Students as (More Than) Consumers? A Bourdieusian Exploration of English Undergraduates' Discourses on and Practices in Higher Education

Carlos Pedro Rodrigues Azevedo

A thesis submitted to the Open University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of People and Organisations

Faculty of Business and Law

The Open University

August 2021

Abstract

'Students as consumers' has become the dominant discourse applied to English undergraduate students in the UK. The production and reproduction of this construction by both the UK policymakers and the academic literature is significantly connected to two main developments: the marketisation of higher education (HE) and the increased financial contribution of English students towards their studies in the UK. Nonetheless, there is still a lack of empirical studies incorporating English undergraduate students' perspectives. Therefore, this study aims to explore English undergraduates' discourses on and practices in a neoliberalised higher education system, specifically, how, or if, they enact the dominant construction of students as consumers of HE. The three main objectives are: (1) to examine how, if at all, the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of English undergraduates shape their understandings of HE; (2) to explore how students construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, particularly how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it; and (3) to appreciate how English undergraduates' aspirations and expectations for the future, specifically regarding employability, relate to their discourses on and practices in HE. The study involves 37 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with existing and soon-to-be English undergraduates at different types of universities in England and Scotland. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and drawing on a theoretical model based on Bourdieusian theory complemented by a poststructuralist concept of identity, in which one helps to illuminate the other, enriching the understanding of the interrelationship between individuals and social structure(s) and contributing to extending Bourdieusian literature. The analysis of the findings informs several original contributions regarding English undergraduates' discourses and practices. Importantly, it shows that, among other aspects, their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds considerably impact the ways in which they enact consumerist discourses on and practices in HE. In this way, this study provides a more nuanced and heterogeneous construction of contemporary English undergraduate students' identities.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the participants' time and generosity. Sometimes, the conversations extended beyond the interviews, which was enjoyable and enriching.

Caroline Clarke, my lead supervisor, accompanied me from the beginning of my doctoral journey and supported me in multiple ways. Alexandra Bristow became my supervisor in 2019 but had a pivotal role in my journey. I learned a lot from both.

Alden, Connie, Effy, Diana, Grace, and Maria helped me gain access to some English undergraduate students. Cláudia, Julian, Lara, Marco, Pedro, and Phil gave me support during different moments of the PhD journey.

Akash, Caroline, and I started our doctoral degrees at the Open University simultaneously. We had serious conversations and lots of fun, shared good and not-so-good stuff, and became friends.

Lin Nielsen, FBL Research Degrees Co-Ordinator, was always very professional, supportive, and kind. Higher Education needs more people like her.

Richard Budd and I had a couple of stimulating conversations about my research, which were significant for my progress.

Last but (definitely) not least, my mum's and my sister's love and support on so many levels made all the difference.

All the people mentioned above have my most heartfelt thank you.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with The Open University's Research Degrees Regulations and it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the author's own work and the views expressed are those of the author. The material submitted is the copy that I intend to be examined.

SIGNED: ....

DATE: 31/08/2021

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Chapter 1 – Introduction 1

- **1.1 Personal Background** 1
- **1.2 Historical Context** 2
- **1.3 Rationale** 5
- **1.4 Aim and Objectives** 5
- **1.5 Theory** 6
- **1.6 Research questions** 7
- **1.7 Methodology** 7
- **1.8 Contributions to knowledge** 9
- **1.9 Thesis outline** 10

Chapter 2 – Contextualising and mapping the field of English neoliberal Higher Education 13

- **2.1 A critical summary of the evolution of neoliberalism** 13
- **2.2 The expansion of neoliberalism into the public sector and the rise of consumerist culture** 16
- **2.3 The English (and Scottish) HE system(s)** 20
- **2.4 League tables and university ranking systems** 23
- **2.5 Neoliberalism's impact on academic work culture and environment** 29
- **2.6 Chapter summary** 35

Chapter 3 – Positioning English undergraduate students 37

- **3.1 The construction of students as consumers** 37
  - 3.1.1 Passive HE students 41
  - 3.1.2 Individualism, instrumentality, and the commoditisation of HE students 45
  - 3.1.3 Empirical research on HE students as consumers in the UK 49
- **3.2 Tuition Fees and Indebtedness** 52
  - 3.2.1 A historical perspective on (the rise of) tuition fees and student loans in the UK 52
  - 3.2.2 Unpacking the Principle of Cost Sharing in HE 56
  - 3.2.3 The impact of indebtedness on HE students 62
- **3.3 English students' different trajectories and experiences** 68
  - 3.3.1 Some initial considerations 69
  - 3.3.2 Degrees of choice in terms of HE students' socioeconomic background 71
  - 3.3.3 Private schools' role in the reproduction of structural societal inequalities 76
  - 3.3.4 The importance of the family 77

3.3.5 Working-class students' struggles in the HE field 80
3.3.6 Moving out of HE: Inequality of graduate outcomes 82
3.4 Chapter summary 86
Chapter 4 – Theoretical framework: A Bourdieusian approach 88
4.1 Introduction 88
4.2 Habitus 90
4.3 Fields and Capitals 95
4.4 The question of reflexivity 102
4.5 Codification 103
4.6 Challenging the idea of a homogenous and unified self: A poststructuralist approach to identity 105
4.7 Chapter summary 109
Chapter 5 Methodology and Research Design 110
5.1 Research philosophy 110
5.1.1 Social constructionism 111
5.1.2 A poststructuralist perspective 113
5.2 Research design 114
5.2.1 A qualitative approach 114
5.2.2 Qualitative interviews 115
5.2.3 Access to participants 118
5.2.4 Deciding on the number of participants 119
5.2.5 Power dynamics with the participants 120
5.2.6 Data collection 121
5.2.7 Transcriptions 125
5.2.8 Data analysis 125
5.3 Key ethical issues 129
5.4 Chapter summary 131
Chapter 6 – The decision-making regarding higher education: why, what, and where to study 134
6.1 The impact of students' socioeconomic and educational background 134
6.1.1 Family 135
6.1.2 Educational background 143
6.2 The role of university rankings and league tables on prospective undergraduate students' decision-making 157
6.3 Chapter summary 164

Chapter 7 – Higher education as an economic transaction? Fees, indebtedness, and the consumption of higher education 166

7.1 Should HE be free or paid for? 166

7.2 Consumers or Students? 178

7.3 Students' relationship with academics 183

7.4 Students' reactions to the academic strikes of 2018 186

7.5 Subsidising cultural capital for the Other? 191

7.6 The payment of fees as an incentive? 196

7.7 Students' constructions of indebtedness 200

7.8 Chapter summary 205

Chapter 8 – Higher education and graduate employability 208

8.1 Following one's heart, playing safe, or aiming to have it all? 208

8.2 Undergraduate students' strategies to increase future employability 218

8.2.1 Higher education credentials: the importance of a good classification 218

8.2.2 The importance of social capital: networking and internships 223

8.3 Chapter summary 225

Chapter 9 – Discussion 228

9.1 Revisiting the aim and the objectives of the study 228

9.2 Discussion 228

9.2.1 How the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds shape undergraduates' understandings of HE 228

9.2.2 Undergraduates' understandings of and position(ing)s in higher education 234

9.2.3 How undergraduates' expectations regarding employability impact on their discourses on and practices in higher education 240

9.3 Chapter summary 244

Chapter 10 – Conclusions 245

10.1 Addressing the research questions 245

10.2 Contributions to the literature 250

10.3 Limitations of my research 251

10.4 Suggestions for further research 252

A final consideration 254

References 255

Annex 1 – Questions and prompts for the interviews 278

Annex 2 – Information sheet for interviewees 279

Annex 3 – Consent form 280

The university is a critical institution or it is nothing. – Stuart Hall

We must learn to pause, collect many perspectives on a topic, turn them over, and resist the lure of panicked and premature judgement. – Judith Butler

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This study seeks to critically unpack the construction of English undergraduate students as consumers of higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK). The metaphor of students as consumers has become the dominant discourse applied to undergraduate students in the UK (McCulloch, 2009; Tight, 2013). The production and reproduction of this construction by both the UK policymakers and the academic literature is significantly connected to two developments: the marketisation of HE and the increased financial contribution of English students towards their studies in the UK. Nonetheless, with some notable exceptions – for example, Budd (2014, 2017a, 2018, 2020) and Tomlinson (2016, 2017) – there is still a lack of empirical studies incorporating English undergraduate students' perspectives.

In this introductory chapter, I start by outlining my personal background relating to how I came to study for a PhD. After, I trace the recent historical context of UK HE, then present my rationale, aims, objectives, theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology. I then discuss the thesis' potential contributions to knowledge and end by providing an outline of the following nine chapters.

1.1 Personal Background

I am Portuguese and I moved to the UK in 2014 to start a new life. I had worked for more than a decade as a contract and project manager in a French multinational. Yet, at some moment, I realised that my professional occupation, although financially rewarding, was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my professional life. I had recently (in 2012) completed a master's in management in Portugal and wanted to continue to develop intellectually by doing a PhD.

But why did I choose this topic? To start, I have always believed that HE should be a human right, not because everyone should feel compelled to pursue HE studies, but because everyone should have that option, regardless of their social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or previous educational experience. And, importantly, I have also always believed that HE should be considered a public service and, therefore, free. My educational background in Portugal probably influenced this aspect.

I have always studied in state institutions, from the first day in kindergarten to my last day in university. I always had friends and colleagues from very different socioeconomic backgrounds with very different life stories. Indeed, in the Portuguese educational system, with some notable exceptions, state schools and state universities were considered better than private ones, so students from different social classes were used to share the same educational space. And, importantly, tuition fees in Portuguese HE were, and still are, almost insignificant in comparison to English HE fees. For all the reasons presented, I believed I would be in an interesting position to undertake this exploration of English undergraduates' discourses on and practices in HE with the 'fresh eyes' of an 'outsider'.

1.2 Historical Context

In the late 1970s, the public sector started to be subjected to profound changes in many parts of the Western world. Those changes were the result of the process of expansion of neoliberal policies into the public sector initially undertaken by Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, soon followed by other countries, namely Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010). The adoption of neoliberal policies by the public sector is usually labelled New Public Management or New Managerialism (Hood, 1995; Deem, 1998).

One of the notorious consequences of the ascension and dominance of neoliberalism was a move from citizenship to consumption in social life, that is, a shift from the public and political to the private and economic (Taylor, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007), with citizens playing a less active role in public life and encouraged to turn themselves into individual and passive consumers of politics (Needham, 2003). Some authors (for instance, Giddens, 1991, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002) argue that the rise of consumer culture has been somewhat empowering, allowing the citizen-consumer to benefit from more flexible and responsive public services. Yet, Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) admit that this is a type of culture where 'the possibilities of biographical slippage and collapse are ever present [and individuals must] struggle to live their lives in a world that increasingly and evidently escapes their grasp' (pp. 24-25), a consideration that is somehow difficult to reconcile with the idea of an effectively empowered citizen.

Clarke et al. (2007) note that consumer culture 'marks a shift towards a more marketized and privatized form of service delivery, driven by commercial rather than public service values' (p. 9). Contrary to Giddens (1994), who defends the rise in consumer culture by claiming that it creates the conditions for more autonomous and freer individuals, Clarke et al. (2007) point out that while consumer culture uses some of the mechanisms of institutional democracy, its practices do not necessarily assume democratic or progressive liberal forms.

In this context, Giroux (2014) argues that the university:

> […] as a center of critique and a democratic public sphere that cultivates the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity is giving way to a view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects. (p. 56)

Importantly, as Santos (2016) observes, market imperatives have often been imposed on universities by the state.

HE policies in the UK have been implemented on the grounds of Schultz's (1961) human capital theory, incorporating Becker's (1993) further advancements regarding education (Tomlinson, 2008). Human capital theory 'views participation in education and training as an investment that yields both social and private returns' (Ashton and Green, 1996, cited in Tomlinson, 2008, p. 50). Underpinning this theory is the idea of the knowledge economy, which, according to Brown et al.'s (2011) critical standpoint, represents the belief that,

> […] the human side of enterprise slowly came to take center stage. Through investments in brainpower, it was thought that nations could deliver prosperity, justice, and social cohesion, companies could develop world-class employees, and individuals could secure a better future for themselves and their family. (p. 16)

It is assumed by the proponents of human capital theory that the expansion of higher levels of education leads to economic development ('social returns'), which in turn leads to higher levels of remuneration for those who participate in education ('private returns') (Adnett and Davies, 2002). The private returns for acquiring an HE degree is what OECD (2012) calls 'earning premium in HE', which the HE Act (2004) and the Augar Review (2019) label 'graduate premium'. This so-called graduate premium has been used by policymakers to justify the application of the principle of cost sharing in HE, that is, to transfer part of the cost of a HE degree from taxpayers to students and their families.

The marketisation of HE and the increased financial contribution of students towards their studies are the two main aspects linked to the construction of HE undergraduate students as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017). Indeed, the academic literature and policymakers have been widely discussing the construction of English undergraduates as HE consumers in the UK, often positioning them as such to a point in which it has become the dominant discourse on HE students (see, for instance, Nordensvärd, 2011; Brooks, 2018; Nixon et al., 2018). However, empirical research on this topic incorporating students' perspectives is somewhat limited (Budd, 2017a). And yet, students' accounts are vital if we are to 'sustain multiple voices [and] diverse interpretations' (Ferraro et al., 2015).

1.3 Rationale

There is a well-established strand of literature on English students' trajectories into HE, namely regarding the impact of their socioeconomic background and social inequalities on their decision-making (see, for instance, Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al. 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Baker, 2019; Bowers-Brown et al., 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Finn and Holton, 2019). However, there is significantly less research on English undergraduate students' dominant construction by the academic literature and policymakers as consumers of HE, especially empirical research incorporating their perspectives (Budd, 2017a). Therefore, I propose that my research and analysis of English undergraduates' discourses on and practices in HE makes an important contribution (see 1.7).

1.4 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in a neoliberal HE; specifically, how, or if, they enact the dominant construction of English undergraduates as consumers of HE.

The three main objectives are:

1. To examine how, if at all, the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of English undergraduates shape their understandings of HE.

2. To explore how students construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, particularly how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it.
3. To appreciate how English undergraduates' aspirations and expectations for the future, specifically regarding employability, relate to their discourses on and practices in HE.

1.5 Theory

The theoretical framework applied to this study must be able to incorporate and help interpret the experiences of undergraduate students with different socioeconomic backgrounds coexisting within the HE sector. Moreover, it must also offer a possibility to frame the construction of English undergraduates as consumers and how students enact this supposed position in practice. A theoretical framework informed by Pierre Bourdieu's core concepts of 'habitus', 'capital' and 'field', and by other Bourdieusian concepts, such as 'codification', 'strategy' and 'power' serves this study well. These concepts are deployed to explore: 1) the role of the habitus and of the different forms of capital in shaping students' trajectories into and within the field of HE; 2) how students construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, in particular, how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it; and 3) the role of habitus in students' aspirations and expectations for the future, namely regarding employability.

This thesis frames the public construction of the student as a consumer (for example, in the literature and in policy documents) as a form of 'codification' and explores the different discourses, strategies, and practices adopted by undergraduates with different habitus and capitals to resist, reshape or reproduce this codification. Moreover, the Bourdieusian framework is complemented with a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction, identity regulation and identity work, which allows for a less deterministic and more flexible approach to the participants' identities.

1.6 Research questions

The main research question this study answers is as follows:

How, if at all, do English undergraduate students enact their positioning as 'higher education consumers' in the UK?

A second research question, derived from the main one, is also addressed:

How, if at all, do English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in HE vary according to their socioeconomic and educational habitus?

1.7 Methodology

I pursue the above objectives and research questions through a critical social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives. Researchers who take a social constructionist approach: (1) do not claim to have any objective knowledge of reality as they cannot be separated from what is being observed; (2) consider human interests as the main driver of social science; (3) do not provide explanations that give access to a specific 'truth', aiming instead to increase general understanding of the situation; and (4) believe that research progresses through obtaining rich data, usually from a restricted number of cases, that generates ideas (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Poststructuralism shares with structuralism the idea that the modern concept of individual is the result of specific historically situated structures or discourses, but the former does not have scientific pretensions and rejects structuralism's claims to objectivity. Many poststructuralist authors agree that 'different epistemological frameworks bring about new meanings, and each framework is accompanied by novel standards of rationality and truth' (Baert and

Carreira da Silva, 2010, pp. 6-7). For this reason, many poststructuralists are interested in deconstructing established truths and expert knowledge, and in revealing the power(s) behind them (Kenny et al., 2011). This study seeks to make a contribution to these endeavours, deconstructing the contemporary dominant constructions of English undergraduates as consumers.

Regarding research design, the data collection technique for this study consists of qualitative (Braun and Clarke, 2008) and reflexive (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviewing is recognised as one of the most used methods in qualitative research (Kvale, 2007; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Mason, 2018) and it was chosen because the participants' accounts obtained through them have the potential to show 'the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 120), which fits the aims and objectives of this study.

I interviewed 30 English undergraduates or prospective undergraduates, some more than once, in a total of 37 interviews over a period of almost four years (2016-2019). At the time of the interviews, the participants were between 18 and 23 years old and attended, or would soon start attending, different types (Pre-1992, including Russell Group[1], and Post-1992[2]) of universities located in England and Scotland. The participants came from different socioeconomic (more and less privileged) and educational (comprehensive, grammar, and private schools) backgrounds. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2016; 2019).

[1] The Russell Group is a group of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK. A detailed list of its members may be found here: https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities

[2] The term 'Post-1992 university' is attributed to HEIs that were given university status in the UK as a result of the elevation of the polytechnics in 1992.

1.8 Contributions to knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge empirically and theoretically. Theoretically, this thesis intends to contribute both to the MOS and HE literature by offering an integrated analysis using, simultaneously, three main Bourdieusian concepts (habitus, capitals, and field) and a poststructuralist conception of identity to explore English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in HE. Regarding English undergraduates' construction as consumers, I frame it as a form of codification in a Bourdieusian sense, which, as far as I am aware, has never been done. By complementing a Bourdieusian theoretical framework with a poststructuralist understanding of identity through empirical research, this thesis establishes a bridge between both literatures, one helping to illuminate the other and enriching the understanding of the interrelationship between individuals and social structure(s). This study modestly contributes to extend the Bourdieusian literature, proposing/offering an alternative form of understanding agents' identity processes and the impact of habitus in their discourses and practices.

Empirically, it contributes to the literature on English undergraduate students' decision-making process regarding HE and, especially, to the literature regarding the construction of English undergraduates as consumers, providing a more nuanced and heterogeneous construction of contemporary English undergraduate students' identities. Moreover, it bridges both strands of literature, which, with very few exceptions, seem to have been produced somewhat separately. To achieve this process of bridging, English undergraduates' discourses on and practices in HE are analysed considering their different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Finally, it also extends the existing literature on undergraduate debt, by introducing new insights and complementing existing research.

1.9 Thesis outline

The remainder of the thesis contains nine chapters. In chapter 2, I contextualise and map the field of English neoliberal HE, presenting its main characteristics and contrasting it with Scottish HE. Furthermore, I explore how English HE has been transformed due to the expansion of neoliberalism into the public sector and the rise of consumerist culture.

In chapter 3, I review the literature that helps to understand how English students are positioned in the field of HE. I start by critically explore their construction as consumers, namely by unpacking the metaphor of students as consumers. Moreover, I address the increase in tuition fees, which the literature points to as having reinforced English HE students' construction as consumers. Finally, I review the literature on undergraduates' different trajectories and experiences, in particular how HE reproduces and reinforces structural societal inequalities.

In chapter 4, I present my theoretical framework for exploring the research question and analysing the participants' accounts. I use a theoretical framework informed by Pierre Bourdieu's core concepts of 'habitus', 'capital' and 'field', and by other Bourdieusian concepts, such as 'codification', 'strategy' and 'power'. Moreover, the Bourdieusian framework is complemented with a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction, identity regulation and identity work, which allows for a less deterministic and more flexible approach to the participants' identities.

In chapter 5, I discuss my methodological approach, based on a social constructionist ontology and poststructuralist epistemology. I outline my research design, including the data collection technique (qualitative semi-structured interviews) and data analysis method (thematic analysis). I finalise the chapter addressing some formal ethic issues.

In chapters 6, 7 and 8, I present the findings of my data analysis divided into different themes and subthemes. In chapter 6, I analyse the participants' decision-making process regarding their future HE experience, namely why they study, what subject to study and in which higher education institution (HEI) to study it. I start the chapter by exploring the role of the participants' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Subsequently, I examine the impact of university rankings and league tables on prospective undergraduate students' decision-making.

In chapter 7, I analyse the participants' constructions of HE and themselves and their perceptions of indebtedness in the context of the payment of high fees by English undergraduates studying in English and Scottish universities. I start by exploring the participants' understandings of having to pay for HE studies. I then analyse how paying for HE impacts their positioning of themselves in HE and their relationship with academics. Subsequently, I examine the role of the academic strikes of 2018 on how students perceive their position in the field, followed by an exploration of students' accounts in terms of their fees subsidising other students/disciplines. Finally, I focus on how paying fees is sometimes constructed as an incentive to put more effort into their studies before I explore the participants' constructions of their indebtedness.

In chapter 8, I analyse the participants' constructions and discourses around the relationship between HE and graduate employability and its implications regarding their positioning and the strategies they adopt in the field of HE. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the participants' reasons for choosing their degree and any relationship this has with the job market. In its second section, I analyse the participants' strategies to increase their future employability.

In chapter 9, the discussion, I start by revisiting the aim and the objectives of this study and then proceed to discuss the data analysis presented in chapters 6, 7, and 8 in relation to the literature (chapters 2 and 3) and the theoretical framework (chapter 4). The discussion shows that my findings are noteworthy since they offer a perspective on English undergraduate students that challenge and go beyond the individualistic and instrumental practices often described in the literature. Rather, my findings enabled me to present their identities as nuanced and their discourses and practices as heterogeneous.

Finally, in chapter 10, I consider my contributions in relation to my research questions. I then conclude the thesis pointing out some of the limitations of the study and outlining some areas for further research.

Chapter 2 – Contextualising and mapping the field of English neoliberal Higher Education

In this chapter, I contextualise and map out the field[3] of English HE and present its main characteristics, while briefly explaining how the Scottish HE system differs from the English one. This contrasting analysis is relevant as some of the participants in this study are English undergraduates studying at Scottish universities (see 5.2.2). I start by critically exploring how contemporary English HE has been transformed due to the expansion of neoliberalism into the public sector and the rise of consumerist culture. I then describe the main features of the English HE sector, contrasting it with the Scottish system, and discuss the impact of league tables and ranking systems on HE. I conclude the chapter by reviewing some of the literature that investigates the impact of these transformations on academics' careers.

2.1 A critical summary of the evolution of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism started to emerge as a hegemonic tendency when it was adopted as a state policy in the first half of the 1970s, notably in Chile and New Zealand. It became more dominant in the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in the UK and Ronald Reagan's Republican Administration in the United States of America (USA) (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010).

[3] Bourdieu defines *field* as 'a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence, and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). This concept and other Bourdieusian concepts are explored in detail in chapter 4.

