselves to change and adapt to the realities of students’ lives in a way that T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> do not”

(Gale and Parker 2014b: 735)

Moreover the ‘becoming’ model (T<sub>3</sub>) sees transition as idiosyncratic rather than universal, and also rejects the problemisation inherent in T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub>. The anxiety and stress of entering higher education is seen as potentially transformative:

“while certain transitions are unsettling and difficult for some people, risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others”  
(Ecclestone et al. 2010: 2)

Perhaps most useful when working with new students is Schlossberg’s notion that dealing with transition is a process that extends over time. She described four critical variables – either assets or liabilities – which dictate an individual’s ability to cope with transition: Situation (what is happening?), Self (to whom is it happening?), Support (what help is available?) and Strategies (how does the person cope?). The third factor, Support, is defined as intimate relationships, family units, network of friends, institutions, and communities (Schlossberg et al. 1995).

Much of the literature on student transition focuses on the ‘Transition as induction’ model (Gale and Parker 2014a) whereby attention and activity is concentrated on engagement activities within the first few weeks. There is also a presumption that students are young, full-time, commencing the first year of an undergraduate study and living on campus. A number of researchers have pointed out that this conception of a ‘typical’ student is no longer relevant in today’s diversified higher education environment. For example, Pokorny et al. (2017) explore the experiences of commuter students while Morgan has called for a reframing of the definition of the first-year student experience in the light of an increasingly diverse student body (2013). Morgan highlights the critical importance of the transition period undergone by students starting university but argues that traditionally the focus has been too narrow, not encompassing the diverse student body and the role of both academic and non-academic activities. In rejecting the over-simplistic nature of most existing models of the student lifecycle, Morgan developed her Student Experience Transitions Model (SET) to encompass the six stages which she believes all students undergo in the transition process, namely First Contact and Admissions; Pre-Arrival; Arrival and Orientation; Induction to Study; Reorientation and Reinduction; and Outduction (Morgan 2013). She later developed the model to include five key themes: Curriculum & Assessment; Pedagogy; Support; Finance; and Employment (Morgan 2020; Fig 2.2). Morgan’s model is aimed at helping practitioners in education to support new students, and her approach differs in its consideration of all aspects of student life: she believes that it is essential to integrate social, personal and academic aspects of the student experience. Moreover, although four of the six stages in the model are undergone during the initial transition period, Morgan does consider the importance of subsequent years through the inclusion of Reorientation and Reinduction stage. Morgan’s work has resonance with this study in its integration of various aspects of the student experience and its rejection of the argument that transition occurs only at the point of entry to university, but instead is an ongoing process.



## The Student Experience Transitions Model for Practitioners

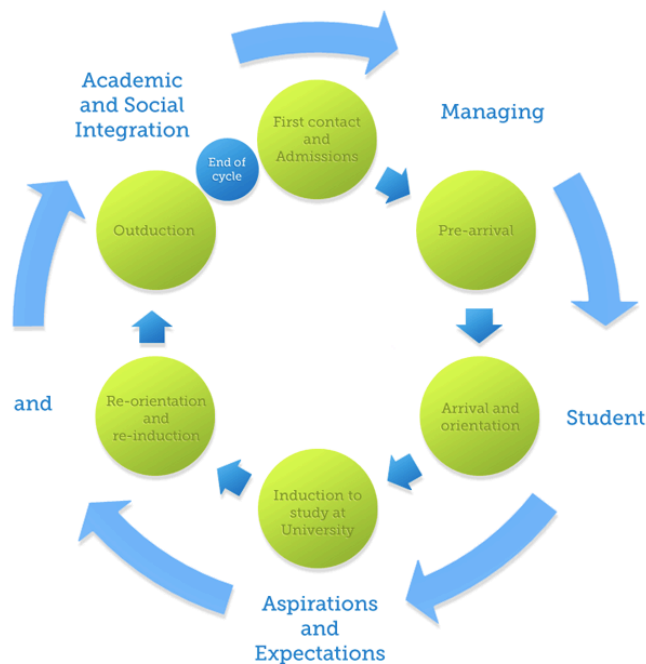


Fig 2.2 – The SET Model (Morgan 2020)

### 2.2.2 Criticisms

Hope (2017) highlights the lack of qualitative research on transition to university and particularly involving the lived experience of young undergraduate students. The implications of this is a potential lack of depth in understanding of how and in what way students transition, particularly those from a First in Family background. She also points to the prevalence of deficit model thinking or “preoccupation in the literature with students who fail in some way” (p.97) which has led to a lack of research into those who succeed. Heaslip et al. (2020) point to the pervasiveness of a deficit model which exists in much of the theory, policy and practice of Widening Participation. The pejorative dialogue of ‘raising aspirations’ is rooted in a neoliberalist meritocratic discourse and positions those who choose not to attend university as somehow lacking. Hope sought to move away from a deficit model in her phenomenological research project on young First in Family undergraduate students and their transition process into higher education (Hope 2017). She argues that engagement with university life is a key element in a successful transition, but that the ability to overcome self-identified difficulties was a crucial element in the transition process and calls for the inclusion of self-reflection into the first-semester curriculum. Hope concludes:

“Transition is not a linear process and universities need to consider that first-generation students’ experiences can incorporate points of tension and confusion, points for reflection, and points that may be disjointed”  
(Hope 2017: 98)

Palmer et al. (2009) point out that much of the research is outcome-oriented – the aim is to reduce attrition – therefore focuses on linking strategy with impact outcomes. Success is measured through improvement in retention and graduation rates (Schnell et al. 2003). Low attrition rates are seen as indicative of the failure of institutional support mechanisms, an outcome of Gale and Parker’s (2014) induction model. There is also more of a focus on academic transition and little attention is paid to the more social contextual aspects of transition. Like Gale and Parker, Palmer et al. (2009) suggest that too much of the research assumes transition takes place within the first year, and there is insufficient focus on turning points or how students negotiate these. Some researchers also believe there is a need to move towards more student-centred studies (Palmer et al. 2009; Hope 2017).

Yorke points out that the literature on student retention and success draws on a variety of theoretical constructs but ultimately sits between the realms of psychology and sociology (Yorke and Longden 2004). Student retention is viewed as a complex issue which is primarily psychological and sociological in nature, but other factors such as economic and policy issues must also be considered. Yorke and Longden argue that student withdrawal is the outcome of transactions between student and institution and student and student, and that a focus on teaching rather than research leads to a higher student retention and success rate (2004). Yorke and Longden argue in favour of outreach, pre-entry and induction activities in order to engage students and support them in their transition but there is little attention paid to how students transition through higher education, apart from a consideration of pedagogic and assessment issues. Although they refer to Tinto’s (1993) model suggesting that social engagement is equally important to academic engagement in terms of student retention, there is little discussion of how to encourage social engagement beyond induction week activities. Indeed Yorke and Longden argue *against* a focus on retention:

“a policy focus on student success in higher education through teaching, learning and assessment, and through institutional support services, is likely to lead to better retention than a focus on retention itself”  
(Yorke and Longden 2004: 135)

Much of Yorke’s focus is on the learning rather than psycho-social experiences of students (Yorke 1999 together with the activities of institutions pre-arrival and on arrival (Yorke and Longden 2004); there is little consideration of engagement and transition in the subsequent months and years.

### 2.2.3 Links to resilience

Gale and Parker’s (2014) ‘transition as becoming’ model suggests that transitions can be a positive process depending on the individual. Similarly Hope (2017) refers to ‘self-identified difficulties’ –

obstacles that hindered students' transition process during their first semester – and suggested that their coping strategies fell into two categories, 'being self-reliant' or 'seeking external assistance'. The coping strategies adopted depend on individualised factors such as habits and traits. This concept of self-reliance echoes the underlying principle in resilience theory that positive personal attributes (or protective factors) will enable an individual to overcome stress.

Hope's (2017) research also reveals that students who successfully overcome these difficulties express pride and satisfaction, whereas if problems were not successfully resolved they returned to the problem-solving activity. Garmezy et al.'s (1984) challenge model of resilience also proposes that risk or stress factors can be an enhancer of competence, or individuals can thrive because of the experience of overcoming adversity (Garmezy et al. 1984; McCord 1994).

#### 2.2.4 Liminality or in-betweenness

The study of transition generally assumes a linear process with a starting point, end point, and a middle zone which entails an element of discomfort, alienation and disorientation. This middle zone has been conceptualised in various ways but it is key to this study. Individuals arrive at university as 'non-students' or 'pre-students', undergo a process of transition which takes them through a zone of change, and ultimately if transition is achieved successfully they end with student identities.

Bridges (1980) proposes that the transition process has three phases: endings, neutral zones, and beginnings; endings are the first phase, the second phase is a period of lostness and emptiness before life resumes with a new pattern and direction, and the third phase is that of beginning anew. Endings involve disengagement, dismantling, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation (1980: 92). For the individual arriving at university, this marks the ending of their previous life (for young undergraduate students most commonly represented by school and family) and the negotiation of a new and independent self-as-student. The neutral zone is a period of emptiness and dislocation, a time of suspension between the old life and the new life. A person is between states, having left previous roles, relationships and attitudes but having not yet established a new life with new roles, relationships and attitudes. Schlossberg likens it to being "in a rudderless boat" (Schlossberg et al. 2005: 40), an analogy which bears a resemblance to the words of one participant in this study who described herself as being "like a buoy on the ocean" (Tricia Interview 1). The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep suggested that the life of an individual is made up of a series of passages from one life-stage to another, and that each passage is marked by a ceremony whose main purpose is to enable the individual to progress from one state to another. He coined the term

“liminality” (from the Latin *limen* meaning a threshold) to describe the disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of transition as an individual leaves their state pre-rite of passage but has not yet achieved their new state (van Gennep 1960). The three phases of a rite of passage were further developed by Victor Turner, namely *preliminal*, *liminal* and *postliminal* (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1964). Many of the ceremonies associated with rites of passage signify a ‘death’ as the individual leaves behind a former life, a passing through the threshold or journey, and a ‘rebirth’ in their new role or identity in society. Turner describes transition as “a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation” (1964: 234) and the individual in the liminal space is

“neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 359)

Turner’s description of liminality is the same as Bridge’s neutral zone, a state of placelessness and dislocation. The ceremonies or rites of passage referred to by van Gennep and Turner help an individual to relocate themselves and manage their transition from one state to another.

Palmer et al. draw on the concept of liminality in their investigation into first year transition. In exploring the concept of students ‘not belonging’ they set this in the context of liminality, arguing that students can be suspended between home and university in a physical and psychological manner:

“our starting premise is that often students do not immediately fit in at university but rather can be in a transient, betwixt space between home and university” (Palmer et al. 2009: 38)

They suggest that individuals must negotiate the turning points at the heart of the ‘betwixt’ state in order to move beyond the liminal condition and enter another social state, i.e. university life. Their research looks at the concept of turning points within the context of the ‘betwixt’ space as a way of contextualising students’ feelings of belonging/not belonging at university, with the turning points used to shed light on how transition takes place. This research builds on the work of Palmer et al. (2009) by exploring the liminality or ‘in-betweeness’ experienced by the students over the extended transition period from arrival through to the end of the second year, and by investigating this through the experiences as described by the students themselves. It also draws on the work of Hope who argues that transition is a process of renegotiation of the self, an interplay between “becoming, being and achieving” which is an integral part of the process of forming a cultural and social identity. As she points out “transitions can be disruptive or they can be quiet and insidious” (2017: 86).

### 2.2.5 Transitional objects

Within the turbulence of the 'betwixt space', symbolic objects have been shown to provide continuity or anchors within the students' lives (Briggs et al. 2009). They illustrate how students bring objects that symbolize home which then act as 'transitional objects' as described by Winnicott in his theories of child development. Winnicott conceived that transitional objects provide a source of support which aids the child in their development of attachments (1971). The metaphor of the safety blanket is often used in relation to Winnicott's theories on the role of transitional objects, as portrayed in the depiction of the Linus character from the *Peanuts* cartoon strip who is never without his blanket:



Fig 2.3 - Linus and his safety blanket  
([https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/Linus%27\\_security\\_blanket](https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/Linus%27_security_blanket))

Winnicott suggests that individuals use familiar items as a defence against anxiety and refers to these items as "transitional objects" (1953: 91). His theory was developed in relation to infants and a stage of intermediate development between attachment to their thumb and an object such as a teddy bear. However, he argues that the psychological value of the object can continue into later life: "a need for a specific object ...that started at a very early date may reappear at a later age when deprivation threatens" (p. 91). He also points out that the importance of the object lies not so much in its symbolic value but rather in its actuality. The transitional object is a physical possession, as opposed to the 'internal object' or mental concept suggested by Melanie Klein (Ogden 1983). However only if the internal object and external object are satisfactory will the individual use the transitional object as part of development. Winnicott perceived that change often involved a level of emotional pain and that transitional objects could represent a means of comfort. For the students in this study, objects and places became emotionally charged as they underwent the sometimes painful process of transition from home to university.

Winnicott sees the physical environment as playing an essential role in the constant task of reality-acceptance. He argues that

“no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience” (1953:95)

It is essential to this process that there is continuity of the “external emotional environment” and elements of the physical environment such as transitional objects (Winnicott 1953: 96). It could be argued that during a period of emotional or psychological upheaval or transition when the strain of relating inner and outer realities becomes more acute, then the importance of the continuity represented by the physical/external emotional environment takes on even greater significance.

#### 2.2.6 Friendship networks and ‘Friendsickness’

The importance of friendship networks to help students integrate into university has long been established. The seminal work of Vincent Tinto in the United States established the importance of early social integration and the development of active social networks to the persistence of undergraduate students (Tinto 1993; Tinto 2006). Astin referred to a student’s peer group as “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (1993:398) and Thomas (2012) demonstrated the importance of a sense of belonging and friendship to the engagement of students. Wyndham-Strydom (2016) saw friendship networks as a key component in assessing the opportunities available to students to fully engage in higher education. Drawing on the ‘capabilities approach’ developed by Sen, Wyndham-Strydom argued that the traditional approach of assessing success solely in terms of statistical measures (e.g number of successful completions) is too simplistic and that equitable participation in higher education should be gauged in terms of a list of seven capabilities, one of which is:

“Social relations and social networks: Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. **Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure.** Mutual trust”

(Wyndham-Strydom 2016: 151. Formatting mine)

Not only is there a substantial body of research establishing the positive effect of interpersonal relationships (i.e. their instrumental role in providing support for the process of identity-formation) but the work of Paul and others demonstrate that it can also be an area of much concern (Paul and White 1990; Paul and Brier 2001; Paul et al. 1998; Hope 2017). Wilcox et al. (2005) show that social ties formed from living with friends are central to the transition process and that “making compatible friends is essential to retention” (2005: 707). Students moving to university will often leave close friends behind which can cause feelings of loss and isolation (Paul et al. 1998) and the

impact of losing the emotional support from friendship networks should not be overlooked. Fisher and Hood (1987) defined homesickness as

“a complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned with grieving for, yearning for, and being preoccupied with thoughts of home” (p. 426)

Students moving to university often experience homesickness but Paul and Brier (2001) suggest a further condition they refer to as ‘friendsickness’ which they describe as “a normative challenge in the college transition that is distressing and dampening to college adjustment” (p.80). The transition process to university compels students to negotiate the loss of their home friends as well as the anxiety of developing new university friendships (Paul and Kelleher 1995). The role of friends was key to the participants in this study. Positive friendship networks could provide emotional and psychological support, but friendsickness was a barrier to transition. Close attachments to home friends sometimes prevented students from forming vital attachments to university friends. Crissman Ishler found that students were reluctant to commit to new friendships:

“This sense of loyalty to old friends prohibited the new students from fully committing to their new life at college. As a result, they did not start connecting to a new peer group, often felt lonely, and did not connect with the social aspect of their new environment” (2004: 527).

This loss of friendship groups has been equated with the grieving process. Paul and Brier (2001) refer to the preoccupation and grief associated with precollege friendships. In describing the stages of grief, Lindemann (1944) described three key steps to overcome grief: (1) emancipation from bondage to the deceased; (2) readjustment to a new environment in which the deceased is missing and (3) the formation of new relationships. If we accept that the loss of former friendships can be equated to losing a loved one we can apply his model to the transition process of students. Only by letting go of the ‘deceased’ – in this case past friendships – can students develop meaningful new relationships and reach Lindemann’s final stage. However when students are reluctant to let go of their former friends, this sense of grief can prevent the transition process and inhibit development, an issue that in a study conducted in 1978 was particularly prevalent amongst female students (Perry 1978 in Briggs et al. 2009). Although clearly a very different era, the issue of friendsickness and its impact on the transition process is one which was apparent in this study.

In this research project homesickness was a barrier to transition and could lead students to abandon their studies through an inability to break the ties with home. This was particularly a problem when feelings of homesickness caused the participants to continually revisit home and thereby hinder their own transition process. However, friendsickness could equally be a hindrance when students were so closely linked to home friends, they found it difficult to develop new friendship networks.

For some this process happened quickly after arrival, but for others this proved to be a slow and quite painful journey.

### **2.3 *Conceptions of Home***

A key concept in this study was the role played by home in the lives of the participants, and the way in which the shift in locus of 'home' played a key part in the transition process. Much has been written about the importance of 'home' from various perspectives including humanistic geography, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and a cultural/historical context (Bachelard 1964; Tuan 1974; Buttimer 1976; Relph 1976; Moore 2000). The role played by home in our sense of rootedness, security and self-identity has been widely recognised across all perspectives; however although recognised as a "profound centre of human existence" (Relph 1976: 43) the tensions between theoretical frameworks have made definitions problematic. A number of researchers have attempted to define the concept of home by exploring the various influences through the literature (Moore 2000; Molony 2010; Board 2014). Board (2014) summarises the varying conceptions and articulations of house and home which are presented in the literature and demonstrates how home is both a physical and symbolic space, but its significance can also lie in more subjective interpretations of 'home' and its meaning (Oswald et al. 2006). Moore 2000 identifies three areas of influence: the cultural, linguistic and historical context; the philosophical and phenomenological context; and the psychological context. From a philosophical perspective she demonstrates how the concept of home as a haven and the importance of bonds we form with place is a key tenet in philosophical and phenomenological work through the 1960s, 70s and 80s (Bachelard 1964, Relph 1976, Buttimer 1980).

Traditionally the UK higher education market was characterised by the traditional 'boarding school' model whereby students leave home and move into campus-based term-time accommodation, leading to a binary discourse of home/here and local/non-local (Finn 2017; Holton and Finn 2020). All the participants in this project followed this traditional trajectory and all eight students had elected to live in campus accommodation in their first year. However, it should be acknowledged that there has been a shift away from this boarding school model with increasing number of students electing to live at home and commute to university (Pokorny et al. 2017; Holton and Finn 2020). leading to a call for a reconsideration of concepts of 'home' and 'place'. Although much of the discussion around commuter or live at home (LAH) students problematises this method of attending university, seeing LAH students as 'missing out' on 'the student experience' and being hampered in



their efforts at identity formation (Holdsworth 2009; Abrahams and Ingram 2013), there is an increasing body of research which critiques this negative discourse and presents localism as a positive choice (Hinton 2011; Holton and Finn 2017; Holton and Finn 2020). This had led to fresh conceptualisations of how university students experience space and the role of place and mobility from an emotional and psychological perspective (Pokorny et al. 2017; Holton and Finn 2020). Holton and Finn (2020) conceive of place as less a physical anchor point and more a dwelling area, a liminoid space in which individual students can feel at home, opt in or out of their conflicting worlds, or reflect on experiences. They term these “belonging, pausing, feeling” (2020: 7). Drawing on the work of Fallov et al. (2013) they present an alternative conception of belonging as a mobile state in which feelings of in-betweenness or liminality are seen as part of the journey and pursuit of particular ways of being in the world (Abrahams and Ingram 2020). In developing their framework of mobile dwelling, Abrahams and Ingram present a new conceptualisation of place for LAH students whereby their experiences of dwelling in liminoid spaces around university create spaces in which they can develop and understand their own identities through a period of transition. In this way they introduce the concepts of dynamism and movement to place rather than the physical space more traditionally envisaged. Although this study does not explore the experience of LAH students, Abrahams and Ingram’s model connects ideas of place with concepts of liminality and in-betweenness explored in section 2.2.4.

Abrahams and Ingram’s contrast of place and space echo concepts developed by Skeggs et al. (2004) who draw a distinction between place as a distinct, stable location, and space as a mobile, volatile space, composed of the movements of the elements within it. Place can be presented as space which results in an apparent ‘authenticity’, allowing political claims to be made:

“space is not just a passive backdrop to human behaviour but is constantly produced and remade as groups struggle for power (or against powerlessness)” (Skeggs et al. 2004: 1839).

Although Skeggs et al. (2004) are largely concerned with the sexual politics of space and place, the conception of place as an entity that is endowed with meaning by the individuals and groups who occupy it, often for the purposes of creating identity, and space as the effect produced by the interaction of the elements within it has relevance for this study. This contrast of place and space as physical and psycho-social elements links to concepts of place explored here in section 2.3.2.

### 2.3.1 Concepts of insideness and outsideness

From the humanist geography tradition, Relph (1976) identifies place experience through the degree of attachment that a person has for a place, defined as 'insideness':

"If a person feels inside a place, he or she is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed...the more profoundly inside a place a person feels, the stronger will be his or her identity with that place."

(Seaman and Sowers 2008: 45)

Outsideness on the other hand is when a person is alienated from place and feels a separation with the world, for example feelings of homesickness when occupying a new place. The concept of 'here' and 'there' is one which appeared throughout the research in this project, however its symbolic interpretation was transposed as some participants compared the safety and security of 'home' (*there*) with the insecurity and alienation of university (*here*). Relph conceptualises varying levels of insideness, the most extreme of which he refers to as *existential insideness* and its opposite *existential outsideness*:

"Existential insideness occurs when a place is experienced unreflectively because it is known, familiar, filled with meanings, and objects and activities that have meaning. It is knowing implicitly that this is where you belong and are at home, in this house, or neighbourhood or region"

(Relph 2018: 10)

Existential outsideness is the state associated with the feelings of alienation or dislocation which is often felt when in a new place. Molony (2010) points to the fact that home can be the 'inside' place of safety and security, a refuge in the face of external exclusion. She argues that the sense of internal familiarity and welcome in the context of external uncertainty and exclusion can reinforce associations of safety and belonging with home. The participants in this study expressed feelings of alienation and dislocation when they arrived at university which represented the external uncertainty of a new environment. One of the aims of this study was to explore the role played by place attachment in the transition process of these individuals as they move from a state of (existential) outsideness to one of insideness.

### 2.3.2 Place attachment, identity and appropriation

An understanding of place and home has long been essential to human beings. The role of place and placelessness in human life and identity is a central theme in humanist geography (Relph 1976; Freestone and Liu 2016). Todres and Galvin (2010) explore the role of place in human existence and draw on the work of Heidegger to propose that the notion of 'dwelling' and 'mobility' are inherent

to the experience of existential wellbeing. Heidegger constructs home and 'being-at-home' in different ways: there is the inauthentic, self-numbing security of "at-homeness" (*zuhause*) which he sees as constricting and limiting. He argues that individuals must recognise the need to undertake a journey towards authenticity which will incorporate the anxiety of *unheimlich* or 'uncanny homelessness' (Heidegger 1978) but will ultimately lead to a more authentic home. *Zuhause* represents place in both its physical form (e.g. the family home) but also with the psychological connotations of taken-for-granted security. The journey from *zuhause* to authenticity involves undergoing a process of existential homelessness (Heidegger 1951; Mugerauer 2008) and this journey is representative of the transition process of First in Family students. They leave their *zuhause* or family home and often experience *unheimlich* or separation anxiety as they venture into the uncharted territory of university. Their successful transition to independence and autonomy is similar to Heidegger's notion of the more authentic homecoming at the end of the journey (Heidegger 1951). Moreover the anxiety of existential homelessness can be the catalyst for progress:

"Facing this "not being at home", although an anxiety-provoking experience, can also open up a path of movement; and this can provide an energising potential that can itself be felt as well-being"  
(Todres and Galvin 2010:3)

This concept links to the challenge model of resilience whereby stress is seen as an enhancer of competence (Garmezy et al. 1984) and the argument that resilience causes a person not simply to thrive despite adversity but rather because of it (McCord 1994). To relate the concept to this study, the anxiety of leaving home and undergoing the sometimes painful process of navigating the in-between space to establish a new home can lead to emotional and psychological growth as individuals transition from a state of dependence to independence.

The psychological context of home drew heavily on Jungian theory to present home as a symbol of self based on the 'collective unconscious' with the focus on the psychological significance of home to the individual. Two key theories within this field are *place attachment* which examines the processes by which people form attachments to home (Giuliani and Feldman 1993) and *place identity* which is concerned with how places contribute to self-identity (Giuliani and Feldman 1993; Moore 2000). Place identity has been defined as:

"a potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings which will change over the course of our lifecycle"  
(Proshansky et al. 1983:60).

The way in which individuals invest home and place with meaning is a key theme in the literature. The concept of *place appropriation* was developed to refer to the process by which individuals attach meaning and significance to places and in so doing are themselves transformed (Altman and

Werner 1985) and coincides with an “actualization of the self” (Korosec-Serfaty 1985: 76). Horwitz and Tognoli (1982) identified the transition process undergone by individuals as they separate from a family home, progressed through places which were ‘not home’ and then created their own home, similar to Heidegger’s notion of a journey from *zu Hause* to authenticity. They conclude that home is closely connected to an individual’s sense of personal growth and change and describe home as “a living process or a construction” (Horwitz and Tognoli 1982: 339). They also question whether the perception of young adults of ‘not being at home’ in their residence could suggest that the individual had not sufficiently separated from the parental home (p. 337), a concept which was further developed by Hausmann et al. (2007) who suggested that students with a very close relationship to parents could find it more difficult to transition to university life and develop a sense of belonging. This echoed with the participants in this study who varied in their processes of transitioning from home: those who had very close links to home and family seemed to find it more difficult to undertake the separation from the family home. Three of the participants exhibited extreme homesickness or separation anxiety. Although it is not possible to draw meaningful conclusions around gender difference with only one male participant in this study, it is interesting to note that the three who struggled to separate were all female. A study into the adjustment processes of first-year students in the US found that women who were less well-adjusted to university life exhibited “higher levels of separation anxiety and enmeshment seeking” while their male counterparts were more “disconnected from significant others” (Holmbeck and Wandrei 1993: 73). Far from separation anxiety, the one male participant in this research (Barry) showed signs of ‘conscious discontinuity’ (see Section 2.3.4).

The concept of home as a signifier of transition, growth and development occurs frequently in the literature (Horwitz and Tognoli 1982; Atman and Werner 1985; Korosec-Serfaty 1985; Moore 2000; Molony 2010). Molony identifies home as both a physical/existential place and a process and explores the challenges inherent in the transitional process:

“achieving at-homeness throughout life is a process of integration of the self with the environment; person and environment become “a part of” the other, thus opening the “self” to possibility, growth, and a future temporal and spatial perspective.” (Molony 2010: 303)

The integration process is marked with specific stages such as ‘nesting’ (Young 1998) which is the active process of creating a home. Molony argues that successful integration or at-homeness enables the ability to grow and develop.

In seeking to provide empirical research with a more coherent theoretical framework, Sixsmith (1986) conducted a phenomenological study with a small cohort of higher education students to

explore the psychological significance of three aspects of their experience of home: the personal, the social and the physical. Her study found clear parallels with earlier work in the area of the emotional significance of home (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977) and the role of home as a place of stability from which one can depart into the world and return (Buttimer 1980):

“Time and again people referred to a sense of belonging, a feeling of relaxation and comfort which to them signified being completely at home, that is, unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular locality”  
(Sixsmith 1986: 294)

Although this research was conducted over thirty years ago, the role of home in creating a sense of belonging and security continues to be represented in the literature to this day.

### 2.3.3 Physical objects and spaces

In exploring the complexity and tensions between the varying approaches to the study of home, Moore points out that one of the least addressed areas is the physical aspect of home as opposed to the personal and psychological (2000). The work conducted by Young (1998) was primarily with older people moving into residential homes, but her findings are also applicable to other age groups. She uses the metaphor of ‘nesting’ to describe the physical process of personalising the physical environment in order to create a sense of home. This is both a physical and emotional process, a transitional process which contributes to ‘at-homeness’ and helps to create a sense of identity. She also believes that furnishing the home with belongings which have a significant history for the individual can serve as an affirmation of personal identity and connect the new place with the old, which was particularly important for those who had moved recently. Molony stresses the importance of furnishing the home space with personal possessions:

“One key to permitting a new door to open seems to be the ability to link the present with the past in a meaningful way, creating a continuity ... Personal possessions or furnishings may provide the touchstones for this link, providing feelings of comfort, belonging, and continuity”  
(Molony 2010: 304)

Dixon and Durrheim (2004) emphasise the role of the physical environment in the creation of self identity. They outline two key elements of place identity from the literature and add a third:

1. A deep-seated familiarity with the physical environment or sense of ‘insideness’ (Relph 1976) or ‘rootedness’ (Tuan 1980)
2. An affective-evaluative component (Proshansky 1983); a sense of emotional belonging to or psychological investment in particular environments
3. The way in which material environments may come to “express or symbolise the self” which can be illustrated through the “personalisation of the home” (Dixon and Durrheim 2004: 458)

#### 2.3.4 Journeys away from home

The increasing exploration of the processes by which home is imbued with meaning has extended to journeys away from home. For Case (1996) the concept of home becomes more meaningful through leaving and returning. Dixon and Durrheim (2004) argue that our sense of 'home' is implicit and unconscious, and it is only at times of transition or change that its significance becomes apparent through the sense of dislocation: "loss of place tends to provoke strong social and psychological responses precisely because it entails a loss of self" (2004: 458). When we are forced to leave home this can result in disruption and dislocation. The impact on elderly people of entering residential care has been widely recognised in the literature (Young 1998; Molony 2010; Board 2014) however little attention has been paid to the effect on young people leaving home for the first time to study at university. This is perhaps surprising considering that British students are disproportionately more likely to move out of the parental home to attend university than any other country (Whyte 2019); in 2018-19 over eighty per cent of full-time undergraduate students lived away from the family home during term time (HESA 2020b).

Chow and Healey (2008) investigate the transition process of students who leave home to study at university and seeks to identify the 'mediating variables' that influence students' place identity and place attachment during this process and how their place identity evolves. They found that the transition from home to university had a significant impact on their participants' self-identity and image: "dislocation undermined participants' social psychological processes" (Chow and Healey 2008: 367). The disruption had both negative and positive connotations in terms of a disruption of identity while at the same time representing the commencement of a new stage in life: a "conscious discontinuity" or separation from a former environment and a move towards a new one as part of a changing identity. However they also noted the importance of continuity in developing a sense of place. An important aspect of place attachment is the links to childhood and dependence, and the disruption involved in creating a new adult identity and assuming the adult responsibilities of independence. The next section investigates the role of capitals in the transition process, including the impact of economic capital.

## 2.4 *Capitals*

In looking at the experiences of First in Family students as they transition into higher education, I have drawn on the work of Bourdieu in relation to habitus, agency and field. The impact of habitus

on non-traditional students is a topic that occurs regularly in the literature, particularly in consideration of working-class students and their experiences in higher education (Reay 1995; Reay 2010; Reay 2015, Crozier et al. 2008, Thomas and Quinn 2017, Scandone 2018). This project focuses on First in Family students, a group that is often subsumed into a larger class-based or socio-economic subset, but there are a number of similarities between these groups designated 'non-traditional'. There are challenges in working with Bourdieusian theory which has become so ubiquitous in this field there are accusations it is "sprayed throughout academic texts like intellectual hair spray" in order to add gravitas (Reay 2004: 432). It can be a difficult concept to work with due to shifting definitions and general 'slipperiness' (Tooley and Darby 1998). This project will attempt to avoid the accusation of hairspray and consider habitus in a meaningful way within the context of field and agency. As concepts of transition and change are integral to this project, the issue of the split self or habitus clivé is particularly relevant.

The impact of social, economic and cultural capital on the choices made by non-traditional students and their experiences in higher education is also widely covered in the literature (Reay, Archer, Bathmaker, etc). The concept of classed habitus (Bourdieu 1984) sheds light on the way in which non-traditional students experience higher education and the dispositions, habits and self-image which can leave them feeling they do not fit in (or in Bourdieu's oft-repeated phrase 'like a fish out of water'). Coulson et al. (2017) refers to universities as "classed institutions which normalise high levels of cultural capital and educational privilege" (p.23). However Bourdieu's conceptions of cultural capital encompasses only those forms of culture which are recognised and valorised by the elite, thereby positioning those from backgrounds which lack recognised forms of capital as 'disadvantaged'. This deficit view has been challenged in recent years and alternative arguments and conceptions of cultural capital put forward (Basit 2014). Yosso drew on critical race theory to present a framework of alternative capitals to reflect the value inherent in non-mainstream cultures, those which are marginalised and devalued by the privileged elite. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Framework (2005) will be considered here in relation to the experiences of First in Family students.

#### 2.4.1 Habitus

Habitus is a concept which has formed the basis of much research into the sociology of education, particularly in the area of widening participation, but it is a highly contested topic (Reay 2004). Habitus is a complex and dynamic framework which combines the individual and the collective, the personal and the social, the past and the present. Habitus is both structured and structuring: an

individual's 'conditions of existence' – primary socialisation and social class – combine to form the structure of the habitus. This in turn generates the dispositions that structure and guide social practice and behaviour (Bourdieu 1990: 60). For Bourdieu, habitus is a set of dispositions which predisposes individuals to act in ways consistent with the social structures of their group or class. These dispositions include our way of thinking, seeing and perceiving the world, our internalisation of the social norms which we are exposed to and our interactions with our social world. Habitus also exists within the body: hexis is the physical manifestation of habitus, the bodily expression of dispositions through our posture, way of speaking, walking, occupying space ("the body is in the social world, but the social world is also in the body" Bourdieu 1990: 190). Thus habitus is the way we identify ourselves and also how others identify us. But habitus is both individual and collective; the body becomes not just the property of the individual but the site of a collective history where the personal combines with the social:

"Bodily hexis is political mythology realised, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking"

(Bourdieu 1977: 95)

Habitus cannot be viewed in isolation but as symbiotic to the field in which it operates – it is most comfortable when operating within a field with which it is familiar. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of a fish in water to describe those who take their social world for granted, not feeling the water or having to think about how to swim (Bourdieu 1989). However a new or unaccustomed field can cause a dislocation of habitus, leaving the individual experiencing a sense of alienation or not fitting in. Middle-class students have been shown to adapt to university life much more readily than their working-class counterparts due to parents and schools "endowing their habitus by providing insights and relevant experiences" (Crozier et al. 2010: 67), or smoothing the transition through the transmission of social and cultural capital (Basit 2014). Less privileged students lack the same self-confidence and are more likely to display academic anxieties and express feelings of "not being up to it" or "not fitting in" (*ibid* p.68), a perception which reappears regularly in the research (Reay 2012). It has been argued that it is this unfamiliarity with the field which leads First in Family students to find it more problematic to establish a fit within higher education (Byrom and Lightfoot 2012); students from more privileged backgrounds find the fit easier because their habitus is more accustomed to the field of higher education and they have a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990; Bathmaker et al. 2013).

There are undoubtedly challenges in working with habitus as a framework as Bourdieu is often vague in his own conceptualisation of the term, leading to the "indeterminacy and changing notions of habitus within Bourdieu's writing" (Reay 1995: 357). It has been critiqued as too broad and



indeterminate to be useful to researchers (Sullivan 2002), “so slippery as to be useless” (Tooley and Darby 1998: 59) and applied in an uncritical manner due to an unquestioning “adulation of great thinkers” (*ibid*: 56). One of the criticisms of habitus is that it is too rigid and deterministic, not allowing the possibility of change (Jenkins 1992; Mills 2008): social structures are embodied in individuals from early childhood which creates a rigidly defined habitus with the result that people act in a way that reproduces the social structures, thereby creating a self-perpetuating circle (Nash 1999). Indeed, one of the so-called ‘slippery’ elements of habitus is its degree of durability. Bourdieu argued that the dispositions originating in habitus were robust and therefore likely to stay unified (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The durability of the habitus is seen as a source of psychological stability because it protects itself from experiences which would challenge it:

“through the systematic ‘choices’ it makes ... the habitus tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible”  
(Bourdieu 1990: 61)

Yet Bourdieu also proposed that it is an active schema, acting as the mediator between structure and agency (Bourdieu 1974) and although largely predetermined, can change in response to new experiences: it is

“an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures”  
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133).

This ‘slipperiness’ of definition has caused some to argue that habitus is of limited use as a conceptual framework as there is no clear connection between individual agency, habitus and social classification (LiPuma 1993). If habitus and social class are inextricably linked, then why do people brought up within the same family or class environment not act in the same way? Agency has a part to play, but this would undermine the argument of habitus being a system of dispositions which governs our behaviour. Nash argues that Bourdieu has two theories of reproduction: the **specific habitus model** which implies that more than one habitus exists within a class and therefore the trajectories of individuals within that class will be influenced by their specific habitus. The **general habitus model** Nash describes as “pseudo-statistical” in that by some “profoundly inexplicable mechanism” individuals embody a generalised habitus which has an inbuilt objective chance of a different outcome (Nash 1999: 178). He believes that the specific habitus model, or the belief that people from a similar background can have more than one habitus, can explain why some individuals from less privileged backgrounds do go to university and thrive and succeed, while others do not, or find the barriers insurmountable.

### 2.4.2 Habitus clivé

Despite his arguments that the dispositions created by habitus are durable and unyielding, Bourdieu acknowledged that profound changes in individual trajectories can provoke a mismatch between primary habitus and the new habitus demanded by the new field, causing a *hysteresis* effect:

“As a result of the hysteresis effect...practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted” (Bourdieu 1977: 78)

The hysteresis of habitus is viewed as one of the principal causes of the “structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities” (*ibid*: 83). As the dispositions which form habitus are disproportionately formed through early experience, it is the more secure middle classes who are more likely to seize the opportunities presented by new field opportunities (Bourdieu 1996) – they know how to ‘play the game’ (Bathmaker 2013).

“Whoever wants to win this game, appropriate the stakes, catch the ball ... must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and the logic of the game” (Bourdieu 1990: 64)

When our conditions of existence change fundamentally, causing our dispositions to become disrupted, this causes a painful dividing of the self, or *habitus clivé*:

“The product of such a contradictory injunction is doomed to be ambivalent about himself...to produce a habitus divided against itself, and doomed to a kind of double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities” (Bourdieu 1999: 511)

Bourdieu admitted to himself experiencing this painful sense of dislocation, a “destabilized habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division, generating suffering” (Bourdieu 2000: 16). When habitus and field become dislocated, this can cause a self which is painfully divided. Social mobility causes individuals to experience new fields which leads to the habitus being forced to adapt to ‘critical challenges’; or modify its structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133).

This concept of a divided habitus is not unanimously accepted, other researchers have identified a more positive process of managing the change and transformation in habitus. Abrahams and Ingram (2013) refer to a ‘chameleon habitus’ with greater capacity for self-reflection, Reay talks about “a constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self” as the habitus adapts and moves between fields (Reay et al. 2009:1103). In these studies the participants expressed a pride in their working-class identity and a desire to maintain this which led them “deconstruct and reconstruct their identities”, moving between multiple versions of themselves (Crozier and Reay 2008: 3).

However the concept of habitus clivé has been supported in other research, where working-class students at elite institutions perceive identification as a university student as incompatible with a working class social background leading them to risk breaking with their background (Jetten et al. 2008) or even dropping out of university due to a ‘fundamental clash’ between working-class habitus and the middle-class culture of university which leads to a “severe habitus dislocation” (Lehmann 2009: 12). Friedman examined habitus through the lens of upward mobility and found that most of his participants had experienced a painful and unsettling process, battling feelings of inferiority in their new field and guilt and estrangement when engaging with their original social spaces. He describes how social mobility often brought with it psychological and emotional injuries. Friedman concludes that the high propensity to display habitus clivé amongst his participants is a challenge to Bourdieu’s conception of unitary class habitus:

“the contemporary British habitus may be subject to significantly more inculcation, alteration and disruption over the lifecourse than Bourdieu envisaged” (Friedman 2016: 37)

When exploring issues of inheritance in relation to social mobility, Bourdieu proposes that the challenges inherent in the relationship between son and father lead to multiple identities and habitus clivé (Bourdieu 1999b). The father wants the son to inherit his dispositions, or habitus, but at the same time wants the son to surpass him and thereby reject his habitus in forging his own. Bourdieu describes this as killing the father and describes the feeling of being ‘torn’: the more the son succeeds (in achieving his father’s ambition for him) the more he fails by coming closer to ‘killing’ him. Conversely the more he fails, the more he succeeds in achieving the father’s subconscious desire to keep his son close. This ‘contradiction of succession’ leads to “a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence” (*ibid*: 511).

Abrahams and Ingram (2013) used data from the initial phase of the Paired Peers project to explore the experience of local students attending university while still living at home. This has traditionally been viewed as problematic for identity formation as moving between the two worlds of home and university make it difficult for local students to develop a sense of belonging in either world (Holdsworth 2009). However, Abrahams and Ingram argue that the ‘cleft habitus’ experienced by home students moving between the different worlds can be seen as a benefit rather than a drawback:

“We argue that in shifting back and forth between misaligned fields people can create their own differently structured space that is neither one place nor the other - nor is it a compromised space between the two worlds rather they open up a space of new cultural possibilities” (Abrahams & Ingram 2013: 3)

They discovered that the local working-class participants in study used various strategies in order to overcome the conflict in habitus from occupying these two separate worlds, namely distancing from the university field, distancing from the home field, or adapting to both fields. They describe this as “a disassociation with one field in order to overcome the habitus tug of the competing fields” (2013: 5). Although none of the participants in this study were home students, there was evidence of similar strategies being employed in relation to home. Some distanced from the university field by remaining closely linked to home (e.g. Tricia; Lauren), others distanced from the home field by moving away from local friends and lives (e.g. Barry; Satin). Abrahams & Ingram describe the strategy of adaptation as a deliberate process, often involving a conscious modification of speech, behaviour and bodily hexus in order to adapt to both fields, which they interpret as evidence of what Ingram terms a “reconciled habitus” (Ingram 2011) where an individual can adapt to both competing fields.

#### 2.4.3 Social and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu referred to capital as the underlying force which governs the social world and which renders the games of society something other than a simple exercise of chance offering equality of opportunity to all; the accumulation and distribution of capital ensures that everything is not equally possible or impossible (Bourdieu 1990 : 241). Capital self-perpetuates through a process of social inertia: the structures of capital reproduce themselves through institutions of which they are the product, thereby ensuring the continued domination of the dominant classes. Thus for Bourdieu the education system is integral to the perpetuation of an unfair system since it advantages those who have access to the dominant culture from the home environment and prevents those from lower classes from gaining educational credentials, yet justifies itself as meritocratic and thereby contributes to the maintenance of the status quo (Sullivan 2002; Aubrey and Riley 2017).

