“The Gilded Circle of Privilege”

A Study of Disadvantaged Students, Elite Environments and Social Mobility in the UK

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A Note on the Word ‘Disadvantaged’

Rhetoric concerning the social mobility discussion is voluminous, both in policy and academic literature, and the author hereby acknowledges the complicated polysemic issues that arise as a result. Students from lower socio-economic quintiles are referred to in multitudinous ways, such as, but not limited to, ‘FSM’ (Free School Meal qualifying), ‘underprivileged’, ‘working-class’, ‘non-elite’, etc. No doubt each of these definitions have both been wielded by authors and policy makers for different, nuanced reasons, and also not. Some are purely economy-focused, some are geographically and situationally implicated, some are in relation to familial aspects, and some are a combination of all these factors. The author has therefore elected to use the word ‘disadvantaged’ to embody all of the above mentioned factors, firstly as a point of all-encompassing convenience, lest time be unnecessarily wasted on splitting definitory hairs, and secondly on account of it being the word most comfortably used by the participants interviewed for the data collection to describe themselves.

Abstract

By many actors in the Higher Education system, social mobility has been considered a solved problem on account of the massification of attendance and the huge increase in disadvantaged student participation. However, the rhetoric that paints this debate in a positive light glosses over the numerous and ever increasing barriers that disadvantaged students continue to face. These barriers, which in this study are split up into cultural and financial, can be addressed at three distinct stages of the Higher Education narrative: Access, Retention and Employment. Having collated an abundant amount of varied evidence from existing studies that attests to these barriers to social mobility, and having discovered a number of interesting themes that appear to run throughout. I have set these themes against relevant, but underused psychosocial and philosophical theory, as well as against the findings from my own data collection, in order to chart the narrative of barriers to social mobility from prior-to undergraduate application, right the way through to graduate employment.

I find that deeply embedded cultural dissimilarity arises between disadvantaged students and elite environments on account of the former's lack of 'embodied capital', which results in a 'cultural discordance' typically associated with feelings of 'non-belonging' and 'alienation'. These feelings can coordinate student agency, often to the end of making irrational decisions. They can also lead to disengagement, and oftentimes the likelihood of dropping out, which is detrimental to social mobility. Widening Access and Retention schemes must therefore be cognizant of the most effective ways to facilitate a sense 'belonging' in disadvantaged students, which I find are, but not at all limited to:

-'demystifying' the notion of the University Experience through outreach programmes before Widening Access students are undergraduates in order to 'cultivate familiarity'

-teaching disadvantaged students 'reflexive engagement' as a means of adapting to differentiated complexities of societal, economic and political uncertainty

-championing those opportunities that allow for disadvantaged students to 'shift habitus' as a means of developing the necessary cultural capital needed to thrive in elite environments, particularly elite recruiting processes, instead of being intimidated by them.

In a series of semi-structured interviews with four disadvantaged undergraduates and three disadvantaged drop-outs, I draw comparisons between and deviations from the existing literature and theory in order to shed some new light on the subtle gaps that are still left untouched in the debate, those namely being, for example:

-the lack of attention paid to the problem of 'cultural matching' in elite hiring procedures

-whether disadvantaged students pandering to ‘cultural fit’ is an ethical way to acquire embodied capital as means of becoming socially mobile

and how, even in the wrath of such continuous criticism; criticism which dispels the credibility of league tables, exposes the discriminative nature of elite University recruitment and which contests that the current hierarchy of institutions induces a Pareto Optimality that is detrimental to social mobility, does the elite manage to autopoietically resist change, and simultaneously, gild its circle of privilege further?

Introduction

The massification of Higher Education attendance has on the one hand increased the number of undergraduate disadvantaged students, which amongst much of the general populous, and many government officials and policy makers, has been viewed as a solved social problem, which has been accompanied with an enormous amount of rhetoric around the success of Widening Access (Reay, 2016). But on the other hand it can be seen as a problem that rather than having been solved, has been 'transmuted from one of restricted access' to one of 'who goes where' (Reay, 2016, p.2). Growing class diversity in Higher Education has actually exacerbated the problem of social mobility in many ways, and has resulted in a 'steeply hierarchical and stratified system' whereby said disadvantaged students are typically 'clustered' in low ranking institutions (Crozier et al., 2009 as cited in Reay, 2016, p.1). Higher Education institutions have themselves become 'highly differentiated', which has intensified the problem of elite exclusivity by effectively marrying disadvantaged students to low ranking institutions and privileged students to elite institutions, thus, preserving the notion of social immobility whilst simultaneously showcasing the opposite (Reay, 2016, p.2). Hills (et al., 2010) even go as far as to argue that the expansion of Higher Education has actually reduced opportunities for social mobility. That is, despite the contrary rhetoric, which constantly seems to champion the success of the many access widening initiatives currently at play in the UK, the statistics regarding elite institutions are telling of their failure: '2.5 per cent of students entering Oxford in 2010-11 came from low-participation neighbourhoods, while for Cambridge first years the figure was 3.1 per cent' (Grove, 2012). Research by Smeeding shows that in elite institutions, 'almost three-quarters of the entering class is from the highest socioeconomic quartile' (Smeeding, 2006, p. 125). Similarly, around 85% of year eight students aspire to gain a Higher Education degree, but only '44 percent of high school graduates from the bottom quintile of income distribution were enrolled in Higher Education afterwards' versus the 'almost 80% of those in the upper quintile' (Smeeding, 2006, p. 125). A report from Kane acknowledges that students with similar test scores from similar schools ultimately go on to attend Higher Education, or not, largely based on whether they come from a high or low income family (Kane, 2004). In addition, The National Education Longitudinal Study (1998) found that '51% from the highest socioeconomic quartile reported having a bachelor's degree twelve years later, as against only 7% of those from the lowest quartile'. On top of all this, social mobility prospects in Higher Education for disadvantaged students are actually fewer now than two decades ago (Shiner & Noden, 2015). A HEFCE report from 2005 indicated that the '20% most disadvantaged students are around six times less likely to participate in Higher

Education than the 40% most advantaged pupils'. Similarly, there is a 'vicious cycle' of employers only targeting a select few elite universities for graduate recruitment, which reinforces elite exclusivity (Milburn, 2012, p. 2).

This study will explore the notion of social mobility for disadvantaged students in the UK in three main sections: Widening Access, Retention and Employability. A central theme that will be revisited throughout is that of 'autopoiesis', i.e. a system that is 'self-supporting, self-producing' and which 'resists change' that threatens its identity (Maturana & Varela, 1981 as cited in Mingers, 1991). This notion is also referred to by Wheeler-Bell in 'Educating the Elite: A Social Justice Education for the Privileged Class' where he describes the amaranthine, self-perpetuating notion of the university elite as both 'gilded' and 'circular'(Wheeler-Bell, 2017, p. 379). In the face of this self-preserving eliteness, disadvantaged students face ever worsening barriers to social mobility, whilst policy rhetoric simultaneously professes the opposite.

When we begin to dissect the system's failure of Widening Access for disadvantaged students, we can see that a number of cultural phenomena lend to the problem. For example, Furlong and Cartmel (2012) point out the notion of 'mutual suspicion', in that the upper classes are typically concerned with 'working class pollution' whilst working class students simultaneously 'express unease' about assimilating with elite environments. Not only is the UK Higher Education system falsely posited as a successful example of something that promotes social mobility then, but the divides that exist within and around it between the disadvantaged and the elite are a source of great tension and alienation, and stem quite considerably from complex, deeply rooted cultural differences. Though some of this discussion will indeed focus on financial barriers to social mobility, the majority of it will focus on the cultural barriers as alluded to by Furlong and Cartmel (2012), and particularly those that have been underrepresented and undertheorised in existing literature. As attested to by Crawford, though the elite (whether it be privileged students, high ranking institutions or prestigious firms) do indeed 'facilitate social reproduction' of themselves, disadvantaged students can 'break down social barriers by actively engaging' in the correct Widening Access initiatives, engagement activities, careers advice, work placements, habitus shifts and social/cultural capital enhancing practises (Crawford, 2019, p. 511). Agency is also an incredibly important topic in this debate, with various theories such as Bordieu's "Logic of Necessity" (1983), Kahneman and Tversky's "Prospect Theory" (1979) and Giddens'(1990) ideas of adaptability to uncertainty via reflexivity, all being key theoretical frameworks in understanding how both economy and the cultural milieu of an individual serves greatly to guide their agency, often to a point of irrationality or heightened immediate utility, which is

potentially detrimental to social mobility in the long run.

Whilst some of the onus to become socially mobile is on the disadvantaged students themselves, a lot of it is on policy makers, Higher Education institutions and their careers advice department/industry collaborations, and on elite businesses and their recruitment processes. There are many elements to this discussion of what impedes and what facilitates social mobility for disadvantaged students in the UK, and many of these elements have been discussed in great, or at least some, detail before in various academic literature. However, the purposes of this thesis are to detail the sometimes subtle, but unforgivably unexplored gaps left by previous studies. There are a number of qualitative studies that have interviewed disadvantaged students to the effect of pinpointing what impedes social mobility, but rarely have these studies been married to in-depth psychological and sociological theory, which this study intends to do. This study also frames some of the social mobility debate with the added stress of COVID-19, which has in many cases served to magnify the barriers disadvantaged students typically face. However, it has also arguably induced a collective sense of belonging through the notion of ‘shared trauma’. This study will also include perspectives from people of disadvantaged backgrounds who dropped out of Higher Education on account of cultural and financial barriers, thus incorporating a sort of first hand retrospective take on how a system has failed them, and how, perhaps, it might not have.

The expansion of Higher Education has not only arguably ‘perpetuated positions of social advantage’, then, but also ‘subsequent labour market outcomes’ (Macmillan, Tyler, & Vignoles, 2013; Macmillan & Vignoles, 2013; Pennington, Sinclair, & Mosley, 2013; Purcell et al., 2012 as cited in Christie, 2016, p. 73), with Christie finding that students with private school backgrounds have ‘favourable positioning’ in the job market (2016, p. 73). Similarly, Riviera asserts that hiring is the ‘most crucial moment in labour market stratification (2012, p. 999)’. What is especially worrying about this is that ‘systematic empirical research on the role of culture in hiring is virtually non-existent’ (Huffcutt, 2011 as cited in Riviera, 2012, p. 999). Beyond the Access and Retention related barriers, I will endeavour to collate as much theory on the barriers to social mobility for disadvantaged students at the recruitment/employment process too, given that it is an extremely malnourished source of debate and yet one of ‘the most crucial’ parts of economic stratification. I will therefore primarily seek to attribute already existing, but perhaps slightly neglected theory to the perspectives of my participants, and in the instances of new ground, formulate new theory. Each main section of the discussion will incorporate relevant findings from the data collection, and where appropriate, suggestions will be made regarding policy/institutional reform in order to ease the barriers that impede social mobility.

Research Questions

The main research questions appear here in bold typeface, the sub-research questions in standard typeface:

I

How, and to what extent is ‘Widening Access’ currently succeeding and/or failing in achieving long term social mobility for disadvantaged students?

- Which elements of ‘Widening Access’ need to be addressed on account of their detrimental nature to social mobility for disadvantaged students?

- Which elements of ‘Widening Access’ actually serve to preserve the elite at the expense of disadvantaged students?

II

How does elitist culture, in its various manifestations across the Higher Education system, both induce and exacerbate cultural barriers for disadvantaged students (such as the notions of ‘alienation’ and ‘non-belonging’)?

-How, and to what extent can a sense of ‘belonging’ be facilitated in disadvantaged students to overcome cultural barriers during the university experience in order to increase retention?

-Is a “habitus shift” the best way to necessitate the required cultural capital needed to become employed at prestigious firms, and why? –or-

- Are ‘cultural matching’ and ‘cultural fit’ problems that need to be combatted rather than pandered to, and why?

III

How important are both financial and cultural factors in terms of how they alter or guide disadvantaged student agency, and how detrimental are these factors to long term social mobility?

- How can disadvantaged students navigate ‘uncertainty’, particularly in the time of COVID-19?

Literature Overview

The social mobility narrative in the UK, though perhaps at its zenith presently, in terms of the amount of Widening Access schemes available, the national cognizance of the debate itself and the volume of policies in aid of it, has had a long and relatively well documented history in academic literature, and I will even refer as far back as Tawney (1964) and his book ‘*Equality*’ to document both the things that have changed through the decades and the things that indeed remain the same. A concept that runs tangent with social mobility for this length of time is that of ‘lifelong learning’, which I will also trace the fluctuating chronicle of, particularly in terms of how policies utilise the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ in different ways to render different goals over time, from its earliest conception in the 1950’s a la UNESCO’s 5th General Conference, through the French context in the 1960’s - ‘éducation permanente’, the 1985 International Conference On Adult Education’s interpretation as disadvantaged people having a ‘right to learn’, all the way through to the modern conception, as in the EU Summit’s establishment of the ‘four pillars of lifelong learning’. With reference to Tuparevska’s (2019) study of equity and social exclusion in lifelong learning policies, I will examine how there is a continuing disconnect between the recommendations of official bodies, such as the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000) and the actual enacted policies, particularly with regards to what constitutes the greatly talked about notion of ‘basic skills’.

This sets the tone for one of the larger issues in the social mobility policy debate, that of the gap between policy rhetoric and reality, a concept alluded to by Bowman (2010, p. 78) as ‘symbolic politics’ in that ‘the rhetorical value of a policy is more important than its instrumental effectiveness’, and also by Pak Tee (2008) who coins the phrase ‘Policy Rhetoric/Reality Gap’. Cornwall and Brock (2006, p. 1055) in their study of ‘buzzwords’ in developmental policy, and particularly those words ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘poverty reduction’ (all words used voluminously in the social mobility debate), also find that there is a culture of opulent but vacuous semantics in policy; ‘the appropriation of nice sounding words’ rather than a genuine call to action. Similarly, a study by Hooley et al (2014)

find the most consistent flaw in social mobility policy to be the pitiful coordination between policy goals and implementation, particularly implementation in institutions.

Aside from the expansion of the Higher Education system and the subsequent trend-ification of the Widening Access debate, the reason why policy rhetoric is so luxurious and bordering on preachy but with questionable execution, is the severe lack of systemic, sturdy evaluation systems. I will refer to the 2019 report "Value for Money in Higher Education" to ground this, which recognises that the "vast amounts of public money" spent on Widening Access schemes and policies is not matched by "clear results". The problem at hand might not even necessarily be one of money being ineffectively spent; it's that there aren't methodical evaluative measures in place for us to even know.

Because Widening Access is a widely discussed trend in the current Higher Education system climate, it has naturally become somewhat of a gimmick, as evidenced above by the grandiosity of the language which often accompanies it. This has myriad detrimental effects, particularly to those disadvantaged students it claims to aid; studies by Augar (2019) and Robinson & Salvestrini (2020) show that Universities focus too narrow-mindedly on the concept of 'participation', in that participation becomes an end in its own right, a way to make Universities look modern, diverse and filling the necessary quotas, rather than a means of opening up social mobility opportunities. Jones and Nangah (2021, p. 62) attest to this point by claiming participation for participation's sake 'is a dangerous tactic that is potential damaging for social mobility'. In the same study they use the term 'alienation' to describe the many disadvantaged students who end up at University through participation schemes. In a great number of studies RE retention, disadvantaged students are seen to have been practically funnelled into University on account of institutions and Widening Access schemes endeavouring to appear successful, but then failing to assimilate said students into the university environment; they are essentially a pawn in a numbers game. The short term success of Widening Access schemes is massively overshadowed by the long term failure of social mobility. Though this is to some degree pointed out by Jones and Nangah (2021, p. 68), and the suggestion of a 'moral duty of care' is included in their study, what appears to be a crucial gap is left open in academic literature concerning this problem, that is, how to continue with the success of the ever expanding Higher Education system, particularly in the participation rates of disadvantaged students, but not *just* for the sake of participation.

This is where the debate shifts to issues of retention, and the literature suggests that the cultural and social disconnect between disadvantaged students and the university

experience, particularly elite university experiences, is the greatest architect of ‘alienation’, which in turn leads to disengagement and non-belonging, which in turn leads to greater chances of dropping out. Jones and Nangah (2021, p. 62) attribute ‘alienation’ to previously experienced ‘trauma’, which itself is comprised of ‘impersonal, interpersonal, relational or attachment-related’ experiences, all of which are evidenced far more in the lives of disadvantaged students, and all of which constitute manifestations of ‘academic mistrust’ which serves as a barrier to engagement. One way of counteracting this notion of alienation is to facilitate ‘belonging’. I will therefore refer to the works of Thomas (1928), Festinger (1954) and Berger and Luckman (1996), who, using Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) (which states that humans passionately seek ‘the company of those who think and feel as we do’ in order to alleviate stress and uncertainty) as a foundation, assert the notion of ‘belonging’ as one of individuals finding collective reassurance amongst each other as a means of combating the ‘chronic ambiguity’ of the world (Marshall, 2002). I will also refer to a study by Miller (2011) which attributes the success of induced social belonging and integration in disadvantaged student to on-campus Recreation Centres, and studies by Nesbitt (1998) and Haines & Fortman (2008) which both found that disadvantaged students partaking in University Societies were found to have better enhanced social-development, which served directly to the advancement of academic learning outcomes, engagement, and therefore had a positive effect on retention. On the theme of facilitating belonging so as to increase retention, I will also detail several university specific schemes, primarily the University of Lancashire’s ‘Flying Start’ initiative, and also the national (now defunct) scheme, “ Aim Higher”, the dissolution of which will also serve as the basis of a brief tangential discussion regarding whether terminating schemes entirely is more financially and socially wasteful than reforming them.

I will refer to a number of other studies that claim to have pinpointed the factors that positively impact the retention rates of disadvantaged students, such as Robbins et al. (2004), ‘social support social involvement, self-evaluation capacity and financial support’; Westrick et al. (2015), first year results; Araque (2009), type of discipline; Oreopoulos (2007), ‘interest’ and ‘motivation’. Though, as evidenced there, there is an array of literature concerning the factors that increase and decrease retention, the blatant issue at hand having collated a lot of these studies is that each of them operates in a vacuum; they focus either on vague or naïve variables, and don’t account for intervening variables. I have, therefore, endeavoured to not only present the findings of each of these studies together and in relation to each other, but also framed the findings with Goldstein’s (2017) suggestions of stable, supportive environments by means of ‘emotional regulation’, ‘relational functioning’ and ‘transition management’, Mantz et al.’s (2003) notion of ‘demystification’, Edwards et al’s

(2002) suggestion of 'reflexive engagement' as a way to overcome what Castells (1996) refers to as 'increased differentiations of uncertainty', and the Dearing Report's (NCIHE, 1997) concept of cultivating familiarity. Another relative gap in the existing literature in this regard is, considering how many articles have been written between the years 2014 and 2019 on the topic of Widening Participation (1903), the fact that only 7 of them even so much as mention "Alienation Theory" and its detriment to student engagement, nor are there any 'robust evaluations of UK based interventions' concerning disadvantaged student access (Younger et al., 2019, p. 769). Specific psycho-social theory such as this is hugely under-discussed in the existing literature on social mobility, and practically non-existent in framing policies.

I will also pay close attention to the existing literature on the role of culture in decision making (Glazer, 2014), and particularly how 'schemas', largely made up of contextual factors, dominate the dynamics of autonomous agency. With reference to disadvantaged students and their contextual "habitus" (Bourdieu), the notions of "cultural and social capital" – which Baars (2016) claims disadvantaged students have significantly less of – and Eleuterio's (1997) and Hoelscher's (1999) literature on the "cultures of teaching" , I will offer some suggestions, backed with data from my own collection, regarding the necessity of 'cultural analysis' and 'culture-sensitive pedagogy' (Thomas, 1997), but also the extension of these concepts to social mobility policy.

Similarly, 'cultural fit' and 'cultural matching' (Riviera, 2012) are two notions that arise, particularly in reference to employability and recruitment processes, whereby the "embodied capital" of a student is subjected to a number of unsystematic, discriminative and subjective vetting procedures, prioritising the cultural fit of a student over genuine academic competencies or qualifications. This is seen especially in elite firm recruiting processes, and Riviera (2012) asserts that this topic, considering that 'hiring is the most crucial moment in labour market stratification', is massively undertheorised. Huffcutt (2011) similarly states that 'systematic empirical research on the role of culture in hiring is virtually non-existent'. I intend to add to the minimal pool of 'cultural fit'/hiring-related academic literature with findings from my own data collection. As noted in a study by Crawford & Wang (2019), there is also extremely little research regarding work placements taken by disadvantaged students and whether these opportunities can assist social mobility.

I will examine studies by Eduventures (2017), Gurak (2001), Noel-Levitz (2010) and Meyer and Jones (2011) in relation to the success and failures of University websites, and

how the ease of information acquisition is an incredibly important factor in determining not only student disengagement whilst an undergraduate, but whether a pre-university student will 'remove a university from their prospective list entirely'. Noel-Levitz (2010) asserts that 'the university website is an essential part of recruiting students'.

I have also collated UCAS applicant statistics (and their fluctuations, for example, before and after the introduction of Tuition Fees), BBC opinion polls and surveys, Higher Education Funding Council for England figures over multiple years (particularly its input into the National Scholarship Programme) and cross referenced all these sources of information against each other with the aid of other government/policy review literature, such as reports by the Office for Fair Access "What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities" (2010), "Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement: Further Analysis" by the HEFCE (2005) and "Government Response to the Education Select Committee report: Value for Money in Higher Education" (2019), in order to establish a narrative of what seems to be working, what doesn't, and most importantly, what elements of the discussion are left relatively disregarded.

One noticeable theme that appears throughout the collated literature is that of Widening Access initiatives being scrapped on account of their inadequate evaluation measures, even though without which they seem to be performing quite successfully, "Aim Higher" perhaps being the prime example of this. What the literature doesn't subsequently discuss, but which is therefore taken up in this study, is the discussion of "reformation vs dissolution", not only in terms of government/institutional time and money wasted, but also social wastefulness, i.e. how best to approach the situation that has the least detriment to disadvantaged students. This will lead into a criticism of the system of performance based funding, or what Osborne and Gaebler (1994) refer to as 'The New Accountability', and the detrimental effects it has on disadvantaged student social mobility by way of careers support organisations.

There is also the neoliberal problem of measurement and tabulation, a concept that rears its head in different manifestations across most of the debates in this discussion. Firstly, there is the problem of league tables and rankings, which give us a pseudo-statistical tabulation of incommensurable proxies' which have also been inflected by 'impressionistic judgements' (Collini, 2012). I will refer to Soh's (2013) study of university league tables and their numerous methodological inaccuracies to suggest the problematic nature of recruitment by employers, a study by Morley and Aynsely (2007, p. 229) evidencing that employers

(especially elite employers) have a tendency to 'undermine equity and widening participation initiatives' by attributing a lot of importance to which university a graduate has attended, based on the eliteness of rankings; rankings which have been proved bogus. The Higher Education Academy recommended in their report 'Dimensions of Quality' (2010) that league tables need to start reflecting 'educational gain' and shift their focus to that of 'outcome oriented'.

A large portion of the literature and studies referred to are thread together by the analogy of the Higher Education elite, whether it be environments, institutions or students, as being like a 'gilded circle of privilege', a phrase coined by Wheeler-Bell in 'Educating the Elite: A Social Justice Education for the Privileged Class' to suggest an ever strengthening, self-perpetuative elite bubble that induces a "pareto optimality"-like scenario, where the people at the top of the hierarchy are ever benefiting at the expense of those at the bottom. The notion attested to here is that though Higher Education is ever expanding, particularly to underrepresented demographics of disadvantaged students, there is much evidence to suggest that this expansion is actually reducing social mobility (Hill et al., 2010). Shiner & Noden (2014) corroborate that this is the case, suggesting that social mobility prospects for the disadvantaged are actually fewer than decades ago. Similarly, evidence from the Sutton Trust shows that 'approximately 3000 people that attend colleges' who are rejected by the top Russell Group Universities 'despite achieving grades as good as, or better than, the entry requirements to courses in those universities' (Sutton Trust, The Missing 3,000, 2004). The Social Mobility Commission (2019, 86) also evidenced that students from 'less traditional backgrounds who do get in' (to University) 'are more likely to drop out and less likely to end up in high skilled jobs' despite also receiving exemplary grades at A-Level. Numerous studies by Macmillan, Tyler, & Vignoles (2013); Macmillan & Vignoles (2013); Pennington, Sinclair, & Mosley (2013); and Purcell et al. (2012) all indicate that the expansion of Higher Education participation has 'perpetuated positions of social advantaged' and as a result, 'subsequent labour market outcomes'. Clearly, Widening Access is not only not a good enough pursuit in itself, but also actually detrimental to social mobility. For Widening Access initiatives to be successful to a degree of enhanced social mobility, there must be keen efforts made at also enhancing retention and career/labour market opportunities.

I will refer to a report by Future First (2012) entitled "Future First, Social Mobility, Careers Advice & Alumni Networks" which asserts that barriers to social mobility aren't simply 'persisting educational/income qualities alone', but are also largely due to disadvantaged students receiving insufficient career support and insufficient social/cultural

capital-building systems for them to be able to write CV's correctly and pass job interviews, even if their grades are high. Furthermore, a study by McKinsey (2012) found that alarmingly large percentages of students didn't know anything about the concept of job openings, work placements or starting wages for different types of jobs at the time of choosing what to study at University, and a similar percentage of them knew very little about which Universities had good and bad graduation rates or work-placements. Also worth noting is that the survey, which interviewed students from nine countries, noted that the students from the UK were the 'least well informed'. What this is all indicative of is, even if both Widening Access and retention focused initiatives are successful, without solid careers advice support systems in place, which not only inform students about relevant information but also help them build the necessary capital to succeed in landing certain jobs, especially with elite firms, social mobility is not successful.

I will therefore refer to the Gatsby Benchmarks and its set of 8 distinct guidelines that seek to measure careers education, information and guidance, and examine a study by Hooley et al (2014) which found that 50% of the schools investigated met three out of eight benchmarks, 31% of schools met four, and 13% achieved five'. There are numerous critiques of the Gatsby Benchmarks, and I will seek to both validate and invalidate the measures based on information from my data collection given that there are few studies which allude to careers support systems being judged by those they seek to actually support.

Theoretical Overview

Though there is a notable amount of literature and studies to accompany the social mobility discussion, academics seem reluctant incorporate social, psychological and philosophical theory into the debate to frame certain arguments, nay galvanise all three to an enlightening effect. There is also a distinct lack of theoretical acknowledgement in actual Widening Access, retention and careers advice policy/initiatives, and I assert, having collated a range of relevant theory, that the social mobility debate must become fast cognizant of how important much of this theory is in terms of understanding how and why disadvantaged students, institutions and elite employers act in the ways they do that prevent social mobility, and thus how best to manoeuvre these ways of culturally-being in the best interests of all three.

As already mentioned, this whole study is framed by the idea of elite environments being 'autopoietic', a term coined by Maturana & Verala, which is perhaps the theoreticized version of 'the gilded circle of privilege', i.e a system that is 'self-supporting, self-producing' and which 'resists change' that threatens its identity. There is a severe lack of acknowledgement in the UK social mobility debate that Widening Access schemes which are not followed up by sturdy retention schemes and solid careers support systems, are actually extremely detrimental to social mobility, and instead serve to solidify the untouchable nature of the elite through a sort of induced 'Pareto Optimality' (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018). The rhetoric surrounding Widening Access is, as noted in the Literature Overview section (and elaborated on in detail in the main discussion of this study) extremely opulent and positive, which in many ways paints a false picture of reality. The importance of framing the social mobility debate with concepts such as 'autopoiesis' is that it will deflate the ego of Widening Access rhetoric, which is largely for show, down to the unfair reality of the situation - that elite students, elite institutions and elite employers exist in a well-protected and self-nurturing ecosystem that not only benefits from the failure of disadvantaged students in the Higher Education system but is also culturally pre-determined to discriminate against them. With this in mind, I will examine Merton's (1968) theory known as "The Matthew Effect of Accumulated Advantage", which, in the context of Higher Education and the elite, shows that government spending tends to be directed at those who already have the resources, such as the middle and upper-classes, as opposed to those who could actually benefit from them.