Although much has been written about neoliberalism, some authors (for example, Thurbon, 2012; Hilgers, 2013) point out how this term is often overused and misused both in popular debate and academia. Brown (2006) observes that 'in ordinary parlance, neoliberalism refers to the repudiation of Keynesian welfare state economics and the ascendance of the Chicago School' (p. 37), which defends free market principles as a means to creating a better society. However, neoliberalism is defined or understood in different ways depending on the political and academic context, as different strands of intellectual thought analyse and discuss it from distinct, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013).

Peck (2010) notes that it is possible to identify three forms of neoliberal thinking in Europe and North America since the 1920s: Ordoliberalism in Germany, the reconstruction of Austrian economics, and the first Chicago School. Those three movements had distinct doctrinal views on the role of the state, the autonomy of markets and their relationship, but became joined into a transnational project with the meetings of the Mont Pelerin Society from 1947, when Friedrich Hayek[4] worked as an interlocutor between Ordoliberalism and the Chicago School led by Milton Friedman (Peck, 2010). While Ordoliberals were 'relatively moderate and pragmatic, [arguing that] the full capacities of markets could only be realized through their embedding in a robust legal and social order, including preemptive, market conforming interventions on the part of the state' (Peck, 2010, p. 17), the members of the Chicago School were less critical of the

[4] Friedrich Hayek sprang out of The Austrian School established by Carl Menger, Eugen Boehm-Bawerk and Ludwig von Mises during the first decade of the twentieth century, which distinguished itself by developing a subjective theory of value. For an explanation of the subjective theory of value, see Peters M. (2016) Neoliberalism, Hayek, and the Austrian School of Economics. In: Peters M. (eds) Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_153-1

limits of the nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* perspective, ‘developing a position that endowed the market with vigorously autonomous capacities’ (ibid.). Hayek and Friedman are usually considered the leading economic thinkers who are responsible for the revival of the free market tradition, which defends the notion that private choice and the rule of law should take precedence over state planning. They see these as necessary steps to achieve an optimisation of resources, whereby ‘all the coercive action of government must be limited to the enforcement of general rules of just conduct’ (Hayek, 1973, p. 14). After 1946, under the leadership of Milton Friedman, the Chicago School became ‘doctrinally anti-state’ and very critical of Keynesianism, socialism, and development economics (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism is conceptualized as a dominant ideology, an economic theory, and a hegemonic mode of discourse centered around the idea that human wellbeing is achieved through individual entrepreneurial freedoms, supported by private property rights and free markets (Harvey, 2005; Peters, 2011). Yet, while in classic economic liberalism it was non-interference that defined the state’s position so that the market could self-regulate, contemporary neoliberalism advocates a proactive position from the state (Peters and Olssen, 2011). Hence, under contemporary liberalism the role of the state is not only ‘to create and preserve an institutional framework [which] guarantee[s] the quality and integrity of money [and] set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights’, but also ‘to guarantee, by force if needed, the proper functioning of markets’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Moreover, as Foucault (2010) observes, the neoliberal state is responsible for creating a context and, within it, the conditions for the economy as a ‘concrete and real space in which the formal structure of competition could function’ (p. 132).

Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) note that many articles published in educational research journals with the word 'neoliberalism' (or a variation) in the title do not define or explain this concept, making it difficult for the reader to understand which definition the authors subscribe to. In this thesis, I follow McCaig's (2018) definition of the English neoliberal HE system, which:

> […] takes a middle ground between a freely privatized market and the continuation of state planning. […] it is designed with several key characteristics in place: to encourage the individualised responsibilisation of risk in the labour market; to reduce public exposure to debt (because the state underwrites tuition fees and thus carries the risk of non-repayment), yet at the same time to ensure the system is responsive to labour market needs and the national economic imperative. It consists of some market incentive but is contained within a regulatory system to control the overall quality, size and shape of the sector. A neoliberal HE system is thus an alternative to a truly open market driven by an 'invisible hand'. (p. 18)

McCaig's (2018) definition is consistent with the earlier observation that contemporary neoliberalism often defends a somewhat proactive position from the state (Peters and Olssen, 2011). As Naidoo et al. (2011) point out, 'governments create the conditions for a quasi-market, and at the same time market mechanisms are deployed to achieve governmental goals' (p. 1145). I will return to the conceptualisation of the English neoliberal HE later in this chapter.

2.2 The expansion of neoliberalism into the public sector and the rise of consumerist culture

The public sector in many parts of the Western world started to be subjected to profound changes in the late 1970s. These changes were a consequence of the process of expansion of neoliberal policies into the public sector initially undertaken by Reagan's Administration in the USA and Thatcher's Government in the UK, soon followed by other countries, namely Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Hood, 1995; Deem, 1998; Gruening, 2001; Deem et al., 2007). The adoption of neoliberal policies by the public sector is usually labelled New Public Management (NPM) or New Managerialism (NM) (Hood, 1995; Deem, 1998; Deem and Brehony, 2005). Although there are differences between these two concepts[5], with NPM being more technical and setting out the organizational strategy and NM being more political and outlining the ideological context, Deem et al. (2007) note that both have:

> […] narrowed the focus and scope of the 'public domain' by justifying the much more extensive use of market-based resource allocation mechanisms and the managerial control regimes that they require to operate effectively within institutional environments in which 'competition', rather than 'collaboration', has become the dominant cultural imperative. (p. 4).

According to Gruening (2001), the typical characteristics of NPM are: accountability for performance; budget cuts; competition; contracting out; decentralisation; performance auditing; performance measurement; privatisation; separation of politics and administration; separation of provision and production; and user charges and vouchers (p. 16). Moreover, examining how the neoliberal conception of the public sector in general affects HE in particular, Lorenz (2012) concludes that: (1) 'neoliberal policies in the public sector [...] are characterized by a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices'; (2) 'NPM policies employ a discourse that parasites the everyday meaning of their concepts [that is, efficiency, quality, accountability,

[5] For a detailed explanation of the differences between NM and NPM, see Deem and Brehony, 2005, pp. 219-221, and Deem et al., 2007, pp. 1-4.

transparency and flexibility] and simultaneously perverts all their original meanings'; and (3) 'the economic definition of education ignores the most important aspects of the education process' (pp. 600-601).

One of the notorious consequences of the ascension and dominance of neoliberalism was a move from citizenship to consumption, that is, a shift from the public and political to the private and economic (Taylor, 2004). Clarke et al. (2007) observe that this shift can be understood:

> […] as part of the extended scope, scale and power of capital in its 'global' phase in which more and more spaces and relationships are subjected to the logic of the market [in] a process of extended commodification or re-commodification [that] individualizes relationships to collective services and depoliticizes 'choice' by subjecting the public domain to the logics of markets and management that constitute 'choice' in the private/market domain. (p. 17).

Needham (2003) observes that the subjugation of the public sphere to the logics of the market has contributed to many citizens playing a less active role in public life and turning into individual and passive consumers of politics. Indeed, constructing citizens as consumers of public services (for instance, education, health, and social care) leads them to experience and expect individualised choice, which is viewed as 'the driving force for change' (Clarke, 2005, p. 449) and efficiencies. Therefore, some authors (for example, Giddens, 1991, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002) argue that the rise of consumer culture and the idea of citizens as consumers is empowering, as choice allows this 'citizen-consumer' to benefit from more flexible and responsive public services. These authors also defend how consumer culture allows individuals to define and project themselves (that is, their identities) both individually and collectively (Clarke et al., 2007). Nonetheless, Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) admit that this is a type of culture where ‘the possibilities of biographical slippage and collapse are ever present [and individuals have to] struggle to live their lives in a world that increasingly and evidently escapes their grasp’ (pp. 24-25). Arguably, Beck and Beck-Gersheim’s (2002) consideration is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the idea of an ‘empowered citizen-consumer’.

Although Giddens (1994) argues that consumer culture somehow ‘leads to greater autonomy of action’ (p.7), Clarke (2005) notes that empowerment may be an ambiguous state as it is important to understand ‘who gets to choose, and what they get to choose […] whose voices get to be recognized and heard, and what the consequences of being heard are’ (p. 450). As Clarke et al. (2007) point out, consumer culture does not involve:

> [a] shift towards democratization – linking more democratic forms of personal relationship, the rise of social movements, the dynamics of organizational decentralization and the dialogic potentials of an emergent global order, [but] a populist shift in politics and culture that does not necessarily translate into democratic or progressive political forms [although it] may appropriate some of the mechanisms and trappings of institutional democracy. (p. 11)

Finally, Clarke et al. (2007) argue that consumer culture signals the transition to a service delivery underpinned by marketisation and privatization, where the focus is on commercial instead of public service values. These commercial values have undoubtedly impacted the contemporary university. Santos (2016) notes that although historically the state, the market, and civil society have influenced university structure and functioning in varying degrees, the market has been the dominant in the last three to four decades. In Santos’s (2016) words, ‘in a few decades the university went from producing knowledge and professionals for the market to becoming itself the market, […] and finally […] to being run like a market organization, a business organization’ (p. 7). Moreover, Santos

(2016) observes that there has been a subordination of civil society concerns to market imperatives, with the latter being often imposed on universities by the state.

2.3 The English (and Scottish) HE system(s)

The UK was the first country in Europe to adopt quasi-market mechanisms and consumerist discourses in the HE sector (Naidoo et al., 2011). Until the devolution in 1998, the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish HE systems were all part of the UK HE system; since then, each of the four nations that constitute the UK has adopted its own HE system. Nonetheless, they are all connected at the research level (for instance, in terms of REF) and all have HEIs that are part of the Russell Group (which defends the interests of the research-intensive universities that constitute it) (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). My focus here is confined to the English and Scottish HE systems, since all the participants in this research are English undergraduates studying in English and Scottish universities.

The Scottish HE system (and, for that matter, the Northern Irish and Welsh ones) is considerably less marketised than the English one. Four main specificities set the Scottish HE system apart from its English counterpart: (1) the unity of the Scottish HE system is more consistent; (2) the absence of tuition fees for Scottish and EU students studying in Scottish universities; (3) a less bureaucratic institutional governance structure; and (4) a greater sense of internal collegiality and academic participation in governance (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Concerning the first specificity, 'the unity of the Scottish university system has been fostered by the absence of divisions between research-intensive and teaching-only universities' (Shattock and Horvath, 2020, p. 65). These authors also highlight how the cohesiveness of the Scottish HE system no longer exists in the English one, due to the intense competition between English universities and the division between, on the one side, research-intensive universities (most of them part of the Russell

Group and often classified as ‘elite universities’), and, on the other, the remaining institutions of the sector.

Regarding the second aspect, while the Scottish government funds students from Scotland and the rest of the EU (due to ‘Brexit’ the latter are likely to start paying international tuition fees from the academic year 2021/2022 onwards), English, Welsh, and Northern Irish students must pay tuition fees in Scottish universities (the amount is similar to the one they would have to pay if they were studying, respectively, in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland). The English tuition fees specificities and their impact on students are critically analysed in a separate section of this chapter (see 3.2).

In terms of the differences between the English and Scottish HE institutional governance structures, Shattock and Horvath (2020) exemplify them by providing a sharp description of some aspects of the process HEIs need to undergo to be recognised as an HE provider in England:

> [Scottish government’s] interventionism pales almost into insignificance in comparison to the changes arising out of the English Higher Education and Research Act, which require legally independent universities to apply for registration to be recognised as higher education providers controlled by 63 pages of conditions, which make them subject to a regulator whose regulatory framework extends over 158 pages, and which requires them to pay expensive subscription charges for the privilege which are to be fixed arbitrarily by the secretary of state. (p. 65)

Shattock and Horvath (2020) conclude by arguing that this represents a highly significant assertion of state's governance control in contemporary British higher education.

The fourth and final specificity that sets the Scottish HE system apart from its English counterpart lies in a more significant internal collegiality and academic participation in governance (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Indeed, Shattock and Horvath (2020) observe that there is evidence to suggest that ‘the quality of academic life for staff and students [in Scottish universities] has been sustained through the pressures of governance change at the systemic level, but one cannot state this so confidently for all the institutions in England’ (p. 67). The current situation of academics within the English HE sector is discussed later in this section (see 2.5).

As mentioned earlier, English HE ‘consists of some market incentive but is contained within a regulatory system to control the overall quality, size and shape of the sector’ (McCaig, 2018, p. 18). Hence, according to McCaig (2018), there is a proactive position from the state, which aims to make English HE politically conform to labour market demands and economic requirements. As Naidoo et al. (2011) explain, ‘governments create the conditions for a quasi-market, and at the same time market mechanisms are deployed to achieve governmental goals’ (p. 1145).

Based on a discourse analysis of policy statements (such as, among others, government-sponsored reviews, funding council reports, White Papers, and Acts of Parliament) over a thirty-year period (1986-2016) and focusing on ‘pro-market arguments employed by governments to impact institutional behaviour in relation to undergraduate provision in England’ (p. 3), McCaig (2018) explores how marketisation has been used to create the current differentiated HE system, achieved mostly through competition:

> Differentiation is important for any HE provider wishing to position its ‘offer’ in relation to other providers […] in individualised or in collective terms. For example, older ‘pre-1992’ universities not only aim to differentiate themselves from each other for competitive reasons (given that they may broadly select

> applicants from the same national and international pool), but as a grouping they seek differentiation in relation to newer post-1992 universities and other providers. Differentiation of this kind is important within a national regulatory system such as has emerged in the UK and (particularly since devolution in 1998) in England. (p. 13)

Huisman et al. (2007), by looking at the institutional diversity in HE systems from a comparative and longitudinal perspective in ten countries (Australia, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and England), conclude that while being a seemingly unified system since 1992, English HE is highly diverse; indeed, it is the most diverse of all the ten systems analysed. Huisman and his colleagues contend that 'although the formal binary divide disappeared, many differences have continued to exist between the 'old' and 'new' universities' (2007, p. 574), which were maintained through market mechanisms supported by the incumbent political powers.

2.4 League tables and university ranking systems

Arguably, the differentiation between various HEIs within the English HE sector is fostered by national and international league tables, university ranking systems, and other consumerist guides (McCaig, 2018) published by, among others, government and accreditation agencies, research organisations, and specialised and popular media. Although they have been part of the US HE sector for decades, these guides only reached worldwide notoriety in the late 1990s due to increased market competition in HE (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007), which they simultaneously reflect and reproduce in their content (Espeland and Sauder, 2016). As Brankovic (2021) points out, 'what all modern rankings have in common […] is that they promote a model of society made up of actors who continuously strive to improve […] and the belief that performances can be measured, with remarkable precision even' (p. 4). In this sense, they 'give the appearance of certainty and avoid the complexities of truth' (Brink, 2018, p. xvii). According to Brankovic (2021), their implementation within society has been so profound that 'the story of rankings can be understood as a story of historical institutionalization' (p.4).

In favour of league tables and university ranking systems, some have advocated that comparing the performance of HEIs within and across countries may be an effective way of helping HE students in their decision-making regarding which HEI to attend and informing university leadership and policymakers on areas needing improvement (Dill and Soo, 2005). Interestingly, some of those (such as, for instance, policymakers) who advocate that league tables may be relevant for undergraduates' choice of an HEI construct them as 'student consumers' (as it is the case of, for example, Dill and Soo, 2005). However, league tables and university rankings are contested and divisive in their effects, having been subjected to considerable criticism.

Based on a re-analysis of findings from six HEIs case studies in England, which are somewhat representative of the different types of institutions in the English HE sector and positions in league tables rankings, Locke (2014) investigated the impact of five league tables, three national[6] and two international[7], pointing out some of their shortcomings. Firstly, they 'deploy reactive measures' (Locke, 2014, p. 86), as HEIs' transformation has been conditioned by what these systems assess as institutional reputation and resources, that is, quality, with quantitative indicators taking priority and not always reflecting the proxies of the qualities that they are supposed to represent. Secondly, ranking systems

[6] The *Sunday Times University Guide*, *The Times Good University Guide*, and *The Guardian University Guide*.

[7] The *Shanghai Jiao Tong University Academic Ranking of the World Universities* and *THES-QS World University Ranking*.

lead to the construction of a 'deficit model' and engender 'self-fulfilling prophecies'[8] (Locke, 2014, p. 87), as they encourage 'lower status' HEIs to imitate 'high status' ones by doing everything possible to maximize their results in the key indicators, leading to less diversity within the HE sector. Thirdly, to play 'the ranking game' (Kehm and Erkkilä, 2014, p. 3), HEIs must 'internalise and institutionalise the logic of ranking systems' (Locke, 2014, p. 78), that is, adopt 'processes by which ranking systems become embedded in organizational structures and procedures and established as the norm' (ibid.). These processes vary according to the type of HEI and its position in the rankings (generally – but not always – with 'elite' institutions more focused on entry requirements and post-1992 and smaller older universities concentrating mainly on the NSS and graduate employment indicators), and the managers responsible for the marketing strategy within the institution will find a way to promote it 'to its major markets […] in a favorable light' (ibid, pp. 87-88). Finally, although some leaders of pre-1992 universities (usually perceived as more research intensive) have claimed that the results of the National Student Survey (NSS) have helped them to rebalance teaching with research, this has often resulted in investing more in student support services and building new study facilities (Locke, 2014).

Moreover, by focusing specifically on reviewing the employability measurement in the league tables of three major national publishers (the *Complete University Guide, The Guardian,* and *Times*), Christie (2017) also argues that their limits and shortcomings are evident. For example, this author focuses on narrow 'standard occupational codes' that exclude potentially rewarding careers; 'regional differences' that eschew socioeconomic

[8] 'Self-fulfilling prophecies' are the 'processes by which reactions to social measures confirm the expectations or predictions that are embedded in measures or which increase the validity of the measures by encouraging behavior that conforms to it' (Espeland and Sauder, 2007, p. 11).

peculiarities of context; ‘postgraduate study as a positive outcome’ that may favour graduates from a more wealthy background and HEIs that offer loyalty discounts; unreliable ‘self-reporting’ methods of providing information; and ‘above all, it is questionable as to whether the destinations of graduates just six months after leaving is really a good measure of the career success, as very often it can take longer for graduates to establish a career’ (Christie, 2017, p. 408).

Drawing on the results of an international survey of HE leaders and senior managers, Hazelkorn (2008) concludes that although some HE leaders are concerned about the what they perceive as the unintended impact of university ranking systems and league tables, they remain highly responsive to them, stating that these guides ‘help maintain and build institutional position and reputation’ (p. 195). However, as Brankovic (2021) notes, reputation proxied by rankings ‘normally come[s] at the expense of everyone else [and] the allure of the alternate reality suggested by rankings can sometimes cut so deep into the social fabric that it becomes almost impossible to ignore or even see beyond it’ (p. 3). Locke (2014) notes that it is difficult for HEIs to resist the influence of these guides when they realise that prospective students and their parents, graduate employers, government officials and policymakers, and others HEIs are paying attention to them (Locke, 2014). Moreover, in the specific case of global rankings, Kehm (2014) points out that it is difficult for universities to escape them because:

> […] rankings themselves and their outcomes have become indicators – or better: proxies – for the economic competitiveness of nations. Thus they become loaded with a symbolic value on the basis of which decisions are taken (e.g., with respect to funding). This symbolic value is then charged with meaning which is no longer related to the actual reality of universities and what they are about. (p. 102)

However, Kehm and Erkkilä (2014) highlight how resistance against university rankings has become more visible in some countries. In Germany, for instance, several universities (for example, the universities of Hamburg, Leipzig, and Cologne) have refused to submit data for the purpose of university rankings and league tables (Kehm and Erkkilä, 2014).

By contrast, the transference in England of a considerable part of the cost of HE study to students (which is also the case when considering English students in Scottish universities) has contributed to a growing impact of university rankings and other data-driven market mechanisms (Locke, 2011). And, unsurprisingly, 'universities who do well tend to amplify and those that do not tend to criticise [them]' (Christie, 2017, p. 412), both reactions suggesting a considerable belief in their influence on students' university decision-making. Some research in the UK and US (for example, Carrico et al., 1997; McDonough et al., 1998) suggests that most students using league tables are those of high achievement and social class, interested in the future employability and incomes of an institution's graduates (Dill and Soo, 2005). More recent research (for instance, Abbot and Leslie, 2004; Broecke, 2012a; 2012b; Gibbons et al., 2015) has shown that university rankings and league tables may impact student choice regarding HE. As Brink (2018) notes, it 'rapidly became true that students worldwide were making career choices based on ranking, rather than the extent to which a university's offering actually matches their own needs and aspirations' (p. 91). Moreover, HEIs' 'prestige' (for example, as proxied by the Russell Group membership) has also been credited as having an impact on students' decision-making (Abbot and Leslie, 2004).

The growing importance of HEIs' positioning in terms of university rankings and league tables has led them to become more competitive and professionalise their marketing strategies (see, for instance, images 2 and 3), with somewhat predictable but undesirable results.

Image 1: Advert in one of the University of Nottingham campuses (captured by the author in 2017)

Image 2: Advert in Keele University campus (captured by the author in 2018)

The Augar Review (2019), for instance, exemplifies the case of ‘one university spending over £3 million a year on marketing and others spending in excess of £1 million […] [and] urge[s] universities to maintain a sense of proportion in their marketing strategies and budgets’ (p. 78). Arguably, this diversion of financial resources towards activities and practices that enhance institutional reputation might have a negative impact on those activities and practices directly related to teaching and learning, such as educational resources and the professional development of academics (Locke, 2014). In the face of all of this, it is not surprising that a study from UK Universities (2018) concludes that there is a public perception that HEIs are increasingly becoming a ‘commercial business, driven by profit’ (p. 10).

2.5 Neoliberalism’s impact on academic work culture and environment

Given all the insights mentioned so far, it is not surprising that the dominance of neoliberal managerialism in HE has been having an impact on the traditional academic work culture and workplace environment within universities (Deem, 1998). Indeed, Ball (2013) notes that one of the consequences of neoliberalism is the adjustment of social relations and practices to the market form, leading to the commodification of educational practices and experiences. This is ‘made possible by a ‘new type of individual’, an individual formed within the logic of competition’ (Ball, 2013, p. 132). In this way, Giroux (2014) points out that the idea of ‘the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects’ (p. 56) is replacing a more traditional view of the university as a critical institution where knowledge, skills, and values vital for the democratic life are produced and reproduced. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) observe that traditionally:

> The ’capital’[9] invested with value in the field of higher education is termed ‘academic capital’ and consists in the first instance of intellectual or cultural,

[9] Bourdieu defines *capitals* as the resources that individuals use ‘to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order’ when such resources operate as a ‘social relation of power’ (Bourdieu, 1989, as cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 73), that is, when social actors struggle for them (and invest in them) as valued resources

> rather than economical or political assets. The logical underlying practice in the field of higher education is therefore shaped by deeply ingrained rule, cultures, values and professional protocols that revolve around the struggle for, and acquisition of, academic capital. (p. 270)

Naidoo and Jamieson's (2005) traditional characterisation of the field of UK HE is consistent with Bourdieu's (1988) observations on French HE. However, English HE has been facing an 'undermining of cultural[/academic] capital' and a 'valorisation of economic capital' (Naidoo, 2004, p. 469). Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) suggest that the commodification of HE implies that educational processes lose their 'intrinsic use-value' so as to become excessively focused on the production of educational credentials with 'exchange-value' (that is, economic worth).

In this way, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) alert that 'the 'devalorisation' of academic capital is likely to shift the underlying logic shaping academic practices' (p. 271), with the pedagogic relationship between academics and students assuming a form similar to the transaction of commodities in the market. In other words, HE risks becoming a commercial transaction in which the lecturer assumes the position of a producer (or service provider) and the student occupies the position of a consumer.