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: the embodied state (dispositions of the mind and body), the objective state (material cultural artefacts) and the institutionalised state (such as educational qualifications). Cultural capital is intrinsically linked to cultural reproduction, or the system whereby the dominant classes ensure their own perpetuation through privileging a set of cultures which is mediated through the education system. Bourdieu called the transmission of cultural capital “the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment” (Bourdieu 2003: 17) and attacks the education system as one of the principal forces in maintaining an unjust social structure through its sanctioning of “the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986: 48). Cultural capital is seen as the currency of the privileged:

“the inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations only really belongs (although it is theoretically offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves” (Bourdieu 1974: 73)

Cultural capital is a familiarity with the dominant culture in society and what that dominant culture has deemed ‘desirable’ or “symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu 1974: 174). This includes knowledge of ‘desirable’ cultural artefacts such as art, music, literature and predominantly the ability to understand and use ‘educated’ language. For Bourdieu, there was a direct correlation between success in education and the possession of cultural capital: those who lack access to the language of education will be prevented from engaging with the system and therefore impeded from progressing through the education system. In effect they will not understand the language used by those transmitting the educational capital they are seeking to gain. As education systems presuppose the possession of cultural capital, this creates an unequal playing field which, according to Bourdieu, penalises the lower classes.

“By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture.” (Bourdieu, 1977: 494)

He argues that cultural goods can only be apprehended by those who possess the ‘code’ to decipher them (Bourdieu 1974).

Although commonly seen in terms of a shared language or cultural reference points, others have sought to broaden the definition to include other aspects of inequality such as levels of confidence and entitlement (Reay 2004). Research has shown that feelings of inadequacy and academic anxiety are far more prevalent amongst working-class students (Reay et al. 2010; Crozier et al. 2010; Jetten et al. 2008):

“working class students, who have already experienced fewer opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital than their middle class counterparts, find that this relative disadvantage persists once they get to university” (Reay 2012: 4)

Bathmaker et al. (2013) describe the mobilisation of different forms of capital in order to gain advantage as ‘playing the game’ and show how the privileged middle class students have internalised this advantage through their pre-university social experiences.

#### 2.4.4 Alternative capitals

Yosso challenged Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital on the grounds that it perpetuated rather than subverted dominant power structures. Bourdieu saw the knowledges possessed by the upper and middle classes as a form of capital which is valuable within a hierarchical society. Some are born into families whose knowledge is deemed valuable and inherit this capital, others access the knowledge of the upper and middle classes and thereby social mobility through formal education. Bourdieu himself recognised that

"The major thrust of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture and, by the same token, of the illegitimacy of the cultures of the dominated groups or classes, comes from exclusion, which perhaps has the most symbolic force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion"

(Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 42)

Bourdieu argues that the appropriation of works of art depends on the mastery the viewer has over the instruments of appropriation or ability to decipher the code. The cultural artefacts he uses as the measure of cultural capital are visits to the theatre, concerts, museums (Bourdieu 1974). He regards regular attendance at theatres, museums, etc as indicators of cultural wealth and argues that individuals from more privileged backgrounds have been given an early initiation or familiarity with this world which increases the ease with which they can appropriate it. Yosso argues that if cultural capital is limited to the knowledge and skills possessed by the privileged members of society, then only certain knowledges are perceived as valuable:

"cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are *valued* by privileged groups in society"

(Yosso 2005: 76)

This conception positions White, middle class culture as the norm against which all other cultures are judged, and Yosso asks why those on the margins are positioned as disadvantaged through an apparent lack of a very specific and tightly defined form of cultural capital. There are other forms of cultural capital possessed by marginalised groups but these are not recognised or valued or recognised by the dominant classes or traditional cultural capital theory.

Yosso draws on Critical Race Theory to challenge the traditional deficit mode of thinking and create an alternative framework called "community cultural wealth" which recognises the cultural assets of groups deemed 'disadvantaged' (Fig 2.4; Yosso 2005).

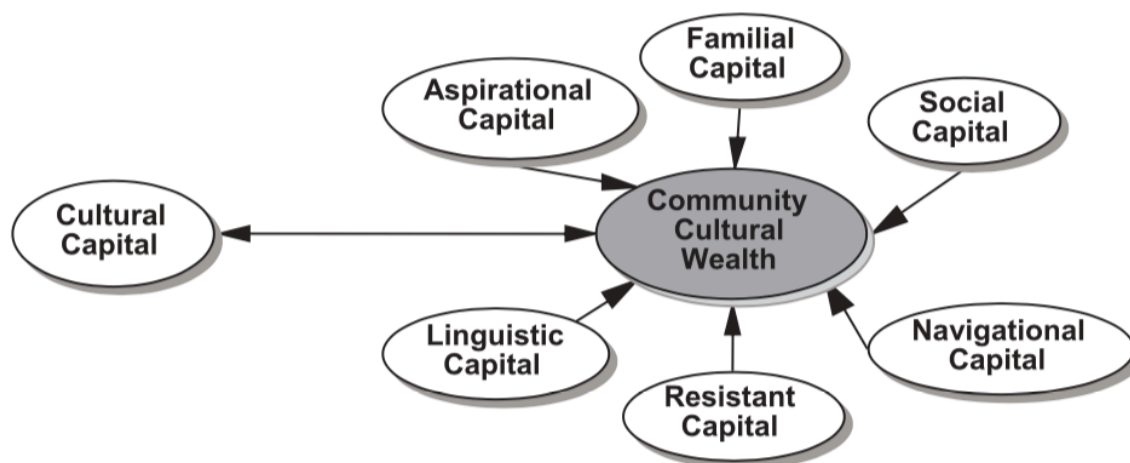


Fig 2.4 - The model of Community Cultural Wealth, Yosso 2005: 78

The alternative capitals developed by Yosso include:

- Aspirational capital – “the ability to maintain hopes for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers” (2005: 77).
- Familial capital - cultural knowledges developed within the community, community history. Commitment to community wellbeing. Communal bonds, funds of knowledge
- Social capital - community resources and networks of people providing emotional as well as instrumental support.
- Navigational capital - the skills to navigate traditionally alien or hostile social institutions.
- Resistant capital - knowledges and skills grounded in resistance to inequality.

The concept of aspirational capital as a form of cultural wealth was particularly significant in this study. Drawing on the work of Gándara conducted with Chicana groups, aspirational capital refers to the “culture of possibility” (Yosso 2005: 78) created when the link between parents’ current occupational status and children’s academic attainment is broken through the aspirations of the parents that their children can achieve higher status. Basit (2014) also refers to aspirational capital in terms of the verbal encouragement provided by working class parents. Equally important was the idea of ‘resiliency’, the positive coping mechanisms developed by children growing up in problematic and stressful environments:

“a set of inner resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning” (Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2000: 229)

Yosso's work is largely concerned with People of Colour but her framework can be applied to other groups designated 'disadvantaged'. In particular the concept of aspirational capital and the idea of resiliency resonates with students from First in Family backgrounds who often lack the specific forms of capital designated by Bourdieu.

### **Summary**

This study draws on the literature surrounding the concept of transition to explore the journey taken by First in Family undergraduate students as they negotiate their way through first and second year. Theories of liminality or in-betweenness are instrumental in highlighting the sense of dislocation experienced by students caught between one identity and another, but this area is not been widely explored in relation to First in Family students. The shock of liminality and sense of alienation and dislocation is more extreme when an individual is unprepared for the experience, and lacks knowledge about the new state they are transitioning to. This makes this particularly relevant to First in Family students and an understanding of how they negotiate liminality is crucial to our ability to help them transition. Conceptions of home and place have been investigated to shed light on the important role played by home to the students in this study and how a sense of place was integral to their development of self-identity. Again this is an area which has not been explored in the context of First in Family students. This section ended with an analysis of Bourdieusian concepts of habitus and capital and how these contribute to our understanding of factors which can impede a successful transition process. A lack of social and cultural capital can be a hindrance to First in Family students, but the presence of alternative capitals such as aspirational capital can offset that imbalance and provide students with drive and aspiration. This links to the resilience shown by those who exceed expectations in overcoming adversity. The concept of resilience in relation to First in Family students has not been widely investigated but contributes to our understanding of why some individuals overcome barriers where others do not.

This study focuses on the experience of a small cohort of First in Family students to explore their experience of transition in order to provide answers to some of the areas still unexplored in the literature. The next section will explain the methodological approach I took to this research, and the methods I adopted.



## 2.5 Conceptual Framework

This project draws on a number of theoretical and conceptual areas within the fields of psychology and sociology. This section presents a table to simplify and clarify the conceptual framework which underpins the study.

Table 2.3 – Key concepts used in this study

Topic	Key Authors	Key Concepts
<b>Resilience</b>	Garmezy et al.  Gauntlett 2018; Seidman and Pedersen 2003	Resilience; Protective factors; Triadic model; challenge model Academic resilience
<b>Transition</b>	Ecclestone 2010 - Gale and Parker 2014 Morgan 2020 Hope 2017 Turner (1964), van Gennep (1960) Palmer et al. 2009 Winnicott 1971  Paul and Brier 2001; Crissman Ishler 2004 Wyndham-Strydom 2016	Transition as a process of being and becoming Transition as development SET model Transition into HE Liminality Transition into HE Transitional objects  Friendsickness  Friendship networks
<b>Home</b>	Winnicott Moore 2000, Molony 2010, Finn 2017; Abrahams  Heidegger  Sixsmith 1986; Young 1998; Molony 2010	Role of objects Role of home  <i>Zuhause</i> , journeys  Place attachment
<b>Capitals</b>	Bourdieu  Yosso	Social capitals; Cultural capitals; habitus  Alternative capitals, Community cultural wealth model

## Chapter 3      Methodology

This study was carried out as part of my Doctorate in Education at Bournemouth University and I set out to understand the experience of students as they transitioned through their first two years of university. My aim was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the experiences of First in Family students over the two years. From an epistemological and ontological perspective, I adopted an interpretive co-constructionist approach and I therefore felt that a small-scale qualitative approach was the most appropriate. I was aware that my research might involve investigating issues which were difficult for participants to articulate, or which could be easier to articulate using various methods such as photo elicitation, therefore my methods needed to accommodate this. The research was exploratory in nature and one of my principal aims was to let the participants foreground issues which were important to them rather than imposing a pre-determined narrative. As the research was conducted over a 20-month period I wanted to tailor my methods to capture their individual trajectories as they navigated their transition through the different phases and stages of their research. I found that their journeys were idiosyncratic and the use of qualitative methods gave them the opportunity to articulate their experiences and highlight the factors that were important to them. In seeking to shed light on areas which might be overlooked or unconsidered, I elected to use a variety of qualitative methods including visual as well as verbal tools. The advantage of a multi-method approach is that it provides flexibility and the opportunity to access areas which might remain hidden in a verbal narrative. Individuals are rarely able to fully explain their actions, intentions or motivations, they can provide stories of what they did and some of the reasons why. Sometimes these stories are interpreted differently with hindsight or in the light of subsequent experiences. Using a range of interconnected methods can help a qualitative researcher “make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied” (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 12). In this study I found the use of in-depth semi-structured interview and photographic techniques allowed me to explore the participants’ evolving articulations of their own experiences and reflections on those experiences. Any co-constructionist approach entails relying on the willingness and ability of participants to create and contribute materials, and this involved some limitations as well as benefits which will be explored throughout the Chapter.

### **3.1 Philosophical approach**

This section will present an overview of my philosophical approach. My research is located within a broadly social constructionist paradigm (Taylor and Ussher 2001) and I adopted a descriptive case study methodology (Yin 2012) using focus groups and in-depth interviews as the main forms of data collection.

#### 3.1.1 Ontology, epistemology and axiology

From an epistemological perspective, this study is interpretivist and located within a social constructionist paradigm, based on my belief that knowledge is subjective and socially constructed. Pring (2000) describes the philosophical positions which underlie epistemology as the difference between a subjective and objective world, or the perception of knowledge which is tangible and 'out there' (positivist approach) as opposed to that which is constructed by each individual in their own context (interpretivist approach). In relation to social research, ontology refers to the study of social reality and its existence in relation to human understanding and interpretation (Crotty 1998); subjectivists view reality as being created through the understanding and perceptions of the people involved (Guba and Lincoln 1998). In this study I set out to investigate the social reality of the participants and their understanding and interpretation of it. Specifically I wanted to construct ways in which they could articulate and reflect on their evolving interpretations of their experiences of transitioning through university life, reflecting on their interactions with place, social relations, identity development and learning.

Crotty describes knowledge as:

“constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (1998: 42)

In this sense knowledge is co-created through social interaction and dialogue. This research was conducted with First in Family students who were exploring a world and experience that was new to them. By inviting students to take the lead on the focus of the research through their choice of the images which directed the discussion, I was creating a space where knowledge was co-created. Through their stories, images and interpretations, we were both involved in making meaningful an environment which invited interpretation as they had fewer of the assumptions which other students might have relied on in terms of making sense of their experiences.

In social constructionist research the contextuality of the participants is key, in other words the way in which they shape their context and are shaped by it: the experience of the individuals cannot be seen as separate from the context in which it was experienced. In this research project, I perceived the 'reality' I was seeking to understand as the lived experience of First in Family students in their first two years of higher education. I believed this reality to be constructed through their individual social and cultural contexts, therefore I needed to adopt a research methodology which would allow an exploration of those contexts and their interpretations of them. Only by exploring their perceptions could I reach an understanding of reality as they experienced it.

Much of the research into First in Family students is qualitative in nature, but there is little work which takes a similar approach in terms of co-creation. I was both insider and outsider as an academic within the institution but acting in my role as research student at a different institution (a divide that was made clear through their Participant Information Sheets). The relationship between myself and the students operated on different levels: on one level I was an academic at the institution, on another level I was also a student. One of the aspects of a study conducted over two years is the changing relationship with the participants. As the research progressed so did the relationship: the participants would ask me how my research was going, much in the way we would discuss their academic assignments. Some of them said how they looked forward to the sessions and were disappointed when the research ended. Although insider-outsider relationships require careful ethical consideration to ensure that participants are respected and protected, there are advantages to a relationship of trust developing. I felt that my position as fellow-student, and the trust they had in me as a researcher, gave them the space to explore issues with confidence and allowed me insights which I would not have had in a more distanced research relationship. This level of insight together with the length of the research process helped me to understand the transition processes and experiences of the students in a way that is rarely explored in the literature.

It is important to acknowledge the implications of this position of co-creator. The data is constructed through the process of interview and analysis. The co-constructed interview is a collaborative method of research which enables deep and rich exploration of complex human relationships and experiences (Patti and Ellis 2017; Talmy 2011). I was not operating as an independent observer but rather an integral part of the data creation and therefore needed to acknowledge my own experiences and viewpoints which would provide the lens through which I interpreted the data. My situation as insider-outsider and former First in Family student could potentially lead me to make assumptions about the experiences of others through my own unconscious bias. Research shows that most people have a 'bias blind spot' whereby they can detect bias in others but are blind to

their own (Williamson and Foley 2018). One of the dangers of an embedded position as a researcher is that you can shape the data to fit your preconceptions which can happen when research is strongly structured. In my position I felt that one way to try to avoid overly influencing the research direction was by adopting a methodological approach which foregrounded the student voice and allowed the participants to choose what to talk about with minimal direction from me.

From an ontological perspective, this project sought to understand the reality of the experience of a small group of students from a particular background. The experiences and interpretations investigated were specific to the individuals undergoing them. My ontological position was neither one of human universality, which would render my findings generalisable to all students from similar backgrounds, nor was it individualistic (Höijer 2008). The ontological assumption which underpins this work is that there is some level of homogeneity between individuals from a similar background (i.e. First in Family) situated within a similar context (commencing undergraduate study of comparable courses at the same institution) and that the findings from this study can provide knowledge which can help us to understand the processes undergone by other students in a similar context. From a generalisability perspective, the findings from this study could be used as the basis of future larger studies which could generate knowledge generalisable to a wider population (issues of generalisability are investigated in Section 3.4.1).

### **3.2 *Methodological framework***

Since the ‘paradigm wars’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gage 1989) gave way to the ‘paradigm dialogue’ (Taylor and Medina 2018) there have been tensions between the relative benefits of positivist and interpretive approaches in education research. Policy-makers tend to favour statistical validity therefore the funding has often been seen to follow positivist studies however influential researchers such as Joe Kincheloe (2004) have argued that scientific approaches are too reductionist when it comes to understanding the student experience and that a pragmatic approach is more appropriate. Education research has seen an increasing emphasis on the importance of the reflective practitioner developing an understanding of the inner life-worlds of their students, an emphasis which lends itself to interpretive enquiry rather than a focus on quantitative measures (Scott and Usher 1996). The new era of dialogue encourages a more flexible approach to educational research rather than the heated paradigmatic dichotomy previously witnessed. Interpretivist research focuses on the individual, seeking to understand the subjective world of their lived experience (Yin 2016; Denzin and Lincoln 2017). An interpretative methodology will foreground the participant voice

without modifying or subverting it in the light of researcher preconceptions; in other words, allowing the participant to talk freely about their thoughts and experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). As this research project set out to understand the experience of a small group of First in Family students it was fundamental that they were able to describe their journey into and through university. I believed an interpretivist methodology to be the most appropriate but considered different approaches as outlined in Section 3.2.1.

### 3.2.1 Grounded theory and phenomenology

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) argue that it is more appropriate for a researcher to view their epistemological philosophy as a continuum rather than a dichotomy of polar opposites, and this was the case in this study. Initially grounded theory was considered as a methodological framework. However grounded theory requires the researcher to approach the data with no conceptual framework but rather to allow the theory to emerge through:

“a continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. A central feature of this analytic approach is ... constant comparative analysis” (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 72)

Although this project was largely data-led and the findings led to a reconceptualization of the framework, the conceptual framework surrounding transitions and the role of place and capitals created a lens which rendered a grounded theory approach inappropriate.

A descriptive phenomenological approach was also considered on the basis that phenomenology investigates how participants experience phenomena and uses in-depth interviews as a primary tool. Finlay (2014) explains that the distinguishing feature of a phenomenological approach is the need to see afresh, to put aside or ‘bracket’ pre-existing attitudes, understandings and interpretations in order to view the phenomena in its natural essence. She argues that from a Husserlian approach, “past knowledge (specifically theoretical or scientific understandings) and ontological assumptions” must be put aside (Finlay 2014: 122). In an earlier paper she argued that the researcher must resist applying external frameworks or judgements (Finlay 2009: 9). In this study the researcher did not start from the point of adopting an ‘open phenomenological attitude’ but rather sought to interpret meaning in the light of existing theoretical understandings, as outlined in previous sections. Therefore a phenomenological approach did not seem appropriate in this instance.

### 3.2.2 Case study approach

Case study research is an empirical investigation that explores a ‘contemporary phenomenon’ (i.e. the case) within a real-world context, particularly when “the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin 2014: 16). This definition is particularly relevant to this study which sets out to research First in family students where the boundaries between the phenomenon (their lived experience in higher education) and the context (their social and cultural background) are not clearly defined. Yin also argues for multiple sources of evidence and triangulation of methods (*ibid*). In this study triangulation was achieved through using varied methods of focus group, interview and visual tools and the multiple sources of evidence were photo elicitation, photo voice and interview transcripts.

Two of the key proponents of case study research, Robert Stake (1995) and Robert Yin (2009, 2012), have classified case studies in different ways. Yin’s typology describes cases as explanatory, exploratory or descriptive, while Stake defines them as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Table 3.1 outlines these categories). This research adopted a descriptive approach as it took the form of an in-depth study of the case (First in Family students) in order to describe the phenomenon (the transition process through two years of undergraduate study).

Table 3.1 – Case study typology according to Stake (1995) and Yin (2009; 2012)

Type	Definition	Source
Explanatory	A study to indicate causality and/or test theories	Yin 2009
Exploratory	A study which explores phenomenon which are of interest to the researcher in a relatively unknown field. Aims to gain insights and suggest further research.	Yin 2009
<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>In-depth study of a case which sets out to describe the phenomenon.</b> Divided into <i>revelatory, exemplary, unique, extreme</i> and <i>typical</i> cases.	Yin 2009; Yin 2012
Intrinsic	The case is studied for its own particular, intrinsic qualities	Stake 1995
Instrumental	A case is studied in order to gain insight or understanding into something else	Stake 1995
Collective	Several cases are studied to form a collective understanding of an issue	Stake 1995

One of the strengths of case study research is that it examines real people in real situations, enabling the researcher to establish an in-depth understanding of the effect of context on the case in

question. A case study can present abstract theories in a more understandable way by seeking to portray the reality of the lived experience of the participant (Yin 2009). Case studies are considered to be particularly effective at recognising the “complexity and embeddedness of social truths” (Bisit 2010: 21).

The case study approach facilitates the in-depth analysis of a case or instance within its social context, thereby allowing for the detailed exploration of social and cultural relationships and influences. It is important in case studies that the event/situation is allowed to speak for itself rather than being interpreted and evaluated by the researcher (Cohen et al. 2011). In this study, the aim of the research was to understand the lived experience of first-generation students within their social, educational and cultural contexts. If we are to understand the lived experience of participants and ensure the validity of the findings, it is vital to foreground the student voice rather than impose an external researcher-led framework. The case study paradigm with its emphasis on allowing the situation to speak for itself was therefore particularly appropriate in this study.

Case studies are often described as the specific instance which illustrates a wider principle (Creswell 1998; Simons 2009; Cohen et al. 2011) but there are differing views on what constitutes a specific instance or case: a single instance of a bounded system such as a child or a class (Creswell 1998) or an attempt to study the particular whilst taking account of the general context (Simons 2009). This study adopts a multiple or collective approach; the cases were students from a First in Family background starting undergraduate degree courses at a post-1992 university in the south of England. In defining the research population, the boundaries of the case study were set. The study focused on First in Family undergraduate students commencing higher education and the institution selected was the researcher’s own place of work (a post-1992 university in the south of England). I chose Solent as the location of the project for a number of reasons. There was a practical element in that this is the institution where I am employed therefore it was easier to access the students for research, but I also felt that it would be an advantage that I was known to the students as they would be likely to feel more comfortable with me than with a stranger. Clearly there are ethical issues around conducting research with your own students and these have been explored in some depth in [Section 3.5](#). Solent is also a university with a strong Widening Participation agenda and research shows that WP students are more likely to choose to study at institutions where they feel comfortable (Reay et al. 2001; 2010) therefore the likelihood was that there would be more students to recruit from. I also wanted to carry out research at an institution with a high proportion of WP students as they were more likely to have a detailed WP policy in place – I wanted to look at a ‘best case scenario’ in order to assess the effectiveness of policy.



In order to ensure some level of parity between students, courses of a similar creative nature were selected. As I was investigating transition into university I needed to look at first year undergraduates and I chose creative media courses as they were similar in nature to the Advertising degrees which were my starting point for recruitment (this process is explained in [Section 3.3.1](#)). The boundaries of the cases were therefore as follows:

- the background of the students (First in Family)
- the type of course (creative undergraduate degree course)
- the time period (students commencing in 2016)
- the institution (post-1992 university in the south of England)

### 3.2.3 Limitations of approach

Case study research can be criticized for being singularistic with no generalisability beyond the confines of the case itself (Potter 1996). The issue of generalisability is discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.1, however it is important to acknowledge this as a potential limitation of the work. Insights into the influences and experiences of participants in this interpretive study cannot be claimed to be the same for all First in Family students, irrespective of their backgrounds, cultures, races and genders. However there are areas of shared experience in being the first in your family to attend higher education, to lack the inherited cultural capital which is intrinsic to those whose parents and possibly grandparents are degree-educated, and that is what this study has investigated. The generalisability is one of cultural homogeneity (the areas of shared experience which are common to many of these students) and also of analytical generalisability (Yin 2016). The theories developed from the cases in this study can provide knowledge which will help researchers to understand the experiences of other First in Family students, much as the work of Diane Reay into working-class students in higher education has provided knowledge which has helped later researchers (Basit 2014). One way to increase the generalisability of a study of this nature is to follow it up with a larger more widespread survey:

“A stronger claim for (empirical) generalization makes it necessary to combine a qualitative study with a survey study, and in this way test the validity of the results on a representative sample of informants. The qualitative study, with its holistic and in-depth perspectives, can still be seen as the main study. The survey broadens the foundation for generalizations”

(Höijer 2008: 228)

### 3.3 Methods

This section will explain the participant selection process (Section 3.3.1) and research methods used in this project. As photo elicitation and photovoice are not commonly seen in educational projects, I have explained them in some detail in Section 3.3.2 to set them in context and explain their applicability to this study. The other research methods of focus group (Section 3.3.3) and in-depth interview (Section 3.3.4) are also explained, followed by a consideration of issues of reliability and validity in Section 3.4. The ethical implications of this study are explored in Section 3.5 followed by a detailed explanation of the fieldwork and analysis procedures in Section 3.6.

Focus groups were held in November 2016; interviews were conducted in March-May 2017 (Interview 1), November 2017 (Interview 2) and May 2018 (Interview 3) – see Table 3.2. In the focus groups photo-elicitation techniques were used; in the interviews a combination of photo-elicitation and photovoice approaches were employed (Section 3.3.2). The focus group and interview sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis process adapted from Braun and Clarke 2009 and Frith and Harcourt 2007 (see Section 3.6.4).

Table 3.2 – Research timing

	Ethical clearance	Focus Groups	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Oct-16					
Nov-16					
Dec-16					
Jan-17					
Feb-17					
Mar-17					
Apr-17					
May-17					
Jun-17					
Jul-17					
Aug-17					
Sep-17					
Oct-17					
Nov-17					
Dec-17					
Jan-18					
Feb-18					
Mar-18					
Apr-18					
May-18					

### 3.3.1 Sampling and recruitment strategy

The research population for this study was First in Family students commencing media-related undergraduate courses at Solent university. I wanted a cohort of 8-9 participants who would take part in both phases of the research: the initial focus group at the start of their first year as undergraduate students, followed by three in-depth one-to-one interviews over the following 18 months culminating in a final interview at the end of their second year. This would give me a potential 26-29 data collection points across their first and second year at university.

It was not possible to use probability sampling techniques in this research, firstly because the population was too small and secondly because there is no sample frame available (First in Family students are not identified in student lists therefore there is no sample frame to draw from). In this project all first year students enrolled on a particular course were contacted and the criteria for First in Family was detailed in the email (i.e. that their parents and grandparents had not attended university). Students were invited to contact me or volunteer for the research if they met the criteria. It was necessary to request volunteers as it was not possible to identify students from First in Family backgrounds, nor would it have seemed appropriate to do so for ethical reasons. Volunteer sampling is a form of purposive sampling which is defined as the deliberate selection of participants due to the qualities they possess (Etikan et al. 2016); in my study they needed to meet the criteria of being first-year undergraduate First in Family students. Evidently a key challenge with volunteer sampling is representativeness – it is difficult to establish how far those who volunteer are typical of the entire group. Jupp (2006) points out that with volunteer sampling it is important to be cautious about generalizing from the volunteer sample to the entire population.

As with all purposive sampling research, it is important to be fully transparent about the criteria on which the sampling process was based. In this project, the population was first year students on creative media courses at Solent University and the criteria for selection was that they self-identified as First in Family. Unlike other purposive sampling methods, with volunteer sampling the researcher does not select the participants therefore there is less of a danger of potential bias, however it was important to bear in mind the challenge to generalisability (as outlined in Section 3.4.4). It is also important with volunteer sampling to make clear what, if any, benefits the volunteers might enjoy. In this research project it was made clear from the outset that there would be no direct benefit to taking part in terms of financial reward, assessment marks or credits.

In order to recruit participants I spoke to all first-year undergraduate students on the two Advertising courses, outlining the subject matter of the research and setting out the criteria for participation (i.e. that First in Family meant they did not have parents or grandparents who had attended higher education), and followed this up with an email to all students. To ensure there was no undue pressure I made it clear that this was personal research not connected to their studies or Solent University, and that all data would be confidential and anonymised. Asking students to identify as First in Family in front of classmates could potentially cause embarrassment so the response mechanism for expressions of interest was via a follow-up email. This also gave them the opportunity to reflect and ask questions privately. The advantage of this process was that no student had been identified by me as First in Family (which could have led to a feeling of stigmatisation) and there was no pressure on any individual student to take part. This disadvantage is that I was totally reliant on the willingness of students to volunteer for the project and I had no means of identifying potential participants. Five students responded but only four met the criteria: Satin, Tricia, India and Lauren<sup>12</sup> (all names are pseudonyms). This was deemed by myself and my supervisory team to be an insufficient number to be viable so I extended my recruitment to Film and TV Production as this was a similar creative media course. I followed the same procedure of an initial talk to all students and two follow-up emails, and this resulted in the recruitment of a further four participants (Barry, Larry, Amber and Cara).

The focus groups were held, and all participants were invited to take part in Phase 2 of the research, the in-depth interviews. At this point India and Larry declined to proceed to the second stage, so I was left with only six participants, which was again deemed insufficient. I then carried out a third recruitment drive following the same procedure and secured two more participants from the Photography degree course, Maria and Donna. As they were recruited after Phase 1 had been completed, they did not take part in the focus groups. This was not an ideal outcome, but I felt it did not unduly hamper the research as the two phases were separate. The final group for Phase 2 of the research consisted of eight participants (three from Advertising, three from Film and TV and two from Photography). Although a small sample size, the multiple methods used with four data collection points over two years plus visual materials produced a large amount of deep rich data. Small sample sizes often attract concerns about rigor and generalisability, and these issues have been addressed in [Section 3.4](#). Table 3.3 shows the recruitment and research activity.

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<sup>12</sup> Biographical details of the participants is given in Section 3.6.1

Table 3.3 – Phases of recruitment and research

Date w/c	Recruitment Activity	Research Activity
24/10/2016	Round 1: Advertising courses Talk - 24/10 Email 1 - 24/10	
31/10/2016	Email 2 – 31/10 (4 students recruited)	
07/11/2016		
14/11/2016	Round 2: Film and TV Prod courses Talk – 17/11 Email 1 – 17/11	
21/11/2016	Email 2 – 23/11 (4 students recruited)	
28/11/2016		Phase 1: Focus group 1 – 28/11 Focus group 2 – 29/11
05/12/2016		<i>Student 1 declines to proceed.</i>
12/12/2016		
19/12/2016		<i>Student 2 declines to proceed.</i>
CHRISTMAS BREAK		
JAN-FEB	NO ACTIVITY	NO ACTIVITY
06/03/2017- 27/03/2017		Phase 2: Interview 1 for 6 participants (Advertising and Film and TV students)
03/04/2017		
10/04/2017		
17/04/2017		
24/04/2017	Round 3: Photography courses Talk – 26/04 Email 1 – 26/04	
02/05/2017	Email 2 – 02/05 (2 students recruited)	
08/05/17		Phase 2: Interview 1 for 2 participants (Photography students)

### Limitations

Volunteer sampling has limitations in terms of generalisability (as explained on page 89). As in all qualitative research, the goal was not to generalise but rather to seek transferability. Generalisability is a concept more relevant to quantitative research and refers to the extent to which the findings can be generalised from a sample to an entire population regardless of context. Transferability on

the other hand refers to the extent to which the findings from one specific context can be transferred to a similar context (Creswell et al. 2000). In this project I make no claims that the findings can be generalised to all First in Family students, however I believe the results are transferable to other individuals in a similar context. When analysing the findings it was therefore important not to make false claims about the representativeness of the sample group and to generalise to all First in Family students but rather to look for findings which were transferable. Moreover, working with a small cohort of students always has limitations as you are very reliant on the willingness and ability of all individuals to fully participate, and a small number of participants makes you vulnerable if any choose to drop out. In this study I found it more difficult to recruit than I had anticipated. This may be because research studies are less common in creative media than in health and psychology courses, for example, therefore students were less open to the idea of taking part or convinced of its value. It may also be that a large proportion of the students I was trying to recruit were obliged to work long hours in part-time jobs to supplement their income and therefore were less willing to sacrifice their time for a project which brought them no immediate benefit in terms of marks or credits. Students are often unwilling to give up time for activities which do not link directly to their studies, and the time pressures on students who combine their studies with many hours of part-time work are even greater. It may also be that students were unwilling to identify themselves as First in Family or were reluctant to discuss their experiences. Whatever the reasons, it was more difficult and time-consuming to recruit participants than I had originally envisaged. With hindsight, I would have started the recruitment process much earlier.

As it had been difficult to recruit my initial cohort of eight participants for the focus groups, when two students decided not to proceed to Phase 2 I was obliged to start the recruitment process again. I was successful in recruiting a further two students from another similar creative media course, however as they did not join the study until April 2017 they did not take place in the focus groups. I felt this was a limitation as I could not trace their transition from the start of their course and I was reliant on their memories of how they felt on arrival rather than investigating the experience as it happened. Although they both had vivid memories of their feelings on arrival, experiences recalled at a later date are subject to memory recall bias (Graham et al. 2003) and as they were recalling events from seven months earlier this possibly affected their responses. The research was also affected when two participants (Amber and Donna) did not take part in the final interview. This was predominantly for practical reasons as both had returned home after the Easter break in their second year. Although attempts were made to meet up this proved impossible to arrange and both were reluctant to have a telephone interview. This was a further limitation on the research as I could not track their transition process through to completion at the end of the second year.

### 3.3.2 Visual methods

In this project, visual methods were used throughout the research. In both phases of the research (the focus groups and the interviews), participants were asked to choose from a selection of pre-printed images (Stokes 2013) to reflect their current experience of being a student and explain their choice in the interview. This process has been referred to here as photo elicitation. In Phase 2 of the research (the interviews) participants were also asked to bring photographs which they had taken to reflect their experience of being a student and to explain the meaning behind the image. In the literature this is often referred to as 'auto-driven photo elicitation' (Torre and Murphy 2015) but the alternative term 'photovoice' has been used in this thesis. The terms are often used interchangeably and there is some confusion over definitions in the literature which will be explored later in this chapter.

Although there is a long tradition of using visual methods in research, particularly in sociological, anthropological and historical settings, it was traditionally the researcher who was in charge of the camera. The growth of collaborative visual methods whereby the participant generates the images is more recent (Buckingham 2009). This section will go on to outline the differences between these two methods, but I will start by explaining why visual methods were used and what they contributed to the study. Although commonly used in health, anthropology, psychology and sociology research (Harper 2002; Phelan and Kinsella 2011), visual methods are relatively scarce within the context of educational research (Torre and Murphy 2015). However, the use of photographic techniques can aid interpretive education research studies such as this as it gives a voice to the students and allows the higher education and institution context to be viewed through the eyes of those who experience it.

The advantages of using visual methods such as photo-elicitation fall into the two realms of practicality and ethics. It has been claimed that the use of visual images can elicit deeper reflection and insight because the visual cortex is located within a part of the brain which is evolutionarily older than the part which processes verbal information, therefore

"images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words" (Harper 2002: 13)

Moreover, individuals often find it easier to express complex or abstract concepts using visual rather than verbal methods. Phelan and Kinsella (2011) claim that children in particular can find it difficult to express verbally their experiences with abstract social issues such as identity and culture, and

using photographs allows them to 'show' rather than 'tell'. The same can be said of young people such as those involved in this research project. Although this research project was not conducted with children, the participants were aged 18-22, an age group who are particularly comfortable with expressing themselves visually as most of them have grown up through the lens of social media.

There is an ethical as well as a practical dimension to the use of visual techniques around issues of empowerment:

"words are the domain of adult researchers and therefore can be disempowering to the young. Images and their mode of production, on the other hand, are central to children's culture from a very early age and therefore empowering." (Prosser and Burke 2008: 407)

As this research study involved the power imbalance inherent in lecturer/student relationships, visual methods were one way of shifting this power dynamic by empowering the participants to take control of the data collection. This was a reflection of the co-creative methodological framework of the study. By selecting or producing an image to reflect their thoughts and emotions there is less likelihood of participants giving the answer they think is required by the interviewer. Some researchers have argued that one of the strengths of visual methods is that they break down power imbalances between researchers and participants (Hurworth 2003; Pink 2001; Knowles and Sweetman 2004); although it is disingenuous to claim that the use of visual methods totally eradicates the imbalance of power, it shifts the dynamic from researcher/expert and student/object:

"While the use of participatory or 'creative' methods might well alter the power relationships between researchers and researched, it can hardly be seen to abolish them completely...the success of such strategies obviously depends upon the quality of the interaction between the interviewer and the subject." (Buckingham 2009: 636)

Through their systematic literature review, Torre and Murphy (2015: 12) identified five key benefits for photographic interview techniques:

#### 1. Empowering participants

This is particularly true of photographic techniques which are controlled by the participant (referred to as auto-driven photo elicitation or photovoice) such as those used in this study. The participant is empowered through the privileging of their experience/knowledge and the ceding of control over the focus of the research. Where surveys and interviews can be used to steer the direction of the research in a pre-ordained direction, participant-generated photographs dictate the focus of the research session:

"In the conventional interview, the roles of the participants are clearer: I received the expected answers to my questions and ideas. In the photo-elicitation interview, the



informants choose a series of photographs which best illustrated their feelings. In the conventional interview, I defined the topics. Here, photographs defined it” (Steiger 2008: 35)

## 2. Building trust between participant and researcher

The use of photographs can be an ice-breaker and ease the tension or awkwardness which can exist in an interview situation. When the participants are sharing their own photographs, they take on an instructor or expert role which reduces inhibitions and creates a rapport with the researcher. In this study, the participants were excited to share their photographs and often contributed more than was asked for. They showed pleasure in explaining the photos and what they represented.

## 3. Helping researchers to better see through the eyes of participants

The use of photographs can trigger memories and deeper reflection than verbal responses and can also facilitate the discussion of subjects which can be hard to articulate. The photographs also provide material on which the researcher can query the participant (Clark-Ibanez 2004). In this study, the participants were encouraged to take photographs of anything which reflected what being a student meant to them. All the photographs contributed were of experiences outside the classroom, which in itself illuminated the areas of importance to the students.

“Because the participant decides what is important and where to elaborate, researchers are often able to access parts of participants’ lives that are unknown or not obvious”

(Torre and Murphy 2015: 14)

The participants took photographs which reflected issues that had not been anticipated by me or articulated by them until the images were discussed during the interview. Some of the participants found it hard to express their feelings verbally during the interview, but then became quite articulate when explaining the photographs.

Torre and Murphy (2015) also point out that photos can illuminate the seemingly ordinary. In this project, in her first interview one student brought a photograph of the street outside her house to reflect the alienation and threat she experienced in an urban environment. Without recalling this contribution, she took a very similar photograph in her third interview to show how nice the street setting was. Her photographs were of seemingly ordinary mundane scenes, but they expressed an area of her inner life which would have been unlikely to emerge in a verbal interview (see Section 4.2.2).

#### 4. Allowing participants to manipulate the photos

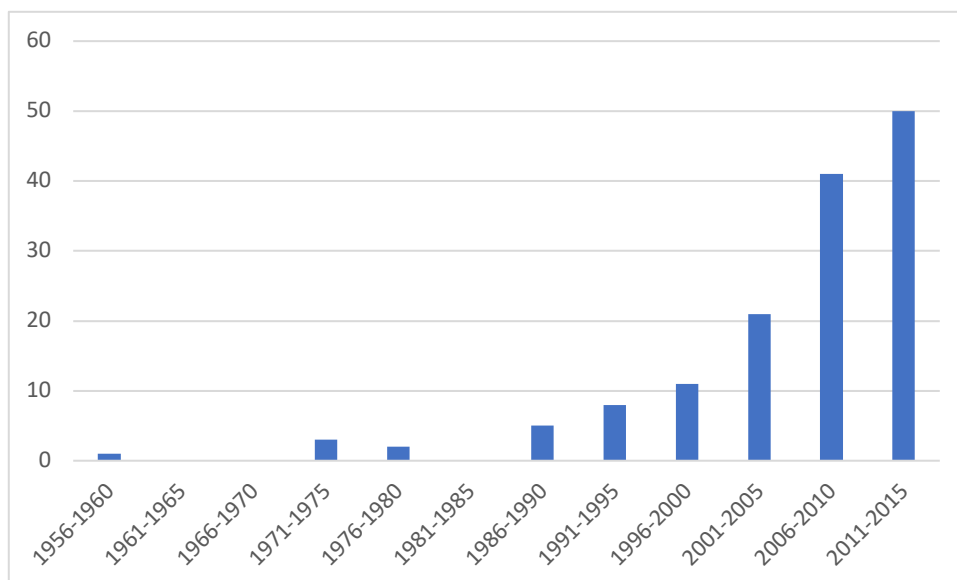
As the photographs were used as a straightforward visual representation of feelings or events, the manipulation of physical photographs was not a method used in this study.

#### 5. Increasing the validity of the participant response

Some researchers have argued that the use of photographs in interviews increases the validity and reliability because the data from the images can be triangulated with that obtained through the interview itself (Harper 2002).

The term **photo elicitation** originated with the work of Collier in the late 1950s in his study of the effects of environment on mental health (1957) however it was largely overlooked as a research method for the next two decades. In 1978 photo elicitation was listed by Wagner as a visual research strategy, but in 2002 Harper found only 53 academic studies which explicitly used the photo-elicitation interview (PEI) as a method (Harper 2002). In a systematic literature review conducted in 2015, Torre and Murphy found that the number of research articles citing PEI as a method rose sharply from 2000-2015 but was still far less common than verbal qualitative research methods (see Figure 3.1).

Fig 3.1 - Number of PEI articles published since 1956



Source: Torre and Murphy 2015: 6

Photo-elicitation has been defined as “the process of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper 2002: 13) and therefore covers all use of photographic images whether

researcher or participant produced. **Photovoice** is another term for auto-directed photo-elicitation interviews whereby participant-generated images are used as the basis for discussion within interviews. Photovoice originated in community-based participatory action research exploring the relationship between people and their social and cultural environments (Fritz and Lysack 2014). It is a participatory method whereby participants take photographic images to document experiences and issues which are significant to them or to reflect on how they see themselves and others (Woodgate et al. 2017; Sitter 2017). The images can then be used in various ways, either as the basis for discussion with the interviewer or as a data source in themselves (Bukowski and Buetow 2011). It is considered an empowering research method as the participant sets the agenda by choosing what aspects of their experience they wish to foreground and the way in which they choose to present them; it is “an unobtrusive way of entering the worlds of individuals...revealing what might be uncomfortable or unknown” (Woodgate et al. 2017: 3).

Originally photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs) used images produced by the researcher. The idea of giving people cameras so they could document their everyday realities was developed in the mid 1990s by Wang and Burris who were inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (Wang 1997; Wang and Burris 1997). Where photovoice differs slightly from auto-directed PEIs is in the conceptual underpinning. Wang and Burris viewed photovoice as a method rooted in feminist theory, reflecting a desire for increased empowerment, critical consciousness and a more democratic community-based approach to photography (Wang and Burris 1997; Wang 2006; Sutton-Brown 2014). It is a method that has been widely used within marginalized communities who tend to lack a voice in political and social spheres. The aim of photovoice is to record the invisible, the unrecorded, with a view to instigating critical dialogue and inciting social change. Participants are asked to identify and represent aspects of their community which they see as significant from their own perspective through the use of photography. It has been described as “grassroots activist research rooted in problem-based inquiry” (Sutton-Brown 2014: 170). Photovoice has continued to be widely used in qualitative research projects involving health (Wang 1999; Cluley 2017), youth groups (Wang 2006) and minority social groups such as the work of Bukowski and Buetow with Maori communities in New Zealand (2011). The conceptual underpinning which differentiates photovoice from auto-directed photo-elicitation interviews was appropriate in this study which also sought to record the unrecorded with a view to instigating critical dialogue. As with the work cited above, this project sought to give a voice to a marginalized group (First in Family students) and explore their experiences through the medium of their photographs. The similarities between community-based participatory action research and this student-based participant-led project made the adoption of photovoice methods particularly relevant. In both studies, the methodological approach seeks to

explore the experience of the participants from their own perspective by giving them the tools to highlight areas which might usually be unrecorded and uninvestigated. The empowerment perspective is in giving participants control over the direction of the research and putting them in the position of 'expert' rather than object of study. In this way a method more commonly seen in health and sociology studies brought value and benefit to a study in an educational context.