I will refer to a number of theories with regards to how people act and make decisions; students, teachers, careers advisors, employers and recruiters are all subject to certain, mostly cultural, predispositions that affect their agency and actions. Rosenthal and Jacobsen, for example, remind us of both the 'Pygmalion Effect' and 'Expectation Theory', i.e. the phenomenon where people tend to perform better when high expectations are placed on them. I will invert the Pygmalion Theory in order to suggest that those Widening Access schemes which seek to recognise disadvantaged students as having greater barriers in the Higher Education system, and in that those very students are self-aware of their own disadvantage, might potentially perform worse on account of there being lower expectations of them. This is, to the author's best knowledge, not noted in any literature concerning social mobility, but is a phenomenon attested to by multiple candidates in my data collection.

Kahneman & Tversky (1979) formulate a behavioural model called "Prospect Theory", which demonstrates that people formulate decisions which involve risk and uncertainty as determined by a personal 'reference point', which is typically an accumulation of prior cultural, social and economic experiences, all of which overshadow the importance

of the potential outcome of the decision. This theory sheds light on certain unanswered questions that have arisen from previous studies on the social mobility debate. For example, a study by Cook (2012) found that people from the most disadvantaged areas who did indeed achieve the required grades to get into the University of Oxford were 'only just over half as likely to apply as private school pupils'. Cook offers little in the way of explaining why this is, but with the application of Prospect Theory, in that disadvantaged students probably have extremely different 'reference points' to privately schooled students, we can begin to understand why getting the correct grades isn't the only requisite for pursuing elite institutions; prior cultural and economic experiences have a psychological value, a value which oftentimes guides agency much more powerfully than potential outcome. Bourdieu's "Logic of Necessity" (1985) is another theory that runs in tandem with this discussion, and is something that retention-focused initiatives need to be especially aware of; the notion of "long term incentives vs short term barriers" is approached in two entirely different ways by disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged students. I will contextualise this particular element of the debate in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby the sense of uncertainty and risk which typically elevates "short term barriers" above and beyond the potential "long term incentives" has been heightened by a considerable degree. Given that there is relatively little in the way of COVID-19 studies that have effectively married qualitative data to existing sociological theory on account of its recentness and continuation, I will seek to code answers from my data collection with the Logic of Necessity to see whether it plays an intensified role in the current moment. I will also examine whether, considering Bourdieu's 'la précarité est aujourd'hui partout' (*precariousness is now everywhere*), Giddens' (1991) suggestion of 'reflexivity' is a suitable remedy to uncertainty; uncertainty thereby being, like the aforementioned 'alienation', a barrier to social mobility.

Based on Giddens' (1991) idea that individual identity is an ever unfolding, interactional project of self-creation that relies heavily on reflexivity, Sanders and Munford (2016, p. 157) propose a theory that Higher Education institutions should be ecosystems that provide 'resilience-building resources' for their inhabitants. They established 5 key orientations that endeavour to facilitate the feeling of belonging in and amongst students, those being 'perseverance, adaptability, relationships, time and honesty', in the hope of dispelling those feelings of estrangement that develop off the back of the university experience being perceived as 'a discordant element' in the narrative of student identity. I will also refer to Diener's (1979) theory of "Deindividuation" in relation to the collective positive effects of "belonging", but also offer a new, COVID-19 re-contextualisation of the word; "Overindividuation", which is perhaps more of a relevant phenomenon at present due to the mandatory implementation of home-study and the temporary dissolution of on-campus

interaction. If "deindividuation" refers positively to the loss of burdensome self-awareness when an individual belongs to a group, then "overindividuation" is surely the opposite, whereby those feelings of hyper self-percipience, or as the first Delphic maxim reads on the Temple of Apollo, "*knowing thyself",* becomes injurious through excessive independence; "*nothing in excess"* reads the second maxim. (It is worth noting that the third and final maxim inscribed on the Temple of Apollo reads "*surety brings ruin*", which unfortunately, unlike the first two maxims which run harmoniously with the developing theory in this discussion, is the exact antipode of Bourdieu's Logic of Necessity, and the fact that 'uncertainty' is perhaps one of the most ruinous factors in the agency of disadvantaged students).

In the same way that Diener (1979) reimagines the theory of individuation in an usually positive manner, so does Alexander (2004) employ the theory of 'Cultural Trauma' to demonstrate that social groups, national societies and whole civilisations recognise shared traumatic experience as a means of establishing solidarity and relationships with each other. I will also apply this theory to the current COVID-19 climate of the Higher Education learning experience, and examine whether the pandemic is substantial enough to warrant a shared cultural trauma that induces a feeling of belonging between those students affected, or, whether it is a case of the exact opposite. This, when framed with the contradictory nature of information ascertained from my data collection, will conceive the theory of the "Paradox of Belonging" during COVID-19, whereby the shared notion of alienation actually serves to generate some feeling of belonging, in that students are collectively sharing the feeling of 'non-belonging'. As a result of it being a shared feeling, they generate a sense of belonging with each other. The absurd nature of this seemingly new and specific phenomenon makes it hard to understand whether it is firstly, a problem, and secondly, if it is, how to solve it.

In terms of solving problems with social mobility however, and who specifically is accountable for the responsibility to do so, I will refer to Young's "Social Connection Model of Responsibility" (2006, p. 102) which claims that 'all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices', which to some extent absolves the onus of liability for disadvantaged students to own their circumstances, and instead transfers the burden of rectifying those systems, structures and cultures that yield disadvantaged environments to the parties that both create and 'gild' them.

I will frame the neo-liberal culture of 'measurability' by referring to Hamann's (2020) notion of the "Foulcauldian Panopticon", in that the tabulation of academic merit is a self-regulatory system, and has created a 'new form of control' whereby all competing Higher

Education institutions regulate their systems of governance to align with this end. This, in one sense, serves as an explanation as to why the elite continue to reign in the Higher Education system, because the factors that inform measurable merit are pandered to, and the rewards gained from showcasing high measures in institutional competition pander to measureable merit. It is essentially a self-fulfilling system. With reference to league tables, for example, institutions will pander to those measures that boost their ranking such as research, and in turn, enhance their elite status, and consequently more funds will end up going to those universities with elite status on account of their research prowess; thus, the circle becomes even more gilded. What this system of tabulation is also indicative of though is 'short term focus' (Hillenbrandt, 2020, p. 4), in that 'quantification based steering instruments require fundamental reform from within a few years after their introduction'. Such a system that requires frequent re-evaluation indicates instability and uncertainty, qualities which we have already attested to inducing barriers to social mobility, such as alienation. The ways systems operate at an institutional level therefore have direct psychological effects on students at the individual level. If institutions operate through systems of tabulation as proxies for quality, and such systems are said to be fast changing and uncertainty creating, then the culture of tabularisation becomes problematic on multiple levels. I will therefore asses the psychological effects of measurability culture on the disadvantaged student with reference to Nathanson's theory of 'dehumanisation' (2019) through the idea of feeling replaceable, and Beyer's theory of 'objectification' (2020), in that being replaceable based on measured competency 'damages culture'. Wallace (as cited in King, 2018, p. 225) recognises the broader implications of the modern proclivity to measure everything, drawing on how sports culture has seeped into other systems to such a degree that whatever is currently immeasurable 'fails to have meaning'. I will include some interesting discussions regarding this idea as framed by the information gathered in my data collection.

I will employ the theory of Structural Determinism to examine how the recruitment process is unfairly weighed against disadvantaged students, particularly in elite firm recruitment, because of the way careers advisors are 'severely limited in what they can achieve' on account of the careers guidance system being 'structurally determined' (Roberts, 2013 as cited in Christie, 2015, p. 74). Also, student agency, whilst it can to some extent be guided (though, as we know already, this is also heavily influenced by the Logic of Necessity, 'the reference point', 'Prospect Theory' and 'schemas') is more often than not 'regulated by social background and geography' (Greenbank, 2011), and because of this, disadvantaged student agency is susceptible to irrationality and informal choices. This is evidenced by Law's "Community Interaction Theory (1981) which similarly recognises that the social environment of a person significantly factors into decision making

It will be interesting to examine whether Widening Access, retention and careers advice policy takes into consideration that ‘irrationality’ and ‘informal choices’ are a key informant of disadvantaged student agency. I will borrow Bennett’s phrase, “the veil of perception” (1971) in order to describe how socio-environment alters the perception of career opportunities to disadvantaged students based on all the aforementioned social phenomena that lend to ‘irrationality’ of agency. One specific example of this found in a study by Christie (2015) is that of “shared folklore”, in that disadvantaged students are typically more susceptible to be suspicious of authority types and their advice, sometimes to the point of inventing stereotypes – for example, Christie found that disadvantaged students consistently depicted careers advisors as being resolutely discouraging *“you can’t do that”*-type figures, when this was considerably not the case. This tendency for disadvantaged students to elect enemies were there perhaps weren’t any is actually so consistent across the board that careers advisors are themselves typically aware of this shared folklore of which they are the subject, and as a result, have likewise (possibly) began to develop what Furlong and Cartmel (2009) refer to as ‘mutual suspicion’. In this sense, disadvantaged students perceptions about how they are perceived themselves, in this case by careers advisors, though might not have been true to start off with, may well end up being rendered true through excessive ‘folklore’ creation.

In relation to Bourdieu’s greater theory of ‘habitus’, I will refer to Ashely and Empson’s “Three Manifestations of Cultural Capital”, those being “institutional capital’, “embodied capital” and “social capital” – all of which are seen as being crucial requirements that are sought after by elite professions in the recruitment process, and I will explore the problem of possessing those cultural capitals being associated far more closely with students from privileged backgrounds. There are a number of theories that suggest this is the case. DiMaggio (1992) coins the term “cultural matching”, for example, which Dunne (et al., 2014) use to frame their study which found that ‘upper middle class students have a much greater tendency to apply to higher status universities in the UK than working class students’, in that people with a certain cultural capital appeal to other people and environments with a similar culture. The ‘Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis’ (Byrne, 1971) and the Homophily Principle (Larzarsfeld and Merton, 1954) also both attest to this idea, evidencing that
parties (students, institutions and employers alike) seek out connections through a means of similarity, and also endeavour to reproduce a social environment whereby that similarity remains unthreatened by deviating factors. Given that cultural matching is seen significantly in the recruiting process at elite universities and elite businesses, with Phillips (et al., 2006)

finding that elite firms were primarily interested in 'deep level cultural homogeneity', and the notion of 'cultural fit' far more than actual academic competency, shows that cultural matching is an element of UK culture that seems to galvanise the gild of privilege even more. This is made especially clear when we consult Binder's theories of "Career Funnelling" (2015), which evidence that elite universities typically host on-campus recruitment exclusively for elite businesses; quite literally conceiving tangible elite bubbles filled with elite opportunities for elite students. Bourdieu thus asserts that cultural similarity is currency; that is has an 'economic conversion value' (Bourdieu, 1986).

In response to all this, I will employ Crawford's theories on potential 'habitus transformations' (2019), as a potentially successful means for disadvantaged students who lack the necessary cultural capital to become desirable to elite environments by way of shifting their habitus through, for example, work placements. I will however acknowledge that 'habitus shift' as a means of solving this problem of cultural matching only concedes to the ethos of the elite rather than endeavours to combat it, which is problematic. "Linguistic capital" is another manifestation of cultural capital that Riviera (2012) briefly notes, but which seems to have been incredibly more important to some of the participants in my data collection, suggesting that dialect, accents and regional slang also have a largely overlooked part in the discriminative practices of cultural matching.

I will also refer briefly to Bronnikov's concept of "clarity gradability" (2008), which concerns the different grades of clarity that different inferences possess, and apply this theory to policy rhetoric, particularly the words that appear quite frequently in the social mobility discussion to categorise demographics, such as 'disadvantaged', 'vulnerable', 'elite' etc. Each of these inferences, at present, seem to be either intangible concepts that are defined differently by different perspectives, or, as is more likely in Widening Access schemes/policy, has a certain list of prerequisites that need to be honoured before somebody or something can be considered that particular thing. For example, Free School Meals students are considered such on the basis of their parental income not meeting a certain threshold. Instead of this black and white demographic categorisation, which seems to polarise students involved in the debate, there could feasibly be a 'gradability' of, for example, the term 'disadvantaged', which would account for the complexities at play in the debate.

Methodology

I

Research Design

I conducted my research investigation and data collection through a series of semi-structured interviews with seven participants, all over the medium of Zoom, and manually transcribed the conversations that occurred. It falls largely under the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research in that I am particularly interested in understanding the perceptions and experiences of individuals that identify as being part of the same community – disadvantaged students.

The epistemologically interpretivist nature of qualitative research allowed me to gain an understanding of the social world through the close scrutiny of the personal perspectives, which I have subsequently subjected to close, theoretically framed interpretation to the effect of informing my research questions. I was constantly cognizant of Bryman's notion of "seeing the world through people's eyes" (2016).The level of intricate detail, emotion, and personal experience I sought to gain from participants would not at all have been possible with a quantitative methodology, nor from a rigid set of questions; the author found that the most interesting perspectives that have informed the main discussion of this study presented themselves when the participants freely deviated from the line of inquiry, and thus conversational meanderings and an 'off the cuff'-style back and forth was indulged. Many of the findings included in the discussion were unencumbered afterthoughts towards the end of the interviews, which strikes the author as especially sincere, especially considering the almost unavoidably contrived nature of an interview set-up.

Though there is a vast array of literature concerning the general widening participation/social mobility narrative in the UK, as outlined in the Literature Overview section, it is arguably to some extent still an explorative design on account of the numerous, barely explored tangents of discussion that appear throughout, a la 'cultural matching in hiring', 'the ethics of habitus shift', and 'the paradox of realities between institutional and student perspective'. The studies and literature referred to throughout do indeed serve as a basis for the debates, but more importantly, points from which to depart from. This deviation has allowed for numerous instances of grounded theory that promote new perspectives on the debate, and to some extent lend interesting answers to my research questions. What many of the previous studies on Widening Access included in this project seriously lack in is in depth, rich content from the perspectives of those talked about; disadvantaged students.

The studies that do offer these in depth perceptions have consistently occurred to me to have also been lacking in something; that of the experiences of those the Widening Access initiatives have failed. A discussion on, particularly, the issue of retention, has not yet seemed to be complete without offering the experiences of those who have indeed dropped out. Therefore, of the seven participants, four were current undergraduates and three were at one stage undergraduates, but dropped out part way through.

II

Recruitment of Participants

I initially contacted a friend who I had previously studied with who I was aware was now teaching first year Bachelor's students as part of his PhD study at a notoriously low ranked University in the North of England, and that he had developed a good rapport with these students on account of he and them all being from the local area, and as such, identified with each other on being from 'disadvantaged backgrounds'. I asked my friend whether any of the students might be interested in me interviewing them for the purposes of this thesis, and two of them contacted me willing to participate. At the end of both those two interviews I mentioned I was interested in interviewing more people, and some days later I received an email from a third student, whom the original students were either respectively friends or acquaintances of from when they were growing up, but who had moved to attend Russell Group Universities. After third interviews I mentioned that I was still looking for more students who considered themselves disadvantaged but preferably were attending elite Universities, and the third participantoffered my email address to one of their friends, who also attended an elite university, only a different one. After the initial connection through my former classmate, the snowball effect ensued, and as a result I ended up with:

Participants 1 and 2 (P1, P2)
-who both attended non-elite University A

Participant 3 (P3)
- who attended elite University B

Participant 4 (P4)
- who attended elite University C

III
Coding

After these interviews I manually transcribed the recordings and categorised certain topics of discussion that cropped up throughout the interviews by codes, which each had subsets of more specific codes (this is not to say that they are any bit mutually exclusive). I was conscious of what Maguire and Delahunt (2017) term “patterns” that can be seen across the data that are thread together by a shared resemblance to either each other or a research question. With this is mind I generated the following codes:

1.
Social Mobility Narrative
‘Widening Access related concern’
‘retention related concern’
‘careers support/employability concern’

2.
Cultural Barriers
‘non-compatibility with elite environments’
‘feelings of non-belonging/alienation’
‘indications of habitus shift as perceived as negative’

3.
Cultural Aid
‘compatibility with elite environments’
‘feelings of belonging/engagement’
‘indications of habitus shift as perceived as positive’

4.
Financial
‘financial barriers’
‘financial aid’

There wasn’t anything excruciatingly methodical about the coding process; it served largely as a matter of grouping types of answers in a convenient way, despite the frequent overlaps of codes in sometimes the same answer. I originally set out to use NVivo in order to both analyse the discourse and help ascribe measures to the frequency of codes most and

least talked about, but it became clear that this sort of systematic categorisation would reduce rich, in depth content (of which the surrounding context is both especially important and interesting) to mere tabulation – a process which would not benefit this discussion and would also serve as a large irony considering a later section in this study which attests to the detrimental nature of tabularisation culture.

In a conscious avoidance of this debate becoming about discipline, I elected not to ask which bachelor's degrees the undergraduate participants were studying, though in hindsight I acknowledge that, whilst this information might have opened up some tangential lines of interest that veered away from the debate at hand, 'it wouldn't hurt to have known'.

Given that the research was always set out to be somewhat exploratory, the knowledge of which codes were necessary only came to fruition at the end of the data collection, as at the time of interviews I wasn't entirely sure my predictions about certain cultural/financial barriers (based on the literature and studies I had examined) would be relevant and to what degree. The codes were therefore born at the end of the interview process as opposed to prior to; none of the questions I asked followed a strict format or narrative as is shown in the codes listed above.

IV

Additional Recruitment

During the manual transcription of P4, I was reminded of a story they told me about a close friend who had recently dropped out of University C during their second year. Though I was happy with the data already accrued, I thought, if possible, it would add an extra dimension to the debate to be able to interview somebody who had indeed dropped out of an elite university and identified as disadvantaged. I re-contacted P4 to ask whether it was possible for them to give me the contact details of the friend who had recently dropped out, and this proved to be successful. I therefore interview Participant 5 (P5) with a sort of retrospective take on their university experience at University C, now with the format of the codes to stick more rigorously too, though like the first set of interviews, I allowed quite extensively for conversational meandering and digressions. Considering the success of the snowball method of recruiting participants, I asked P5 whether they knew anybody else who had recently dropped out. They didn't know anybody who had recently dropped out, but they did have two family members who had attended University a number of years before, together, on the same course, who had both dropped out before graduation at the same time to pursue jobs at the same family company after an opportunity had arisen. I ended up making

contact with them both, (P6 and P7) and did one last joint interview to gain their perspectives, though this last interview was admittedly a lot shorter than the previous interviews, and was slightly less engaged on account of the personal experiences they talked about having happened almost ten years ago. The segments from this final interview are presented as they occurred, which includes interruptions and conversations between the two of them.

V

Ethical Considerations and the Quality of Data

I was constantly aware of the limitations of my project as it unfolded, particularly the validity and reliability aspects, which, at the recommendation of Guba and Lincoln (1994) on account of this being a qualitative study, have been replaced by considerations of “trustworthiness” and “authenticity”. Blumer’s (1954) strong recommendation against using ‘definitive concepts’, and instead to opt for sensitising concepts, was of constant importance to me, in that it sets an academically dangerous precedent in endeavouring to rigidly fix concepts in the social world by supposed indicative measures. This was largely the reason why I didn’t use NVivo, so as to not reduce complex social phenomena to trite categorisation.

Instead, I was consistently conscious of remaining nuanced and sensitised. I endeavoured to ensure this to the best of my ability by, though conscious of the gaps existing in previous Widening Participation literature, avoiding asking leading questions, and allowing for topics to arise naturally. I intended on the interviews being as long as naturally and comfortably possible to ensure that I could collect enough data, i.e. rich rigour, to draw what Geertz (1973) refers to as ‘thick descriptions’. This was true in all cases except for the last joint interview, which, though it presented a few interesting perspectives, was slightly harder to coordinate on account of the time gap between the interview and the experiences talked about, and also the fact that there was two people being interviewed at once, so the flow was sometimes interrupted. As with the initial five interviews, it was fairly easy to attempt credibility measures by relaying the conversations to the participants both as the interview was playing out and also at the end. This notion of respondent validation, whereby I gave each participant the opportunity to confirm or reject my interpretations of what they were saying as the interview was unfolding, also clarified many points of discussion, and in some cases opened up new points of discussion after I initially thought the interview might be coming to a natural close.

One way I ensured the reliability of my study was to pursue an ‘auditing’ approach

(as recommended by Guba and Lincoln, 1994) as the project unfolded, by keeping a very precise and orderly accumulation of my transcripts, subsequent codes and data analysis, so that my thesis mentor could at any point track the progression and transparency of my work. I am aware of the fact that in a qualitative study such as this, complete objectivity is impossible, but I believe there was a substantial distance between me, the participants included and the institutions discussed to formulate a good sense of objectivity. The participants included have no personal relation to me, nor do any of the institutions they happened to attend. Each of their identities is protected by my having ascribed them name codes, and there is no information in any of the interviews that attests to their identities.

In terms of the topic and lines of inquiry, I also endeavoured to maintain objectivity to the best of my ability, though in retrospect I believe that it was difficult to illicit truly interesting, relevant and natural responses without to some degree hinting at a bias one way or another. Guba and Lincoln (1994) claim that an important factor in ensuring trustworthiness is to avoid personal bias, and I concede that this was probably the most difficult consideration to fulfil, largely because it was easy to sympathise with the experiences of the participants, whereby I would occasionally be 'won over' to their plight without realising in the moment.

The word 'disadvantaged' in itself holds a lot of weight, particularly in the UK context where stratification and the class system is something that people are nationally conscious of. I did, however, confirm with all participants prior to beginning the interviews that 'disadvantaged' was an appropriate way of describing their socio-economic backgrounds, that they were happy with this description and that it was at some point relevant to the discussion at hand given the topic of my discussion and nature of my research questions. As is discoursed at length in a particular section of the main discussion, 'disadvantage' represents many factors, and though all the participants did indeed believe this word applied to them and their situation, I became aware of the various degrees and manifestations of 'disadvantage' between the participants and how they all differed from each other. It was therefore of extreme importance to maintain a sensitivity to various and differing contexts, under the umbrella of 'disadvantaged' in order to understand the data properly.

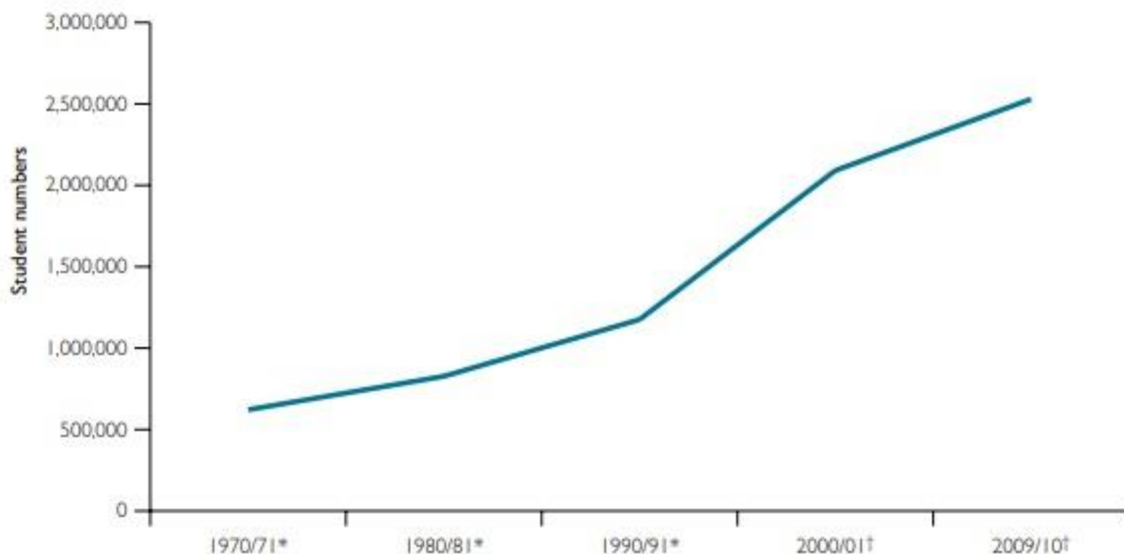
It was also important to maintain a sense of philosophical self-reflection throughout the data collection process, to be constantly self-critical in my personal responses to the information that was being collected from my participants, constantly regulating my own biases and not have them affect to a great extent the natural course of theory generation on this topic.

The sample size may be not large enough to be highly representative (nor was that especially the intent of this study) but the depth of content reached with each participant (except perhaps P6 and P7) especially given that the same reoccurring themes seemed to appear from participant to participant without me at all pushing for such, will hopefully give this data collection an air of substantialness and context specific transferability. The purpose of this data collect was not to purport generalisations about disadvantaged student perspective, but to lend some new, in depth perspectives to the ongoing debate, and marry some hard, original evidence to the already existing literature and theory which oftentimes foregoes the accompaniment of genuine student perceptions and experience.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

WIDENING ACCESS

The growth of Higher Education participation in the UK over the last several decades has been unarguably huge, as evidenced in the graph below. Statistics also paint the increase of disadvantaged student participation in an incredibly impressive light, showing an increase of 50% in the 'likelihood of those from the lowest participation areas in the country (which tend to be the most disadvantaged communities)' attending Higher Education (HEFCE, *Trends in Young Participation in Higher Education*, 2010).



(Source: Growth in UK Higher Education
*Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record and Individualised Learner Record
† Further Education Statistical Record; Higher Education Statistical Record; Education Statistics for the United Kingdom; Northern Ireland Higher Education Statistics)

Research studies clearly indicate the positive long term societal, financial and personal benefits of being in possession of a Higher Education qualification. The Browne Review (2010), for example, found that Higher Education graduates are not only more likely to be employed, have a higher salary and a greater job satisfaction, but also are more likely to have a healthier lifestyle, less likely to suffer from depression and less likely to commit crime. According to the “Study In UK” (website, there are at least 65,000 different undergraduate programmes in the UK, indicating that the content available to study is vast and broad reaching, further suggesting that the reason why graduates in general seem to reap so many of the same long term societal benefits is because of the collective ‘University experience’ itself; the combination of academic qualifications gained and the social capital gained from the university experience are extremely important instruments in facilitating social mobility. One study by the Leadership Foundation (2012) shows that the university experience helps nurture certain important aptitudes and competences, such as public speaking, team-work, time management and problem solving, and that these gained skills ‘increase the level of democratic engagement in society’.

Not only do universities provide individuals with the skills and qualifications that allow them to progress socially and financially, but these individual advancements collectively serve society as a whole; one study by New Economics Foundation (2011) claiming that universities add £1.3 billion to the UK economy every year through ‘improved outcomes in terms of health, political engagement and the building of trust’.

Considering all the individual and collective societal benefits of Higher Education then, Widening Access and the consequent social mobility that accrues off the back of this pursuit is essential for not only personal advantage but for the nation’s progression as a whole. The problem is that whilst Widening Access statistics show that disadvantaged students are participating in Higher Education at rates greater than ever before, they are still firstly, underrepresented, and secondly, especially underrepresented at elite universities, which ‘consistently fail to meet benchmark entry requirements for disadvantaged pupils’ (Baars, 2016, p. 18). A study in 1997 showed that 80% of people from the highest social class pursued Higher Education, whereas just 14% attended from the lowest social class

(CVCP, 1999).

There are a plethora of reasons why disadvantaged individuals attend university (and especially elite universities) significantly less, but two of the main areas of discussion (and yet still probably the most misunderstood and therefore prevailing) are financial and cultural barriers, the latter of which will form the majority of the discussion.

I

Financial Barriers

It is well documented that financial barriers, whether it be tuition fees, the cost of living away from home, or simply the cost of not being able to work as a result of full time studies, is a huge blockade for many disadvantaged students. A BBC poll in 2011 just after the significant rise in tuition fees found that 1 in 10 college students said they were deterred from attending university as a direct result of the tuition increase (ComRes/BBC poll, October 2011), and another study by UCAS (2012) showed that applications by A-Level students to universities dropped by 1% immediately following the rise in tuition fees. Applications from students in areas of the UK such as the South West and the North East, which are both areas with significantly lower socio-economy, fell by 12.1%. When compared with the national average, which only fell by 10%, we can quite clearly see that tuition fees significantly impact fair access for disadvantaged students (UCAS, 2012 Applicant Figures – 30 June Deadline, 2012).