Moreover, although the 2011 White Paper confirmed the existence of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE), this body was eventually replaced by the Office for Students (OfS), founded in January 2018. Jo Johnson, the UK Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation at the time, described the OfS as:

(Swartz, 1997) used to reproduce social inequalities in society (Bourdieu, 1986). This concept and other Bourdieusian concepts are explored in detail in chapter 4.

> [a] different way of looking at how the sector is regulated […] that is going to be driving value for money in the provision of higher education. That's a core concern right now for students who are bearing the cost or a significant part of the cost of their higher education. (Adam, 2018, cited in Shattock and Horvath, 2020, p. 33).

Hence, the OfS is conceived as a market regulator with powers of intervention in the HE sector similar to those of, for instance, the Office for Communications (Ofcom) in telecoms (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Importantly, HE students are expressly constructed and positioned as consumers (see chapter 3).

From this consumerist point of view, in which HE is constructed as a commercial transaction, it is assumed that competition has the potential to level up the faculty's quality and, consequently, ensure high-quality teaching, while minimizing 'poor quality' delivery, so that:

> Rather than merely stipulating new procedures to enhance the functioning of higher education, consumerism may be seen as a device to reform academic culture and pedagogic relationships to comply with market frameworks. It is therefore apparent that such policies are attempts to change, fundamentally, the terms on which education takes place in universities. (Naidoo et al., 2011, p. 1145)

These changes in the field of HE, fostered by competition, impact how some academics currently experience their careers and the academic-student' relationship (see 3.1). Indeed, the ascendance of market mechanisms within English HE implies that academics have less to say in terms of university government and management (Deem et al., 2007). Guthrie and Neumann (2007) note that traditional academic decision-making methods based on the collegiality of academics are being abandoned in favour of market-based methods. Some authors (for example, Deem, 1998; Lorenz, 2012) argue that in a process similar to the one experienced by public service workers, in which their condition and practice has moved from ‘regulated autonomy’ to ‘institutionalized distrust’ (Dent and Whitehead, 2002), the control and monitoring of academics’ activities (or, from a managerialist perspective, performance) has led to the replacement of an environment based on ‘minimal hierarchy and maximum trust’ (Deem, 1998, p. 48) with ‘a culture of permanent distrust’ (Lorenz, 2012, p. 609). Furthermore, while traditionally academics have enjoyed considerable academic freedom[10], some authors (for example, Altbach, 2001; Akerlind and Kayrooz, 2003; Shore, 2008) argue that such freedom is being eroded due to the introduction of permanent NPM controls over academic personnel.

Since academics are not a homogeneous group, they react in different ways to managerialism, which manifests itself in a variety of different ways depending on context. Based on qualitative empirical data collected between 1998 and 2000, Deem et al. (2007) conclude that neoliberal discourses and practices within universities are ‘resisted, avoided, and adapted in all sorts of ways by all sorts of individuals and groups trying to get the day-to-day business of higher education done’ (p. 27). For instance, Robinson et al. (2017), based on an empirical qualitative study with early career academics (ECAs) in the UK, argue that ‘being in potentially hostile environments can lead to the development of a strong reflexivity [and] a very well-developed political sensitivity’ as well as ‘the development of successful practices of resistance and change within […] institutions’ (p. 501). Knights and McCabe (2000) also conclude that although ‘new management

[10] Academic freedom can succinctly be described as academics’ capacity “to choose teaching and research topics, and to pursue them without governmental influence” (Kayrooz et al., 2007, p.8), which sits ‘at the very core of the mission of the university [and is] essential to teaching and researching’ (Altbach, 2001, p. 205).

innovations' are effective in increasing control over work processes and the subjectivity of staff, they might stimulate resistance on the part of employees. However, Deem et al. (2007) observe that many academics have embraced the management and leadership opportunities created by the adoption of managerial practices within HE. Moreover, Clarke and Knights (2015) note that the 'tensions, contradictions and ethical dilemmas that revolve around careerism [may] leave academics disengaged from practices that do not directly enhance their career profile, such as teaching and spending time with students' (p. 1869), with 'institutionally valued' activities taking priority over 'ethically valuable' ones' (p. 1874).

Clarke et al. (2012) also interrogate how 'the historical, cultural, economic, political and institutional relations in HE […] shape or reshape […] how academic subjectivities are sustained or transformed' (p. 6). The authors conclude that the increasing demands to perform, including the need to continually publish more and more in top-ranked journals, with the inevitable criticism and rejection associated (Gabriel, 2010), results in academics' identities becoming more fragile and insecure (Clarke et al., 2012). Moreover, based on empirical research conducted with business school academics, Knights and Clarke (2014) describe the academic lives of their participants as 'bittersweet', based on ambivalence surrounding what should constitute academic life (that is, being entitled to full freedom in teaching, researching and pursuing knowledge) and the near impossibility, at least for the majority of them, of achieving it. Arguably this contradiction has a major impact on ECAs. Indeed, Robinson et al. (2017) point out ECAs' perceptions of the difficulty 'to work out the complex rules of the game and to operate well within this changing academic field while at the same time holding values of vocation and personal integrity related to different conceptions of academic labour' (p. 502).

Although holding values of integrity can be challenging and present dilemmas for academics, it also opens the possibility for different forms of resistance. For instance, Bowes-Catton et al.'s (2020) 'at-home' ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) analyses the actions of an informal and non-hierarchical collective of academic and non-academic staff at The Open University (UK) against what they perceived to be the illegitimate actions of their Vice Chancellor, which ultimately led to his resignation in April 2018. Although the authors are aware of how their love for the distinctive social mission of The Open University was relevant in their refusal to comply, they expect that their story can function as an example to academics in other HEIs that resistance is possible. This article was published in a special issue of the academic journal *Management Learning* intitled *The Performative University: 'Targets', 'Terror' and 'Taking Back Freedom' in Academia*, which includes eight papers[11] from several different countries. In the introduction, guest editors Jones et al. (2020) manifest their hope that:

> […] this special issue […] offers a chance to raise the conversation enough to inspire academics and managers alike to develop a collective activism of solidarity, which recognises increasing structural power inequity consequentially stemming from neo-liberal marketisation and competitive pressures. (p. 364)

Crimmins et al. (2021) also exemplify potential academic resistance practices. During a research project involving rural women in Australia, Crimmins and her female colleagues experienced a dilemma about presenting some of the views expressed by their research participants, in which the policy position of the government department that funded their

[11] Other than Bowes-Catton et al. (2020), the papers in this special issue are Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020; Butler and Spoelstra, 2020; McCann et al., 2020; Ratle et al., 2020; Jelonek and Mazur, 2020; Dean et al., 2020; Wieners and Weber, 2020. Somewhat surprisingly (at least to me), none of these papers focuses directly on the performative university's impact on HE students.

study was criticised. Moreover, Crimmins at al.'s (2021) dilemma was aggravated by the difficulty that female academics in Australia experience in attaining funding. However, they decided not only to present those findings but also to take the opportunity to problematize how neoliberal academia can negatively impact the researcher's autonomy and, therefore, academic freedom. I mention Crimmins et al.'s (2021) example because although it occurred in the Australian HE sector, it is not difficult to imagine the same or a similar challenge in English HE. The process of English HE marketisation has also been impacting on students' positioning, which is explored in the next chapter.

2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I explained the evolution of neoliberalism and explored how contemporary English HE has been transformed due to the expansion of neoliberalism into the public sector and the rise of consumerist culture. I outlined how the marketisation of the HE field, where the focus is on commercial instead of public values, impacted the contemporary university.

I described the main features of the English HE sector, briefly explaining how Scottish HE differs, with the English sector being significantly more marketised. One of the main differences is the absence of tuition fees for Scottish students studying in Scottish universities. This is relevant as some of the participants in this study are English undergraduates studying at Scottish universities.

I examined the growing importance of HEIs' positioning in terms of university rankings and league tables, and how these consumerist guides led them to become more competitive and professionalise their marketing strategies. I analysed some of the literature that explores their somewhat predictable but undesirable results, as well as their shortcomings, paying particular attention to the employability measurement in the league tables.

Finally, I reviewed some of the literature that investigates the impact of all the transformations mentioned above on academics' careers and experiences, as academics are the agents in the HE field who supposedly interact more closely with HE students and, therefore, may impact students’ discourses on and practices in the field.

In the next chapter, I review the literature on English undergraduate students’ positioning(s).

Chapter 3 – Positioning English undergraduate students

This chapter consists of three major sections. In the first section, I critically explore English undergraduate students' construction as consumers, by unpacking the metaphor of students as consumers. In the second section, I address the increase in tuition fees in the UK, which the literature points to as having reinforced English HE students' construction as consumers. Finally, in the third section, I explore English undergraduates' different trajectories and experiences, particularly how HE reproduces and reinforces structural societal inequalities.

3.1 The construction of students as consumers

The construction of English undergraduate students as consumers links two interrelated aspects: (1) the marketisation of HE and (2) the increased financial contribution of students towards their studies (see also 3.2) (Tomlinson, 2017). Some authors (see, for example, Molesworth et al., 2009; Maringe, 2011; van Andel et al., 2012; Williams, 2013; Giroux, 2014; Brink, 2018) argue that the marketisation of HE leads to the commodification of knowledge and the consequent transformation of HE into a commodity, that is, a consumer good. From this consumerist point of view, the university's role becomes that of a producer and seller (in the form of programmes of study and support for the pursuit of that programme), while students are positioned as purchasers, that is, consumers with rights (McCulloch, 2009; Maringe, 2011; Brink, 2018). Hence, English students are now predominantly constructed as consumers by policymakers (for example, in policy documents published by governmental bodies, such as The Office for Students), HEI (both in internal strategic documents and marketing actions), academics, and the media (see, for example, Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009; Nordensvärd, 2011; Williams, 2013; Brooks, 2018).

Concerning HE policies, Brooks (2018) adopts a discursive approach to investigate how students are constructed as consumers in contemporary English HE policy, arguing that policies can have unintended consequences regarding their impact:

> […] actively reshaping understandings and practices in the environments in which they are introduced. Dominant constructions of students are thus likely to exert some influence. Indeed, a considerable number of scholars have argued that students' relationships with higher education have been fundamentally altered by their positioning, within policy, as consumers, and the reshaping of the sector in general along market lines. (p. 746)

Nonetheless, Brooks (2018) also points out that although the influence of English government policy speeches and documents is often significant and the consumer discourse impactful, they do not always immediately and entirely transfer into practice. Indeed, in many cases policy pronouncements need to be 'enacted by relevant actors who interpret, translate and sometimes resist policy imperatives' (Brooks, 2018, p. 746). Some aspects, however, leave less space for interpretation and resistance; for example, the fact that UK universities must now comply with the consumer protection law, which explicitly defines the relationship between universities and students, positioning the former as a provider and the latter as consumers (CMA, 2015).

The construction of undergraduate students as consumers is usually referred to in academic literature as a metaphor, and it is the dominant metaphor applied to UK HE students (McCulloch, 2009; Tight, 2013). McCulloch (2009) expounds the metaphor of the student as a consumer in the following way:

> […] the university acts as the provider of products and services, in the form of programmes of study and support for the pursuit of those programmes, and the student acts as a consumer of those products and that support. The notion of the

> student as a consumer has driven much change within universities, not only within academic areas where 'quality', and its enhancement, have dominated agendas over the same period, but also in areas such as student support and institutional marketing. (pp. 171-172)

Tight (2013) complements this explanation by arguing that the metaphor of students as consumers was reinforced by the introduction of tuition fees, as 'having paid their fees, [HE students] are customers of universities and consumers of the education and other services they provide' (p. 303). As Marginson (1997) notes, 'in a low cost or free system there is limited scope for investor calculations, […] where there are significant user charges it is another matter' (p. 122). Barnett (2011) distinguishes between students as consumers and students as customers. According to this author, the position of students constructed as costumers is active, as students are engaged, making options and having a stake in their experience. In contrast, the student constructed as a consumer assumes a passive position, merely 'consuming the service extended to him or her' (Barnett, 2011, p. 43).

Paraphrasing Kuhn (1996), McCulloch (2009) observes that 'metaphors are powerful, and serve to structure perceptions and, thereby, actions' (p. 171). Moreover, Tight (2013) argues that student metaphors contribute to our understanding of HE policies through three inter-related (p. 304) aspects: (1) 'simplification' (as it is easier to evaluate how well objects are represented when they are presented in a simplified form), (2) 'variety' (as we can apply a multitude of metaphors to any particular set of circumstances) and, (3) 'level' (as metaphors can contribute to highlighting the levels of policy, and its impact, that are relevant for us).

While acknowledging Tight's (2013) argument, I contend that the excessive dominance of the metaphor of students as consumers in the academic literature somewhat marginalises other constructions and metaphors (and, consequently, other potential forms of action, behaviour, and discourse) within the field of HE, leading to an oversimplification and reductionism of English HE students' positioning. Moreover, due to its dominant position, this metaphor (and some of the concepts usually associated with it, such as, for example, 'student experience', 'student satisfaction' and 'value for money') is often uncritically (and sometimes unreflexively) reproduced by different actors involved in the HE sector (for example, policymakers, academic leadership, and scholars) in a way that reinforces and reifies it. Indeed, Sabri (2011), based on a critical discourse analysis of selected HE policy texts, provides some examples of such reproduction and reification and concludes that:

> The consumer is a sacred form […] in many public domains and in higher education we [use] a language that has come to recursively reproduce a set of shared sacred meanings. Invocations of 'the student experience' are wrapped in a sense of righteousness, which often accuses other actors of failing students in some way. At the same time, this sacred form reduces what students do to an economic transaction, in effect it is a hollowing out of education from experience. 'The student experience' has become a mantra, apparently used to give students a voice and at the same time constraining that voice by isolating it from other voices around it, and from the complex environment that enables us meaningfully to interpret those voices. The habit of homogenising and simplifying who students are, where they come from, and what their experiences are, perpetuates a taken-for-granted abstract and disembodied 'the student experience'. This amounts to a diminution of student agency within policy discourse at a time when there is clearly a burgeoning research evidence of complexity and diversity in students' experiences in higher education […] (p. 665)

Indeed, there is a significant body of academic literature on the complexity and diversity of English/UK HE students' experiences due to their different economic, social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds (for example, Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al. 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Baker, 2019; Bowers-Brown et al., 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Finn and Holton, 2019), explored in 3.3.

3.1.1 Passive HE students

Despite its dominant position, there is no consensus in the literature over the adoption of the metaphor regarding students as consumers. McMillan and Cheney (1996) admit that this metaphor was 'initially appealing [and] appeared […] seemingly for all the right reasons – responsibility, accountability and practical relevance, to mention a few. [However, it has been] reshap[ing] educational philosophy and process in some rather alarming ways' (p. 2). Indeed, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) observe that applying a framework derived from the commercial sector to the HE sector, which is 'driven by a different set of values and rewards' (p. 272), may compromise the pedagogic relationship between lecturers and undergraduates.

McMillan and Cheney (1996) point out that the consumer metaphor 'suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process' (p. 5) and 'inappropriately compartmentalizes the education experience as a product as opposed to a process' (p. 7). The argument here is that within the contemporary university the exchange between lecturers and students tends to be unidirectional because 'students are encouraged to view themselves as consumers, […] view[ing] the act of learning as a commercial transaction' (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p. 272). In this way, they do not position themselves at the center of the educational process, rather occupying a passive position as consumers (McMillan and Cheney, 1996). Maringe (2011) notes that such a passive positioning is problematic because ‘education is a conjoint activity between teachers and learners where new knowledge is gained as a result of the conjoint effort of both teachers and learners’ (p. 148).

Some authors (for example, McCulloch, 2009; Cuthbert, 2010) propose that the metaphor of students as co-producers of learning and knowledge overcomes some of the issues concerning the metaphor of students as consumers. Tight (2013), however, argues that it is unrealistic to believe that ‘all students have the capacity and the desire to engage in the co-production of knowledge’ (p. 296). Nonetheless, the absence of such an ongoing interaction makes it more difficult for students to experience a transformational relationship with knowledge instead of learning only what is strictly necessary to pass exams and obtain an academic credential, the former being what Ashwin (2020) contends is what HE is, or should be, fundamentally about.

Relatedly, McMillan and Cheney (1996) contend that the metaphor of students as consumers ‘excessively fosters the self-promotional activities of professors and at the same time promotes the entertainment model of learning’ (p.6). Some authors (see, for example, Molesworth et al. 2009; Scullion et al., 2011) argue that students tend to see HE through the lens of their life experience as consumers because they have been exposed to consumer culture from an early age. In turn, lecturers may feel the temptation of being instrumental and (self-) manage their professional progression (or, in some cases, merely keeping their jobs) by trying to adapt themselves to the market. If students prefer to be passive recipients of information delivered in a ‘friendly’ way, academics may start delivering information in an entertaining and less demanding way because their professional progression is dependent, at least to a certain an extent, on students’ satisfaction. Ultimately, this may be a self-defeating strategy because undergraduate students do not react hegemonically to different modes of delivering lectures, and it is not possible to adapt a specific lecture in a way that satisfies every one of them (Maringe, 2011).

However, the existence of tuition fees means that HE institutions' economic success depends on the number of students they admit every year; the more students they admit, the more income they will receive (Foskett, 2011). In this sense, some HE institutions might be tempted to facilitate the acquisition of a degree certificate to attract more students. Hence, Moleswoorth et al. (2009) suggest that ‘a direct link may be established between high numbers of passes and the economic success of the institution, further reducing difficult material and inflating academic policy that maximizes pass rates’ (p. 283). Relatedly, the Augar Review (2019) shares these concerns about grade inflation, partially suggesting that:

> The growth in the proportion of first and upper second-class degrees awarded has been too great to suggest plausibly that it can be entirely attributed to a genuine improvement in the quality of students’ academic performance. It is not unreasonable to assume that part of the explanation is that academic assessment has become a means of reputational enhancement [of higher education institutions], albeit how this has happened is unclear. (p. 78)

Nonetheless, it is essential to point out that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting these conjectures so far.

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 presents student satisfaction as a right and the main objective of HE, critical to ensuring that the ‘market’ functions as it is expected (Brooks, 2018). Maringe (2011) questions ‘whether guaranteeing and delivering [immediate] customer satisfaction should be a goal unto itself in higher education’ (p. 148). According to Maringe (2011), the satisfaction students derive from their educational experience is not immediate in all its aspects, and often ‘comes from the pain of a sometimes tortuous journey which takes the student through a vast array of experiences, difficult reading and hard assignments' (p. 149). Yet, students' evaluations are usually conducted during the educational experience or immediately afterwards, 'precluding the possibility for sustained reflection on what has really been learned' (McMillan and Cheney, 1996, p. 9).

Moreover, it could also be argued that students usually are not prepared to assess the quality of the delivered teaching and the resources and techniques best suited to develop the learning process (Maringe, 2011). This does not mean that allowing students to assess and evaluate certain aspects of their experience is never of relevance within the university. For example, it may be relevant to know what they have to say about the resources available in the library, about the quality of service in the canteen, and about the best time for lectures (Maringe, 2011), as the data provided can help improve these aspects. And due to those services' nature, it does not make sense to apply the same type of limitations and objections to the assessment and evaluation of the quality of the educational experience.

However, HEI themselves often seem to encourage students to complete course evaluation forms to transform their results into marketing materials to be published in academic brochures (Jones-Devitt and Samiei, 2011). Sabri (2103) argues that the National Student Survey (NSS) has become the principal measure of 'student experience/satisfaction' in the UK, redefining the relationships between students and academics, academics and managers, and students and HEI. In this way, according to Sabri (2013),

> Lecturers are required to encourage students to complete the survey, then to take part in a 'constructive discussion of the results before being subjected to personal and professional judgment by these results. Professional identity narratives are co-opted into the production of the NSS when lecturers perform their

> exhortations to students to fill in the questionnaire. As the results are produced it becomes a form of public measurement of their competence to 'provide' a 'good student experience'. (p. 8)

There is evidence that surveys such as the NSS should be approached cautiously since they do not always reflect only students' perceptions regarding the 'quality' of teaching and courses. For instance, in a recent literature review and synthesis of research on this type of survey, Heffernan (2021) argues that student surveys' results sometimes reflect racist, sexist, and homophobic prejudices as they are influenced by student demographics and the teaching academic's culture.

Moreover, some authors contend that the insights mentioned so far have had an impact on the relationship between teachers and undergraduate students. For instance, Williams (2013) observes that this relationship has been reshaped and its present configuration is not clear. Lorenz (2012) further suggests that the construction of students as consumers with explicit consumer rights implies that the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, in which the 'teacher represents professional authority' (p. 621), may tend to disappear or even be inverted.

3.1.2 Individualism, instrumentality, and the commoditisation of HE students

Unpacking the construction/metaphor of students as consumers, Nordensvärd (2011) differentiates three possible consumer attitudes based on students' motives to pursue a HE degree. One reason is acquiring skills that will benefit their employability in the future. To fulfill this objective, universities must equip students with knowledge and skills to make them viable in the work market. Another possible motive is to acquire the degree itself, and here students' attitude translate into an even more instrumental relationship with HE than the previous one, because in this case students do not consider it primarily relevant to acquire skills and knowledge, but are merely interested in acquiring a certificate or diploma that acknowledges those knowledge and skills. One final motive to pursue HE is the fun side of being a HE student, that is, having a good time while waiting to graduate (for example, making new friends and partying). In this third category, HE is still instrumental but differently from the two previous motives as it deviates from an economic perspective. Nordensvärd (2011) points out how these three consumer attitudes are not mutually exclusive and can assume different combinations or configurations.

The consumption of skills and 'acquiring' a degree are, from a neoliberal perspective, an investment into undergraduate students' future employability. Therefore, when students act as consumers, they act simultaneously as (self-)managers because they need to choose the skills or a degree that will increase their employability when they finish their HE studies (Nordensvärd, 2011). The focus on future employability means that undergraduates' main reason to choose a degree and a HEI may not be their personal interest and orientation, but something that the market values and recognises as relevant. Hence, some students may end up applying some market control mechanisms to their learning process, that is, 'develop[ing] their own learning strategy, monitor[ing] the process and evaluat[ing] the results' (Nordensvärd, 2011, p. 161). This instrumental and transactional attitude also has an impact on the learning process (discussed earlier), as to have a degree, it is argued, is more important than to be a learner (Molesworth et al., 2009).