Confusingly the definitions are not always clear in the literature, however photo elicitation is generally used to refer to the use of any photographic images used in the research interview, whereas photovoice describes the research process whereby participants generate, select and edit their own photographic images. In this study, photo elicitation specifically refers to the process of providing pre-produced images for participants to select and discuss, whereas photovoice is the research method whereby participants were asked to take photographs which represented their experience then provide a selection of these at interview. This represents a more active role played by the students as they were given minimal instruction and freedom to generate images which expressed their experiences of being a student, in whatever situation or capacity they felt most relevant. As photovoice puts the camera into the hands of the participants, it gives them control over the production and selection of images for inclusion in the research. In choosing which elements of their world to document, the participants can create the context which they consider important (Clark-Ibanez 2004) and highlight issues which have not necessarily been prioritised by the researcher (Frith and Harcourt 2007; Garcia et al. 2007).

There are two main advantages to the use of photo-elicitation techniques in a study such as this. Firstly it can be an ice breaker, a way into a topic which involves discussing personal and emotional issues. Choosing a photograph to express your feelings can allow participants to articulate thoughts and emotions which can be difficult to access verbally (Harper 2002). For example, in the focus group one student chose a picture of a staircase:



Fig 3.2 – Picture card ‘Staircase’, Focus Group 1 (Stokes 2013)

When asked why this image was selected, the participant explained:

*“it just looks quite complicated and looks like you’re at the bottom and you’re looking up. And then there’s like...a lot of stuff you have to go through. So, it seems quite daunting, maybe. At university, it’s like so much pressure to be good and make my parents proud and family proud of what I’m doing.”*  
(Barry, Focus Group)

This is an example of how using photo elicitation can lead to the exploration of quite deep personal reactions and emotions. The method elicited similar responses at all stages of the research, and often the students reflected on how their choice of images changed through the process and what implications this had for their own development.

Another advantage of photo elicitation is that images are not as constraining as words. The same image can be interpreted in multiple ways and can therefore lead to different discussion directions. For example the same picture card was chosen in the focus group by one participant (Cara) and in an interview by a different individual (Lauren); they had not attended the same focus group so Lauren had not been party to the first discussion.



Fig 3.3 – Picture card ‘bird in flight’ (Stokes 2013)

Cara chose this card because for her it represented the anxiety and pressure of university: *“it’s like a bird, you’re always in flight and when you stop for one moment, you get in over your head. So you go down”* (see Section 3.3.3 for the full transcript of her comments). For Lauren however, the picture symbolised positive feelings of *“independence...being free from your family”*. The same image sparked totally different discussions with each of these individuals.

### **Bourdieu and photography**

There are other advantages to using photovoice as a research method. It is “an unobtrusive way of entering the worlds of individuals...revealing what might be uncomfortable or unknown” (Woodgate et al. 2017:2) and can be a useful method to investigate aspects of life which might be difficult to verbalise or consciously explain; visual methods are particularly helpful in research concerned with exploring habitus (Sweetman 2009). Taking photographs can be a way of articulating the everyday, or as Bourdieu described it “illuminating aspects of the mundane, the taken-for-granted and that which cannot even be made explicit” (Bourdieu 1977 in Sweetman 2009: 494). Using photographs, participants can present what is significant to them in everyday life and also how they see themselves and others in a way which might never be revealed in the spoken word. Banks (2011) argues that photographs exercise agency by prompting people to see things with a new perspective. It also gives the researcher access to the thoughts, feelings and otherwise ‘hidden’ aspects of the lives of participants. Photovoice can therefore be a way of accessing different information than might be revealed through other methods. The process of creating the image and then elaborating on the information contained within it has been described as “an opportunity to gain not just more

but different insights into social phenomena, which research methods relying on oral, aural or written data cannot provide” (Rose 2016: 305).

For example participants in this study did not initially discuss physical space when asked about their experiences of being a student in either the focus groups or the interviews, however these figured strongly in their photographs (see Section 4.2). Once they were asked to explain the significance of the images they had brought, the role played by physical space in their transition process was highlighted. This can be taken as an example of what Harper refers to as images evoking “deeper elements of human consciousness than do words” (2002: 13). Some of the issues which were important or significant did not appear during the conscious reflection and verbalisation of the interview but were expressed through the production of images. Similarly, in her first interview Tricia’s unease at her urban surroundings emerged during the explanation of her photograph where she described her street as “like a ghetto” (Tricia, Interview 1):

Fig 3.4 - “Like a ghetto”: Street scene, Interview 1



In most situations, habitus can be difficult to reflect on or verbalise (although Bourdieu explains that in situations where there is a tension between habitus and field individuals become more aware or conscious of it, feeling like a ‘fish out of water’). Sweetman (2009) argues that this tendency is becoming more common and refers to the development of a ‘reflexive habitus’ (p. 495). Bourdieu himself advocated the use of photography, arguing that the practice of photography is a way of expressing habitus (1984; 1990). This concept has been further developed by advocating the use of photography to uncover deeper aspects of habitus which may be difficult to access consciously or verbalise (Sweetman 2009). A study by Frohmann (2005) asked participants to reflect on their experiences as students with a view to exploring the impact of social/cultural background and

habitus. By using visual methods, it was felt that participants could express themselves visually without having to consciously process their thoughts and feelings into words, thereby tapping into their subconscious emotions and attitudes.

Interpretive theory dictates that in order to understand people we have to understand both their intentions and interpretations of their actions, in other words that observing behaviour is not enough without also exploring motives (Pring 2000). For the purposes of this study, it was therefore essential that I used methods which gave the participants the space to explore their actions and interpretations. Sometimes this entailed asking the participants to reflect on subconscious thought processes and motivations, and this is where the use of visual research methods was invaluable in allowing the participants to explore subconscious thoughts and motives in both the focus groups and in-depth interviews.

### **Limitations**

There are practical limitations to using photographic techniques which I encountered in this project. Sometimes the participants forgot to take photos, forgot to bring them, or in one instance brought them to the interview then forgot to send them to me (and deleted them by accident). As a researcher you ideally want your participants to take time and care in taking and selecting photos for the interview, but clearly this was far more of a priority for me than them and occasionally the photos were taken at the last minute. Although this did not have an overly negative effect on the research, as the images they brought always engendered discussion and insight, I was very reliant on the effort they put into the process. This is one of the limitations of co-creative research where you have more of a vested interest in the process and outcomes than your participants.

There are also important ethical issues to consider in using participant-created visual images which are explored in section x. Although participants were made fully aware of how their images would be used and the importance of not showing anything which could identify themselves or others, this instruction was largely overlooked which meant that images had to be carefully altered to obscure any faces (see Figure 4.13).

### **3.3.3 Focus Group**

Focus groups are different from other forms of qualitative research through their explicit use of group interaction to produce data (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). They rely on the assumption that a collective response resulting from group dynamics will generate different data than in a one-to-one



setting (Williams and Katz 2001). In a group setting the participants interact with each other in such a way that their views can be put across and their agenda can dominate rather than being imposed by the researcher; the data emerges from the interaction of the group. As the individuals within the group share a common characteristic (in this study they were all first year First-in-Family students) the group dynamic can cause topics to arise which might not have been foreseen by the interviewer. A focus group interview is also an effective technique when researching individuals who may feel more comfortable talking as part of a group than in a solo interview (Yin 2016). It can therefore be a useful way of uncovering issues and generating ideas which can be followed up in more detail by means of individual interview (Cohen et al. 2011).

For this project I felt that a focus group was a good way to start the research process as it allowed the participants to explore their shared experience. I felt it would be less intimidating than a one-to-one interview and would reduce the power imbalance as the students would be interacting with each other rather than directly with me. This reduced the risk of participants giving the answers they thought I was looking for, and used the group dynamic to allow issues to emerge which were of importance to them rather than imposed by me. The topics discussed could then form the basis of the in-depth interviews in Phase 2 of the research.

From an ethical perspective, it is important to provide a safe, supportive environment when conducting qualitative research, particularly research of this nature which asks participants to explore and share personal experiences (Yin 2016). It is also vital from the perspective of the reliability of the data. As previously mentioned, this research set out to investigate the experience of students and this can only be done if participants feel safe and comfortable to share their experiences. With this in mind I conducted two groups, one for each of the courses: groups who are known to each other tend to talk more and are more productive (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). There are different views on the role of the moderator: Merton et al. (1990) believed that the key criteria for focus group research is that those interviewed have shared a particular situation and that the researcher has conducted a provisional analysis of the “hypothetically significant elements” in order to create a set of hypotheses which are then used as a basis for their interview guide (Merton et al. 1990: 3). However, for more deductive studies such as this one, a semi-structured approach is more appropriate in order to allow the interaction between the participants to provide the richness of data as they discuss their shared experience. In this type of study, rather than the researcher conducting prior analysis and imposing a hypothesis, they should intervene as little as possible and act as “facilitators” to the discussion rather than interviewers (Basit 2010).

One of the roles of the moderator is to encourage all members to join in rather than allow one or two members to dominate the discussion (Yin 2016). Focus groups have their own dynamics and as a moderator it is important to find the balance between guiding the discussion and influencing it and thereby introducing bias. An effective moderator will interject as little as possible, however this is not always easy, particularly if some members are reticent. Researchers must be cognisant of the group effect which can lead members to self-censor or adjust their contribution in order to conform to the group consensus (Powell and Single 1996). The focus groups in this study were small with only four participants in each group (according to Mitchell 1988 this is the minimum number). Although one of the advantages of small groups is that all members are more likely to take part, I still found that some participants tended to dominate the conversation and it required careful moderation to ensure the less vocal members were given time and space to contribute. I started my focus group sessions inviting each member to talk about their chosen image which ensured each member of the group contributed. After this point, if I felt that one member was dominating the conversation I would invite the others in the group to give their views or reactions, as shown in the excerpt given overleaf. After Cara had explained her choice of image I asked *“Is that something anybody else can relate to?”* at which point Amber explained her own experiences.

It is important to start a focus group session with an informal ice-breaking period which allows the participants to interact informally; this interaction is vital to allow participants to relax and to create an atmosphere which is conducive to frank and open discussion (Powell and Single 1996). My focus groups required participants to discuss personal feelings and emotions, therefore it was important they felt comfortable to talk freely with each other and with me. In order to initiate informal discussion, I started each session by asking the group members to select an image from a set of cards laid out on a table, a picture which represented their experience of being a student. Not only did this get the members talking to each other, but also introduced the topics we would cover in the session and formed the basis of a photo elicitation exercise. At the start of the group discussion, each member introduced themselves and explained their choice of image and what it represented to them. I found this was an effective way of getting the students to explore their thoughts and feelings in a way that was comfortable and allowed them to participate with each other, as illustrated in the excerpt below. This was at the start of the first focus when each participant explained their choice of image:



Fig 3.5 – Cara’s picture, ‘bird in flight’ (Stokes 2013)

*INT: Cara, tell me about your picture and why you chose it.*

*CARA: I think it’s a hawk, in flight. So basically I picked it because in uni, it’s like a bird, you’re always in flight and when you stop for one moment, you get in over your head. So you go down.*

*INT: Is that how it feels to you?*

*CARA: At the moment, yeah. My particular thoughts of it is I’m just a little bit over my head. Everything is just rushing over me and then for one moment I just lose it.*

*INT: What do you mean by over your head?*

*CARA: So basically you know when the bird stops flying? It will just fall out of the sky. So if I stop going for one moment, I feel like everything’s just going to rush in, and then I’ll just lose all my footing... Kind of academically, like work and outside, because I work as well, alongside uni. So everything’s just kind of built up at the moment. So yeah, it feels like I’m kind of over my head.*

*INT: Is that something anybody else can relate to?*

*AMBER: I was going to say kind of, because I don’t know what you guys are in, but like, I have so many jobs, so much uni work and just...I keep myself going because my downtime is me sleeping on purpose. I’m always busy, even if I finish in the studio at 5.00 I go to the library till 8.00 just to make sure that I’m doing work before I crash. So I do everything just before I crash and then it’s....*

*CARA: Yeah, I’m literally the same, especially the last two weeks ... It feels at the moment like I’m just drowning because there’s so much stuff to do and so much work to do in uni. So yeah, that’s my thoughts at this particular time.*

(Excerpt from Focus Group 1)

This excerpt shows how the use of the picture card was a way into the discussion, a means by which Cara could bring up the subject of feeling overwhelmed. It also demonstrates how the group dynamic enriched the data, with Amber agreeing with Cara’s comments and introducing her own experiences which were similar to Cara’s. The group dynamics allowed for rich data to emerge, both in areas of similarity and difference between the participants. At the end of the study some students

felt regret that the process was over as they had benefitted from the opportunity to share their experiences with others from a similar background. The discussions initiated in the focus groups had led to the identification of themes which would be explored in more depth in the second phase of the research, the in-depth interviews, such as the role of place, home and money.

### **Limitations**

Although group dynamics can be an advantage in focus groups, they can also be a limitation. Individuals can feel constrained to go along with the prevailing viewpoint and agree with the consensus, even if they have a differing view. Groups can also be overly dominated by one or more individuals which can mean that less vocal participants do not put their views across. If sensitive issues are being discussed, as was the case in this study, participants might be reluctant to share their thoughts and feelings unless they feel comfortable and secure in the group setting. Although effective moderation can reduce these limitations, it is not always possible to be sure that all individuals are being completely honest in expressing their views or agreeing with the group.

#### **3.3.4 In-depth interview**

The main method used in this project was the in-depth interview, incorporating photo-elicitation and photovoice techniques. The qualitative interview is a means to understand a complex social world from the perspective of the participant (Yin 2016) and it is a widely-used method in research studies whose main objective is to understand the lived experience of individuals and the way they interpret those experiences (Seidman 2006). In-depth interviews are flexible as they allow a conversational tone to be adopted and the interviewer can explore issues raised by the participant in more detail. It is ideally suited to a social constructivist study as it facilitates the shared exploration of the participant's experience and the meaning they ascribe to it, rather than imposing a researcher-led structure. This is further enhanced through the use of photographic techniques such as in photo-elicitation interviews or PEIs which further lend themselves to shared exploration of experience. In-depth interviews can generate rich and thick data and when interviews are repeated over time (as was the case here) it allows for deeper exploration of ideas as the trust between researcher and participant grows (Yin 2016). In this project the participants were interviewed three times in Phase 2 at approximately six-monthly intervals (see Table 3.3). Of the eight participants involved in Phase 2 of the research, only six took part in the final interview as one participant had dropped out of university and had returned home and was reluctant to take part in a telephone interview.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations/criticisms of the qualitative interview is the effect of the researcher on the interview process (Yin 2016; Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Ideally the interviewer will keep their questions to a minimum in a manner which will encourage the interviewee to respond in an extended monologue. Indeed, Yin advocates the use of the “silent but deliberate pause” (2016: 144). I found this difficult to achieve in my own research as some students needed encouragement and gentle probes to elicit detailed answers (this is where again the photographic methods made it easier for students to articulate their thoughts and feelings). This may in part have been a result of the power imbalance, though it is also no doubt a result of my own inexperience as an interviewer. Although I have experience as both moderator and interviewer, I have often found there is a tendency to feel uncomfortable with a silence and therefore fill it by rewording a question or offering an explanation and this can confuse the interviewee or result in leading questions (Powell and Single 1996). I was always aware of the dangers of being overly directive and therefore made every effort to reflect the participants’ replies back at them for elaboration rather than suggesting responses, however looking back at the transcripts I was aware that at times I talked more in the interview than I would have ideally chosen. This is one of the dangers of qualitative research, particularly when relatively new to the field.

### **3.4 Reliability, validity and triangulation**

#### 3.4.1 Generalisability

Validity, reliability and objectivity or generalisability have been described as the ‘holy trinity’ of research (Kvale 1995) but there are differing interpretations of these measures dependent on the philosophical underpinning of the methodological approach. For positivists, research is founded on the belief that knowledge is an objective reality to be discovered by the subjective researcher, thus positivist research makes claims to reliability and validity through ensuring an objective distance from the world and thereby not ‘tainting’ the research with the researcher’s own subjective beliefs and bias (Angen 2000). Generalisability is linked to external validity and is usually reliant on statistical sampling. The philosophical foundation of interpretive research on the other hand is that knowledge is subjective, co-created and context-specific, therefore interpretivist studies must find different ways to establish validity. Rather than seeking for causal definitions, replicability and statistical generalisation through rigorous adherence to methodological rules, qualitative research searches for illumination and understanding (Golafshani 2003). Angen argues that the “myriad influences that impinge on human thought, speech, and action” (Angen 2000: 379) require an

alternative approach to the reductive, positivist methods which seek to devise a unitary truth of human behaviour. A qualitative interpretive approach seeks to “enlarge and deepen our understanding of what it means to be human in this more-than-human realm.” (*ibid*: 379)

One of the ramifications of an interpretivist paradigm is the concept of singularity: if an individual’s social world entirely comprises their interpretations of it, as seen through the lens of their conceptions of meaning (Pring 2015), then no two contexts are ever alike because the interpretations of the individuals involved will never be identical. This leads to accusations that case study research can only be intrinsic, that as the case study involves “an intense study of the particular” (Pring 2015:5-6), it is impossible to generalise the findings to other situations. Yet Stake’s typology of an *instrumental* as opposed to an *intrinsic* case study proposes the study of a case in order to provide insight into a particular issue or build theory, thereby shedding light on other similar situations; assumptions can be inferred from the in-depth study of the individual/collective case and generalisations can be made from that assumption (Stake 1995). Höijer (2008) addresses the issue of generalisation in qualitative research and points to the underlying differences between a universal/individualistic/cultural homogeneity ontological approach. A radical social constructionist or situationalist approach would argue that meaning is situation-bound and cannot be generalised beyond the research setting (Potter 1996), but an alternative ontological approach assumes some levels of heterogeneity amongst individuals from similar social and cultural backgrounds thereby allowing a degree of generalisation (Höijer 2008). Case study research also lends itself to a model of analytical generalisation, whereby a theory developed from one case can assist researchers to understand similar cases (Robson 2002; Yin 2016). However, in this particular study, the in-depth exploration of the experience of a small group of individuals was used to provide insight into the issue of First in Family students in higher education rather than making claims to widespread generalisability.

### 3.4.2 Validity and Reliability

Validity, or the degree to which research “accurately represents those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise” (Hammersley 1987: 69), has been a source of contention for qualitative researchers for some time. Questions of validity are of vital importance to any research study, but the concepts of validity and reliability were originally conceived in relation to positivist studies and therefore their applicability to interpretivist research has been contested. Reliability refers to whether the result is replicable, which is based on the assumption that there are

similarities between the wider population and research sample and that reliable research can therefore be generalised to the wider group (Golafshani 2003). Validity was rooted in conceptions of objectivity and truth – whether the means of measurement actually measure what they set out to measure (Golafshani 2003). However, these considerations are of less concern to qualitative research such as this where I set out to investigate phenomena within the context in which they occur. Interpretivist studies often focus on the experiential or the emotional; rather than seeking to uncover a single, tangible reality and establish its replicability to a wider audience, naturalistic research assumes multiple constructed realities and the potential uniqueness of individual contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Seale 1999). Transferability acknowledges the unique aspects of the original situation and suggests that generalisability may be more in the form of a working hypothesis than a conclusion (Guba and Lincoln 1985). This study is a small-scale qualitative project situated within a particular context; its transferability lies partly in transferability to similar contexts, and also in the implications which can be posed at a conceptual level rather than seeking to claim universal generalisability of the specific findings. In this case the external validity of the study lies in its links to theoretical propositions (Yin 2014).

At the heart of the issue of validity and reliability lies the question:

“Are these findings sufficiently authentic . . . that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them?”  
(Lincoln et al. 2011: 120)

If validity and reliability are viewed as less useful terms for qualitative research, then trustworthiness is crucial (Seale 1999). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that although some methods are more suited than others for carrying out research on the human construction of social realities, rigor must be evidenced in both the application of the chosen method, and in the interpretation of the data. They argue that researchers must ask themselves the question, “Can our co-created constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomenon?” (Lincoln et al. 2011: 120). They propose their own essential criteria for qualitative studies: credibility (in place of truth value), dependability (in place of consistency or reliability), transferability (in place of applicability or external validity), confirmability (in place of neutrality or objectivity) and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1989). These criteria are set out in Table 3.4 together with ways to increase the quality of the study in line with their framework.

Table 3.4 – Guba and Lincoln’s criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research

Criteria	Explanation	Application in this study
Credibility	<i>Do participants feel that the findings</i>	Prolonged engagement – the study

	<p><i>represent their experience?</i></p> <p>Ways to increase credibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolonged engagement</li> <li>• Triangulation (of sources and researchers)</li> </ul>	<p>took place over 20 months.</p> <p>Triangulation of methods (focus group, in-depth interview, photo-elicitation and photovoice) and sources (interview transcripts and recordings, photographs, printed images)</p>
Transferability	<p><i>Are the findings applicable in other contexts?</i></p> <p>Ways to increase transferability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing rich descriptions of participant responses</li> <li>• “Naturalistic generalisability occurs when the findings are in harmony with the experiences of the individual evaluating the research” (Treharne and Riggs 2015: 63)</li> </ul>	<p>Rich descriptions of participant responses have been provided in this thesis.</p>
Dependability	<p><i>Would similar findings be produced if someone else undertook the research?</i></p> <p>Ways to increase dependability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triangulation of researchers</li> <li>• Research auditing</li> </ul>	<p>As this project was undertaken by a single researcher there was no possibility for triangulation of researchers. However the supervisory team had access to all data and analysis.</p>
Confirmability	<p><i>Are the findings a product of participants’ responses and not the researcher’s biases, motivations or perspectives?</i></p> <p>Ways to increase confirmability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Auditing</li> <li>• Transparent report of the findings</li> </ul>	<p>Attempts to reduce researcher bias and foreground student voice have been explained elsewhere. Transparency has been achieved through rich, thick description, extended participant quotes, and overseeing by the supervisory team.</p>
Authenticity	<p><i>Does the research represent a fair range of viewpoints on the topic? Do the findings have transformative potential?</i></p> <p>Ways to increase authenticity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member checking with end users such as practitioners</li> </ul>	<p>Member checking has been carried out through involvement with the supervisory team.</p>

*Adapted from Lincoln and Guba 1985; Treharne and Riggs 2015*

Axiology concerns the role of values and how the researcher’s own values can impact on the research process (Allen and Varga 2007). Researchers bring their own beliefs, values and ideas to their research from the posing of the initial research through to the analysis and writing up of the report. In positivist research an over-riding principle is to reduce subjectivity as far as possible, but in interpretive co-created projects such as this one the researcher is an intrinsic part of the process of creating knowledge. The key element here was to be aware of the impact of my role in the process and try to reduce the potential for bias by carefully considering the validity and authenticity of the



data and maintaining transparency in my approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. I developed my methodology carefully to foreground the student voice and offset any inclination to drive the research in a particular direction. The use of images chosen or created by the participants allowed them to take the lead in deciding what was discussed: allowing the phenomenon to dictate the process is a way of reducing researcher bias (Holloway and Todres 2003).

### 3.4.3 Strategies to increase quality in this study

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) claim that a qualitative study cannot be assessed for overall validity (i.e. credibility, dependability, generalisability, trustworthiness) but that validity within qualitative research is relative to the purposes of the study (p.238-239); in other words, establishing validity within qualitative research depends on the paradigm adopted by the researcher (Creswell and Miller 2000). In a social constructivist study where reality is seen as constructed and contextualized and multiple constructions may exist, validity must be rooted in trustworthiness and authenticity (Creswell and Miller 2000; Guba and Lincoln 1985). If the trustworthiness of the research is established in terms of its overall purpose then this may substantiate a claim of generalisability (Stenbacka 2001). Within a social constructivist study, validity is rooted in the concepts of trustworthiness

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) advocate the use of assessment strategies to evaluate and/or increase legitimization of qualitative research projects. They provide a comprehensive list of strategies and a number of these strategies have been adopted in this study.

1. **Prolonged engagement**, i.e. conducting a study for long enough to obtain “an adequate representation of the “voice” under study...building trust with study participants” Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007: 239).

This study was conducted over a period of 20 months or two academic years (Oct 2016-May 2018). In that period there were four data collection points (Phase 1 focus group and Phase 2 three in-depth interviews<sup>13</sup>). This gave an opportunity to gain a representation of their voice over a period of time and also enabled trust to be established between myself and the participants.

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<sup>13</sup> Not all participants took part at every data collection point – see Table 3.8 for clarification

2. **Triangulation**, or the use of multiple methods, sources and theories to reduce the possibility of chance associations and systematic biases, allowing greater confidence in interpretations (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007).

Multiple data collection methods and data sources were used to triangulate the findings in this project: the methods used were focus group, qualitative interview and photographic techniques (photo-elicitation and photovoice). The data sources were the transcripts and the photographs generated by the participants. This enabled the convergence and confirmation of themes through multiple data sources and reduced the possibility of relying on chance associations or basing interpretations on insufficient evidence.

3. **Clarifying researcher bias.** Researcher bias is arguably the most serious threat to validity in qualitative research. Researcher bias can exist in two ways: the effect of the researcher on the participant, and the effect of the participant on the researcher (Miles and Huberman 1994; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). In the former, the participant can either resist the researcher who is viewed as intrusive, or alternatively give the responses they believe are the 'correct' ones (i.e. subconscious participant collusion). Alternatively, the researcher can lose sight of their research objectives and 'go native'. Researcher bias can also exist at data collection and interpretation stage when a researcher asks leading questions or interprets data in a manner to fit their preconceived conceptual framework. Researcher bias can be reduced by adopting methods which allow the participants to direct the narrative thereby reducing the risk of 'leading questions', using methods which bypass the 'conscious response' thereby reducing the risk of participant collusion, and using data triangulation to verify the findings.

In this project I was aware of my own potential bias as a First in Family student and therefore made a deliberate decision to try and reduce my own control over the data collection and allow the participants to direct the narrative through the use of photographic methods. Photo-elicitation and photovoice are a way of expressing issues which can be difficult to articulate and visual methods can bypass the conscious response. By leaving the direction very open-ended (i.e. "take photographs of anything which expresses 'being a student' to you") there was little opportunity for students to try and anticipate a 'desired response'. The use of multiple data methods and sources also facilitated triangulation which further reduces bias.

4. **Following up surprises.** "Interpretivist research lends itself to unexpected findings, some of which may be very surprising to the analysts...qualitative researchers should follow up these

surprises” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007: 243). Following up should involve revising theory and looking for evidence to support the revised theory.

This study used a student-centred, data-led approach which produced unexpected findings (for example themes were identified in the data which I had not anticipated, such as the importance of home and place to the transition of students). In following up these surprises, the literature was re-visited and the conceptual framework revised to reflect the new themes which had been identified.

5. **Rich and thick descriptions.** One important way of establishing credibility is by providing rich and thick description “deep, dense, detailed accounts” (Creswell 1998: 73) such as verbatim transcripts rather than selected notes. Rich, thick descriptions increase transferability.

This study uses extended verbatim quotations taken from full transcripts to create thick description in support of interpretations and analysis.

### **3.5 *Ethical considerations***

When conducting any research project, it is vital to consider all the ethical implications of your research in order to protect your participants. For qualitative researchers, the nature of the research undertaken necessitates entering into a relationship with the participants (Marvasti 2004). This is particularly true in a project of this nature which involved asking individuals to share personal experiences and emotions. It was of utmost important to me as a researcher, lecturer and individual with a duty of care to my students that I treated my participants with courtesy and respect and protected their rights and anonymity at all times.

With any project, it is essential that the proposed research is subjected to an ethical approval process. As a doctoral student at Bournemouth University, the proposal was submitted for ethical approval which was given in October 2016. As part of the process, the relationship between researcher and participants was explained and the safeguards put in place were made clear.

The Economic and Social Research Council outlines six key principles of ethical research which have been followed in the design and conduct of this research project (ESRC 2015). These are explained

below. All italicized text is taken from the *ESRC principles and expectations for ethical research* (ESRC 2015: 4):

1. Voluntary participation

*“Research participants should take part voluntarily, free from any coercion or undue influence, and their rights, dignity and (when possible) autonomy should be respected and appropriately protected”*

This is an important consideration in studies such as this where the research is carried out by a lecturer with students. I made it clear from the start of the recruitment process that not only was there no obligation for them to take part, there was no advantage to them in terms of their studies. I explained that the research was conducted at Solent university but was not a university project and their responses would not be shared with any members of the university other than in anonymised format. This was made clear during the recruitment talks, an introductory explanation at the start of each data collection point, and the informed consent procedure. Their rights to withdraw at any stage of the research process were also made clear at each stage both verbally and via the Participant Information Sheet, and participants did make use of these rights and choose to withdraw from the research.

2. Minimisation of potential risk of harm

*“Research should be worthwhile and provide value that outweighs any risk or harm. Researchers should aim to maximise the benefit of the research and minimise potential risk of harm to participants and researchers. All potential risk and harm should be mitigated by robust precautions”*

There was no risk of physical harm to the participants, but I considered the risks of emotional or psychological upset. For example, I wanted to ensure that my participants did not see themselves as disadvantaged or marginalised as a result of the study. Indeed, this led me to reconsider my own approach and reject the deficit lens through which WP students can often be viewed, and instead allow their experiences to guide the research. One way to mitigate against potential harm is by providing a contact outside the research project, and a member of each course team who was known to the students agreed to act as confidential contact. I also made it clear that the students could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable with the research process.

### 3. Informed consent

*“Research staff and participants should be given appropriate information about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks and benefits, if any, are involved”.*

It was very important to me as an ethical researcher and individual with a duty of care that the students were fully informed at all stages of the research process, therefore the informed consent procedure was followed rigorously. The purpose, method and intended use of the research were explained in the recruitment talk and follow-up emails together with an indication of what involvement would entail. It was made clear that volunteering for Phase 1 (focus group) did not commit to taking part in Phase 2 (interviews) and that students could leave at any time and ask for their data to be deleted should they wish. Rights to anonymity and confidentiality were also made clear. This information was repeated in the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) together with the name of an independent contact known to them who could be contacted about any further concerns or questions. The Participant Information Sheet ([Appendix A](#)) and Phase 1 and 2 Consent forms<sup>14</sup> ([Appendix B](#) and [C](#)) were sent to the volunteers one week prior to the research taking place and both forms were gone through with the students at the start of each session. This ensured they were understood all the details of the project and their rights within it and had the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were given printed copies to retain for their reference, with one signed copy of the Consent form returned to me.

### 4. Anonymity and confidentiality

*“Individual research participant and group preferences regarding anonymity should be respected and participant requirements concerning the confidential nature of information and personal data should be respected”.*

The rights to anonymity and confidentiality were also a vital consideration in this study. At the start of the first data collection point (the focus group) participants were asked to choose a pseudonym and they were only referred to by that name from that point onwards (a pseudonym was a more appropriate solution than using ‘Participant A’ etc as the members of the focus group would sometimes refer to each other during the session, which was recorded and transcribed. They found it easier to call each other by a name than a letter so pseudonyms

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<sup>14</sup> An amended PIS and Consent form was created for Phase 2 to cover the use of visual images.

were used throughout the focus group and interview sessions). Asking them to choose their own pseudonym gave them an element of control over the process. All recordings, transcriptions and analysis documents were pseudonymised in this way and saved under the pseudonym. The Consent forms bore their actual name as they had to be signed, so these printed documents were kept securely in a locked box at my home. The data recordings were saved on my laptop and protected by password.

Consent form B gave permission for the students' photographs to be used for analysis and reproduced in the report (see Appendix C) therefore participants were advised to avoid taking photographs which showed their own or others' faces or could identify them in any way. However many of the photographs they contributed did show faces, both their own and other individuals not involved in the research. In order to ensure the anonymity of all individuals depicted, the faces have been obscured in this report.

#### 5. Integrity and transparency

*"Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure recognised standards of integrity are met, and quality and transparency are assured"*

The research design and informed consent procedures were reviewed by the supervisory team before being submitted for approval to the Bournemouth University Ethics Approval committee. Once approval had been granted, the supervisory team was consulted through all stages of the research and had access to data collection and analysis procedures.

#### 6. Independence of research

*"The independence of research should be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality should be explicit".*

The independence of this research project was made clear to the participants through the recruitment process and the informed consent procedure, and the contact details of the lead supervisor were provided for any questions about the independence of the research.

This research project was predominantly located within a social sciences arena, therefore the ESRC guidelines were highly appropriate, but was also set within an educational context therefore it was important to also consider the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for conducting ethical research in education (BERA 2018). Many of the guidelines mirror the ESRC stipulations outlined above; the table below maps the two sets of guidelines:

Table 3.5 – A comparison of ESRC and BERA Ethical Guidelines

<b>ESRC Guidelines (ESRC)</b>	<b>BERA Guidelines (BERA 2018)</b>
Voluntary participation	Right to withdraw
Minimisation of potential risk of harm	Harm arising from participation
Informed consent	Consent
Anonymity & confidentiality	Privacy and data storage
Integrity and transparency	Transparency
Independence of research	
	Incentives
	Disclosure

Source: ESRC (2015); BERA (2018)

The BERA guidelines have two additional principles which do not appear in the ESRC regulations. These are related to Incentives (which should be “commensurate with good sense” and always acknowledged: BERA 2018: 33) and Disclosure (should participants reveal illegal behaviour or behaviour that could be harmful to themselves or others, researchers may be under a legal or moral obligation to disclose confidential information to authorities). This last provision is of particular importance in research such as this where the researcher had a duty of care to the participants, however this situation did not arise in this project.

However within the BERA guidelines, there are additional considerations to take into account. For example, clause 47 of the BERA guidelines point to the threat of possible consequences to participants should they be identifiable through inference or association, and the incumbent need for researchers to take all reasonable precautions to avoid this, for example by fictionalising or altering identifiable details. In this study all participants were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, however there was a risk that certain participants could be identified by association. For example, two students were from overseas and referring to their country of origin could have rendered them identifiable by inference. As the participants shared sensitive and personal information, it was important to consider the audience who might have access to these findings and whether this could cause potential future harm or distress to the students. In order to take all reasonable precautions, specific information which could lead to identification was therefore altered, by eliding the specific term (e.g. “Maria was 23 and from \*\*\*” (p.124) and “Barry described his home as a “*small village in \*\*\*\*\**” - p. 143).

BERA guidelines make specific reference to the tensions which can arise when the research methods include the use of photographs in the context of visual ethnography. The guidelines state: “Researchers need to use their judgment about the appropriateness of anonymity in such circumstances” (BERA 2018: 47). In this study all reasonable precautions were taken to protect the anonymity of both the participants and anyone featured in the photographs by the use of photo editing prior to reproduction in this report (for an example of this editing technique, see p.142).

Another important consideration for this project was the relationship between myself as lecturer and the participants as students and the power imbalance this entails. The ESRC guidelines specify that special attention should be given to “potentially vulnerable individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship” (ESRC 2015: 8) and that those in such a position should be given the “time and opportunity to access support in their decision-making” (p. 29). At each stage of the research process the participants were given one week between receiving the Participant Information Sheet and the research taking place. This was done to ensure they had time and opportunity to make contact with the lead supervisor or independent course team member should they have any concerns or questions.

The issue of “dependent or unequal relationship” was one I considered in depth. In the past students have been required to take part in lecturer’s research studies and could be penalised through failed units or extra assignments or given inducements in terms of extra credits (Clark and McCann 2004). Clearly this pressure is unethical. The issue lies in whether the power imbalance between lecturer and student renders them as ‘vulnerable’. Assuming that they are not designated as vulnerable because of any other factor such as health or age, students are considered competent to give informed consent to research (Clark and McCann2004). However, the Social Research Association (SRA) stipulates that vulnerable populations include “those in a dependent relationship to the researcher” (SRA 2003: 30) and that extra care should be taken to ensure their rights are protected and their compliance freely given. Although a student may be deemed competent to give informed consent, this competence could be impeded in situations where they feel obliged to take part in course-related research. MacDonald (2002) pointed out that an individual’s capacity to make autonomous decisions can be eroded by power structures within relationships and institutional ethics committees must therefore make sure that consent is not only informed but also voluntary. The crucial concern is the perceptions of students around what might happen if they refuse to take part. In this study coercion – whether real or perceived - was not an issue. Potential participants were not identified and asked directly to take part, but instead an open invitation was issued to the whole student group and volunteers were asked to contact me for further information if they were



interested. As I did not know which students met the criteria of First in Family, I was not in a position to coerce anyone. It was also made very clear that participation in the research would not bring any benefits in terms of extra credits or improved marks, and that the research was unconnected with their coursework and in fact with the university itself. Participants could potentially have felt obliged to continue with the process after the focus groups, which is why I divided the research into Phase 1 (focus group) and Phase 2 (interviews) to give a natural break point for participants to withdraw if they wished. I believed they might feel reluctant to tell me in person they did not wish to proceed, or to state this in front of other group members, so I asked all participants to contact me privately by email to state whether they wished to take part in Phase 2 or not. In this way I tried to reduce any sense of obligation to continue, and two participants did email me to say they did not wish to proceed to Phase 2. In response I thanked them for their contribution, said I was sorry they would not be continuing but did not try to persuade them otherwise.

The informed consent procedure and research design was used to reduce any sense of obligation to participate on the part of student, however there are other ethical issues to consider. It is also essential that students do not feel they should answer in a certain way to 'please' the researcher, a process referred to as 'subconscious participant collusion' (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). The steps taken to reduce participant collusion have been covered in Section 3.4.3. By using participant-controlled photographic techniques the students could choose what areas they felt were significant and they wanted to discuss. This avoided the risk of researcher bias through the selection of topics which I felt were most appropriate or which suited my objectives. The open-ended instruction made it difficult for students to try and guess what photographs I might want to see or responses I might want to hear. It is clearly impossible to eradicate any possibility of researcher bias, particularly in interpretive studies where the researcher is an integral part of the knowledge creation process, but selecting methods which gave control over the narrative to the participants I attempted to reduce the power imbalance and offset the risk of researcher bias and participant collusion.

However, using visual methods has its own ethical implications. Three major considerations are that (1) participants are fully aware how their photos will be used; (2) photographs should not identify the participants for confidentiality reasons; and (3) the images should not identify non-participants who have not consented to take part in the study (Torre and Murphy 2015). The first of these issues was addressed through the use of the PIS and Informed Consent procedure where participants were made fully aware of how their images would be used and gave signed consent to their use. This was repeated at each data collection point. It was also explained to them that they should not use

images which showed their own or others' faces. This requirement was often overlooked, so I addressed the issue by editing the photographs to conceal any faces before including them here.

### **3.6    *Research Phase***

#### 3.6.1    Participant details

The recruitment procedures were outlined in Section 3.3.1. In total eight participants were recruited for Phase 1 (four from Advertising and four from Film and TV) and two more were substituted for Phase 2 (three from Advertising, three from Film and TV and two Photography). Table 3.7 gives information and biographical details about the participants including their chosen pseudonym, phase of the research in which they participated, age at the start of the research process, course they were enrolled on, and university pathway (according to the typology created by Waller 2015 and shown in Table 3.6).

Table 3.6 - A typology of university pathway

The taken for granted pathway	going to university is seen as normal, majority in family has a degree, siblings are already at university, most people at school are going. Many middle-class students fall into this category, particularly the upper middle classes.
The planning pathway	going to university was a long-term goal and choices and actions were deliberately taken to achieve it. Aspirant and academically gifted young people from the working class may follow this route, as may highly motivated middle-class students.
The drifting pathway	people could not really give an account of how they decided to go to university, they lacked aims and objectives, but ended up there regardless. Drifters can come from all classes.
The rescue pathway	the young person did not envisage going to university, was drifting, possibly falling into bad habits, but somebody took an interest and motivated them into applying. Rescues may involve less academic working-class and some demotivated middle-class students.
The derailment pathway	the opposite of rescue. The young person starts off on a positive course towards university but something happens - illness, exam failure, family breakup - which disrupts their progress, resulting in dropout or setback. This can affect all class groupings.
The disorganized route	an extreme version of the three former routes. Because of their own or family actions - such as moving around the country, moving between schools, etc., - the trajectory is disrupted, even ruptured. The young person may start a degree, leave it, return to another course later in life, or enter into employment for a time before entering higher education. This pattern is often associated with mature students.

(Waller 2015)

Table 3.7 – Interview Participant details

Name	Phase	Age	Course	Residence	Finances*	Typology	Biographical details
Barry (M)	1 & 2	18	Film and TV	UK	Extreme	Drifting/ Rescue	Barry came from a small rural village. He was the only one of his peer group to attend university and was initially reluctant to apply himself, only doing so to keep his parents happy.
Amber (F)	1 & 2	19	Film and TV	UK	Extreme	Planning	Amber lived in a city about an hour away and was the only one of her peer group to attend university (although her brother was also in higher education). Her parents had encouraged both children to consider university from a very young age. Amber had a part-time job back at home which involved a lot of hours at work and a lot of travel.
Cara (F)	1 & 2	22	Film and TV	UK	Extreme	Rescue	Cara was 22 and her family was opposed to her going to university; she had not considered it until it was suggested when she was on work experience, and her route into higher education had been problematical.
Larry (M)	1	18	Film and TV	UK	Moderate	Planning	Larry came from a comfortably off background and had always intended to go to university. He declined to take part in further research after Phase 1.
Tricia (F)	1 & 2	19	Advertising	UK	Moderate	Derailment	Tricia had started her degree at Solent the previous year but had dropped out and was now re-starting her first year. Tricia also came from a rural village.
Lauren (F)	1 & 2	18	Advertising	UK	Ultra	Drifting	Lauren had a very close network of friends from home, most of whom had also gone to university. The family were well off and Lauren was the only one of the participants to not mention a part-time job.
Satin (F)	1 & 2	18	Advertising	Non-UK	Extreme	Planning	Satin was brought up by her grandmother overseas; none of her peers went to university and it was unusual for people from her background. At 16 Satin emigrated to join her mother because of better educational opportunities but did so reluctantly. Satin was not eligible for a maintenance loan and received no financial support from her family.
India (F)	1	18	Advertising	UK	Moderate	Planning	India was from a comfortably off family who migrated to the UK. She had moved around a lot as a child and found it easier to settle and make new friendship groups than some of her peers. India declined to take part in further research after Phase 1.
Maria (F)	2	23	Photography	Non-UK	Extreme	Planning	Maria was 23 and moved to the UK in order to attend university; she was the only one of her peers to do so. Maria worked long hours to support herself and send money home.
Donna (F)	2	18	Photography	UK	Moderate	Drifting	Donna had originally decided she did not want to attend university, despite encouragement from her parents and a teacher (her peers did not attend university). She was very close to her parents, particularly her mother, and had one older sister.

\*Extreme – Little or no financial support from parents. Working long hours in a part-time job.

Moderate – Some support from home. Supplemented with some part-time hours.

Ultra – Well supported by parents. Minimum part-time hours work.