Another study showed that ‘people from poorer backgrounds’ were not only significantly more likely than ‘people from wealthier backgrounds’ to choose Higher Education institutions with much lower fees, but also much more likely to study at a university close to home so as to save on living costs and also perhaps be able to work alongside the education (Opinion Panel, *How Have Higher Tuition Fees Affected the Decision-making Process of 2012 Applicants*?, 2012).

Given that financial troubles are a huge blockage to the beneficial pursuit of Widening Access, both governments and universities have implemented fiscally based policies, initiatives and support schemes in aid of assisting social mobility. Evidence indicates that the majority of UK universities’ access-related spending goes towards bursaries to support students (Milburn, 2012). There are also countless instances of the government providing huge sums of money in aid of student financial support, for example £368 million to the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2013, and £50 million,

£100 million and £150 million to the National Scholarship programme in the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively – indicating also the exponentially growing monetary support from the government to these schemes (Milburn, 2012, p. 40)

The huge amounts of financial support from governments and universities towards to students is, on the surface, good. However, there are a number of problems to be addressed, problems that are usually overshadowed by the impressive monetary figures that are put forward.

I.i

The Misplacement of Financial Support (Outputs vs Inputs)

The first problem to address, considering that bursaries are primarily intended as an incentive to sway otherwise financially struggling students to attend Higher Education, is that the Office for Fair Access produced a report which indicated bursaries 'have not influenced the choice of university in disadvantaged young people', nor have Universities offering higher bursaries received more applications or attendance from disadvantaged young people, and incidentally, universities offering lower bursaries have actually had increased applications and attendance from young disadvantaged people (OFFA, 2010). This data suggests that simply offering block financial incentives such as bursaries directly to disadvantaged students isn't necessarily an effective method in Widening Access, which subsequently confirms that the notion of 'financial barrier' is a much more nuanced concept than not having enough money.

The same report by the Office for Fair Access suggested that progress regarding increased diversity of participation would rely quite heavily on 'expenditure moving towards outreach activity' and the 'measurable progress of outputs', instead of being too focused on 'assessments of inputs and processes' (OFFA, 2010). One problem that is so simple in its premise that it is constantly overlooked is the fact that prospective students do not understand how tuition fees and bursaries work, and in particular the repayment method. There are numerous different household income thresholds in order to qualify for free school meals – this being a common proxy for economically disadvantaged students – but £7400 is a reoccurring figure. Given that since the tuition fee rise in 2011, the vast majority of institutions charge £9000 per year, to see both those figures in the same sentence is an extremely daunting comparison. However, statistics show that students aren't being sufficiently informed on how tuition fees, loans and grants operate, particularly from an angle of longevity. For example, a study by Sutton Trust showed that 25% of applicants aren't

aware that their debt will be dispelled after three decades, and an alarming amount of students are totally unaware of the repayment thresholds, and even then, how much is required from them to be paid back on a monthly basis (Sutton Trust, 2011).

I.ii

Financial Aid Opportunities As Being Insubstantially Communicated

Similarly, the £300 million given to the National Scholarship Programme between 2012 and 2015 looks incredibly impressive at first, but aside from the statistics which indicate fee-waivering has little impact on overall social mobility, the programme was not made clear to the very people who it was intended to help and therefore knowledge of eligibility was virtually non-existent (HEFCE, 2015). In a report entitled 'Government Response to the Education Select Committee report: Value for Money in Higher Education' (2019) it was asserted that students being able to make 'informed choices' was 'at the heart of recent reforms to Higher Education', yet the report offered no additional information as to how this was going to be achieved.

An issue that is being overlooked, therefore, is one of insubstantial communication on the part of governments and institutions to prospective students regarding what help they can receive. This is incredibly important in terms of Widening Access because a significant amount of people who are grappling with the idea of potential financial blockades or difficulties will dispel the notion of attending Higher Education without knowing there are multiple schemes available that will help them.

> "I didn't know about what money I was entitled to…..until really late on. If I'd have known earlier I probably wouldn't have worried so much." (P2)

Given that the types and amounts of bursaries available differ from individual to individual depending on their specific, personal background, it must be the duty of the government and institutions to lend much more money and attention to communicative campaigns whereby the goal is to endow the individual with as much sound information regarding their own particular financial situation, with a clear outline as to how both the near and distant future is going to look like for them.

Many young individuals turn to popular online forums when they don't know information about something, such as The Student Room or Reddit, oftentimes championing the informal nature of these conversational message boards over the clinical, utilitarian nature of official

websites.

> "Sometimes you get sick of these official websites…government websites…student finance. They're really rubbish. I look at them for two minutes, can't find anything useful and then just go on Reddit or something." (P1)

One problem with this is that there is no guarantee of correct information on unofficial message boards, and no obligation of accountability. One suggestion might be to appeal to the friendlier, more human nature of social media forums, but to create one that is administrated officially and has some means of accountability. This could be in the form of an app, preferably on an institution to institution basis, whereby prospective and current students can ask questions about their personal financial scenario, discuss with others in a similar scenario, have a diary of dates which indicate when certain bursaries/grants/loans will be made available to them with a monthly spending plan perhaps connected to their bank account, and then for postgraduates, a calculation system linked to their monthly income whereby one can work out how much tuition fee repayment one will have to pay back currently, in the future, and also specifically when.

> "There's a lot of people from poor backgrounds at my Uni. Me included. Funny thing is we get these grants but we don't know how to spend them…I'd blown half of mine before I'd even bought my books. We need someone telling us how to spend properly… we're not used to having six grand all of a sudden." (P2)

This appeal to map out hypothetical future scenarios regarding money might put ruminating individuals at ease. Essentially, it would be a personalised platform rife with various finance-related communications to ease and aid the understanding of concerned students, disadvantaged or otherwise, in how best to operate their monetary manoeuvres before, during and after their Higher Education experience. As Participant 2 attested to, sometimes a financial barrier isn't as simple as not having money; it's having money and not knowing exactly what to do with it.

I.iii

Accountability Measures For Institutional Spending

Another problem mentioned briefly above, is that of the accountability for how money is spent, and subsequent studies and evaluations of schemes/policies in order to review their effectiveness. The previously mentioned £368 million block grant awarded by the

government through the Higher Education Funding Council for England, for example, has been criticized heavily for its total lack of subsequent evaluation in terms of how effectively the money was spent, therefore eradicating all possibility of allocating it more effectively in the future. The 2019 report (*Value for Money in Higher Education* - House of Commons Education Committee) was clearly critical of the evaluation processes of government and institutional spending on Higher Education, claiming that though there are 'vast amounts of public money' spent on Widening Access and participation schemes, 'the results of this expenditure are not always clear to see' (HCEC, 2019). The issue at hand might not necessarily be that the money is not being spent effectively; it is that there aren't sufficient accountability/evaluation measures in place for us to even know. The report suggested that if institutions didn't begin to exhibit some kind of 'transparency' regarding the effectiveness of their spending, particularly with regards to disadvantaged students, 'penalties' wold accrue. Subsequently, the conception of an 'Evidence and Impact Exchange' was suggested in order to understand the best practices of evaluating funding, and consequently took place in the spring of 2019. Ironically, there has been extremely little information regarding the effectiveness of the exchange.

I.iv

Aim Higher: Reformation vs Dissolution

One programme that was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England was 'Aim Higher' (2004-2011), which was dedicated to Widening Access specifically for disadvantaged students by partnering schools and colleges with universities, hosting summer schools, careers advice and mentoring programmes. In one sense, it was an initiative championed for its holding the 'needs of the individual learner' above the desires of the institution, by focusing particular attention on personalised outreach activities instead of large scale, personally indifferent fee waivers (Milburn, 2012, p. 37). However, it was ultimately discarded as a result of the practically non-existent evaluations of how the money was being spent and to what positive or indeed negative effects. This lack of a 'systematic' and 'robust' evaluation system was significant to the programme's demise, which was otherwise showing clear potential in the pursuit of Widening Access (Milburn, 2012, p. 37). This is not the only well-funded access widening initiative to have been scrapped as a result of having insufficient accountability measures. One suggestion in the aid of monetary efficiency might be to, instead of precipitously ceasing such programmes on account of their somewhat vague results, reform already existing programmes by introducing effectiveness measures, and build on the work and experience that has already been achieved. The Aim Higher programme, in one single year (2010), was responsible for organising more than

50,000 events and 2,000,000 individual contacts (Milburn, 2012, p. 37). Aim Higher being a prime example, the government has a tendency to abandon such initiatives that bear great potential instead of reforming them with better evaluative systems; they throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, which only serves to be a further waste of time, effort and money.

Sticking briefly with accountability measures, there has been recent discussion in the access widening debate regarding the potential implementation of a 'Unique Learner Number', which, 'analogous to the NHS number', would be a sort of lifelong, personal credential, whereby the progress of the individual could be monitored over time and thus used as an indicator as to whether access-widening initiatives are succeeding or not (Milburn, 2012, p. 25). One of the main failures of the current Widening Access agenda is that, as a result of government, institution and policy maker's neoliberally induced fetish for hyper-competition and attractive statistics that serve as proxies for success, Widening Access becomes participation for participations sake, rather than a morally-conscious system that aims to increase social mobility. I will talk about this concept in greater detail using relevant theory and examples later in the next section. A Unique Learner Number, with its lifelong-quality, would effectively be able to trace an individual's social mobility long term. The problem with many Widening Access scheme measures is that they observe whether a disadvantaged student attends University directly after graduating college, and pay not too much mind to what happens after that. A Unique Learner Number would thus allow for a more extensive, further reaching insight into how disadvantaged students and their Higher Education experiences effect social mobility long term. As it currently stands, many studies report exclusively on whether college students attend university immediately after completing their A-Levels. In many cases, disadvantaged students will postpone their Higher Education experiences, and the Unique Leaner Number would give a fairer description of how they navigate their educational narrative; it might even give some useful insights into how a disadvantage student's agency differs to a more advantaged student, and consequently, which particular barriers that affect disadvantaged students need to be combatted in Widening Access policies.

Essentially, as pointed out in a report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies on Widening Participation, the volume of financial investment in Widening Access 'has not been matched by efforts to better understand what really works' (IFS, 2010 as cited in Milburn, 2012, p. 77). This lack of spending evaluation is serving to the detriment of being able to better the course of social mobility for disadvantaged students.

II

Cultural Barriers

Perhaps slightly less well documented are the numerous and sometimes difficult to recognise cultural barriers that hinder economically disadvantaged students from Higher Education participation. As indicated by some of the reports mentioned in the previous section, the vast amount of government and institutional economic support seems impressive when it is viewed purely as numerical figures, but doesn't necessarily achieve the expected correlatingly impressive results in terms of social mobility in the long run, particularly when the form of help is in block grants, bursaries, fee waivers, or primarily concerned with 'inputs and processes'. These sorts of impersonal subsidies appear to be less effective than those other schemes and programmes which engage students at a more personal level and engage with those cultural aspects of an individual which appear to be central to their decision making process.

II.i

Guiding Student Agency

In the study "The Role of Culture in Decision Making", Glazer explains that the 'schemas' which guide the dynamics of autonomous agency are primarily activated by the combination of 'salient information', i.e. that which is objectively presented, and 'contextual factors', i.e. the cultural milieu that the individual is both in and somewhat of a product of (Glazer, 2014, p. 23). Glazer also points out that 'the fact decision making is even researched at all' must mean that the aforementioned factors that constitute decision making, can be, to an extent, 'controlled'; in the context of Widening Access and social mobility, then, both the Higher Education institutions and the government have to be conscious of how important culture and context is in decision making, twinned with the salient information at hand (Glazer, 2014, p. 23). It's also worth noting that Hannon, Faas & O'Sullivan (2017) assert that if disadvantaged students have the 'opportunity to develop cultural and social capital, and are supported with agency', then there is a greater tendency for them to have greater aspirations and heightened engagement, which consequently proliferates resilience and adaptability; two key skills need to combat academic hurdles (Hannon, Faas & O'Sullivan, 2017, p. 4).

One culturally-conscious scheme that has proved largely successful is 'Flying Start', specific to the University of Central Lancashire, which aims to guide student agency. It is worth noting that a study on the richest and poorest regions on Northern Europe by Eurostat, a data agency of the EU, revealed that Lancashire was the 7th poorest region in Northern

Europe, with a GRP per capita of £25,600, compared to West London's £188,900 (EUROSTAT Statistics, 2020). One central cultural aspect that was considered by the scheme is that of 'non-belonging'; it has been widely documented that simply the notion of a Higher Education landscapes is sometimes enough to alienate disadvantaged students enough to deter them from ever attending, regardless of their academic competency or potential.

II.ii

Academic Capability Overshadowed by "Cultural Deficit"

One study, for example, shows that people from the most disadvantaged areas who did indeed achieve the required grades to get into the University of Oxford were only just over half as likely to apply as a private school pupils (Cook, 2012). Similarly, a research study by the Sutton Trust indicated that there 'approximately 3000 people that attend colleges' who are rejected by the top Russell Group Universities 'despite achieving grades as good as, or better than, the entry requirements to courses in those universities' (Sutton Trust, 2004). This likely suggests that, alongside elite institution bias, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, though often endowed with the academic competency, are lacking in other necessary skills; the lack therefore could feasibly be as a result of their background. For example, Baars claims that disadvantaged students 'are less likely to have access to the forms of cultural capital that are required at interview and when writing a personal statement', which, even if they are gifted with the necessary academic talent, will ultimately restrict their progression in the Higher Education system, and as a consequence halt their social mobility (Baars, 2016, p.5). This is what is known as "Cultural Deficit Theory", which states that the home environment of a student is often insufficient in terms of preparing said student for the basic social, linguistic and cognitive competencies required to perform well in a learning environment. Social mobility therefore heavily relies on Widening Access schemes to be not only cognisant of, but actively working with the cultural milieu and home-life of an individual (Piña-Watson et al., 2016).

> "First seminar I ever had…we had these icebreakers…where you've got to introduce yourself and that. Soon as I opened my mouth I could tell they were looking at me funny. They'd all come from the same private schools, they knew each other already… sort of like…knew how to be in that kind of environment. I had no idea." (P3)

'Flying Start' therefore set out to cultivate a sense of belonging at university, to demonstrate

to potential disadvantaged undergraduates that the university experience was not something to be alienated by, nor a frightening concept to be deterred by; instead, the scheme endeavoured to marry said students to the idea of the university experience by encouraging collegiality, by familiarising the students with academic work spaces, university libraries and communal work sessions with other students that might resemble the dynamics of a casual seminar or colloquium. Effective evaluation of the scheme produced some very useful data – one, that 'at least 80% of the participants had no family experience of Higher Education', thus the target audience primarily fulfilled, and two, that the 'institution's overall non-completion rate decreased significantly' after the scheme had been put into practice (Milburn, 2012, p. 62).

II.iii

Expectation Theory and The Pygmalion Effect

Another initiative that has shown success is the Higher Education Access Programme for Schools, which encourages teachers to work very closely with disadvantaged pupils by identifying their socio-economic, cultural situation as somewhat of a hindrance to their developing potential to become academically gifted, and therefore, working with this information to provide the necessary support via primarily 'personalised mentoring and university visits' (McKinsey, 2012). The evaluation measures show that 'more than 80%' of said pupils 'successfully progressed to university' and also, said students were '20% more likely to receive offers' from elite institutions, thus reaffirming that the personal, culture-conscious approach of these initiatives bear successful results (McKinsey, 2012). Though this particular initiative has been a relative success in terms of what the accrued data indicates, the nature of the required 'identifying' process does however open up the potential to induce a negative Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal, 2002). Given that initiatives like this one rely quite heavily on individual teachers identifying disadvantages in individual students on somewhat of a personal, subjective level, this very identification process, when viewed through a lens of psychological theory, and specifically, Expectation Theory (Vroom, 1963), might bring about the negative of the intended effect, in that students have a tendency to perform academically to the degree of that which is expected of them.

> "…it's not the best Uni, right. And we all know that, and we all know we're not the brightest kids on the block, right. But it's like...the teachers know it too. They barely expect anything from us. They're even surprised when we show up to class, like – 'wow, you actually made it in, good job!' It feels like the bar is set super low." (P1)

The presupposition of *being identified as someone who is from a disadvantaged background* is that they are less equipped to academically achieve as a direct result of this background, and therefore could potentially bring about the cognitive notion within the individual's psyche that less is expected of them, and therefore, a negative exhibition of the Pygmalion Effect manifests (Rosenthal, 2002). The Higher Education Access Programme for Schools, and other initiatives that rely on similar identification processes needs to be conscious of the potentially negative psychological effects on the learning experience that inevitably come off the back of being identified as disadvantaged or different.

II.iv
The Necessity of Cultural Analysis

Day, in line with the culturally sensitive Widening Access schemes mentioned above, suggests that this culture-conscious mode of thinking should similarly extend to policies, advocating that policy development should move from 'paternalistic government' to 'gaining an understanding of cultural situations, values and norms of the socially excluded' (Day, 2013, p. 4). Thomas coins the term 'culture-sensitive pedagogy', and asserts it as a goal for the education system (Thomas, 1997, p. 14). He concedes that the 'search for universals of human behaviour have been patchy', and similarly, the quest to pinpoint 'cultural universals' or 'common principals' is equally difficult and problematic (Thomas, 1997, p. 14). Despite this difficulty, he stresses that the benefits of culture-sensitive education trump the arduous process by which it must be attained, and in the pursuit of such a system, offers several ideas to nurture its manifestation. Thomas (1997), in reference to the research studies enacted by Aikman (1994) and Teasdale (1994), claims that the 'essential prerequisite' for a culture-sensitive education is a 'cultural analysis' (Thomas, 1997, p. 20).

The studies by Aikman and Teasdale are perhaps extreme examples of cultural analysis, given that they were working with Peruvian tribes and Australian Aborigines respectively, and that the exploration of cultural idiosyncrasies and behaviour patterns at home and in school in these particular contexts are no doubt vastly different to that of a UK context whereby the cultural differences of socio-economic backgrounds are slightly more nuanced. Still, the general notion applies: the essential prerequisite for an education system that is successfully culture-sensitive is a careful but thorough cultural analysis, the information subsequently accrued of which is utilized judiciously by institutions and teachers to the benefit of the student.

II.v

Cultures of Teaching

This segues into the importance of teaching and teachers. The success and failure of many Widening Access related programmes are significantly dependent on the culture of teaching and culture-sensitive teaching processes. Feiman determined that rather than the previously understood singular, 'uniform' culture of teaching, there is rather a 'variety of cultures of teaching' down to the wealth of diverse and complex educational situations and students (Feiman et al., 1986, p. 506). It is when a specific culture of teaching is perspicacious of its environment and students, and subsequently acts according to this knowledge (i.e. successful in its cultural analysis) that it is a successful learning environment. For example, Eleuterio and Hoelscher both found in their respective studies that teachers who shared the same cultural identities and socio-economic backgrounds with students tended to 'build trust and foster stronger relationships', which consequently leads to better 'student engagement, higher motivation and excitement about learning together' (Eleuterio, 1997; Hoelscher, 1999 as cited in Altugan, 2014, p. 455)

> "One of my teachers is a real character. She comes in wearing all these hippy clothes with scruffy hair…which is like…not exactly a done thing at my Uni…you know….everybody is pretty uptight with it. But she is just so unpretentious…and like, really clever. I'm so much more engaged with her. It's like, the rest of them are sometimes too serious for me to…take seriously" (P4)

Binns (2019) asserts that disadvantaged students have a tendency to be more engaged when their professors have previously been disadvantaged students themselves, or come from working class backgrounds, on the principal that student-teacher relatability is a strong factor in manufacturing a sense of belonging, which as previously discussed, is a sure remedy to alienation, disengagement and subsequent dropping out.

The Department for Education UK published a statement of intent in 2018 regarding the intended diversification of the teaching workforce. Only several current statistics are included in the report – '8% of teachers come from ethnic minority backgrounds, but only 3% of headteachers come from ethnic minority backgrounds and 74% of teachers are women, but only 66% of headteachers are women' (DfE, *Statement of Intent*, 2018). The information is barely useful when served in such a microcosm. In addition, the notion of diversity has been reduced to only several variables. As indicated by the studies of Eleuterio and Hoelscher, diversity and representation has the potential to be extremely successful when it

is applied in the corresponding scenario. However, other studies have also indicated the opposite: that more fulfilled learning accrues when students academically interact with other students and teachers who are from different backgrounds or cultures.

For example, in the US context, the most elite universities regard diversity as not only a necessity for successful academic learning but a 'prerequisite for excellence' (Gurin et al., 2004, p. 98). Consider the implications of the legal case, "Grutter v Bollinger" regarding the admissions process of elite universities for example, which resulted in The Supreme Court ruling that there is "compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body", given that the skills acquired from a learning environment rife with varying perspectives and backgrounds is both an invaluable experience and helps 'equip students to participate meaningfully in a democratic society' (Gratz v Bollinger 539 US 244, 2003; Grutter v Bollinger 539 US 306, 2003).

II.vi
Diversity Statements

Practically every University in the UK has some form of a 'diversity statement' on their webpage, each of which is a barely veiled imitation of all the others, thinly asserting vague intentions to broaden participation. Similarly, the majority of institutions, particularly those elite ones which have been criticised most vehemently for their biased admissions processes and 'gilded circles of privilege' regarding the homogeneity of their undergraduate intake demographic, also seem to boast about their diversity with seemingly arbitrary, cherry picked figures. For example, The University of Cambridge features a webpage (Diversity Statement) which exclusively lists the percentages of 'disadvantaged students' who have attended:

"-20% of all undergraduate students who accepted a place at Cambridge in 2015 were from a BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) background
-In 2015/16, 25.3% of undergraduate students, 36.9% of taught postgraduates and 38.7% of research postgraduates were from BME background.
-The number of our students disclosing a disability is rising each year and 2152 students accessed support for a disability during their studies in 2015/16"

Not to say that the overall good of widened access isn't being achieved, and that participation for disadvantaged students isn't indeed widening, but the intent seems to be skewed, or presented perhaps sort of inappropriately or gimmicky by carelessly wielding supposedly impressive figures with little justification and never seemingly to the benefit of social mobility.

Rather, it seems to be the institution exclusively interested in the presentation or perception of itself; buying into the trend of the time. In the same sense that those Widening Access schemes that are concerned exclusively with inputs and processes typically tend to be less successful than those concerned with outputs and long term societal benefits, so does this boastful list of input figures seem to be institutionally vain and ill-serving in terms of the main point of Widening Access; to enhance social mobility. Institutions need to, at the very least, extend the available diversity-related information beyond simply how many people of certain disadvantaged demographics have attended, and begin to include information about how those disadvantaged students fared academically, whether they were personally fulfilled, whether their university experience did indeed facilitate their social mobility, and how successful their consequent pursuit for employability was as a result of their experience and degree acquisition. Given that one of the greatest deterrents for disadvantage students is the non-apparent immediate utility of a degree, simply listing growing figures of disadvantaged student attendance is simply not enough to win over the cynical agency of such students; a dedicated page to disadvantaged students' greatly enhanced potential for social mobility, backed up with university-specific studies and data, however, could very possibly be enough to sway that utility-conscious cynicism and thus widen access with the best of intentions. Similarly, policies that concern diversification must exhibit more information on long term effects, legitimised by statistics garnered from theory and studies, and also be conscious of the fact that 'diversity' is a complex issue, the definition of which changes depending on context. For example, the implications of diversity in one region, or indeed singular institution, are by no means the same as in another region or institution.

A 'Diversity Index' claims that The University of Westminster is the 'most diverse', reasoned by its 170 nationalities and 8582 international students. This, again, is a showcase of how the modern, institutional view of 'diversity' has been reduced to a seemingly primitive variable and wielded as a numerical success (WhatUni Website, 2020). Significantly more helpful than this is the 'Feel At Home Index', which through the filters of discipline, study level and institution, one can search for percentages of ethnicities within that university under the principle that you will 'feel more at home' at a university with more students of your ethnicity. Again, like the aforementioned naïve interpretations of diversity, the Feel At Home Index is extremely narrow. But, it does bear the foundations of a helpful tool that could be utilized in aid of widening participation. A similar tool, which could equally be called something akin to Feel At Home in that the same sentiment is trying to be achieved, which incorporated not only ethnicity but also a wider variety of cultural backgrounds, experiences, interests, locations, etc., would absolutely be something to consider in terms of ultimately Widening Access to disadvantaged students. It has been documented in several studies that if certain

marginalised 'groups' are not represented at university, the notion of the 'gilded circular privilege' continues in its cycle of self-perpetuity on account of the said former students believing that Higher Education is 'not for them'; the primary deterrent here being one of 'perceived student profile', alienation and cultural incompatibility rather than anything remotely regarding actual academic competence (Milburn, 2012, p. 20).

II.vii

The Absurd Nature of "Excellence", The Contradictory Nature of Access Principles and the "Vacuity" of the Elite

Universities in general, but also particularly the elite institutions, seem to exhibit incongruity when it comes to establishing principles for Higher Education access. Take the three principles of Higher Education access of The University of Oxford for example:

• excellence – academic merit should be the sole standard of access
• fair equality of opportunity – access mechanisms should correct for background social inequalities
• social benefit – access should depend on what the students are likely to do with the education they get.

Firstly, as with most universities, 'excellence' is confidently asserted as 'the sole standard'. This is problematic in itself when we consider Collini's critique of universities using 'excellence' as both a prerequisite for admission and also a goal, in that the word 'excellence' reeks of vacuity because there is no such thing as 'excellence in the abstract' (Collini, 2012 as cited in Seeber, 2016, p. 9). Collini subsequently states that for the word 'excellence' to have any meaning in this context, there must be in place 'an agreement about the character and worth of the relevant activity' and also an 'agreed means of comparative judgement' by which one instance can embody more or less of said excellence than another (Collini, 2012 as cited in Seeber, 2016, p. 9). He concludes the critique by considering the farcical nature of one UK University claiming to go 'beyond excellence'. Gillies similarly notes the absurdity of the word 'excellence', particularly when used by the UK government to serve both an elitist-leaning notion of superiority and distinction, but also a Widening Access-leaning notion of 'excellence for all, regardless of background' (Gillies, 2007, p. 32). He essentially asserts that 'excellence', a term used across UK universities when it comes to requisites for access, is a perfect example of 'double-coding', in that it is 'rich in connotative power' but simultaneously ambiguous and malleable' (Gillies, 2007, p. 32). Pak Tee also comments on 'excellence' being a prime example of how various players in the Higher

Education system place far more importance on 'symbolic expression' rather than 'achievable reality'(Pak Tee, 2008, p. 597). The confidence with which requirements for access are asserted considering their inherent absurd ambiguity is a testament to the often facile, confusing nature of Higher Education. (I will also refer to the problems of dramatic rhetoric in Higher Education policy later on in greater detail).

The second principal, fair equality of opportunity, seems to be fundamentally at odds with the first principal; the first places sole merit on excellence, and the second demands mechanisms that seemingly allow for 'less excellent' students to participate. Given that the first principle is confusing on its own terms, the fact that the second is also at odds with it generates a nexus of conflicting aims.

> "You don't need that good A-Levels to get into (*University A)*…actually, I think they even lowered the grades to get onto my course since I've been here. Like…practically anybody can get in. And sometimes when I think about that…I guess I don't feel so good about it. It's not that special, is it?" (P1)

What Participant 1 seems to be alluding to here is that the mechanisms that allow for more people who are less academically competent to access University, often simultaneously dilutes the perceptive worth of the Higher Education experience, which seems to be discouraging and disengaging.