McMillan and Cheney (1996) consider that another consequence of the metaphor of the student as a consumer 'reinforces individualism at the expense of community' (p. 9). It is important to note that consumerism is intimately associated with competition because within the neoliberal university it has been 'transformed from being a peripheral element in the practices of higher education to being an ideology that enters into the character of the central practices of academic life' (Barnett, 2003, p. 84) where the 'student-consumer

[..] emerges as the focus of competition' (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p. 270). Indeed, pursuing HE studies to be employable in the future may imply, from some HE students' perspective, the need to start competing among themselves for the best position in the present. In the context of the neoliberalist transformations of the Australian HE sector, Marginson (1997), drawing on Foucauldian theory, explains that:

> The goal of neo-liberal reform is to produce the human subject as *Homo economicus* in every sphere. […] neo-liberal government is active and reconstructive, seeking to transform a wide range of private and public sites, including education, into market economies premised on self-managing economic consumer-investors. […] education is centrally implicated in neo-liberal strategy. Attributes of self-transformation, such as self-reflection, 'lifelong learning', and career management are largely formed in education; and education's role as a gateway to labour markets is near universal. By modelling education as a market in self-investment, and by installing market choice and competition in the government of education and its consumption-investment by individuals, neo-liberal reform seeks to ground the formation of self-managing individuality in *Homo economicus*. (p. 122)

In the context of English, and more broadly UK HEIs, some studies point to students' focus on degrees as an economic self-investment. Tomlinson (2008), based on a qualitative study with fifty-three final-year undergraduates in a pre-1992 HEI, concludes that students perceive the need to add value and distinction to their HE credentials, namely through the importance attached to grades, the profile of their HEI, and postgraduate studies, 'mainly as a way of 'standing apart' from other graduates with similar profiles and achievements […] to give themselves a positional advantage in the labour market' (pp. 55-56). However, the participants in Tomlinson's study also manifest the need to develop soft credentials (that is, credentials outside their formal learning, such as professional placements or voluntary work) due to 'their concerns about the growing homogenisation of hard credentials' (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 57).

Moreover, Bates and Kaye (2014), based on qualitative research involving sixty-two first-year UK psychology undergraduates – undertaken both before and after the introduction of the fee rise in 2012 for home and EU fulltime students – at two UK HEI, conclude that both pre- and post-fee rise students hold expectations that their degree presents them with better employment prospects. However, some pre-fee rise students admit that they would have been more selective in their choice of degree if they were paying higher fees, opting instead for one with better economic return – or, as one of the participants in Bates and Kaye's (2014) study formulates it, 'a degree in something that I can make quite a lot of money' (p. 666).

The state often acts as a manager of human capital by positioning HE students as investments (Nordensvärd, 2011); for example, in facilitating access to degrees which are considered more valuable to society in a specific moment. From this perspective, the student is not just a subject of the global economy, but also, or mainly, an object of it. Therefore, the construction/metaphor of the student as a consumer implies not only the commoditisation of HE but also of the students as it (re)configures them as 'commodities to consume and to invest in' (Nordensvärd, 2011, p. 157). This commoditisation of students is not surprising. Indeed, Bauman (2005) contends that in our contemporary society we can only have access to consuming life (that is, being consumers) if we are simultaneously able to demonstrate our own use value (that is, being commodities). In this sense, Bauman (2005) concludes that being a consumer and being an object of consumption are two roles that 'intertwine, blend and merge' (p. 10).

3.1.3 Empirical research on HE students as consumers in the UK

Despite the existing empirical research in the field of educational studies on specific aspects of how UK undergraduates experience HE (see, for instance, Tomlinson, 2008 and Bates and Kaye, 2014), it is noted that the construction of undergraduate students as consumers, from their own perspectives, has received little empirical attention from researchers (Johnson and Deem, 2003; Budd, 2017a; Budd, 2020). Indeed, Budd (2017a) argues that although UK undergraduates, in particular English ones, have been constructed as consumers of HE, 'any consideration on this topic must include an analysis of how students themselves understand and experience their HE and broader social contexts' (p. 23). Moreover, Nixon et al. (2018) point out that the construction of students as consumers of HE is often present in the debate about the marketisation of HE in England as a 'contested yet under-analysed entity' (p. 927). There is, however, a small body of empirical research that is relevant in this respect.

Based on a comparative empirical research on how English and German undergraduates experience and orient themselves towards their degrees, Budd (2017a) concludes that the way in which English participants (a total of thirteen) position themselves in the field involves a fair degree of complexity and is multi-dimensional, that is, they are 'ex- and intrinsically, instrumentally, and altruistically motivated – sometimes all at the same time' (p. 35) in combinations that, despite some noticeable patterns, are 'always personally unique' (p. 33). For example, Budd (2017a) observes that although English participants' decisions are much more instrumental than their German peers and to a large extent directed towards later employment (in part due to their awareness of an increasingly competitive and limited graduate labour market), they are 'more often directed towards certain kinds of jobs rather than salaries', including in some cases 'wanting to contribute to social/progress justice' (p. 33). Moreover, most English participants in Budd's (2017a) study feel responsible for their degrees, namely in terms of 'the need for diligence, self-organisation, independent study, and solving one's own intellectual problems' – contrary, for example, to the findings of White's (2007) study with Australian undergraduate students, which suggest that HE 'has become a consumable commodity for which teachers not students have primary responsibility' (p. 603). Finally, in another paper based on the same empirical data, Budd (2018) observes that 'English students all accepted the fact that they, and not the state, should pay for tuition fees, and mostly believed that the university should generate a capital surplus for itself from those fees' (p. 145). However, it is worth mentioning that Budd (2017a, 2018) interviewed his participants in the spring and summer of 2012, just before the rise of HE tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 in England for home and EU fulltime students.

The findings of Tomlinson's (2016, 2017) empirical research with sixty-eight undergraduates of different types of HEI (Russell Group, 1994 Group, Post-1992, Guild, research-driven, and Northern Irish institutions) studying a diverse range of subject disciplines (social and human sciences, natural/physical sciences, arts and humanities, and vocational and semi-vocational degrees) illustrating how UK students understand and approach their HE are somewhat similar to those of Budd (2017a). Tomlinson (2016) notes that most of the participants identify with the construction of students as consumers, which is shown by the 'evident level of scrutiny and questioning […] of their institution's provision and quality' (p. 164). Nonetheless, Tomlinson (2017) points out that most students' references to consumerism are 'largely notional and do not necessarily fully inform their approaches to, and behaviours within, higher education' (p. 464). Importantly, most of the participants resort to 'strongly individualised [neoliberal] discourses around personal application and opportunity maximisation' (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 164). However, at the same time, some students also reveal 'genuine engagement with subject learning, which also may explain their choice of programme' (ibid., p. 165) – and I would suggest, 'genuine engagement' may also be a consequence of subject choice, as some students may start feeling 'genuinely engaged' when they study a subject for the first time at university.

With some similarity to Budd's (2017a) findings, Tomlinson (2017) concludes that 'there are variations in students' attitudes, even though there are many shared concerns' (p. 464). For example, regarding what students expect from HE, some undergraduates expect a 'return' on their 'investment', others reflect critically on this neoliberal construction, dissociating themselves from it, and most occupy a ground somewhere between these two positions (Tomlinson, 2017). Hence, Tomlinson (2017), paraphrasing Bauman (1991), observes that 'different value and identity positions can intersect and become contingent on specific contexts and circumstances in an individual's on-going social and institutional experience' (p. 464).

Nixon et al.'s (2018) study presents much less nuanced findings than Budd's (2017a, 2018) and Tomlinson's (2016, 2017). Based on a study with twenty-two undergraduates at a research-intensive university in England, Nixon et al. (2018) observe that the participants discursively constructed themselves as paying customers and consumers in terms of their identity as students. Moreover, using a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, the authors noticed among the participants an 'unconscious ideal of a wished-for love relationship with their tutors' (ibid., p. 937). Nixon et al. (2018) conclude that the participants aimed for narcissistic gratification, which may even imply engaging in exploitative interpersonal relationships with their lecturers and tutors. It is important to mention that the authors note that their sample is drawn from a university attended mainly by middle-class students.

As mentioned above, some authors (see, for example, Maringe, 2011; Tight, 2013) suggest that the construction of students as consumers was reinforced by introducing fees in HE, as ‘students, having paid their fees, are customers of universities and consumers of the education and other services they provide’ (p. 203). The introduction of tuition fees in UK HE is explored in the next section.

3.2 Tuition Fees and Indebtedness

This section covers the rise of undergraduate students’ tuition fees in the English HE sector. Firstly, it presents a historical perspective on tuition fees, namely the main steps of its implementation in chronological order and the economic and political justifications. Secondly, the principle of cost sharing, advanced through political power as one of the main economic justifications for the increase of tuition fees, is critically unpacked. Finally, some of the theoretical and empirical literature on the impact of indebtedness on students is reviewed.

3.2.1 A historical perspective on (the rise of) tuition fees and student loans in the UK

The system of funding HE in England changed significantly in 2012, mainly due to a massive increase in student tuition fees (Bates and Kaye, 2014; Jones, 2016; Clark et al., 2019). Indeed, the rise in student fees from £3,375 to £9,000 in England in 2012 made the country ‘one of the costliest places to attend university in the world’ (Jones, 2016, p. 277). It is important, however, to point out that these changes did not appear overnight, without warning; they were, instead, the culmination of a process of radical reform in English HE over the previous two (to three) decades (Shattock, 2012; Bachan, 2014).

The expansion of the UK HE sector and the governmental desire to widen and increase HE participation, especially since the second half of the 1990s, led to the construction of a ‘funding crisis’, from which student loans emerged as a political solution (Barr and Crawford, 1998). Although student loans had already been introduced in 1990/1991, their initial aim was to reduce the public subsidisation of student living costs, by combining them with educational grants, bursaries, and parental contributions (Buchanan, 2014). Gradually, however, the educational maintenance grants were replaced by income-assessed loans, which in 1998 became the only maintenance allowance available to undergraduate students in UK HE (Buchanan, 2014).

Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the UK from 1997 to 2007, ‘saw the problem of HE finance in a broader picture of New Public Management reform’ (Shattock, 2012, p. 163). The introduction of tuition fees was presented by Blair (2010) as part of a ‘troubled process’ whose aim was ‘introducing competition; blurring distinctions between the public and private sector; […] and in general trying to force the system up, letting it innovate, differentiate, breathe and stretch its limbs’ (p. 480-481). Moreover, Blair (2010) argued that in terms of leagues tables, North American universities were better positioned in the field of global HE ‘due to their system of fees’ (p. 482). Indeed, according to Blair (2010), universities in the United States ‘were more entrepreneurial’, ‘went after their alumni’, had a ‘bursary system [that] allowed them to attract poorer students’, and ‘could attract the best academics’ due to ‘their financial flexibility’ (p. 482). As ‘simplistic’ (Shattock, 2012, p. 164) and contested as Blair’s view of North American HE was, the implementation of tuition fees in UK HE went ahead.

The proposed introduction of variable tuition fees in the 2003 White Paper is described by Shattock and Horvath (2020) as ‘the first real attempt to harness market forces’ (p. 29) regarding UK HE. The 2003 White Paper recommended a differentiation between research intensive universities (pre-1992) and teaching universities (post-1992) in terms of the tuitions fees that they would charge students. The idea was to have a market in which HE institutions would charge fees according to their different ‘quality’ and ‘reputation’ (based on their success in research deployed in the media league tables), in order to distinguish the ‘best’ universities and make them more competitive internationally (Shattock, 2012). The government’s intention, however, was not fully realised, as almost all post-1992 institutions decided to charge the maximum amount of fees allowed at that time - £3,000. Shattock and Horvath (2020) point out that, from an institutional perspective, post-1992 institutions’ decision was the inevitable outcome, ‘since to charge a lower fee was to admit shortcomings, which would be bound to affect recruitment’ (p. 30).

The following year, the Higher Education Act (2004) introduced several changes to the HE system in the UK, including student loans as a way of students paying their tuition fees (except in Scotland, which resisted the idea of charging fees to its students). These loans would only have to be repaid by students after their graduation, when they would already be earning a specific level of remuneration (when students start repaying their loan and how much they repay is defined in legislation and depends on their repayment plan). According to Shattock (2012), this ‘political decision’ meant that HE was no longer considered ‘sufficiently a public good to require a full financial subsidy for all students engaged in it’ (p. 165). However, it was established that an independent commission would review the outcomes of the new tuition fee policy three years later, that is, in 2006-07 (Shattock, 2012). The review of the outcomes was led by the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, which published its findings in 2010. This document, entitled ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education’, became known as the Browne Review.

The Browne Review 2010 ‘opted for an almost totally marketized solution’ (Shattock, 2012, p. 166), advocating that: 1) HE institutions should be entitled to charge market priced fees; 2) student choice of HE institution would increase the sector's quality; and 3) few limits should be placed on HE's expansion. Moreover, with the abolishment of the cap on tuition fees, the intervention of the state, and specifically its contributions to the HE sector should be reduced accordingly (Jones, 2016). However, the government, a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, decided not only to control the number of students, but also to establish a maximum tuition fee level. Hence, tuition fees were capped at £9,000 a year for the academic year 2012-13, a value almost three times higher than the maximum value of £3,375 for the academic year 2011-12. For the academic year 2020-21, tuition fees are capped at £9,250 a year. Due to this intervention of the state, McCaig (2018) contends that 'the English neoliberal tuition fee system […] takes a middle ground between a freely privatized market and the continuation of state planning' (p. 18).

In 2019, the Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, also known as Augar Review (2019), was presented to Parliament. The independent panel chaired by Philip Augar was guided by a set of principles, including the principle of cost sharing in HE, according to which 'the cost of post-18 education should be shared between taxpayers, employers and learners' (Augar Review, 2019, p. 8). The justification for maintaining this principle was that,

> The alternatives are simply inconceivable. Getting the taxpayer to pay for everything is unaffordable. Getting learners to pay all their own costs is unfair to those of limited means. Getting employers to pay for the whole system would put too much emphasis on economic value alone. A shared responsibility, in our view, is the only fair and feasible solution. (Augar Review, 2019, p. 8)

Moreover, the Independent Panel's proposals reinforced the principle of cost sharing in HE by stating that,

> Most graduates benefit significantly from participating in higher education – as does the economy and wider society. We therefore endorse the established principle that students and state should share the cost of tertiary education. We support the income-contingent repayment approach as a means of delivering this fairly, with those benefiting the most making the greatest contribution. However, public misunderstanding is high and better communication is required, including a new name, the Student Contribution System. We believe that more graduates should repay their loans in full over their lifetimes, and recommend extending the repayment period for future students and effectively freezing the repayment threshold. These changes – with the reduction in fees [to £7,500 a year] – would apply only to students entering higher education from 2021-22 at the earliest. […] Some aspects of the present system appear to be unfairly punitive and we recommend reducing students' in-study interest charges and capping graduates' lifetime repayments. (Augar Review, 2019, pp. 10-11)

Despite proposing some changes, namely a slight reduction of fees, a reduction of in-study interest charges, and a new name for the tuition fees' system, the Augar Review (2019) was influenced to a large extent by the principle of cost sharing. Since the report defends the principle of cost sharing in HE as a matter of fairness (Augar Review, 2019), it is valuable to unpack this principle analytically and critically; in particular, the assumption that its application is a matter of fairness.

3.2.2 Unpacking the Principle of Cost Sharing in HE

The principle of cost sharing in HE defends a shift partially from taxpayers to parents and students (Johnstone, 2004). Policymakers tend to justify this principle on the grounds that 'graduates experience significant financial and personal benefits from participating in HE' (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 49). For example, the increase of tuition fees was described by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) as a 'foregone gain' rather than a ‘direct loss’ (Clark et al., 2019). According to Clark et al. (2019), the intention was to present tuition fees as ‘a portion of future earnings […] with the emphasis on benefits similarly lessening the perception of cost’ (p. 713). In this context, it is therefore pertinent to explore the relationship between attending HE and labour market outcomes.

As mentioned in 1.2, HE policies in the UK have been implemented on the grounds of Schultz’s (1961) human capital theory, incorporating Becker’s (1993) advancements regarding education (Tomlinson, 2008). Human capital theory ‘views participation in education and training as an investment that yields both social and private returns’ (Ashton and Green, 1996, cited in Tomlinson, 2008, p. 50). Underpinning this theory is the idea of the knowledge economy, which, according to Brown et al.’s (2011) critical standpoint, represents the belief that,

> […] the human side of enterprise slowly came to take center stage. Through investments in brainpower, it was thought that nations could deliver prosperity, justice, and social cohesion, companies could develop world-class employees, and individuals could secure a better future for themselves and their family. (p. 16)

Hence, it is assumed by the proponents of human capital theory that the expansion of higher levels of education leads to economic development (‘social returns’), which in turn leads to higher levels of remuneration for those who participate in education (‘private returns’) (Adnett and Davies, 2002). The private returns for attending a HE degree is what OECD (2012) calls ‘earning premium in HE’ and the HE Act (2004) and Augar Review (2019), among others, labels ‘graduate premium’. This so-called graduate premium has been used, as mentioned previously, by policymakers to justify the application of the principle of cost sharing in HE, that is, to transfer part of the cost of a HE degree from taxpayers to students and their families. However, the fairness of this principle can be questioned, and its unintended consequences should be assessed.

At a theoretical level, the positional conflict (or credentialist) approach takes a contrasting stance on the relationship between HE credentials and employment. Influenced by Weber's (1948) conceptions of power and monopoly, Collins (1979) argues that the rise of HE credentials (that is, HE qualifications) *per se* does not necessarily add significant value to an individual's human capital. The idea here is that credentials and jobs are positional goods because 'what counts is how individuals are positioned relative to others, given a limited supply of places at highly ranked universities and with leading employers' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 136). Therefore, 'in a context of increasing positional competition, [the privileged] seek to reproduce their advantage through wealth and ownership rather than credential competition' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 134). As Tomlinson (2008) explains, the proponents of the positional conflict interpretation claim that 'instead of reflecting an increase in the skills and knowledge demands needed to *do jobs*, the upsurge in HE credentials simply means that the stakes have been raised for what is needed to *get* jobs' (p. 50). Hence, a HE degree is no longer enough (Tomlinson, 2008) and extracurricular activities (for instance, internships and volunteering) are increasingly necessary to guarantee graduate employability (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tholen, 2013).

Bradley and Waller's (2018) empirical research with, on the one side, undergraduates from a Russell Group institution, and, on the other, students from a post-92 university, shows that undergraduates who had already secured a destination (a course, an internship, or a job) fixed by the end of their final year generally came from wealthier backgrounds. However, their study also demonstrates that social class differences are mediated by the type of HE institution attended by students, that is, the type of university an undergraduate student attends can have a considerable influence on future employability. Hence, Bradley and Waller (2018) suggest that students attending a Russell Group institution tend to make an easier transition into the job market than those attending a post-92 institution. Moreover, Leuze (2011) compares pre- and post-1992 graduate earnings in the UK (1979-2007), concluding that graduates from the former tend to occupy better-paid positions.

However, Britton et al.'s (2016) research shows that even among undergraduates who attend higher-ranking institutions, students from less advantaged backgrounds have worse graduate earnings prospects. Furthermore, Green and Kynaston (2019) point out some studies show that 'a privately educated man (but not woman) leaving university with exactly the same degree as a state-educated man will later enjoy a pay gap of 7 to 15 per cent (studies vary in their exact findings) in his favour' (p. 13). Moreover, Britton et al.'s (2021) recent research, using the Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes data set (published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies), on the returns to undergraduate degrees by socioeconomic group and ethnicity is relevant here. The report pointed out that although state-educated students from the poorest families also enjoy 'relatively high returns from going to university' (p. 2) (as the earning prospects would be very low if they did not attend university),

> there is substantial heterogeneity across groups. Returns are especially high for privately-educated graduates, whose median earnings at age 30 are the highest of all groups. (p. 2)

These findings have an important impact on debates over inequalities in HE[12], especially in a context where 'those from the upper end of the social class structure dominate elite universities' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 134).

[12] The inequality of graduate outcomes is analysed in more detail in 3.3.6.

Moreover, Phil Brown's research into the labour market for graduates (Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2011; Brown, 2013; Tholen and Brown, 2018) highlights and contributes to the criticisms of the neoliberal discourse around employability, as well as the problems of graduate employability; in particular, the changing nature of the graduate labour market and the limits of graduate employability. Some of the literature on the criticisms of the neoliberal discourse around employability has already been explored, but it is still important to examine this in the context of unpacking the principle of cost-sharing.

Brown et al. (2011) coined the expression 'opportunity trap' to describe the 'increasing social congestion in the competition for decent jobs as people scramble for highly rated schools, colleges, and jobs' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 135). Hence, this concept points to one of the limits of the knowledge economy; the more educated people (with HE credentials) a society has, the more the competition for highly qualified jobs increases, meaning that not all the graduates can get a job that corresponds to their expectations and qualifications. Therefore, Brown et al. (2011) argue that 'extending opportunities based on human capital investment will not deliver individual freedom or prosperity but rather contribute to an opportunity trap' (132).

Importantly, these insights are not (entirely) ignored by policymakers. Indeed, the Augar Review (2019) acknowledges that:

> a graduate earning premium is usual but not universal [because] while most graduates can expect a significant lifetime premium in earning, at age 29 graduates in some subjects from some universities earn less than their peers who did not embark upon or complete study for a degree' (p. 87).

The Augar Review (2019) also mentions how 'the impact of different degree subjects on earnings varies considerably according to the institution [students] attended, [with] the typical Russell Group graduate enjoy[ing] a very high earnings premium' (Augar Review, 2019, p. 88). Although 'graduates of pre-1992 universities generally benefit from an earnings premium, […] most of the institutions and courses associated with a negative return in earnings are found within this group' (Augar Review, 2019, p. 88).

Nonetheless, all English undergraduates pay approximately the same value of tuition fees, that is, the maximum amount allowed. This value does not consider the variations in the graduate premium in terms of the subject they study and the type of institution that they attend, nor the changing nature of the graduate labour market and the limits of graduate employability. Therefore, I argue that the fairness of the principle of cost sharing as it has been applied in the HE sector is, at the very least, questionable. And this is particularly concerning because there is evidence that HE students from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to choose high wage premium subjects (Davies et al., 2013). Indeed, Davies et al. (2013) argue that students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to consider subjects that may lead to higher status professions and greater earnings, collect information about those subjects and better interpret it in terms of employability prospects. Moreover, as Brink (2018) points out:

> The undergraduate fee is fixed no matter what subject you study at each university. Yet the real cost of a course in sociology is a fraction of the real cost of a course in medicine […]. Students therefore end their studies with much the same level of debt, but with quite different levels of value for money' (p. 141).[13]

My objective here is to deconstruct the principle of cost sharing. Yet, it is essential to keep in mind that there are also non-economic standpoints on the value of HE – for

[13] I must say that it is my understanding that a statement like this, in which the levels of value for money of attending different degrees are assessed, although unintentionally, somewhat reifies the construction of HE as a consumer good/service.

example, as mentioned earlier, Ashwin (2020) contends that HE is, or should be, fundamentally about students having the possibility of a transformational relationship with a structured body of knowledge.

3.2.3 The impact of indebtedness on HE students

From a theoretical standpoint, Lazzarato (2012) argues that in contemporary neoliberalism, responsibility for debt is internalised, producing a system of ‘interiorised debt’ (p. 78) in which subjects are constructed (and produced by neoliberal policies) as ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Foucault, 2010), that is, as their own managers.