### 3.6.2 Fieldwork

The initial focus groups were held in November 2016 with four Advertising students in one group (Satin, Lauren, India and Tricia) and four Film and TV students in the second group (Barry, Cara, Amber and Larry). The original intention was to carry out data collection at the start and end of each academic year, however this timeline had to be adapted. It took longer to recruit participants than anticipated so the focus groups were held in November rather than October of the first year. The first interviews were brought forward to March as the Film and TV students would be filming on location after the Easter break therefore not easily available (the additional participants were not recruited until April so their interviews took place in May). In the second year the interviews took place as planned at the beginning and end of the academic year (see Table 3.8).

The participants were sent Participant Information Sheets (PIS) and consent forms one week prior to the session. At the start of the focus group session I made any necessary introductions and went through the PIS and consent forms with the students, before asking them to read over the forms and sign one copy, keeping the other for their own records. The sessions lasted 40-50 minutes and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The photographic cards were spread out on tables around the edge of the room and students were invited to wander round and look at the cards, choosing one which they felt reflected something about their experience of being a student. The discussion started with me asking each participant what image they had chosen and what it represented for them. From this point the discussion was largely unstructured with occasional prompts or requests for clarification from me. At the end of the session the participants were thanked for their contribution and invited to take part in the second stage of the research process (in-depth interviews). It was made clear to them that there was no compulsion to continue with their participation, and they were asked to contact me via email if they wished to continue (this was done to avoid any feeling of awkwardness at being 'put on the spot' in front of the other participants). At this stage Larry and India contacted me to say they did not wish to continue any further but were happy for me to use their data.

The second phase of the research was the in-depth interviews; the first round was carried out in March 2017. Interviewees were sent new Participant Information Sheets and consent forms one week before and were given copies to read and sign prior to the start of the interview. The consent forms covered the same issues as those for Phase 1, but with the addition of a question giving their consent to the use of the photographs they contributed (see Appendix C). The interviews lasted 40-60 minutes, were audio-recorded and later transcribed. In April two further participants were

recruited (Maria and Donna) and they were interviewed in May 2017. The second round of interviews took place in November 2017 at the start of their second year, and the final interviews in May 2018 (two participants had left university and did not take part in this final round).

Table 3.8 – Schedule of interviews

	Phase 1	Phase 2		
Pseudonym	Focus Group (PE*)	Interview 1 (PE + PV**)	Interview 2 (PE + PV)	Interview 3 (PE + PV)
Larry <sup>15</sup>	1 – 28 Nov 16			
Barry	1 – 28 Nov 16	27 March 17	28 Nov 17	8 May 18
Amber	1 – 28 Nov 16	20 March 17	15 Nov 17	
Cara	1 – 28 Nov 16	13 March 17	20 Nov 17	11 May 18
India <sup>16</sup>	2 – 29 Nov 16			
Tricia	2 – 29 Nov 16	28 March 17	27 Nov 17	8 May 18
Lauren	2 – 29 Nov 16	28 March 17	21 Nov 17	2 May 18
Satin	2 – 29 Nov 16	15 March 17	13 Nov 17	14 May 18
Maria <sup>17</sup>		19 May 17	21 Nov 17	14 May 18
Donna		19 May 17	29 Nov 17	

\* PE – photo-elicitation methods used

\*\*PV – Photovoice methods used

### Use of photographic materials

Photo-elicitation was used in both focus groups and interviews. The same image cards were used in and participants were asked to select an image to reflect their experience at that point. By using the same method it enabled us to reflect back on their previous choice and how their changing selection of image reflected changes in their experience or outlook. This is demonstrated below in a series of excerpts from the focus group and interviews with one participant, Barry:

<sup>15</sup> Larry did not proceed to Phase 2

<sup>16</sup> India did not proceed to Phase 2

<sup>17</sup> Maria and Donna were recruited after Phase 1 had been completed

### **Focus Group 1 (Nov 2016):**

*INT: And Barry, what's your picture?*

*BAR: I got the staircase. It just looks like quite complicated and looks like you're at the bottom and you're looking up. And then there's like...a lot of stuff you have to go through. So it seems quite daunting, maybe. At university, and it's like so much pressure to be good and make my parents proud and family proud of what I'm doing. Yeah. That's why I picked this one.*

### **Interview 1 (Apr 2017):**

*INT: You remember in the focus group, when I asked you all to take a card, and you'd taken the staircase...And you said you're at the bottom looking up and you talked about it being quite daunting and a lot of pressure and I just wondered if you still think that's how you'd express it, being a student?*

*BAR: I actually say -- no. Because at the start, you know, there is a lot going on. You don't know where you're going. It's very stressful. You don't know if you've done the right thing. I was feeling that but now we're in April, I've got a lot clearer mind. And I sort of know where I want to go more.*

### **Interview 2 (Nov 2017)**

*INT: You've chosen the picture of the sign 'Think, Slow Down'. Why is that?*

*BAR: I don't know, because a lot of things are going through my head at the moment and I'm not stopping and assessing things, and I need to focus in on one particular thing. Because last year was stressful, but this year's a lot more, because second year is where the grades count, last year didn't. I thought it was stressful last year but this year's a bit more and as I got a lot more going on, I can't just like pass, it has to be a good grade, a really good grade.*

### **Interview 3 (May 2018)**

*BAR: ....definitely talking about being at peace. This one.*

*INT: Okay, so you're going for the clouds? That's interesting because the last time you spoke to me all your pictures were about stress and you talked about how stressed you were.*

*BAR: Yeah, I sort of decided around December-time to not be too focused on grades. And it sort of released the stress a lot more... it has actually turned out better 'cause I think for this term, I'm doing a lot better, I'd say, with grades. Maybe focusing too much on your grade sort of hinders you almost ... when you have that sort of freedom, you just—I don't know you're more creative I think, yeah.*

In Phase 2 the second visual research method was introduced where participants were asked to bring a selection of photos they had taken themselves and discuss their significance (photovoice). The instruction was very open-ended to try to reduce any temptation on the part of the individual to subconsciously collude by taking the kind of photos they thought I wanted to see. The only instruction was to 'take a photo which they thought represented being a student to them'. From an

ethical perspective they were asked to avoid taking photos of other people or to ask their permission if the faces of others appeared in the photos.

### 3.6.3 Analytical strategy

#### **Thematic analysis**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a principal benefit of thematic analysis is its flexibility as it can be applied in different ways according to the theoretical framework and can also be used across epistemological approaches. There have been criticisms of thematic analysis as insufficiently rigorous (Boyatzis 1998; Vaismoradi et al. 2013) however Braun and Clarke (2006) postulate that this is more a problem of poor application and explication by the researcher than any inherent weaknesses in the method.

In this interpretive study an inductive approach to analysis was adopted. In this ‘bottom up’ approach, the analysis is not driven by the researcher’s preconceptions but rather is based on a careful reading of the data to identify meanings and patterns (Frith and Gleeson 2004); a key advantage of thematic analysis in inductive studies is that it facilitates this approach. Indeed Braun and Clarke refer to thematic analysis as a kind of ‘grounded theory lite’ where the researcher does not subscribe to the theoretical commitments of a “full-fat grounded theory” which necessitates the data leading to theory development (2006: 81) but uses thematic analysis as a data-driven approach. This is particularly appropriate for social constructionist research where the emphasis is on “the multiplicity of interrelated, subjective and often oppositional understandings, each with their own inherent validity” (Taylor and Ussher 2001: 295).

When identifying themes, it is important to clarify the process used to identify and select relevant themes; as Braun and Clarke 2006 point out, any reference to themes ‘emerging’ in a passive manner is erroneous and misleading. All researchers identify themes according to their own selection criteria and therefore a degree of ongoing reflexivity is essential. This study sought to foreground student voices in order to generate understanding and the research was therefore conducted in a flexible manner to allow students to present material which they felt was relevant. In continuing this process, it was important not to try and impose meaning on the data or try to fit it into a pre-existing coding framework but rather to ‘listen’ carefully to the students’ voices and identify emerging themes and patterns, as set out in Section 3.6.4. This then led to a return to the literature to analyse the theory which was relevant to the themes raised by the students.



### **Epistemological assumptions**

The first vital step is to outline the assumptions which informed the analysis and led the researcher to identify the relevant themes and create links. Thematic analysis has been used here primarily within a social constructivist epistemology in that the patterns identified are viewed as socially produced and interpreted. In this way it has close links to a 'contextualist' method, i.e. sitting between essentialism and constructionism, as the researcher believes that individuals interpret their experiences through the lens of a broader social and cultural context. Constructionism is a paradigm which focuses on the manner in which individuals are created by the social world, and the manner in which we use language to inform our sense of self and the worlds we inhabit (Taylor and Ussher 2001). The analysis process therefore needed to foreground the voice of the participants and the way in which they constructed meaning from their experiences. Once the data had been coded and categorised to show patterns, it was then interpreted in relation to literature in order to attempt to identify meanings and implications.

#### **3.6.4 Process of analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six stages for conducting thematic analysis:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Each of these stages was used as a guide in the data analysis process as explained below. The results were shared with the supervisory team at interim points to ensure credibility.

##### **1. Familiarisation.**

The first step was to familiarise myself with the data. The recordings were transcribed and the printed transcripts were read alongside the recording to amend any errors of transcription. The amended transcripts were then made available to the supervisory team (a sample of full transcripts is provided at Appendix I-K. The entire dataset of 24 transcripts has not been provided due to length).

## 2. Code generation.

The transcripts were highlighted and colour-coded to identify initial codes (see Appendix D). This was done systematically both horizontally (i.e. all interviews in each phase) and vertically (all 3 phases for each participants).

## 3. Identifying themes.

Once the coding had been completed, the codes were collated into themes.

## 4. Reviewing themes.

At this stage Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate the creation of a thematic 'map' of the analysis by verifying if the themes work in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire data set. I produced a mindmap for each interview (see Appendix E). This allowed a clearer visual representation of the themes within each interview which could be compared horizontally and vertically. A mindmap was produced for each focus group and each interview (24 maps in total). These were then shared with the supervisory team to ensure credibility.

## 5. Defining themes.

The mindmaps were collated into a table which showed the themes across each stage of the process (Appendix F). This allowed the overall story of the analysis to be represented more clearly. Some themes appeared consistently across all the interview phases (e.g. Home), while others applied to one particular phase (e.g. lack of money – Interview 1). This allowed me to track areas of change and transition and also recurring themes.

## 6. Report production.

In the final stage, the findings chapter explained the themes identified in the table and extended quotations were selected to include in the final report (See Appendix G). Although there was an initial conceptual framework to the study, the data was analysed in an inductive manner which allowed themes to be identified which had not been envisaged at the literature review stage. This led to a second phase of literature review, based on the emerging themes.

An example of my analysis procedure is given in the appendices. Firstly there is the raw data in the form of the printed transcript which is then colour-coded as outlined at Stage 2 'Code generation' (Appendix D). Following the identification of themes, Stage 4 involved producing a mindmap for each participant at each research phase as shown at Appendix E. At Stage 5 the mindmaps were

then collated into a thematic table (Appendix F). At Stage 6 extended quotations were selected for inclusion in the final report (Appendix G).

### 3.6.5 Reflection on methodology

In qualitative research, the researcher will always influence the collection and interpretation of data as the research itself is co-created between researcher and participant (Finlay 2002a). In this study, my behaviour will have affected the responses of my participants and I was embedded in the research process. This co-creative aspect of qualitative research is one of the ways in which a study such as this can produce rich in-depth data as the trust develops between researcher and researched. However, there must be a degree of reflexivity if there is any claim to the integrity of the findings. “Through the use of reflexivity, subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity” (Finlay 2002: 531).

In the pre-fieldwork phase I needed to reflect on my relationship with the topic. As a First in Family student, lecturer, professional academic and researcher, I came from a position of multiple viewpoints and lenses. I was always aware that this might be a temptation to design my research to meet my preconceived outcomes rather than genuinely exploring the students’ experiences. My self-reflection on my closeness to the research topic was instrumental in my creation of a methodology which attempted to sideline my role and foreground my participants. In designing a 2-year research process I felt that participants would become more confident to express their own opinions and overcome any tendency to subconsciously collude in the process by giving me the answers they thought I wanted. I chose to use photographic methods at each stage as I felt this would give the participants more autonomy and me less control over the data. However, I needed to change my perspective and rather than see my embeddedness as a limitation to the research, rather acknowledge its advantages whilst at the same time putting in place measures to protect the integrity of the research.

The outcomes of data collection in a qualitative study are fundamentally influenced by the relationship between the researcher and the participant. In my research I wanted to develop a sense of trust and familiarity to build confidence in my participants so they could talk freely. However, my own disposition can sometimes obstruct my best intentions. I wanted to avoid asking leading questions of my participants, but when they seemed to find it difficult to articulate their responses, I found it difficult not to jump in and help them. One particular individual, Barry, often seemed to struggle to find the right words or would tail off in his reply. This pushed me to ask more questions

in an attempt to clarify and I ended up becoming more directive, without this being my intention. I found his awkwardness uncomfortable but looking back on the transcripts I realised that on occasion my questions might have been interpreted as leading.

Finlay cites a paper given by Gough (1999) in which he explored his use of humour in the interview process and the way in which he used humour to 'collude' with the participants and reduce the interviewer/participant gap:

"I suppose the use of humour helps to suggest the illusion of "normal" conversation, with the researcher temporarily colluding as one of the "lads" ...This particular example could indicate a degree of self-deprecation, perhaps in an effort to reduce power differentials, or perhaps attempting to endear myself to the participants. Perhaps such occasional contributions give the impression of participation, thus rendering temporarily the otherwise peculiar position of polite interrogator less salient. It is also possible that humour is attempted as a defence in light of anxiety or discomfort around my "difference" (as researcher, tutor, outsider) and "using" the participants for data."

(Gough 1999 in Finlay 2002a)

Reading this extract made me reflect on my own practice in interviews and my tendency to use humour to collude or 'endear' myself to the participants. Humour can certainly be an ice-breaker and can reduce the perceived power differential by giving the impression of 'being on the same level' but my over-sensitivity to potential discomfort can result in a tendency to over-compensate. I believe the familiarity the participants felt with me was an asset to the research in their ability and confidence to talk freely. However, it can also make me too present in the research process, rather than taking a back seat.

When it came to the data analysis process, I reflected on my processes and realised that in my first attempts at coding the data I was highlighting areas which matched my preconceptions of what was important. I had initially thought that influences on the choice of institution would be a factor and was therefore searching for references to this in the transcripts in order to colour-code it. When I reflected on this, I realised that this was not an issue raised by the participants unless I specifically asked about it. In realising this, I also recognised that I was trying to make the data fit my preconceptions rather than the other way round. I was looking for data which matched my framework as a First in Family student from the 1990s and a middle-aged researcher/academic This led to a major shift in my research: in starting again with the analysis and leaving my preconceptions to one side, I realised that the topics being raised by the students through their words and photographs were issues I had not previously considered. This led me to revisit the literature and adapt my conceptual framework to fit the words of the students, not vice versa.

Finlay warns against the dangers of:

*“infinite regress, with researchers getting lost in endless narcissistic personal emoting or interminable deconstructions of deconstructions where all meaning gets lost”*

(Finlay 2002b: 226)

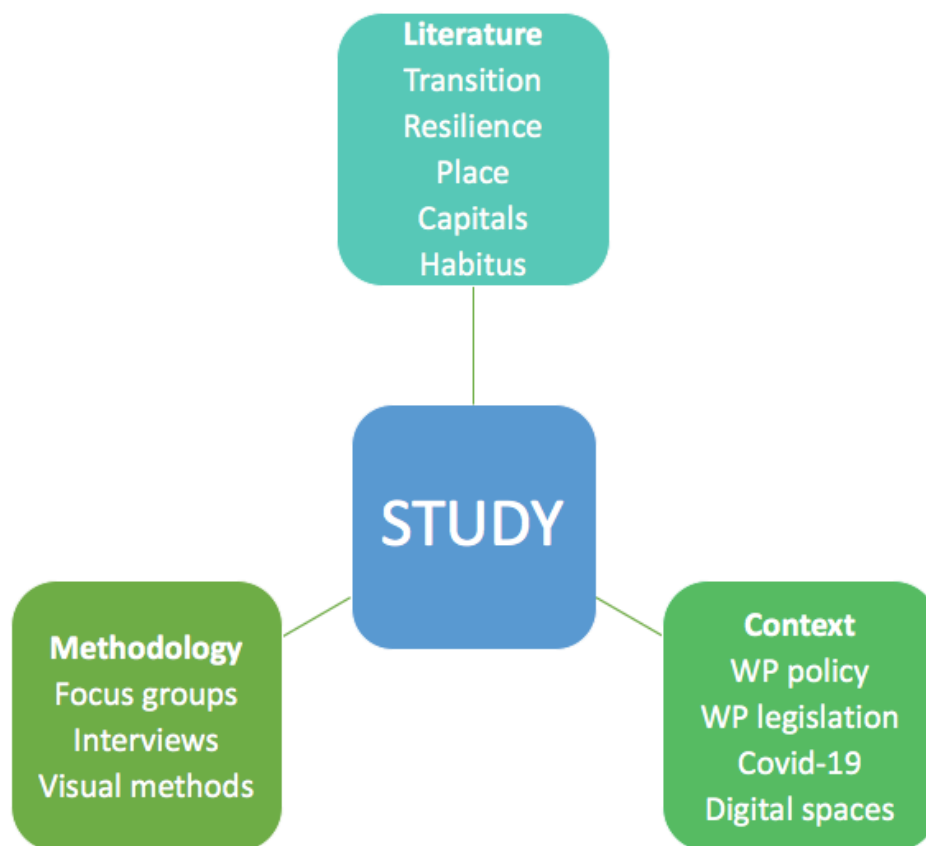
In this section I have attempted to show how reflexivity had a positive influence on my research by giving me insight into the impact of my perspective on the research and revealing unconscious biases in my approach. By continually reflecting on my role in the process I became more aware of these impact and potential biases and put in place mechanisms to try and reduce them. Reflexivity does not render qualitative research perfect, but it does situate the researcher and shine a light on our personal and often subconscious motivations and interpretations which in turn increases the integrity of our work.

In summary, in this research project I constructed a methodology which was based on my position as a qualitative researcher and which I felt would give me the best opportunity of allowing the student voice to emerge through words and pictures. Chapter Four will describe the findings of my research and the principal themes I identified.

### **3.7 Intersectionality**

This study sits at the intersection between theoretical frameworks and research paradigms. In attempting to understand the real experience of First in Family students, it was necessary to incorporate multiple theories of transition, resilience, place and capitals. This has entailed drawing on the fields of sociology and psychology to explore the psycho-social influences and factors which all contributed to the experiences of the participants. Although essentially an interpretivist social-constructivist study, it also owes much to a grounded approach of constructing meaning through the data which has led to a reframing of the conceptual framework. The methods used are appropriate to in-depth qualitative research but have also borrowed visual techniques more commonly found in health and social research settings. In order to gain a full picture of the experience of First in Family students it was necessary to explore in detail the backdrop of Widening Participation legislation and policy, and to consider this in the current context of a world changed utterly by the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the strengths of this study is its situatedness within the intersection of influencing factors, which I have attempted to visualise below.

Fig 3.6 – Intersectionality of this study



### ***3.7.1 Intersectionality of students***

One of the dangers of qualitative research is to ignore the intersectional nature of human beings. It is possible to view participants in terms of one criteria – e.g. their First in Family status – and ignore the competing influences that constitute an individual’s personal and social context. In this study seven of the eight participants were female therefore it is not possible to make any claims about gender differences, but clearly these may have existed. Participants also differed in terms of ethnicity – this data was not recorded as ethnicity and race were not factors under consideration in this research, however is also likely to have had an impact on the individual’s perceptions and responses. It is important to acknowledge the intersectionality of the participants though criteria such as gender, ethnic background and age were not included as comparators in this research. This is an aspect which should be considered in more widescale further research projects.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings from the research conducted in Phases 1 and 2 between November 2016 and May 2018. Although the research findings have been presented according to identified themes in this Chapter, the full analysis and synthesis with the literature will be presented in Chapter 5. Using an adapted version of Braun and Clarke's process as outlined in Section 3.6.3, I started by reading through all the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data then colour-coded the transcripts to identify initial codes. At this point in the research there were certain themes I was expecting to see, for example I had anticipated that the participants would talk about academic engagement and their journey as a student. I had assumed that academic and classroom activities would be a significant factor in their overall experience, for example their relationships with lecturers, the process of dealing with assessment requirements, encountering unfamiliar academic terminology, however these did not appear in either their pictures or words. From the data it would appear that their experiences outside the classroom played a far more significant role in being a student. This was interesting as it highlighted my unconscious expectations and assumptions – clearly the academic experience seemed more significant to me in my role as an academic than it did to them as students. The most important issues for them were the social, emotional and psychological factors of becoming a student. This was an advantage of my research approach because it allowed the students to highlight what was important to them, even when this confounded my own expectations.

Once the colour-coding of the transcripts had been completed I collated the findings into themes and visualized these by producing a thematic mind map for each data point as shown in Appendix D. There were common themes which appeared across multiple datapoints (e.g. were raised by different participants at different stages of the research process) and these main thematic areas were collated into over-riding categories. Some of these categories were in line with my expectations (such as the role of friends) however other categories had not been anticipated. For example, the role of home in the transition process was a surprise to me and led to a return to the literature to investigate conceptions of 'home'. Similarly, participants across data points referred to their sense of aspiration or drive, an idea I related to the concept of resilience.

Overall the data analysis process identified four main thematic areas: home, friends, resilience and capitals. At each data collection point the themes were presented slightly differently as the students

progressed through their journey (for example references to home friends and friendsickness were replaced with representations of university friends and new networks). Table 4.1 shows the overriding thematic area (which I have called ‘categories’) and the themes within this category as they were presented at each stage of the research. This shows how the themes developed over the course of the research process. For example, the theme of ‘home’ appeared at each stage of the research however in the initial stages (focus group and interview 1) it was largely expressed in terms of homesickness and missing parents and family. By interview 2 (which took place at the start of their second year) the participants were talking about home in terms of the process of ‘homifying’ their university living space and creating a second home. By the time of the final interview at the end of the second year, references to home centred around the transference of ‘home’ to university. Thus, the category of home appeared across data points but the theme developed through the process.

Table 4.1 – Categories and themes

<b>How do First in Family students transition into and through their first and second years of higher education?</b>				
<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>THEMES</b>			
	<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Interview 1</b>	<b>Interview 2</b>	<b>Interview 3</b>
<b>1. HOME:</b> The transition of ‘home’ and ‘here’ <a href="#">Section 4.2</a>	Homesickness	Homesickness	Homification/ ‘Second home’	Transference of ‘home’
<b>2. FRIENDS:</b> The transition of friendship networks <a href="#">Section 4.3</a>	Separation from home friends. Friendsickness.	Separation from home friends. Support of new friends.	Role of university friends.	Transference of friendship support network.
<b>3. RESILIENCE:</b> The transition of self and identity <a href="#">Section 4.4</a>	Independence	Resilience / aspiration Making others proud.	Resilience Making others proud	Resilience Making others proud.
<b>4. CAPITALS:</b> The role of economic, social and cultural capitals <a href="#">Section 4.5</a>		Lack of money Social capital	Impact of part-time job (time)	



## 4.2 Home: the transition of 'home' and 'here'

The concept of 'home' was a theme which emerged strongly through the narratives of many of the respondents (Amber, Donna, Lauren, Maria and Tricia) but there was a change in their narrative of 'home' and 'here' through the data collection points. The locus of home shifted through the phases of interview.

### 1.2.1 'Home' and 'here'

In the initial interviews, home was commonly constructed in binary terms of '*there*' (i.e. home) and '*here*' (i.e. university). *There* represented home, safety, security, family, relationships, happiness whilst *here* (university) was the reverse: manifested by insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, stress – as outlined in Tricia's narrative in the next section. For some students this representation was quite extreme: Lauren became unwell in her first term and associated university with illness, somewhere she needed to escape from to recover. In the first phase of interviews many of the students saw *here* as alien and isolating. The importance of place and 'home' was significant in the photo elicitation: when asked to bring photos which reflected their experience of being a student a number of the respondents picked photos which represented *home* and *here* and the contrast between them.

### **Here as a negative non-space**

Tricia was repeating her first year after dropping out the previous year. Previously she had struggled to make the break and her close ties to home (returning every weekend) prevented her from making the transition process, ultimately leading her to withdraw from university. She was now returning to university to try again. Hausmann et al. (2007) suggest that students who have close ties to their parents and home lives can find it difficult to make the transition to university life and this seems to reflect Tricia's experience. In her first interview Tricia represented *home* and *here* as strongly contrasting; she described *home* (where she came from) as "*kind of green and nice*" whereas *here* (university accommodation) "*looked like a ghetto*" (Tricia Interview 1). This was also reflected in her photos: *home* was a rural field of flowers (Fig 4.2) while *here* was a congested urban street scene (Fig 4.1). When asked how she felt when she looked at the photo of *home* she said "*it just makes me feel happy*". Moreover, Tricia constructed a narrative of safety and threat around her concepts of place: *home* was "*like a safety blanket*" whereas *here* was compared to "*being on a buoy out in the ocean*" (Tricia Interview 1). She chose a picture of a smashed door (Fig 4.3) to express the crime in urban

areas where “people rob people and damage things”; something she believed would never happen at home.



Fig 4.1 – Tricia Int 1 ‘here’



Fig 4.2 – Tricia Int 1 ‘home’

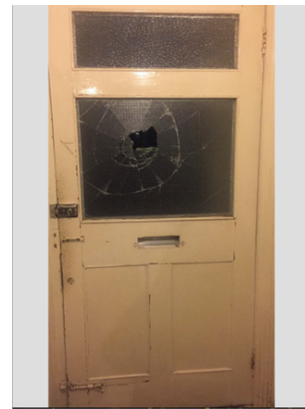


Fig 4.3 – Tricia Int 1 ‘door’

For Maria, *home* and *here* were highly emotional concepts. *Home* was overseas and throughout her interviews she spoke of homesickness for her family, home, friends and her country. She expressed the difficulty and loneliness of her life here: “*it was kind of sad at the beginning because I cry a lot and it was very difficult for me*” (Maria Interview 1). In our second interview, when Maria was asked what photographs she had brought as part of the research process (i.e. photos which represented what ‘being a student’ meant to her) she contributed pictures taken as part of a coursework project which had been set after our first interview. Maria had chosen to base her project around concepts of ‘house’ (i.e. student accommodation) and ‘home’ (the family home overseas). There was an interesting convergence between this research and Maria’s own exploration of place and space. Although we had not talked about physical space in our first interview, I had asked her whether England ‘felt like home’ and she subsequently chose to base a coursework project around relationships with home and space:

*“the relationships with the others and the spaces, like the bedrooms, and what makes you feel like home or what can remind me of home. This is a house, because it’s a non-place, it’s not permanent, right? But what makes you feel more at home and not in the house, because this is all \_\_\_ people [i.e. from the same country as Maria] so the ‘home’ is in \*\*\* and ‘house’ is here, it’s in England”.*

(Maria Interview 2)

Maria used a binary narrative of *house* and *home*: *house* is a “non-place” because it is temporary whereas *home* is in \*\*\*. Her project focused on the ways in which she and her flatmates attempted to feel more *at home* rather than *in the house*. Her photographs showed how the students used reminders and objects from home in order to transform *house* into *home* or *non-space* into *space*.

When asked to pick four key photographs she chose pictures of her flatmates' bedside tables and desks. All looked similar, with framed photos and objects from home, representing how different people use the same methods to transform their physical environment from *house* to *home* (Fig 4.4-4.6). Maria explained how she rarely even looked at the photographs of her family on her walls:

*"I don't even look at them. You'd even forgot that they were there, but they are there. It's everywhere.... all different people have exactly the same, like pictures of family and teddy bears, everything that makes them feel better, if they're homesick"* (Maria Interview 2)



Fig 4.4 – Maria, 'space' 1



Fig 4.5 – Maria, 'space' 2



Fig 4.6 – Maria, 'space' 3

Maria's concepts of 'space' and 'non-space' tie in with Augé's concepts of 'non-places', those that have no relational or identity significance (Augé 1995: 27 – see Section 5.3.1). It is also an interesting reflection on the research process itself. I did not ask whether our conversation in Interview 1 had led to her thoughts around the significance of space, but it made me reflect on the way that the research process can influence the thoughts and reactions of the participants beyond the research itself. Clearly this links to the ethical imperative to 'do no harm' to participants, both within and without the research itself.

Donna expressed very similar sentiments, describing her halls in her first year as space that was *"not really yours, not really permanent"*, *"like a hotel"* and *"like I wasn't living there at all"* (Donna Interview 2). She had felt very homesick in her first year and her loneliness and dislocation seemed to be reflected in her surroundings which she said were so clean and tidy it was like she wasn't living there (Donna Interview 2). This sense of not occupying her own space is resonant with Maria's description of 'non-space'. There were elements of nostalgia in the way that some of the participants idealised their 'home' space to the detriment of the reality of 'here'. The word nostalgia has its roots in the Greek *nostos* meaning 'return home' and *algos* meaning 'pain', resulting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century definition of 'acute homesickness' and the modern meaning of 'sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past' (Oxford English Dictionary). The sentimental yearning for the past they had left behind was signified through the presence of objects as reminders of home (such as the teddy in Figure 4.6) and the emotional attachments these objects signified.

#### 4.2.2 Transference of locus: homesickness and 'homification'

The second interviews took place at the start of the students' second year, therefore they were no longer in student halls but had moved into shared houses or flats. This represented not only a change of physical space but also an increasing control over their living conditions: student halls are allocated by the university, but students choose their own houses and who they live with. This is a period of transition as they move from the insecurity of the fresher to the more settled nature of the second-year student which is reflected in a changing relationship with their personal physical space. It also represents a significant stage in the transition from dependence to autonomy which takes place over the student journey. The narrative of 'second home' appeared repeatedly in the dialogue. As the students became more settled and more independent, so the locus of *home* and *second home* shifted. In the second round of interviews the participants were starting to refer to their student houses as their 'second home', in contrast with the 'non-space' of their first-year halls. This was a process which took place over the course of the interviews: by the third interview (which took place at the end of their second year) they were starting to view their student houses as 'home' and the family home as their 'second home'. This transition process was expressed tangibly through the 'homification' of their rooms as they gradually populated their physical space with possessions from home, thereby shifting the location of 'home'. This physical process reflected an emotional transition as they became increasingly independent and autonomous.

In her second year, Donna moved into a house and she described trying to make it "*as homely as possible*" by bringing belongings from home (a process also described by Tricia and Maria). Donna portrayed this transition through the photographs she selected. The photograph of her sink in first year halls is shown below (Fig. 4.7) and Donna explained how "*the way it was so clean it all sort of looked like I wasn't living there at all*" (Donna Interview 2). In contrast she described her room in her second-year student house as "*more messy*" and her "*second home*". This is reflected in Fig. 4.8 which shows a more cluttered space with pictures on the wall; a space she referred to as "*home*" or "*homely*".



Fig 4.7 – Donna Interview 2, ‘halls’



Fig 4.8 – Donna Interview 2, ‘home’

In her third interview Tricia used very similar language to Donna, describing how she had made her house in Southampton ‘homely’. In her third interview she brought a photo of her desk<sup>18</sup> and her room to represent her experience of being a student, and talked about the difference between halls and her second-year home:

*“Got loads of stuff on my table —whereas before [in halls] it was very much desk, laptop, make-up bag and that was literally it and I had all my things at home. All the little bits and bobs that I needed for here as if it was like a hotel or something. It was very plain. And now it’s just full of everything, all my stuff. It’s like I’m visiting at home really.”*

(Tricia, Interview 3)

This shift in ‘home’ and ‘second home’ was a process shared by other participants. Lauren described how her conceptions of ‘home’ had transferred from the family home to university: *“in the first year I definitely felt like ‘home home’ was home and this... I was on holiday when I was here, but it has switched”* (Lauren Interview 3). This echoes Tricia’s feelings that returning home was like ‘visiting’.

With all three students, the importance of belongings and their emotional significance was key in the process of transferring the locus of ‘home’. Tricia described bringing all her belongings from her parents’ house and how this changed her mental attitude: *“this is my house. It’s got everything in it”* (Tricia Interview 3). For the first time she referred to Southampton as *“home”* and her family house as her *“secondary home”* where she felt she was ‘visiting’. This was particularly noticeable as homesickness had been a strong thread throughout Tricia’s narrative; her transition had been more problematic than most and she had found it difficult to separate herself from home. She described deliberately leaving items at home in her first year so she would have a reason to go back, whereas now she felt like Southampton was home and returning to the family home as *“like I’m visiting”*.

<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately these photos are not available as Tricia deleted them by mistake after the interview.

Tricia's transition process as she relocated the locus of 'home' from her parents' house to her own student house is reflective of her transition from dependence to independence. Like Donna and Maria, her process of making 'house' into 'home' was indicative of her process of increasing confidence and independence. In her first interview Tricia talked about home as a 'security blanket', somewhere she needed to keep returning to:

*That probably added to me feeling more homesick in the first year, just because I went home so much...Home is like safety, it's like a safety blanket. Here it's like, I don't know, being on a buoy out in the ocean. It's very alone"*  
(Tricia Interview 1)

By her third interview she saw the family home as a 'secondary home':

*It sounds so odd but I feel like here is home. My mum gets so upset when I say "I'm going home" as in to Southampton but... it [family home] is kind of like a secondary home now... I don't need that security blanket.*  
(Tricia Interview 3)

The importance of this process was also reflected through her photographs. Again there were striking similarities between the pictures chosen by these three students (who did not know each other) and also the language they used to describe them. Like Donna, Tricia described her previous accommodation as "*very plain, like a hotel or something*" (Tricia Interview 3) whereas the photos she picked to portray her current environment showed firstly her desk covered with personal belongings and secondly a wall covered with photos to remind her of home (reminiscent of Maria's photo project).

Tricia's transition process was represented in her third choice of photo. In her first interview, Tricia brought a photo of the street to show how alien and urban the scene was, "*like a ghetto*" (Figure 4.1). Now her street scene was "*like just nice, like suburbia kind of, sort of cute*" (Tricia Interview 3). When prompted, she had no recollection of her first photograph; now the setting seemed familiar and comfortable, not threatening. This transition was particularly important for Tricia as her homesickness had caused her to withdraw in her first year.

For both Tricia and Donna, the move from student halls to a shared flat was an important stage in their transition and made them feel much more "*grounded*":

*"Hopefully if you've moved into a house or whatever, that's what most people get and I've really found that this year and it's really helped me to sort of not miss home as much at all"*  
(Donna Interview 2).

#### 4.2.3 Alternative transitions

Not all the students underwent a similar transition process. Like Tricia, Barry came from a rural background but constructed it in a very different way. For Tricia, home was security, safety, somewhere 'green' and rural in contrast to the threatening urban environment she experienced in Southampton. She found it difficult to make the break from home and initially returned every weekend. Barry described his home as a "*small village in \*\*\*\*\**" and expressed boredom and frustration at his home: "*There's not much you can do there. There's no shops. There's only one shop and I worked there*" (Barry Interview 1). Barry liked living in the city and did not spend much time at the family home. He expressed a sense of alienation when he went back and felt like he was "*going back into my old ways*". Barry never mentioned feeling homesick and seemed to feel much less of a sense of attachment to home; he did not mention any transference of locus or possessions, nor were these reflected in his photographs.

Cara did not seem to have a strong connection with home and family. Her relationship with home was more fractured: like Barry she did not discuss her family home as either a physical space or an emotional support and did not go through the homification processes the others talked about. Cara's sense of 'home' seemed to be more rooted in people than physical spaces: she described the importance of housemates and new relationships and the sense of belonging she felt at university ("*I feel like I belong here*", Cara Interview 1) along with an increasing sense of separation from her family.

Not all the participants transitioned from 'home' to 'here'. Unlike Tricia and Donna, Maria showed little sign of having undergone this process as \*\*\* was still home, as reflected in her language. Although she had lived in the UK full-time for over three years and intended to stay after graduating, Maria spoke of 'coming back' to \*\*\*, not 'going back', as though she resided there:

*INT: Does it [Southampton] feel like home?*

*MAR: Not yet, no. I feel like I'm doing something here and then I'll come back [to \*\*\*]. I look forward to finish but I know that I'm not coming back now. I will stay for a while, I don't know how long. I think we can manage to stay a bit longer. But I would like to come back one day.*  
(Maria Interview 3)

This seemed to reflect her very strong links to \*\*\* which she continued to see as home, and any period away as temporary.

### 4.3 *Friends: the transition of friendship networks*

Just as the shift in locus of *home* was indicative of personal change, so the relationship with friends underwent a transition. Friendship networks, both with 'home-friends' and 'uni-friends' had a profound effect on the ease with which participants transitioned into university. Strong links with home friends could be either a source of comfort and support (Maria; Donna) or alternatively a barrier to transition and a contributory factor to homesickness (Tricia; Lauren). For other respondents the relationship with home-friends was characterised as one of increasing separation and alienation. There was a feeling that the students had 'moved on' and left their friends behind, and Barry and Amber also referred to a sense of animosity on the part of their home-friends. For respondents like Cara on the other hand, there was no indication of a support network from home-friends and the friendships she referred to were generally those she had made at university.

#### 4.3.1 Separation from 'home-friends'

The relationship with home friends was complex and multi-layered. Four of the participants did not appear to have very close relationships with home friends (Satin, Barry, Amber and Cara) and they were the individuals who most actively embraced the opportunity for change which university afforded them. All four expressed the idea that they only really became 'themselves' once at university and perhaps this explains why their relationships with home friends was more distant. They were also the participants who had the most distant relationship with home and family and were least likely to mention homesickness (in fact Satin and Cara had fractured relationships with parents). Their eagerness to change and transition into a new identity may partly explain why they expressed an increasing sense of alienation from their former friends. Barry was very clear from the start that university had caused him to change, to become more outgoing and confident. When asked whether his home-friends saw him differently, Barry felt that his friends looked down on him for making poor life choices by saddling himself with student debt rather than earning money: *"I feel like they see me as I've done the wrong thing"* (Barry Interview 2). He described feeling awkward with them because he was aware he had changed and they seemed to resent it. Barry described being different when he returned home, *"going back into my old ways"* and reverting to the more shy person he had been before:



*INT: How do you feel when you go home and see your friends?*

*BAR: It feels different, definitely. It feels like going back into my old ways sort of thing... now, like I said, I am confident at uni. I sort of go back to being a bit more shy when I go back home which is so weird. Definitely.* (Barry Interview 1)

In his second interview this sense of separation had increased; Barry said his friends regarded his student debt as “*obscene*” and “*a waste of money*”, and they saw his decision to go to university as “*alien*”. Barry was aware of his increasing alienation from them: “*I don’t know, I just feel completely different towards them.*” (Barry Interview 2). Barry’s transition from the ‘old self’ at home to his ‘new self’ was particularly marked. He made a conscious effort to distance himself from his ‘old self’ and saw the ‘new self’ as his real identity. Just as other participants began to feel less comfortable in their old homes, so Barry felt less comfortable with his old self.

Amber had a similar experience with home-friends; none of her friends had gone to university and she felt ostracised:

*When I arrived, I didn’t have any friends. Like I only talked to one person from back home because the rest of them just had their own groups and they didn’t really... like because I went to uni, they stopped talking to me...they were like, “Ah, you think you’re better than us so we’re not talking to you anymore,” it’s kind of the vibe I get.* (Amber Interview 1)

In both Barry and Amber’s experience, their home-friends seemed to push them away and resent the changes they saw. Although they lacked the emotional support of a close friendship network from home, at the same time there was no barrier to their transition.

Donna and Maria had very different experiences. They had much closer relationships with home friends but despite the fact they were also the only ones from their friendship groups to attend university, unlike Barry and Amber, their friends were very supportive:

*“They were all just like, “We’re so proud of you,” you know, “Go do it.” Like they all didn’t really want to do college or whatever, they were all sick of school as soon as we came out of school, and I was always the one that was, you know, they were like, we’re so proud that you actually went to uni.”* (Donna Interview 1)

She found their support and encouragement helped get her through when she was homesick in her first year, and she in turn influenced them to make different choices:

*“they’re all jealous of my uni experience now because I look like I enjoy it so much that they’re all like... one of my friends was just thinking of coming on a course with me now, she was like, “Oh, it looks so great that I want to do is as well.”* (Donna Interview 1)

Maria was in close contact with her friends overseas and found this a great support:

*"I have friends, so my friends are always there... we talk every day, we have a group chat and we talk every day. That helps a lot. I know they are there. If something happens, I can send a message and they will reply to me and say, "Oh, what happened, this and that"... This was good because I'm here and they are there, like, we're like close to each other.*

(Maria Interview 1)

For some of the other participants, close home friendships could be a barrier to creating new relationships at university. This was particularly true for Lauren who described the possessive element of her home friendship network:

*"I had been with my friends since Reception, and we all had. So when we were split up from each other we didn't know what to do. We were like 'Oh my God'. And when one of us would be talking on Facebook to someone we had met on our course they would be like 'Why are you talking to them? Don't talk to them', like a bit protective of everyone?"*

(Lauren, Focus Group)

Throughout her first year and into her second year, Lauren returned home frequently and was in daily contact with her friends, saying, *"I can't imagine not being in contact with them every day"* (Lauren Interview 1). Her narrative and photographs frequently referenced her home friends and how much they looked forward to reuniting in the holidays.