The third principle, social benefit in terms of access depending on what students are likely to achieve with their degree, seems in its own free standing right a very fair, socially-conscious principle, engaged with ethical utilitarianism. However, a number of studies show data which indicates the opposite; that institutions are far more concerned with inputs rather than outputs when it comes to disadvantaged students. In a document published by The Russell Group in 2011 (*Submission to Call For Evidence,* 2011) it was claimed that "many children from poorer backgrounds are significantly underperforming at school and this is the key reason why so few of them are gaining a place at a leading university". But, a study on the University of Oxford revealed that even if students from the most deprived state schools did get the requisite grades to get onto a course, they were 'nearly three times less likely to be offered a place as those from private schools' (Milburn, 2012, p. 46). Knowing this statistic, combined with various other research studies that bear similar evidence, such as a study at the University of Bristol in 2011 which found that privately educated students achieved lower grades than state-educated students with the same A-level grades, shows

that when elite institutions assert principles championing output, they are likely not being entirely genuine with that assertion. Two other studies by the Higher Education Funding Council in 2003 and 2005 also found that state educated students are more likely to graduate from university with higher grades than privately educated students who had similar A-level results, with the key take-away being *on account that they got in in the first place* – this, therefore, (access) being a huge barrier.

> "Honestly the hardest part was getting in. I don't mean the A-Level grades either… I mean all the other stuff. The interviews, application forms. All the administrative things. I had to do two written assignments as part of the interview you know…like… on the spot basically. That was really intense. Now that I'm actually studying here it's much less stress to do…the actual degree, ha-ha" (P3)

The University of London coined the term 'adjusted criteria' in order to allow for a certain equity of comparison between students of varying institutions, based on the student's particular performance in the context of the average performance of the institution they graduated from – adopting a per-capita-esque notion of fair cross-institution assessment. This was, like the majority of Widening Access schemes, in order to identify disadvantaged students with potential who otherwise wouldn't be able to get into more elite universities on account of their low grades by national standards, even though by regional or institutional standards they might be very high. The subsequent evaluation research of the project found that those disadvantaged students admitted on such grounds, despite their lower grades, were 'just as successful as other applicants in their progression through university education'.

The University of Oxford's third principle about access; that it should depend on outputs rather than inputs, is, with the knowledge of all the aforementioned research studies, a sound principle to assert. The problem is that it does not follow through with said assertion, and thus, seems to make a novelty of the notion of disadvantaged students; in the one sense they posit that long term societal yield trumps the temporary meritocratic shortcomings of disadvantaged applicants, but reject not only these disadvantaged students in lieu of privately education students, but also those disadvantaged students who achieved exactly the same grades as those privately educated students, which, additionally undermines the first and second principles. What all this is indicative of, to borrow Collini's word, is the 'vacuity' of the elite and the superficial nature of prestigious institutions' access principles. On the one hand they champion trendy, modern diversification schemes, and in the other, contradict those very principles and ever more fancifully gild the circle privilege.

II.viii

A Moral Duty of Care

In a similar vein, another problem we see with Widening Access for disadvantaged students is that universities, policy makers and governments alike are all seemingly obsessed with attractive statistics regarding greater disadvantaged student participation in HE without much ethical consideration for whether that is actually the best thing for them. Essentially, in such a market oriented system, numbers trump all other considerations. The Social Mobility Commission (2019) attested to the fact that the competitive sphere of statistics and Widening Access-related measures that Universities, governments and policy makers operate in (and measure success by) often results in 'perverse incentives being offered to disadvantaged students' which ultimately are 'not suitable for them' (Milburn, 2012, p. 82). Jones and Nangah (2021), in response to this, suggest that a 'moral duty of care' should be present on the Widening Access agenda, based on the evidence gathered by Augar (2019) and Robinson and Salvestrini (2020), which shows that Higher Education Institutions focus too narrow-mindedly on the concept of 'participation' as an end in itself, rather than catering for what is best for the student long term, and consequently, social mobility (Jones & Nangah, 2021, p. 68). The reason this is incredibly important is that encouraging disadvantaged students to participate in Higher Education purely on the grounds that increased participation makes the institution look good and modern/makes the Widening Access policy seem successful, oftentimes will not be a good fit for the student, and off the back of this manifests a disharmony between the student and the Higher Education experience, which Jones and Nangah term 'alienation' (2021, p. 62).

> "…a lot of the time I feel like this isn't right for me. I don't hate it, I'm just…I don't think it's the best thing for me. When I look back I can see how I was just randomly forced into the idea at college…it's just what everyone else was doing. I didn't even think about it. Now I'm here and I can't really opt out…£30,000 down already…you know what I mean?" (P1)

Essentially, Jones and Nangah believe that participation for the sake of participation, which regularly appears to be the case, is a 'dangerous tactic that is potentially damaging for social mobility and not the least for each potentially vulnerable student' (2021, p. 68).

The answer to this problem is not to shift the focus away from Widening Access for disadvantaged students, but to employ a morally engaged system of recruitment, whereby said recruitment is not focused solely on 'meeting government targets' and widening-access quotas, but instead facilitates the correct 'support and resources' that allow disadvantaged students to become engaged with their academic environment without having been sold a lie about what is in store for them (or offered 'perverse incentives') and thus thrive in the Higher Education system; consequently advancing social mobility (Augar 2019; Robinson & Salvestrini 2020 as cited in Jones & Nangah, 2021, p. 63). Instead of focusing purely on participation for participation's sake, then, we must extend the scope of widening-access schemes and policies so that they're fundamentally conscious of the barriers that disadvantaged students face, so that they can offer solutions to these barriers and avoid the 'alienation' that occurs when disadvantaged students are at odds with, or unduly misinformed about, their Higher Education experience.

II.ix

Alienation and Academic Mistrust

Jones and Nangah trace the narrative of how 'alienation' comes into being ('alienation' defined by Çağlar (2012) is when 'students display negative attitudes towards their educational experiences and the institution' – as cited in Jones & Nangah, 2021, p. 67). They purport that 'alienation' is a product of disengagement with the university experience, and this is particularly prominent in disadvantaged students on account of them being more like to have experienced previous 'trauma', which itself is comprised of 'impersonal, interpersonal, relational or attachment-related' experiences (Jones and Nangah, 2021, p. 68). A combination of these traumatic factors lends to a sort of 'academic mistrust', which serves as a barrier to engagement. Lack of engagement potentially leads to bad academic performance and dropping-out, and is therefore detrimental to social mobility.

> "…I didn't like the professors, I didn't like the campus…the course…just…the whole environment. It was exactly the opposite of where I needed to be at the time. It was like being on the moon." (P7)

This theory of alienation serves as a framework of understanding how best to lace Widening Access policy with engagement-promoting ideals. A solid understanding of this complex, psychologically-based narrative of alienation at both the teaching and curriculum level would not only satisfy the aforementioned statistic/target-obsessed element of 'participation', as is the current focus of institutions, policy makers and governments, but would also honour the

moral duty of Widening Access by appealing to the psychology of students, increasing their engagement, decreasing their alienation and consequently cultivating genuine social mobility.

The current problem is that this sort of holistic-approach, which considers the complex psychological narrative of the student, is scarce even talked about, less actually used in Widening Access schemes and policies. For example, between the years 2014 and 2019, 1903 academic articles were written about widening participation, and of these, just 7 were relevant to the UK context where specific engagement barriers were discussed in relation to Alienation Theory (Jones and Nangah, 2021). Nor are there any 'robust evaluations of UK based interventions' concerning disadvantaged student Widening Access (Younger et al., 2019, p. 769).

Essentially, all the information mentioned above considered, policy makers, institutions and governments need to be much more acutely aware of how important and potentially detrimental the psychological narrative of disadvantaged students is, particularly in terms of it leading to alienation, and in their implementation of Widening Access schemes and policies, must consider 'cross-collaborative techniques of student support'. This could range from curricula changes, whereby courses are altered, to teachers conducting lessons in a different manner; Dunkley (2018) suggests 'trauma management training' for teachers, for example (as cited in Jones & Nangah, 2021, p. 67). Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) also suggest that counsellors who can serve as 'relatable role models' could potentially escalate student engagement through inspiring 'confidence' and 'higher aspirations' under the principle of student-staff rapport precipitates academic trust, which as mentioned before, serves as a safeguard to alienation (Jones & Nangah, 2021, p. 67).

> "There's a lot of these ancient professors at *(University B)…*they're comically upper-class. They've been born into it, educated in it…live it…work it. When occasionally one of *us* gets in, and we open our mouth in a seminar with a different accent… or a different viewpoint, you can see it on their faces…it's like they're peering into a new world." (P3)

Harms (2010) suggests that regardless of how the institution approaches disadvantaged student alienation, the bare minimum is to at least acknowledge the presence of trauma. Something as simple as acknowledgement, irrespective of what particular scheme or intervention it is channelled through, is the correct groundwork for dispelling alienation, and the first step towards a morally conscious Widening Access agenda.

RETENTION

Access is of course merely the first hurdle of the Higher Education system for disadvantaged students to overcome. Providing they do so, the next difficulty, typically, is to complete the course without dropping out. The Social Mobility Commission (2019) evidenced that students from 'less traditional backgrounds who do get in' (to University) 'are more likely to drop out and less likely to end up in high skilled jobs'.

As a whole, the UK actually has relatively impressive percentages of dropout rates by European standards, with an average of only 6.3% of UK students dropping out of undergraduate courses. However, when you consider the dropout percentages by types of institution, there is a more telling narrative afoot. The University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford boast the lowest dropout rates of the entire UK, which are 1% and 1.2% respectively, whereas the highest dropout rates are found at London Metropolitan University and The University of Bolton (18.6%, 15.4%). The former two Universities hold the 1st and 2nd place on the 2020 University ranking, whereas the latter two hold 126th and 128th (Frobisher, 2020).

Just off the back of these few statistics then, we might assert that there is a worrisome correlation between non-elite, low ranked Universities and high dropout rates. Retention therefore is a much greater issue for lower-status Universities with larger amounts of disadvantaged students. There is little information regarding socio-economic background in the Diversity/Transparency statements by London Metropolitan University, but it does state that for the year 2020 '17% of students had a disability and 63% were from an ethnic minority background'. The University also resides in the Islington borough of London, which has the fourth highest poverty rate out of all 32 boroughs- 34%. The University of Bolton resides in the county of Lancashire, which as evidenced in the previous section, is one of the poorest regions in Europe (My London Website, 2020).

I

Misdirected Funding and the Recurring Problem of Absent Accountability Measures

In 2008 there was £800 million awarded to UK Universities from the government with the exclusive intention of improving the national retention rate, but when the House of

Commons' Public Accounts Committee evaluated the retention rates subsequent to the vast money injection it found that universities had 'made little progress in five years' (HOC, 2012). As with many initiatives aimed at Widening Access, the government's first mode of remedy is to impersonally toss large amounts of financial incentives the way of the students in the form of bursaries, fee waivers, grants and loans, with the naïve assumption that this will serve adequately in keeping students enrolled because they have to worry less about financial concerns. Whilst this may be the case in many instances, it is simply not the whole story. As it stands there is extremely little information and evidence to suggest that bursary schemes indeed affect retention rates in a significant way, and therefore it is of importance that Universities establish some kind of evaluation method whereby bursary schemes and the like are rigorously analysed, accounting also for the different circumstances and demographics of the students that receive them, in order to establish the most strategic, effective and resourceful ways to not only allocate money, but reduced dropouts.

£800 million is an impressive looking figure, and the UK government is not short of impressive looking figures when it comes to funding Higher Education, but as suggested above, without the correct implementation and a subsequent accountability process, a vast figure yields little significance. In a number of cases a lot less money, but spent more strategically, yields far greater success. For example, a scheme was developed in 2006 by John Smith and Son, a small chain of bookstores featured on multiple University of East London campuses, whereby disadvantaged students were eligible for a progress bursary. Instead of the bursary being in the form of a block grant, it was provided in the form of credit, redeemable at certain on-campus stores in order for students to buy books and materials for their course. The amount of credit awarded, and also the intervals at which it was made available, corresponded to the individual student's progression on their course; the better and further along they got with their studies, the more credit was unveiled to them. The credit could also be used for on-campus accommodation, library cafes and gyms. Evaluation of the scheme in the years following its conception found that students who were on the scheme purchased, on average, twice as many books as those on the same course who were not part of the bursary scheme which led to a greater student engagement with academia, and as a result, the University cut its dropout rate 'in half' (Milburn, 2012, p. 64).

II

The Cultural Compatibility of Disadvantaged Students with the University Experience

Alongside the stressful or inadequate personal economy of the student, the socio-cultural

aspect is heavily prominent in terms of affecting retention, i.e. the compatibility of the individual student with their university environment. There are several studies concerning this, and in each study the notion is referred to in different ways, which is the first inkling as to how difficult 'the university experience' as a concept is to pin down. This in itself is indeed one of the problems. We might be reminded of CS Peirce's notion of 'qualia' (1866) when referring to 'the university experience', in that describing the aspects, activities and dynamics that constitute a university environment, even in perfect detail, still falls short of the ineffable personal experience one undergoes when actually experiencing it. The first problem therefore is that the university experience can never satisfactorily be described to potential students ahead of their being admitted to university, and thus, they don't quite know what they are getting themselves into without the aid of experience-centered initiation schemes.

> "…our idea of what it was going to be like was way way off-" (P7) "-yeah, we justi hadn't been properly informed about what was expected of us…how much work was involved-" (P6) "-exactly… we just thought it was going to be partying and messing around. We had no idea." (P7)

II.i

Qualia and Demystification

As with such schemes as Flying Start, mentioned in the previous section, other similar schemes need to be enforced across the nation which allow students long prior to their undergraduate years to be able to develop the 'qualia' (the "*what it is like*" state of experience) of what it means to be part of the university experience in a bid to avoid later unfulfilled or incorrect expectations, or any other such alienation and discomfort from not having known what to expect, all of which leads to more likelihood of dropping out. In one case study which sought to familiarise college students with a notion of the university experience, one student claimed the success of this scheme was in the 'demystification' of Higher Education - 'for me it's all about confidence, raising confidence levels and demystifying university' (Yorke & Thomas, 2003, p. 68). This is incredibly telling of just how shrouded 'the university experience' is as a concept to students in general, but also especially disadvantaged students who more often than not, have no familial experience with university and are very probably the first in their family to ever attend Higher Education.

> "I'm the first person to go to Uni in my family. Don't get me wrong it was…it's exciting to think about. But before I started I was really stressed about it. I don't know whether it sounds stupid to say, especially now that I'm here and I love it…but I was so

> scared. I had nobody to talk to about it…none of my friends had been to Uni either. It was just a huge question mark lingering over me." (P4)

This is further evidenced in a study by Yorke and Thomas which analysed the six UK universities with the best retention rates and found that the 'strongest common denominator' identified across all the institutions was a 'sustained commitment to "the student experience"' (2003, p. 67). Bourdieu (1977) refers to the same notion of a good relationship between the student and the university as 'institutional habitus', and confirmed in his study that the strength and authenticity of such a relationship is fundamental to student agency, and in particular, that of remaining in Higher Education or dropping out. Essentially, the findings of Yorke, Thomas and Bordieu are all alluding to that fact that the 'cultural inclusiveness' of an institution has a great bearing on how students 'feel like they fit or belong' to that particular institution (Yorke & Thomas, 2003, p. 67). 'Belonging' therefore becomes a central term regarding student retention.

II.ii

A Brief Introduction to Belonging

A psychological study by Pittman and Richmond (2007) found that a sense of 'belonging' at university was one of the most significant factors in not only determining future grades, but the dynamics and success of a student's 'psychological adjustment (i.e., self-worth, internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours)' (Pittman & Richmond, 20007, p. 283). It is also worth mentioning that the same study found 'parental education (i.e., whether the participant was a first-generation college student)' was an extremely significant factor in determining this sense of 'belonging' (Pittman & Richmond, 2007, p. 274). The same reason was mentioned several times by different Participants in my data collection, for example:

> "…my parents never went to University either, or my brothers. I think that was a big part of me dropping out actually. Whenever I was having a tough time and I spoke to them about it, I got this '*we told you so'* kind of attitude. They never went…they didn't get it…and they eventually filled me with the same feeling after a while. I think if I'd have had better support that way, I would've stuck with it" (P5)

With this finding and also Pittman's study in mind, it might be most beneficial in terms of policy making and/or retention schemes to focus on those students who have no or very little familial experience of university, as the evidence suggests it is much more difficult for them to cultivate a true sense of belonging; a belonging which acts as a sort of psychological

safety net to a sense of alienation, which might in turn lead to disengagement and consequent dropping out. To manifest a successful sense of belonging (of a student to their university environment or experience) the process must begin as early as possible. Conservatively, it must begin at at least the late High School or early College era, and also be something that is not abandoned as soon the student begins University, but rather something that is maintained, nourished and built upon throughout their learning narrative.

II.iii

Cultivating Familiarity Prior to University: "The Done-Thing"

Addressing the prior-to university process first, there seems to be two fundamental approaches to familiarising students with the university experience, and each are intrinsically related to and perpetuative of each other, that is, practical involvement (as in actual student kinesis; visiting universities; first-hand experience) and what the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) refers to as 'development of a culture in which lifelong learning is seen as the norm'. As already stated, these are by no means mutually exclusive, but can indeed be induced in different ways.

The implication of the latter is that Higher Education should be a normalised idea; one that is embedded into the collective consciousness of the nation, presumably on the assumption that that which has been familiarised from a young age is not only not 'mystifying' (as it was earlier described), or just the generic, safe route, but something to be actively pursued for myriad benefits.

> "I have a lot of friends that I grew up with that don't go to Uni that would probably love it. They don't apply because it's not 'the done-thing' where I'm from." (P1)

This induced notion of normalisation is very closely tied to student agency; after all, the primary concern of the likes of the Dearing Report is to, through familiarisation, imbue students with the confidence and self-assuredness to *choose* Higher Education. The problem of course, as hinted at in many of the previous sections, is that disadvantaged students are predisposed to decide differently than advantaged students on account of their different cultures, upbringing and socio-economies. Such a difference in agency can be framed by the implications of Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), a behavioural model that suggests people base their decisions that involve certain levels of 'risk and uncertainty' in terms of an already existing, personal point of reference, such as their socio-economic position, rather than the potential outcome.

II.iv

"Prospect Theory" and Deconstructing the *Reference Point*

With this in mind, the 'development of a culture in which lifelong learning is seen as the norm' must be more input focused than output focused, particularly when concerned with disadvantaged students, as Prospect Theory suggests such students are far more likely to see Higher Education - with its high tuition fees, unfamiliar 'mystifying' culture and no guarantee of a well-paid career - as a risk, and therefore opt out. The initial normalisation of Higher Education must then shift away from the promise of grand economic return or social mobility, and focus more on changing the student's perception of what Prospect Theory defines as the 'reference point' on which risk-averse agency is considerably based. When studies show that disadvantaged students don't believe that university is 'for the likes of them', or not 'the done-thing' where they come from, this is indicative of the 'reference point' dominating the agency of the student, i.e. a prior, personal condition is governing the decision making process. The 'reference point' is therefore typically, but not confined to, a disadvantaged socio-economic condition.

> "It seems to be a very local thing. Me and my friends grew up in the same small town…went to the same primary school…high school. Did the same things. Did the same B-Techs at college. We were all, and still are, trapped by this small town mentality. Nobody goes out of the norm for fear of being judged. It's really powerful….that. It stops people from doing stuff that could be really good for them." (P2)

Efforts must be made from a young age to deconstruct the pseudo-power of the 'reference point' in order to liberate individual agency. One way of doing this might be through the notion of 'lifelong learning' and through policies which endeavour to induce this notion. I will elaborate on this in the next paragraph after a brief contextual introduction.

II.v

"La Précarité Est Aujourd'hui Partout"

In addition to these personal, prior difficulties that have beset disadvantaged students, are the more general underlining 'late modern structural changes in society' (Giddens, 1990), whereby increased marketisation and market competition have both shifted and destabilised society's previous conception of steady, predictable work/ educational patterns and instead

an induced ‘social arrhythmia’ has broken down the ‘perceived rhythms of the life cycle’ (Castells, 1996). In referring to this notion, Bourdieu claims ‘la précarité est aujourd'hui partout’ (*precariousness is now everywhere*) (1997). As a consequence of this relatively recent, untraditional, societal uncertainty, people have to ‘negotiate their own lives more reflexively’ (Giddens, 1990). This is indeed a problem for disadvantaged students, who’s already heightened aversion to risk and uncertainty is in turn exacerbated by the continually shifting dynamics of neo-liberally induced societal uncertainty – ‘the poor face more risks and shocks and can adapt less to change than the well-off’ (UNDP 2014 Human Development Report).

> “…I think one of the biggest things for us was the not knowing part. Not knowing what’s going to happen in the future. It’s really terrifying thinking of thousands of pounds worth of debt and no guarantee of a job.” (P7)

> “…at the time I thought it was much better to quit when I was only £3000 down after the first year…than like…yeah…£15,000 debt or whatever after four years. I got a job straight away after I dropped out…paid the £3000 back quite quickly-” (P6) “-it’s £9000 a year now though isn’t it? Awful. Imagine having £30,000…hanging over your head before you’ve even started. I wouldn’t even consider that…even now.” (P7)

As briefly introduced above, one key notion in terms of policy making that the government sets out in order to remedy some of the ills of these uncertainties is referred to as ‘lifelong learning’. Policies concerning ‘lifelong learning’ are typically in aid of conceiving a ‘learning society/age/culture’ in order to ‘increase social inclusion’ and maximise an individual’s adaptiveness to their changing environment (Ranson & Strain, 2002, p. 526). A disadvantaged student successfully invested in the principles of lifelong learning would ideally be able to overcome their restrictive ‘reference point’; the adaptability and reflexive skills gained from lifelong learning would be sufficiently adequate to deconstruct the formerly dominant risk-averse mind-set that sways their agency typically in the way of non-participation in/dropping out of Higher Education.

III
Lifelong Learning

III.i
A Brief History

The history and fluctuating interpretations of 'lifelong learning' have given rise to differing policy aims over the last three decades or so, which, with present hindsight, we can extrapolate the positive impacts from and be aware of the negative. The origin of 'lifelong learning' as a concept can be traced as far back as the 1970's according to Dehmel (2006, as cited in Lee, 2008, p. 445), or even the 1950's if we consider UNESCO's 5th General Conference in June 1950 whereby the UNESCO Institute for Education was conceived. It could also be seen in the French context in the mid-1960s; 'éducation permanente', which Finger and Asun (2001) declared a 'western centred quasi-political idea for humanising educational development' (as cited in Lee, 2008, p. 446), and which Dohmen (1996) believed was somewhat inspired by the principle tenets of the French Revolution, i.e. 'liberty, equality and fraternity' (as cited in Lee, 2008, p. 447). Though the current ethos of lifelong learning was indeed present in some of these earlier conceptions, if only apparitional and without any firm practical implementation, it began to resemble more closely what it does today in the mid-1980s, i.e. less of a nebulous idea and more of a focused pursuit with the aim of familiarising disadvantaged people with Higher Education. This significant establishment of a nucleus in the long dormant cell of lifelong learning was marked by the 1985 International Conference on Adult Education which primarily asserted the importance of disadvantaged people having a 'right to learn' (Lee, 2008, p. 448).

However, by the mid-1990s lifelong learning had already become 'neoliberalised', by championing the education of disadvantaged people purely through an economic lens, i.e., in an increasingly competitive global climate, the maximum amount of educated people contributes fiscally to the nation. This shift in the narrative of lifelong learning was marked by a White Paper in 1995 entitled 'Towards the Learning Society Comparative Education 453' (CEC, 1995), in which 'lifelong learning' was essentially seen as the means to an economically successful society's end, rather than the decades previous 'éducation permanente' approach which championed the 'humanising' of educational development (Finger & Asun 2001). Unsurprisingly then, the White Paper was disparaged mostly for this reason, on account of its supposed intention to remedy 'social exclusion' instead being utilised largely for its potentially fiscal benefits rather than personal or collective social advancement. Perhaps as a consequence of this ill-received interpretation of lifelong

learning, an EU Summit in 1998 established 'four pillars of lifelong learning', those being 'employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities'(Lee, 2008, p. 454).. For the first time we see the more modern, neo-liberally conscious ideals as in the former two pillars, married to the previously 'human'-centred notions of 60's, as in the latter two pillars.

III.ii

The Matthew Effect

Cut to the present day, where these aforementioned pillars still serve as the basic principles, lifelong learning policies both succeed in and fall short of their aims in different ways. One fundamental problem of current lifelong learning policies is the tendency to generate what Merton (1968) termed 'The Matthew Effect of Accumulated Advantaged', in that, in this context, government spending tends to go to 'those who already have resources such as the middle- and upper-classes' rather than the disadvantaged, thereby aiding the progression of those who need it the least and inducing a Pareto Optimality of opportunities (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018). One simple example of this is the amount of funding given to elite universities, which have the least amount of disadvantaged students, compared to the amount of funding given to the lowest ranking universities, which have the most disadvantaged students.

> "I don't know much about funding to be honest. All I know is that half our projectors don't work properly…oh…and there's at least a few seminar rooms with chalkboards still in them. Can you believe that? It's the 21st century…we're all paying £9000 a year…and they're using chalkboards. I bet that's not a thing at UCL." (P1)

The highest funded Universities are Oxford, Cambridge and UCL, which received in 2015 £139,061,600, £131,610,416 and £120,096,538 respectively for research funding alone. Though there are countless rankings that display the highest funded institutions, it is practically impossible to find even one similar table that instead displays the lowest funded institutions. With the aforementioned figures in mind though, one recent research grant to UCLan (which fails to even rank on most UK University League Tables) is boasted about with pride on multiple of their webpages. It is an 18th month study and the grant is £1,000,000. The excitement with which this relatively tiny grant is received is perhaps telling of how little economic support lower status Universities - the ones that have the largest amount of disadvantaged students - actually receive. Thus, The Matthew Effect is one

negative impact of modern lifelong learning policy.

III.iii
The Policy Rhetoric/ Reality Gap

Another problem of lifelong learning policy is simply the sheer vagueness that shrouds the aims. As with a lot of modern policy, certain rhetoric is elected to convey bold, forthright objectives, but there is often little in the way of actually rendering such objectives in reality. Carrera and Geyer (2009) remark on the frequently exercised phrase 'social exclusion' in such policies, in that its constant use, without any accompanying measures to remedy said exclusion, has reduced it to a sort of gimmicky doublespeak. The problem thus being that social exclusion (the concept) *is* indeed a huge hindrance to equity and social mobility, but the notion of it has been transformed by excessive policy rhetoric and consequently reduced to a mere phrase that through overuse bears little genuine meaning anymore. As Cohen points out in his essay entitled 'Governance and Instruction', there is often a great disconnect between the policy and its implementation in practise; the problem of 'incoherence' between 'educational inquiry and educational reality' (Cohen, 1992, p. 5). Bowman refers to this as 'symbolic politics' (2010, p. 78), in that 'the rhetorical value of a policy is more important than its instrumental effectiveness', and Pak Tee similarly refers to it as the 'Policy Rhetoric/Reality Gap'(2008).

In coining this globally relevant term, one of the three main examples Pak Tee uses to express such a phenomenon is 'the UK and its New Labour education policies to ensure children from every background get the best start in life' (2008, p. 598). Rather than wielding the Policy Rhetoric/Reality gap as a pure critique, he offers some explanations as to why such a phenomenon occurs and also offers some potential remedies to it, which will be useful to incorporate into this discussion.

One interesting idea that Pak Tee introduces to the discussion is the 'Paradox of Realities'. In short, he reminds us that an analysis regarding the success of a policy from the Macro level might be greatly different to that of an analysis about the very same policy but from the vantage point of the Micro level. He uses the analogy of taking pictures of a garden; a long distance shot might give the impression the garden is perfect and well maintained; a close up shot might reveal in more detail the shortcomings of its upkeep (Pak Tee, 2008). (Consider also the opening scene from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, which after briefly displaying a quiet, Elysian-esque suburban garden and the serene merriness with which it is maintained by the owner, descends to a vantage point within the grass where hundreds of

beetles are living in a chaotic and vulgar microcosmic ecosystem, unseen by those above). Essentially, and as I have already mentioned in slightly different contexts earlier on in this discussion, statistics and figures can be exerted very carefully by government and policy makers to exhibit a science of success regarding their strategies, but it is rare that the same comprehensive notion of success is applicable when you take a 'deep dive' into the institutional and indeed individual experience.