For most people, however, being an entrepreneur of the self is limited to managing employability, including the financial aspects related to it (such as drops in wages/income), and debt (Lazzarato, 2012) In this way, debt becomes a technique of power, in which ‘the power to constrain and control debtors does not come from outside, as in disciplinary societies, but from debtors themselves […] and is exercised within an open space and an unlimited time, that is, the space and time of life itself’ (Lazzarato, 2015, p. 69). Building on Deleuze’s (1995) assertion that ‘a man [sic] is no longer a man [sic] confined but a man [sic] in debt’ (p. 81), Lazzarato 2012 claims that there has been a transition from disciplinary societies to a control society in which people are kept in a state of subjectification through debt. Referring to the case of American HE students, Lazzarato (2015) observes that:

> Students not only consider themselves human capital, which they must valorize through their own investments (the university loans they take out), but they also feel compelled to act, think and behave as if they were individual business. Debt requires an apprenticeship in a certain behavior, accounting rules, and organizational

> principles traditionally implemented within a corporation on people who have not yet gone on the job market. (pp. 70-71)

The American HE students are an example of this subjectification operated by debt because they are indebted before joining the job market (Lazzarato, 2015), thus being stripped of their 'future labour power' (Hartlep and Eckrich, 2013, p. 94). As Chomsky (quoted by Hartlep and Eckrich, 2013) argues:

> Students who acquire large debts putting themselves through school are unlikely to think about changing society. When you trap people in a system of debt they can't afford the time to think. Tuition fee increases are a 'disciplinary technique,' and, by the time students graduate, they are not only loaded with debt, but have also internalized the 'disciplinarian culture.' This makes them efficient components of the consumer economy. (p. 82)

Despite differences in the American and English tuition fees systems and loans' repayment conditions, it is perhaps reasonable to extend the theoretical considerations mentioned above to English undergraduates' contemporary experiences of indebtedness and conditions of subjectivation.

The introduction of the high values of tuition fees in the UK HE sector has raised concerns about its impact on students' expectations regarding their university experience (Bates and Kaye, 2014). It has also been suggested that it will be more difficult for some students who may need to drop out of university, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, to re-enter due to the debt they would already have accumulated (Bradley, 2017). Nonetheless, there is little qualitative research about students' experience of indebtedness due to the introduction of loans for tuition fees (Harrison et al., 2015). According to Harrison et al. (2015), the existent research on this topic, both qualitative and quantitative, suggests that students' attitudes, understandings, and experiences of indebtedness are not homogeneous within or between socioeconomic categories. These authors also note that participants' understanding of indebtedness varies to some extent within and across cohorts, adding to the necessity of obtaining a more in-depth and broader knowledge of undergraduates' perspectives on this issue, namely through empirical qualitative research.

Regarding students' attitudes towards debt, Harrison et al. (2015), based on a qualitative study with sixty-two full-time undergraduates from a teaching-intensive university, present a six-point typology: (1) debt-positive; (2) debt-savvy; (3) debt-resigned; (4) debt-oblivious; (5) debt-anxious; and (6) debt-angry. The findings of the study reveal that the first four types (that is, debt-positive, debt-savvy, debt-resigned, and debt-oblivious) are more prevalent, with 'the 'centre of gravity' [lying] somewhere between the debt-savvy and debt-resigned groups' (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 100), with only one-fifth of the students fitting in the debt-anxious and debt-angry categories. Moreover, Harrison et al. (2015) establish a correspondence between these types and the participants' socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds. Thus, debt-positive students (see below) are mostly from lower-income families, while debt-resigned and debt-oblivious are mainly from a more privileged background. Debt-savvy students are mainly from urban areas, debt-anxious from families that are debt-averse. Debt-angry is a very heterogeneous category in terms of the socioeconomic origin of the participants. However, Harrison and colleagues point out that many students' 'views fell across different types [and] it is possible that [their] attitudes are fluid over time and influenced by recent events' (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 93).

The labels of the six categories developed by Harrison et al. (2015) are self-explanatory. Still, one of them may be somewhat misleading regarding what it is designating. Contrary to how it could be legitimately misinterpreted, debt-positive students are not necessarily favourable to the current loans/debt system. According to Harrison et al. (2015), what defines this category is to believe that the loan is 'a strong and rational financial investment in their future [that] pay[s] dividends in the long run, in terms of employability, earning potential and job security' (p. 94). And although the authors present evidence that these undergraduates view 'debt as a reasonable price to pay to improve their economic situation beyond that of their parents' (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 94), it seems more difficult to conclude that students view debt as an investment in their future, at least based on the account presented in the article:

> *Sarah:* I know I had the attitude where I was … going to be in debt, that I was going to have a good job at the end of it and I will be able to pay it off in no time… I don't think I look at it as a bad thing.
>
> *Interviewer:* Yes – it's not such a stigma?
>
> *Sarah:* No, I don't think so; I think it is something that is expected. You go to university knowing that you are going to come out with a massive debt.

Sarah's account (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 94) seems to suggest that what she considers to be an investment in her future is attending HE and receiving a diploma at the end of her degree, and not the loan/debt; as mentioned above, debt is 'the price to pay' (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 94). In this sense, I would argue that debt is a consequence of the investment, and not the investment itself. I believe this distinction is essential, as ignoring it may have implications on how students' perceptions of their indebtedness are publicly constructed. Indeed, accepting an inevitable consequence (debt) of choice (pursuing HE studies) when there is no other alternative (as it would be impossible for Sarah to support the financial cost of HE studies without a loan) is not the same as believing that the loan is 'a strong and rational financial investment in [the] future'. In some cases, due to the constrained nature of choice, students may even end up perceiving their indebtedness as a responsibility of the State (Esson and Ertl, 2016).

Some studies demonstrate the extent to which students see their debt as an educational investment that is mediated through subject choice. The findings of Harrison and Agnew's (2016) quantitative study with 439 first-year undergraduates in England and New Zealand suggest that business students show higher confidence in a future return than social science students. This does not necessarily imply that business students have a higher level of financial literacy, as many business students do not know about the functioning of the repayment system, but, instead, reflects their higher graduate salary expectations. However, Bachan's (2014) empirical quantitative research with business and finance undergraduates from a single English university indicates that many of them are not able to sensibly assess either their future earnings or debt. Bates and Kaye (2014) qualitative study with first-year psychology students in the UK also demonstrates that a considerable part of the student body ignores the functioning of the repayment system.

Another significant aspect to consider when analyzing students' experiences of indebtedness is their socioeconomic background. Although Harrison and Agnew's (2016) study 'finds no systematic socioeconomic basis for students' debt attitudes' (p. 351), some other empirical studies do establish such a basis. Bachan (2014), for example, observes that student debt expectations are reduced by parental home ownership, parental experience of HE, and parental financial support. These findings are not entirely surprising as they expectedly enhance some students' sense of financial security (Bachan, 2014) and echo the results of studies conducted before the massive increase in tuition fees in UK HE (for example, Davies and Lea, 1995). Bachan (2014) points out that it would be important to have more studies involving other universities and different degree programmes across the UK HE sector.

Clark et al. (2019), based on a three-year longitudinal study with a group of undergraduates from a single red brick university in the North of England who started their HE studies in 2013, explore how students respond to the changes in the system of tuition fees in England and, specifically, how they understand and negotiate indebtedness. These authors note that lower-income students find it more difficult to transfer to another programme when they are not happy with their current one because they would not be able to afford the debt they would incur by doing so.

Despite the empirical evidence that students' socioeconomic background has an impact on their experience of indebtedness, some authors (for example, Christie et al., 2003; Harding, 2011; Harrison and Agnew, 2016) observe that students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and financial conditions have different attitudes towards indebtedness. This suggests that there are most probably aspects other than financial circumstances influencing students' attitudes. Based on their study, Harrison and Chudry (2011) note that undergraduates with extrovert personality traits are likely to accumulate more debt, as personality traits 'influence financial decision-making for students as much as for any other portions of society' (p. 166). Moreover, students who are more susceptible to suffering from anxiety may show more concern when confronted with an experience of indebtedness (Harrison and Chudry, 2011).

Clark et al.'s (2019) study demonstrates that most students' decisions are made intuitively, that is, without consulting available data, as it is not easy for most of them to predict either expected earnings or debts. Clark et al (2019) argue that this is problematic because policymakers' preferences for a market-oriented approach to HE assumes that students would make informed decisions about their university choices. However, there is empirical evidence (see, for example, Dodds, 2011) to suggest that 'there is no simple relationship between the provision of information and knowledge acquired (and decisions made) by prospective students' (Brooks, 2018, p. 746). This means that market-oriented policies have been implemented in the UK based on problematic assumptions, which may result in unpredictable outcomes.

Finally, Tomlinson (2016), based on interviews and/or focus groups with undergraduates, concludes that debt has not deterred students from entering HE. I believe that this type of conclusion should be approached with some caution. Indeed, if students are pursuing undergraduate studies, it is because the prospect of indebtedness obviously did not prevent them from doing so. However, I suggest that it is only possible to fully explore the impact of debt as a deterrent to entering HE among individuals who decided not to go into HE after finishing their secondary school education.

3.3 English students' different trajectories and experiences

Despite policymakers' tendency to homogenise contemporary HE students' experiences under the umbrella of students as consumers, there is a significant body of literature presenting evidence that students' trajectories into, within and out of UK HE, particularly in England, are anything but homogeneous. This heterogeneity results from the interplay between different aspects, for example, social, economic, and geographic of HE students' lived experiences, from their birth (and, in a way, even before that moment) until they finish their undergraduate degrees and, for some, enter the job market. In this section, I explore some of the theoretical and empirical academic literature around these issues. The objective is to provide a more nuanced and richer idea of English undergraduate students' trajectories and experiences than the construction of students as consumers allows for. In particular, I will unpick existing inequalities and social divisions that are reproduced by the education and HE systems.

3.3.1 Some initial considerations

In 2017/18, the UK HE initial participation rate was 50.5%[14] and there has been an indisputable expansion of HE and widening of access from the 1990s onwards (Reay et al., 2005; Boliver, 2018). While this expansion and widening participation has led to a higher representation in HE of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Budd, 2017b), there are still divisions based on HE students' socioeconomic background, particularly at so-called high-status universities (Boliver, 2013).

Entering university and the experience of being an HE student, as well as the future pathways available after concluding the degree, are to a large extent dependent on socioeconomic background (Boliver, 2013; Budd, 2017b; Reay, 2017; Boliver, 2018). As Reay (2017) puts it, 'English education is class divided' (p. 154). The Augar Review (2019) notes that,

> Disadvantaged 18-years-old are more likely to enter HE than ever before but […] advantaged 18-years-old were more than twice as likely to enter full-time HE in 2018 as their disadvantaged peers. (p. 85)

There are studies that demonstrate that the growth in HE participation has not been evenly distributed; students from less privileged backgrounds are concentrated in less prestigious HEIs (such as post-1992 institutions) (see, for example, Paterson, 1997; Boliver, 2013; Boliver, 2018; Harrison, 2018). As Harrison (2018) notes, 'there has been remarkable little change in the social mix of elite universities within the period, with some even

[14] The HEIP measure for 17 to 30 year-olds in 2018/19 was 51.9%. For detailed statistics, consult: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education/2018-19

becoming less diverse' (p. 75). Policymakers are aware of this issue, which is acknowledged in the Augar Review (2019):

> Only around 4 per cent of disadvantaged 18-years-old go to the highest tariff[15] universities, and advantaged applicants are more than 5.7 times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers. (p. 85)

It is understood that the existence of high fees for English students in UK HE (see 3.2.1) also deters potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds from entering HE. Again, the Augar Review (2019) points out that,

> […] research by the academics Callender and Mason found 'lower class students are still far more likely to be deterred from planning to enter higher education because of fear of debt'. They also report that lower-family income students were more debt-averse in 2015 than in 2002. (p. 85)

Moreover, the majority of young English HE students stay local for university (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018), and approximately a fifth of English HE students continues to live with their families while doing their degree (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Many of them are undergraduates from disadvantaged or working-class backgrounds who attend local HEIs due to financial constraints that constitute a limit to their geographical mobility (Davies et al. 2008; Mangan et al., 2010; Gibbons and Vignoles, 2011). In this way, living at home is often a way of reducing costs and being cost-efficient (Finn and Holton, 2019). Nonetheless, Finn and Holton (2019) argue that despite being minority, the experience of students who de-locate to attend a university away from home is 'the most symbolically

[15] For information on the classification of HEIs according to tariff points, see: Purcell, K., Elias, P. and Atfield, G. (2009). A new classification of higher education institutions. Manchester: HECSU www.hecsu.ac.uk.

valued and normalised within discursive framings of authenticity and experience' (p. 32). Among other factors, this contributes to many students from disadvantaged backgrounds perceiving universities an 'unfamiliar and predominantly middle-class environment' (Loveday, 2015, p. 573).

A final initial consideration is that while my focus in this thesis is on English undergraduates, the existence of HE divisions based on students' socioeconomic background is not specific to English HE students. Indeed, Budd (2017b) observes that 'international comparative studies have shown that there is a relationship between social and educational equality [as] the distance between rich and poor is greater when there is a large variation in educational attainment' (p. 111).

3.3.2 Degrees of choice in terms of HE students' socioeconomic background

In the English context, the influence of social class on access to HE has been introduced in the public debate one-sidedly, focusing mainly on issues of selectivity and the practices of elitism in HEIs (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005). Although these issues are extremely relevant, especially in a context where universities constructed and positioned as prestigious (that is, Oxbridge[16], The Russell Group, and pre-1992 universities in general) are not representative of wider society (Boliver, 2018), Ball et al. (2002) observe that 'the social dimensions of choice' (p. 51) are neglected. The social dimensions of choice refer to the effects generated by the influence of family, institutions, and other individuals in undergraduate students' choice-making processes (Ball et al., 2002). Ball et al. (2002) argue that neglecting the social dimensions of choice is problematic and needs to be addressed because 'the perceptions, distinctions and choices of HEIs used and

---

[16] Oxbridge refers to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

made by students play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in HE' (p. 52).

Following Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), Reay and her colleagues consider the concept of 'choice' to be problematic from a sociological perspective, as it may contribute to the idea of an absolutely (or, at least, to a large extent) free agent (Ball et al., 2002). Therefore, according to these authors, it would be more appropriate to use the term 'decision-making' because 'where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 51). Ball et al. (2002) observe that this distinction assumes a certain relevance in their study. However, despite this initial observation (and distinction), Reay and her colleagues tend to use the term 'choice' in their published work, inclusively in its titles (see Ball et al., 2002 and Reay et al., 2005), as they want to 'sketch out [a] sociology of choice in relation to the field of HE' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 52). In this thesis, I tend to use the expression 'choice' to name the final step of the choice-making process and 'decision-making' to refer to the process itself, albeit both expressions are sometimes used interchangeably.

Importantly, Reay and her colleagues' research (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) illuminates the extent to which prospective HE students from different ages and genders face highly distinct 'degrees of choice', largely shaped by a complex combination of social factors mainly grounded on social class. Using both quantitative and qualitative data and drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of 'classification' (that is, social classifications of both self and institutions) and 'judgement' (that is, classificatory judgments in specific fields), Ball et al. (2002) argue that 'the perceptions, distinctions and choices of HE institutions used and made by students play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in HE [by] embody[ing] social structures' (p.

52). Therefore, according to Ball et al. (2002), choice of university is 'a choice of lifestyle and a matter of *taste*'[17] (p. 53) somewhat 'delimited [by] *opportunity structures* and different [social, spatial and temporal] *horizons of action*' (p.55), which may be material or perceptual. In this sense, social class plays a significant role in the decision-making process because university choice seems to be, to some extent, a question of 'class-matching' and 'social closure' (Parkin, 1974).

Ball et al. (2002) note that their findings support Hodkinson and Sparke's (1997) theory of 'pragmatically rational decision-making', in which:

> […] decisions were pragmatic, rather than systematic. They were based on partial information located in the familiar and the known. The decision-making was context-related, and could not be separated from the family background, culture and life histories […]. The decisions were opportunistic, being based on fortuitous contacts and experiences. The decisions were made when the person felt able to do so and were reactions to opportunities as they were perceived and encountered. Decisions were only partially rational, being also influenced by feelings and emotions. Finally, decisions often involved accepting one option rather than choosing between many. Decisions were neither technically rational nor irrational.' (p. 33)

Following Bourdieu, Hodkinson and Sparke (1997) point out that human activity and individuals' beliefs are culturally and socially situated. While not disagreeing with Hodkinson and Sparke (1997), Reay and her colleagues (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) note that students' embodiment of social structures happens only

[17] The habitus produces individuals' lifestyles, which, when perceived in their relationality through habitus schemes, 'become sign systems that are socially qualified' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168). This explanation is further developed in chapter 4.

to a certain extent. This means that their decision-making processes are not entirely deterministic, allowing for a certain degree of agency, as students sometimes go beyond both their opportunity structures and social, spatial, and temporal horizons of action. For instance, although deciding to pursue HE studies and trying to be accepted at selective HEIs is typically more prevalent among students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds than among those from less advantaged ones, it is not the case that all working-class undergraduates attend post-1992 HEIs. Relatedly, Ball et al. (2002) point out that post-1992 HEIs should not be positioned in the field of HE as a 'kind of second best or result of lack of alternatives for all students' (p. 53) from less privileged or working-class backgrounds. One of the consequences of positioning post-1992 universities as a 'consolation prize' is that those applying to study in these HEIs risk being perceived as having an aspiration deficit.

Bowers-Brown et al. (2019) observe that the discursive construction of (high) aspiration(s) implies that 'regardless of individual structural conditions, material circumstances, or starting location, education can provide the same opportunities for all to succeed if they only have a desire to do so' (p. 207). Hence, raising working-class students' aspirations regarding their participation in HE (by, for instance, inciting them to attend Oxbridge or other Russell Group institutions) and plans for future employment has become one of the prevalent contemporary discourses in terms of how to overcome educational inequalities (Bowers-Brown et al., 2019). These discourses on or around aspiration tend to construct success as an outcome of high aspirations and motivation and failure as the result of low, or even lack of, aspirations and motivation (Baker, 2019; Bowers-Brown et al., 2019).

Interconnectedly, students' neoliberal construction as consumers (see 3.1) emphasizes students' necessity to make 'good choices' in the UK HE' market' (Baker, 2019, p. 300).

The assumption here is that students have the power to make 'good choices' if they have the 'right' sources of information (Baker, 2019). Through a combination of the discourses around aspirations and students as consumers, young people are constructed as 'rational, autonomous adult citizens-to-be, responsible for their future life chances' (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 293).

Furthermore, it is often assumed that merit alone, as a combination of talent and effort, justifies individuals' different outcomes (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Indeed, the principle of meritocracy (to which I return later in this section) somewhat underpins Schultz's (1961) and Becker's (1993) human capital theory (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). However, as explained in 3.2.2, the human capital theory is highly problematic and incapable of explaining by itself the variation in future graduate employability and earnings. As Friedman and Laurison (2019) critically point out,

> One of the biggest problems with the human capital theory is that it implies that people operate in a vacuum, that their work life is cut off from outside influences and that their career progression is driven solely by their own skills, 'merits' and actions. In other words, it implies that we live in an era of meritocratic individualism where success and failure are solely matters of personal responsibility. (p. 88)

In this way, discourses around aspiration, motivation, and merit arguably end up placing an excessive emphasis on agentic elements and individuals' supposedly intrinsic qualities, failing to acknowledge structural societal inequalities that are also produced and reproduced in the fields of education and HE by their agents and institutions (Tarabini and Ingram, 2018).

3.3.3 Private schools' role in the reproduction of structural societal inequalities

Official figures reveal that high-status universities make more offers to privately educated students, who typically come from more privileged backgrounds. Indeed,

> […] between 2010 and 2015 an average of 43 per cent of offers from Oxford and 37 per cent from Cambridge were made to privately educated students […] in a typical year during this decade [the 2010s], not only have some 1,600 state schools not had any sixth-formers going to Oxbridge, but more pupils from Westminster School [an independent school in London] have gone to Oxbridge than have pupils qualifying for free school meals from everywhere in Britain. […] government figures in 2015 showed pupils from fee-paying schools to be five times as likely as pupils from state schools to go to Oxbridge; and twice as likely to attend a Russell Group university. (Green and Kynaston, 2019, pp. 11-12).

Green and Kynaston (2019) argue that these figures demonstrate the existence of a systemic 'pattern of privilege' (p. 12), according to which students from independent schools tend to go to high-status universities.

Indeed, private schools (also known as public or independent schools) play a significant role in producing and reproducing societal inequalities in England (Green et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018; Green and Kynaston, 2019). Although private schools are often classified as 'elite' schools, there is a distinctive hierarchy among them (Power at al., 2003). Only a small number of independent schools (that is, those schools whose intake comes exclusively from extremely wealthy backgrounds) hold the cultural, social and economic capital that would allow them to be considered elite schools (Green et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018; Gamsu, 2020). However, all private schools are united by their financial and material resources (Green and Kynaston, 2019), and their claim to offer an education superior in several aspects to the one offered by the state educational system (Gamsu, 2020). The geography of independent schools in England, predominant in the South-East of England and London, reflects the country's regional socioeconomic inequality and, therefore, the uneven distribution of the English middle class across the country (Gamsu, 2020).

Reay and her colleagues' research (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2009) shows that English HE students' previous educational experiences (that is, the type of school they have attended before university) significantly influence pursuing (or not) undergraduate studies and university choice. Baker (2019) also points out the influence of teachers and tutors in prospective undergraduates' decision-making, strategies and practices. Moreover, Mangan et al.'s (2010) quantitative study with 1272 English students from different schools shows that attending an independent school increases considerably the probability of applying to Oxbridge and going to a 'high-ranked' HEI compared to state school pupils. Ball et al. (2002) refer to this influence as the 'school effect' or 'institutional habitus'[18], that is, the embedded perceptions and expectations of choice that are constructed over time in relation to school friends and teachers' opinions and recommendations.

3.3.4 The importance of the family

In addition to the influence of the educational experience, research shows that 'family habitus' (that is, one's dispositions that integrate the experiences, views, and expectations of the family) also plays a vital role in students' decision-making processes (see, for

[18] Bourdieu defines *habitus* as 'a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). This concept is explored in detail in chapter 4.

instance, Ball et al., 2002; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Winter and Chapleo, 2017). As a result, Ball et al. (2002) argue that 'embedded perceptions and expectations make certain choices 'obvious' and others unthinkable, according to where you stand in the overall landscape of choice' (p. 58).

Reay and her colleagues (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) employ Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) concepts of 'normal biographies' and 'choice biographies' to explain the different degrees of choices of working and middle-class students. While normal biographies are marked by linear, anticipated, and predictable transitions, choice biographies, by contrast, are more fragmentary, discontinuous, and unpredictable (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Unsurprisingly, while middle-class students tend to live normal biographies, in which the decision to pursue undergraduate studies is normalised to the point of being almost a 'non-decision' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 57), working-class students' experiences can be described as choice biographies, in which they 'are forced to reflect on the available options and justify their decision' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998, p. 65).

However, middle-class students' 'non-decisions' do not imply that they are not aware of which options might benefit them the most in the future. Based on their empirical data, Reay and her colleagues (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) observe that most middle-class participants prefer to attend high-status universities because they are aware that getting a degree from these HEIs will be beneficial for their career, making it easier to convert that educational capital into economic capital. Their data also demonstrates a connection between career motivated options and family's explicit influence and advice (Ball et al., 2002). Such middle-class trajectories imply 'active planning', which in many cases starts in a very early stage of students' educational experience (Reay et al., 2005).