Fig 4.9 – Lauren Interview 2 'Disneyland'

*"I'm seeing my friends from home and it just felt nice... Friendship from home, yeah. I'm making sure I'm seeing them still and it was nice...it was a really good time"*



Fig 4.10 – Lauren Interview 2 'birthday party'

*"this one was my 19th birthday, at home again with some more home friends... it was like before uni, it just felt normal. We always pick up where we left off...we don't feel distant from each other, it feels exactly the same...it felt like uni was distant and this was back to normal, like what it was like before uni."*

It was only by the third interview that Lauren seemed to be distancing herself from her home friends, referring to the lives of those who had stayed at home as *“a bit boring”*. She was also starting to grow apart from those home friends who were at other universities. Despite trying to stay in contact through social media, there was a sense of growing apart as they were all *“in our own bubbles”* (Lauren Interview 3). This showed a real shift from her first and second interviews where she was still very close to her home friends. By the third interview she described university friends as *“much closer”*. What is noticeable is how her photographs change. In her second interview two of her four photographs feature her home friends, but by her third interview it is her university friends who appear in the photos:

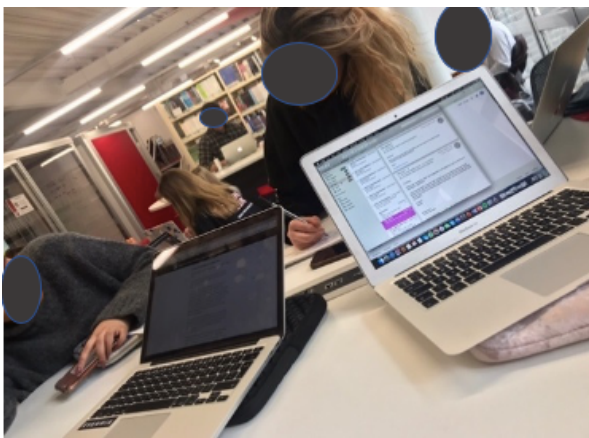


Fig 4.11 – Lauren Int 3 ‘working in the library’

*“I need to rely on the people who are doing this with me because they’re the people who know and who can help me...our group has gotten closer definitely”*



Fig 4.12 – Lauren Int 3 ‘uni trip’

*“We rely on each other so much, I don’t know how many messages I get from them on a daily basis... I guess it shows how we’ve gotten closer because of that trip”*

Lauren’s friendships with home-friends gradually changed as she underwent the transition process; as the locus of home changed, so did the locus of friendship. Similarly, Donna’s first interview features her home friends strongly, and the importance of the encouragement and support they gave her. By the second interview she described herself as *“a bit more sorted out for second year which has helped me a lot like emotionally”* and part of this being *“sorted out”* was around making new friendship groups. She reflected on the difficulties she had faced in the first year:

*I’d never been away for such long periods of time with complete strangers basically or having to make friends and connections with people that you have no idea who they are. Now in second year, you’ve got a really close-knit support group of friends. Hopefully you’ve moved into a house, it’s really helped me to sort of not miss home as much at all. I just enjoy now being here and then it makes me appreciate going home when I can ... I think that’s a lot more about being sort of grounded and being...knowing where I am...I think it’s really helped being with other people that I can trust and rely on and just talk to about anything really.*

(Donna Interview 2)

### 4.3.2 The importance of 'new friends'

Developing friendships at university played a vital role in the transition process, helping the students to feel 'at home'. In the focus group Lauren described how friends were particularly important at the start of university because you no longer had your family: *"when you're at home you're with family, whether you've fallen out with friends or not, whereas here you're completely on your own. You need to have friends"* (Lauren, Focus Group). For Donna, her university friends became her *"support network"* and stopped her dropping out when she felt *"terribly homesick"*. She describes how she made a close friendship with a flatmate who was also considering dropping out, and they supported each other. Those participants with the closest home links (Donna, Tricia, Lauren and Maria) seemed to have most problem adjusting, describing the first year as a time of loneliness and isolation:

*DON: Speaking to other people and being really open about how you feel is probably the best thing for it, because you have a little room to yourself, and you can lock yourself in that room, and you can get really lonely, so I feel like coming out and just being in the kitchen and just being like "I'm having a bit of a down day guys, is anyone else feeling a bit homesick?" just being really honest is probably how I got over it.* (Donna Interview 1)

Tricia had also struggled with her first year and described her time as 'horrible':

*TRICIA: Sometimes like when we're all like on our separate rooms and things and doing our own thing, it can get quite like lonely ... weekends are horrible here, like horrible. Everyone says it. It's just boring and just dull and nothing to do. So they would just stay in their room, watch Netflix. Sometimes, it gets a bit depressing actually.* (Tricia Interview 1)

In the first year, making friends could seem quite stressful. Barry and Satin talked about the pressure to go out and spend money socialising as a way of creating networks (see Section 4.5.3) and Barry also talked about *"wondering whether people like you"* (Barry Interview 1). By the second year the students felt much more secure and grounded in their friendships and this in turn gave them more security in their university life. Donna explained how in the first year she felt a bit lost and surrounded by strangers, but in the second year she chose her own friends:

*"one of the biggest differences in second year is that you are constantly surrounding yourself with people you've chosen to surround yourself with rather than the system's chosen it for you"* (Donna Interview 2).

For those participants whose links with home seemed less strong (Cara, Barry and Satin) there was less of a sense of homesickness and 'friendsickness'. Barry's reinvention of himself has already been mentioned, but Cara also welcomed the opportunity to make new friends and she referred to them as her 'uni family':



*"But you'll always have your 'uni family' to be there and blow off steam. Uni is more about the many instead of the one"*

(Cara journal entry)

Fig 4.13 – Cara Journal: 'Uni Family'

## 4.4 Resilience: the transition of self and identity

### 4.4.1 Self-awareness and confidence

The homification process described in Section 4.2 is the physical manifestation of an emotional and psychological process as the students underwent a separation from their former life and home and transitioned into something different. For some of them the 'between space' of their first year was difficult, for others there was a conscious realization of the transition process. Transition is idiosyncratic and for some it was a more positive experience than for others. Some of the participants exhibited high levels of self-awareness and embraced the opportunity for self-transformation: *"I know who I am, I know what I want to do and there's a clear path ahead"* (Cara Interview 1)

For a number of the participants the second year brought about increased self-awareness and reflection on how they were changing and this was brought up in the second phase of interviews. Donna chose an image of a flamingo looking at its reflection to symbolize her own process (Fig 4.14):

*"I think this year has just been a massive reflection on my work and myself...I feel like I've got everything a bit more sorted out, a bit more grounded."*

(Donna Interview 2)





Fig 4.14 – Picture card ‘Flamingo’, Donna Int 2 (Stokes 2013)

Satin also showed a growing level of self-awareness and an understanding of her transition:

*“the biggest thing I think about second year is sort of just understanding life again sort of understanding what things are important and things like that.”* (Satin Interview 2)

In his first interview Barry had mentioned the increased confidence which university brought him, but in his second interview he exhibited much higher levels of self-awareness. His narrative reveals an awareness of a deliberate effort to change his identity by constructing a different ‘self’ in his new surroundings, creating a student identity which would fit more comfortable within the university environment:

*BAR: I definitely noticed the confidence boost...I moved into a house with some people I knew but I didn’t know their friends ... I was quite talkative, I was like friendly and now they’re my friends as well, so I was really open and stuff like that. I’m finding that a lot easier.*

*INT: Is that different from when you came?*

*BAR: Definitely. Definitely, I was really quiet and like introverted.*

(Barry Interview 2)

When asked to elaborate, Barry described seeing himself in a different way, as someone more self-confident who had “*proper intellectual conversations*”, something he would never have done before, and who was no longer an “*extreme introvert*” but was more open and outgoing. He attributed these changes to being at university and having the opportunity to mix with a wider variety of people. Barry’s view of his transition process is quite striking. He saw a clear distinction between his current self and the person he would have become without the changes brought about by attending university, and saw this transformation as overwhelmingly positive:

*“I’d be very different, definitely...I would’ve probably found a full-time job where I didn’t have to integrate with other people. I wouldn’t have liked who I would have been”* (Barry Interview 2)

Amber also expressed a positive sense of personal change and transition. She saw university as a space of creative and personal freedom and described herself as having “*blossomed*”, able to “*be herself*” and not be judged as she would be at home, becoming more “*strong-minded and ambitious*”. She described a form of regeneration, the opportunity to recreate herself in a different way in a new environment where she was not known or pigeon-holed:

*“...enough creative freedom and space to express myself .... when you’re growing up you kind of get a name for yourself in a way, like this is how this person is supposed to behave for their whole life, but the second you move away you get a fresh start, you can like make yourself”*

(Amber Interview 1)

Like Barry, Amber described herself as a different person at home, quieter and more withdrawn, whereas at university she felt accepted for who she was:

*“I’ve always been a really bossy loud person, but it’s like people just accept you for who you are now...like if I’m loud, someone’s like “Ok, you’re a loud person, cool”. But whereas back home they’re like “Can you be quiet? You’re being loud”*

(Amber Interview 1)

Both Barry and Amber believed they had developed a more confident and outgoing identity at university as they reconstructed themselves to adapt to their environment.

Barry also underwent a transition in confidence in his own abilities and work. In his second interview Barry talked about his need to “*prove to myself that I’m good enough to be here*” (Barry Interview 2) and this linked to his initial feelings of ‘not being good enough’:

*“You’re not smart, not intelligent. You’re average. I thought it [university] was just for those really smart people...I thought I’d be the outcast”*

(Barry, Focus Group)

However by his final interview at the end of the second year he was showing much more confidence in his own abilities, bringing photographs to show how proud he was of his work. One of the photographs he brought was of himself on a film shoot:



Fig 4.15 – Barry Interview 3 ‘Film shoot’

When asked to explain its significance, he spoke about his pride in his work and reaping the rewards:

*I guess you’re working hard but you’re proud of what you’re doing and it’s sort of reaping in the rewards. I know for this shoot specifically, I enjoyed it throughout. I was directing and we knew it was something special and it was good... I was very proud of it.*

(Barry Interview 3)

Three of Barry’s four photographs for this interview were connected with this particular film shoot and his pride in his work and confidence in his own abilities as a director. These reflect the way in which he felt he was achieving his aspirations, but also how he had transitioned in his confidence in his own abilities through the two years of the research. He had also started to direct (a role he had been assigned by others on the course rather than choosing for himself). He described his initial reluctance to take on the role and his surprise and pleasure at his ability to take charge and subsequent success. He chose a photo with himself large in the foreground to show his position of importance as director:





Fig 4.16 - Barry Interview 3 'Directing'

#### 4.4.2 Independence and resilience

The participants' journey towards independence took place over the course of all three phases as they underwent a gradual transition towards autonomy. Their journey from total dependence to independence was partly played out in the arena of finances. At the start of their journey they were struggling to achieve financial autonomy and independence and for some of them the need to be financially independent and not ask their parents for support was indicative of their desire to be autonomous and to be seen as 'adult'. For example, both Satin and Barry were reluctant to approach their parents for money even when they were struggling financially. Although partly financial, the over-riding factor seemed to be a desire for their parents to see them as managing and living independently. For Barry, his worry about how his parents viewed him was a major factor:

*"asking my parents for money, I don't really want to do that. It's like, 'what will they think of me?' if I asked for it and they'd say, "Oh, is he independent?" and stuff like that. "Can he handle himself on his own?" I didn't want them to have a bad representation of me. That is why even in that time, I refused to ask for money. They even asked, "Are you good for money?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm fine" even though I was really poor and I was really struggling. I had about 8 pounds a week to spend on food".*  
(Barry Interview 1)

Satin's struggle to achieve independence from her mother was more deep-rooted, but was also played out through a narrative of money. At the start, Satin was completely financially dependent on her mother (her mother had control over Satin's finances which she gave to her in the form of a weekly allowance). Satin had agreed to give her money to her mother because they both felt she would not be able to manage it herself. She had only £50/week to live on, but described how difficult she found it on one occasion where she exceeded her budget before the end of the week:

*"I remember there was a week where I ran out of money on a Tuesday and I had nothing...that was the first and only time I called my mum and asked her for money, for her to borrow me*

*money, first and only time I did that. Because it felt awful, it felt absolutely awful...she gave it to me but she was just sort of a bit disappointed. You can feel it in her voice that I didn't manage to have the money until the end of the week"*  
(Satin Interview 1)

By the second interview, Satin had rejected this financial arrangement and insisted on having control of her own money, a move which her mother resisted:

*"Last year we agreed that she's going to budget my money so I don't spend it all in one go. But this year, I kind of told her that I'm just going to do my own thing...And I think that's so much better. Initially she was not happy about it because obviously she has no control over what I do because I take care of my own finances. But I kind of think it's for the better."*

(Satin Interview 2)

Satin recognised that her mother was seeking to control her through managing her finances, and she was struggling to resist that control and become independent. By the third interview she had achieved financial independence:

*"you don't have to rely on anyone which is really good because I don't like to rely on other people... I like to have my own money and all that kind of thing and I don't have to ask anyone. So that's been really good"*

(Satin Interview 3)

The importance of freedom and independence to Satin was also expressed through her choice of pictures. In her second interview she picked the card showing a windsurfer and described it in terms of being "free". In her third interview she chose a picture of a kite *"because it symbolises freedom"* (see Fig. 4.17 and 4.18).



Fig 4.17 – Satin Interview 2, 'Windsurfer'



Fig 4.18 – Satin Interview 3, 'Kite'

Satin's transition process had taken her from a financial dependent who returned home every holiday to an independent adult who managed her own finances. She had also become much more autonomous, choosing to limit her returns home:

*"because I feel like I'm better when in distance from my family. If we're in distance we sort of have more positive things to talk about but if we're together then we don't"* (Satin Interview 3)

She said her mother *"wasn't very happy"* that she had chosen to stay in Southampton for the summer and struggled with the idea of Satin being more independent. Satin described her mother as *"like really annoyed that I'm just running away basically"* (Satin Interview 3), which seemed to reflect her mother's awareness that Satin was moving away from parental control and exerting her own autonomy.

The move to assert independence and separation from home was reflected in the transition of locus between 'home' and 'here' as discussed [in Section 4.2](#). By the second year they expressed a stronger sense of autonomy, seeing themselves as 'more independent' and more 'settled' and more grounded: *"I'm way more settled"* (Lauren Interview 2): *"I just enjoy being here... I think that's a lot more about being sort of grounded"* (Donna Interview 2).

Lauren had been very attached to home in her first interview, returning most weekends and referring constantly to home friends and family. By the second interview she was returning less often and describing feelings of *"being suffocated"*. This was caused by a dissonance between her new status as an independent adult at university, and her old life with her family who still viewed her as a dependent:

*"I've become more independent. And when I was at home I've felt so suffocated...I'm so used to doing my own thing and I just walk out the house and my aunt's like, "Where are you going?" and I'm like "Oh I forgot I have to tell you where I'm going all the time now...I have to like listen to your orders again"* (Lauren Interview 2)

Lauren also chose a picture which expressed freedom, a bird in flight (see [Fig 3.2](#)) which spoke to her of *"independence...being free from your family, not in a bad way, in a good way"* (Lauren Interview 2).

Amber's transition process was less straightforward. In her first interview she compared herself to friends who had stayed at home and had children, saying she wanted to continue studying and get a good job. She took pride in her independence and the opportunities that her degree would open up to her. In her second interview she talked about her determination to succeed and not drop out.

*"Some of my friends did get pregnant and then had kids and they were like, "I don't want to go to uni because I want to look after my kid." And then some were like, "I'm going to a full-time job." And then others like me were like, well I want to study some more and then potentially get a good full-time job".*  
(Amber Interview 1)

*"I would be happy with that [a 2:2] as long as I passed the course with the amount of crap that's happened in the last two and a half years, if I pass the course I will be extremely happy with myself"*  
(Amber Interview 2)

By the time of the third round of interviews, Amber did not take part as she was focusing on her forthcoming wedding and had more or less dropped out of university. So from her initial phases of looking for a different life, she had ended up reverting to the choices made by those friends she had initially distanced herself from.

#### 4.4.3 Dispositional factors in overcoming adversity

A recurring theme in the interviews was way in which the participants' own individual aspiration and drive was a contributory factor in overcoming adversity. Cara in particular referred to the many barriers she had to overcome in order to get to university.

*CARA: I think it's just like throughout my life I never really got helped by people, so I always have felt like I'm being pushed back. Like an invisible wall and it's just there and I have to try and push it in order to get where I want to go and what I want to do. And I just felt like, it's like the universe was pushing me back at the time.*

*INT: So what was the wall do you think?*

*CARA: I don't know. It's just that I feel like because no one really said, "Oh, you can do it." I was just being maybe invisible a little bit. Because I had speech issues and stuff. I still do now, so I think like just that little.... Like, I had to fight a little bit more to understand things a little bit better and stuff. It's just like a little wall that's like trying to hold me back a little bit, yeah. It's just this really weird sense, to be fair. Like feeling that you're being pushed back. But I feel like it's loosened up now a little bit more. Now, I feel like I can just do things... And I know what I can do and I know what I can't do. And I'm not afraid to say, "I can't do that." So, I'm happy. I think it's just the fact that I know who I am, I know what I want to do and there's just a clear path ahead. Like, I feel I can do things now and there's no wall, I've knocked it down.*

(Cara Interview 1)

The wall was a recurring image in her interviews and she perceived it to be built by the people around her who failed to give support and encouragement: *"they put that wall there"*. She believed the wall was partly due to the attitude of her teachers *"I never really had much help from teachers to be honest... I never had teachers who took an interest and stuff"*, and her mother who resented the idea of her leaving home and going to university:

*"She hated the idea. I don't think she talked to me for a while...I always said the main people that can hurt me are my family. Because they're my family so I take everything on board. And they've never really been like the most supportive people".* (Cara Interview 1)

However, Cara also saw the wall in a positive light, in the sense that overcoming adversity has made her stronger: *"they put that wall there but then it also built me up thinking, "I don't care what you think. I'll do what I want"* (Cara Interview 1).

She felt that having to fight harder to get to university made her more driven than her peers:

*"When you are the underdog you want to just try and do more and I feel like most people have had it easier than I have ... I have a little bit more fight than other people...Because I had been told "No, you can't do that" And then it's like a passion and I was like, "No, I can do that." And it has probably made me improve my chances of doing things. Because I'm in the mind frame it's like "I can do that." People who've been told that they can do things all their life think it's easy ... whereas I've had to fight for things"* (Cara Interview 1)

This made her more determined to make the most of every opportunity and she referred to her own *"drive to do more and be more"* (Cara Interview 1) than those around her. Friends from college also saw this drive, telling her *"in five years' time...you'll probably be somewhere better than us because you've got the drive"* (Cara Interview 1). She believed that her experiences had given her a clear sense of self-knowledge: *"I know who I am, I know what I want to do and there's a clear path ahead."* She also expressed the view that her past experiences had contributed to this self-awareness, saying *"that's probably why I am happier and I do know who I am because of everything in life"* (Cara, Interview 3).

Maria also showed an awareness that she was different to her home friends, despite her closeness to them. When she said *"if I want to do a thing I will do it, no matter what or how, I will do it. My personality is like this"* (Maria Interview 1) she was also expressing the determination which set her apart. Satin described herself as *"not like other people from my background"* (Satin Interview 1) because she didn't want to settle for a menial job and later in her third interview she expressed a similar determination to Maria: *"If I have decided I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this whatever it takes...I'm not going to quit"* (Satin Interview 3).

## 4.5 Capitals: the role of economic, social and cultural capitals

### 4.5.1 Cultural and social capital

For First in Family students, the lack of knowledge in the family about university can be a barrier, which is a form cultural capital. Donna described feeling like “*a blank canvas*” when she arrived, as though her lack absence of social and cultural capital rendered her somehow invisible. She felt very unprepared for university life as her parents and family “*had no idea*” about higher education (Donna Interview 1). When she first arrived at her flat she discovered that the other flatmates had all been in touch over the summer via social media and had got to know each other, but she had been unaware of the existence of the Facebook groups and was therefore the stranger in the group, the unknown ‘other person’. Her words suggest a feeling of being insubstantial and alienated through her lack of social capital:

*DON: it was so weird for me, there’s like a Facebook group that they all joined to say that they’re all living in the Southampton halls, I had no idea about it, I didn’t join any social media, so when they all saw each other at the flat, they all knew who each other was because of Facebook profiles, and for me ... they were like, “Oh, you’re the other person.” And no-one knew who I was, and I didn’t know who anyone else was, but they’d all been talking through social media because they created like a halls chat for Southampton Solent, so that was weird as well. I was walking in there like a complete blank canvas, while everyone else was like, “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen you, yeah. I’ve spoken to you all summer.”*

*INT: And how did that make you feel?*

*DON: It was a bit weird. I felt a bit clueless, because I was like, “Oh, God. How did everyone know something about this and I didn’t?”*

(Donna Interview 1)

This feeling of alienation was also expressed through her confusion with regard to the geographical space. She felt a lack of connectedness between halls and the university and her words express a sense of dislocation and alienation.

*Just knowing where you are makes you a bit more confident, because I felt completely clueless the first day I walked in there. I didn’t even know how to get to uni because me and mum drove around Southampton the day that we came to the open day, and we were like, “Oh, this is so lovely. Oh, this is nice.” And then when we arrived here, we went straight to the halls and I couldn’t work out where the halls was in relation to the university, it was like two different worlds, so yeah, it was a bit strange. I did feel a bit clueless the first couple of weeks.*

(Donna Interview 1)

This dislocation and disorientation suggest that for Donna, university did not feel like a place she could create a home or belong. When describing her arrival, Donna repeatedly used the word “overwhelming”:



*“it’s quite **overwhelming**, that’s how it feels when you come to uni, especially in a city like Southampton. But I’ve come from quite a small like, little village, and it is quite **overwhelming** how many people are here, and having to find your way around ... It was **overwhelming**.”*

(Donna Interview 1)

All the students in this project were First in Family and felt elements of their backgrounds represented barriers which they had to overcome in order to succeed as a student. This took various forms: being unprepared for university life was common to a number of them (Donna, Barry, Tricia, Satin) and struggling with finances was also a recurring theme. Parents and family could not share their own experiences and a number of participants said they did not receive much support or advice from teachers. This unpreparedness extended to understanding procedures prior to arrival or feeling ill-equipped for the realities of student life, such as Barry who described not knowing what to expect and having no concept of what student life would be like. His parents could not give him advice and he received little help from teachers:

*“They [teachers] didn’t say anything about university actually. Never mentioned it. So we just didn’t talk about it.”*

(Barry Interview 1)

Tricia talked about “*not being quite ready*” for university the first time round, making “*a bad decision*” to live in halls because she was unaware what this entailed, and having expectations of university life which mostly centred around things she had seen on television, so finding the reality quite different. Cara also received no encouragement from her teachers, and unlike Barry, her family were not supportive:

*“I never really received much help from teachers to be honest. I don’t know what it was. The only teacher I received help from was my tutor in Year 10. She was the only one that, like, strived me to do better things and she encouraged when all others were, like in my opinion weren’t very good. I never really had very good teachers.”*

(Cara Interview 1)

Donna was also unaware of what to look for in a university and felt she lacked advice:

*“Because none of my friends were looking at universities, and mum and dad had no idea about universities, like no one else in my family had an outlook on it except for my sister, and she’d gotten it wrong the first time, maybe because no one gave her advice, but when you’re going around in the university open days, it’s completely different to when you’re like, going to halls and moving your stuff in on the first day, you’re like, I don’t even remember this place, it looks completely different”*

(Donna Interview 1)

Cara’s said that she knew nothing about applying to university and never considered it an option, it was only a friend at her part-time job who told her she could apply for a foundation and helped her with the application form. She used her journal to describe her feelings when she started university and her description of the ‘blank information page’ resonates with Donna’s sense of being a ‘blank canvas’:



Fig 4.19 – Cara Journal: Starting uni

*“Uni can be a lot of things at the same time. At the start you’re like a blank information page. Ready to be moulded into something. Most of the time you seem like you’re going into the unknown and you get thrown around a lot, turning every way”. (Cara journal entry)*

Cara’s “invisible wall” was representative of the barriers put up by those around her who were unwilling or unable to assist in her journey. Cara lacked the social and cultural capital of those whose family, teachers and peers can offer encouragement, support and advice in the process of getting to university. The first time I met Cara, in the focus group, she referred to being ‘over her head’. In a striking visual analogy she picked the card of the bird in flight to signify her feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious at the start of university (see Fig 3.5). Her explanation of what the image represented reflected the impact of capitals on her anxiety:

*“When the bird stops flying it will just fall out of the sky. So if I stop going for one moment, I feel like everything’s just going to rush in, and then I’ll just lose all my footing... academically, like work and outside, because I work as well, alongside uni.” (Cara, Focus Group)*

This was the start of Cara’s first year and she had described being unsupported and unprepared for academic life and work; alongside this her lack of economic capital obliged her to work long hours in a part-time job from the start.

Barry also talked about his background in terms of disadvantage in comparison to others. He was aware that other course-mates came from more privileged backgrounds which gave them an



advantage. He described needing to work harder and not having the same opportunities as others, such as a friend who had contacts in the industry and easily found placements and even a graduate job. In this instance Barry lacked the social capital of others on the course. He described how people from his background had to work harder than those who *"have it given to them, and they expect an easy life and are going to get it"* (Barry Interview 2). Later he referred again to those who:

*"get everything handed to them and they get the opportunity to do more stuff to get a bigger portfolio, whereas someone like me wouldn't have that opportunity. So I'd have not as good a chance."*  
(Barry Interview 3)

Rather than resenting the advantages of others, Barry seemed quite accepting that he would just have to work harder:

*"But that's just the sort of thing you've got to live with and you can't do anything about it, it's just the way it is and you just got to work your hardest to get where they are as well... it's the luck of the draw in a way... You've got to work with what you've got."*  
(Barry Interview 2)

Barry also linked academic and social capital, in that he directly linked people he perceived as 'smarter' (and therefore more likely to go to university) with those who were better off financially. University was not for the likes of him because he was 'average':

*"when you're a kid and when you're 13, 14 and you think about university, it's like something not for you. You're not smart, not intelligent. You're average. I thought it was just for those really smart people. And that was one of the reasons why I didn't get it because I thought it was going to be the super intelligent people with rich families. And I thought I'd be the outcast"*  
(Barry, Focus Group)

Academic capital is an element of cultural capital and both Cara and Barry expressed anxiety around their academic ability. Cara referred to her teachers who had 'built the wall' in not supporting her, apart from one teacher who had *"strived me to do better things"* (Cara Interview 1). Her complicated and unusual syntax is an articulation of the complex structure of her aspiration, motivation and capital. Cara's lack of support from teachers and family and her own personal issues had contributed to her struggles to find direction and contributed to the anxiety she expressed through her visual analogy of the bird in flight, her fear that if she stopped for a minute then everything would *"rush in"* and she would *"lose her footing"*. Cara demonstrated an anxiety about her lack of academic capital which was partly borne out of her past experiences (*"I've always had to fight to try and get better grades a little bit more than other people"* – Interview 1) and partly from the people around her who had discouraged her. However, this anxiety led to a work ethic which made her try harder than those around her, her *"drive to do more and be more"* (Cara Interview 1). Cara's lack of academic capital translated into a resilience and drive which led to her overcoming the obstacles and succeeding despite the odds.

#### 4.5.2 Aspirational capital

A key theme in the students' interviews was the reaction of their parents. For a number of the participants, their attendance at university was a source of great pride to their parents and a means of fulfilling parental aspiration to see their offspring achieve a higher social status or financial reward. This could be a source of motivation, or on occasion a pressure to succeed, to 'make them proud'.

*"it's like so much pressure to be good and make my parents proud and family proud of what I'm doing"*  
(Barry, Focus group)

Barry was resistant to the idea of higher education and it was only his father's determination that drove him to apply and accept a place:

*he [my dad] tried to force me to go to university, which eventually worked. And yeah, I just want to make him proud.*  
(Barry, Focus Group)

*"I think if he hadn't nagged me, I wouldn't have went, definitely 100%. If it wasn't for that ... I wouldn't even be thinking about university because like, it was never mentioned in school. And if it wasn't mentioned at home, I wouldn't even be thinking about it, sort of thing. But because he sort of kept on nagging me about it, I was just thinking about it and that's all you need really I think"*  
(Barry, Interview 1)

He saw this as the difference between himself and his peers, the reason he was at university and none of his home friends had gone. Barry mentioned his father not taking up the opportunity to attend university in both the focus group and second interview:

*"My dad wanted to go to university, well after college he was going to but then he decided not to because he was making a bit of money. But that didn't really work out and he said that was the biggest mistake of his life. So, he's trying to...he tried to force me to go to university, which eventually worked. And yeah, I just want to make him proud."*  
(Barry, Focus Group)

*"My dad had the opportunity to go to university, he was fairly smart and he just chose not to do it. And it sort of backfired on him and he regrets it a lot. And every time we talk he mentions the fact that he didn't go to university and it would've changed his life completely and would've given him a better life"*  
(Barry, Interview 2)

*"he said that was the biggest mistake of his life"*  
(Barry, Interview 2)

His father's determination for Barry to enjoy the benefits he had missed out on was a form of aspirational capital which was a major factor in Barry entering higher education. In the focus group, Barry chose a picture of a staircase going up to represent his feeling that he was at the bottom and it was quite daunting looking up.

The urge to make his parents proud continued into his first interview:

*"I was thinking in my head if I just say yes, he will be proud of me, which he was, so that sort of took me over the edge to go into uni as well...I wanted them to think of me that I was.. that I could handle myself you know. Because after them saying that they were proud of me, I wanted them to think, you know, he's -- he can handle himself away from home... I didn't want them to have a bad representation of me"* (Barry, Interview 1)

By his second interview, Barry was more concerned about making himself proud than his parents:

*BAR: it's like I want to do the best I can. I don't want to like be half-assed and like get a poor degree and just like give up my life and just end up in a dead-end job. I have to get the high grades and focus in this career, otherwise it would be pointless with the money and stuff like student loans. It's just I don't see the point if you don't be the best.*

*INT: And your parents?*

*BAR:I think at the moment, it's just for me because they're proud of me no matter what now. Because I think they just wanted me to be at uni so I guess, the pressure on that side is more off because I think it's from just me personally. Now that I'm here I've got to like prove to myself that I'm good enough to be here.*

(Barry, Interview 2)

By his third interview, Barry was expressing much more of a sense of pride in his own work and achievements.

For Maria university was also a way of making her mother proud. In her first interview she stated *"I really want to make my mum proud"* She explained that her mum had not really believed she would stay in England and see it through and this was part of Maria's drive:..." *she is proud of me because I managed to do it all by myself"* (Maria Interview 1). By her third interview this was still a major influencing factor: *"She's very proud I know she is very proud because I can see that she's proud"* (Maria Interview 3).

Aspirational capital can also be an individual's own desire to achieve more than their parents. This was again a theme in Barry's narrative. Although reluctant to apply to university, he was also aware he did not want the same life as his father:

*"I just thought I want to get a good job rather than... I don't want to seem mean but ...be like my dad? It's just my dad doesn't have the best job in the world and he doesn't get paid the best either. So, I just wanted to be successful, I guess. And I thought university was the way to do that."* (Barry, Interview 1)

#### 4.5.3 Links between economic and social capitals

Money – or rather the lack of it – was an important issue for the participants across all three phases of the interview process and was reflected both visually through their photographs and verbally in

their narratives. Most of them were from relatively deprived backgrounds and were heavily reliant on part-time wages for their income. The lack of money impacted their lives in ways which I found unexpected, particularly at the start. By the second interviews, most of the students were working long hours in part-time jobs so the pressure of this and their lack of time became a theme. By the third interview, they were starting to cut back on their hours as academic work pressures became greater. In the first interview Amber, Barry, Cara, Maria and Satin all talked about the issue of money and expressed its major impact on their student experience. Satin and Barry both talked about how stressful they found their lack of money. Barry had about £20 to live on which left him £8 to spend on food, and Satin had £50 per week in total to cover everything apart from her rent. Both were very reluctant to ask for help from their parents (see [Section 4.4.2](#)).

Barry and Satin both brought photographs which reflected the importance of money to their lives. There is a striking similarity between the photographs chosen by these students who did not know each other.



Fig 4.20 - Barry Interview 1 'empty wallet'

*"I took that in December time when I was extremely low on money and I couldn't really afford to buy anything. And I was struggling for everything and it was stressing me out."*



Fig 4.21 - Barry Interview 1 'coins'

*"It's to represent that I had just pennies and five p's scattered across my table, it's just that's all I had."*



Fig 4.22 – Satin Interview 1 ‘pennies’



Fig 4.23 – Satin Interview 1 ‘budgeting’

*“Pretty much living on the pennies*

*“This picture sums up everything in terms of budgeting”*

Money was also an issue for Amber and Maria who both worked long hours in part-time jobs from the start. Amber had five different jobs, some of them at her parental home which she travelled back to each week. She said *“I need to earn at least £75 or £100 a week just to pay rent alone”* (Amber Interview 1). Maria had a full-time job in order to pay for her rent, living costs and also send money back to her mother and sister overseas. Her struggle to earn money and juggle student life was very stressful:

*“Sometimes I’m working 70 hours per week...It’s sometimes tough, so tough that I’m getting crazy you know...No one in my course is working like the type of hours and the type of work that I’m doing, so yeah, I think it’s very different.”*

(Maria Interview 1)

### ***A barrier in terms of making friends***

In their first year, the students felt there was a pressure to go out and socialize and their lack of finances made it difficult for them to do so. This had a detrimental effect on their ability to integrate with peers and thereby feel part of the student group. Satin particularly felt this – she was not entitled to apply for a student loan so her sole income was from the £50 a week her mother allocated from Satin’s savings. She referred to *“quite a struggle in terms of social life because of the money”* (Satin Interview 1). She described how awkward her lack of money made her feel with friends:

*"It's kind of a barrier in terms of gaining friends as well because they go out for lunch and I don't. I can't. I take mine with me and I usually just eat it and buy a coffee or something. But after a while, it just doesn't work anymore because it's just awkward so that was a bit of a hard thing."*

(Satin Interview 1)

Barry also talked about the pressure to socialise. He explained the difficulties during your first term, how he felt he needed to go out in order to make friends and socialise, but this ate into his budget, leaving only £8 per week for food:

*BAR: You have to go out. It's like everyone is going out, so you have to go out. You want to be a part of the group so you come out every night. Not every night, every week.*

*INT: So is there a pressure in a way?*

*BAR: Yeah, especially during that time [first term] when you're still trying to make friends, so you have to go out every single week...even if you don't have the money. That's why I had to sacrifice my food budget slightly, you know...It's definitely a difficult time.* (Barry Interview 1)

Tricia felt her lack of money contributed to her loneliness and depression in her first year. She described not wanting to go out because she was anxious about spending money, so staying on her own in her room. Although she said people were *"pressuring you to come out and socialise all the time"* (Tricia Interview 2), her anxiety about spending money prevented her joining in:

*"Initially it's not fun. Especially at weekends, it's boring, you feel like you have to stay in halls because you don't want to spend your money... I just felt a bit of anxiety towards money. I'd see other students going to London or even going to the beach or something, like doing normal things, I just felt I don't want to go and have a drink and waste my money on having experiences, I'd rather stay in and not have that...it sounds bad, but not give myself the opportunity to spend my money."* (Tricia Interview 2)

### **Money and time**

Money was still an issue in the second and third interviews, but it changed as the students' lives transitioned. In the first interview the problem for most of them was the lack of money and the pressure to spend it going out and socialising. By the second interview they had moved into shared houses and most of them had part-time jobs. There was less pressure to go out and their part-time earning supplemented their income. At this time the stress point was around juggling paid work with university work as some of them had jobs which involved a lot of hours. Amber was still struggling to maintain multiple jobs and stated *"I'm spending more of my time working than learning to have enough money to live"* (Amber Interview 2). Barry now had a weekend job which meant he worked all day Saturday and Sunday, which put pressure on his university work:

*“It would be better if I didn’t have a job because I am trying to work with like uni stuff and having a job as well is making it a lot tougher...now that I have money coming in I don’t have any pressures with money so that’s good It’s just that the side effect is uni and like work and that’s sort of a stress...I swapped one for the other”*  
(Barry Interview 2)

Cara and Satin both welcomed the freedom and independence their part-time jobs brought them, whilst acknowledging the stress of trying to manage university work. Maria was working a 40-hour week alongside increased academic workloads as a second-year student. For her time was always a big concern:

*“Now I’ve been promoted so I have work over 40 hours per week, plus I’m trying to do 40 hours uni... everything in one week and then, I still have time to sleep and have social life. I wake up by 6.00 and then I’m going to work and then I finish working I’m coming to uni, or going to uni and then going to work afterwards. Yeah, I never see the daylight”.*  
(Maria Interview 2)

By the third interview, all the students apart from Maria had cut back on their part-time hours as workloads increased at university. For most of them money was still a concern, but the combination of holiday jobs and reduced socialising made it less of an acute pressure. For Barry and Satin the change in focus is reflected in their photographs. In their first interviews, Barry and Satin brought photographs to express their anxiety over money (Fig [4.18-4.21](#)). In their third interview the photos were very different; Barry’s photos mostly featured his film projects for his coursework while Satin’s featured travel and friends.

## **Summary**

The narrative that emerged from the data revealed that although students had quite different trajectories into and through higher education, there were areas of shared experience. Aspects such as home, friends and money were common factors to all, and a sense of aspiration which helped them overcome adversity was a common theme in the narrative. Despite different social, cultural and geographical backgrounds, there were strong areas of commonality in the narratives of the students which will be analysed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 5                      Discussion

### **5.1    *Introduction and Conceptual Framework***

The purpose of this study was to explore how First in Family students transition into and through higher education, and the factors which can assist or impede their progress. The aim of this chapter is to compare the findings of the study to the wider literature in order to demonstrate the unique contribution this project makes to the understanding of transition and the experience of students. The research question this study set out to address was:

**What factors influence how First in Family students transition into and through their first and second years of higher education?**

The inductive nature of this research led to the identification of concepts and themes which had not originally been envisaged. At the outset, my aim was to draw on a Bourdieusian framework and analyse the data through the sociological lens of habitus/field, cultural and social capitals. However, as my research was data-led, other themes were identified which I had not envisaged, and which necessitated a return to the literature. What had originally been intended as a sociologically based study took on psychological aspects through the identification of themes around resilience and transition. Barriers to transition were both social and psychological and were complex and multi-faceted. For example, most students experience a level of homesickness on arrival at university, but I explored why for some participants this was a natural stage in establishing a new identity where for others the links to home appeared to be too strong and a barrier to engagement. Strong attachment to parents can be a positive source of support and encouragement, or conversely a bind that is too difficult to break. This discussion chapter situates the study between the two paradigms of sociology and psychology, considering both the individual and the context in which they operate, and how these together impact on transition into and through HE.

Most studies of student transition focus on the first few months (Hope 2017; Palmer et al. 2009), but findings from this study show that transition is a more complex process than originally conceived and one that continues well into the second year of study. Where this study provides a new dimension is in the investigation of the between-space of first to second year. The first point of contact was shortly after students had arrived and the final interview took place just before they finished their second year, at the point when students tend to be more established. We have long been aware that the first year of undergraduate study can be tricky for students to negotiate and



attrition rates in the first year are higher (HESA 2019a). Indeed, many university support mechanisms are focused on helping to students to navigate this challenging period. This research shows that the transition phase, when students occupy a liminal space between home and university, extends into the second year and it was only at the end of this period that the participants appeared to be transferring out of liminality and into a new grounded identity as an established student with increased feelings of security and belonging. This study investigated how participants experienced this liminal space in order to understand how they successfully navigated their way through and beyond. These findings have important implications for university staff and support networks. With a greater understanding of how students navigate this potentially problematic space, HEIs will be better equipped to support and understand those from First in Family backgrounds.

The study drew on the concept of ‘between space’ – the transitional space between home and university, and an area of liminality or ‘non-space’. My research set out to investigate the key factors which impacted on students’ transition process as they moved through this space and created a new self-identity and to explore these in the light of what is currently known about them through the literature and what knowledge my study is adding. I identified three key areas which impacted on the transition process of First in Family students entering higher education (Fig 5.1).

#### **Factor 1 - Place ([Section 5.3](#) and [5.4](#))**

The first factor I have called ‘place’ and this encompasses physical space and social space. A major influence on the transition process was the gradual personalisation of the students’ physical space and how this impacted on their sense of belonging. For some of the participants this creation of a new place-identity reflected the psychological and social impact of transferring the locus of ‘home’ to university - a concept I have identified as ‘homification’. Another aspect of place was the impact of friendship networks, both those left behind and new relationships created at university. I investigated this in the context of friendsickness and looked at how strong friendships can be both an advantage and a hindrance to the transition process. This factor has been divided into two sections: ‘Home’ (Section 5.3) and ‘Friends’ (Section 5.4).

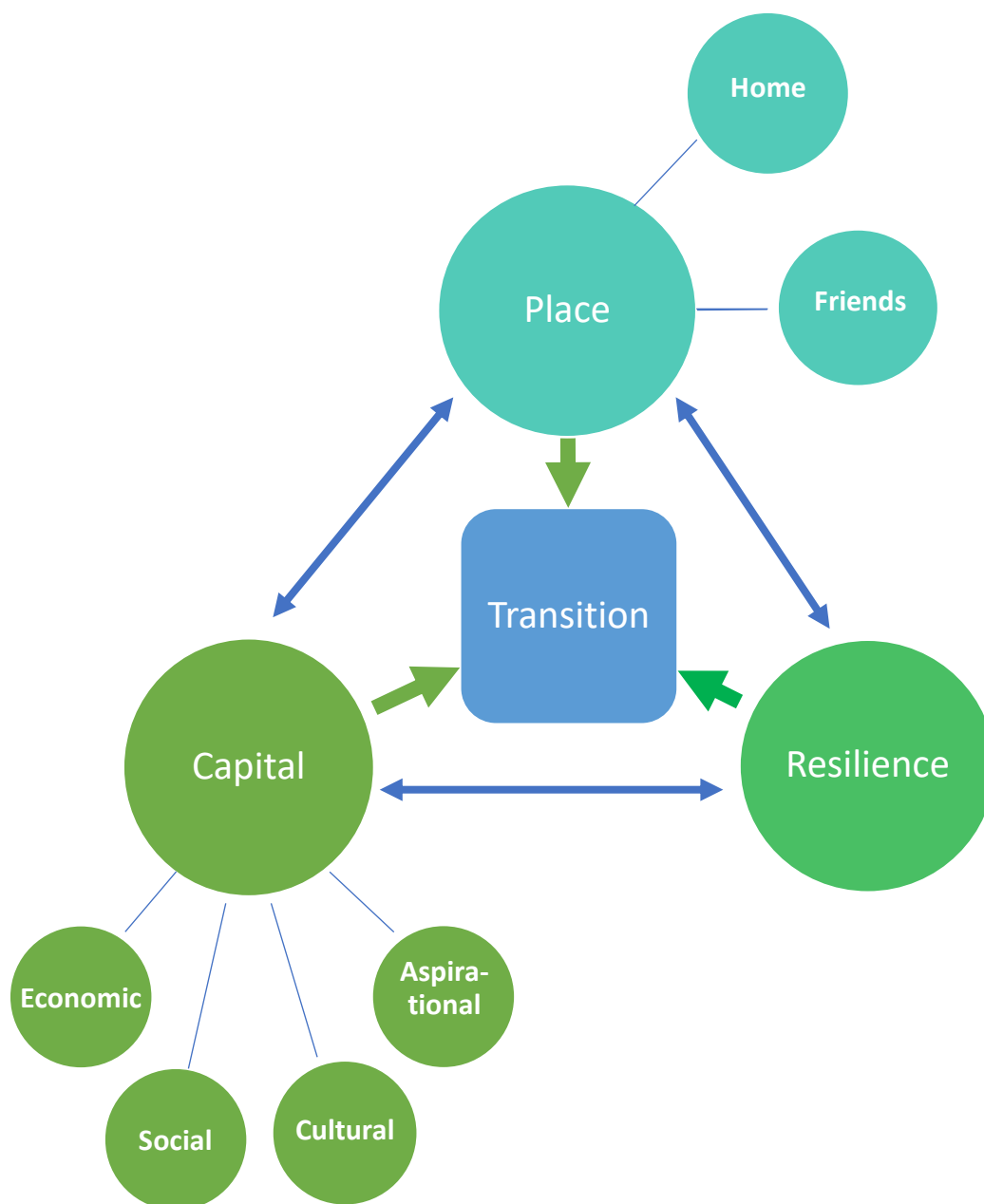
#### **Factor 2 - Resilience ([Section 5.5](#))**

The second influence on transition I have called resilience, which refers partly to the psychological concept of resilience as put forward by theorists such as Garmezy et al. 1984. I investigate the resilience displayed by the participants in overcoming barriers and how the challenge model of resilience can help us to understand this process.

### Factor 3 - Capitals ([Section 5.6](#))

The third area of influence is capitals, incorporating Bourdieusian concepts of social and cultural capital together with alternative capitals such as the aspirational capital presented in Yosso's CCW framework (Yosso 2015). I investigated the impact that a lack of social, cultural and academic capital had on the experiences of the students from a social and psychological perspective and how a lack of economic capital had social as well as financial effects.

Fig 5.1 – The impact of place, resilience and capital on the transition process



This chapter will firstly set out the concept of transition as explored in this study and then analyse the findings in terms of Place, Resilience and Capitals to show how these factors influenced the transition process of the First in Family students in this study.