> "I went to an open day at *(University B)* before I ended up studying here. I distinctly remember this overload of information about diversity and representation. The whole schtick, you know? I thought wow…I had no idea they were so keen on this…especially considering the elite reputation. Now I'm here I realise how bogus all that is. It's just a show. There's barely anybody from disadvantaged backgrounds here…honestly." (P3)

Pak Tee's ultimate defence of the Policy Rhetoric/Reality Gap is, however, problematic. He essentially concludes that whilst policy rhetoric can 'signal various desiderata and directions but not rigidly determine' which concrete practical actions should be taken, this is not a problem as leaving said directions slightly nebulous allows for policies to be moulded to differing 'local contexts' whilst simultaneously being able to 'retain their evocative values for an ideal state of affairs' (Pak Tee, 2008, p. 601). Essentially, he is forgiving the shallow, embellishment of policy language because he believes there is some benefit to conceiving a self-confessedly unattainable-through-actual-practice utopian paragon to which we should Sisypheanly appeal. He justifies this by claiming all institutional contexts are different and will therefore reinterpret vague policies through their own personal lens anyway. Whilst this latter point may be at least somewhat true, in that all institutional contexts are indeed different and require slightly amended aims in order to function to the best of their ability, I assert that it establishes a dangerous precedent in policy making in general. If we are so easy to admit right off the bat that policy rhetoric is somewhat of a gimmick that appeals to an unattainable idealism, then this is already to some extent an admittance of defeat, or at the very least incompetence; the problems it sets out to remedy are deemed unfixable before they've even been attempted to be fixed.

A compromise needs to be arrived at then, whereby policies can indeed be interpreted slightly differently by differing institutional contexts, but not as a result of incredibly nebulous, opulently written policies that are lost to an unreachable idealism. They should be grounded in reality and clearly establish guidelines that allow for slight manoeuvring depending on the institutional context. This way, subsequent analysis of a

policy's success can be carried out, across all contexts, without having infinite different institutional interpretations of that one policy.

III.iv
Revisiting Nebulous Buzzwords and Overgeneralised Aims

To use another lexicon-related example in order to point out lifelong learning policy's tendency to induce unhelpful paradoxes, we must look at the word 'equity', how frequently it appears in lifelong learning policy aims and what it mistakenly implies. Turparevska reminds us that on the one hand when we think of equity we think of 'treating people equally' (2019, p. 7). Simultaneously on the other hand, the means of securing such an equity for disadvantaged people is one of 'positively discriminating against some people', i.e. 'not treating unequals equally' (UNESCO, 2014). Again, similar to the implications of both the 'Policy Rhetoric/Reality Gap' and the paradox of "excellence", social mobility policy suffers from a problem of words, unclear meanings and consequent paradoxes, in that 'buzzwords' are incorporated as a means of alluring show, rarely with a subsequent (nay successful) practical manifestation of a solution. Cornwall and Brock (2006) in their study of the particular policy buzzwords 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction' found that the allure of a policy declaring its aims in such a way that 'combines no-nonsense pragmatism', as in seemingly clear cut and all-encompassing concepts as in the aforementioned three, with the 'almost unimpeachable' air of 'moral authority' with which said buzzwords are imbued, is practically irresistible (Cornwall & Brock, 2006, p. 1043). The slickness with which certain buzzwords are wielded doesn't, however, change the fact that they are more likely than not 'simply the appropriation of nice-sounding words' (Cornwall & Brock, 2006, p. 1044).

This may seem merely like a shallow critique of language, but the greater negative implications of nebulous buzzwords in social mobility policy are extremely important to address. To summarise then: firstly, there is the problem of these particularly buzzwords being so vague, as in 'social exclusion' or 'equity', that they have no one meaning. As a result of this, policies have a 'propensity to shelter multiple meanings' which therefore renders them 'politically expedient' on account of any number of institutions being able to interpret the same policy in any number of different ways, which in turn sets a precedent; if there is no coherent meaning in a policy, common across different actors, then the policy is arguably meaningless (Cornwall and Brock, 2006). Consequently, being able to interpret a policy any number of ways across any number of actors makes it near impossible to evaluate the success of a policy, which prevents any further knowledge/progression being

done on as how best to solve whatever problem the policy concerns. As mentioned in many of the previous sections of this this study, evaluation and accountability measures are of extreme importance to social progression; it is through evaluation measures that we learn how to successfully progress with regards to any genre of policy. Secondly, the luxurious nature of buzzwords in policy 'shores up utopias' without being obliged to accompany said words with practical guidelines as to how best to achieve such a utopia (Cornwall and Brock, 2006, p. 1055) leaving disadvantaged students often misled by false promises.

Turning now to a detailed examination of lifelong learning policies by Tuparevska (2019), in which she analysed specifically the measures and aims concerning 'equity and social exclusion' in 59 EU policy documents, we can see exactly in which practical-based regards they fail and succeed (). The analysis found that the vast majority of measures concerned 'early school leavers', and then the other primary measures that were apparent but less frequently mentioned were 'migrants, the low-skilled and those with special needs' (Turparevska, 2019, p. 10). It comes as no surprise that retention in Higher Education is something that is in many ways determined and affected by circumstances that occur in the individual's life long before the actual university experience. A study by Sylva (et al., 2003) showed that some of the earliest years of an individual's educational experience, mostly between ages 3 and 7, had a huge effect on later social disadvantages. It will be impossible to successfully examine as far back as pre-primary school education policy in this study, but I will be conscious of, as I have been in the previous Widening Access section, the fact that it is crucial to be 'ahead of the curve' when it comes to successful retention; the factors which affect retention most are as much apparent prior to the university experience as they are during it. As with many of the schemes for Widening Access then, it is also very important in terms of retention for a relationship to be developed between the students and the institution in order to 'shape and develop institutional commitment', as early as possible (Berger & Braxton, 1998, p. 107). I will assess some case studies and schemes that endeavour to do this shortly.

Similar to the nebulous nature of policy buzzwords, Tuparevska (2019) also finds throughout the 59 EU lifelong learning policies there is a tendency to overgeneralise aims and themes to a point of redundancy. 'Vulnerabilities' and helping people with vulnerabilities is a key issue throughout said policies, but few distinctions are made within the word as to how different vulnerabilities, or indeed the combination of multiple vulnerabilities, should be appropriately and successfully dealt with. The purposeful vagueness of policy rhetoric, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, seems to be a product of the culture of uncertainty we now inhabit, and that itself seems to be a product of neoliberalism and the fast changing

societal needs which parallel market demands. Essentially, policies seem to remain relatively uncertain in their aims and vague in their definitions because they ultimately mirror the tableau of the culture in which they are also a part.

III.v
Increased Differentiations of Uncertainty

One misconception about the culture of uncertainty brought on by fast changing structural changes in society is that that very ‘uncertainty’ is a uniform concept. Rather, ‘change processes have produced an increased differentiation’ between people in society, whereby different demographics of people are subject to different manifestations of ‘uncertainty’ (Castells, 1996). Given that lifelong learning is primarily to equip the individual with the suitable gusto to deal effectively with fast changing structural vicissitudes, policies concerning lifelong learning must be aptly au courant of the nuances of differing, subjective uncertainties, and endeavour to accommodate the individual as such, as opposed to a blanket, objective notion of uncertainty which doesn’t take into account what Castells refers to as ‘increased differentiations of uncertainty’. In short, policy must firstly not be so naïve as to assume ‘lifelong learning’ is an objective notion that means the same thing to all students, and secondly, policy mustn’t simply mirror the uncertainty that is apparent in society, but counteract it with concrete solutions.

Edwards (et al. 2002) point out that the emphasis of policies in the early 2000’s was on ‘skills acquisition rather than the forms of social and self-questioning’, the latter being the desired, ‘reflexive engagement’ needed in order to overcome the modern notion of uncertainty (Ranson & Strain, 2002, p. 525).

> “When things got hard, I didn’t really take it as a challenge. I just gave up. I got no support from family or friends…and I didn’t have the drive to get through it myself…so I just quit. That seemed like the easiest option.” (P5)

Cut to a decade and a half later, with reference to Tuparevska’s study on EU lifelong learning policy documents, and there has been little change. One of her primary concerns, in addition to over-generalising with the use of buzzwords, was the ‘overemphasis on “basic skills”’. This is particularly emphasised in ‘The New Skills Agenda for Europe’ (European Commission, 2016) and the 2016 ‘Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults’ (European Commission, 2016), in which practically all other considerations regarding lifelong learning as a means of social mobility are colossally overshadowed by the need for ‘basic skills’, which, again, to resurrect the essence of the

previous complaint of modern education policy, is also perplexing vague. Tuparevska points out that this obsession with 'basic skills' refocuses the onus of responsibility onto the individual, making them accountable for their potential to become at some point socially mobile as opposed to assessing the greater 'systemic factors' that contribute to disadvantages, and seeking remedy those instead (2019, p. 12).

III.vi
The Social Connection Model of Responsibility

Implying, through policy aims, that the disadvantaged individual is solely accountable for their own disadvantage, and therefore putting the onus of responsibility purely on them to overcome it via education, is directly at odds with Young's Social Connection Model of Responsibility, which states that 'all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices' (Young, 2006, p. 102). Disadvantaged students are not the cause of their own disadvantage. Rather, they have been, most typically, born into an environment which, beyond their control, has systemically, structurally and culturally dictated their disadvantage. 'Systemic' and 'structural' are also to a large extent, nebulous in their meaning, and it is hard to point a specific finger of blame on whom is the worst contributor to the most disadvantaged quintiles of society, nor is this the place for such a discussion. However, what should be taken from this is that by the principles of the Social Connection Model of Responsibility, it should definitely not be the individual's sole responsibility, through for example, gaining 'basic skills', to socially transcend their disadvantage; rather, the responsibility should at least partly be on somebody else, primarily the government and policy makers. As such, Young calls for 'collective action' in order to solve social injustices (2006, p. 102). Lifelong learning policy should take a lesson from this model, in that individual responsibility for unwanted, ungovernable disadvantage is an ungracious and doomed to fail aim for social mobility policy.

> "The whole process is a bit of a fight to be honest. I come from no money…I have no money. My parents have no money. And none of that is our doing, we were born into it. It's like that as far back as we know. And yeah, now I'm fighting my way out…not just for me but my family's sake too obviously. Sounds cliché I know…but it's just…a huge responsibility for one person. There really hasn't been much help." (P4)

Whilst the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Commission of European Communities, 2000) provided an extensive list of what ‘basic skills’ actually means, such as ‘active participation in the knowledge society’, ‘having a coherent sense of identity’ and ‘learning how to adapt to change’, which are of course sound, sensible and incredibly appropriate skills, the 59 EU documents that Tuparevska (2019) analyses finds very little in the way of this interpretation of ‘basic skills’. Instead, ‘basic skills’ has been taken to mean rudimentary numeracy and literary skills. Whilst rudimentary numeracy and literary skills are indeed important, ‘basic skills’ is simply not that cut and dry, and policies need to be far more conscious of the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning definition of ‘basic skills’ which incorporates a wide range of confidence enhancing, risk-taking, adaptative and communication-related skills that are far more about identity development than mere rudimentary practical skills. Given that the modern university experience is comprised very largely of communicative spaces, such as interactive seminars, colloquiums, debates, presentations etc., it is extremely important that lifelong learning policies induce a culture of skill in disadvantaged students that is not only compatible with, but successful in these academic environments.

This narrow policy focus on the individual, and individual responsibility, ultimately contradicts its previous aim to tackle ‘social exclusion’, a concept which cannot be decoupled from its collective, societal implications. Strikingly absent from policy then is any sort of acknowledgement of how ‘specific socioeconomic, institutional and cultural contexts characterise the different welfare regimes’ (Walther, 2006, as cited in Tuparevka, 2019, p. 11), choosing to focus on specific individual aims such as ‘basic skills’ acquisition in lieu of any sort of wider social phenomena; a fixation on the micro level and the neglect of the macro level. Why neglecting broader social phenomena is a problem is evidenced in various studies, where said phenomena, such as ‘family life, health, housing, finances, economical status, psycho-social structures and a sense of belonging’ have been noted to be incredibly important factors in determining the level of one’s social exclusion, and indeed, when rendered positively, inclusion (De Greef, M. , Verté, D. , & Segers, M., 2012 as cited in Tuparevska, 2019, p. 14).

> “When I started making friends here *(University B)…*friends who’d been privately school…I found out that they’d all had philosophy lessons from, like, year nine…current affairs…no…cultural affairs and general knowledge and…political science. All this kind of thing. They all knew so much stuff from early on. When I was in year nine it was times tables.” (P3)

There are therefore many complex social factors at play in determining what constitutes social exclusion, and if policy chooses to overlook them in favour of more individual-based, black and white remedies such as 'basic skills', then there is little in the way of such policies successfully undoing the complex ills brought on by those phenomena.

IV
Uncertainty

IV.i
COVID-19

Given that one of the overarching themes of this particular section is that of 'uncertainty'; it being a quiet but powerful actor in the lives of the disadvantaged, something that dictates agency, especially in terms of retention and dropping out, it would seem inappropriate to forego mentioning the sheer amounts of unprecedented uncertainty that the ongoing, global COVID-19 pandemic has brought about. The disruption of on-campus, in-person experiences, the shift to online learning environments and the question of value for money have been three of the many COVID-19 induced factors that have contributed to uncertainty for many students. Given that it is a very recent phenomenon, there is little in the way of concrete policy to counteract this uncertainty, but if we briefly consider some of the 'Nine Ideas for Public Action – Education in a Post COVID World' laid out by UNESCO (2020), we can see that the two leading ideas are 'education as a common good' and 'the right to education'. The former idea acknowledges that disadvantaged people and the lack of opportunities afforded to them has been 'magnified' by the pandemic, and states that for a society to be 'resilient' and 'maximise potential' it requires a 'broad distribution of capabilities' and a 'diversity of talents' (UNESCO, 2020). This, in contrast with the policy documents analysed by Tuparevska only a couple of years previous, shows that right off the bat, there is not only an acknowledgement for broad social phenomena having a large impact on a society and its functionality, but that the individual, micro focus on things such as 'basic skills' is exchanged for an ethos of collective responsibility, stating that there is an 'undeniable necessity of collaboration, solidarity and collective action' needed for 'the common good' (UNESCO, 2020). For perhaps the first, clear time, solving social disadvantage through education is posited as a collective 'social good', rather than a series

of individual wins.

With regards to COVID-19 and it serving as perhaps the ultimate contemporary example of uncertainty, we might look to how certain institutions have responded to the problem of retention in this shroud of sudden, exacerbated societal uncertainty. The Bloomsbury Institute said of its anticipated COVID-19 related student drop-outs, 'the Covid-19 challenge was not just about how we moved to online teaching, it was also about how we adapted our support services to ensure students had easy and effective access during a period of high anxiety and uncertainty'(Fairhurst, 2020). In this sense, the online logistics of teaching and learning were only as important as the student services and student psychological welfare. In addition to launching a Virtual Reception, whereby students could easily discuss wellbeing, finances, administrative things etc., an online Peer Assisted Learning scheme for work related assistance and a Bloomsbury Radio Station to foster some kind of student community in light of the otherwise isolatory environment of studying at home, they also established a COVID-19 Task Force and Student Experience Working Group, which was actively working on how best to advance the support of students in any way possible, and constantly reactive to the changing rules and regulations.

IV.ii
The Digital Divide

Though the majority of Universities have relatively successfully manoeuvred a shift to online teaching, what this has ultimately shed light on is the 'digital divide', and the great number of disadvantaged students who have a much more limited access to internet, computers and a work-compatible environment at home. Statistics show that 96% of the UK's population has internet access, which has risen dramatically in the last decade from 73% in 2010. This figure, however, is not a particularly accurate reflection of how some disadvantaged students have been burdened by digitalisation of Higher Education learning. Lake and Makori (2020) compiled some recent studies which give a better insight into how new difficulties for disadvantaged students have manifested, for example the Pew Research Centre (2020) found in a poll that roughly 1 in 5 students will likely not be able to complete their schoolwork because they do not have access to a suitable computer, or will have to use public WiFi because the internet connection at home isn't reliable enough. It was also found that 3 in 10 students would likely have to complete some of their schoolwork on a mobile phone for lack of a more appropriate device (Lake & Makori, 2020). A RAND Corporation survey found that roughly 75% of teachers believe their students lack the necessary access to the correct technology in order to complete work effectively (RAND, 2020).

> “When Corona started and I had to go home…that was difficult. I’d gone from a campus with so many library and study rooms…you couldn’t move for computers…to fighting with my little sister over the one computer at home. She trying to watching cartoons on YouTube and I’m trying to write a dissertation…” (P4)

Without the necessary means to complete work effectively, the motivation, engagement and subsequent good grades required to keep a student enrolled in their course might falter.

A COVID-19 Critical Response Webcast administered by Academic Impressions, which featured student retention expert Julie Nash (Vice Provost of Undergraduate Studies and Student Success at the University of Massachusetts Lowell), discussed a number of potential measures to combat the uncertainty bestowed upon disadvantaged students in an effort to minimise drop-outs (Academic Impressions, 2020). Some of the many measures were ‘keeping an academic library facility open as long as possible to serve students as an internet café’, an institutional responsibility to promote information that might help disadvantaged students such as ‘internet companies offering free or discounted WiFi to students who are affected by COVID-19 and campus closures’, providing ‘loaner laptops to lower-income students’ and institutional responsibility to provide ‘public WiFi hotspots, for example on parked buses in rural areas’.

IV.iii

Microgrants and “The Logic of Necessity”

Nash also stressed the importance of ‘micrograntsʼ, in that overcoming ‘immediate hurdles’ are vastly more important for disadvantaged students who oftentimes are burdened much more by present uncertainty and struggle rather than motivated by the long term benefits; i.e., a small microgrant that helps with immediate problems, such as buying books and paying semester fees, though in the greater scheme of things seems quite insignificant, will play a huge role in the retention process.

> “I lost my part time job because of Corona. It was only a few evenings a week but the money went a long way. When I didn’t have that coming in anymore it was pretty scary…I didn’t know how I was gonna pay rent if it carried on. Then I get this email about a one-time sum of money for students laid off because of the pandemic. That honestly saved me. I don’t know what I would’ve done without that…and you know…it wasn’t even a huge amount.” (P2)

In keeping with Bordieu's Logic of Necessity (1985) a disadvantaged student will be much more convinced to continue their studies with the help of an immediate microgrant than, for example, the unguaranteed idea of the long term potential to eventually secure a high paying job. The Logic of Necessity is something that needs to frame financial discussions on how best to serve retention, as the long term incentives to continue education such as potentially having a well-paid job are totally overshadowed by the very present shroud of uncertainty, which has been heightened by the current pandemic.

IV.iv

Inadequate Evidence For Reasons Why

As with access, and as highlighted in many of the paragraphs above, the two fundamental categories concerning retention boil down to economic and socio-cultural, in that problems with money and problems of incompatible socio-cultures/backgrounds (and a combination of the two) are usually the main reasons why students drop out. A study by Robbins et al. (2004) for example, pinpointed the most significant factors in inducing drop-outs were 'social support, social involvement, self-evaluation capacity and financial support'. Westrick et al. (2015) found that the results from the first year of university was one of the more significant predictors for drop-outs, in that the higher the first year grades, the lower the chance of dropping out afterwards. Araque (2009) makes a correlation between discipline and drop-out, finding that, for example, Humanities students had a significantly higher chance of dropping out than, for example, engineering students. Oreopoulos (2007) merely posited from his research study that students are most likely to drop-out if they are 'uninterested' and 'unmotivated'. The problem with all these studies is that they are either incredibly vague or focus on naïve variables.

RE Westrick et al. (2015), there are no indications as to why those specific students received worse grades, and therefore we are not given any sort of knowledge as to how to combat the original problem, i.e. the bad grades. It is one thing for retention-conscious initiatives to focus on students who have received bad grades in their first year in an attempt to stop them from dropping out, but perhaps the efforts should begin before that stage; to prevent those students from receiving bad grades in the first place by endeavouring to understand how and why they might. RE Araque (2009), it is not a random coincidence that Humanities students drop-out at a far greater rate than Engineering students, a study by Mestan attributing it largely to 'career and directional purpose', in that students are worried

about the potential of their degree’s utility and eventual economic return) the assumption thus being Humanities have worse career prospects than, for example, Science and Maths degrees (Mestan, 2016, p. 983). However, whilst there seems to be a tendency to attribute disciplines such as Science and Maths as significantly more of a safe option when it comes to employment and economic returns, many studies either indicate the contrary - ‘Humanities graduates are employed at a rate of 91.1% (above science and maths)’ (Graduate Outcomes Survey, 2019– Longitudinal QILT), or, where the evidence does show that humanities students earn less of a salary, they still show that the people in those jobs displayed ‘equal levels of perceived well-being’ to those in higher paid Science/Maths related jobs (The State of the Humanities, 2018).

What all of these previous studies indicate is that the discussion regarding student retention and dropout rates is inadequate, and focuses quite half-heartedly on vague variables, which I believe, if dissected at a much more personal level, will give a greater insight as to why students actually drop out, which will consequently give us an insight in how best to develop a framework of initiatives that endeavour to remedy the problem. The latter point regarding well-being might also be of interest in the discussion, in that the economic incentives are potentially problematic in the long run; not only are students deterred from either starting or carrying on with certain disciplines which are considered less useful or might reap a lesser salary, but concepts such as ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ are either sacrificed, or at the very least, overlooked in favour of the former, utilitarian, fiscal benefits. Though a successful career is something the vast majority of graduates are acutely conscious of in their reasons for attending Higher Education, there is reason to believe that choosing a degree for purely future economic benefits can lend to a great amount of dissatisfaction whilst studying, and can likely lead to dropouts.

> “I definitely picked the wrong degree. I knew very quickly. I wanted to skip to the end and get an amazing job straight away. You know in cartoons when their eyes turn into dollar bills? That was me…I wanted to be rich for the sake of it. Three months in and I realised it was never going to happen…I hated the course.” (P5)

Thomas points out that whilst the governmental focus of Higher Education purpose is largely constrained to employability and national economy, there are of course vast and complex personal and societal benefits, one for example, is the encouragement of ‘social cohesion’ (2001, p. 14). Research from the Institute of Education similarly indicates that graduates of Higher Education institutions not only have a greater chance of employability and higher salaries, but also exhibit more long term contented behaviour, are ‘less likely to show

depression', 'more like to be in better physical health' and even have a strong tendency to exhibit 'more egalitarian and anti-racist attitudes' (Milburn, 2012, p. 13).

Such information and statistics concerning the social and personal benefits of having a Higher Education are is rarely available in the same way information and statistics concerning employability and potential salaries are. To champion only the latter two as incentives may be terrible for retention in the long run, as students are, not so much sold a lie, as they are sold only one side of the story. To end up choosing a degree purely for the potential long term financial benefits, and then that degree being totally incompatible with the student's personality, work ethic or interests, will ultimately lead to drop outs. If institutions proposed a wide range of benefits from having a Higher Education degree, there might be more of an incentive to choose courses not purely for the potential financial benefit, but rather, for the personal and social benefits, plus, the joy of learning.

IV.v

The Problem of Clarity and the Ease of Information Acquisition

It is arguable therefore, with reference to the case studies listed above, that one issue with retention is that of information and clarity, in that there isn't a sufficient amount of either available to the disadvantaged student concerning undergraduate degrees before they choose which course study. One step that has been taken by the Russell Group in an attempt to remedy this problem somewhat has been the publication 'Informed Choices', which has since been digitalised. It essentially lays out information and advice on college subjects, which ones and combinations of ones to take in order to get into certain Bachelor's degrees and specific universities, and other such content. The website is laid out in a clear, concise way, and is easy to navigate through. The problem of 'Informed Choices' is that it is barely marketed, and students, especially those who would benefit from the information the most, don't seem to know about it. I asked each of my seven participants about Informed Choices and none of them had even remotely heard of it, though several mentioned knowing about similar, more localised publications (leaflets) made by their respective colleges.

In addition to these helpful tools remaining seemingly elusive to those who most need them, there is an issue with clarity across Higher Education administration and policies, for example, as pointed out by Milburn 'the fact UCAS has to publish a 368-page book explaining how the admissions process works suggests that it is in dire need of simplification', but this problem of clarity is also institutional (2012, p. 51). Whilst

disadvantaged students might not know about the existence of ‘Informed Choices’, they absolutely do know about University Websites, and that is the first place they look when they are seeking information. We might look to University websites as prime example of mostly failed clarity. One of the problems of the modern proclivity to digitalise information is that whilst the impressiveness of both the general concept of collected online information and the professional aesthetic with which it is usually presented seems necessary and current, the actual content is overshadowed and often falls short of adequate.

For example, a survey by Eduventures (2017) which interviewed more than 500 students found that only 63% of said students actually found the information on University websites ‘useful’ (as cited in Meyer & Jones, 2011, p. 2). A study by Gurak (2001) showed how the content of University webpages, in terms of who the information was aimed at, was typically weighed quite obviously in favour of staff, with 34% of the links on the homepage related to ‘student needs’, such as ‘admissions, registration and course information’ and 43% related to ‘faculty services, and functions aligned with operating the institution’ (as cited in Meyer & Jones, 2011, p. 2). It also concluded that ‘the hardest information to find’ was that concerning tuition fees and finances, which were either ‘four clicks’ away from the home page, or indeed, in 15% of the cases in the study, ‘not found at all’ (Gurak , 2001 as cited in Meyer & Jones, 2011, p. 2). Inadequate or difficult to find information is a very important factor in retention, and also in Widening Access, with a study by Noel-Levitz (2010) finding that 1 in 4 students ‘removed a university from their prospective list’ as a result of not being able to find the relevant or required information on that University’s website (as cited in Meyer & Jones, 2011, p. 2). What Noel-Levitz concludes is that ‘the university website is an essential part of recruiting students’, and what I posit in turn is that being unable to easily find clear information from the institution’s website is also likely to affect the agency of the undergraduate during their studies also.

> “The thing you notice about our generation is that we’re hot on instant gratification…or just...immediacy. You know? Look at ordering delivery on your phone…there’s a pizza on your doorstep before you’ve even closed the app…that’s what our generation expects. When you go on University websites and you’ve gotta click through ten pages to find out…the good stuff…like…where you can go on a year abroad, people lose interest very quickly.” (P4)

Essentially, given the above research studies and findings, the ease of institution/course-related information acquisition via websites clearly impacts to a certain degree a student’s agency, and thus, has the potential to affect not only access to Higher Education, but also

retention during it. There must therefore be some institutional reform regarding clarity of information and ease of access on their websites, for both the purposes of Widening Access to potential students and retention for current undergraduates.

Marcus and Gould offer one suggestion of how to honour what Noel-Levitz (2007) describes as a student desire for institutional 'connection' via its website, that being the 'attendance to cultural differences' (2000, p. 32). Whilst they are largely electing 'cultural differences' to mean students from different countries, it also stands that more nuanced interpretations of cultural differences, such as socio-economy, and also the differences of culture within and between actual disciplines. Meyer and Jones noted that one feature on every university website they analysed was 'audience segmentation', whereby different sections of the website had been split up and had varying aesthetics and presentational dynamics to suit each group, primarily 'future students, 'current students' and 'faculty and staff' (Meyer & Jones, 2011, p. 4). I posit that a similar idea be adopted and used for actual disciplines. Many universities are both succeeding and failing at this in varying ways. If we look at the University of Oxford's course webpages, though it is arguable that Biochemistry and English Literature are infinitely different courses with vastly different cultures, the only noticeable difference to the clinical visual nature of their relatively uninspired webpages is that the former displays a picture of a molecular cell, and the latter displays a picture of what could be medieval script. However, the actual content offered is thorough, concise, and there are multiple links to course-related career advice, statistics on employment, fees, funding, admissions requirements, etc. (though It is also perhaps worth noting that a link leading to the careers service (https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/jobs/) which can be found somewhere on virtually all subject webpages, has, at least during the entirety of writing this thesis, led to a 'page not found'). One interesting feature of the webpages is that actual student experiences are offered, each course featuring around 3 small paragraphs from undergraduates of that particular programme saying what they enjoy about the course. This may indeed appeal more to the concept of 'connection' that is important for Widening Access, but it is of course exclusively aimed at prospective students. Perhaps a similar webpage might be of use, which instead of endeavouring to recruit students, supports already admitted students at a course level with relevant aid and assistance, examples of shared experiences, etc., in order to prevent the alienation induced by 'disconnect'.