Indeed, many middle-class families' practices include 'the continual working on the child to create an individual with the right capitals to succeed in life [that] involves a high degree of engagement in structured ECAs [extracurricular activities]' (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 726). Later, the skills developed through these early ECAs and ECAs developed during students' HE experience can be used to increase their employability potential (Tomlinson, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2013; 2016). Parents' support can also involve helping students with their homework and/or paying for private tuition (Ball, 2003). Moreover, Brown and Tannock (2009) note that transformations in graduate labour markets caused by an increase in the number of HE institutions led privileged families 'to position their children in the most prestigious schools and programmes, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite' (p. 384). Ball et al. (2002) argue that from a Bourdieusian perspective, families' involvement suggests 'middle-class concerns about social advantage and strategies of social reproduction' (p. 60). Moreover, Bathmaker et al. (2016) note that some middle-class students 'build on the concerted cultivation of capitals they have experienced in the families' (p. 30) when they become HE students, which Bathemaker and her colleagues refer to as 'hypermobilization' of capitals.

Most of the working-class participants in Ball et al. (2002) study, on the other hand, are not as inclined to attend high-status universities, preferring to choose a university where they can be with other students from similar backgrounds. In this sense, working-class preferences (or, to use a Bourdieusian expression, 'tastes') are underpinned by the 'classed nature' of HEIs (Ball et al., 2002, p. 60). While this is also the case with middle-class students, their preferences do not tend to be expressed in an explicit way (Reay et al., 2005). Moreover, working-class students' educational trajectories typically do not rely on the same type of family-supported active planning that middle-class students benefit from.

For instance, based on an empirical study with working-class undergraduate students at a prestigious university, Reay et al. (2009) findings suggest that most working-class students 'came to see themselves as potential Southern [an anonymised prestigious university] material very late in their secondary school career [and] when the impetus to apply […] came it was rarely from the family' (p. 1108). However, Reay et al. (2009) point out that this does not mean that working-class students are not encouraged and emotionally supported by their families, but simply that they do not have the same informed guidance that their middle-class peers have.

3.3.5 Working-class students' struggles in the HE field

Crozier et al. (2019) start by noting that 'universities are not traditionally places frequented by working-class people' (p. 2). Based on the case-study of twenty-four White and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) working-class students from three different types of universities, Crozier et al. (2019) explore these HE students' adaptation, change, and resistance through processes of navigation and identity work. Crozier and her colleagues' (2019) findings show that university expectations and normalised constructions of how a HE student must be are unfamiliar to a large majority of their working-class participants. Nonetheless, Crozier et al. (2019) observe that most of them resist pressures to assimilate entirely to the dominant norm and create hybrid identities, which incorporate experiences and ways of being into their original habitus through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Moreover, Crozier and her colleagues argue that while students are ambitious, their aim is not leaving their social class behind but getting a 'good' job (Crozier et al., 2019). In this way, the students contradict dominant discourses around aspirations and social mobility. Indeed, they keep a strong identification with their social class of origin, which works as a source of motivation for them (Crozier et al., 2019, p. 12). Importantly, Crozier et al.'s (2019) findings show that working-class students' experiences are heterogeneous, as they 'diverge in their sense of themselves and the development of their identities given that they are produced by their different social, geographical and school experiences' (p.13).

As mentioned earlier, a significant proportion of English HE students from disadvantaged backgrounds stay local for university (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) and continue to live at home while doing their degree (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). Based on a three-year qualitative longitudinal study with English working-class undergraduate students at The University of Bristol and The University of the West of England (part of the Paired Peers project) that draws on Bourdieusian theory, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) attempt to illuminate how students negotiate the continuous transition between the local and the HE fields, conceived as fields of struggle, and how this impacts on their habitus, understood as both an individual and a collective concept (Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus are explored in chapter 4).

Since the local and HE fields are somewhat contradictory, Abrahams and Ingram's (2013) students' conceptualisation of their positions and dispositions shows that although they remain separate, they adopt strategies that allow them to switch between fields smoothly and continuously. This is possible by internalising the new field's structures (HE) and adapting their habitus accordingly; specifically, the strategy consists of students changing their accents, speeches, appearances, and behaviours somewhat unconsciously, as students only realise these changes *a posteriori* (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). Abrahams and Ingram (2013) coin the resulting habitus as 'chameleon habitus'.

According to Abrahams and Ingram (2013), chameleon habitus creates a new space and is characterised by students' capacity 'to fit into the new field whilst simultaneously remaining within their old field [and] illustrates […] how reflexivity can occur through encountering a new field and adapting one's schemes of perception' (p. 11). Abrahams and Ingram (2013) point out that although previous studies (see, for example, Holdsworth, 2006) argue that residential status constitutes a barrier for working-class local students fitting in at university, the main obstacle is indeed the existence of class barriers in UK HE. These barriers contribute to many working-class students feeling unadjusted at university and may result in emotional and psychological pain (Reay, 1997).

3.3.6 Moving out of HE: Inequality of graduate outcomes

As previously mentioned, there are fewer English students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering UK high-status universities than their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds (Augar Review, 2019). Indeed, for several reasons, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to such HEIs and, if they do so, be offered a place at them (see, for example, Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Green and Kynaston, 2019). Hence, these students tend to attend less prestigious universities, such as post-1992 institutions, which constitute the majority of HEIs associated with negative graduate returns (Augar Review, 2019). This situation significantly impacts these students' employability and graduate outcomes (Abrahams, 2017).

Yet, there are other explanations for the inequality of graduate outcomes. For instance, Abrahams (2017) explores the different predispositions of working-class and middle-class English undergraduates to get involved in nepotism practices, that is, in using their contacts and networks to gain a positional advantage in terms of employability. Abrahams' (2017) empirical research involves undergraduate students from The

University of Bristol (a Russell Group institution) and The University of the West of England (a post-1992 institution) and draws on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which can be defined as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p 248) (for a Bourdieusian theoretical exploration of the different forms of capital, see 4.3). Based on her study's findings, Abrahams (2017) observes that although, as expected, working-class students have less social capital than middle-class students, not all of them lack it. However, her findings suggest that opposite to middle-class students, working-class students are less inclined to make use of their social capital (Abrahams, 2017). Indeed, across Abrahams' (2017) participants, the middle-class students are well aware of the existence of an 'opportunity trap' (Brown et al., 2011). In such a context of 'increasing positional competition' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 134), 'middle-class students' […] habitus was acutely attuned to the rules of the game in this field [and they] were aware that a degree was no longer enough' (Abrahams, 2017, p. 637). Moreover, Abrahams (2017) middle-class participants not only have more social capital than their working-class peers, but they are also more inclined to use it, which may involve a 'commodification of social relations' (Wittel, 2001, p. 52-53). From a Bourdieusian perspective, these middle-class students have 'a feel for the game and a willingness to engage in it' (Abrahams, 2017, p. 637), that is, their 'habitus […] enables the infinite number of acts of the game' and, therefore, they 'are prepared to perceive [the constraints and demands of the game] and carry them out' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 63).

Yet, it is relevant to point out that while all Abrahams' (2017) middle-class participants admit the possibility of using social capital to get competitive advantage in the job market, not all react in the same way when questioned if they think that people from different socioeconomic background (will) have the same opportunities after university. Most middle-class students construct using social capital as ‘necessary’ and do not feel guilty because they do not consider it to be cheating, revealing what Abrahams (2017) classifies as ‘shameless entitlement’. Some students, however, express a sense of guilt and point out that they have never used it (Abrahams, 2017). Interestingly, the latter group of students does not exclude the possibility of using their connections if necessary, that is, if their position becomes endangered (Abrahams, 2017).

Importantly, social capital also puts middle-class students in a privileged position to gain access to internships, which, in turn, contribute to increasing future employability prospects by generating more social capital themselves (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Abrahams, 2017). In Bathmaker et al.’s (2013) empirical study, which is part of the same research project as Abrahams’ (2017) study (the Paired Peers project), middle-class students were more successful than their working-class peers in securing internships even when there were no differences in terms of academic attainment, especially in areas such as law and banking. Unsurprisingly, when considering students’ participation in internships, having less economic capital also contributes to inequalities, as many are unpaid, implying that students who cannot afford to work without any remuneration (typically, students from less advantaged backgrounds) do not have equal access to them (Bathmaker at al., 2013). Yet, Bathmaker et al. (2013) note that some working-class students prefer not to do internships to concentrate on their degree, focusing instead on achieving high marks in their academic work. As mentioned earlier, this suggests a lack of knowledge of the new rules of the game in a context of positional competition (Brown et al., 2011).

Most working-class participants in Abraham’s (2017) study do not consider using social capital to gain an advantage over other students or graduates. This circumstance is explained by two main reasons, which are intertwined. Firstly, similarly to Bathmaker et al.'s (2013) study, working-class students emphasise the value of their HE credentials, revealing significant trust in meritocracy compared to middle-class students (Abrahams, 2017). It is essential to mention that meritocracy is a contested concept at least since it was criticized and satirised by Young (1994 [1958]). From a Bourdieusian perspective, meritocracy is an ideological artifice whose rules are set by the dominant groups to conceal structural inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) by 'converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities' (Reay, 1998, p. 1). Concerningly, dominated groups are more willing to accept the meritocratic principle that achieving one's goals only depends on ones' hard work, which, when one fails, leads to feelings of shame and, consequently, symbolic domination (Abrahams, 2017). Secondly, and relatedly, working-class participants in Abrahams' (2017) study' 'displayed a commitment to a 'sense of honour' which ruled out using social capital to gain an advantage as morally unacceptable, preferring to make it themselves' (p. 638).

Abrahams (2017) observes that a sense of hard work and achievement permeates how these students see themselves. Moreover, Abrahams (2017) suggests that this sense is connected to their perseverance and resilience, which translates into a continuous fight to be regarded as socially worthy (Bradley and Ingram, 2013). In terms of identity work (that is, the reflexive process through which individuals form, maintain, and transform their sense of self; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), it is possible to argue that Abraham's (2017) working-class participants' primary focus seems to be forming and maintaining their sense of self as socially worthy through a process of 'honourable mobility'. However, Abrahams (2017) warns that it remains to be seen if these working-class students will remain attached to these notions if their transition to the competitive job market proves to be unsuccessful.

3.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I sought to present the positioning of English undergraduates. I started by reviewing the construction of undergraduates as consumers both in academic literature and policy documents, highlighting its link to two main aspects: the marketisation of HE and the increased financial contribution of students towards their studies. The literature on this topic argues that applying a framework derived from the commercial sector to HE may lead to passive, individual, instrumental, and commoditised HE students. I ended the first section of this chapter by reviewing a small body of empirical research on how English undergraduates understand and experience their HE context.

In the second section of the chapter, I explored the rise of undergraduates' tuitions fees in the English HE sector by presenting a historical perspective on tuition fees and student loans in the UK. Moreover, I unpacked the principle of cost-sharing in HE, showing its problematic assumptions, namely in terms of graduate employability, and limitations. I ended the second section by reviewing the literature on the impact of indebtedness on HE students, namely the implications of the neoliberal construction of students as indebted subjects and the impact of their socioeconomic backgrounds on how they react to it.

Finally, in the third section, I reviewed the literature covering English undergraduates' different trajectories and experiences regarding their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. I paid particular attention to the social dimensions of choice and how neglecting the distinction between 'choice biographies' and 'normal biographies' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) is problematic. I highlighted the role of private schools in the reproduction of social inequalities, how family habitus plays a vital role in students' decision-making process, and the fallacy of the discourses around meritocracy. I also covered the struggles of working-class students in the field of HE, reviewing some of the central literature that shows that university expectations and normalised constructions of how HE students must be are unfamiliar to many students from less privileged backgrounds. I ended this section and the chapter reviewing the literature on the inequality of graduate outcomes due to the socioeconomic background and the type of HEI attended by students.

In the next chapter, I present the theoretical framework that informs my thesis.

Chapter 4 – Theoretical framework: A Bourdieusian approach

4.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I use a theoretical framework informed fundamentally by Pierre Bourdieu's core concepts of 'habitus', 'capital' (in its different forms) and 'field', and also by other Bourdieusian concepts, such as 'codification', 'strategy' and 'power'. These concepts are deployed to explore:

1. How, if at all, the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of English undergraduates shape their understandings of HE.
2. How English undergraduates construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, particularly how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it.
3. How English undergraduates' aspirations and expectations for the future, specifically regarding employability, relate to their discourses on and practices in HE.

This thesis frames the public construction of the student as a consumer (for example, in the literature and in policy documents) as a form of 'codification' and explores the different strategies and practices that agents (that is, undergraduate students) with different habitus and capitals adopt to resist, reshape, or reproduce this codification. Moreover, I combine the above mentioned Bourdieusian approach with a poststructuralism concept of identity construction.

The use of a Bourdieusian approach is not novel, either in educational research or management and organisational studies (MOS). Bourdieusian analyses have been extensively used in educational research to critically unpack how educational systems maintain, legitimise and reproduce social inequalities (see, for example, Abrahams, 2017;

Ball et al., 2002; Naidoo, 2004; Reay et al., 2009; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). This is not surprising since it has been observed that Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus, 'capital' and 'field' 'make an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of practice within higher education institutions' (Naidoo et al., 2011, p. 1146). In management and organisations studies, Bourdieu's work has been receiving growing attention in recent years (Sieweke, 2014), with 'an increasing number of researchers apply[ing] concepts such as habitus, field or capital to investigate phenomena in MOS' (p. 532) (see, for example, Battilana, 2006; Mutch, 2003; Coupland, 2015; Robinson et al., 2017).

However, there have been criticisms of how Bourdieu's ideas and concepts have been applied by MOS and Education scholars. Sieweke (2014) points out that some researchers separate Bourdieu's 'theoretical triad' (p. 532) (that is, habitus, field, and capital) and that habitus has been overlooked in comparison to the other two concepts (field and capital). The disintegration of Bourdieu's theoretical triad and lack of attention to the concept of habitus is problematic because scholars tend to ignore the inner logic of the triad (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). Moreover, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) argue that the explanatory power of cultural capital and habitus' increases significantly when both are taken together and in conjunction with practice and field. Indeed, these concepts make full sense only in relation to one another (Naidoo, 2004) because it is 'through the works of habitus that practice is linked with capital and field' (Reay, 2004, p. 432).

There have also been criticisms of Bourdieu's sociological model, namely, of his theory of action, which I will review and respond to in my conceptual discussion below. It is relevant to note that, for Bourdieu, theoretical concepts are 'tools for conducting empirical research rather than formal constructs, definitions, or abstract, fixed, propositions' (Swartz, 2013, p. 20). Bourdieu's understanding of theoretical concepts makes them more flexible for conducting empirical research, but, simultaneously, more complex to grasp and explain.

4.2 Habitus

A central question in Bourdieu's theory of practice is: 'how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 65). For Bourdieu, social action cannot be explained by a binary in which actions are either the result of 'voluntarist decisions of reason' (that is, the result of free will) or caused by a reaction to 'mechanisms that are external to agents' (that is, determined by the structure) (Hoy, 2005, p. 106). Moreover, Bourdieu aims to surpass the subjective/objective dualism through a reconceptualisation of the relations between the symbolic and material aspects of social life (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu attempts to reconcile and transcend this dualism through the concept of habitus (Swartz, 1997; Reay, 2004; Hoy, 2005; Swartz, 2013). For Bourdieu the habitus is 'a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). In this way, it is a 'structured structure' (*opus operatum*) predisposed to function as a 'structuring structure' (*modus operandi*) (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168).

The habitus is simultaneously one of Bourdieu's most contested and less well-known concepts (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu's account of the habitus – as well as that of the field, where the habitus is always situated – follows from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty[19] (Hoy, 2005), for it is a 'way of adding the social dimension to Merleau-

[19] Putting it very briefly, Merleau-Ponty (2012) argues that 'all consciousness is, in some measure, perceptual consciousness' (p. 395), meaning that consciousness is always embodied, differently from Cartesian *cogito* or Kantian *ego*. For Merleau-Ponty, knowledge is always influenced by one's past

Ponty's theory of embodiment' (p. 101), by making it 'more concrete' (p. 105). Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus intends to demonstrate the ways in which 'the body is in the social world [and] the social world is in the body' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 142). For Bourdieu, therefore, the biological and social dimensions are always entwined, and the habitus is what unifies them (Hoy, 2005).

Bourdieu distinguishes the habitus from the notion of habit (Hoy, 2005). According to Hoy (2005), habit is generally 'contrasted to deliberations or decisions of the will, [which] Bourdieu views […] as an oversimplified account of agency' (p. 105). Indeed, Bourdieu (1990b) argues that:

> There is an economy of practices, a reason immanent in practices, whose 'origin' lies neither in the 'decisions' of reason understood as a rational calculation nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents. […] If one fails to recognise any form of action other than rational action or mechanical reaction, it is impossible to understand the logic of all actions that are reasonable without being the product of a reasoned design, still less of rational calculation; informed by a kind of objective finality without being consciously organised in relation to an explicitly constituted end; intelligible and coherent without springing from an intention of coherence and a deliberate decision; adjusted to the future without being the product of a project or a plan. (pp. 50-51)

Bourdieu's concept of habitus 'evolved from a normative and cognitive emphasis to a more dispositional and practical understanding of action' (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 133), which

experiences in ways that are often difficult to understand, analyse and express, so much of it remains tacit (Hoy, 2005). Moreover, an important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the question of freedom. For Merleau-Ponty (), freedom is always situated in a 'field' (p. 404), which is 'already constituted, but also never completely constituted' (pp. 438-439). Therefore, like Bourdieu after him, Merleau-Ponty refuses both determinist and absolute agency.

reveals a development to a view more attentive to 'socialisation and body language' (Swartz, 1997, p. 103). Indeed, Bourdieu (1990a) notes that he started developing the notion of habitus to show that within the social world practices are generated not only by express and explicit norms, rules and laws or rational calculation, but also by practical models, that is, implicit 'principles imposing order on action' (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 78-79). These principles of classification, of hierarchisation, of division and of vision involve operations of judgment, of analysis, of perception and of understanding which enable each of us to operate, that is, to be in action.

Swartz (1997) notes that for Bourdieu the 'habitus results from early socialisation experiences in which external structures are internalised [and it] tends to shape individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated [and] aspirations and expectations […] are in turn externalised in action that tends to reproduce the objective structure of life chances' (p. 103). Hence, 'different conditions of existence [tend to] produce different habitus' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 166). Moreover, the concept of habitus also denotes a collective dimension, as the embodied dispositions acquired through the formative experiences of childhood reflect the entire history of the group (Nash, 1999). Indeed, the practices of an agent tend to be consistent with the practices of the other agents of the same class because all of them are the product of systematic 'transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168).

The habitus produces individuals' lifestyles, which, when perceived in their relationality through habitus schemes, 'become sign systems that are socially qualified' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168). The perception of these 'distinctive and distinct' (ibid., 170) signs is operated by taste. Bourdieu (2010) defines taste as:

> The propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, in the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis. […] A system of classificatory schemes which may only very partially become conscious. […] It transforms […] classified practices, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position, by perceiving them in their mutual relations and in terms of social classificatory schemes. (pp.169-170)

Therefore, taste organises the classificatory system that matches properties (which include, for instance, people, cultural goods, holiday destinations, educational institutions, professional occupations, etc.) to generate systematic practices and choices by which individuals and groups manifest their distinction, constituting a lifestyle mediated and unified by the habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). As noted in chapter 3, socioeconomic background plays a significant role in one's decision-making regarding pursuing HE studies and in which HEI to do it, as it is a 'choice of lifestyle and a matter of *taste*' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 53) somewhat delimited by material and perceptual 'opportunity structures' and different social, spatial, and temporal 'horizons of action' (ibid, p.55).

Importantly, although Bourdieu does not engage extensively with the affective dispositions of the habitus, some scholars (notably, Reay, 2015; Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; and Threadgold, 2020) argue that the concept can be extended to include them. By doing so it becomes a tool to understand and explore 'the affective dimensions of both privilege and disadvantage' (Reay, 2015, p. 21). Threadgold (2020) notes that habitus explains individuals' feelings and practices when they move to different social spaces, and those feelings and practices lead them to reproduce or transform social inequalities instinctively or reflexively. In Threadgold's (2020) own words:

> What sparks these different dispositional orientations, what Bourdieu calls 'practices', is one's social capacity to be affected and to affect. The habitus is embodied experience, affinities assembled through repetition that transforms feelings and emotions into beliefs, temperaments and preferences. Habitus should be thought of as an affective reservoir of immanent dispositions, primed to instinctively react in some situations, or to reflexively deliberate in others. (p. 55)

Therefore, affect happens at the level of what Bourdieu (2010) defines as habitus functioning as a 'structuring structure' (p. 168). In this way, the habitus can be described as 'a set of dispositions that delineates how one feels in specific situations, whereby feelings emerge from one's affinities with the contents of the space they are occupying [and] produce context-specific practices' (Threadgold, 2020, p.55)

All the considerations presented so far do not mean that the habitus is absolutely deterministic (a criticism often directed at Bourdieu; see, for instance, Burawoy, 2012), as this concept designates 'a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.214), leaving some space for agents to select other forms of conduct or practices than those internalised as most likely to succeed. Indeed, the habitus is constantly restructured by individuals' encounters within the social world (Di Maggio, 1979). Hence, Threadgold (2020) warns researchers that they should not put their participants into 'habitus boxes' (p. 54). However, critically analysing this concept, Reay (2004) observes that habitus tends to operate at 'an unconscious level unless individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self' (p. 438). This confrontation tends to occur when individuals move to a different field or a different part of the same social field.

4.3 Fields and Capitals

For Bourdieu, all practices take place in structured 'arenas of conflict' or 'arenas of struggle' called 'fields' (Swartz, 2013, p. 57). Fields are the social structures in which habitus is always situated and operates (Swartz, 1997). It is the interaction of habitus and field that generates the logic of practice, as the concept of field 'gives habitus a dynamic quality' (Reay, 2004, p. 435). As Bourdieu's explains,

> The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a hierarchy of intersecting fields). On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy. (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989, p. 44)

Indeed, the habitus is always situated within a specific social field (for example, the political or academic fields), as the body does not occupy the entire world all at once (Hoy, 2005). To avoid connecting habitus to the subjective aspect and field to the objective one, Bourdieu characterises the distinction between them as 'the difference between the feel for the game and the game itself' (Hoy, 2005, p. 110), that is, the difference between the commitment to the field and one's investments in it and the field itself. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992),

> We have an *investment in the game, illusio* (from *ludus*, the game): players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and the stakes; they

> grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing and not by way of a contract, that the game is worth playing, that is 'worth the candle,' and this collusion is the very basis of their competition. (p. 98)

Hoy (2005) observes that the game is a social object as it needs players (that is, agents) to exist, in the same way that players only exist within the game (that is, the field). Therefore, Bourdieu (2000) alerts us as to how withdrawing oneself from the game comes with the consequence of 'social death' (p. 153), as only by playing the game (that is, making investments in the field) we can be part of it (that is, be on the inside of the field). Yet, the habitus 'may be superseded under certain circumstances […] by other principles', namely 'in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to the field' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 108).

Social agents acting in a specific field must, or are expected, to share and respect a set of rules that specify the forms of action that are legitimate in the field (Swartz, 2013). In Bourdieu's (1990a) own words,

> The habitus, as society written into the body, into the biological individual, enables the infinite number of acts of the game – written into the game as possibilities and objective demands – to be produced; the constraints and demands of the game, although they are not restricted to a code of rules, impose themselves on those people – and those people alone – who, because they have a feel for the game, a feel, that is, for the immanent necessity of the game, are prepared to perceive them and carry them out. The habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature. (p. 63)

Hoy (2005) agrees with Bourdieu in that 'the field imposes on what agents can or cannot do' (p. 113). However, for Bourdieu, the field is not a causal notion. This means that 'the field does not determine every move that agents make, but it makes any particular move intelligible' (Hoy, 2005, p. 113).