## **5.2 Transition**

As shown in Chapter 2, most of the literature in this area focuses on how students transition into higher education and then how they transition out of it into employment; there is little research into how they navigate their way *through* university (Trigwell 2017). Moreover, much of the work is concerned with explaining what transition is, rather than how and why it occurs (Gale and Parker 2014a). This research set out to investigate the journey of students through their first two years of university as they negotiated the complex process of changing self-identity from the new arrival (fresher) through to established student (completing second year). It also explored the processes by which students transitioned, and the factors which could influence that process. Although it is vital to comprehend what transition is, this approach does little to help us understand the experiences students have and the factors which can aid or impede transition if we do not also understand the how and why of transition. Without investigating the ways in which students experience transition we place boundaries around our knowledge and will therefore be restricted in our ability to support and aid the transition process or identify key areas of difficulty or challenge for First in Family students. Students who struggle to effectively transition are more likely to drop out of university, and attrition has a detrimental impact not only on the HE sector but also in terms of the financial burden to students who do not complete their degree. A greater understanding of the transition process will lead to more targeted and effective support mechanisms.

In [Section 2.2.1](#) varying definitions of transition are explored: the models adopted for this study were those that conceptualise transition as a process of being and becoming as individuals transform and create a new student identity, an interpretation rooted in developmental psychology (Ecclestone et al. 2010; Gale and Parker 2014a). In this research, students were asked to photograph and discuss ‘what being a student was like for them’ therefore the indicators of transition that arose were those that were identified as significant to them. This led to a blurring of boundaries between the social and the psychological: ‘place’ was a factor which was represented across many of the data collection points as it was significant laterally (i.e. for a number of students at each interview point) and also vertically (i.e. it reoccurred in more than one interview with the same participant). Place was also multifaceted in its significance which was physical (the rooms they occupied and their

surroundings), social (how their living space was affected by the presence or absence of friends) and psychological (how they adapted their space to provide comfort and security).

This chapter will now set out the findings in relation to each of the contributory factors illustrated in Figure 5.1. The most significant factor in the research was place as that was represented regularly in the interviews and photographs selected by the participants so this is presented first, followed by resilience and capitals.

### **5.3 Place: 'home'**

The role of 'home' in the transition of students and the creation of a sense of belonging does not feature widely in the literature, yet this research highlights how crucial this was as a turning point in the lives of the students and a reflection of their psychological and emotional journey. As with 'place', the concept of 'home' is complex, containing elements of the physical, the social and the psychological and is worth defining here. There are various conceptualisations of 'home' in the literature, ranging from a simple definition of a physical dwelling space, to a social-spatial entity (Saunders and Williams 1988) or a psycho-social interpretation which sees home as a source of psychological attachment (Giuliani 1991). Home was argued to be the basis of security and identity (Porteus 1976) and ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1996). The varying conceptions are brought together by Easthope who states:

"homes are 'places' that hold considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning for individuals .... In understanding a person's connection with their home we go some way towards understanding their social relations, their psychology and their emotions and we can begin to understand their 'lived experiences'" (2004: 135)

When starting this study, the concept of place was not one which had been identified as significant to the research. However, it became evident that place and home were of great significance and import to the students. As the research progressed it became apparent that physical space was both a driver of social, psychological and emotional states and also a reflector of them. As the participants created a space in which they felt 'at home', so they described feeling more 'grounded' and settled as students. Home as a signifier of the transition process was identified by the participants through the frequency with which concepts of 'home' and 'here' featured in their narratives and photographs (where 'home' represented the locus of security and 'here' was a transitional and shifting space). Easthope's conception of home became an underpinning concept in the analysis of the role of place in the students' experience.

### 5.3.1 'Home' and 'here'

When the participants described 'home' In the initial interviews, it was clear that for Tricia, Maria, Donna and Lauren 'home' (i.e. the family home which they had left) was seen as a source of security and safety as opposed to 'here'. This was particularly apparent in Tricia's case who described home as *"a safety blanket"* and *"kind of green and nice"* whereas 'here' was a *"like a ghetto"* (Tricia Interview 1). Her words are redolent of a sense of danger and threat, a sentiment further reflected in her photo of the smashed front door and her belief that in urban areas people *"rob and damage things"*; she saw herself as different to those around her because of *"having different morals and being brought up differently"* (Tricia Interview 1). Research shows that transition is negatively affected when students perceive an incompatibility between their social background identity and student identity which leads to disidentification. This perceived incompatibility is often due to *"differences in norms and values between the self and the relevant social groups"* (De Vreeze et al. 2018: 687). Although it is impossible to eradicate differences in norms and values when individuals from various backgrounds are brought together in a community, discussing these differences can lead to a greater sense of understanding and respect for individual difference. As universities we could and should do more to facilitate a shared space where differences in norms could be talked about. Our focus as educators is often too much on the preparing for the academic nature of university life where there could be more attention paid to the social and emotional challenges of living and working with others who may have come from very different backgrounds and moral frameworks.

For Tricia her physical space is a manifestation of *"considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning"* (Easthope 2004: 135); it is physical (rural v. urban), social (safety and moral values v. crime and violence) and psychological (her *"safety blanket"* and source of happiness). Hausmann et al. (2007) found that while parental support was generally an advantage to students, if the connection was very close it could sometimes prove to be a disadvantage: *"students who are more closely connected to their parents could also be more tied to their home lives in general instead of to college, thus decreasing their sense of belonging with the university"* (p. 830). There is also some evidence to suggest that students who go home more often during term time are more likely to drop out (Massey et al. 2003). Tricia's links with home were so close she had found it impossible to make the break the preceding year and described deliberately leaving items behind so she would have to return home every weekend, which in turn led to her dropping out.

There are lessons here for universities, parents and students. Most students will experience some level of homesickness during their first semester, however evidence suggests that if students continually return home they can find it harder to make the transition and develop a sense of belonging at university (Tricia herself recognized that returning home so regularly during her first attempt at university life had only exacerbated the problem by increasing her homesickness). If parents and students are prepared for this eventuality, they may be better able to navigate this period successfully. Advice for parents and students on the possibility of homesickness and strategies on how best to navigate this period should be sent out prior to arrival and there should be a greater investment in one-to-one counselling for 'at risk' students during this period. Although counselling is available, it is usually reliant on students requesting it and they are often reluctant to do so. When looking back on her aborted first attempt at university, Tricia acknowledged that she had been depressed but had not felt able to approach anyone or ask for help and instead continually returned home. Donna on the other hand made a deliberate decision not to return home during the first weeks because her terrible homesickness would have made her want to stay, so her parents and friends chose to visit her instead. Despite her homesickness, Donna's transition process was less problematic than Tricia's and by Christmas she was already feeling more settled.

At present universities monitor non-attendance in class, but actions outside of class are not monitored. There is a need for a proactive approach to this issue; as universities we should be dedicating time and resources to exploring with students the challenges experienced in the first weeks of university and the potential problems with returning home frequently. Not only would this facilitate a greater understanding of the issue for both staff and students, it would allow them to recognise that others were facing the same challenges and to give each other support. Donna described how one of the main factors which helped her overcome her homesickness was the presence of a friend who was feeling the same way. The mutual support they gave each other helped them both overcome their problems. Tricia did finally overcome her links to home, however many others like Tricia will not make a second attempt and instead will become another attrition statistic, leading to financial penalties to themselves and the university.

The change of identity undergone by students can be linked to the idea of a transforming habitus, and home has been constructed as the concrete imagining of the habitus. Easthope (2004) suggests that habitus is connected to our sense of place, both because it is linked to the concept of rootedness (feeling 'at home' in a particular place) but also because people make conscious choices about how they relate to place (Easthope 2004). Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that individuals feel 'at home' in the fields where their habitus has developed (1992 in Friedman 2016: 300) and a sense

of place is engendered through a process of emotional attachment (Dixon and Durrheim 2004). When the places in which our habitus is rooted are changed rapidly (in this case because of a sudden transference of 'home') feelings of rootedness reduce and individuals have a heightened need to create a sense of place as "secure and stable" (Easthope 2004).

This manifestation of an emotional and psychological journey was reflected in the narratives of other participants who also constructed 'here' in terms of its contrast with 'home'. For Donna 'here' was "*not really permanent, not really yours*" and "*like a hotel*" whereas for Maria it was "*non-space*". Maria had based a coursework project on her idea of 'non-space' (her term), photographing hers and her flat-mates' bedrooms and how they tried to furnish them with reminders of home. Her concepts of 'non-space' link to Augé's theories:

"if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 1995: 27)

Maria's description of her flat as a 'non-space' connects with the concept of 'inbetweenness' or liminality, a transient state of being suspended between home and university in a physical and psychological manner which individuals must break through in order to achieve transition to a new social state of being (Van Gennep 1909, Palmer et al. 2009). This "betwixt space" is reflective of a lack of belonging or placelessness which can contribute to students' anxiety and homesickness. Bachelard believed that the home is "a key element in the development of people's sense of themselves as belonging to a place" (1969:72). Palmer et al. (2009) refer to the importance of breaking out of this 'liminality'; for the students in this study, a major factor in their ability to break out of this liminality was the process whereby they transformed their physical space thereby creating a new 'home' and transferring the locus of ontological security from the family home to their 'here home'.

These findings have enormous significance for higher education institutions. There is widespread recognition of the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in terms of both student wellbeing and engagement and persistence (Chow and Healy 2008; Hausmann et al. 2007). Although induction policy in most HEIs incorporates processes to help students settle in by means of making new friendship networks, relatively little attention is paid to the significance of the physical environment and its impact on transition. Pokorny et al. (2017: 555) suggest that "universities need to be more responsive to home and community factors" and point to the implications for estates planning as well as recruitment and induction. Whyte (2017) has outlined the discrepancies between policy and practice when it comes to university accommodation: while on the one hand institutions recognize

the need to support student mental health and wellbeing, this is often not reflected in their living spaces. As one journalist put it:

“Most students spend their first year living in large and impersonal halls with few communal spaces, doomed to sitting alone in their bedroom if they don’t make friends easily. There tend to be few older ‘grown-ups’ around, save for the security guard or the postgrad who gets free board in exchange for just being there. It is easy to see how many students might fall through the cracks of human contact”.  
(Foges 2019)

Whyte’s report refers to an interview with the mother of a Bristol undergraduate who committed suicide in which she questioned whether “his problems owed much to the shock he experienced in moving to a massive, anonymous tower block far from home” (Whyte 2019: 43). Whyte quotes the Minister for Universities, Chris Skidmore, who stated, “The quality of accommodation can affect student welfare” (Weale 2019 in Whyte 2019). In a time when we are increasingly seeing the provision of university accommodation in the hands of private developers, higher education providers need to take responsibility for the provision of accommodation which engenders a sense of belonging and identity, not isolation and anonymity.

In a period of increasing concern about student mental health issues, the impact of living conditions on mental well-being has never been more important. The OfS (2019b) points out that there has been a year-on-year rise in students seeking support for mental health issues and the proportion of UK domiciled full-time students who reported a mental health condition has more than doubled from 1.4% in 2012-13 to 3.5% in 2017-18 – a figure which is undoubtedly underestimated due to the fear of stigmatization – and that females are twice as likely as males to experience mental health conditions<sup>19</sup>. The OfS report also makes clear the gap in outcomes between students with mental health conditions and those without (for example, higher attrition rates) and shows how factors such as social disadvantage can impact those gaps (OfS 2019b). The Royal College of Psychiatrists hypothesized that widening participation has contributed to this increase in mental health issues partly due to increased financial pressures on students from less privileged backgrounds combined with a reduction in government funding to support them (RCP 2011). Evidence points to the fact that the peak onset for mental health conditions is prior to the age of 24 so university students are already a high risk group (Macaskill 2012), and are then undergoing the transition to independence and adulthood combined with the stress factors outlined in this report.

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<sup>19</sup> In 2017 the Mental Health of Children and Young People survey assessed 23.9% of females aged 17-19 to have mental health issues compared to their 10.3% of males (NHS Digital 2017)



### 5.3.2 Homification

The concept of homification, or the personalisation of the physical living space through the gradual transference of physical possessions, is both a reflection of the transition process and a driver of it; in understanding the role played by physical space and surroundings we can help students to navigate the transition process more successfully. Homification is a physical and psycho-social process, a manifestation of their gradual process of creating a new identity and a 'home' that has the psycho-spatial connotations of security and identity outlined by Giuliani (1999). Homification is also a reflection of the process of separation from home and the creation of a new independent identity, place-appropriation forming the basis of a sense of groundedness or rootedness.

The importance of symbolic objects to provide an anchor within the turbulent 'betwixt' space in students' lives is a concept which builds on Winnicott's theories of transitional objects as a defence against anxiety (Winnicott 1953; Briggs et al. 2009). By 'homifying' their living space, the participants started to refer to their university houses as 'home' and described feeling more grounded and settled. This was also reflected in the photographs they took where the discomfort in the 'non-space' of halls was replaced by a sense of 'home' and belonging once they could transform their living space. Home had a physical aspect (the physical objects they brought from home), a social aspect (the social space of the house as support network) and a psychological aspect (the transference of 'home' as the source of security and safety). The process was not instantaneous but a gradual transference of locus until for the students 'here' became 'home' as opposed to the family 'second' home. The length of time taken by this process depended to a great extent on the closeness of their ties to home on arrival. Understanding the role played by homification can help us to understand the transition process undergone by some students whose narrative and photographs reflected the importance of this physical manifestation (Donna, Tricia, Lauren, Satin).

However there were those for whom homification did not appear to be a feature of their transition process. Maria consciously resisted conceptualising her university accommodation as 'home'; as an international student her sense of identity was so deeply rooted in her home country it almost seemed to be a betrayal for her to transfer the concept of home to here. De Vreeze et al. (2018) point to the perceived incompatibility which arises from differences in norms and values between the individual and their social groups: this disidentification was apparent in Maria's rejection of British cultural norms such attitudes to drinking, work and the family. Her own very close ties to her family overseas were a key part of her social and psychological identity, and the importance of family ties appears to be common to her culture. It seemed that Maria was resistant to the idea of

transferring the locus of home from \*\*\* to the UK, because it would equate to a loss of identity or the replacement of a cultural and sociological value system with one which she perceived as inferior. Place-referent continuity is a type of self-environment relationship which contributes to self-identity through the maintenance of continuity (Giuliani 1991; Twigger-Ross and Uzell 1996). Places act as reference points to past selves and by maintaining links with that place individuals preserve a sense of continuity to their identity. The distancing process as they transition from home leads to a loss of tangible connections to self-identity and a sense of place dislocation. This was apparent in the participants in this study who found it difficult to loosen the ties with home, such as Tricia and Maria. Chow and Healey (2008) explored place attachment during the transition from home to university; in their in-depth study they found that for some students, home was an anchor for place-linked memories and provided a source of stability or place-referent continuity. Maria exhibited strong place-referent continuity and her words and pictures showed the extent to which she sought to preserve her identity through maintaining her links to \*\*\* and home.

However other participants consciously distanced themselves from their former lives and selves. The transition process can lead to a “conscious discontinuity” whereby individual’s distance themselves from home and seek out places that are more congruent with their changing sense of self (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). Hormuth (1990) proposed that relocating can represent a change in self-identity with the former place symbolising the old self and the new place becoming an opportunity for a new self-identity. This was evidenced in Barry’s case: for Barry his family home symbolised his old self which he wanted to leave behind while university was the opportunity to develop a new self-identity. He exhibited conscious discontinuity in his desire to leave behind a place which felt restricting in a physical, social and psychological sense. Barry’s sense of frustration at the limitations imposed were echoed in his description of a small village with only one shop, a limited network of friends, and an old ‘self’ he wanted to leave behind. His changing sense of self felt more congruent with the expanded opportunities provided by the city, the university and his new friendship networks and this contributed to his changing concept of self. Cara also demonstrated conscious discontinuity in using the transition to a university as a means of making a deliberate break with a past life that was fractured and turbulent and embracing the opportunity for growth and transformation. Thus homification was a symbolic process for those who manifested a sense of place-referent continuity while for those seeking conscious discontinuity there was less of a need to ‘homify’ their physical space and more of a breaking of connections with the past and embracing of the opportunities provided by the new.

These findings are significant when considered in the context of the evidence of increasing student anxiety, depression and homesickness (NHS Digital 2017; OfS2019b). Place is an important part of the construction of self-identity and evidence shows that when an individual is subject to changes in their physical environment over which they have no control this results in the loss of continuity which can lead to a grief reaction (Fried 1963). Although students starting university have chosen the relocation which is part of their transition to university, they were not in control of their physical environment in their first year. The impersonal ‘non-space’ of halls which they encountered on arrival contributed to their feelings of alienation and seemed to position them in a state of liminality between home and here. The process of homifying their physical living space did not take place until they were in rented houses in their second year, and it was at this point they showed signs of transitioning out of and beyond the liminal space. If more effort were made to create a ‘home from home’ from the start, first year students might feel less alienated and inbetween. This could be done partly by HEIs investing in student halls to ensure that the space is not only comfortable and fit for purpose, but also encourages personalisation. Partly this could be achieved through more relaxed regulations around modifying spaces (i.e. putting up pictures, photos) and partly by providing more objects such as pinboards, photoboard, etc. Parents and students could also be made aware of the importance of this transition period and encouraged to bring as many personal possessions from home as possible.

Quinlan (2016) argues that the research on emotion in higher education is “undertheorized” (p.9) and sets out to show the emotional aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. She solicited a series of poems from students, teachers and parents and presents these in chapters linked thematically to stages of the student lifecycle, linking emergent themes to theoretical areas or social issues. Section 3 of her book deals with transition to higher education and how their process of adjustment and the extent to which they establish a feeling of belonging sets the stage for their subsequent university experience. In her poem, student Katie Thornton described the role of place in her own transition from home to university:

***Hiraeth***

My Mum couldn’t get the day off.

Dad drove me.  
Boot of the car rammed with books  
boots, shoes,  
clothes, enough  
for Milan’s Fashion Week,  
an army supply of tea,  
two pillows

and a blanket that would always smell of home even when it no longer did.  
On the drive up we listened to old 30's swing  
and talked  
and laughed  
and sang that we were so happy in the Congo I refuse to go.

We arrived at my destination.  
A shiny tower, silver  
with purple at the top.  
I was given a fob-key to one of the identical white rooms.

It took four trips up and down  
Up and down  
Up and down  
Up in the boxy, metallic elevator.

**It took a bit longer to ponder on how to turn a white, identical room into home when nails and blue-tak were prohibited.**

My Dad went to the car one final time and returned with Audrey Hepburn, in a sleek black dress, huge hat, Cat around her shoulders and a cigarette held between her pearly whites.

I recognised an optimism and hopefulness behind his gift.  
**In keeping with the rules we couldn't hang it on the wall. Instead he put it on the basic, uniform wooden desk, leaning against the new, unmarred cork-board.**

And we hugged.

It is a most peculiar sadness, leaving for the first time. It is  
an ending of something you have  
always known.  
You knew this time approached but never acknowledged  
how big the shift would be.  
For some there is fear, anxiety, sadness

But it seems to me that on the whole it is not right to mourn.  
Because in the morning  
- after that first night alone –  
doors open.  
Windows too.

**Unfamiliar territory shapes itself into a curious new home. Different from the one you left. Real nonetheless.**

Eventually this world you didn't know  
how to enter becomes your life. The only things  
you lacked were the tools to unlock it  
And now  
day by day  
you equip yourself.

You learn how to live it  
You love to live it.

(Thornton in Quinlan 2016: 24-25. Bold formatting mine)

In the commentary on her poem, Thornton explains how she was accustomed to goodbyes but explains:

“I remember no change as vividly as leaving home for the first time. I feel it’s the most loaded transition. It is tied up in loss and fear and only partially developed independence. But all this is outweighed by new opportunities” (*ibid*: 25).

Thornton explains that the title ‘Hiraeth’ is a Welsh word with no direct English translation, meaning “homesickness mixed with a sense of grief, longing or nostalgia for the past” (*ibid*: 25).

The poem illustrates the role of place in the transition process, and underlying sense of loss and bereavement. Home is represented in terms of warmth and security – books, pillows, tea and the blanket “that would always smell of home” (reminiscent of Tricia’s ‘safety blanket’ and the Peanuts character Linus with his security blanket as featured in Fig 2.3). ‘Here’ is represented in very different terms which suggest coldness, impersonality and a lack of comfort - a “shiny silver tower” and “boxy, metallic elevator”. The sense of liminal space is reinforced by her description of a “white, identical room” and the challenge of turning this into home when she was not even permitted to put pictures on the wall other than on the “new, unmarred cork-board”. The efforts made by her father to ease the process are undermined by university rules against personalising her space. This moving poem which reflects both the pain and optimism of this transition process underlines how HEIs can play a role in easing this transition, providing time and opportunity at open days to explain these challenges to parents and students and by encouraging personalisation and homification of spaces when students arrive.

### 5.3.3 Summary

The role played by place and home in the transition process has important implications for policy and practice. The homification process led to students feeling much more grounded and settled once they could create their own spaces, but this did not happen until the second year. The vital role of fostering a sense of belonging from the moment students arrive is recognised in the literature (Pokorny et al. 2017) and in admissions policy and practice, however insufficient attention is paid to the living environments of students yet this is clearly a significant factor, particularly in the current context of the massification of higher education and the increasing corporatisation of halls of residence. HEIs could do more to foster a home environment and sense of community by

encouraging students to adapt their space to feel like home and abolishing rules such as those mentioned by Thornton in her poem. Much money has been invested into learning spaces in many HEIs, and their importance should not be underplayed. However, living space is equally important and universities could invest more into making these spaces less like 'identical white rooms' and more like comfortable living spaces.

## **5.4 Place: friends**

A key theme across all participants in this study was the importance of friends and peers in facilitating (or hindering) the transition process. Friends provided a buffer against homesickness, a sense of belonging in new surroundings, or in some cases a connection with home that was hard to break. Friendships have been shown to be crucial in creating a sense of engagement with university and the role of friendship networks in engendering a sense of belonging in higher education is well-acknowledged in the literature (Crissman and Ishler 2004; Thomas 2012; Thomas 2013). However much of the extant literature is focused on the development of new friendship networks and how these can support a student through their first year (Crissman and Ishler 2004). There is much less attention paid to the emotional injury caused by missing friends from home and how this can hinder transition, or the disruption and pain involved when an individual changes and rejects or is rejected by former friends. These are themes which were expressed by the participants in this study.

### 5.4.1 Friendsickness

Friendsickness (Paul and Brier 2001) refers to the distress students can feel at being separated from an established network of friends ('home friends') and research into the potentially negative effect on the transition process is limited. The research conducted here suggests that friendsickness and homesickness are closely linked and concepts of 'inbetweenness' apply equally to both (Palmer et al. 2014). In the same way that students experience the anxiety and placelessness of the 'betwixt space' between home and university, they also exist in the space between home friends and university friends. They are left in the gap as one network of friends is left behind and a new network is still being created. The importance of turning points as the mechanism to break out of this liminal space applies equally here: students must transfer the locus of their support and security network from home friends to university friends if they are to engender a sense of belonging and create a new student identity. As students start to relinquish their grip on home friendships and find their support from new networks, so they develop a sense of belonging rooted in 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.

This was strongly reflected in Lauren’s narrative. In Section 4.3.1 Lauren’s changing relationship with her home friends was documented, showing her transition from home to university friends. For both Donna and Lauren, the shift of emphasis from home to university friends marked a turning point in their transition process. Both attributed their increasing sense of being ‘grounded’ to the development and support from new friendships, whereas Maria seems to struggle throughout the research process with homesickness and friendsickness. The importance of making new social networks at university is widely recognised and many induction activities are focused on helping students make new friendships. However, there is little recognition of the role friendsickness can play. As with the comments made in the previous section, students and their parents could be helped with this process by being made aware of it. The support of home-friends can be a great emotional comfort at university, but if these friendships are not added to with university relationships then friendsickness can hinder students’ development of a sense of belonging and impede their transition process (in fact in Lauren’s case, her home friends actively impeded any attempts at transition by objecting to her attempts to form new relationships).

Friendsickness may have been a barrier to some of the participants, but for others the issue they encountered was one of alienation from their former friends. The feeling of alienation from former friends described by both Barry and Amber are indicative of the dislocation caused by *habitus clivé*. For Barry he resolved the issue by embracing his new life and rarely returning home, even in the summer holidays. Although in many ways his transition process was less problematic (there was no indication of homesickness or friendsickness), his distancing from home and cutting home ties did appear to cause him some discomfort. In research work with working class graduates from elite universities, Friedman found that most of his participants battled with feelings of guilt and estrangement which led him to conclude that social mobility can cause emotional and psychological injuries (2016). Similarly, there is psychological and emotional pain involved in leaving behind old friends, both from the perspective of loss (friendsickness) and alienation (*habitus clivé*) and this can be a barrier to transition.

### 5.4.2 Summary

There is little doubt that friends play an integral role in the transition process, but this role is complex and multi-layered. Friends who stay at home and do not go to university can be a source of support and encouragement, an incentive to succeed (Donna) or a contributory factor to homesickness and a barrier to transition (Lauren); in some cases they can be both (Maria). Home friends who are not supportive of your decision to go to university can be a source of discomfort and alienation (Barry and Amber). Friends can also be a motivating factor to change, i.e. a reminder of the self and the life you have rejected (Barry, Cara, Satin). In all cases, the development of new friendship networks is a key factor in a sense of belonging. For some students' new friendships can be integral to the development of a new identity, an opportunity to change and be someone new amongst people who do not know you (Barry and Amber). For others the gradual transference of friendship from home friends to university friends marks the transition process into a sense of belonging (Lauren). For those who suffer from homesickness, new friendships can provide the emotional support necessary to help you through that process (Donna). The need for universities to facilitate social opportunities for developing friendship networks both inside and outside the classroom has never been more important than it is in 2020 with the impact of COVID-19. Social communities, both online and offline, could play an integral role in helping students to negotiate a successful transition process.

## 5.5 *Resilience*

It has been argued that academic resilience is a purely social phenomenon (Seidman and Pedersen 2003; Gauntlett 2018) but that individual or dispositional traits can provide protective factors (Masten and Garmezy 1995). Participants in this study exhibited individual traits which contributed to their resilience and showed some level of awareness of being different in this respect from their peers. Masten and Garmezy introduced the triadic model of protective factors, namely individual or dispositional factors; familial factors; and wider social environment factors (1995). The role of friendship networks as a protective factor has been discussed in the previous section, the participants in this study also exhibited dispositional protective factors which moderated environmental factors and led to a more positive trajectory than might have been expected (Masten et al. 1990). In [Table 2.1](#) individual or dispositional factors include “autonomy, internal locus of control, self-esteem, social skills and sense of purpose or drive” (Masten et al. 1990: 429).



Some of the participants in this study, such as Cara and Maria, exhibited high levels of academic resilience, overcoming substantial adversity to get to and stay at university. Cara's description of pushing back at an invisible wall encapsulated the many social, financial and personal barriers she encountered in accessing university. She attributed her extraordinary resilience partly to the fact that she was 'different'. She talked about her *"drive to do more and be more"* (Cara Interview 1) which motivated her to achieve more than those around her - a trait recognised by her peers. Similarly Maria had overcome considerable adversity and showed enormous levels of resilience, and she put this down to her personality: *"if I want to do a thing I will do it, no matter what or how, I will do it. My personality is like this"* (Maria Interview 1). The resilience both these participants exhibit is partly attributable to dispositional factors, or Masten et al.'s "sense of purpose and drive" (1990: 426). This is not to deny that there were other social protective factors in existence but there was clearly a dispositional element in the resilience they exhibit. Garmezy et al. 1985 suggested dispositional factors which included sense of purpose (drive/aspiration), self-esteem and autonomy (see Table 2.1). These protective factors were evidenced in the participants awareness of their own determination.

#### 5.5.1 The Challenge Model

In Chapter Two the challenge model of adaptation was explored whereby stress is seen as a potential enhancer of competence, in other words resilience causes a person to thrive not despite adversity but because of it (Garmezy et al. 1984; McCord 1994). From an academic resilience perspective, the anxiety and stress of entering higher education is seen as potentially transformative:

*"while certain transitions are unsettling and difficult for some people, risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others"*

(Ecclestone et al. 2010: 2)

Thus transition is viewed as way of developing resilience.

This concept of resilience being increased by adversity is one which occurred in the participants' narrative: for Cara, overcoming the 'invisible wall' had made her more determined and driven, Maria was proud of how hard she had fought and how determined she was. Students who come from backgrounds like Cara's and Maria's, who have to overcome substantial adversity in accessing higher education, are commonly viewed through a deficit lens. They are often referred to in terms of lack and disadvantage, yet the challenge model suggests an alternative interpretation, that adversity can be a positive factor and can increase resilience in an individual and instill a sense of pride and self-worth. Cara had a clear sense of self, of knowing who she is and where she is going; Barry felt that

having to fight harder made him more determined. This suggests that for these participants, the experience of overcoming adversity had increased their resilience; indeed the adversity had caused them to thrive. When they encountered barriers in the transition process, their resilience equipped them to overcome – they had the drive and determination to succeed at all costs. Although they did encounter barriers such as homesickness, friendsickness, long working hours and a relative lack of social and economic capital, their resilience and the awareness of how hard they had fought to get to where they were helped them to overcome those barriers. This links to the idea of transition as a process of being and becoming (Ecclestone et al. 2010) as their resilience in surmounting obstacles developed and transformed their self-identity. The process of overcoming adversity led to a “renegotiation of the self” (Hope 2017: 73) and re-shaping of identity (Krause and Coates 2008).

## **5.6 Capitals**

It would be difficult to research first-generation students without alluding to the work of Bourdieu. Although not a central conceptual framework to this study, issues related to cultural and social capital were touched on by the students and will be considered in this section, together with alternative capitals such as the model of Community Cultural Wealth developed by Yosso (2015; Section 5.6.3).

### **5.6.1 Cultural and social capital**

As identified in Chapter Two, Bourdieu claimed that cultural goods can only be apprehended by those who possess the ‘code’ to decipher them (Bourdieu 1974). One of the challenges faced by First in Family students is the lack of access to the ‘code’ to decipher higher education. This can be in terms of the labyrinthine processes around accessing higher education, lack of awareness on arrival, or the challenge of managing expectations once they are students. A lack of inherited cultural capital can make negotiating the higher education system alienating and disorienting (Pokorny et al. 2017). This has been covered extensively in the literature (Reay 2004, 2010; Thomas and Quinn 2007), but the findings in this study point to particular problems encountered by First in Family students who cannot turn to family members for advice.

Donna’s experience highlights the crucial role which can be played by social media in developing a sense of belonging prior to arrival. Donna described feeling “weird” and alienated because she was not party to the social media groups shared by her other flatmates over the summer prior to arrival.

This is an area not really explored in the literature, the ‘softer’ social side to accessing university. Arrival time is challenging and intimidating for many students, but those who have family members to turn to for advice are more likely to be aware of the existence of Facebook groups or chat groups for those sharing accommodation. There is an opportunity for universities to capitalise on the networking opportunities of social media by ensuring all students have access to the more informal groups which exist. Official university Facebook groups can be set up for first year accommodation sites and all students can be invited to enrol when they accept their offer. (It is important not to overlook students who live at home or ‘stayed education’ students (Pokorny et al. 2017) by only focusing on accommodation groups, however the focus of this study is on those students in university accommodation). This is an area which universities need to address and can be done through contact and information prior to arrival. The process of ‘keeping students warm’ by maintaining contact over the summer period prior to arrival should include advising them of informal social media networks. This could well be of particular importance in the summer of 2020: as this report is being written we have no clear guidance on how the COVID-19 situation will affect universities in September 2020, and to what extent students will be able to resume campus-living. If there is an element of remote attendance – as is currently anticipated – then social networks will be of even greater importance.

### 5.6.2 The impact of economic capital

Students from non-traditional backgrounds who lack economic capital are often compelled to work longer hours than their peers in paid jobs to supplement their income and the impact on their studies has been demonstrated (Reay 2010; Crozier et al. 2008). Moreover, a quantitative study conducted amongst undergraduate full-time students in Scotland suggested that part-time working had a small but significant detrimental effect on mental and physical health of students (Carney et al. 2005). The focus of most of the research is on the impact part-time work has on academic achievement and policy recommendations centre around recommending maximum hours for part-time work. However, this research revealed the impact that a lack of money had on students’ ability to make friends and thereby create social capital.

Developing a friendship network has been highlighted as a major contributory factor in the successful social transition of first year students (Kantanis 2000; Crissman-Ishler 2004; Thomas 2012) and has been explored in Section 5.4 above. But a lack of economic capital was a barrier to developing such networks; Barry explained how he drastically reduced his food budget in order to have the money to go out in the first few months and explained “*you have to go out every single*

*week even if you don't have the money"* (Barry Interview 1). Tricia felt her lack of money contributed to her loneliness and depression and Satin described her lack of money as a *"barrier in terms of making friends"*. Students who lack economic capital experience a double layer of disadvantage in creating friendship networks in their crucial first few months: some do not have the money to go out regularly and therefore feel they are missing out on opportunities to make social connections (e.g. Satin, Tricia); others are working so many hours in paid employment they do not have the time to socialise with their peers (e.g. Maria); and a third group feel pressurised to get into debt or reduce expenditure in other areas in order to take part in social activities (e.g. Barry). As the students transitioned through university, the pressure to spend money on socialising reduced - by the second year, students had moved into shared houses, there was less pressure to go out and most of them had part-time jobs. However, at this point the impact of a lack of money was less acute but was replaced by the stress and anxiety of juggling paid work and university study.

Money, or the lack of it, had a far-reaching impact on the students' lives in ways which were relatively unexpected. Research shows that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to drop out than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Crawford 2014; SMF 2017; HESA 2020a). Earlier this year the Higher Education Policy Institute called for the Government to introduce a 'First-in-Family Allowance' ensuring that the first year of a degree is tuition-free for all First in Family undergraduate students (Day et al. 2020: 7). The need to juggle part-time paid work with study is not new and has been covered in both extant literature (Hordósy et al. 2018; Reay et al. 2009) and policy (OfS 2019a): maintenance loans for students are means-tested and universities provide hardship grants for those in genuine financial need. This report is not concerned with student finance per se, however the impact on students' ability to make social bonds and create friendship networks is not so widely covered, and this was clearly a cause of some anxiety to students. There was an awareness that their peers with fewer financial concerns had more time, freedom and finances to invest in developing a social network and this was clearly not only a cause of some stress and concern, but for some students led to them cutting back on food budgets in order to afford to socialise. The participants in this study were aware of the importance of developing new friendship networks (as has been covered in Section 5.4) but their lack of finances made it difficult for them to do so. In view of the importance of friendship networks to the transition process, there is a need for institutions to recognise the financial pressures which hinder students from taking part in social activities and either providing more subsidized opportunities for social interaction or greater financial support for students. This is becoming increasingly important as the cost of student accommodation run by privately owned providers is increasing exponentially, leaving students from more disadvantaged backgrounds under more and more financial pressure.

### 5.6.3 Alternative capitals

In opposing what she perceived as the inherent bias integral to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Yosso (2005) suggested alternative capitals which benefitted those outside the dominant mainstream in society. Her conception of aspirational capital was particularly relevant to this study. Aspirational capital is predominantly perceived as the aspiration of parents who seek to break the links between their own occupational status and their children's future attainment (Gandara 1995) but it can also incorporate the aspiration of the children themselves who want to achieve higher social status than their parents and see education as a means to achieve this. Aspirational capital, like cultural and social capital, is an asset to the individual. Yosso conceived aspirational capital as residing in parents who wanted something better for their children, but it can also exist in individuals who want a better life for themselves. This can be a powerful motivation and a drive to succeed; aspirational capital can thus be a driver for social mobility through the desire to achieve a higher status, either for the individual themselves or their children.

Aspirational capital was a major theme in the narratives of the students. For First in Family students, attending university can be a source of great pride to their parents which can be both a motivation and a pressure. Barry spoke eloquently about his father's determination to see his son achieve the benefits he lacked, and how this had been a major motivating factor in Barry deciding to apply. However, he also described how this was a pressure to make his parents proud. This lessened as he became more secure in his parents' pride in him, and his desire to make his father proud was replaced by his own urge to succeed. Barry was also motivated by the desire to have a different life to that of his father, one which was more successful and well-paid. Amber's parents took their children to university open days from a very young age in the hopes of instilling a desire for the university education they had never achieved. Donna's parents strongly encouraged her to go, and Maria was driven by the desire to make her mother proud and be an inspiration to her younger sister (thereby becoming a source of aspirational capital herself). Aspirational capital was a major influence in these students' desire to attend university; the desire to make their parents proud and to justify any sacrifices drove them to achieve.

Aspirational capital does not feature strongly in the literature on First in Family students, but this research shows that this is a key motivating factor in their lives. For the First in Family students in this study, the aspirations of their parents and the desire to make them proud was a major motivating force in their lives. Reflecting Yosso's framework, a number of the parents in this study wanted to see their children achieve a better life and saw education as the means of achieving this

(Yosso 2005). In turn the motivation to fulfil their parents' aspirations for them and justify their pride in their achievement was a factor which kept the students going even in the face of adversity. For First in Family students aspirational capital was closely linked with the idea of pride – making their parents proud, and taking pride in themselves. Barry and Maria often mentioned the desire to make their parents proud and how this was a motivating factor to encourage them to do well. There is a sense in which First in Family students are pioneers, the first members of their family to achieve higher education. In Maria and Tricia's case there was also a desire to be a role model for younger siblings, thus becoming a source of aspirational capital themselves. There was also a financial element, an awareness that university education came at a cost to their parents and a pressure to make that investment worth it.

Aspirational capital also took the form of individuals aspiring to a different or better life than that of their parents or those around them. Barry wanted a different life from his father's and Cara and Satin aspired to something better than the adults in their social or employment circles. This desire for a different life was a motivating factor in encouraging them to work harder and achieve, and this was a form of capital. Yosso described aspirational capital as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers" (2005: 77) but she predominantly saw this as a form of social or familial capital, the aspirations that parents have for their children. In this study the aspiration expressed by some of the students was more in the way of an individual capital, an inner drive which led them to work harder than others around them. There was an awareness amongst some of the students that they were 'different', possessing a determination which was a major factor in their success, such as Cara's drive to "*do more and be more*" (Cara Interview 1).

There is a symbiosis between the aspiration to succeed and the dispositional protective factors or "sense of purpose and drive" (Masten et al. 1990: 426) which form part of the triadic model of resilience (Masten and Garmezy 1995). The participants who displayed aspirational capital saw their difference as partly due to personality traits and partly a sense of purpose (Cara Interview 3 – "*I know who I am, I know what I want to do and there's a clear path ahead*"). Sometimes this sense of purpose was attributable to aspirational capital in their desire to achieve something more than their parents, but their acknowledgement of their 'difference' from their peers suggested an awareness of an underlying difference that went beyond their aspirations. Scandone conceptualises aspiration as an aspect of habitus and argues that this framework allows us to examine the ways in which "multiple, intersecting dimensions of social identity and social structures play out in the shaping, re-shaping and possible fading of aspirations" (2018: 518).

#### 5.6.4 Summary

Figure 5.2 presents the culmination of this project in a diagrammatic form. This research showed that First in Family students undergo a transition process from when they arrive with a ‘non-student’ or ‘pre-student’ identity through their first and second years of higher education until at the end of their second year they have established a student identity. When they first arrive at university they are in a ‘non-student’ or ‘pre-student’ state. All higher education students share this experience to a certain degree, but First in Family students are likely to be less prepared for student life due to the lack of inherited cultural or academic capital. This ‘non-student’ state can be experienced as alienating, isolating, disorienting or alternatively motivating and providing new opportunities. In order to transition from ‘non-student’ to ‘student’ identity, individuals must negotiate the liminal or in-between space where their identities are evolving. The process of navigating this in-between space is influenced by certain key factors: firstly their **resilience**, or the dispositional, social and familial protective factors which helped them to overcome adversity and succeed despite (or even because of) the odds (Garmezy et al. 1985 – see [table 2.1](#)). Secondly there is the role of **place** which is divided into two areas: the impact of home from a psycho-social and physical perspective and the establishment of new friendship networks. Place attachment theory explains how home can be the source of security and identity (Korosec-Serfaty 1985) and objects can be invested with psychological and emotional significance (Winnicott 1953). The transference of the emotional and psychological locus of home and the impact of the creation of a secure home was a key factor in the transition process of the participants in this study. Alongside that was the creation of the support mechanism provided by new friendship networks. The third factor is the various **capitals** and the effect this had on their transition process. An absence of inherited social and cultural capital presented a barrier, and the lack of economic capital had a negative effect socially and financially. However, the presence of aspirational capital was a motivating force (Yosso 2005).

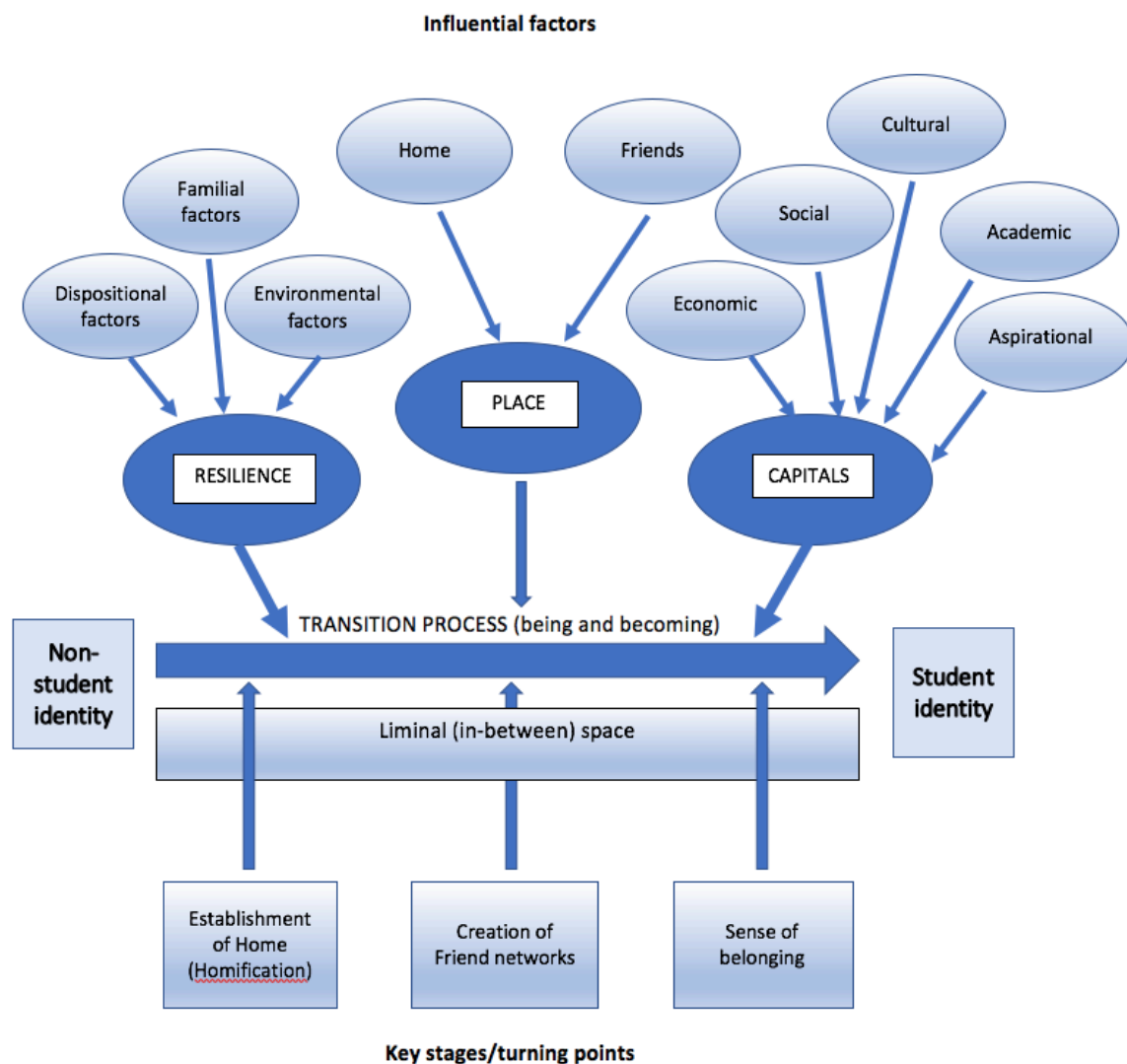
Within the transition process there were key milestones or turning points which were pivotal in the establishment of a new identity, as outlined by Gale and Parker (2014a). The key points identified through the research were firstly the creation of ‘home’ in terms of the physical space and the psycho-social connotations. For some students, particularly those with close home ties, this involved the homification of their living space. A second key milestone was the development of a new friendship network. This was an idiosyncratic process: for some participants new friendships were made immediately and were vital to the process, whereas for others the transference from old friends and the feelings of friendsickness were a barrier to transformation. The third key stage was

the development of a sense of belonging which was a key indicator of the successful creation of a new student identity.