> "When I was applying to Universities I just wanted to know what the people who already studied there thought. You can read as much information as you like, but nothing beats somebody…who's actually going through it to tell you what the deal is. There should be more of that I think. Except for open days it was actually really hard

to hear about student's personal experiences." (P2)

In a study aimed at improving retention rates in lower socio-economic groups by Yorke and Thomas the researchers found that in all interviews with disadvantaged students was the notion of 'belonging to' and 'a sense of personal intimacy with' the university an incredibly important factor in determining continuation, as well as the extent to which the university was perceived as 'friendly' (2003, p. 67).

V
Belonging

Given that 'belonging' is a concept that has cropped up in multiple studies regarding retention, particularly with reference to disadvantage students who evidently find it harder to achieve this sentiment, we must delve into the psychological implications and make-up of such a concept, so as to know how to facilitate 'belonging' through policy and institutional reform.

The notion of 'belonging' has been discussed by a great many social scientists in the past century, notably Thomas (1928), Festinger (1954) and Berger and Luckman (1996), who, building on Durkheim's "Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (1912) which states that humans passionately seek 'the company of those who think and feel as we do' in order to alleviate stress and uncertainty, essentially assert the notion of 'belonging' as one of individuals finding collective reassurance amongst each other as a means of combating the 'chronic ambiguity' of the world (as cited in Marshall, 2002). Durkheim (1912) also notes that this tendency for humans to become social interdependent, particularly in times of uncertainty, or what he calls 'great collective shock', elects 'membership and unity' as a proxy for security (as cited in Marshall, 2002).

V.i
Deindividuation/*Overindividuation*

Diener (1979) gives his own spin on the much used sociological term 'deindividuation' as a means of describing the collective positive effects of 'belonging' . He says that deindividuation equates to a loss of a sense of self, but that this loss is actually a positive thing because it encourages behaviour that is 'free from normative and moral constraints', encourages 'unity' and reduces the restrictive inhibitions of 'self-awareness' (Diener, 1979,

as cited in Marshall, 2002, p. 362). To bring this notion to the present moment, a moment in which the COVID-19 pandemic has forced University campuses to close globally and the university experience has transformed from one of face-to-face interaction and participation to one of that is distant and separated, we might postulate that the problem in 2021 is one of 'overindividuation'. Many studies show that the university experience has very quickly become a lonely and diasporic one, quite the antithesis of 'belonging'.

> "…it didn't make sense to live at my Uni dorm anymore, so I moved home. I didn't think it was going to be a big deal, but after a few months I was so lonely. Not just lonely…but like…actually alone too. I was really disconnected from everything. And everybody I've spoken to has said the same." (P1)

Zajonc states that 'co-presence fosters a physiological arousal' which 'facilitates more intense and prolonged activity' (1965, p. 270) The resulting implication of this is that people who perform tasks in groups that have developed a sense of unity, have a strong tendency to improve each other's performance in a sort of cumulative, self-fulfilling way. By Diener's (1979) theory then, the current university experience, with its sudden lack of 'co-presence' induces hyper-selfawareness, which brings with it a whole host of limitations detrimental to not only the general psyche of the individual student, but by Zanjoc's theory, the probable worsening of academic performance. The combination of worsened academic performance and loss of belonging, as I have outlined in various studies earlier in this thesis, are two of the main reasons why students drop-out. Therefore, a heightened emphasis should be put on fostering a sense of belonging, particularly at present, in order to dilute the limitive nature of hyper-selfawareness and nurture the capacity for humans to perform better in situations where there is unity and co-presence.

In what ways, then, might this sense of belonging that is so necessary for academic performance and continuation be successfully harboured whilst at the University? Considering the current pandemic and the change in what 'university experience' actually entails, it will be necessary to split the following section, which offers some case studies regarding the fostering of 'belonging' and its impact on retention, into *Pre-(and Post) COVID-19* and *During COVID-19*, the former section offering some solutions under normal university circumstances, the latter dealing specifically with the current situation of physical/geographical limitations.

V.ii
Fostering Belonging Under Normal Circumstances

One study by Miller found that students who made use of Recreation Centres on University Campuses were more likely to experience 'bonding, social belonging' and 'integrate' into the University experience, which consequently had a positive effect on retention (Miller, 2011, p. 124). Similarly, Nesbitt (1998) and Haines & Fortman (2008) found that partaking in University Clubs enhanced 'social-development' which ultimately lended to 'advanced learning outcomes' (as cited in Miller, 2011, p. 118). Similarly, some findings from my data collection suggested the same (also in relation to COVID-19, too):

> "One of my favourite things about Uni is the badminton team. I'm not even good…it's just fun and I love the people. Since we've all been at home in isolation we've had a weekly zoom call where we all play games and…get drunk basically. It's one of the things that's kept me going." (P4)

> "I'm part of a few societies. There's one where we just meet and watch films together…go for a drink afterwards. It's that simple really, you just want some like-minded people to hang out with." (P3)

These three studies and the findings from my data collection exhibit a tendency for group activity, via University societies, clubs and recreation centres, to foster a sense of belonging that extends beyond the said society/club/centre, and actually effects how the student feels like they belong to the institution as whole. Consequently, the potency of this feeling of belonging can positively affect the continuation of studies.

V.ii.i
Interventions

A research project by Murphy carried out field experiments at select Universities, whereby a number of socially disadvantaged first year students were required to take an extra semester-long course in which they would read texts written by third year students, the content of which would consist of first hand personal experiences regarding 'belonging', and how the feelings of uncertainty that they experienced during their first year were 'temporary and normal' Murphy et al., 2020, p. 1) The first year students would then be required to discuss the texts in detail, and conduct various academic responses to them, such as presentations and essays. The technique was described as an 'intervention', and was

considered a success given that ‘continuous enrolment over 2 years was raised by 9 percentage points’ among socially disadvantaged students (Murphy et al., 2021, p. 4). Not only was the course successful in ‘bolstering’ a sense of belonging through the discussed texts and mutual experiences, but given that the course was so smoothly espoused into the forerunning curriculum allowed for students to attain maximum engagement with the work, which in turn meant that their grades for it were also high; as highlighted in the studies by Good (et al. 2012) and Murphy (et al. 2015), good academic performance fuels a sense of belonging, and conversely, bad academic performance destabilises it. The project was successful on two fronts then, both fronts dispelling the disadvantaged student’s tendency to interpret ‘day-today adversities’ as ‘global’. One important note made by the researchers though, is that ‘disproportionate attention’ is given to elite institutions in research, and therefore results garnered from elite institution-focused research projects aren’t necessarily a sound default that can be applied to all institutions given the range and diversity of institutions. Murphy (et al.) therefore recommend that ‘intervention’-style case studies such as this one should be elected carefully when used for the purposes of informing nationwide policy implementation or reform, because the assumption is, based on the huge variability of institutions and students within them, that different, nuanced versions of ‘interventions’ are required for different institutional contexts to achieve the desired positive retention effect.

The above case study is one of the extremely few projects concerned with the individual, personal experience-related level of understanding how fostering a sense of belonging positively impacts retention. We can however draw some potentially helpful conclusions from other studies that have focused on younger disadvantaged children at the primary and secondary school level, and perhaps elect some of the theory discovered in these studies to apply to undergraduate level students with a few necessary adjustments/assumptions.

V.ii.ii

The Five Key Orientations of Belonging

Sanders and Munford built a theory of school ecologies as ‘resilience-building resources’ based on Giddens’ (1990) idea that individual identity is a ‘reflexive, interactional project of self-creation’ which continues ever forwards such as a narrative (Sanders & Munford, 2016, p. 157). They recognised that for many disadvantaged students, the school experience was a ‘discordant element’ in their respective narratives, which resulted in estrangement from and hostility towards education (Sanders & Munford, 2016, p. 161)There were various manifestations of why this was so, but the most coherent reason was the feeling of simply

‘not fitting in’ or that school and formal education was just ‘not for them’.

> “…I didn’t fit in at all…from the get go. Aside from the money stuff, I just knew straight away….I had this feeling. I’d be sat in lectures looking at the people around me thinking, am I one of these guys? Is this me? I legitimately had these mini existential crises – ha-ha! There wasn’t anything or anybody there that made me feel a part of the experience. I was really missing out on something.” (P6)

Thus begins a perpetuative cycle of alienation, whereby the alienation eventually gets so robust that, in the mind of the alienated student, ‘remaining at school becomes unsustainable in the evolving self-narrative’. Sanders and Munford (2016) therefore endeavoured to reimagine the school experience to embody a series of anti-alienatative factors that would induce belonging rather than augment it. They set forth 5 key orientations, based on what the interviewed students personally explained would help them to feel like they belonged, which were – ‘perseverance, adaptability, relationships, time and honesty’ (Sanders & Munford, 2016, p. 166). The researchers suggested that teachers, social workers and counsellors at the school pursue these orientations with a much more diluted sense of ‘personal boundary’ than is generally considered default in a clinical, business-like school setting; creating authentic and dependable relationships with students establishes not only a remedy to the contrived nature of schooling, but also institutes a sense of longevity that is indispensably important to the notion of the reflexive individual narrative. Though this study was of high school level students, I believe that the same reimagination of school ecology carried out at the university level would have a positive impact on ‘belonging’ and individual narrative. If campus psychologists and social workers were assigned to specific students, the developing of a person relationship would induce a stability in said student’s life; where courses/friends/teachers/classrooms/accommodation might frequently change and fluctuate throughout the university experience, one steady, reliable person who embodies resilience and permanence would set a very good actual and symbolic precedent.

> “In many regards I still don’t fit in. But…it’s not that big of a deal for me. I get over it. I can see how it would get to some people though” (P3)

Whilst the research project above suggested ‘not fitting in’ was the main source of alienation for high school students, and this is indeed the case in a vast majority of undergraduates too, there is also evidence to suggest that undergraduate alienation can be caused by slightly more complex, university-specific factors.

V.ii.iii

An Introduction to the Culture of Measurability and "False Proxies"

Higher Education institutions are much more driven by neoliberal marketisation than primary schools or high schools, because hyper-competitiveness amongst universities is a necessary requirement for mere institutional survival, given that the surest way to secure research grants, funding and consequent prestige, is through competing for it against other institutions. Complex notions such as prestige, status and quality, therefore, are ascribed proxies by which we can measure them. League tables and rankings typically stand in for prestige and status, and with specific reference to the UK, the Russell Group Universities (informally known as Red Brick), and institutional quality in part comes down to statistics of graduate employability, which in turn largely comes down to the academic success of its students, marked by their graduating degree grades. On multiple levels then, the student who attends university unwittingly becomes part of a complex series of proxies, all based on the notions of competition and measurability; an environment which thrives on multifaceted, sometimes 'false' proxies of tabulation, comparisons and categorisations.

One of the problems of such importance being placed on quantification is that subsequent policies must be implemented to define indicators, clarify accountability and regulate various other quantification methods, and that these policies of control 'cost £1 billion per year in the UK alone'. Considering the UK government typically spends around £4 billion per year on Higher Education in general, it is clear that the former figure is considerable, and at the very least worthy of critique. I will elaborate later in greater detail the notion of 'social wastefulness'. There is also the problem of these policy makers drawing up modes of accountability and regulations that don't cater for the 'complexities of distinguished regulatory fields' (Hillenbrand, 2020, p. 2).

Given that tuition fees in the UK have trebled in the past decade, the necessity of demonstrating 'value for money' has become paramount; quantities, numbers, rankings – all such tangible benchmarks are used as an easily perceivable stand-in for indicators of genuine quality. But as Kandiko et al. point out, we have reached a point whereby quantification is so obsessed over that we are currently in a situation whereby numbers are an end in themselves, or as they refer to it, 'numbers without a purpose' (Kandiko et al., 2020 as cited in Hillenbrand, 2020, p. 3). It is as if we have collectively forgotten that tabulation is just a representation of something else, albeit oftentimes not even an accurate representation (I will refer to the questionable nature of league tables in a following section) and instead are exclusively concerned with numbers. In one sense, this notion of quantities

without meaning imbues the Higher Education system and the things it values with a sort of quasi-nihilistic nature, which sees both institutional quality and individual student human capital undermined by oftentimes insincere tabulation. On the other hand, Huber insists that though quantification seems to be a 'messy affair' that perhaps distracts Higher Education from a 'unified goal', it can also create 'a stability of purpose', in that management by numbers can be easily 'incorporated into the traditional organisational form of the university' across the board (Huber, 2020, p. 34).

Hamann (2020) reminds us of the Foulcauldian notion of the panopticon in terms of academic quantification, in that tabulation and the significance it has since accumulated in a marketised system, is actually a sufficient self-regulatory power in itself; it has created a 'new form of control' whereby all Higher Education institutions are competing for the same end and regulate their systems of governance in tandem with this end (Hamman, 2020, p. 68). However, though this might be true, any market based system is fast changing, and Hillenbrand reminds us that 'quantification based steering instruments require fundamental reform from within a few years after their introduction' (Hillenbrand, 2020, p. 4). This indicates the incredibly 'short term focus' of a quantification based system, and such a system that requires re-evaluating at a frequent rate suggests instability and fragility; qualities that not only do we not want to build an education system on, but qualities that induce alienation and uncertainty at the student level, which, as discussed in the previous section, are factors that are detrimental to 'belonging' and therefore the social mobility narrative.

V.ii.iv

The Psychological Effects of Measurability Culture on the Student

This culture of institutional tabulation naturally extends to the student, most notably academic capability ultimately being reduced to a grading system. This system of numerical representation by which to compare students against each other induces some significant psychological effects, especially the exacerbation of 'alienation', which as we know is tied very closely to dropping out of university and therefore a barrier to social mobility.

> "The first grade I ever got back from an essay…well…I got the worst in the class. It wasn't even that bad to be honest…the grade… but it was still the lowest. Everybody was discussing the grades afterwards and I just stayed quiet. I felt awful. I actually felt like quitting there and then." (P1)

In Harvey's study 'Defining and Measuring Employability' (2001) he finds a number of problems with the notion of measurability at the student level, and refers to how the potential employability of a person is also often reduced to quite literally a numbered scale.

Firstly, he points out the problematic notion of the 'outcome approach', which sees employability as 'being construed as an institutional achievement' as opposed to 'the propensity of the individual student to get employment' (Harvey, 2001, p. 97). Not only does the nature of employability indicators display 'irrational activity' which essentially renders useless most of the measures meaningless, but the merit of the individual is being demeaned to a crude quantity, which is in turn exploited by institutions for their own gain (*"x course has an employability rate of z");* they seek to increase their institutional prestige by guaranteeing some measure of employability in order to maintain high enrolment, secure the best funding, etc. He concludes the study by declaring 'employability' as a term to be used frugally, as it is a polygonal, inconsistent concept (Harvey, 2001). Therefore, a consequence of measurability is that students have 'internalised the imperative to perform', which is a sort of 'subjectification process' that sees them as both 'observing entrepreneurial subjects' and simultaneously 'observed, objectified labouring bodies' (Moore, 2016, p. 2774). Essentially, the modern neoliberal climate of institutional competition, with its need for quantifying knowledge/skills/quality so as to be able to measure individuals/institutions against each other, has altered the social environment and infiltrated the psyche; students have come to believe themselves to be measurable, and in turn, replaceable. Nathanson (2019) refers to the notion of replacability as 'dehumanizing' and Bauer considers how viewing humans as replaceable based on their competencies is not only 'objectification', but that ignoring the wider contributions of a person actually damages culture (Bauer, 2020).

Performing numerically well is therefore both incredibly important to institutional survival - 'It appears that governmental funding decisions are sometimes made dependent on an institution's rank in the global league tables' – (The UQI Study, 2005), and individual success alike; statistics showing that higher grades from higher ranking institutions directly correlate to higher retention; higher employability; greater long term financial returns.

> "Sometimes you get this feeling that the teachers…they want you to get a good mark so they look good. If we do good, they look good. And if they look good, the faculty looks good. And then…the University looks good. It's just all about who looks good…about league tables and competition…all that. They're not that bothered about whether we're actually learning stuff or not." (P4)

Given that the study by Sanders and Munford (2016) claimed that the most important element in dispelling alienation in students was to imbue the school ecology with some sense of permanence and stability, the modern tendency for institutions to constantly bend their identities as a result of isomorphic pressures in order to survive in a heavily marketised climate is entirely at odds with the notion of a stable environment for students. One element of this organisational transformation has been coined 'governance by numbers' by Hillenbrand (2020, p. 2). Quantification has evidently become a key influence on institutional decision making, and Dahler-Larsen contends that the identity and structure of not only Higher Education institutions, but contemporary society as a whole is characterised by relentless efforts at audit and evaluation and consequent change (Dahler-Larsen, as cited in Julnes, 2015). Similarly, Collini refers to 'market-oriented societies', which through the 'decline of deference', 'erosion of trust' and the 'empowerment of populist relativism' have conceived a sort of communal 'audit culture' of themselves which fetishises benchmarks and metrics across *all* phenomena in the society of which they are a part (Collini, 2012 as cited in Seeber, 2016, p. 9). This idea parallels Wallace's thoughts on sport and religion, in that sport has to a certain extent replaced religion in social life; the primary way the former subsumes the latter being it's 'emphasis on bureaucratisation and quantification', and ultimately that if competition's subsequent accomplishment isn't measurable, it 'fails to have meaning' (Wallace as cited in King, 2018, p. 225). Bowman acknowledges a similar concept – 'sports - which are easily observed, measured and rewarded – are so popular in contemporary culture that analogies and spillover effects' into other domains, such as Higher Education, are inevitable (Bowman, 2010, p. 78). The combination of competition and tabulation induces a great amount of existential stress on the students.

> "My friend went to this alternative high school where they don't believe in grades…at least for the first few years. And then towards the end obviously you need something to show for yourself…if you want to carry on to college and University…so then they suddenly give you this grade out of nowhere…and my friend told me he was so relieved to finally…like…know where he stood. He didn't know how clever he was supposed to be the whole time." (P3)

V.ii.v
Retention-Centered Solutions

Cabrera (at al. 2006) established a framework of retention-centered solutions, all focused on institutional and social adaptation, those chiefly being 'promoting the social life of the

students' body' by 'organising recreational and cultural events', 'university guidance programs', 'programs that provide pre-university information and experience' and 'counselling and student support'. Each of these broad categories links directly with one or more case studies/research projects mentioned above, indicating their gravity in the pursuit of retention. Given that each university boasts differing cultures, governance norms and modes of operating, what I assert is that each university conceive a sort of Retention Department, whereby a framework similar to that of Cabrera's is utilised, but institutionally personalised to fit the nature of that specific university, whereby the members of this department are focused primarily on those factors that increase retention. This wouldn't necessarily need to be a huge department, even in the largest universities, but rather one that is extremely well-networked and closely linked to many other departments. It would act as a sort of administrative proxy, through which students would be connected to other already existing people, such as counsellors, campus psychiatrists, and available funding schemes and grants, social media, clubs and societies etc., which might not have been a previously obvious option for the student to consult, for the exclusive purpose of remedying whichever factor it is that is making that student want to drop-out. The proposed retention department (which would ideally sport a less clinical name) would operate with a dynamic similar to that of a price-comparison website, where the department, with the greatest framework of knowledge in how best to deal with a drop-out inducing factors, such as 'not feeling like you belong', would subsequently match the student to the best known solution to that particular problem, for example, a counsellor. Goldstein suggests the importance of stable, supportive environments at universities with easy and reliable access to counselling amenities on account of 'attachment styles', i.e., the fostering of belonging, directly correlating with 'emotional regulation', 'relational functioning' and 'transition management' (Goldstein, 2017, p. 135)

> "…at the time I really didn't fit in and really didn't enjoy it. There's no doubt about that. But, I reckon a lot of people experienced the same thing… but actually had someone to talk about it too. I don't know…maybe if I could've chatted with somebody, and they told me what would solve my problems…like a trained person, you know…then who's to say…maybe I wouldn't have dropped out." (P5)

V.iii

Fostering Belonging During COVID-19: Restricted Circumstances

Given the relative recentness of the COVID-19 pandemic, there haven't been a great number of studies regarding its impact on students, particularly in terms of the long term

psychological effects of disadvantaged students and how their academic performance/academic continuation is impacted. However, there have been enough studies to give a preliminary reading of how the situation is currently playing out, and what informed speculations we can make about the near future. One study, which used the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale to assess the emotional impact of the pandemic reported that 'extremely severe scores of anxiety, depression and stress' in the surveyed students were at '21.34%, 34.19% and 28.14%' respectively, all very high percentages (Odriozola-González, 2020, p. 2).

Another study found that as a result of COVID-19, '13% of students delayed graduation', '40% lost a job, internship, or offer' and '29% were expected to earn less of a salary at 35' (Aucejo, 2020, p. 1). The same study found some distinct correlations between lower-income students and being more negatively affected by the pandemic, for example, being '55% more likely than their higher-income peers to have delayed graduation due to COVID-19' (Aucejo, 2020, p. 1). In addition, he found that the distinction between the students who actually increased their study time by more than 4 hours per week as a result of COVID-related restrictions, and those students who reduced their study time by more than 5 hours per week, was largely a socioeconomic one (Aucejo, 2020). Whilst there was no further data in this study to suggest why, my findings alluded to some of them, primarily: lack of empathy from parents, less resources and space for studing and restricted access to technology.

> "My parents didn't go to University…they just don't get it. They don't understand what it takes. I'm there in the middle of a zoom seminar and my mum's trying to hoover the room. She doesn't get it." (P2)

> "We've got a super small house and loads of us in it. I couldn't get away from noise, I couldn't study properly….it was unbearable." (P1)

> "…it sounds silly but it comes down to the most banal things. I do most of my work on my iPad, it's just easier, and guess what…we have like two chargers between all of us. I almost missed a submission deadline just because my iPad was out of charge….because, you know, somebody else is using it. It's so silly, but I don't think people realise this is the norm for a lot of people." (P4)

V.iii.i

The Psychological Impacts of Mandatory Home Study

A study by Cao found a number of 'protective factors' against the anxiety brought on by pandemic-related learning changes, primarily 'income stability', 'living with parents/other people' and 'living in urban areas' (Cao, 2020, p. 1). 'Living with parents/other people' seems to be up for debate then, considering that the opposite was indicated by the findings in my data collection. A study on the psychological impacts of being quarantined by Brook (et al. 2020) also offered a number of informed suggestions of how to effectively diminish the stress brought on by being in an isolated learning environment, particularly for a long, mandatory period of time. First and foremost she asserts that 'information is key', in that those effected were much more likely to be relieved of anxiety if they were reassured as to why they were being subjected to the situation they were in (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 912). Whilst it seems relatively obvious, given that it is a global pandemic with many of the same restrictions being imposed in all contexts world-wide, the simple, frequent reminders from authority bodies and official institutions in explaining the situation and justifying certain dynamics and changes was an extremely important factor in alleviating stress; 'effective and rapid communication is essential' (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 912).

> "It would've been nice to get some encouraging emails from the faculty or professors whilst I was stuck at home. I don't know…maybe it's a bit childish…but even just some recognition of the inconvenience it was causing would've been really nice." (P1)

The second important suggestion was that relevant 'supplies' need to be provided. In the context of education, where, for instance, libraries have been made unavailable, digitalised texts must be made available to the same degree of stress-free acquisition as in going to the library to retrieve a book (Brooks et al., 2020). This ease of information acquisition similarly goes for professors being available to speak to students; if pre-COVID the professor had a drop-in office hour, said office hour must be made available in a digital setting.

> "One of the students on my course made a GoogleDocs page and uploaded all the course texts onto it. Then the professor ended up finding out and added some more relevant things. That was really great…saved me a lot of time and stress." (P4)

Thirdly, Brooks stresses the importance of social-networks, as not just a 'key priority', but that the failure to engage with them is associated very closely with 'immediate anxiety' and

‘long-term distress’ (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 912). The study by Odriozola-González (2020) likewise found that social media was used as a primary stress reliever by most students, chiefly Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. These latter two findings emphasise the necessity of a digitalised, interactive community, in which the aforementioned sense of ‘belonging’ can be fostered even when physically isolated.

> “I wasn’t a massive fan of Instagram prior to COVID-19…but it ended up being my main way of staying in touch with course friends. It’s easy to lose track of work and deadlines when you’re not…like…actually on campus, in the swim of it…so talking to people on my course through that was really important.” (P4)

The final key suggestion by Brook (et al 2020) echoes the essence of the first, only through a lens of altruism. It was found in the study that anxiety was diminished when people were reminded of how their participation in adherence to the restrictions was in turn ‘helping keep others safe’. Reassurance, coupled with the bigger, more socially conscious picture, was marked a very significant way to alleviate COVID-related anxiety.

Though it is too soon to properly know the long-term effects of COVID-related restrictions on Higher Education retention, especially in disadvantaged students, we can surmise from the above studies and findings just how said restrictions lend a hand in the creation of anxiety, stress and alienation in students, and, given that we know these three traits bear a significant correlation with drop-out rates, we can consequently attest to the likely negative effects the pandemic will have on disadvantaged students in the long run if such restrictions stay in place. We can also use the information from the research projects named above in order to develop some possible schemes aimed at alleviating these drop-out causing factors in a time of heightened anxiety, and know how to deal with similar circumstances in the future.

V.iii.ii

Cultural Trauma

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a rare case in terms of it affecting the vast majority of the world, and therefore is somewhat of an uncommonly global experience, the opportunity to capitalise on a sense of belonging that is forged through a collective, intercontinentally shared experience arises, and is almost perfectly suited, logistics-wise, to that of digital media which is designed to transcend geographical boundaries on account of it being unfailingly unimpeded by physical restrictions. Alexander’s theory of ‘Cultural Trauma’ (2004)

states that 'social groups, national societies and even sometimes civilisations not only cognitively identify human suffering', but 'define their solidary relationships to each other' by means of shared trauma. In one sense, then, the sense of belonging that is so crucially necessary to combat many of the negative psychological and sociological hindrances in the educative narrative of the disadvantaged student can be generated off the back of the global pandemic, and presumably, since the larger and more global the trauma, the more people can relate to the negative experiences associated with it, a greater sense of belonging is fostered the more trauma manifests. To reiterate: we might posit this somewhat guardedly as a positive, or, anti-paradox, in that the greater and more widely dispersed the COVID-induced trauma is on the learning experience, the easier it is to utilise that trauma to cultivate a sense of belonging amongst those affected. Essentially, COVID-19 induced trauma actually bears fruitful capital in terms of bringing the affected together, and this notion of togetherness is an extremely important factor in retention, and thus, social mobility.

> "…it was a weird feeling, because even though I felt alone, we all did. It was this collective-aloneness…do you know what I mean? In a way all of us were alone, but together. Just knowing it was a shared experience alleviated a lot of the anxiety it brought on." (P3)

V.iii.iii
Social Media

One problem with fostering a sense of belonging through social media is that it is largely beyond the means of the Higher Education institution to will it into being. Outside of active, university-related social media pages, it is mostly down to the individual's own responsibility to participate in social media. One interesting phenomenon noted from my data collection is the importance of unofficial, 'meme' accounts, particularly on the social media sites Instagram and TikTok, which featured jokes and 'trends' that were specifically related to one particular university. The jokes on these pages typically require a sort of inside knowledge of that specific University's culture, campus, accommodation, city etc., to such a degree that it feels like a club. For almost every university in the UK there is a correlating, unofficial Instagram, TikTok, Twitter or Facebook meme page, which typically have many thousands of followers and a great deal of interaction. It was reported by several of my interviewees that these meme pages were a source of comfort during the time where there was no on-campus teaching.

> "It was so nice to see TikTok trends and memes specifically about our University…it

was like everybody who went to *(University A)* was reminiscing about campus life and…the Uni experience. You started to realise all of us were missing the same things." (P2)

"I started following meme pages on Instagram…that were all in-jokes about *(University A)* and the students that go. They're super funny. That helped with the feeling alone…'cause you're scrolling through these memes like…'I used to do that!'" (P1)

The jokes featured have even since become primarily at the expense of the COVID-19 situation, which has made light of the otherwise undesirable changes. This combination of social media, digitalised communication and post-ironic self-aware parody has combatted alienation. Again, it appears that a large part of the charm of these social media joke pages is that they are unofficial, and sort of exist in tandem with the institution as opposed to a part of it, meaning that if the institution became involved, in order to promote, fund or monitor it, its original appeal would diminish. This therefore is another case of individual responsibility.