The macro unit of analysis for Bourdieu is not society, but the field (Swartz, 2013), which Bourdieu defines as:

> a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence, and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97)

This definition reveals the relational aspect of Bourdieu's theory. Although the position of agents and institutions in a specific field implies some level of agreement around essential principles (Naidoo, 2004), fields are not unified by functional coherence, but by the fact that agents and institutions always hold positions relationally, in opposition to others, and it is this opposition that confers the field its unity (Swartz, 1997; 2013). For Bourdieu, therefore, fields are not the result of consensus, but rather the product of continuing conflict (Naidoo, 2004) in which 'capital and field mutually define and specify each other' (Swartz, 2013, pp. 58-59). Although Bourdieu (1991) notes that the degree of institutionalisation is one of the main characteristics of fields, and the concepts of field and institution can sometimes overlap, they do not equate. Indeed, fields may be inter- or intra-institutional in extent and institutions may represent positions within fields (Bourdieu, and Wacquant, 1992). Moreover, the concept of field covers social worlds where practices are not strongly institutionalised and boundaries are sometimes somewhat diffuse (Swartz, 1997). As I explain in more detail later, the field of HE is a highly institutionalised and codified one.

Swartz (1997) notes that although Bourdieu sometimes uses the designations ‘field’ and ‘market’ interchangeably, field does not correspond to the traditional (that is, neo-classical) idea of market. Indeed, field is a more comprehensive concept than market. It not only reflects the rank and hierarchy of all the agents, groups, and organisations within it, but it also suggests the strategies of agents and institutions which characterise the interactions between them (Swartz, 1997). Therefore, it is a concept that ‘has great methodological utility for illustrating power relations, following trajectories through social space and tracing how forms of capital operate’ (Threadgold, 2020, p. 75).

The concept of ‘strategy’ is paramount in Bourdieu’s theory of action, as fields are set up through the practical strategies of agents with different levels of skills and invested with different habitus and quantities of specific capital (Bourdieu, 2000). The manifestations of such strategies are referred to as ‘position takings’ (Bourdieu, 1993, as cited in Naidoo, 2004, p. 459), which cannot be separated from the objective positions occupied by the agent or the institution as a consequence of the quantity of specific capital that they hold (Bourdieu, 1993, as cited in Naidoo, 2004). For instance, as mentioned in chapter 3, middle-class and upper-middle-class students tend to prefer pursuing HE studies in high-status HEIs, such as those members of the Russell Group.

The strategies are oriented by the distribution of specific types of capital accumulated in previous struggles (Swartz, 2013). Importantly, Bourdieu (1993a) observes that,

> When one speaks of specific capital, this means to say that this capital is effective in relation to a particular field, and therefore within the limits of

> that field, and that it is only convertible into another type of capital on certain conditions. (p. 73)

Bourdieu extends the economic metaphor of capital, which traditionally only included material sources of power, to nonmaterial forms of power, such as cultural, social, or symbolic ones (Swartz, 1997). Although it is common to have numerous types of capital operating in a field, the field tends to be identified by a specific sort of capital, and the definition of the most legitimate form of capital for the field is achieved through struggle (Swartz, 2013). Traditionally, as an institutionalised form of cultural capital, academic capital is the dominant form of capital in the field of HE (Naidoo, 2004).

Bourdieu's understanding is that individuals and groups use a diversity of cultural, social, and symbolic resources 'to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order' (Swartz, 1997, p. 73). For Bourdieu (1989) these resources are conceptualised as capital when they operate as a 'social relation of power' (p. 375), that is, when social actors struggle for them (and invest in them) as valued resources used to reproduce social inequalities in society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Regarding the different forms of capital, it is possible to establish a typology divided into four generic types: economic, cultural[20] , social, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital refers to assets that are 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights' (p. 242). Cultural capital may also be converted into money or property rights, but not directly nor immediately. Bourdieu (1986) indicates that

[20] In Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Bourdieu notes that cultural capital should be called 'informational capital' (p. 19) to distance it from the concept's high-culture interpretations that some critics (for example, Lamont and Lareau, 1988) have pointed out. However, the concept 'informational capital' has rarely been used in the literature, so I use the term 'cultural capital' in this thesis.

cultural capital can present three forms: 'embodied', when it refers to 'the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (such as, for example, the ways of perceiving, talking, and acting); 'objectified' in cultural goods (such as, for instance, pictures and books) that can be appropriated materially (by an investment of economic capital) and symbolically (by an investment of embodied cultural capital); and 'institutionalised', when the cultural capital possessed by an agent is institutionally and officially recognised and objectified (the classical example being an agent's academic qualifications and credentials) (pp. 243-247). Social capital designates the sum of resources which are linked to being part of a network of acquaintances more or less institutionalised (in other words, being member of a group) (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) points out that social capital 'is so totally governed by the logic of knowledge and acknowledgment that it always functions as symbolic capital' (p. 257).

Bourdieu's (1986) understanding is that economic forms of capital tend to dominate cultural and social ones, which are 'transformed [or] disguised forms of economic capital' (p. 252). Although the different types of capital are interrelated and can be interchangeable (Bourdieu, 1990b), Swartz (1997) notes that the relationship between social capital and cultural capital is more profound than their relationships with economic capital. Moreover, in general, it appears to be easier to convert economic capital into social and cultural capital than the other way around (Swartz, 1997). However, only through research is it possible to determine the dominant forms of capital and their interrelations in a specific social order (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu (1990a) explains that economic, cultural, and social capitals assume the form of symbolic capital when 'perceived and recognised as legitimate' (p. 128), that is, when the unequal distribution of capital becomes a legitimate 'system of perceived differences [and] distinctive properties' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168). For this to happen it is always necessary to hold some social capital in order to exercise symbolic power, which is the 'capacity to impose meanings or representations of social reality as legitimate from some authority that forms the basis for that capacity for imposition' (Swartz, 2013, p. 101). Symbolic capital, therefore, is a type of capital in which power is not perceived as such, but as 'legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others' (Swartz, 1997, p. 43). The capacity to conduct symbolic action arises from the social authority that agents, organisations, or institutions can call up (Swartz, 2013). Hence, to exercise symbolic power, agents, institutions, or organisations must hold symbolic capital, that is, to be a socially recognised and approved authority. Swartz (2013) observes that symbolic power is a constitutive force in the social world as it is formative of collective identities, that is, symbolic power involves the power to classify and differentiate those groups whose agents possess social capital. Moreover, symbolic power operates to reproduce this stratified social order. As Bourdieu (1990a) observes:

> When [symbolic power] is acknowledged in accordance with the categories of perception that it imposes, the symbolic power relations tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations which constitute the structure of the social space. (p. 135)

Naidoo (2004) argues that the idea of fields as products of continuing conflict is important for the analysis of HE in a time of increasing commodification of university practices and products, in which HE is likely to become the locus of power struggles over the legitimate capital required to attain dominance' (p. 469). The result of these power struggles has been 'the undermining of cultural capital and the valorisation of economic capital' (Naidoo, 2004, p. 469). The valorisation of economic capital over cultural capital has arguably become increasingly more evident and profound in the contemporary university.

4.4 The question of reflexivity

Although Bourdieu's sociological model aims at reconciling the concepts of structure and agency, Reay (2004) observes that he 'seems to leap straight from a rationalist interpretation to an anti-rationalist one' (p. 438). Nonetheless, Reay (2004) argues that what is problematic in Bourdieu's theory is not a lack of the individual's capacity for agency, but rather 'the focus on pre-reflective dimensions of action' (p. 437), in which the unconscious aspects of the habitus are overplayed. According to Reay (2004), this 'does not allow for any ethical dimensions of habitus' (p. 438), since any possible habitus must comprehend 'dialogues with oneself' (Crossley, 2000, as cited in Reay, 2004, p. 438). However, Reay (2004) notes that in some of Bourdieu's later work, such as *State of Nobility* (Bourdieu, 1998), the cognitive aspects of the habitus are acknowledged.

Bourdieu's tendency to stress the pre-reflexive dimension of action also leads him to neglect the capacity for mundane reflexivity in everyday experiences (Lahiri, 2011). Lahiri (2011) claims that Bourdieu limits the scope of reflexivity to long term calculations and strategies, neglecting how everyday small decisions are crucial in the process of reflexivity, given the complex and changeable characteristics of our contemporary societies – or, to use Bauman's (2000, 2005) concept, our liquid life/modernity.

This thesis does not reject Bourdieu's understanding of reflexivity, which involves a more significant potential political content. Still, it tempers it with Lahiri's (2011) broader understanding of reflexivity, valorising not only long-term strategies but also short-term strategies. These short-term strategies are characterised by varying degrees of spontaneity and it is understood that most decisions can be reversed or adjusted. Therefore, the ways in which students' everyday experiences reflect their processes of reflexivity should not be neglected or undervalued.

4.5 Codification

The field of HE is highly codified and institutionalised (Swartz, 1997). Although most everyday ordinary practices 'are guided by practical models' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 78) that are not explicit, these models may sometimes be made explicit, that is, objectified through *codification* (Bourdieu, 1990a). Bourdieu (1990a) observes that codification is 'an operation of symbolic ordering' (p. 80) that exists in close collusion with 'discipline and the normalisation of practices' (p. 80), as the homogenisation of practices achieved by codification 'minimises ambiguity and vagueness […] in interactions' (p. 80) by 'producing clear classes and making clear cuts, establishing firm frontiers, even if this means eliminating people who are neither fish nor fowl' (p.82).

One of the features of codification is 'formalisation', which establishes an explicit normativity and, at least in abstract, the possibility to control the coherence of the practices, behaviours and discourses of the agents within a specific field.

Another feature associated with codification is *officialization*, which implies making codified practices 'visible, public, known to all, published' (p. 81). The most accomplished manner of officialization is *publication* (Bourdieu, 1990a), because it involves *divulgation*, i.e., 'unveiling in front of everybody' (p. 82) and *authenticating*, that is, 'the consensus of everyone regarding the thing which is thus unveiled' (p. 82).

This study frames the construction of the student as a consumer of HE in academic and non-academic literature, in the media, in marketing actions led by UK HE institutions and in official policy documents (published both by UK academic institutions and governmental bodies, such as The Office for Students), which was explored in chapter 3, as an attempt form of codification. The fact that UK universities must comply with the consumer protection law, which positions universities as providers and undergraduate students as consumers (CMA, 2015), is one of the most evident examples of the codification of students as consumers.

Bourdieu (1990a) points out that although formalisation diminishes ambiguity and vagueness in interactions by ensuring ‘calculability and predictability’ (p. 84), that diminution is achieved at the cost of ‘invention, improvisation and creation’ (p.84), which he considers to be both a virtue and a vice. Moreover, formalisation involves symbolic violence, that is, ‘a properly symbolic effectiveness of form’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 84). Indeed, as Bourdieu (1990a) observes,

> Paying due respect to forms means giving an action or a discourse the form which is recognised as suitable, legitimate, approved, that is, a form of a kind that allows the open production, in public view, of a wish or a practice that, if presented in any other way, would be unacceptable. (p. 85)

Although, as Tight (2013) observes, ‘there are so many, competing metaphors for the student swirling around at the present time’ (p. 303) (as, for example, McCulloch (2009) and Cuthbert’s (2010) conception of the student as co-producer), the codification of UK higher education students as consumers of HE tries to reduce other constructions and potential forms of action, behaviour and discourse to a marginal position within the field of higher education. As Bourdieu (1990a) points out, ‘what can be codified easily is what has already been the object of a juridical or quasi-juridical piece of codification’ (p.82) as this codification ‘makes possible a controlled consensus or meaning, [that is,] you are sure of giving the same sense to the words’ (p.82).

I suggest that what has been taken for granted is how it would be possible to frame and regulate all students’ experiences through a process of codification, which involves the construction of UK students as consumers. However, as Clarke et al. (2007) contend, political subjects are not necessarily ‘docile bodies’ dispossessed of agency and reflexivity. From this point of view, it should not be immediately assumed that undergraduate students are not able to contest the way(s) they are constructed in policy documents. Therefore, I argue that there is a need to explore how agents (that is, English undergraduate students) with different habitus, capitals, and strategies within the field of HE resist, reshape, and/or reproduce the official(ised) discourses and practices.

4.6 Challenging the idea of a homogenous and unified self: A poststructuralist approach to identity

In ‘The biographical illusion’, Bourdieu (1987) takes a stance against the ‘life-history’ approach as a way to analyse and describe individuals’ ‘identity’, namely against the ‘fact that a *life* constitutes a whole, a coherent and directed ensemble, which can and must be grasped as unitary expression of a subjective and objective *intention* of a project’ (p. 298). Bourdieu (1987) also argues that our contemporary society uses different social institutions (as, for example, the proper name) to totalise and unify the self. du Gay (2007) observes that Bourdieu’s point is that life-history’s unified self is ‘not a natural or essential element of being human, but historically variable and contingent upon particular socio-cultural practices’ (p. 27) because ‘any description is only valid within the limits of a given time and place’ (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 301). Instead of a life-history approach, Bourdieu (1987) contends that understanding the trajectory of (a category of) agents is better achieved by analysing the structure of the field(s) in which that trajectory occurs. Bourdieu’s insight is taken into consideration, and I offer a mapping of the structure of the field of HE as well as a review of the main literature on English HE students’ diverse economic, social, cultural and geographic backgrounds (see chapters 2 and 3).

Moreover, to further contribute to the understanding of different aspects of English undergraduate students' experiences, discourses, practices, and perceptions of themselves in contemporary HE, the Bourdieusian approach I am following in this thesis is, in some instances, complemented with some poststructuralist conceptions of identity. I contend that this combination enriches the understanding of the interrelationship between individuals and social structure(s) because, as Ybema et al. (2009) observe,

> Individuals deploy a wide variety of […] identification processes to develop an ongoing sense of the 'self' and the 'other' in interaction with their social environments. […] since such practices articulate the personal in relation to the social, analytically, the notion of 'identity' may be regarded as a fundamental bridging concept between the individual and society. Its potential mediating quality lies in its dual character – it refracts what can be seen as a 'permanent dialectic' between the self and social structure. (p. 300).

Moreover, the concept of identity not only reflects the interrelationship between the individual and social structure, as it 'neither imprisons […] nor detaches […] persons from their social and symbolic universes' (Davis, 1991, p. 105, quoted by Brown, 2015, p. 20). This intrinsic analytical quality of the concept may help to explain why management and organisation studies (MOS) scholars from different ontological and epistemological standpoints (among others, interpretivist and critical scholars inspired by poststructuralist influences) adopt identity to frame their studies (Alvesson et al., 2008). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) even observe that the concept of identity is one of the most studied in contemporary MOS.

There has been, however, some criticism on how MOS scholars adopt identity to frame their empirical or theoretical studies. Knights and Clarke (2017), for example, critically analysed a selected body of literature on identity and concluded that many scholars fail to interrogate the concept of identity, often taking it for granted. According to Knights and Clarke, this failure results, at least in part, in leaving unchallenged 'individuals' preoccupation with, or attachment to, identity' (Knights and Clarke, 2017, p. 349). Hence, ignoring that it is never possible to autonomously secure the self leads to a 'reinforcement of everyday preoccupations with self' and a 'deflection of alternative practices of embodied engagement' (Knights and Clarke, 2017, p. 337). Moreover, Knights and Clarke (2017) also encourage MOS scholars not to restrict themselves to contemporary theoretical debates on the self from their discipline, but to go beyond it both disciplinary and temporally. Coupland and Brown (2012) point out that if MOS scholars fail to do this, 'identity studies may become overly myopic, introspective and detached from broader debates' (p.2).

In this thesis, I follow Bristow and colleagues' approach to identity construction, identity regulation, and identity work, based on the works of Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Collinson (2003); to know,

> […] the conceptualization of identity construction as a dynamic and ongoing process that in contemporary contexts is driven by identity insecurity (inability to permanently secure stable identities). The process of identity construction combines identity regulation (a pervasive modality of normative control exercised upon individuals within the broader context of power relations) with identity work (a reflexive process through which individuals shape, maintain, and transform their sense of self; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003). (Bristow et al., 2019, p. 242)

Therefore, I do not approach the participants' identities as final. Instead, they are considered 'a temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions' (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 6) whose formation processes 'are complex, iterative, often unstable and always 'in process'' (Coupland and Brown, 2012, p. 1). Knights and Willmott (1989) suggest that an individual's attachment to specific notions of the self may result in insecurities because identity depends on others' judgments and validations of the self that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. As Collinson (2003) argues, the notions of insecurity and identity are closely tied, insecurity being one of the main drivers for the preoccupation with identity.

Although neoliberal ideologies spread standard narratives through a managerial discourse that tends to produce 'stereotypical individuals' (Verhaeghe, 2014, p. 32), making it difficult to think or act outside of its dominant discursive practices (Young, 1981), 'regimes of government […] do not determine forms of subjectivity' (Dean, 1999, p. 32). Indeed, as Knights and Clarke (2017) observe, 'power/knowledge effects on subjectivity do not remove the agency of subjects to mediate, interpret, negotiate and resist the meanings and relations surrounding their subjection' (p. 338). Hence, it is legitimate to assume that English undergraduate students' subjection to dominant discursive constructions and narratives of them as consumers of HE may or may not occur in practice. And, if it occurs, it is also legitimate to consider that it may assume different configurations according to each student individual and collective trajectory.

I argue that the lack of interrogation over claims that most UK undergraduate students enact as consumers not only reproduces and solidifies these identity constructions, but it is potentially derogatory and patronising, as it homogenises and oversimplifies processes of identity formation that Brown (2015) describes as complex. At the very least, as mentioned earlier, it is unsubstantiated given the absence of a broader body of qualitative empirical research on ‘how [English] students themselves understand and experience their HE and broader social contexts’ (Budd, 2017a. p. 23). Therefore, we still need to better understand how the practices of managerialism are affecting students and their relations, that is, there is a need for their ‘identity dynamics to be better understood’ (Brown, 2015, p. 20).

4.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I explained the theoretical framework applied to this study. The theoretical framework is informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s core concepts of ‘habitus’, ‘capital’ and ‘field’, and by other Bourdieusian concepts, such as ‘codification’, ‘strategy’ and ‘power’ serves this study well. I framed the public construction of the student as a consumer as a form of ‘codification’. Moreover, the Bourdieusian framework was complemented with a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction, identity regulation and identity work, which allows for a less deterministic and more flexible approach to the participants' identities.

In the next chapter, I explain my methodological approach and research design.

Chapter 5 Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, I explain my methodology and research design. I start by presenting my research philosophy, which is underpinned by a social constructionism approach and poststructuralism perspective. Then I explain the research design, which includes the option for a qualitative approach and qualitative interviews, aspects related to my access to participants, decisions on the number of participants, reflections on power dynamics with the participants, description of the data collection, transcription options, and data analysis. Finally, I describe how I addressed some ethical issues.

Throughout the chapter, I present some reflexive considerations, which, as Willig (2008) observes, 'can be discussed under a separate heading [or] alternatively, they can be integrated into the report and raised in context' (p. 18). I opted to present my reflexive considerations in context to give a more integrated perspective of my dilemmas and options.

5.1 Research philosophy

Research philosophy 'refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge' (Saunders and Bristow, 2019, p. 130). Researchers cannot escape bringing their beliefs to their studies (Creswell, 2013) and at every stage of the research process make ontological assumptions (that is, a patterned set of assumptions concerning the realities we encounter in our research), epistemological assumptions (that is, assumptions about the knowledge of those realities), and axiological assumptions (that is, assumptions about how our values influence our research process) (Creswell, 2013; Saunders and Bristow, 2019). Those assumptions are essential to decide on the methods through which we can approach those realities and knowledge (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

5.1.1 Social constructionism

As a researcher, I adopt a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism has emerged as a paradigm in social theory[21] since Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann introduced the term 'social construction' in 1966 with the publication of *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. According to Saunders and Bristow (2019), social constructionism puts forward that,

> reality is constructed through social interaction in which social actors create partially shared meanings and realities, in other words reality is constructed intersubjectively. As social interactions between actors are a continual process, social phenomena are in a constant state of flux and revision (p. 137).

Burr (2015) observes that although there is no single feature that would be adequate to include all the disciplines, approaches, and authors included within a social constructionist approach, it is possible to identify some of the key assumptions generally accepted and contained within it. Firstly, it is fundamental for social constructionists to take a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, that is, to constantly question the ways through which we try to make sense of the world and ourselves. For instance, the use of certain categories to classify or divide individuals may, and sometimes must, be questioned (such as, for example, when considering gender, the social division 'made' between the categories 'men' and 'women').

Secondly, those who follow a social constructionist approach argue that taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves are historically and culturally specific and, therefore, relative, and dynamic. Taking that into consideration prevents us from

[21] In simple terms, social theory may be defined as a 'relatively systematic, abstract and general reflection on the workings of the social world' (Baert and Carreira da Silva, 2010, p. 1).

believing that some systems of knowledge are more ‘truthful’, important, and relevant than others just because they are historically, culturally, and geographically closer to us and, therefore, more accessible in terms of their understanding. For instance, as a researcher raised and living in the Global North, I must approach contemporary western systems of knowledge in a reflexive and thoughtful way rather than just adopting an ethnocentric stance.

Thirdly, our versions of knowledge, that is, our ways of understanding the world and ourselves, come from our social interactions (for example, through language or observation) with our objects of knowledge, so that knowledge is sustained through social processes. This means that all researchers’ accounts are themselves specific social constructions, that is, they are the outcome of researchers’ methodological interactions with objects of knowledge (and here it is important not to forget that subjects are simultaneously objects of knowledge) and their conceptualisation through a reflexive process (Cassell, 2005).

Finally, researchers should always keep in mind that knowledge and social action go together; a specific social construction implies specific social actions (Burr, 2015).

To summarise, researchers who take a social constructionist approach: (1) do not claim to have any objective knowledge of reality as they cannot be separated from what is being observed; (2) consider human interests as the main driver of social science; (3) do not provide explanations that purport to give access to a specific ‘truth’, aiming instead to increase general understanding of the situation; and (4) believe that research progresses through obtaining rich data, usually from a restricted number of cases, that generates ideas (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

Social constructionism allows for authors to develop social theory through a variety of perspectives (Burr, 2015). In this study, I follow a poststructuralist perspective[22].

5.1.2 A poststructuralist perspective

Some authors understand poststructuralism as an onto-epistemological position that can be situated within the ontology of social constructionism, assuming multiple, socially constructed, and contested realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Poststructuralism emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to two already existing movements: phenomenology and structuralism. In common with phenomenology and structuralism, poststructuralists strove for 'a connection to directly lived experience' (Gutting, 2001, p. 252), but poststructuralists argued that phenomenologists' conception of such an experience was based on 'an untenable centrality of the individual subject' (ibid.). Poststructuralism shares with structuralism the idea that the modern concept of individual is the result of specific historically situated structures or discourses (Baert and Carreira da Silva, 2010). However, in direct contrast to structuralism, poststructuralism does not have scientific pretensions and rejects structuralism's claims to objectivity, with many of its authors defending the notion that 'different epistemological frameworks bring about new meanings, and each framework is accompanied by novel standards of rationality and truth' (Baert and Carreira da Silva, 2010, pp. 6-7). For this reason, many poststructuralist authors are interested in deconstructing established truths and expert knowledge, and in revealing the power(s) behind them (Kenny et al., 2011). This doctoral study seeks to make a modest contribution to these endeavours, deconstructing the contemporary dominant construction of English undergraduate students as consumers.