Although there are limitations in providing an apparently reductionist representation of the research such as that shown in Fig 5.2, it provides a visual representation of the results of the research.

Fig 5.2 – the Conceptual Framework

**How do First in Family students transition into and through their first and second years of higher education?**





## Chapter 6                      Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1      *Conclusions*

This thesis has set out to provide a binocular view of widening participation. On the one hand there is the over-arching systemic overview of WP policy and the place of fair access and inclusion within the larger debate of the role of the university in today's social and economic world. However, in focusing on the specificity of the student experience, I have also highlighted the lack of recognition within policy of the obstacles and experiences which constitute being a First in Family student. There is a tendency within policy-making to homogenize the 'widening participation' or 'disadvantaged' student, however the research undertaken here has illuminated the specificity and diversity of the experiences of these students. Policy is necessarily written from a distance and sometimes seems to overlook the one person the policy is designed to help (i.e. the student); this research has got up close and personal to understand the student experience in a granular way.

WP policy has undergone many changes since its inception in the late 1990s, which has led to a lack of consistency. Subsequent governments with differing political agendas and an increasing focus on marketisation has led to a shift in the discourse from social mobility to accountability (see section 1.2). The demise of the centrally funded Aimhigher scheme and its replacement with a more localised approach through individual outreach schemes and regional partnerships has resulted in a call for more robust and standardised evaluation criteria. The introduction of Access and Participation plans requires all institutions to highlight their key WP priorities and establish outreach programmes to address these, with clear evaluation criteria. Regional partnerships have seen Russell Group institutions join forces with post-1992 universities, such as the Southern Universities Network (SUN) which is a collaborative partnership incorporating the Universities of Southampton and Winchester together with post-1992 universities such as Solent with the aim of providing outreach activities for schools and colleges in the region under the umbrella of the UniConnect programme. As it was established in January 2020 it is too early to tell whether the venture has been successful, particularly in view of the subsequent disruption to all schooling and outreach activities caused by Covid-19. It remains to be seen whether partnerships such as these will prove to be effective in terms of WP policy and practice.

This study has used interpretive and visual methods to explore the experiences of First in Family students as they navigate their first and second year of higher education, undergoing a transition

process from their point of arrival to their establishment of a student identity. I set out to answer the question **‘How do First in Family students transition into and through their first and second years of higher education’** and have used the unusual approach in education research of utilizing visual research alongside qualitative methods which has led to a richness of data which would not have been possible otherwise. Unlike many other research projects which explore issues of transition, it has not only focused on the induction stage during the first few weeks of higher education but also the journey through university – not just the ‘getting in’ but also the ‘getting on’ (Waller et al. 2017).

This study must be placed in the context of the current situation. Although the coronavirus pandemic could not have been envisaged, at the time of writing this report the higher education sector is facing a period of unprecedented uncertainty. At present we do not know to what extent university campuses will be able to reopen in September or how much learning will be done online rather than face-to-face. This would clearly have a major impact on student engagement and the transition process would undergo substantial changes. Initial evidence points to the fact that many prospective undergraduate students are considering deferring their studies or not attending at all (Montecute and Holt-White 2020). From an institutional perspective, the financial pressures on universities are likely to be unparalleled and it will be vital for institutions to do everything in their power to reduce attrition rates and increase student engagement. From the perspective of students, those who do choose to take up their places in 2020 will face a very different learning environment, a world in which many of the traditional means of engagement may have been changed through social distancing regulations. The Sutton Trust research suggests that the impact of changes will be felt most strongly by under-represented groups for whom university is seen as a higher financial risk (Montecute and Holt-White 2020). This research is more important than ever if higher education institutions are to understand and support the transition process of those students who do embark on their undergraduate studies in these uncertain times.

Students starting higher education undergo a transition process from their initial ‘non-student’ identity to the establishment of a student identity. This journey is particularly prevalent in the first and second year of higher education, as after this point the students who progress to third year have usually successfully transitioned (as evidenced by lower attrition rates). In undertaking this journey, students must navigate an in-between or liminal space when they are neither one nor the other, but rather evolving from non-student to student identity. This in-between space is subject to influential factors which can assist or impede their progress, and there are key milestones to negotiate. The majority of students starting higher education undergo a period of transition, but First in Family

students often lack cultural capital and in particular inherited academic capital. They cannot turn to parents and family members for advice as they are often the pioneers in their family in educational terms, and this in itself can be either an additional pressure in terms of parental expectations or a motivating factor or form of aspirational capital. Moreover, the adversity some of them had encountered in accessing higher education led to an increased resilience and a drive and determination to succeed. Their resilience, particularly the dispositional factors deriving from an increased drive and aspiration, was a motivating force. The self-awareness among some of the participants of their difference from peers in terms of an increased desire to work harder and achieve more was a form of capital in itself.

The use of photo elicitation and photovoice methods in this project allowed participants to focus on issues which had not been preconceived and which do not appear in the extant literature. One major issue was the importance of place and home. The literature around home was explored to find a meaning for the concept of 'home' and the connotations of safety and security. The sterile living spaces which students often occupy in their first year contributed to feelings of alienation and homesickness. Through a gradual process of homification – transforming their living space through the personalisation process of physical objects – the students started to feel more grounded and rooted. This process was accelerated through their second year when their living spaces were more 'homely' and by the end of the second year, most participants were conceptualising 'home' as their university accommodation rather than the family home. The role of transitional objects in the homification process was presented through the interviews and photographs of the participants.

The support of friendship networks was a key contributor to a sense of student identity. However, 'friendsickness' was a factor which could impede the transition process, just as homesickness can. Close ties to home, family and friends, particularly when combined with regular returns to the family home, made it more difficult for them to transition and navigate their liminal space. For some of the participants there was a deliberate embracing of new friends and a turning away from old friends as a process of renegotiation of the self and creation of a new identity. However, the distancing from old friends could lead to anxiety and dislocation, a divided sense of self as the painful process of separation was undergone. The establishment of university friendship networks was an important turning point in their transition as it entailed a transference of locus of emotional support.

The student identity and sense of belonging are inextricably intertwined. What this study contributed to our understanding of this process is the unspoken and unresearched elements that contribute to a sense of identity. Partly this is practical – the physical elements of creating a homely

environment for students when they arrive. However, there are also psycho-social contributions – the recognition of contributory factors which impede the successful transition and engagement process. This is prescient at the current time of national higher education policy changes.

## **6.2 Limitations**

This study was a small-scale interpretivist project involving eight participants. Although studies of this nature provide rich, thick data on student experience, a much wider research project would be needed to provide statistical validity. A number of limitations apply here. The study was conducted at a single post-1992 higher education institution with students from media-related courses, it would be useful to extend this to consider different types of institution, students and courses (see Section 6.2.1). The study used a volunteer sampling methodology which has challenges regarding claims to representativeness. As the sample was self-selecting it is dangerous to make assumptions that they are representative of the entire population. In this study I do not claim that the findings are generalizable to all First in Family students, however the research has provided new information which further, more widespread research could substantiate.

### **6.2.1 Future Research**

This study has highlighted the need for further and more widespread investigation of the experience of First in Family students. A quantitative approach would allow much greater claims for generalisability and allow more widespread conclusions to be reached. As the cohort in this study was so small it was not possible to investigate the intersectionality of race, age or gender and further research in this area would be beneficial. For example, mature students are more likely to come from First in Family backgrounds, but also more likely to have already achieved independence before arriving at university so the impact of their First in Family status is likely to be different. In this study there were differences between Barry's attitudes to home, family and home friends, but with only one male in the cohort it was not possible to make any claims about gender differences – this would be a subject that could usefully be explored in a more widespread project.

The participants in this research were from a post-1992 institution but it would be advisable to investigate the experiences of students in more academic HEIs. To this end a future research project following the Paired Peers model (Bathmaker et al. 2016) by comparing students from Solent and Southampton University (a member of the Russell Group) would allow for insightful comparisons to be made. It would also be advisable to look at students from different research areas – a cross

institutional analysis that included students from topic areas such as science, business and law would generate much greater insights.

The role of social media in creating a sense of identity and belonging prior to arrival was a finding in this study, and this is an area which is still under-researched. Further research into how social media could be used more effectively by universities in reaching out to First in Family students prior to arrival would be highly beneficial, particularly in the current climate. And finally, research has already shown that WP students are likely to be the hardest hit by the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. At this time of change and upheaval, research is sorely needed into what impact the pandemic has had, and how online learning can potentially affect students such as First in Family in terms of economic, social, emotional and psychological effects.

### **Summary**

- Cross institutional research with a Russell Group university – e.g. University of Southampton – to compare student experience. The study to match students across different disciplines such as science, business, law, etc. The population to be designed in order to consider intersectionality with regard to age, race, gender.
- The findings from this qualitative study to be used as the basis of a wider quantitative research project.
- Research project into the role of social media and its benefits to universities in terms of creating a sense of belonging and identity, particularly in the current climate with potential distancing rules in place for the 2020/21 academic year.
- Research into Covid-19 and subsequent changes to the learning and teaching environment as well as the social environment and its impact on First in Family students. This could be viewed in the context of the DigComp (European Digital Competence) framework 2016 (Biggins et al. 2017)

## 6.3 Recommendations

### 6.3.1 Place (physical space)

The implications of this research suggest that universities need to be more cognisant of the role of place in the transition of students and the development of a sense of belonging. This should be set within an institutional policy framework which incorporates recruitment processes, induction, estates and student support. Student accommodation needs to be reframed as much more than just a place to live, but also as a factor in engagement, belonging, and mental health. In their research into ‘stayeducation’ students Pokorny et al. (2017) conclude that the importance of space in developing social relationships is often overlooked.

There is growing concern around the increasing costs of privately-owned student accommodation which is causing financial pressure on both students and parents, while failing to put the student at the heart of the process. In a recent Higher Education Policy Institute report the following statement was made:

“The design of accommodation should be reviewed by universities and other providers alike. As a report published in 2019 outlines, many developments have not been designed with student wellbeing in mind<sup>20</sup>. There has been an over-emphasis on cellular accommodation and an under-appreciation of the need for communal and shared space. There is also a need to consult students more fully as part of the design process. At present students’ voices are often ignored and their experiences disregarded. Their expertise and their interests should not be discounted any longer.”  
(Whyte 2019: 45)

This is an issue for government and institutions. Accommodation plays a key role in the development of a student’s sense of belonging. Large, impersonal communal halls with small cellular rooms is increasing a sense of alienation for some students. Policies by university Estates is compounding this problem, as expressed in Katie Thornton’s poem when she refers to the “nails and blu-tak [that] were prohibited” and rules preventing pictures being hung on the walls (Thornton, K. in Quinlan 2016). Universities should involve students and Estates departments in discussions around the personalisation of physical space. Students should be able to adapt their space to put up pictures and objects from home. Designated areas such as cork-walls and hanging spaces could be provided to encourage this. Large accommodation blocks should be designed with comfortable breakout and

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<sup>20</sup> Scott Brownrigg and Galliford Try, Impact of Accommodation Environments on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing, June 2019 [https://www.gallifordtry.co.uk/~media/Files/G/GallifordTry/downloads/group-publications/Impact%20of%20Accommodation%20Environments\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gallifordtry.co.uk/~media/Files/G/GallifordTry/downloads/group-publications/Impact%20of%20Accommodation%20Environments_Final.pdf) (accessed 18 October 2019).

communal areas to encourage interaction. Accommodation should be designed to engender a sense of belonging and identity.

### 6.3.2 Pre-arrival – Open Days and Induction

Recruitment and induction processes could be better utilised to prepare students for some of the challenges higher education might bring. With regard to physical space, parents and students at Open Days could be advised on the importance of homifying the physical space and encouraged to bring personal possessions and objects to make the place more secure and familiar, advice that should be repeated in communications prior to arrival.

Parental support can be a key factor in students attending university, however close ties to home, family and home-friends can be a barrier to transition particularly when accompanied by frequent returns to the family home. In order to aid transition, universities should be using Open Days to provide advice to parents and new students on the possibility of homesickness and strategies to counter it, including how parents can best support students in the initial weeks by maintaining regular contact but limiting returns home. The establishment of supportive friendship networks at university is a key factor in student transition and induction activities should prioritise the establishment of new friendship networks. Sessions which facilitate the exploration of issues around homesickness and friendsickness will allow students to express their anxieties and recognise that others have the same feelings, encourage mutual peer support, educate academic staff about the prevalence of these issues and also enable tutors to identify students who may be particularly at-risk and in need of further support. In extreme cases this may be a referral to counselling services, but as one student expressed it in the research, the actions of a designated staff member who checked in with her every couple of weeks by text or message would have made a substantial difference to her increasing sense of isolation and depression. This kind of support for at-risk students such as First in Family can halt the cycle of non-attendance which often ends in dropping out.

The literature and this research highlighted the effect of different norms and values. This can be alienating for individuals who have not lived away from home before and may feel out of their depth in a new environment with people from different backgrounds. Induction sessions which encourage discussion and open sharing of difference in norms and values could increase a sense of belonging and community amongst students.

### 6.3.3 Social media

Social media should be utilised more proactively by university accommodation services. This could include earlier allocation of rooms so that students can see their rooms before they arrive and 360° viewing software would allow them to familiarise themselves with the space. Digital techniques used by stores such as Ikea would allow students to personalise their space digitally and visualise their possessions in the room. It would also give parents/carers a closer connection by allowing them to see the space the students will occupy.

Social media can also be used more effectively as a connection network for students pre-arrival. Facebook, WhatsApp or TikTok groups could be created as informal spaces for students to communicate and establish friendships prior to arrival so that they are not in the position Donna found herself of being outside the group. Students could be informed of these groups at Open Days and via communications over the summer, but membership of the groups should be monitored so that those who have not signed up could be sent reminders in case they had not attended an Open Day or were unaware of their existence. Level 1 leaders or personal tutors should be encouraged to occasionally post in these groups so that they are a familiar face when students arrive (particularly those staff who are involved in pastoral support for first year students).

### 6.3.4 Practical steps

- Reframing and redesign of accommodation space to engender a sense of belonging through the encouragement of personalisation
- Creation of varied communal and breakout spaces to encourage socialising in small as well as large groups
- Greater use of social media and visualisation software to facilitate a sense of familiarity with the physical space prior to arrival
- Utilisation of social media networks to encourage greater communication between students before arrival
- Monitoring of social media groups to ensure all future students are aware of their existence
- Open day sessions with parents to offer advice on factors influencing transition such as homesickness, friendsickness, homification
- Use of induction sessions to facilitate exploration of issues affecting transition such as homesickness, friendsickness, negative impact of returning home too often, impact of different



norms, values and practices, etc. Use of small group teaching techniques to encourage peer support and learning

This study has investigated the experience of First in Family students navigating the transition process into and through higher education. It has set this in the context of policy which seeks on the one hand to improve social justice by widening participation but on the other to suffer from a confusion over what the role of universities is in the current climate. This research has shown that this group of students often gets lost within research and policy. Understanding their experiences is instrumental to providing adequate support and represents one small part of creating fair and equitable access to higher education to all.

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## Appendices



## ***Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet***

### **Changing spaces: the impact of background on the experience of first-in-family higher education students in a post-1992 institution**

#### **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in research that is being conducted as part of a project overseen by Bournemouth University. 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 (for example other students or your Course Leader or Programme Group Leader whose contact details are given at the end of this sheet). Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information ([laura.campbell@solent.ac.uk](mailto:laura.campbell@solent.ac.uk)). Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

#### **What is the purpose of the project?**

This research project aims to explore the experience of first-year degree students who come from backgrounds designated as 'under-represented' (i.e. are the first in their family to attend HE and come from schools or neighbourhoods where it is unusual for people to go to university). The study aims to find out more about what motivates students like you to come to university, what encourages or hinders you, and what experiences you had during your first weeks here. This study will run from November 2016 to May 2017.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have already indicated that you would be willing to take part in this research project and described yourself as eligible by fulfilling one of the criteria for 'under-represented backgrounds' (as outlined above). You will be part of a focus group consisting of 6-8 fellow students, some/all of whom you will probably know.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is entirely up to you 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 Participant Agreement Form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it impacting upon/adversely affecting your education or that of others. Agreement to take part in one stage of the project does not commit you to any further stages – you are entitled to withdraw up to the point at which the data is transcribed and fully anonymised.

#### **What do I have to do?**

##### **Phase 1**

You will be asked to take part in a focus group which should take approximately 45-60 minutes (refreshments will be provided). The focus group will entail open and unstructured discussion around a range of topics. At some points you may be asked to carry out creative tasks, such as captioning photographs or completing sentences, as a group and/or on your own.

In agreeing to take part in this research, you will be expected to attend the focus group at the times specified and to take part in the discussion. I hope you will be happy to speak frankly and honestly.

## **Phase 2**

There is no expectation to take part in any further research, however if you would like to continue in the project you can indicate this after the focus group. Further research would entail keeping a visual diary / blog over the course of the academic year and taking part in three one-to-one follow-up interviews with me to explore some of the issues raised in more depth. Follow-up interviews will be unstructured and will involve an informal discussion about your diary and some of your experiences during your course. The photographs you take can be used in the reporting of the research, but your name will not be linked with them and you will not be identifiable from the photographs used.

If you choose to take part in Phase 2, you will be given a second Participant Agreement Form to sign. By signing the form, you give your permission for the photographs to be used in this manner.

This research project will be qualitative, which means that it will use the discussions from the focus group and interviews to explore the topics in the research project. There will be no questionnaires or other methods of research.

As you know, I am a Senior Lecturer at Southampton Solent University and also a student on the Doctorate in Education at Bournemouth University. This project is being carried out as part of my Doctorate studies and has not been commissioned by Southampton Solent University or any other organisation.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no foreseeable disadvantages or risks, apart from giving up your valuable time.

### **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 to improve the experiences of all students from under-represented backgrounds in higher education.

### **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?/ What will happen to the results of the research project?**

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. If the results of the research are published, you will not be able to be identified in any way as all the data will be anonymised.

### **What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?**

This research seeks to explore the experiences of under-represented students on a creative degree course at Southampton Solent University and your views, opinions and reflections are therefore essential to achieving the research objectives.

### **Contact for further information**

For further information please contact me, Laura Campbell (e: [laura.campbell@solent.ac.uk](mailto:laura.campbell@solent.ac.uk); t: 023 8201 3848).

Taking part in this project will not impact in any way on your studies. However if you have any concerns, please contact your Course Leader Richard Berry at [richard.berry@solent.ac.uk](mailto:richard.berry@solent.ac.uk).

### **Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

The focus group session and subsequent interviews will be recorded on audio media. The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

By signing the Participant Agreement form, you give your permission for the recordings to take place and be used in this manner.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information. You will be given a copy of this Participant Information Sheet and a signed Participant Agreement form to keep.**

Laura Campbell  
October 2016

## Appendix B – Phase 1 Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

**Full title of project: Changing spaces: the impact of background on first-year students in a post-1992 institution. Research phase 1 : Focus group**

**Name, position and contact details of researcher: Laura Campbell, Senior Lecturer Southampton Solent University. E: [laurafcam@hotmail.com](mailto:laurafcam@hotmail.com), m: 07928 265615**

**Name, position and contact details of supervisor: Dr Iain MacRury, Deputy Dean - Research and Professional Practice, CEMP, Bournemouth University. E: [imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk) T: 01202 962465**

**Please initial  
here**

I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary.	
I understand that I am free to withdraw up to the point where the data are processed and become anonymous, so my identity cannot be determined.	
During the research process, I am free to withdraw without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
Should I not wish to answer any particular question(s) or take part in an activity, 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 outputs that result from the research.	
I understand taking part in the research will include being recorded (audio) but that these recordings will be deleted once transcribed.	
I agree to take part in the above research project.	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

*This form should be signed and dated by all parties after the participant receives a copy of the participant information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated participant agreement form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.*

## Appendix C – Phase 2 Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

**Full title of project: Changing spaces: the impact of background on first-year students in a post-1992 institution.**

#### Research phase 2 : Photo diary / interview

Name, position and contact details of researcher: **Laura Campbell, Senior Lecturer Southampton Solent University.** E: [lauracamp@hotmail.com](mailto:lauracamp@hotmail.com), m: 07928 265615

Name, position and contact details of supervisor: **Dr Iain MacRury, Deputy Dean - Research and Professional Practice, CEMP, Bournemouth University.** E: [imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk) T: 01202 962465

**Please initial here**

I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary.	
I understand that I am free to withdraw up to the point where the data are processed and become anonymous, so my identity cannot be determined.	
During the research process, I am free to withdraw without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
Should I not wish to answer any particular question(s) or take part in an activity, 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 outputs that result from the research.	
I understand taking part in the research will include being recorded (audio) but that these recordings will be deleted once transcribed.	
I give permission for members of the research team to use photographs taken by me during the research process. I understand that my name will not be linked with the visual research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the outputs 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

*This form should be signed and dated by all parties after the participant receives a copy of the participant information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated participant agreement form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.*

## Appendix D – Colour coded transcript

Cara – 13 March 2017

battle and like I've said like **I never really had teachers who took an interest and stuff.** And then, like me and my tutors and then eventually, "Oh, Cara, yeah, you can do this." it's like, "Why don't you do that?" And then he sends me things, "Oh, this might interest you and stuff." It really does, like.... You know, **when you are the underdog you want to just try and do more and I feel like most people, just some people have had it easier than I have. Like, I've always had to fight to try and get better grades like a little bit more than other people. So, yeah, I think it has because just of my personal stuff really. Just a little bit more fight than other people, so.**

INT:

And, do you think that's an advantage or a disadvantage?

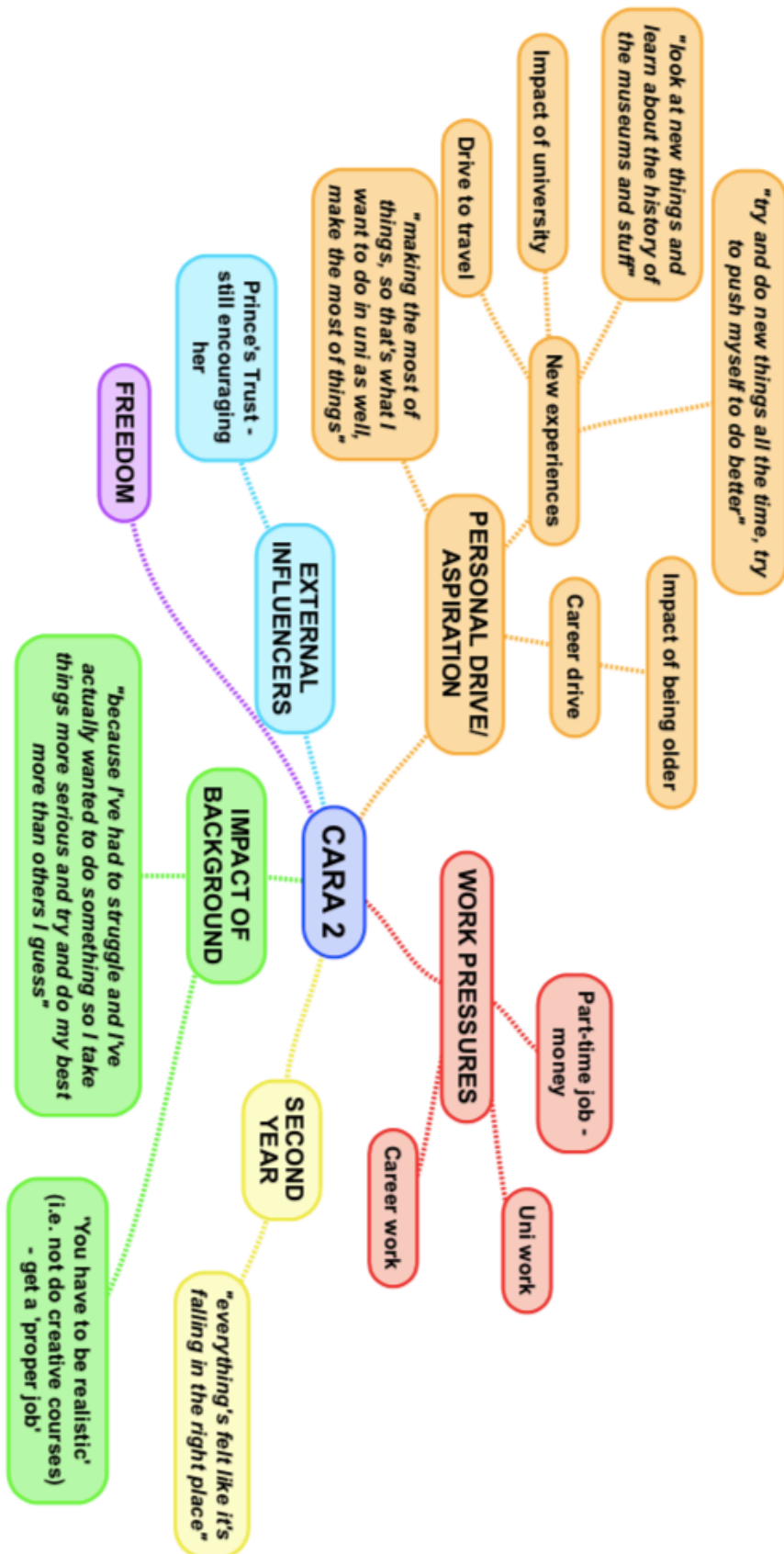
CARA:

Yeah, probably an advantage. Because, I...my friend has told me like then in third year when we talk about the future it was like, "Oh, I wonder what we'll do like in five years' time." And they're like, "Oh, I'll probably just sit down and, like still be in dead end jobs but you'll probably be in like somewhere better than us because you've got the drive." So, that's a really fantastic compliment from my friend. So, it's like I guess passion does.... **because I had been told, "No, you can't do that" And then it's like a passion and I was like, "No. I can do that." And it has like probably made me improve my chances of doing things. Because I'm in the mind frame it's like, "I can do that." Whereas people who've been told that they can do things all their life thinks it's easy so they should just get it. Whereas I've had to fight for things, so I guess it does...** And there's also, I went back to the BBC, like the year after? And the guy remembered me and he sat me down and he told like everyone else to go to the next room because we were having a talk in the feed truck. **And he sat me down, shut the door and just said, like gave me like the most fantastic speech about how to get into the industry, what I should look for, what type of people that the industry need.** And he was like, you know, "You can't be...." There was someone else on third year there and he was like, this guy said, "Oh, I wrote an essay about this, like this and this." And he was like really big for his boots and stuff. And he's the guy that was touring us was like, "Yeah, I did that. I made that. And what you wrote an essay on is what I did. And he's like, "That's wrong." And he just put the guy in his place sort of and it was like, "oh crap". That was quite funny. And then he told them, "Everyone go there," and he just sat me down and he's like, "I found this year that you're asking more questions, you know a little bit more." **And he was like, "You seem a little bit more like in your element, kind of like in your place?" And he just gave me such a fantastic speech about like what sort of people don't last in the industry and what people do and how I should go about like talking to different people and stuff, it was just great.**

INT:

So, when he'd seen you before, what...was it on the same course?

## Appendix E – Mind Map



## Appendix F – Thematic table

How do First in Family students transition into and through their first and second years of higher education?				
CATEGORY	THEMES			
	Focus Group	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
1. HOME: The transition of 'home' and 'here' <a href="#">Section 4.2</a>	Homesickness	Homesickness	<u>Homification/</u> 'Second home'	Transference of 'home'
2. FRIENDS: The transition of friendship networks <a href="#">Section 4.3</a>	Separation from home friends. <u>Friendsickness.</u>	Separation from home friends. Support of new friends.	Role of university friends.	Transference of friendship support network.
3. RESILIENCE: The transition of self and identity <a href="#">Section 4.4</a>	Independence	Resilience / aspiration Making others proud.	Resilience Making others proud	Resilience Making others proud.
4. CAPITALS: The role of economic, social and cultural capitals <a href="#">Section 4.5</a>		Lack of money Social capital	Impact of part-time job (time)	



## Appendix G – Quotation selection

Yes. ¶	
MOD <sup>+</sup> [Laughs].- But? ¶	
BARRY <sup>+</sup> I took two photos that were taken about two or three months ago.- I realised that I deleted them.- But I retook them today but not as good.- Okay.- Where is it? Okay, these two.- So, that is one of just... ¶	
MOD <sup>+</sup> Okay.- So talk me through this one.- So you got your feet and your looking into an empty wallet? ¶	
BARRY <sup>+</sup> Yeah.- [Laughs].- So basically like I took that in like December time, well actually I took that today but I--- I took it in December.- It's when I was extremely low on money and I didn't really, I couldn't really afford to buy anything really.- And I was struggling for everything, yeah.- And it was sort of stressing me out kind of. ¶	
MOD <sup>+</sup> And how did that affect you, I mean, did it make you question whether you should be here or did it...? -What kind of effect did it have? ¶	
BARRY <sup>+</sup> It didn't make me question if I made the right decision although, I could have thought about that but I didn't.- I was just thinking, in that--- when I was really low, I was just thinking, should I ask my parents for money sort of thing or should I not, it's like.... the other photo's actually also sort of the same but there's more pennies there. ¶	
MOD <sup>+</sup> Okay.- So yeah.- More money? ¶	QUOTE
BARRY <sup>+</sup> There's more pennies and five p's.- It's just to represent that... I had, just like pennies and like five p's scattered across like my --- my table, it's just, that's all I had, you know.- I go back to, yeah, asking my parents for money, I was like, I don't really want to do that and it's like, what will they think of me sort of thing, if I asked for it and they'd say, "Oh, is he independent?" and stuff like that.- "Can he handle himself on his own?" -I didn't want them to have a bad representation of me. ¶	
MOD <sup>+</sup> So it was important to you that, they thought you were independent and coping? ¶	
BARRY <sup>+</sup> Yeah.- Exactly.- That is why I have never really -- even in that time, I refused to ask for money and I always said that.- I was, they even asked, "Are you good for money?" -I was like, "Yeah, I'm fine". even though I was like really poor and I was really struggling.- I had about 8 pounds a week to spend on food. ¶	

## **Appendix H – Moderator Guide**

Date of interview: .....

Time: .....

Participant: .....

### **1. Welcome.**

Ask permission to record the interview, remind them of confidentiality and anonymity.  
Check they are happy to proceed, find out if they have any questions or concerns since last meeting.  
Give them consent forms, give them time to read, ask questions, check they are happy to sign and give consent.

*Start recording.*

Ask them to select image from the cards around the room.

### **2. Image card**

Talk about what the image means to them, what does it say about being a student.  
Refer back to image chosen last time if appropriate.

### **3. General discussion**

How is life as a student for them now? How have things changed since the last interview?  
Allow them to lead the discussion.

### **4. Photographs**

Ask them to show you the photographs they have brought and explain their significance.

Explore areas they raise.

### **5. Thank and close.**

Arrange date for next interview.

<b>REMEMBER: ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION, DON'T LEAD IT</b>
--

## ***Appendix I – Transcript Barry Interview 1***

INT: You remember in the focus group, when I asked you all to take a card, and you'd taken the staircase?

BAR: Yes the staircase one.

INT: And you said you're at the bottom looking up and you talked about it being quite daunting and a lot of pressure and I just wondered if you still think that's how you'd express it, being a student?

BAR: I actually say -- no. Because at the start, you know, there is a lot of going on. You don't know where you're going. It's very stressful. You don't know if you've done the right thing. I was feeling that but now we're in April, I've got a lot clearer mind. And I sort of know where I want to go more.

INT: In what way was that?

BAR: I thought, you end up in debt afterwards, is film the best degree to have? ... People go to university to do subjects like, you know, history, geography, physics, you know. They become doctors, lawyers. But film, that's something that you don't think of being like, you know, a degree sort of thing? You just like go into the industry straight away, but I feel right now that I have made the right decision because there are lot of places to go through university. Like, they give you like more options I believe, with the -- well they give you more contacts and like, this thing called the Solent Creatives thing where you can have paid jobs that you can do which build up your portfolio throughout the entire three years. And by the end of that, you know, if an employer sees that you have all this like work experience and you have a degree on top of it, they're going to hire you instead of someone who just has the portfolio? I assume so.....

INT: Why do you think you had that view point of 'is this a proper degree'?

BAR: Well, actually, my dad was just like happy that I went to university. My mum sort of wanted me to do something more academic because I was going to do business two years ago at Oxford Brookes but I dropped out and went to college instead and did a media course at college.

INT: And what made you make that decision do you think?

BAR: It was really last minute, it was in August. I already had the place and I was going to go in September but I just didn't want to do it. It's because, I did business at sixth form. I enjoyed it at the start and through like GCSE, I enjoyed it but, after a while, it became really boring. I was like, debating like -- in my life, do I really want to be this boring person that does this boring job and you know, it was scary, I didn't want to do that and I saw media and it seemed fun and interesting. I love cameras, I love filming, stuff like that -- but yeah. Very last minute, rash decision but I think it was a really good decision.

INT: Was it difficult to against what your mum wanted for you?

BAR: Yeah. I just, I felt like, at the end, she eventually understood that it's something I wanted to do. She forgave me. She just found out that... I enjoyed it a lot and I was happy. So, she thinks -- if I was happy, she was happy, so, yeah.

INT: So, talk me through your journey to going to university.

BAR: How it became an option for me to go to university? So, when I was younger, I just, I didn't think I was like a smart kid or anything. I thought that I was just like an average kid, just like, do what my parents did, where I just -- after school you go to college, maybe go to college and then go straight to work. It wasn't really a part of my... I wasn't planning, you know like where

other kids, they plan for university, they plan what uni they want to go to and they think about their career like that. Whereas with me, it was just, go to school and get a job, you know. But then, umm...

INT: And what, sort of, age were you when that's what you expected your life would be?

BAR: Probably, I don't know, up until like Year 11, 12. So I was about like 15 yeah.

INT: Were your friends planning on going to university or were they, like you, thinking, "Oh no that's not for me."

BAR: Yeah. All of them. That it's not for them. Every single one of them. So, I was in that group of friends that just didn't have that mindset, so I guess I just followed that, sort of thing, but you know...

INT: And did your teachers or anybody suggest you think about it as an option?

BAR: Nope. They didn't. None of them did.

INT: So what was it that changed your mind then?

BAR: It was, in Year 13 when I was about to do..when I was doing business. And, teachers didn't tell me to do it or encourage me to do it, I just thought, you know, I kind of want to get a good job rather than... I don't want to seem mean but ...be like my dad? It's just, you know, my dad doesn't have the best job in the world and he doesn't get paid the best either. So, I wanted to.. I just wanted to be successful, I guess. And I thought university was the way in through that, yeah.

INT: And was there anything in particular?

BAR: It was just, what was the turn, the actual turning point, I'm trying to think, it was some time in Year 13 and I was, I know it had something to do with -- I wanted to be successful and I wanted to have a lot of money [laugh]. I probably just watching my dad's life going past because he's had so many like failed businesses and like failed stuff going on. I just didn't want to end up like that. So that was a turning point for me and also, like, when I was doing business, I was..I was doing really well, I was getting good grades. So I was like, hmm, yeah, maybe I'd be... maybe university is suited for me. That's the sort of thing -- that was sort of what I going through at the time.

INT: So was it that... do you think that it was at that point in your life when maybe you start looking at the future more?

BAR: Yeah. Because it was, in year 13 that was when, "oh after this, you're an adult, you know, you have to live your life". So, that was a really, emotional sort of time, a lot of different emotions going on and stuff like that, I didn't know.... My headspace wasn't like -- it was just all over the place, yeah.

INT: And were you getting encouragement from the teachers?

BAR: They just, they don't really...they just didn't say anything about university actually. Never mentioned it. So we just didn't talk about it.

INT: And what about your parents, because again, something you mentioned in the focus group was the fact that your dad played a big role. So, can you talk a little bit more about that?

BAR: You see, in about year 12, he really wanted me to go to uni and I was just against it so much and I didn't want to go and he kept on pushing me and pushing me for it -- but it was during like the year 13, sixth form last year -- it was just..when he was pushing me, I just started to realise that maybe it's a good option, I guess. Yeah. I guess, my parents felt proud when I got into uni. But before then, my dad, when he was like, nagging me to go to uni and I was

thinking in my head if I just say yes, he will be proud of me...? which he was, so that sort of took me over the edge to go into uni as well, so...

INT: Do you think knowing how much he wanted you to was a factor in it?

BAR: I think if he hadn't nagged me, I wouldn't have went, definitely. Definitely 100%. If it wasn't for that, I don't think... First of all, I wouldn't even be in the same -- I wouldn't even be thinking about university because like, it was never mentioned in the school. And if it wasn't mentioned at home, I wouldn't even be thinking about it, sort of thing. But because he sort of kept on nagging me about it, I was just thinking about it and that's all you need really I think. When I was in college, they wanted you to go to university. I think on the first day as well they said, "Every single one of our students last year went to university". So, that was sort of, "Okay. This is what we should do then" pretty much.

INT: Yeah. But you hadn't been having any of that up until that point?

BAR: I didn't.. which was surprising, you know.

INT: Yeah. And did all of your friends end up going? Did they change their mind as well?

BAR: No, they didn't. Because like I said earlier that, no one really mentioned university at school and my dad, he mentioned at home but like, some of these other students probably didn't get that. So they didn't think about university that much. That is all they need right?

INT: Do you think you've changed over this year?

BAR: I guess... since coming to university, I have opened up a little bit more. I wouldn't say I was completely introvert back at home but I was quiet. And since coming to uni and meeting new people and -- yeah I've just been more open. And I didn't care what people think sort of thing.

INT: Were you homesick when you started? For friends and things like that?

BAR: No. I wasn't. Not at all.

INT: Do you keep in touch with your friends from home or do you...?

BAR: Oh yeah. I still talk to them. Well I didn't have a lot of friends back at home so that's probably why. I had a small group of friends and that's was all I need. We speak to -- we group chat like everyday so...

INT: And they're still at home?

BAR: Yeah. Well, one of my friends who actually -- he left in year 10 so, but we still kept in contact and he is at University of Manchester. So he went to uni. Actually, in our entire class or group, he was the only other person that went --and he left in year 10.

INT: Did you bring any photos?

BAR: Yes. I took two photos that were taken about two or three months ago. I realised that I deleted them. But I retook them today but not as good. Okay, these two.

INT: Okay. So talk me through this one. So you've got your feet and your looking into an empty wallet?

BAR: Yeah. [Laughs]. So basically like I took that in like December time. It's when I was extremely low on money and I didn't really, I couldn't really afford to buy anything really. And I was struggling for everything, yeah. And it was sort of stressing me out kind of.

INT: And how did that affect you?

BAR: It didn't make me question if I made the right decision although, I could have thought about that but I didn't. I was just thinking, in that -- when I was really low, I was just thinking, should

I ask my parents for money sort of thing or should I not, it's like.... the other photo's actually also sort of the same but there's more pennies there.

INT: Okay. More money?

BAR: There's more pennies and five p's. It's just to represent that...I had, just like pennies and like five p's scattered across like my -- my table, it's just, that's all I had, you know. I go back to, yeah, asking my parents for money, I was like, I don't really want to do that and it's like, what will they think of me sort of thing, if I asked for it and they'd say, "Oh, is he independent?" and stuff like that. "Can he handle himself on his own?" I didn't want them to have a bad representation of me.

INT: So it was important to you that they thought you were independent?

BAR: Yeah. Exactly. That is why I have never really -- even in that time, I refused to ask for money and I always said that. I was, they even asked, "Are you good for money?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm fine" even though I was like really poor and I was really struggling. I had about 8 pounds a week to spend on food.

INT: And why, why do you think you were so determined to not even take it when they were offering?

BAR: I think it was that, I wanted them to think of me that I was.. that I could handle myself you know. Because after them saying that they were proud of me, I wanted them to think, you know, he's -- he can handle himself away from home, he doesn't need us, sort of thing, yeah. Sort of like that, yeah.

INT: Did that have an impact?

BAR: You see, well, I spent about like £8 a week on food where I spent -- I had like in my budget about £20 altogether a week sort of thing. I spend about like £10 going out... I wanted to go out which is the thing. Which was a bad decision to be fair. [Laughs] Yeah, because it left about £8 on food. But, this is the thing, you buy like a bottle of vodka and you just -- pre-load and you're good for the night. You drink that and you get free entry so it's fine...

INT: And is it just that going out is fun, and that's why you wanted to do it?

BAR: It's sort of like, it's sort of like you have to go out. It's like everyone is going out, so you have to go out. You want to be a part of the group so, you come out every night. Every -- not every night, every week. Actually one person does go out every night. I don't know how she spends that much money.

INT: So, is it a pressure in its own way?

BAR: I wouldn't say pressure because, I mean I enjoyed it but, I probably wouldn't do it every week if I wanted to. Well especially during that time, when I took a photo in the September to December sort of time when you're still like trying to make friends, so you have to go out every single week... even if you don't have the money. That's why I had to sacrifice my food budget, slightly, you know.

INT: And is that relaxed a bit now, because you made friends?

BAR: A lot more, yeah. It is a lot more relaxed. I go out maybe once or twice every month? I got more money now.

INT: So, is it different from the first term?

BAR: Yeah. It's definitely a difficult time because there is a lot of going on and you're still not 100% sure if you've done the right thing and you've got to make new friends and you're wondering if people like you, you're wondering if you like the course, you're wondering if you've done

the right thing... stuff like that and you think about money as well and that sort of the time is probably the most stressful.

INT: And did you talk to people on the course, at lectures or anything like that?

BAR: Like talking to the lecturers?

INT: Yeah.

BAR: I've never really talked to the lecturers. I spoke to like a tutor. I had three lecturers. No, not really. I guess that's something I just keep to myself, sort of thing.

INT: Yeah. Okay. And now you're nearly at the end of your first year. And how has it been really? Work-wise, has that been what you expected?