V.iii.iv

University/Student Communication

When asked about how the University communicated with them during lengthy periods of home-study, every interviewee alluded to the notion of being neglected. Very little correspondence was generated on part of the institution about the COVID situation, and when there was an occasional email, it was typically an invitation to fill out a survey about their personal experiences. Considering the section above which talks about the culture of 'measurability' and how this ultimately reduces the individual to metrics, the comments made by my interviewees were not entirely incongruent to this idea, one of them claiming-

"…you don't hear from anybody for like, a month…and then when you do it's just a survey. You have to rate how happy you are on a numbered scale." (P1)

"I got an email about a survey…to do with the pandemic. How I was coping and all that. Every few days I got a reminder about it. I think I got about eight emails in one month. They weren't bothered about how I was doing…they just wanted another stat for their project. Worst of all was that it was during exam time too…you know…I

didn't even have time to fill it out if I wanted to." (P4)

Taking from Brooks' (et al., 2020) first and final suggestion, something as simple as the University sending emails or texts to the students, preferably at least somewhat personalised, reminding them of why the situation is like it is (even if it is seemingly obvious) and subsequently how important it is for the greater good of society/the world it is that they comply with the restrictions. On top of that, whilst Universities may believe that offering surveys gives the student a chance to voice their concerns, firstly, being offered a numerical 1-10 system in order to express complex emotions is not a successful way for distress to be conveyed (and might actually induce more stress) and secondly, more often than not, having to fill out a lengthy survey is more of a hindrance than a welcome means of evaluation, especially considering most of the surveys were sent out at the end of the semester as a sort of retrospect, which coincided with the time students had the most work to complete and/or exams coming up. Higher Education institutions therefore need to be more cognizant of student correspondence, and especially of the potentially demeaning impact of badly timed, mostly numerical surveys.

EMPLOYABILITY and CAREER ADVICE

"In the UK, the majority of top professionals such as lawyers, journalists, medics, politicians, university vice-chancellors and chief executive officers were educated at elite universities" (ST, 2009, 2016).

Introduction

If acquiring a Higher Education qualification constitutes the potential means to become socially mobile, then employment is surely the movement. Becoming employed is therefore the last main step in the social mobility agenda, for without the option to utilise a Higher Education degree to its greatest advantage, all the potential to become socially mobile gained from said degree remains extremely limited, and therefore, immobile.

A Sutton Trust research project (*Degrees of Success*, 2011) found that careers advice and support at the high school level is an incredibly large factor in determining student agency, even more so than academic capability. For example, one high school in the project was recorded as having 65% of their students to go on and attend University,

whereas another high school with almost identical A-level results found only 28% of their students going on to attend university; the careers advice support system of the latter high school noted as being dramatically less adequate and therefore a large contributing factor to these percentage differences (Milburn, 2012, p. 85). As with both Widening Access and retention initiatives, initiatives aimed at boosting employability and careers advice for disadvantaged students must be forward-thinking, and therefore the groundwork must be laid as early as possible; at least at the University level, but also ideally at the college and high school level too. This is because each step of the education process is inextricably linked, particularly when it comes to requisite disciplines to be able to study certain degrees and then attain certain careers. For example, to become an engineer, one must have taken an engineering degree at university, which will have required maths at A-level and therefore a good grade in maths at GCSE level. This is why it is important to implement solid career advice support systems as early as possible because decisions taken as early as at high school level are incredibly important in mapping out the student narrative throughout Higher Education and all the way to employment.

It is therefore crucial to examine this barrier (inadequate career advice) and which other final barriers remain for disadvantaged students concerning employability, such as the problem of perceived value, and how, using case studies, policies, theory and literature, we can suggest some policies that assuage these barriers, allowing for as unproblematic a transition from education to career.

I

The Problem of Perceived Value

One problem right off the bat concerns the relationship between the employer's perceived value of both the degree the student has acquired and the institution they have acquired it from. Statistics show that the UK's 'top employers target their graduate recruitment efforts on only 19 of 115 Universities' (Milburn, 2012, p. 21). The issue of perceived value then splits into two sub-issues; one of assumed ability, i.e. that any student who has attended an elite university automatically is endowed with the best, most competent abilities, and another of overlooked potential, i.e. there are evidently a huge number of students who didn't attend those exclusive elite universities but are indeed equipped with the required skills needed for the job.

A study by the University of Leicester displayed how the majority of employers 'target the universities with the highest proportion of relatively well-off students', which Milburn

(2012) points out is a direct threat to social mobility, in that the institutions most interesting to employers always have the least amount of disadvantaged students.

I.i

League Tables

One of the main factors that motivates employers' perceived values of degrees and graduate capabilities is league tables and rankings, which have been born off the back of a neoliberally induced, quantifiable culture of competition. Hundreds of different 'weights' make up a Universities final score on a league table, resulting in one final number by which all institutions can be easily compared to each other, and whereby ranking 1 is better than ranking 2, 2 better than 3, etc. On the face of things, given that league tables are a stand in for quality, it would seem obvious and expected that the top employers would seek out students from the top universities. However, there has been much controversy around the legitimacy of league tables.

Collini, for example, argues that rankings give us a 'pseudo-statistical tabulation of incommensurable proxies' which have also been inflected by 'impressionistic judgements' (Collini, 2007, p. 56) Some hard evidence to validate this statement can been seen in a study by Soh, in which he discovered an array of methodological inaccuracies in the way that league tables and rankings data is collated and displayed, such as 'precision', 'arbitrary weighting' and the 'discrepancy between nominal and attained weights' (Soh, 2013, p. 207). Put simply, the number of variables that make up a 'score' for a University are ascribed 'weights' that indicate varying levels of significance that are ultimately used in the construction of that particular University's status profile. There were major discrepancies found in the way the nominal weights correlate to the attained weights in all three major University League Tables: ARWU, QSWUR and THEWUR. The high level of prestige and associated quality that comes hand in hand with a high ranking on one of these league tables not only affects how funding is allocated (in that an institution will pander to the variables that increase league table position in lieu of focusing on increasing academic quality, teaching facilities, student experience, etc.) but then also how employers are wrongly perceiving quality. League tables and rankings are therefore a 'false proxy' for quality, and the culture of obsessive measurability and comparison, as discussed in an earlier section, negatively impacts those disadvantaged students who may be extremely well qualified for a certain job, but are overlooked because they haven't attended a high ranked institution and are consequently perceived to be less academically competent.

A study by Morley and Aynsley found that the sorts of information employers use in their recruitment process, league tables included, have a very significant potential to 'undermine equity and widening participation initiatives', because, although the employers who were surveyed in the projected on the one hand stated that the least amount of emphasis in the recruitment process was on graduate 'quality and standards' and rather on 'interpersonal and communication skills', over 25% of said employers used 'Top 20' lists for recruitment decision making and over 80% of them 'cited the importance of institutional reputation' (Morley & Aynsley, 2007, p. 229). This reputation was not limited to actual league tables even, but also extended to 'grapevine knowledge, personal knowledge, performance of past graduates, prejudice against new universities' and even 'imagined league tables' (Morley and Aynsley, 2007, p. 229). Essentially, the study found that not only is the notion of employability bound up in and determined by a number of discriminative, spurious variables that demonise non-elite universities, but that the systems and schemes to aid social mobility and generate fair opportunities for disadvantaged students are undermined at the last stage in the process by a rigid, prejudicial recruitment culture. Employers must be deincentivized from championing not only league tables and rankings as the definitive proxy for academic quality, but other false factors that make up associated reputation, and a shift in the narrow, associative-reputation-centered perception of human capital to a more individual-student-centered measurement process must be achieved lest all the Widening Access initiatives and retention increasing policies be undermined at the final stage of social mobility; employment.

> "…you know what one of the funniest things was? I dropped out of *(University C)* right…and it's a pretty highly ranked Red Brick. The firm I work in now…when I applied to it a few years ago I had a joint interview with another applicant…this guy who'd actually graduated from (*a low ranked University)*…got the Bachelor's and everything. But the fact I'd done a year at *(University C)* came up and I ended up getting the position. Half of me thinks they thought 'he got into *(University C)?* Wow!'" (P5)

I.ii

Tabulation Culture As Unavoidable

To establish such a giant cultural shift is obviously no easy task. To revisit Wallace's notion of modernity, in that contemporary culture fetishizes 'measurability' to such a degree that whatever is immeasurable 'fails to have meaning', might serve as groundwork for how to

approach the problem of league tables; some form of measurement, whether it be rankings, Russell Group Universities, degree classification etc., is practically unavoidable considering the collective cultural default. However, if league tables and rankings broadened the factors of what contributes to their institutional score to include a much more varied, individual-capability focused set of weights, instead of the lofty amounts of attention paid to research prowess and citations, it might give a fairer representation of the actual academic quality of graduates. Essentially, the problem is that the majority of scores that give a University a high ranking are based on institutional research merits and not student capability, and yet, employers only target a very small number of highly ranked universities on the basis that those students that graduate from said universities are the best. Mantz and York (2003) similarly purport that leagues tables need to refocus on better reflecting 'educational gain' and 'outcomes' rather than being driven by input - "the primary determinant of a university's position in a league table is the class profile of its students" (Hall, 2010).

One suggestion is to, instead of relying on the current league tables that pit institutions against each other based on mostly factors that have no bearing on student capability ('profitability, market share and growth are the acid tests of performance') Gunn & Hill conceive a number of new league tables that focus more on individual factors, perhaps split according to discipline, degree classification, and perhaps even take into consideration disadvantaged background (Gunn & Hill, 2008, p. 274). What is most important though is that there is a shift from input related measures to output related measures, specifically at the individual student level, and that these new output focused measurement systems are endorsed by government and institutions alike so that they bear enough credibility to be considered by employers (Dill, 2005). In the same sense that there is an issue with elite institutions reinforcing their own esteem, there is also an issue of elite league tables perpetuating their own reputation, such as The Times and The Guardian, who's editors, it might be worth noting, attended The University of York and The University of Oxford respectively.

I.iii

Rankings Reform

The actual credibility of league tables notwithstanding, the influence they have in the agency and decision making processes of both students and employers is undeniable. RE the former, for example, consider the instance in 1998 when the Johnson School of Management ascended 10 places from 18th to 8th on the Business Week league table and consequently the student applications for the following year rose by 50 percent. League

tables do not seem to be going anywhere. Many of the studies mentioned above that critique their legitimacy are from many years ago and very little has changed in terms of their presence in the Higher Education system. Given that there is a culture of measurability, and employers also desire a proxy for quality, league tables are here to stay; the reform must therefore either concern a fundamental change in which variables are considered when making up institutional scores, or, the creation of a number of varying league tables which are measured on different merits that have some form of official recognition the way The Times rankings does. Essentially, as per the recommendation from The Higher Education Academy in 'Dimensions of Quality' (2010), league tables need to start reflecting educational gain and become outcome oriented, which will drive the implicit relationship between employers, students and employability to fairer grounds, particularly for disadvantaged students who's 'input' criteria does not stand them in equal stead with privileged students (Gibbs, 2010). The tendency for prejudiced employer perceptions of 'reputation' and 'value' must be addressed too, as this serves as a major blockade to social mobility; a graduate's actual academic competency can be disregarded by imagined associations that are grounded in no statistical evidence at all, but based on discriminative imaginations, personal judgement and opinion.

II

Inadequate Careers Advice Support

Another problem at the employability level, as mentioned briefly in the introduction, is the severe lack of information available to students regarding both general and specific career advice. A Future First report (2012 - Future First, Social Mobility, Careers Advice & Alumni Networks) professed that social mobility isn't only being impeded by 'persisting educational/income qualities alone', but also largely by students being deprived of sufficient careers advice. McKinsey (2012) found in a survey that only 46% of students knew about 'job openings or wages when choosing what to study', and only 40% of them knew anything about 'which universities had the highest graduation/ successful job-placement rates'. The survey addressed students from nine countries in total, and the students from the UK were noted to be 'the least well informed' with regards to career information (McKinsey, 2012). Another survey by CBI (2016) found that 82% of employers in the UK reported that the 'quality of careers advice that young people receive is not good enough to help them make informed decisions about future career options' and actually only 3% found the quality of information regarding careers advice to be at all 'adequate' (CBI, 2016b, p. 43 as cited in *Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning,* p. 68). Ofsted (2013) similarly found that 80% of high schools were not providing effective levels of career advice.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do with my degree when I finish. No idea. It's a terrifying thought. My parents…my family are always asking me 'what do you want to be?' and I don't know. Nobody has ever told me what I can be." (P1)

The Careers and Enterprise Company (2016) noted that the success of careers advice in the UK depends on region, finding that the worst career support systems were in rural and post-industrial areas, typically where socio-economically disadvantaged students tend to come from. Conversely, the greatest career advice support systems were found in areas London with high socio-economy and its surrounding counties. Though careers related support is generally quite nationally inadequate, there is also some evidence to suggest that disadvantaged students are worse affected still by this inadequacy.

There are several obvious reasons as to why career advice in the UK is so dire. Firstly, as suggested by the CBI report (2016), is that the fast and frequently changing nature of jobs, largely due to neoliberal market competition and the technologisation of services, has meant that career advice becomes quickly outdated or irrelevant on account of its failure to keep up with the rapidly changing job market. As mentioned in previous sections, this fast changing contemporary environment conceives a lingering notion of uncertainty, and career advice support systems are in no way an exception to being negatively affected by this uncertainty. Another reason is that in the last decade the funding for the career advice department Connexions, a government agency conceived off the back of the Learning and Skills Act dedicated to the guidance and support of young students, had its funding cut by over £200 million, which according to the UK Careers Sector Strategy Forum (*Submission to Call for Evidence*, 2011) resulted firstly in the loss of 4000 career advisors and therefore the deprivation of information for students, but also eventually in its dissolution as a coherent agency, instead having its core principals adopted at random and to varying degrees of willingness by local authorities.

II.i

Evaluation Systems - Gatsby Benchmarks and National Careers Service

Also, as with both Widening Access and retention initiatives, one of the main problems with career guidance is the current absence of methodical, comprehensive evaluation that shows which elements of policies are working and which aren't. The lack of observed evaluation regarding career guidance policy appears to be the greatest shortcoming at the moment. There are, however, a few recent research projects which have endeavoured to analyse

career guidance policy, most notably Hooley et al.'s (2014) report for the Sutton Trust, which located the main weaknesses being poor coordination between policy goals and actual implementation in institutions (similar to the failings of Widening Access and retention RE the 'policy rhetoric gap') and the little attention afforded to 'systematic measurement of policy impact'. Hooley et al (2014) note that the only previous instance of examining this area was the Ofsted review in 2012 which, to a lesser detailed extent, located the same shortcomings.

(Gatsby Charitable Foundation (2014) *Good Career Guidance*, Appendix 5. London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation)

Gatsby Benchmark 1 A stable careers programme	Gatsby Benchmark 2 Learning from labour market information	Gatsby Benchmark 3 Addressing the needs of every pupil	Gatsby Benchmark 4 Linking curriculum learning to careers
Gatsby Benchmark 5 Encounters with employers and employees	Gatsby Benchmark 6 Experiences of workplaces	Gatsby Benchmark 7 Encounters with further and higher education	Gatsby Benchmark 8 Personal guidance

The Gatsby Benchmarks were subsequently introduced off the back of the dissolution of Connexions as a set of 8 distinct guidelines to measure careers education, information and guidance by. Research by Hooley et al. (2014) found that '50% of the schools investigated met three out of eight benchmarks, 31% of schools met four, and 13% achieved five', all indicative of widespread failing support systems. However, there is some confusion regarding what exactly the Gatsby Benchmarks are supposed to be. Many institutions and researchers alike employ the Gatsby Benchmarks as an accountability measure for the success or failure of careers guidance, yet the Senior Advisor of the Gatsby Foundation and

conceiver of the benchmarks themselves, Sir John Holman, expressed that they should not be used as an accountability measure (Outstanding Careers Website, *Quality Control and Assessment,* 2019), but merely a set of recommendations. Not only is there the problem of, as shown in the data above, institutions failing to meet some of those recommendations, but also the problem of institutions potentially meeting all of the guidelines and then being wholly satisfied that their careers guidance is 100% successful and there is no room for improvement.

As regards the first problem, there is the irony of institutions themselves not being guided in how to guide students. This is likely as a result of the sudden lack of financial support from the government and the institutional pressure to prioritise other areas than careers guidance– such as, as mentioned earlier, those things that boost league table measures. However, the National Careers Service is one main publically funded UK agency that seeks to offer careers guidance to students based on a set of clear goals. It's goals are also admirable; 'the Government aims for the National Careers Service to have the capacity to help 700,000 adults face-to-face each year, handle up to one million telephone advice sessions and provide 20 million online sessions', it's guidance is extensive; 'CV writing, understanding the job market, searching and applying for jobs, interview techniques, searching for courses and training schemes, finding funding to support learning, finding out

about volunteering opportunities to help develop work skills, identifying key strengths and skills, exploring career options, choosing training routes, developing a plan for career goals', and it's attention to detail, especially regarding tailored support, is almost excessive for an agency that operates exclusively in England, by, for example, offering services in all of the following languages; 'Farsi, French, Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Sylheti and Urdu' (National Careers Service Website). There is also a very clear cut, rigorously detailed evaluation process of its operations, releasing an annual 'National Careers Service: Customer Satisfaction and Progression Report' (pictured) which is typically no less than 60 pages of exhaustive self-assessment and consequent recommendations.

This clear, detailed, routine approach to evaluation is perhaps, alongside its extensive list of services offered, its greatest asset, particularly considering the current climate of social mobility-related policy and its general lack of evaluative measures.

However, this is somewhat of a double edged sword. The National Careers service is split into many organisations across the UK and each one of these organisations is funded differently depending on their 'results', as in, how successful each organisation was in various elements of the evaluative process, such as 'satisfied customers', 'successful career development of client' etc. The annual report therefore determines, very strictly, how funding is

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awarded (Hooley, 2020).

II.ii

The Psychological Implications of Performance Based Funding on Career Advisors i.e. 'The Paradox of Pay Performance'

This system of performance based funding is what Osborne and Gaebler refer to as 'The New Accountability', and has become a popular neoliberal phenomenon across many contemporary organisations (Osborne & Gaebler, 1994 as cited in Burke, 2002). However, there is reason to believe that performance based funding serves to the detriment of the National Careers Service, and therefore social mobility, on account of the discord between the nature of the organisation and the psychological implications of performance-funding on the employees. That is, Alfie Kohn (1993) in his critique 'Punished By Rewards' asserted that performance funding systems 'vitiate interest in, and commitment to, work'. Given that the nature of the National Careers Service, which champions personal connections between advisors and students by encouraging face-to-face meetings, and expects the advisor to guide the student on very personal, long-term trajectory life choices, an 'interest in and commitment to' the work is essential for its success, this is not a job you can approach half-heartedly if eventual social mobility is to be achieved in the long run. A research project by Christie found that careers advisors displayed a commitment that not only 'enabled and motivated' students, but made them 'resilient in turbulent environments'; this commitment was founded in a 'strong sense of responsibility' for students, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Christie, 2015, p. 81). By Kohn's (1993) token, injecting a National Careers Service branch with the sudden stress of performance based funding, which is currently the case, debases the advisors' incentives to properly commit to the student, which leads to disengagement between both parties, bad advice given, and in the long term, negatively affects social mobility. This theory is also backed up by Moynihan (2008), who suggests that, given those who work in public service usually have a default tendency to possess 'strong intrinsic motivations' anyway, introducing a market model 'may actually reduce performance'.

Alongside the negative psychological implications of performance based funding on an organisation such as the National Careers Service, there is also the case of it failing in many other regards. Kellough and Lu (1993, ROPPA) collate a vast amount of empirical evidence that determines this system of funding 'repeatedly proves to be unworkable' across various types of organisations, for various reasons. They also conclude that despite this evidence of continuous failure, 'government is still reluctant to abandon it'. This is what

Bowman (2010) refers to as ‘failure syndrome’, in that though the system of performance based funding consistently fails, especially for organisations such as the National Careers Service which relies on intrinsic interest, commitment and the conception of authentic personal relationships between the careers advisors and students, it has become the ‘new normal’ in the contemporary political environment. Bowman also points out that with the implementation of performance funding comes the ‘major administrative undertaking’ of having to continuously ‘re-evaluate motivation and productivity’ (2008, p. 78). This sheds a new light on the annual National Careers Service: Customer Satisfaction and Progression Report, which I previously referred to as an exemplary account of evaluation. Through the lens of Bowman’s (2010) cynicism, such an evaluative process could actually be viewed in two separate negative ways. One is that such a huge, detailed report is not only an expense that could be spent elsewhere, but also time that could be spent elsewhere; ‘elsewhere’ in both these scenarios meaning careers advice to needing students. Secondly, there is no doubt that the annual report changes its measures, variables, format, focuses, recommendations etc. every year; it constantly has to be revised as a process in itself to keep up with certain fluctuating accountabilities and concentrations. This becomes another huge administrative task, the detriments of which are similar to the former point. This is perhaps what we might refer to as the ‘paradox of evaluation’: the more stringent the accountability process, the more time and money is spent on evaluative measures, which in turn takes away from the time and money spent on the very things the evaluative measures are assessing the success of.

With an eye to achieving social mobility, the government must aid external careers guidance organisations with the most appropriate means of funding so as to support and encourage their initiative to the maximum means of success. The psychological stress of meeting benchmarks in order to secure performance based funding takes away from the quality of service the advisors can provide students, and this creates an unneeded barrier to social mobility for disadvantaged students.

II.iii

Student Agency, Social Background and Community Interaction Theory

Within Higher Education institutions, there are no real nationally implemented, official benchmarks as to how careers guidance services should operate, but the Quality Assurance Agency makes some broad, relatively unspecific suggestions that are meant to be interpreted by different institutions to fit their respective contexts. Christie (2015, p. 72) points out that the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services doesn’t even bother

to offer frequent evaluations of university careers guidance operations on account of it being very difficult to make 'exact recommendations' given the 'diverse characteristics of universities'. Roberts (2013, as cited in Christie, 2015, p. 74) also points out that career advisors are 'severely limited in what they can achieve' given how 'structurally determined' (as in structural determinism) the careers guidance system is; individual agency, whilst it can be to some extent guided, is mostly 'regulated by social background and geography'. In the same sense that widening participation and retention initiatives can't be wholly solved with financial incentives, nor can the problem of employability be wholly solved by careers guidance, as disadvantaged students tend to be most agentically susceptible to the socio-cultural environment from which they have come.

> "An opportunity came up for us both…my dad's friend had a business and he was looking for workers at the time. We just took it. We knew him and…it was the area we grew up…a safe option. If we'd had a meeting with a careers advisor at the time…I don't know-" (P7) "-they'd have definitely advised against it. Definitely." (P6)

Greenbank (similarly contends that working-class students 'are more likely to use their own informal connections for careers advice' instead of actual careers guidance services, which leads to 'irrational career decision making' (Greenbank, 2011 as cited in Christie, 2015, p. 75) 'Informal connections' is of course in large part the individual's socio-environment.

However, Clegg and Rowland contrastingly assert that socio-environment does not have to 'determine fate', and argue that the powerful structural determinism that skews disadvantaged student agency with regards to perceiving available opportunities can be corrected with 'appropriate support' (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, as cited in Christie, 2015, p. 75). Law's Community Interaction Theory serves to back this up (Law, 1981). Law also recognises that the social environment we are in affects the way we think and serves to guide our agency, and, in the case of disadvantaged students growing up in places where perhaps Higher Education isn't seen as either 'the done-thing' or a safe payoff, the social environment tends to affect this agency to the detriment of pursuing available opportunities to enhance individual social mobility. However, unlike Roberts (2013), Law makes the important distinction between how environments affect our agency and the actual opportunities available, asserting that to become aware of the former is to open up a clear pathway to the latter. Essentially, he believes that the opportunities for successful social mobility are always there, regardless of being disadvantaged or not, but we need to deconstruct how people perceive those opportunities negatively on account of how they're psychologically influenced by their socio-context. To borrow Bennett's (1971) phrase, socio-

environment often constitutes a 'veil of perception' which not only clouds the available career opportunities, but actively discourages pursuance of them, because the 'veil' casts those opportunities in an unfavourable light.

Law acknowledges a Development Identity Theory basis in conceiving his own theory, stating that those people we are surrounded by, particularly in our formative years whilst we are developing our identities, affect our opinions, decisions, judgements and perceptions. Most notably, he reminds us of 'Expectations', meaning the boundaries of acceptability within a community, 'Feedback', meaning how others in our social context judge us, and 'Modelling', which refers to how we tend to follow the example of others in our social context. Each of these social aspects of communities, varying from community to community, have a huge impact on not only our agency, but how we perceive opportunity, for the worse or the better depending on that community.

> "When I go home during Christmas and meet my older aunties and uncles…let's just say they don't get it. They've never been to University…they probably can't spell it. I'm joking…but I'm not. Right? But then my friends, people my age from home who I grew up with…who don't go to University…they're all really supportive, they think it's great. I think it's a generational thing…you know… like who gets it and who doesn't." (P4)

There is also the problem of 'shared folklore' amongst disadvantaged student about careers advisors, with a research study by Christie (2015) finding that careers advisors are consistently depicted as discouraging, '*you can't do that'*-type figures, though this depiction is widely contested by those advisors themselves. Nonetheless, this 'folklore' seems to hold strong amongst disadvantaged students.

> "…I can't bring myself to go to the careers office though. There is one there on campus…but I can't do it. I'm gonna go in, say what I want to be, and they're gonna laugh at me." (P2)

This could very possibly be connected to the previously mentioned 'veil' of altered perception on account of the socio-environment of a disadvantaged individual, particularly because of the working-class tendency of 'elective solidarity' – i.e. the systems of who to trust and distrust based relatability; careers advisors are typically educated and qualified, and for many disadvantaged students this immediately becomes somebody they distrust

(Raudenbush, 2016).

II.iv

In Spite of 'A Numbers Game' – A 9th Gatsby Benchmark

Revisiting the second problem with the Gatsby Benchmarks, i.e. that it's not obviously clear that they're guidelines as opposed to official accountability measures, institutions fall into the trap of false qualities proxies once again, whereby a university that has ticked 6 benchmarks is seen as better than one that has only ticked 5, which is clearly not always the case. One careers advisor from the Christie research project (2015) said of this – 'the parts of our work that are probably most valued by students are actually least valued by management and the institution – we seem to have moved into a numbers game. Impact and influence is measured by numbers'. The Outstanding Careers website suggests one way to remedy this problem – to add a 9th, self-reflective benchmark entitled 'Evaluation and Improvement', which serves as a sort of Janusian, simultaneously forward-looking and retrospective benchmark that evaluates the extent to which all the previous benchmarks have been successfully achieved, and seeks to further improve them. This final benchmark renders the Gatsby measures constantly cyclical as opposed to 'ticked off' or completable; the necessity of an improvement measure makes the institutions constantly re-evaluate its own careers advice performance.

II.v

'Vulnerability' and the Problem of Semantics

Hooley et al. (2014) imply that under the currently failing system the three necessary requisites for attaining good career guidance are to 'live in the right local authority', 'go to the right school' and 'be defined as vulnerable'. The former two indicate issues of geography and imply that there is the issue of a nationally unhomogenised career supports system, whereby the quality of available career guidance ultimately depends on the area and the specific institution. The latter requisite suggests that being 'vulnerable' actually stands you in better stead for acquiring good careers advice, which on the surface of things appears to be a positive for disadvantaged students. However, as ever, a complex issue of semantics arises. Langley et al. (2014) found that whilst students who came under the category of 'vulnerable' were entitled to more and better quality career guidance than those who didn't, the factors that constitute vulnerability are 'highly variable' and are oftentimes unduly narrowed to exclusively mean such blanket elements as 'learning difficulties' or 'difficult personal circumstances'. 'Vulnerability' is therefore left a complex and inadequately defined concept in this context, and is highly in need of some parameters of meaning so that the

correct disadvantaged students are honoured with the necessary support provisions. Policy makers might be conscious of Bronnikov's (2008) notion of 'clarity gradability', in that different inferences often tend to have different grades of clarity. On the back of this concept, 'vulnerability' could feasibly, rather than 'vulnerable or not vulnerable', be a spectrum, accounting for the vast complexities of the category, hopefully to the end of not missing anybody out purely because they don't fit a simplified checklist as seems to be the current case.

Hooley at al. (2014) also find evidence of the connection between poor attendance of High School and low socioeconomic status, and in turn, an association between 'persistent absences and low achieving students'. Given that in the majority of cases, good grades are a prerequisite for University courses, careers advice should extend to endeavouring to increase attendance, or at least a shift in focus to the present; making students understand that low attendance at present is detrimental to their employment opportunities in the long run is extremely important.

> "Ever since we started doing lectures and seminars on zoom, it's like the professors don't care whether we attend or not. I missed two last week…nobody ever chased me down about it. I've noticed certain people who haven't been in any of the zoom lectures since we started. Nobody seems to be bothered about it." (P1)

In conclusion to this section, careers advice guidance is fairly complex, in that it is affected not only by how much it is funded and in which manner it is funded, but also by a whole host of socio-environment-related matters which alter the student's perception of opportunity. It is therefore not just about 'which job suits you', but rather about setting the precedent of achieving goals, developing engagement and responsibilities, and breaking down the barriers created by limitive social-background. Killen et al. confirm that good careers advice helps disadvantaged students 'understand the relationship between educational goals as access to occupational goals', and also, ideally, should involve employers in the process. This segues into the next section which will assess some schemes that push to help disadvantaged students gain work experience, years in industry and placements.

III

Work Experience

There has been a reasonable amount of research that attests to the success of yearlong

work placements during a bachelor's degree, in that those students who complete such placements have a much better employment rate and salary both 6 months after graduation and 7 years after graduation (Brooks & Youngson, 2014; Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Wilton, 2011, 2012 as cited in Brooks, 2016). However, there has been extremely little research regarding whether such placements, when undertaken by specifically disadvantaged students, can assist social mobility (Crawford & Wang, 2019). It is well noted that the current government attests to the notion that these work placements will 'help underprivileged students' on account of elite businesses recruiting graduates primarily based on 'relevant work experience' rather than their backgrounds, and said work placements will thus serve to 'eradicate the social reproduction of inequality' (Ashley & Empson, 2017, p. 222), but this is wholly at odds with a whole host of other research studies which claim it is extremely difficult for disadvantaged students to even secure these work placements because , for one, elite profession placements are often by word of mouth to those in the know, and therefore disadvantaged students lack the 'social connections' required to even become aware of the opportunity, and secondly, the majority of all work placements are unpaid, and therefore disadvantaged students typically do not have the economy to support a year of unpaid work (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013 as cited in Wang & Crawford, 2018).

III.i

The Three Manifestations of Cultural Capital

In fact, three manifestations of 'cultural capital' are noted as being essential prerequisites in a student that elite professions seek out in the recruitment process, and the problem is that there is a close association between these cultural capitals and privileged social backgrounds (Ashley & Empson, 2017, p. 214). Firstly, 'institutional capital' is both the prestige of the university which has sort of been passed down to the student by association and the classification of degree attained, a 1st being better than a 2:1 for example. Secondly, 'embodied capital', (also referred to by Bourdieu as 'habitus') refers to the general dispositions, communicative skills, appearance and demeanour of a student. Thirdly, 'social capital' refers to a student's interest in, understanding of and propensity to the line of work they desire to be in (Ashley & Empson, 2017, p. 214).

It is this second manifestation of cultural capital I shall focus on in this next section, it being the most problematic barrier to disadvantaged students in achieving social mobility. The reason why 'embodied capital' is so important to and 'deeply entrenched in' the 'organisational habitus of elite employers' is because the success of these firms often relies

heavily on the social and hierarchical power amassed by prestige, which in both maintained and perpetuated by the kinds of individuals it recruits (Ashley & Empson, 2017). Therefore, the recruitment strategy must be homogenous; focusing on those graduates that possess the correct habitus so as to further the organisation's 'symbolic capital' of elite status is imperative to institutional survival; any such 'deviation' from this strategy is thus considered as having the potential to be a catastrophic detriment to the preservation of elite status (Ashley & Empson, 2017).

III.ii

A Necessary Habitus Shift?

Essentially, when it comes to work placements and therefore future employability, the 'gilded circle of privilege' will only become stronger and prevent social mobility unless there is a system in place that can endow disadvantaged students with the necessary means to shift habitus, or, induce a sort of cultural mimetic isomorphism so that their habitus becomes one of desirability for elite employers. Studies show that this is indeed possible, such as Lee and Kramer who found out that 'working class students who are fully integrated and have achieved academic success at university can consolidate their working-class habitus with the upper middle-class culture of the academic field' (Lee & Kramer, 2013). A long term fix would perhaps attack the culture of employer prestige, which seems to value embodied capital over actual academic capability, but for the purposes of time and the limitations ergo set by the size of this project, the focus of this section will be on how disadvantaged students can indeed adopt the correct habitus so as to be appealing to employers.

Crawford and Wang, in their summary of Bourdieu's philosophy of habitus, suggests that yearlong placements themselves are the surest way for disadvantaged students to begin their 'habitus transformation', by acquiring the necessary forms of embodied capital directly from the environment of the elite organisations themselves. The theory is that elite employers, seeing that a graduate (even if from a disadvantaged background or non-elite university) already has work experience from a placement with a similar elite employer, will assume there has been a certain amount of 'professional-oriented habitus' development (Crawford & Wang, 2019).

> "There's fitting in and then there's changing who you are. I'm not changing my accent just so people feel more comfortable around me…or it makes me look more educated in an interview. I'm not doing it." (P3)

The issue of course, as outlined in the finding above from Participant 3, is that habitus shift might actually be seen as not only demeaning, but a call to sacrifice parts of your identity that are important to you. Whether habitus shift is the most ethical way for disadvantaged students to gain cultural capital then is a point of contention.

III.iii
The Problem of Class/Cultural Matching

However, the main cultural problem in the UK that overrides the possibility for disadvantaged students to advance their social mobility through habitus transformation in the first place is the idea of 'class matching' (Bourdieu, 1990), an idea similarly referred to later by DiMaggio as 'cultural matching' (DiMaggio, 1992, p. 127). It is essentially the process of aligning the individual habitus (i.e. all the factors that make up social background, personal cultural milieu, etc.) to the habitus of an organisation, whether it be a University or a business. Class-matching is a phenomenon that occurs on multiple levels of execution, in that students with a certain habitus will typically seek out institutions with a corresponding habitus to belong to, and institutions/businesses (as outlined in the previous paragraph) tend to recruit students with the corresponding habitus for a multitude of reasons (such as, again, maintaining levels of elite status). This sort of 'class matching' activity is evidence by Dunne, King, & Ahrens (2014, p. 1648), who found that 'upper middle class students have a much greater tendency to apply to higher status universities in the UK than working class students'. The problem that arises from the seemingly unavoidable culture of class-matching is that privileged students will most likely secure the majority of elite placements on account of their matching habitus, and disadvantaged students will secure low-status placements on account of theirs. Class matching is an element of UK culture that seems to galvanise the gild of privilege even more.

> "There are some pretty good work placements on my course…huge businesses…like, very elite. I'm just not sure whether I have the confidence to even go for them. I can't imagine me working for places like that. And moreover, I can't imagine places like that wanting me." (P4)

This statement is backed up by a research study by Riviera (2012); by my knowledge the only in depth qualitative study to consider the impact of cultural matching in the case of elite professional service firm recruitment. She argues that recruitment is not, as it is commonly posited, simply a process of 'skills sorting', but rather a complex process of cultural matching, whereby employers seek not only academic aptitude from, but cultural similarities

with, the graduates they hire, such as, but not limited to, 'leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles'. The study found that cultural similarities were 'highly salient' to recruiters, particularly in elite firms, and in many cases even 'outweighed concerns about absolute productivity' (Riviera, 2012). In her study she found that recruiters prioritised 'cultural fit' far more than those other factors we might have previously assumed would mean the most, such as qualifications, and as a result of this historical neglect to the impact of cultural matching in employability, she asserts that this topic has been massively 'undertheorized' (Riviera, 2012). In this sense, recruitment to elite firms can be seen as misunderstood 'gatekeeping mechanisms that facilitate career opportunities' for those privileged students with the correct cultural capital, whilst simultaneously a barrier to those disadvantaged students without it; 'hiring is a critical site of economic stratification and social closure' (Elliot & Smith 2004).

III.iv

Cultural Similarity As Currency

Grounded in both older psychological and sociological theory, such as the 'Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis' (Byrne, 1971) and the Homophily Principle (Larzarsfeld and Merton, 1954), and newer notions such as 'Groupthink' and 'Echo Chambers', all of which allude to the fact that humans not only seek out connection through a means of similarity, but also seek to reproduce a social environment whereby that similarity remains unthreatened by deviating factors regardless of the potentially irrational decision making that results from it, the hiring process is clearly a manifestation of all these terms. Graves and Powell (2014), like Riviera, believe that employers often place more attention on the subjective, interpersonal factors that constitute homophily than they do on actual academic capability or qualifications. Bourdieu thus asserts that cultural similarity is currency; that is has an 'economic conversion value' (Bourdieu, 1986). This does of course work both ways, in that elite employers seek to hire graduates with elitist cultural capital, just as non-elite, or, low status employers might discriminate against the very same elitist factors. But the problem is that for successful social mobility, disadvantaged students must presented fair opportunities to participate in elite jobs, which primarily offer greater financial rewards, and the commonly misunderstood conception is that good grades allows this opportunity. As in the studies mentioned above, this is clearly not the case, with cultural capital, cultural fit, and cultural similarities all being championed in elite settings as above and beyond qualifications or capabilities. Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale (2006) found that whilst elite firms were at least moderately interested in 'surface-level diversity' (i.e. demographic) in applications from graduates, what they were primarily interested in at the actual job interview was 'deep level

cultural homogeneity'.

III.v

Career Funnelling

This notion is also reciprocated by elite university campuses. A study by Binder et al. (2015) found that prestigious Higher Education institutions typically host on-campus corporate recruitment exclusively for elite finance, consulting and high-tech jobs. Not only do the elite employers target only the elite universities, but the elite universities similarly only host on-campus recruitment fairs for elite jobs, ultimately creating a self-perpetuating system of elitist cultural capital, whereby students at prestigious universities are effectively 'funnelled' into prestigious jobs. The on-campus recruitment environment at elite universities seeks to establish Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital having an economic value, and the fact that those students belong to elite institutions means that they have the rare opportunity to buy into elite jobs. Conversely, low-ranking institutions are neglected by elite employers, and therefore disadvantaged students are largely neglected the opportunity. In the rare instances that disadvantaged students attend elite universities, there is still the huge problem, as mentioned above, of 'cultural matching', in that typically, a three year bachelor's degree at an elite university is not typically enough time for a habitus-shift. One notable element of this is 'linguistic capital', which was noted by Riviera (2012) as being extremely important to employers. Disadvantaged students are more likely to have regional accents or dialects, whereas privileged students are more likely to speak in Received Pronunciation. Though habitus-shift is possible for disadvantaged students, and certain elements of cultural capital can be obtained/learned from experiences studying at elite universities, dialect and accents rarely change in such a short amount of time, and dialect and accents typically embody extremely potent cultural associations.

> "My mum told me this story about when she was in a job interview…her and this other woman that she'd grown up with had gone in for the same position to be a secretary at a law firm. It ended up being that they both got the job…another position came available at the right time and they both got a job there. Some months later my mum came across some papers…some notes that the employer had written in the interview. It turned out that if there had only been one position, the other woman would have gotten it. Next to this woman's name the employer had written 'no trace of regional accent' and a big tick." (P3)

Perhaps a large part of the problem of cultural matching stems from the fact that the people

leading the hiring processes at elite firms are typically those who will end up working with the candidate, have had minimal training in ethical recruitment practices, and are essentially not actual Human Resource Representatives (Riviera, 2012). One fix would be to encourage the government to implement fairer recruitment practises at especially elite firms in order to reduce the amount of subjective discriminations that recruiters are prone to in aid of finding their desired cultural fit in an employee. Instead, more emphasis should be placed on academic ability, future goals, work ethic, etc.

III.vi

Addressing the Elite Elephant in the Room

Something else that needs to be addressed is that barely any recognition of the above information is acknowledged by employment schemes, policy, Higher Education institutions or academics alike.

Guile and Lahiff acknowledge that work experience helps students 'develop expertise: knowledge, skill and judgement' as is the default acknowledgement regarding employability skills, but also 'social capital: the networks to help them secure employment' (Guile and Lahiff, 2013, p. 302). However, whilst they recognise this latter point, i.e. the extreme importance of social capital in the employment process, they fail to detail the elitist culture currently in place, whereby it is the norm that complex, subjective discriminations are afforded to students by elite employers, and that in a huge number of instances, disadvantaged students are by default mostly unable to attain the necessary social capital on account of their upbringing, family connections and economy to honour elite recruiters' quotas for cultural fit.

In a 'Submission to Call for Evidence' report on student employability (2011), it was stated that employers are looking for 'skills' which are developed through 'academic study, work experience and extra-curricular activity'. The supposed edge to these findings was that it pointed out that employers put a great deal of value on 'overall student experience' rather than just 'academic credentials'. This is of course true, but it oversimplifies the case massively. Similarly, if we look to a large, government funded nationwide initiative, such as the Employability Statements and Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR, 2007), we can see that 'employability skills' are indeed varied enough to include an extensive list of practical and academic skills like 'interview techniques', 'job-searching skills', 'good curriculum vitae', as well as generic skills like 'teamwork', 'organisational and communication skills', and also personal skills like 'punctuality', 'self-confidence' and 'discipline'. With this in

mind as the prime example of how enhancing employability is perceived, i.e., an exhaustive list of skills that can be taught by institutions and through work experience to students in order to boost their chances of becoming employed, the problem is that this perception of employability, as with practically all other policy and academic literature on the matter, doesn't take into consideration, firstly, the default cultural differences between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, in that, they don't approach and acquire 'employability skills' in the same ways, and secondly, the complexity of said cultural capital, particularly in how it influences employers, and especially elite employers. Virtually no policy or student employment initiatives, to the best of the authors knowledge, acknowledges this extremely potent, socio-cultural phenomenon, and there has been only one study that recognises it and its huge impact on employability, disadvantaged students and social mobility (Riviera, 2012).

III.vii

Collaborations Between Universities and Employers

A suggestion, therefore, would be for non-elite universities to endeavour to collaborate/develop relationships with elite employers, by not only securing recruitment fairs on campus, but creating work-placement schemes with them, under the assumption that those more disadvantaged students, having been given the opportunity to develop elements of elite cultural capital whilst on the placement, will have a better chance at securing an elite job in the future, not just because of the experience gained but because of their better chance at developing the embodied capital needed for cultural fit. The Wilson Review (2012, *A Review of Business* – University Collaboration), which studied the relationships between Higher Education institutions and employers suggested that careers service departments within the university should 'establish a skills supply chain' between them and local businesses. Given that universities are both formally required to provide a statement on employability and employability prospects, as per the Higher Education Funding Council for England: Circular Letter 12/2010 on Employability Statements (2010), and also presumably in the university's best interest to have good rates of graduate employment for the sake of their reputation, status and league table rankings, it should do everything in its power to empower its internal careers service department to develop relationships with businesses, preferably high paying/elite ones, and serve as a well informed and active mediator between disadvantaged students and said businesses.

One example of this is the Graduate Internship Programme at Teesside University, which offers a three month paid placement with a local business. Lee, a member of staff at

the institution notes that Teesside University has 'an ethos of widening participation', placing priority focus on disadvantaged students from the local area (Lee, 2014, p. 355). What's especially interesting about the programme is that it endeavours to 'create and imbed an increasing number of graduate level jobs in the locality' (Lee, 2014, p. 355). In one sense, as is posited by Lee, this is a positive employment initiative, not only on account of its focus on disadvantaged students, but also because of its local focus, in that it seeks to boost region-specific academic talent/business and therefore both conceives and perpetuates regional growth – this being especially important for social mobility on account of the number of disadvantaged students local to the area who are now clearly aware of an institution-to-employment narrative aimed specifically at them. In another sense, it is arguable that this programme, given that it is aimed at disadvantaged students from a low-ranking university in a post-industrial, largely underfunded area, actually serves to perpetuate social immobility. In the same way that elite students are funnelled into elite jobs, this could be seen as the converse: non-elite students being funnelled into non-elite jobs (the business named in the programme being a Steelworks Company). Therefore, on the one hand it is an admirable scheme in terms of disadvantaged students having the opportunity to partake in work experience, which works well in their favour in terms of future employment and fulfils the first, basic step of social mobility, but it simultaneously drives the gap between high and low prestige jobs ever wider, by failing to counteract the 'gilded privilege' opportunities of the elite. This type of programme offers a non-confrontational alternative to 'gilded privilege' as opposed to a means of stopping its cyclical, amaranthine process.

Another example of university-employer collaboration is the University of Lincoln's partnership with Siemens, which allows the latter direct access to 'a pool of industry ready students' (Milburn, 2012, p. 68). Siemens also aided the establishment of a new engineering school at the campus (https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/businessengagement/industrylinks/), which serves as a good example of reciprocal assistance between the university and the business; the former creates qualified graduates and channels them directly into the business, and in turn, the business funds and aids the university in order to generate more potential workers. This symbiotic relationship between institution and employer can be seen across many universities in the UK, and this does appear to be a step in the correct direction. One possible concern, however, is that it appears to be mostly hard disciplines that boast the most work placement opportunities, and though it is hard to evidence here without investigating every Higher Education institution in the UK, it appears to be much more difficult to find a useful university-industry collaboration for somebody studying English Literature or Classics than it is for somebody studying Engineering or Chemistry. This is a problem for disadvantaged students as there is evidence to show less-science oriented and

more vocational studies are ‘disproportionately favoured by students from lower-income backgrounds’ (Dilnot, 2017 – UCL Institute of Education Website). If the opportunity for hard discipline work placements hugely outweighs that of soft disciplines, and there is evidence to suggest disadvantaged students disproportionately favour the latter, then there is a link between discipline choice and social mobility. This is particularly poignant information in this debate considering there is a lot of evidence to suggest the subjects with the highest market value are computing, medicine, engineering, law and mathematical sciences, and the subjects with the least favourable employment outcomes are art, humanities and languages (Social Mobility big paper). More research should be done on this matter, and then institutions and policy makers should be made conscious of the result, as this connection has, to the best of the author's knowledge, rarely been fully entertained in prior academic literature.

Regardless, Blackmore (et al., 2015) finds that elite recruiters prefer graduates with relevant work experience, and Milburn (2009) attests to the idea that partaking in relevant work placements helps disadvantaged students into ‘high-quality employment’ thus ‘eradicating the social reproduction of inequality’.

> “I'm currently looking at what work placements I can take next year. If I can get a year of experience under my belt, I know for sure that I'd feel one hundred times more confident about getting a job when I graduate.” (P4)

Conclusions and Suggested Further Research

I

How, and to what extent is ‘Widening Access’ currently succeeding and/or failing in achieving long term social mobility for disadvantaged students?

One of the greatest problems with Widening Participation is that there is a significant lack of subsequent evaluations or longitudinal research to chart the success long term. We know for a fact that access to University as a whole has indeed been significantly widened, but the statistics show that disadvantaged students, though attending Higher Education more than ever before, are typically pre-determined to attend low-ranking, non-elite institutions. These types of institutions typically offer less means of gaining cultural capital, less means of

adopting associated prestige, and less opportunities to secure high-quality work placements – all of which give the student a worse chance at social mobility long term, as high-quality employers place huge value on all of these factors, oftentimes more so than academic capability or qualifications. The types of non-elite institutions which have primarily disadvantaged students attending them are also typically less equipped with adequate careers support departments, which again, deprives the student of necessary advice on how best to utilise their opportunities to become socially mobile.

- Which elements of 'Widening Access' need to be addressed on account of their detrimental nature to social mobility for disadvantaged students?

Therefore, participation for participations sake, or "a numbers game", needs to be fundamentally reconsidered. As Murphy et al. state, broad-access institutions do indeed have the ability to play a democratizing role in society by opening up opportunities for disadvantaged students at a rate greater than ever before, but simultaneously, said institutions also have particularly low graduation rates from these students, suggesting that they don't have the support systems in place to adequately see disadvantaged students through the whole process.

- Which elements of 'Widening Access' actually serve to preserve the elite at the expense of disadvantaged students?

On account of Higher Education institutions having become highly differentiated, the problem of exclusivity has become exacerbated (Reay, 2016); elite institutions have become more elite, and low-ranking institutions have effectively become receptacles into which disadvantaged pupils are funnelled. All the while, this preservation of the elite bubble, which also gets stronger and more exclusive the more expansive the Higher Education system becomes, is overshadowed by opulent, flowery rhetoric that paints a picture of the exact opposite, i.e. widening participations success. Similarly, there is a vicious cycle of elite employers only targeting this ever tightening bubble of elite universities and students for graduation recruitment, which simultaneously galvanises further the circle of privilege beyond the education system and caps disadvantaged student opportunity for social mobility at the crucial moment of employment.

II

How does elitist culture, in its various manifestations across the Higher Education system, both induce and exacerbate cultural barriers for disadvantaged students (such as the notions of 'alienation' and 'non-belonging')?

As we now know, 'cultural deficit' alludes to the fact that students are often ill prepared, on account of their upbringing and socio-economy, in terms of having acquired the necessary social, linguistic and cognitive competences needed to perform well in university environments. The cultural milieu a person grows up in is extremely informative to how they operate at university, and disadvantaged students tend to be on the wrong side of this, especially in elite environments which are structurally determined to discriminate against them. There should be, therefore, a sense of duty on part of government, policy makers and the institutions themselves to recognise the feelings of alienation and non-belonging that disadvantaged students oftentimes feel as a result of this cultural clash, and seek to remedy it in the name of enhanced social mobility; non-belonging is evidenced to lead to disengagement, worse grades and dropping out.

> -How, and to what extent can a sense of 'belonging' be facilitated in disadvantaged students to overcome cultural barriers during the university experience in order to increase retention?

A key component of 'Lifelong Learning' policy is concerned with 'normalising' the Higher Education system from as early as possible. Schemes aimed at building up a sense of cultural familiarity between disadvantaged students and University environments, prior to their studies starting, have been known to facilitate belonging, such as 'Flying Start'. 'Belonging' is a concept that develops when students find collective reassurances amongst each other, to the effect of contesting a looming sense of chronic ambiguity. This ambiguity typically occurs when a student is part of an uncertain, culturally incompatible environment, and heightened by a sense of hyper self-awareness. What needs to be achieved to effectively facilitate an adequate sense of belonging is therefore a combination of cultural familiarity with the university environment, be it elite or otherwise, the process of deindividuation so as to reduce the restrictive inhibitions of hyper self-awareness, and to implement systems, whether it be through curriculum or otherwise, that teach disadvantaged students to be reflexive and adaptable, so that when, for example, education is temporarily perceived as a discordant element in the narrative of their identity, they can overcome it. It

has also been noted by both my findings and already existing studies that university societies, clubs and on campus Recreation Centres can successfully facilitate belonging, even to the point of advanced learning outcomes in their unrelated academic studies.

-Is a “habitus shift” the best way to necessitate the required cultural capital needed to become employed at prestigious firms, and why?

The success of elite firms relies quite heavily on the symbolic social power gained from their prestige, which in turn is both generated and perpetuated by the types of graduates it recruits. A habitus shift, or, the process of a disadvantaged student amassing cultural capital in order to qualify as one of these sought-after graduates is indeed a feasible way to transcend the exclusive and discriminatory choosing habits of elite recruiters. The problem with this is that, firstly, there are no initiatives that are fully invested in the concepts of ‘cultural capital attainment’ and ‘habitus shift’, particularly for the purposes of a way of securing elite jobs, and secondly, that this process involves a very sentimental identity shift that some students may not at all be happy with. Work placements seem to be the most ethical, productive and useful ways that disadvantaged students can gain good cultural capital, and therefore institutions should seek to establish better connections with industry if they want to enhance social mobility.

There is also the issue that a lot of the required cultural capital that elite institutions seek cannot be taught, such as family background and connections. I would elect therefore that a habitus shift is something that can, in some instances, be a way for disadvantaged students to become socially mobile, though it comes down to what the individual is willing to do. Ideally, elite firms would reform their recruitment processes to become less obsessed with prestige and cultural fit, and more interested in academic competence, though, this is clearly not soon to be the case.

-or- Are ‘cultural matching’ and ‘cultural fit’ problems that need to be combatted rather than pandered to?

Cultural matching and cultural fit have been noted as being hugely under-discussed topics in the debate, particularly during the elite recruitment process, but have been said to be systems of gatekeeping that facilitate social closure in that they prevent disadvantaged students from career opportunities based on the often subjective conjecture of recruiters. As with the previous sub-research question, though habitus shift is only a quick, shallow fix to a deeper, cultural problem, appealing to cultural fit is perhaps the best way at present for

disadvantaged students to get a foot in the door so to speak, and have an opportunity to advance their social mobility through elite jobs, though it might admittedly require some pandering. My assertion is that the phenomenon of cultural matching is injurious to social mobility, but more research needs to be undertaken to find out exactly how it works, so that firstly, disadvantaged students can tactically pander to what is expected of them by elite recruiters, and then secondly, the greater challenge of dissolving the phenomenon of cultural matching can take place, through necessary policies and socio-cultural shifts in hiring practises.

III

How important are both financial and cultural factors in terms of how they alter or guide disadvantaged student agency, and how detrimental are these factors to long term social mobility?

Disadvantaged students do seem to act in accordance with the Logic of Necessity and Prospect Theory, in that immediate utility, or, immediate financial stress, trumps potential long term benefits. The good thing about this is that loans, grants and bursaries are indeed available, and given that the former two typically work on an amount received correlates to family incoming, disadvantaged students likely receive more to account for their situation. The problem at hand is that available financial resources are not adequately communicated to students, so little in fact that they are very unaware of what they are entitled to. Without the comfort of knowing what they are entitled to, decision making regresses to one as in the Logic of Necessity, and this not only impedes opportunity, but heightens stress and uncertainty, both which lead to academic disengagement. More Higher Education policy, as with the Dearing Report and goals of Lifelong Policy, needs to focus on normalising Higher Education for disadvantaged students from a younger age. This normalisation imbues students who would otherwise see themselves as incompatible with elite environments develop the confidence to choose to pursue Higher Education. Initiatives such as Aim Higher and Flying Start are a sure way to begin this normalisation process, and through their outreach programmes, campus visits and guest lecturers, the familiarisation that amasses between the disadvantaged student and the university environment facilitates opportunities for long term social mobility.

- How can disadvantaged students navigate ‘uncertainty’, particularly in the time of COVID-19?

Lifelong Learning policy must shift from mere skills acquisition to one of teaching self-questioning, social adaptability and reflexive engagement, these being attested to ways of successfully overcoming uncertainty. It was also theorised that community, particularly communities conceived through shared trauma, was a noted way of overcoming uncertainty, and these communities were primarily assisted through the use of social media. The adaptation of institution support services to cater for COVID-19 related anxieties, the conception of virtual receptions, peer assisted learning schemes and COVID-19 task forces all served to be good examples of how to reduce uncertainty, as were the introduction of microgrants which helped students who had been laid off with a one-time block grant.

Limitations

If more time and resources had been available, I would like to have interviewed a great many more participants. Though I believe the content generated from the data collection was indeed rich and interesting, this study would have benefitted tenfold from more participants, especially participants who have already graduated and become employed at an elite firm; this new set of perspectives would have fleshed out the final section 'Employability and Careers Advice', which at current, is admittedly lacking in participant perspectives. Also, the data collection was gathered under lockdown, which limited the interviews to a digital environment. I believe that this digital set-up might've impeded what would've been a better, more natural flow of face-to-face conversation, particularly considering the lagging audio, bad signal and connection.

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Acknowledgements

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