BAR: After like the first year, I think it's about what I expected. It's definitely what I expected. But it's something I could handle. From my schedule, I can get it right. So I can -- it was fine, it wasn't -- when I was going into it, I was thinking, this is going to be a ton of work, you're going to have work constantly 24/7, you'll be stressed out all the time, but yeah. But I was also thinking that the schedule's right, I can get it sort of right. So I was thinking yeah. That was it. Just scheduling everything right and it wasn't as bad. It is manageable definitely.

INT: And so, and what about the whole experience of being at university, has that been what you expected?

BAR: I have expected different things. One day I thought that it was going to be me by myself in a tiny little room, doing work on my own, being unsociable. And another time I was thinking, maybe I'll have a lot of friends, be going out all the time. Another time I was thinking, was I going to be like really smart and academic do all the work constantly, but you know. Before I came, that's what I thinking, I was thinking different things. I wasn't just thinking, "Oh it's just going to be like this." I said, it could be like this, it could be like that, it could be like that.

INT: So you didn't know what to expect?

BAR: Exactly. Pretty much. It is all of them, mixed into one.

INT: [Laughs]. And is that good or bad?

BAR: Its, its good. Definitely

INT: And would you say having been here and now kind of getting to the end of the year, your aspirations for your future and where you see your life going, have they changed?

BAR: Yeah I'd say so. Well, I know what I wanted to do just before going to uni, doing this course. I wanted to be sort of like I wanted to have my own like -- well I didn't want -- I wanted to work in a film production, any film or video production company. But now, it's slightly changing. I want to own my own film production company sort of thing. So that's the only difference sort of thing.

INT: When you go back home and you see your friends, what is it like? How do you all still get on?

BAR: I feel like they see me as I've done the wrong thing. Like, he's.... when I went back home during Christmas, it sort of felt like, "Ooh, he's going to end up in a lot of debt" and it goes up and like, they got like decent sort of jobs, you know, and there's me student, going to end up in debt in three years not having a job, so... I think that's how they see it, sort of thing.

INT: So they think that you've made bad choices?

BAR: Yeah. They never said that but that's sort of what it feels like, you know.

INT: That is really interesting because somebody else that I spoke to said, "Oh, my friends look at me as though, I think I'm better than them."

BAR: Yeah. That's it. That's it.

INT: So how is it when you go home and you see your friends?

BAR: I feel.. I want..I just, I don't know. It feels different definitely. It feels like going back into my old ways sort of thing and, now like I said, I was confident at uni. I sort of go back to being a bit more shy when I come back home which is so weird. Definitely.

INT: And with your friends here, you feel more comfortable, like yourself.

BAR: Yeah. I think that is why I'm less homesick, probably. Because I enjoy -- I prefer my friends here than I do at home sort of thing, yeah.

INT: Do you think your parents see a change in you when you go back home?

BAR: I'm trying to think. Umm. I don't know. My dad is definitely talking to me like, I am a lot older. He uses more academic words. [Laughs]. But my mum is, umm, the same, I'd say, yeah.

INT: Are you going back home for the summer?

BAR: Sort of, I'm going back home in June until July then I'm coming back up here because we have a house.

INT: Okay. So you will just be going home for a short period.

BAR: Yeah. It's just June to July.

INT: And is that your choice because you don't want to spend a long time at home?

BAR: It was mainly the house thing. I didn't really mind if it was like July or September but, I think, after about now, I prefer going back in July.

INT: You prefer to be here?

BAR: Yeah. It's not just the uni, I like the city as well. Because I'm from a small village in \*\*\*\*. There are not too many people about and, yeah. There's not much you can do there. There's no shops. There's only one shop. I worked there.

INT: When you decided you wanted to do film at university and when you were looking at different places that you could go, what made you choose here?

BAR: When I was choosing places, that was during the time when I still, I didn't want to go to university, so I was just looking at... I looked at different universities and I didn't care where it was, it was just.. but then when I was looking at...when I actually went to Southampton for the taster, I was like wait, this is, this is different – there are shops here. There's a Costa over there and there's a Starbucks over there and I was like, what's this? I'm not used to it, -- and I was like, I think I'm going to like this.

INT: Because it's got Costa and Starbucks. [Laughs]

BAR: Because it's got Costa and Starbucks. [Laughs] I was joking.

INT: Okay. So, when you were applying, you still didn't want to go? Even though you were applying for film and by that point, you were applying for the courses that you wanted to do, you still didn't really want to go then?

BAR: I wasn't -- I didn't desperately NOT want to go. But, I sort of had like, "Maybe it's okay", sort of mindset. But I didn't really want to go. I wasn't, I wasn't interested in going but I wasn't like completely against it, if that makes any sense.

INT: And did you feel the same when you got here?

BAR: No. No.



INT: So, at what point, when did it change?

BAR: I'd say, after I had my taster at Southampton. That was when, I was like, "Oh, I think I'm going to like this a lot."

INT: Because you enjoyed the taster?

BAR: Yeah. A lot.

INT: And again, maybe do you think that's partly down you just didn't know what to expect what university was?

BAR: Yeah. Exactly. I didn't know what it's going to be or stuff like that. And Southampton was actually the last place to offer me an interview sort of thing and I – all the others, I just didn't show up to the interview because I just I didn't care about going to uni. So, when it came to the last one I thought, I might as well just go because it is the last one, so... And I really liked the taster and it looked like a nice place to live in and I thought, yeah, this is nice.

INT: So you applied. You were getting offered all these interviews but you weren't going to the interviews because you didn't really want to go?

BAR: Yeah, exactly.

INT: So were you applying to keep your parents happy?

BAR: Pretty much, yeah. Well it's sort of like, because you needed like five options. Therefore, I thought well I'll do these five options but I won't tell them that I got an interview or anything. So, yeah.

INT: So, I was just wondering what was going through your mind then?

BAR: It was definitely a tough one. It was like...because I was still..It was still like mixed, I was like, "Should I go?" "Should I not go? Umm, maybe it's a good thing, maybe it's not, and it's sort of like, oh it's an interview all the way in like Winchester, no all the way in Worcester, is it Worcester, somewhere like that? And I was like, "Oh it's kind of far." And the one in Northampton is too far.

INT: Yeah. So you were kind of keeping your options open. Would you do that now?

BAR: Oh no. No.

INT: Okay. That's great. Thank you very much.

## ***Appendix J –Transcript Barry Interview 2***

INT: You've chosen the 'Think, Slow Down'. Why, is that what you need to be doing more?

BAR: I don't know, because like I guess, a lot of things are going through my head at the moment and I'm not like stopping and like assessing things, and like I need to focus in on one particular thing ...

INT: More so than last year?

BAR: A little bit, yeah I'd say so. Because last year was stressful, but like this year's a lot more because second year is like it's where the grades sort of count, last year didn't, so. I thought it was stressful last year but this year's a bit more and as I got a lot more going on, I can't just like pass, it has to be a good grade, a really good grade so I have to like, I don't know, be like... I don't know, yeah.

INT: Yeah. So it's the work pressures, is that that's going on?

BAR: Yeah. This year I've got a job as well. So on the weekends I'm doing like six, seven hours on Saturday and six, seven hours on Sunday.

INT: Right. And how's that working out?

BAR: Probably would be better if I didn't have a job because I am trying to work with like uni stuff and having a job as well is making it a lot tougher.

INT: Yeah. That you're finding the time pressures difficult?

BAR: Yeah. Especially with our course because we have to do a lot of practical stuff. So like filming, all that sort of stuff on top of like essays and like scripts and all that sort of jazz.

INT: So it's quite pressured this year. Is everybody in the same boat?

BAR: Well, I'd say like in our course, I'd say maybe a third of the people have jobs so like the other two-thirds don't. I know a few students that are quite wealthy and they don't have jobs, and I guess they don't need jobs.

INT: Yeah. So do you think that's an advantage for them?

BAR: Yeah, I guess so because they have the extra time to work on their like essays or portfolios and stuff like that, whereas I got to work to get the money instead.

INT: Yeah. One of the things you've talked about last time around was money pressures

BAR: Yeah. I was really struggling, yeah.

INT: And you didn't want to ask your parents for money and... So is the job, is that making a difference?

BAR: Well, now that I have money coming in, I don't have any pressures with money or anything like that, so that's good. It's just that the side effect is uni and like work and that's sort of stress. I swapped one for another, definitely.

INT: And one of the things, before I forget, your pictures from first time around, you never sent them to me, do you think you could do that at some point?

BAR: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

INT: There's only two of them...

BAR: I can send them right now if you want.

INT: Yeah, that would be cool. And then you've got some today...

BAR: Because I got three more today...

INT: While you're thinking about it. So you had your feet, looking into an empty wallet, and you had coins.

BAR: Yeah. Yeah.

INT: So yeah, that was the theme last time around.

BAR: Yeah, it was money. Now it's definitely not money. Now it's sort of about stress actually, yeah, so that's the theme. I can't find them. They're somewhere. They got to be, I hope so. I'm pretty sure I didn't delete them. Wait, I'll find them somewhere. I think they might be in this one. Yeah, I found them.

INT: So I've looked at some of the things we've talked about last time around and you've talked a little bit about how you thought you'd changed and I just wondered how do you think you've changed now, if at all?

BAR: I definitely noticed the confidence sort of boost. Like from this September is when... Because I moved into a house with like some people I knew, I knew all of them but I didn't know their sort of friends group, and like we all sort of integrated into them. And I was like quite talkative, I was like friendly and now they're my friends as well, so I was really like open and like stuff like that. And I'm finding that a lot easier as well.

INT: Because you weren't so much so like that, you're saying when you first came here from home you're a lot quieter.

BAR: Definitely. Definitely, I was really quiet and like introverted and, yeah.

INT: What do you think has made the difference? What's brought the change?

BAR: I'd say just, I guess, having to be around a lot of people because when I was back home, I was in like a tiny little village, I just go to school and then come back home and that was it really. And I had this small, small group of friends and that was it. But yeah, having to come to uni and make all these new friends and like having to work with them and then you'd sort of have to...because you're in that environment, you have to like be like that I guess.

INT: Yeah. And do you think about the kind of person you are, do you think that changed being here?

BAR: Yeah definitely.

INT: In what way?

BAR: In a sort of... Well the things that I notice is, I'd say conversations I have like we have like proper intellectual conversations. Especially in the summer with like my housemates, I never did that, definitely, and that and like confidence and like that sort of stuff. Yeah, I can't really think of too much...

INT: Do you think you're different now?

BAR: Definitely. Definitely. Like I said I was like, like extreme introvert, I just go home and play video games and that's why I had a really bad social life and I was just, yeah, in my own box.

INT: So do you think you'd be very different?

BAR: I'd be very different, definitely. I would've like probably found like a full-time job where I didn't have to like integrate with like other people and I would've just... It would've have been... I wouldn't have liked who I would have been, if you know what I mean. Yeah, definitely.

INT: Okay. And we talked last time about you find it quite difficult with your friends at home that you didn't really fit in, how's that been?

BAR: I haven't really spoken to them at all, really. Yeah, no. I just... No, I stopped talking to them.

INT: Because you've got nothing in common or because you didn't feel comfortable?

BAR: It's just the type of people that they were sort of thing, sort of negative sort of thing. I guess we had like gaming in common, playing video games. And like because in the area that I lived in is there's not too many people, not like a variety of people, whereas university there's like...you can find the friends that are like you, sort of. But when you're back home, you don't have that so you're stuck with what you've got, sort of thing.

INT: So it's more like they're friends through circumstance?

BAR: Yes, definitely. Yeah.

INT: Okay. And what about your parents?

BAR: He just always seems proud of me all the time, yeah. Yeah, so I think he does expect big things for me.

INT: Does he?

BAR: Yeah. Expects me to be a director and stuff like this and like a big cinematographer or like a writer, something like that, yeah.

INT: And how does that make you feel?

BAR: Well I always like joke around with him about that sort of stuff, but like because I don't take it too seriously because... I guess, if it was like more literal I would've definitely been quite stressed about it, but I don't know if he thinks that he's being serious, so.

INT: Okay. And what about your mum, because she wasn't all that happy initially that you were doing film, was she?

BAR: No, I think she wanted me to either go into like business, law, any of that sort of stuff, but she's definitely happy. I showed her one of my short films and she really liked it. She said I had to act in it, she said I was really a good actor and it's nice that I directed it as well. And she seemed really proud as well, so I guess she's like she's a lot better with it now, yeah, she's happy. She's happy that I'm happy sort of thing.

INT: Yeah. Do you think it was important to them that you were doing something that they could see a job at the end of it?

BAR: Yeah definitely. I mean, before I went to uni, I told them what course I'm doing and I said to them like what sort of like areas I can go into as well. So I made sure they're aware of like careers I can go into before spending all that money, student loans, yeah.

INT: And do you think like the money and the fees is more of a worry because it's not something that they're used to...?

BAR: It's a sort of thing that you keep to the back of your head and try to ignore it.

INT: Does it worry you?

BAR: I know that it's going to be there for like a lot of my working life. I know it goes off after like 25 years or something like that, but it is like annoying, it's more of an annoyance than anything else. I'm not worried about it because I know that... But I had to be earning a certain amount to even take it off as well, so that's... But at least there's a higher ladder I can climb than not being at uni.

INT: Yeah. And what about your old friends and their attitude towards you?

BAR: Well, they just see it as so like obscene and they see it as like 'oh you're just wasting so much money and all the sort of stuff and you're going to like go nowhere and you're going to end up

in like a dead end job' sort of thing. They didn't say that but you can sort of like see that from them. But yeah, it's like, I don't know, I just felt completely different towards... I think, because they don't have, or I didn't have the mindset of going to uni, no one did, and it's just seen as like alien, yeah.

INT: It's interesting that out of everybody you went even though everybody had the same mindset. Everybody was going, "That's not for us, that's alien" and yet out of everybody, you decided to go, what do you put that down to, what made a difference?

BAR: I guess I'm just... I don't want to say this but I guess I'm just too easily influenced by my parents.

INT: So it was them wanting it for you, you think that made the difference?

BAR: Yeah. I just said all right, fine, yeah that sort of thing. I know that if it didn't work out, that I'll be stuck in debt and that worried me. But my dad said, don't worry about that and just focus on education, and I just sort of said okay, fine. So yeah.

INT: And do you think their parents didn't think the same way as your parents did?

BAR: That's a tough one because like I know like a lot of them is just... I'd say a lot of my sort of circle of like other classes that I was in, half of the students were like poor anyway, half of the students were like just, I don't know, middleclass, we got the working class, middleclass and there's no one really in the upper class in sort of my area, so they are all just like that where... You see, like my dad had the opportunity to go to university, he was fairly smart and he just chose not to do it. And it sort of backfired on him somewhat and he regrets it a lot. And he said every time we talk, he sometimes mentions the fact that he didn't go to university and it would've change his life completely and would've given him like a better life sort of thing, so.

INT: Why did he choose not to go, do you know?

BAR: Because he was earning a decent amount for his age, because he was working with his brothers in a restaurant and he was earning like £450 a week which is a lot for a 21-year-old, especia-... No about £400, yeah, and especially for when you're in, was it the late '80s early '90s, so yeah.

INT: So I suppose that's similar to your friends because you're saying they all got jobs, so to be thinking about taking debt on instead would seem mad

BAR: My dad was just earning a lot of money so he feel like he could just progress in that sort of area but it was sort of more of like a dead end thing.

INT: Yeah, so is that opportunities thing. What are you thinking now about your future plans?

BAR: I definitely have an area I want to go into which is, I said it was I wanted it to be my back up but I want to go in that sort of area instead. Which is more of the freelancing sort of thing, I really like using the cameras and like experimenting with shots, I feel I can do that with freelancing a lot more, and like photography and like shooting weddings and like stuff like that sort of stuff, and I think that would be really cool.

INT: So that's changed a lot since the last time we talked because last time we talked, you definitely you wanted your own production company.

BAR: Well, it's sort of in a similar vein as having my own production company, which I still want to do but I want to do it in like the sort of freelance way, yeah. Well, but that'd also be tough, I'll have to probably do like a partnership with someone else, yeah.

INT: But I suppose it's like coming back to opportunities and things, isn't it, different things...

BAR: Yeah exactly, because I can't like get my own business because I just would not have the money or have the opportunity too so I'd have to find someone. Like one of my friends, he's

also thinking about doing that, maybe a partnership because he's, I mean he's well-off as well, so.

INT: So you're saying you're in a house now and you feel really settled in your house and your friendship group, so when you look back to when you first started, and you were talking about that kind of pressure to go out every night and spend all your money, you couldn't really afford the week because you had to spend it on alcohol and going out and all of that, and how's life in general outside of work changed?

BAR: Well, we don't really go out as much at all which is fine with me. But, well, obviously I don't have to worry about money anyway so that wasn't an issue, it's just it was more of like a first year sort of thing where you just want to do everything and like go out, do this and do that, and it's just a lot more... Like we do like game nights which is more fun, and stuffs like that, and it's just...yeah. Like one of my housemate's group of friends are like very like geeky, like extremely geeky, I wouldn't say I am because I don't think I am, but like they wanted us to play this game called DandD and I joined them and I had a lot of fun as a new area that I'm into now so, which is, yeah. And because of that I met like all her friends as well so I'm just sort of opening areas I didn't know were there sort of thing.

INT: Okay. Yeah, so finding new people. Do you think you are more settled?

BAR: Definitely. Definitely. I feel like being in a house does that as well because you're being in a house instead of halls, it feels a lot more homely sort of thing. Whereas at halls, it's just you in that one room and that's it, sort of thing. Like when you're in a house, you have your room but also you're speaking to your housemates constantly, you're in the kitchen, you're talking, you're in living room watching TV sort of thing, and it feels very like home.

INT: Do you think that your social life and friends makes a lot of difference?

BAR: Yeah, I do think that the friends here benefitted me because, again, it's like we have a lot more stuff in common and it makes me feel more at ease and stuff like that and relaxed and like, yeah.

INT: So you've talked about the gaming and stuff, you're finding like new experiences and new things you're getting into.

BAR: Yeah, like that game that I talked about called Dungeons and Dragons, I didn't think I would like it because...I just saw it as like the sort of geeky thing where like people were in a basement and it's all sweaty, nerdy. But no, it's very, very chilled out and it's really cool, yeah. That sort of thing, that's new to me which I enjoyed and, yeah. Yeah, I'm trying to think what else. I stopped playing video games, I stopped doing that and...

INT: Why?

BAR: It just like reminded me of like depressing times. Not depressing times, it's not the right word to use, it's just more of like a sort of the time of life I didn't enjoy sort of thing. And like I didn't love video games, I just played it and it's actually kind of stressful. I don't know, but like whenever like you get killed in a game you get angry, whenever you lose you get angry and it's just it's actually quite stressful so I just removed that completely and it seems a lot better.

INT: So you feel less stressed from not doing it?

BAR: Yeah. I don't think that I would because...yeah.

INT: And it's quite, I suppose, it's very solitary isn't it?

BAR: Yeah. Yeah, you're sort of in your own sort of bubble sort of thing. When you're playing video games, I guess, you're sort of zoned into like by yourself.

INT: So would you say your main pressure's now really the time?

BAR: Definitely. Yeah, time. Yeah I wish I did have the weekend off, but also I'd rather have... I don't know, I'm still sort of 50-50 whether I'd have the extra time on the weekend to work or without having the money, or having the money and have time.

INT: Yeah, which is worth more to you?

BAR: Yeah.

INT: And do you need to work that much, do you need that much income?

BAR: No, I don't. I need about like about 6 hours a week and like at work, they're making me do about up to about 16 to 20 hours a week.

INT: That's a lot.

BAR: Yeah. Sometimes it's 10 hours, which I don't like.

INT: So it's not so much that you're working that much because that's how much money you want, you actually don't want to work that much but that is work that's making you do it.

BAR: Yeah. Yeah, pretty much. In June, I looked everywhere for jobs and I applied at like I think about like 25 different places, I applied everywhere in Westquay and I can't... I got like a few interviews, I got about five interviews and like I didn't get any. And so I just explored a bit further, I went to Totten and I got the job at Greggs. And I got that job so I feel like if I left that job to go to...I won't be able to find like another job sort of thing.

INT: It's quite difficult I guess being in a university town with lot of students.

BAR: Yeah exactly, where there as so many people applying for the same job, which is crazy.

INT: Yeah. It is quite a pressure isn't it? Okay. So what about your photos, what did you bring this time?

BAR: I think it is sort of somewhat stress related.

INT: Do you feel stressed about academic work?

BAR: No I think it's more of just a slight progression sort of thing, it's something I can keep up with, but yeah.

INT: So it's the pressure from yourself?

BAR: Definitely. Especially with like the article that we're doing which is like... I read one of the articles that they've done last year and it was really, really good and I'm like, how do I do that. And I started like reading more articles and more articles and like watching video essays, reading books and like watching the right films that are about it and stuff like that and it's just, it's a lot of information. But like this is one of them that I'd have...

INT: So that's a book open with a cup of coffee on the side.

BAR: Yeah, which says take five.

INT: Okay. And so what's that saying?

BAR: I guess it's me trying... Basically, what reading is at uni is just trying to find quotes, so you're going through an entire book, it can be like two hours just finding the right quotes and to go for like every page, and that's me stressing out and with that coffee.

INT: The take five thing?

BAR: The take five, and you're trying to like stay focused. And so I'm in sort of stressful area when I took...I was like, oh, this is a good photo

INT: That's a photo about being stressed?

BAR: Yeah. Because I was quite stressed. (Chuckles)

INT: Yeah. It's a little bit like linked to your slowdown thing, isn't it, that just everything, just taking some time to take five.

BAR: Yeah. And this one as well is where the one we're trying to like...

INT: So it's a shelf with books.

BAR: We're trying to like finding like a certain area we have to talk about and there's like so many different books you need to read and you don't know which ones to go with and that just shows like the chaos of like trying to find what you're looking for sort of thing.

INT: Was this a project on racism?

BAR: Yes, that we're currently doing now, this is the article.

INT: Okay. Have you always been the same about having high expectations and being hard on yourself, have you always been like that?

BAR: Definitely with sports. Definitely with sports and gaming when I was younger, I had really high expectations, I wanted to be the best and I didn't really do that at school, but it's just...

INT: I was just going to say, it wasn't at school then?

BAR: No, no, definitely it was not school. Maybe like one subject, but I never had that mentality for school. But since coming to uni, it's a high level and it's sort of, I don't know, prestige. It's like you're at university, you got to like be the best sort of thing.

INT: So you saw yourself as someone that was going to be the best at sports. But not at school, and now you're also seeing yourself as somebody that's going to be the best in uni work so, you know, is that because you changed how you see yourself, you're kind of somebody doing a degree, and?

BAR: Yeah. Because I just feel like a different person, it's like I want to do the best I can. I don't want to like be half-assed and like get a poor degree and just like give up my life and just end up in a dead-end job. I have to like get the high grades and focus in this career, otherwise it would be pointless with the money and stuff like that, student loans. It's just I don't see the point if you don't be the best.

INT: Yeah. And is it just for you?

BAR: I think at the moment, it's just for me because my parents are proud of me no matter what now. Because I think they just wanted me to be at uni so I guess, the pressure on that side is more off because I think it's from just me personally trying to...yeah.

INT: You kind of done it, you're here, yeah.

BAR: Yeah. And that's all they wanted. And now that I'm here I've got to like prove to myself that I'm good enough to be here and, yeah.

INT: Do you ever worry about that?

BAR: No, no. Well, I don't know. It's a tough one. Yeah, like sometimes when we're talking about a subject that I just have no idea what to say, and they ask you your opinion and you just don't know and like, oh god, am I smart enough to be at university, I don't know what to say, I hope he doesn't ask for my opinion because I got no idea, that sort of thing.

INT: And are you still thinking that sometimes now?

BAR: Yeah. Just once on a topic, I think it was on disability, we have to do like...it's for the article where you have to talk about disability, race, gender, sexuality and yeah, one of our lectures was about disability and I just, I don't know what to say because I'd never really experienced



it, I don't know too much about it, I didn't know what to say. I had this like this book, this big book, and I had this huge quote and I didn't know how to like decipher it, and it just seemed too much for me.

INT: You said you have five photos, was there one more?

BAR: Yes. This one was more of a different one because it's a screenshot of my playlist. I don't know if you wanted that but...

INT: Yeah, definitely. It's all about anything that means something to you. So what does that mean to you?

BAR: So this is when I need to really focus in and like I have a lot of pressure. If I just put on like my playlist, especially a movie score because you know, it's got sort of the classical, musical instrument sort of thing, it helps me like, I don't know, get into a zone and just forget about everything else sort of thing. So yeah, I use that a lot.

INT: So again, this is similar theme isn't it, it's about that stress and how you're dealing with stress and that time out, take five.

BAR: Yeah. It's usually this time of year as well. So it's the November, December is when I'm the most stressed. November, December and March, April.

INT: Because of deadlines?

BAR: Deadlines, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

INT: Yes, the road to Christmas, yeah?

BAR: Yeah like also we're meant to be filming tomorrow, all day like 8:00 AM until 5:00 PM at the New Forest, but our actress said that she couldn't do it, so now... And our deadline's in just over a week so we got to like to find... So like if I didn't have work, we would've been able to like do something on the weekend, but we couldn't. Yeah, because that was next day she was available. I can't do it because I'm the director for the music video, so.

INT: So what are you going to do?

BAR: We have to find another actress and film on a different day, yeah.

INT: So actually, again, it's how work impacts on trying to get everything done. Is it difficult to juggle everything?

BAR: Yeah, it really is.

INT: And how do you find the group work, do you have a good group of people to work with, that you get on with?

BAR: Definitely. So like what they did with us is, last year we have two...our class is about 30 of us and they split us into two groups but this year, they took me out of one group and put me in another. But they only swapped me and a few other people, so I was like with sort of with like my friends sort of group. But this year, I made sure I was in a group... People said last year in the other group, they were like very like, they're very controlling and opinionated, they all like argued a lot and I didn't want really want to be a part of that so I just stay with the people that got transferred over and we stuck together and we've...

INT: Okay. And you worked well together?

BAR: We worked really well, like every like twice a week we have like production meetings so we're 100% sure what we're doing and stuff like that. And we all get along well, we have really good teamwork and we help each other out sort of thing.

INT: Are they from similar background?

BAR: So there's three other people and two other my...one of them is quite wealthy.

INT: So he doesn't have to work as much?

BAR: Yeah. But he went on a holiday to New York last summer and he got everything paid for him and he paid for his like friends like travel as well, but he's 18 and he went to America and they were allowed to drink at clubs because they were just rich enough to afford it sort of thing. Yeah, to like first class. Yeah, so he's quite wealthy.

INT: And do you notice any difference in attitude towards work or college work or anything like that?

BAR: He's a lot more laidback when it comes to working, definitely. Like he does the least amount definitely. Yeah, but we know that from last year so we gave him the least stuff to do as well because we knew he wouldn't do it, so.

INT: Why do you think that is?

BAR: I guess we have to like work for it more whereas, I don't know, people of the sort of privileged background they have it given to them so, and I know they expect like an easy life sort of thing. And like he's going to get an easy life because like after when he graduates, he's going to Hollywood and he's got a job already.

INT: So it's almost like you're saying it comes easier, but then because it comes easy, you don't fight as hard for it, and maybe you fought quite hard to get here and...

BAR: Mm, and they don't, sort of thing. But that's just the sort of thing you got to live with and you can't like, you can't do anything about it, it's just the way it is and you just got to work your hardest to get where they are as well.

INT: Okay.

## ***Appendix K - Transcript Barry Interview 3***

BA: It's just those two. Definitely talking about being at peace. This one.

INT: Okay, so you're going for the clouds? That's interesting because the last time you spoke to me all your pictures were about stress and you talked about how stressed you were.

BA: Yeah, I sort of decided around like December time to not be too focused on grades. And it sort of released the stress a lot more.

INT: And what made you decide that?

BA: Because of a few grades I got in January, I just know I'm not gonna get a First now. It has actually turned out sort of better 'cause I think for this term, I'm doing a lot better, I'd say, with grades. Maybe focusing too much on your grade sort of hinders you almost.

INT: Well particularly maybe when you're doing something quite creative.

BA: Yeah, probably, definitely, when you have that sort of freedom, you just—I don't know you're more creative I think, yeah.

INT: And you did talk to me about overthinking things

BA: Yeah, I think so too because, yeah, I got like, there was an essay, I got like a C2 and someone else has got a C1 and I was like, "Oh, this could be impossible now", but yeah.

INT: And why do you think you got low grades for those?

BA: I think because we all had to sort about once, almost. And, you know, we got like two theory units and two new, creative practical units and one practical unit and I was just focusing all my effort in that, and when it came to like the theory stuff, I was stressing saying, "I didn't have much time left" so I was just rushing it and like stuff like that and didn't really care about too much sort of stuff and when it came those final like, week I had to work really hard on it and it just took my time.

INT: You talked before about struggling with knowing what to read and how much to read, do you think that makes it harder?

BA: Definitely. Because there's a lot of books out there, you just don't understand, and like, and but all our theory stuff is surrounded, you have to read all these books, you have to get all these quotes and you have to like understand them all and in order to like, validate your essay. Sometimes it's fine, I get it and it's all good.

INT: Do you ever ask for help?

BA: Um...not by lecturers, no. I did ask my friend who is on the course as well for help and that's about it.

INT: But you wouldn't ask a lecturer for help?

BA: And after that, I guess not. It's not that I wouldn't, it's just—I don't know. I just don't, yeah.

INT: That's just quite interesting, isn't it? You were talking about a lot of pressure you put on yourself. So, do you feel more relaxed now?

BA: Yeah, definitely, because like I said when just getting rid of that stress stuff has helped me. I feel better.

INT: And how's work? You were working at Greggs so how's that now?

BA: My hours got reduced. I didn't even ask them but they got reduced and that's going fine. We have a new employee there as well and they're just rotating the hours like I get about 6 to 12 hours which is fine. Every weekend which is good. I'm happy with it.

INT: Because last time you said you needed the money but you needed time, so you've got the balance right now?

BA: Yeah, definitely, it's alright, not bad.

INT: So how are you feeling? Thinking back over your two years, how do you think you've changed? Since when you first arrived here to where you are now?

BA: Like before then I've always been introverted. You're just coming out of your shell a lot more and more, and it's just going like that. It's all progressing a bit more. Probably, I'd say one thing that changed, I've become, in a way, more independent in terms of like being in a house, you gotta do certain things, chores or lots of bills sort of stuff. And being up to date with that side of life.

INT: Just sort of living on your own and managing that?

BA: Yeah, yeah.

INT: How would you say—how do you think your parents see you now?

BA: I'm not too sure. I don't really speak to them too often when I'm at uni.

INT: Do you go home much?

BA: Not really, I think last time I was home was end of December.

INT: Was it the same in your first year, or did you go home less in your second?

BA: First year, I went home a bit more, second year, I've been home once and after Christmas.

INT: Just because you're busy?

BA: Mainly 'cause of my job at Greggs, I usually go home for a week but then, you know, because I have work now I could like take off time but

INT: Then you're not earning?

BA: Yeah.

INT: So, are you going home for the summer?

BA: No. I've booked off like a weekend from work, so that gives me around two weeks at home almost.

INT: So, you're gonna have two weeks at home and then other than that be here?

BA: Pretty much, but I'd go home as well, like on a Monday to a Thursday.

INT: And how do you think you'll find it at home now?

BA: It's just very like small and I think I said I live in like a little village, not much there at all and one shop, and it's just small. You've got a small room and it's just—

INT: Have you got brothers and sisters?

BA: Yeah, two sisters. One younger and one older.

INT: Okay, are they still at home?

BA: My younger sister, Sabina, she is still at home, yeah.

INT: And is your younger sister going to university?

BA: No, no. Well she got a good job though recently, which is all good.

INT: And do you catch up with anybody when you're there?

BA: No, no, not at all.

INT: What do you think they're doing nowadays?

BA: I know one of them is in the plumbing industry and that's all there, yeah. They're not too close to me but, see it's split up into like two groups of friends. I have my like friends in my sort of classes and then my classes were not very like—they were just like the troublemaker's sort of things but at lunchtime—so I speak to them in classes and at lunchtime I played football with my other friends. So, they weren't close at all really. I played football with them but there wasn't any..

INT: But you don't really see—do you feel quite different from them?

BA: Yeah.

INT: In what way?

BA: I guess like the troublemakers, they sort of just ended up like—well, they just don't care about their career or anything like that. They just want to get like a sort of normal job in a way, and just live like a normal boring life, sort of thing and it's just—

INT: And do you think that's what you would have ended up doing if you had stayed?

BA: Mm-hmm. Definitely, I've got like some of my friends got babies now as well, four friends, yeah. And two friends that are married. I wouldn't say that they're close friends, and you're sort of friends there, I guess. And it's just weird and strange.

INT: Yeah, must be really strange. We were talking about one of your friends that had a lot of money and had connections, was gonna go and work in Hollywood and what's your experience like compared to theirs?

BA: I guess they get it handed to them and like they get the opportunity to do more stuff to get like a bigger portfolio in a way, whereas someone like me wouldn't have that opportunity. So, like, I'd have a— I don't know, just not as good of a chance I guess.

INT: So, what sort—when you say opportunity to do work for their portfolio, what sort of opportunity do you mean?

BA: Yeah, like one of my—that friend I was talking about in I think February or March he went to one of the countries around Europe to film a rugby match for England. And he got like, first-class plane tickets and it was like, come on, that's really mad.

INT: Yeah. And how do you think it's different?

BA: Just the people that he knows. I don't see any difference.

INT: So do you think he has the advantage or you have the advantage?

BA: He has the advantage. I've had to work hard but like because he's got the opportunities, he has the chance to work hard for it and if he gets like a big job he has a chance like work hard for it, if you know what I mean? It's up to him, but I feel like he would if he was offered something really big, he'd work really hard for it. I'm sure anybody would.

INT: So, do you think he will get opportunities that you won't because of his background?

BA: Yeah, maybe I might get lucky somewhere but, yeah.

INT: And do you think it's unfair?

BA: Actually, I don't know. Maybe, maybe not because, you know, it's just the luck of the draw, kind of in a way. I don't know, you've got to work with what you've got.

INT: Okay, let's have a look at your photos.

BA: I have quite a few. This is the first one, I don't know why.

INT: Okay, so that's you in the sunshine, Doing some digging?

BA: We were—that was during our film shoot in Eastbourne. We'd spent about like 10 hours building our set, building our set about like 7. We were knackered

INT: I bet you were. So, what does that say about being a student?

BA: That I guess you have to like, you know, you're working hard but you're proud of what you're doing and it's sort of reaping in the rewards. I know for this shoot specifically, I enjoyed it throughout. I was directing and we knew it was something special and it was good.

INT: Okay, and did you do well?

BA: Yeah, I'm still editing it now but yeah, it's all good. I was very proud of it. Very proud.

INT: And does that kind of reaffirm you're doing the right thing?

BA: Yeah, definitely, definitely.

INT: Have you changed about what you want to do? Because we were talking about just having different opportunities open to you, what do you think you want to go on to do now?

BA: I was thinking about this the other day and I think it's true like the course that I'm doing is reflecting what I'm like because I tend to like choose different paths and I like different things so that I said I was going to that then I said I was gonna go into freelancing. And my last two projects, the music video and this film, I directed it, as I always really just like directing. And then, yeah, so it's like there's so many different areas in like the course that I'm doing there's a lot of different opportunities I can go into, but freelancing is definitely one of the areas I'm looking into a lot, yeah.

INT: But these three years is giving you the chance to explore.

BA: All of them yeah. I can do freelancing but I can like decide which area I'd go into like, I could go into directing, freelance directing and/or areas in that, yeah.

INT: Okay, so next photo.

BA: This one was a funny one.

INT: Okay, so you got a can of something sitting in the sun. What's this one saying to you, what's that about?

BA: This one was after we submitted an assignment and it was like that's our third one, so yeah, that means what I had to focus on was the two practical projects. So, all like, you know, just for relaxing and this was on the day when it was like really hot. It was like a Thursday. We went down the common, had a barbeque, played some football.

INT: Nice, so your wind down time?

BA: Yeah, yeah.

INT: Okay, next one.

BA: Next one is— where was it? It's—I need to find it, if I can. It's somewhere, one second.

INT: It's alright, no rush.

BA: Now where was it. Oh yeah, this one's very, I don't know, it's just a meme. So, basically, throughout like all of uni a lot of our procrastination is looking at memes. I think I got like—I have like loads. If I wanna like procrastinate, I just go on Instagram, just look at all the memes I can and just—it's sort of a way to like to sort of pass the time, but also have a little chuckle and—I just thought it was funny.

INT: I mean, everything to do with Trump is just open to memes isn't it. Okay, and did you have another one?

BA: I did.

INT: Can you e-mail these to me by the way? Or AirDrop them or something.

BA: Oh, yeah. Oh, where's the final one. I didn't know which one to choose.

INT: You can choose both of them.

BA: It was this one, me directing and the one there.

INT: Yep and is that the same shoot as the other one?

BA: Yeah, it's the same shoot.

INT: Okay. So, you look very big in the foreground. so talk to me about that one.

BA: So, this was second day of shooting, probably our biggest shoot that we've done and do you want me to explain what's going on? He's just running across the track and I asked my cameraman to just follow him to make it really shaky on purpose and I was just looking at seeing if he was doing it right, seeing if he's running right, tell him to look back and cough because he has an illness as well. He's running away from like scavengers sort of thing.

INT: And how does it feel? How do you feel being director?

BA: Now, I like it a lot because I get the final say on everything which is everything creative which is, I like that a lot and then so if I know it's bad, it's because of me and if I know if it's good, I know it's them as well but like I did creative input there sort of thing.

INT: Yeah. You like to control things?

BA: Yeah, definitely. It was a lot of fun so I had the control to, when we were casting actors, I was given full control and everyone agreed that I'd have final say. Since I had, oh jeez. Like this, the young girl we were gonna get like an 18-year-old actor or 18 to 21 that looks young in the film. Because it's hard to get a child actor. But then we had like 30 girls and only one of them was 11 years old and I cast her and no one was happy about, nobody wanted to cast her because it was a lot of like hassle, but I cast her anyway and she was amazing.

INT: So, you kind of felt sort of vindicated in your choice?

BA: Yeah, exactly but you know, they were all like, they're all happy with that as well. It was tough because I've never like directed a kid. That was tough, yeah.

INT: Okay cool, so that made that your fifth photo, or did you have another one?

BA: Oh yeah, the other one was— where is it.

INT: Okay, another happy shot. Is this the same shoot again?

BA: Yes, same shoot.



INT: So, talk to me about that one.

BA: It rained the day before. And it's really muddy and this is a marsh so the entire area is like really watery and sort of like almost like swamp almost and I was the one sort of leading to see if it got to like, is the mud started sinking. So, I was the one testing that out to see if it was stable. We had cameras as well and I didn't wanted to slip and then the camera falls off.

INT: So, what does that say about you and your experience of...?

BA: It's always like—I just like going first.

INT: That sounds like a big change.

BA: I guess so, yeah. I think it just came from having the job role of, half of it is probably having the job role of the director, 'cause I might have mentioned it in November, I was shoved into the director's role.

INT: No, you didn't mention it.

BA: Oh, yeah, well it was for a music video that went really, really well. We got the highest grade in class.

INT: Okay. So, you didn't particularly choose to be director?

BA: No, I didn't want to be director because I don't want to have that pressure on me. I don't want to like, if it messed up, it would be my fault sort of thing. And yeah, so I just sort of took it up and sort of learnt as it went on and I learnt what it meant to be a director so I just followed that through almost and that went well.

INT: And now you ended up really liking it?

BA: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. I directed another short film so I was shoved into that one as well. Which is like more out of my comfort zone because it was a short film about a modelling agency and I knew nothing about like modelling and all that sort of stuff, so I had to direct that which was really interesting. Whenever I'm shoved in something and I just try to work, go there and ends up doing alright.

INT: And then go, "All right, so I can do it."

BA: Yeah.

INT: Okay, so if I asked you to give me three words which for you describe either how you've changed or, you know, like your journey to here, what would those three words be?

BA: Three separate words?

INT: Three separate words.

BA: I guess one of them has to be stress because I have been stressed a lot. Another one has to be time. And I think the last one is I'd say thankful.

INT: Thankful for what?

BA: I don't know, just going to uni and have my parents to like push me to do university, have my friends push me to be a director I guess, sort of, yeah.

INT: Because it was very much your dad really that was quite a key figure to you coming here/

BA: Yeah, definitely.

INT: And how about your friends? You said you were more settled last time I saw you because you were in a house and had made a lot of friends. Is that still the same?

BA: Yeah. That's still the case as well. I mean we got fallouts, especially one of our housemates, she's leaving, that's actually S\*\*\*\*. And leaving to another house but, yeah. It hasn't been all sweet but, yeah.

INT: Yeah. Okay. That's brilliant. Thank you very much.

BA: Thank you.

INT: Well good luck with all the rest of your hand-ins. How do you sort of—

BA: 'Cause I'm a little bit annoyed because we've only got one practical unit.

INT: Oh, okay. You prefer the practical to the theory?

BA: Yeah. And the one practical is optional so it's a final major project, the FMP.

INT: Okay.

BA: And I don't have a group. Well, I do have a group but it's like there's three different groups I can join.

INT: Right. And you don't know which one?

BA: Yeah. There's one group with the one I did the music video on and when I did this one on. Only problem is that guy that I work with, he's not a team player.

INT: Oh, okay.

BA: And he's a bit unreliable at times but on shoot, he's really good.

INT: Right.

BA: So, there's that and another girl that did the music video, she's a bit too stressful so I don't know if I have to join them but I get to be a director or join another group, there's more of them. And I would be on sound which is really interesting, I'd be interested in to go into and I would be able to co-direct.

INT: Okay. So, you could co-direct, you just couldn't completely director?

BA: And the other group I've joined is maybe S\*\*\*\* but I'd probably be, again, like maybe assistant director and co-writer.

INT: Okay. So, sort of different roles. So, I think—are you better at pushing yourself out of your comfort zone now?

BA: I guess so, yeah. But, yeah, but I’ve done directing.

INT: Yeah.

BA: And anyway, you’ll have to stay with directing or change it up and find something I might be better around.

INT: Yeah, ‘cause I suppose that next year is your last opportunity to explore different roles.

BA: Because what I’ve been thinking recently is that to be a director, there’s so many people that want to be a director and there’s only like limited spaces. I think it gives you less options if you want to be a director. I was speaking to one person but she was talking about like how in sound that so many people want like sound designers and it’s a good way in sort of thing.

INT: Well also sometimes, it’s a way in isn’t it?

BA: It’s a way into the industry so, I could maybe do my FMP in sound or I could try and stick with directing but—

INT: Are you gonna talk to your tutors about that?

BA: Not, probably not. Maybe I should. Probably not.

INT: Well, they’re probably in a good position to give you some advice.

BA: Yeah. I think you’re right, maybe I should. I feel like with me, I need someone to push me to a certain area. It’s probably ‘cause I don’t make a decision and have it to be like the wrong decision because I’m afraid of that.

INT: Yeah, so you kind of making other people make that decision for you.

BA: Yeah, that worked. I could say, “It’s not my fault, it’s your fault”.

INT: Yes, but now that you’ve been director, you realised that you actually like making the decisions.

BA: Yeah, but those kinds of decisions, like I’d still have other people surrounding me with like good opinions to help me.

INT: Yeah, yeah. So next year is going to be more of the same, more opportunities lots of work. Excited?

BA: Yes. Very excited. I know there’s a lot of theory stuff which I’m not excited for.