[22] As mentioned in chapter 4, this study applies a theoretical framework based on some of Bourdieu's main concepts combined with a poststructuralist understanding of identity.

5.2 Research design

5.2.1 A qualitative approach

I use a qualitative approach due to my research philosophy and because this study aims to understand a particular interpretation of social reality from the perspective of the participants (Bryman, 1984). Indeed, the purpose of a qualitative approach is 'to understand and explore meaning and the ways people make meaning, rather than to prove a theory or determine a relationship between factors' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 35). Creswell (2013) proposes that qualitative research:

> Begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting, sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns of themes. The final written report […] includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

Creswell (2013) also emphasises that researchers use qualitative research 'when existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining' (p. 48). This study aims to explore English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in a neoliberalised HE sector; specifically, how they enact the dominant construction of English undergraduates as consumers of HE. I believe that such a construction fails to capture all the complexities involved in English undergraduates' experiences within HE, and, therefore, a qualitative approach is the best-suited option for its study.

In contrast, a quantitative methodology is often described as applying a positivist approach to social phenomena, characterised by the belief that all phenomena can be reduced to empirical indicators which represent a search for the truth and a preoccupation with objectivity, replicability and causality (Bryman, 1984). Moreover, one of the main characteristics of quantitative methodology is that it seeks to identify and measure concepts through operationalising them, exploring the relationships between variables, and to explain or predict aspects of the phenomena under study with the aim of generalizing the findings (Tolich and Davidson, 2003).

I do not believe that social scientists can be neutral observers and limit themselves to articulating a scientific ‘truth’ as positivists understand it. As mentioned earlier, a poststructuralist approach does not have scientific pretensions nor claims to objectivity. Instead, I support the view that different epistemological frameworks have different standards of truth (Baert and Carreira da Silva, 2010).

5.2.2 Qualitative interviews

For this study the main collection technique consisted of qualitative one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviewing is clearly recognised as one of the most used methods in qualitative research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Mason, 2018). One of the reasons for the preference for interviews in qualitative research, according to Vlachou (2017), is ‘giving voice to research participants’ (p. 50).

When I started my research with existing and soon-to-be English HE students in England and Scotland in 2016, one of my main objectives was to explore their discourses on and practices in HE, as there were very few qualitative studies incorporating students' accounts. However, giving voice to HE students does not imply that I was expecting to capture their 'truth'; I do not believe that such an enterprise would be possible. Yet, I believed that, to a greater or lesser extent, their 'accounts [could show] the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 120). Furthermore, I was also interested in exploring the relationship between public discourses of students as consumers and the ways in which HE students themselves enact, if at all, those discourses.

According to Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 78), qualitative interviews are usually divided into three types: *structured* ('the questions and the response categories are predetermined by the researcher'), *semi-structured* ('the researcher has a list of questions but there is scope for the participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated') or *unstructured* ('the researcher has, at most, a list of themes or topics to discuss with the participant, but the interview is strongly participant-lead'). However, these authors alert us as to how such a division fails to notice that all interviews, as any other social interaction, 'are structured in some way' (p. 78) by both interviewer and interviewee.

Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 79) prefer to distinguish between 'standardised' or 'closed' interviews and 'qualitative' or 'open' interviews. In the former, the interviewer asks each participant exactly the same questions in the same way and order, and all questions are prepared in advance. Moreover, closed questions are widely used, and response categories are determined in advance by the researcher, while every effort is made to minimize the 'impact' of the interviewer on the participants' responses. In the latter, questions' wording and order are loose, and flexible, and vary according to the style of the interviewer and the responses of the participants, with space for unplanned questions. Furthermore, open-ended questions are preferred to encourage in-depth responses, as the goal is to capture the range and diversity of participants' responses. Most importantly, in this type of interview the interviewer co-constructs meaning(s) with the participant. Braun and Clarke's (2013) distinction is very close to the classification presented by Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007), which distinguishes between 'prestructured' (standardised or close) and 'reflexive' (qualitative or open) interviews.

It was clear from the beginning that structured, standardised, or closed interviews would not be an adequate instrument for my research, so I aimed to develop qualitative reflexive interviews. Indeed, I wanted to explore the possibilities of interviewing at a space and time where discursive constructions can be made; a setting where the participants could describe and account for their practices, experiences, and expectations as students within HE.

Before starting to interview the participants, I prepared an outline of the topics and issues to discuss and also some questions (see Annex 1), but there was flexibility around ordering and the provision of suitable prompts for developing the discussion, in terms of what participants considered to be relevant. To that effect, I have used mainly open-ended questions because it was important to let the interviewees give more in-depth responses (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

Qualitative/reflexive interview(ing) and open-ended questions may be challenging for a less experienced interviewer (Creswell, 2013), but I felt that my skills developed progressively. Yet, feeling more or less secure and confortable also depended, to a considerable extent, on the interaction with each of the participants. There were moments during the interviews when I felt that the interaction with a particular participant was highly rewarding – at least for me – as they were answering questions in a way that seemed to reveal an interest in sharing their experiences with me. Sometimes, however, I had the impression that the participants were an absent presence, answering mechanically, which implied an extra effort from my side to keep the interview moving on. Exceptionally, some students' accounts moved me and I felt that they were seeing me as someone with whom they could share experiences that they did not usually reveal to other people.

Like Alvesson and Detz (2000), I do not believe 'that genuine experiences can be captured with the help of unstructured interviews' (p. 72). However, I am aware that along each interview both my subjectivity and the participants' subjectivity were being constantly mutually constituted and co-constructed. Indeed, the interviews are an arena in which the self of the interviewer and the self of the interviewees are in process and being produced within dynamic power relations because, to quote Jackson and Mazzei (2012), '[the] self is never stable but is constantly shifting in response to particular situations and conditions, and notions of subjectivity capture this active process of taking up certain subject positions in an ongoing process of "becoming" – rather than merely "being" – in the world' (p. 53).

5.2.3 Access to participants

A potential problem that may arise in a research project is obtaining access to research participants, so one of my primary concerns was finding individuals available and interested in participating in the study. My sampling approach was 'purposive', as I wanted to generate 'insight and in-depth understanding [through] information-rich' data (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The main setback of this approach is that it does not allow to generalise the research findings (Braun and Clarke, 2013), but, as mentioned above, that was not the aim of this study nor of qualitative research in general (ibid.).

In 2016, I gained access to two of the participants in the pilot project through one colleague from the Open University. Subsequently, I asked most of the participants if they could help me in the process, namely publicising the research through their contacts and introducing me to other undergraduates who would not mind participating in the study. Some of them introduced me to the other participants by email, and I invited them for an interview also by email. Therefore, the sampling technique began as a ‘convenience sample’ (Patton, 2002), taking the form of ‘snowball or chain’ (Creswell, 2013, p. 158).

5.2.4 Deciding on the number of participants

In relation to the number of participants included in the research, a number of factors were decisive. Following Patton’s (2002) advice, I had to take into consideration ‘what [I] wanted to know, what [would be] useful and what [could] be done with available time and resources’ (p. 244). This advice is considerably abstract, and initially I did not consider the literature to be very helpful in terms of deciding exactly how many participants should be included in the study. In retrospect, I understand that I was trying to do something unreasonable, that is, to find an easy solution to a complex issue.

Indeed, reading the literature to make informed decisions about how to proceed and talking to other researchers – more experienced ones, such as supervisors, but also colleagues and co-researchers with a similar level of experience – to get an opinion and better articulate ideas is an important process and can be decisive (Mason, 2018). However, the number of participants is often the result of a specific and unique combination of factors that no one can predict, such as ‘the quality of the data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of information obtained from each participant, the number of interviews per participant […] and the qualitative method and study design used’ (Morse, as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 55).

As I proceeded with my interviews, I started to acquire a better understanding of the number of participants that would suit my purpose. At some point I decided that I had enough accounts to address both my research questions and my objectives, that is, that the data was of sufficient 'depth to provide salient information in relation to research purpose and of sufficient breadth to allow coverage within the responses' (Saunders and Townsend, 2016, p. 838). This does not mean that I claim to have met a saturation point (Morse, 1995). To clarify, saturation 'invokes a particular model of qualitative research (experiential, more positivist) where data is collected to provide a *complete* and *truthful* picture of the object of study' (Braun and Clarke, 2008, p. 56), an aim that is not compatible with my epistemological standpoint. Indeed, I believe that we can only collect fragments that will enrich our knowledge of a specific social phenomena, but this knowledge will always be incomplete. Moreover, as O'Reilly and Parker (2013) observe, not reaching a saturation point does not mean that the findings are invalid, but merely that the phenomenon has not yet been fully explored.

5.2.5 Power dynamics with the participants

At the start of the interview, I explained the research project to them face-to-face and in detail and made myself available to answer any questions or clarify any doubts. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note that there is a power asymmetry in the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee, highlighting that it is not a relationship between equals, but one where the interviewer dominates. To diminish the impact of this inequality, these authors propose a more collaborative and open interview. I believe that as the participants knew that I was a (postgraduate research) student myself, I managed to mitigate such an issue. Indeed, although I have a fair knowledge of academic culture, I am not an academic, which gave me a good balance of views.

However, this does not mean that there were no issues, especially at the beginning of the data collection. I was somewhat nervous when I started interviewing the participants. In retrospect, I believe that not being an English native speaker was the factor that contributed the most to that circumstance. I remember a particular moment, the first time I interviewed Gina, then a first year History Student at the University of Leeds, in which I felt particularly insecure as I started doubting if I was making myself clear during the interview. After the interview, I mentioned this episode to my lead supervisor, who told me that maybe this student was not speaking much because she was nervous and insecure herself, for being interviewed by someone older and occupying a position that could be seen as closer to one of her lecturers than to a fellow student. This experience allowed me to adjust some aspects of my interactions with the participants and made me more confident as I advanced. Willig (2008) observes that researchers should 'familiarize themselves with the participant's cultural milieu, and the status of the interview within this milieu' (p.24). For instance, instead of suggesting the local of the interviews, I let the participants decide where the interviews took place because I wanted to ensure that they would feel as comfortable and secure as possible while answering the questions (some took place in pubs and students unions). Moreover, I adopted a relaxed posture as much as possible and convenient, always presenting myself as another HE student.

5.2.6 Data collection

All the interviews took place in the United Kingdom (England and Scotland). I started the data collection in June of 2016 (interviewing a total of seven participants for my Mres research project) and I continued interviewing participants until March 2019, having completed a total of 37 interviews (see table 1 for detailed information about the participants). Although this was not a longitudinal project in terms of research design, some participants (five) were interviewed at more than one point in time (three at a yearly interval during their studies, and three in the first and final years of their degrees).

The research included participants who attended both private, grammar, and comprehensive schools, as well as different types of universities:

- Russell Group members: University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of Leeds, London School of Economics and Social Sciences (LSE), University of Oxford, and University of York.
- Pre-1992 non-members of the Russell Group: University of Bath, University of Keele, and University of Reading.
- Post-1992: University of West England.

Some participants were finishing a gap year the first time they were interviewed but had already received a university offer. I believe that this diversity contributed to the possibility of presenting a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon under research (Creswell, 2013).

The pilot project consisted of seven interviews. Five participants were just finishing their first year as university students, and two participants were about to start their undergraduate degrees in October 2016, after a gap year. Two participants were female, and five were male. At the time of the interviews, all of them were 19 years old, or turning 19 years old, in 2016. All of them were studying or were about to study away from home. Thus they all had, or would have to, move geographically to pursue their HE studies. It is also relevant to mention that due to convenience sampling, six of them studied together in secondary school, and pertinent to note that all studied in private schools.

In addition, I conducted five more interviews in June 2017. Four of the participants had already been interviewed in 2016 and one was interviewed for the first time. The student interviewed for the first time would commence her HE studies in October 2017, and she was the first participant in this research project who attended a state comprehensive school. This was a significant moment in terms of developing my research design because, although I was aware of it at the time and it was impossible to overcome it due to time restrictions, one of the limitations of the pilot project was precisely the absence of students coming from state comprehensive and grammar schools. For instance, all the participants in the pilot project had expressed the idea of HE studies as a natural progression, and it prompted me to wonder if the accounts of students who studied from state comprehensive and grammar schools would have expressed the same understandings and reflected similar discourses.

The interviews for this study lasted between 30 and 90 minutes (most of them around 45 to 60 minutes). The participants were asked about several matters associated with their day-to-day life as higher education students, their expectations and plans for the future, the impact of other people in selecting their choice of degree, and their relationships with teachers, academic staff and colleagues (see Annex 1). The objectives were: 1) to examine the role of English undergraduates' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds on how they understand HE; 2) to explore how students construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, particularly how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it; and 3) to explore how English undergraduates' aspirations and expectations for the future, specifically regarding employability, relate to their discourses on an practices in HE. All the interviews were digitally recorded and latter fully transcribed.

Pseudonym	*Gender (M/F)*	*Degree subject*	*University*	*Year of study (1^{st} interview)*	*Educational background (type of school)*	*Socioeconomic background/social class*[23]	*No. of interviews*
Emma	F	Medicine	Edinburgh	First	Private	Privileged	2
Alfie	M	Mathematics	Edinburgh	First	Private	Privileged	3
Arthur	M	Economics/Psychology	Glasgow	(gap year)	Private	Middle-class	2
Gina	F	History	Leeds	First	Private	Privileged	2
Bill	M	Business	Bath	First	Private	Middle-class	3
Bob	M	Law	Oxford	First	Private	Middle-class	1
Charles	M	English Literature	Trinity College	(gap year)	Private	Middle-class	1
Linda	F	Architecture	Newcastle	(gap year)	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Tim	M	Management	LSE	First	Private	Upper-middle-class	1
Hugh	M	Criminology	Keele	Third	Private	Middle-class	1
Ralph	M	Classics	Reading	First	Comprehensive	Working-class	1
Chloe	F	Criminology Psychology	Keele	Third	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Joanna	F	Ancient History/History	Reading	First	Grammar	Working-class	1
Miriam	F	Forensic Science	Keele	Third	Comprehensive	Working-class	1
Barbara	F	American Studies	Keele	Third	Comprehensive	Working-class	1
Harry	M	International Business	West of England	Third	Private/Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Martha	F	International Business	West of England	Third	Private	Privileged	1
Edna	F	German	Edinburgh	First	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Bernard	M	History	Edinburgh	Third	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Steve	M	Biological Sciences	Edinburgh	Second	Grammar	Working-class	1
Ernest	M	History	Edinburgh	Third	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Colin	M	Mathematics	Edinburgh	Fourth	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1
Anna	F	Psychology	York	Third	Comprehensive	Upper-working-class	1
Caroline	F	History	York	Third	Comprehensive/Private	Middle-class	1
Esther	F	History	Leeds	Third	Comprehensive	Working-class	1
Audrey	F	Fine Art/History of Art	Leeds	Third	Private	Middle-class	1
Olga	F	English and History	Leeds	Third	Private	Middle-class	1
Philip	M	English Literature	Leeds	Third	Private	Upper-middle-class	1
Andrew	M	Classics	Oxford	Second	Comprehensive	Upper-middle class	1
Sandra	F	Sociology	Bath	Second	Comprehensive	Middle-class	1

Table 1: Information about the participants

[23] The socioeconomic background/social class classification was made by the participants themselves.

5.2.7 Transcriptions

Transcribing is a common step in the qualitative analysis of spoken discourse that involves the 'graphic representation of selective aspects of verbal, prosodic and paralinguistic behaviour' (Flick, 2014, p. 66). While all the linguist contents (that is, the words) of the interviews were transcribed, the non-linguistic features (that is, the prosodic and paralinguistic aspects, such as the intonation of the voice) were not included in the transcript because I was mostly more interested in *what* they said than in *how* they said it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Nonetheless, many times during the analysis of the data, I listened to the audio-recordings to better understand the data, that is, to explore, in specific instances, *how* the participants said something (for example, to check if their tone of voice suggested irony).

5.2.8 Data analysis

The data were analysed through thematic analysis following mostly Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013; 2016; 2019) advice and guidelines, although not rigidly. Thematic analysis is widely used as a qualitative analytic method of data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It allows researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data collected for a specific research project (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between 'data corpus, 'data set', and 'data item'. Data corpus refers to all data collected for the research project; data set refers to all the data from the data corpus selected for a specific analysis, which may include many or all data items of our data corpus; and data item refers to each individual piece of data collected, which in the case of this study are each individual interview that I conducted with the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

A) Familiarising myself with my data

The first step of the analysis was familiarising myself with my data set, which corresponds to my data corpus. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that it is important to know the 'depth and breadth of the content' (p. 87). That familiarisation was facilitated by the fact that I conducted all the interviews. Nonetheless, I proceeded to several readings of the transcripts in an 'active way' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87), searching for patterns and relevant information to accomplish my objectives and reply to my research questions. At this stage, I started taking notes for the process of coding and also thinking of potential themes.

B) Generating initial codes

Once I felt familiarised with the data and had an initial list of ideas about what would be interesting to include, I started producing initial codes from the data. Codes 'identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 88) regarding the phenomenon. I started coding through a software programme (NVivo) but, at some point, decided to perform it manually, as the latter option felt more 'organic' to me. Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) observe that coding depends on analysts approaching the data with specific questions they want to code around ('theory-driven') or themes being dependent on the data ('data-driven') (pp. 88-89). Instead of moving from theory to data (deduction) or data to theory (induction), I moved back and forth, combining deduction and induction (Suddaby 2006; Saunders and Bristow, 2019). I had specific questions I wanted to code around related to my research questions and objectives (and so I included them, although not directly, in the interview script, as they informed my questions to the participants – see Annex 1), but I also allowed myself to go beyond those and find new codes that I had not anticipated. Mason (2018) observes that 'there is probably no better mechanism for ensuring that the creation of codes is interactive between research questions and data than the process of coding itself' (p. 204), so the relevant codes were defined gradually through an iterative process that lasted for several months.

C) Searching for, reviewing, defining, and naming themes

The third stage of my thematic analysis corresponded to Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013) phases three ('searching for themes'), four ('reviewing themes'), and five ('defining and naming themes'). I do not consider these three phases separate as I constantly moved back and forth during this stage; it was an abductive process (Suddaby 2006; Saunders and Bristow, 2019). Moreover, defining and naming some themes often led to reviewing others and even finding new ones.

Once I had a list of codes identified across my data set, I refocused the analysis at a broader level, developing themes. Although I started trying to make sense of potential themes while coding, I delved deep into it at this stage. This process was also significantly time-consuming, as themes 'are analytic outputs developed through and from the creative labour of our coding [and] reflect considerable analytic 'work', and are *actively* created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process, and subjectivity' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 594). As Braun and Clarke (2006) observe, developing themes often involved combining, refining, separating, and even discarding them.

Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that 'data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes (p. 91). While I divided the data analytically within themes, sometimes they were highly interconnected and entwined, which should not be considered surprising. I tried to avoid overlap between the data contained within themes, but that occurred sporadically, when it was important for the understanding of some themes. When it happened, I mentioned it in the data analysis chapters.

Finally, I defined and named the themes. I did it taking into consideration the patterns united by a core concept, which Braun and Clarke (2013) conceptualise as 'central organising concept'. However, it is relevant to mention that I do not share Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013; 2019) strict concept of theme, something I do not consider to be problematic, as Braun and Clarke (2019) themselves recognise that there are 'radically different conceptualisations of themes' (p. 593).

Indeed, I aimed to achieve a combination of breadth and depth in my analysis. Therefore, I looked for themes as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) but complemented them by exploring a few individual narratives in more depth (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, in a few instances, I have included themes that were not the result of found patterns within the data set but were identified exclusively within a data item (that is, within a specific interview). The most notable example may be found in the last subtheme presented in chapter 8, in which I analyse the importance of social capital through networking and internships. That analysis is based on one of the interviews, as only one of the participants mentioned this aspect. It is included in the chapter because it fits the theme well (see 8.2 – Undergraduate students' strategies to increase future employability) and contributes to our understanding of how social capital plays an important role in how some undergraduates play the game.

D) Producing the report

The final stage of data analysis is reporting it, which corresponds to chapters 6, 7, and 8 of this thesis. As Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, the analysis must provide 'a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story to tell – within and across themes' (p. 93). Braun and Clarke (2013) observe that there are two main ways of using the data extracts: illustratively or analytically. In the former, the extracts are used as illustrative examples, and in the latter, the content of the extract is analysed (p. 252). In my data analysis (see chapters 6, 7, and 8), I use data extracts in both ways.

Moreover, Braun and Clarke (2006) note that:

> Extracts need to be embedded within an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story you are telling about your data, and your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data, and make an argument in relation to your research question. (p. 93)

My analysis was framed by the Bourdieusian theoretical framework and poststructuralist concept of identity explained in chapter 4. I believe that in the three chapters dedicated to data analysis (6, 7, and 8) I managed to build an analytic narrative that contributes to our understanding of English undergraduates understanding of, discourses on, and practices in HE. The narrative begins before they start their HE studies, exploring the role of the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds on their decision-making and their practices within HE, and seeks to show their expectations for a field that all of them anticipate entering after finishing HE: the job market.

5.3 Key ethical issues

Creswell (2013) observes that the idea of ethical issues only occurring during the data collection phase is not accurate, for they may occur in any phase of the research process: prior to conducting the study; at the beginning of the study; during data collection; in data analysis; in reporting the data; or in publishing the study. Furthermore, as Creswell also notes, these issues 'are ever expanding in scope as inquirers become more sensitive to the needs of participants, sites, stakeholders, and publishers of research' (p. 56).

Formally, the first step in the consideration of ethics took place even before the data collection commenced by obtaining the approval of the Open University in order to conduct this research. The specific entity responsible for this approval is the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. To obtain its authorisation, I consulted the ethical standards of doing research at the Open University. Once the Human Research Ethics Committee verified and approved my ethics proposal (ref. HREC/2017/2490/Azevedo/1), I was able to commence the study.

At the beginning, I informed the participants of the purpose of the research and asked for their collaboration by email. During this phase, I was careful to make sure that no one felt pressured to participate in this study. Before starting the interviews, I asked the participants to read the information sheet (see annex 2), which mentioned their right to withdraw from the study, and asked them to sign a consent form (see annex 3). Moreover, I reassured all the participants that their identities would be kept confidential at all stages of the research. To ensure this, I have used appropriate procedures when collecting the data; for example, I have anonymised all information regarding participants' identities.

Data collection is one of the most sensitive phases of the research process involving the participants (Creswell, 2013), because it is during this phase that the researcher interacts most with them. I have tried to build a trusting relationship with the participants, and by this I mean one where both parties were aware of what was expected from them and did their best to respect the other party's expectations. To achieve this I explained to the students again what the purpose of the study was at the beginning of each interview, and detailed how the information would be used (Willig, 2008)

A doctoral research student doing research on a topic involving academia is in a somewhat peculiar position. I have a fair knowledge of the academic culture but, at the same time, I am not enacting in the academic world in the same way as academics and do not consider myself an insider-researcher (see, for instance, Costley et al., 2010). Therefore, when analysing the data, I have kept focused on presenting different points of view, even – or especially – when they were contradictory, as it is essential to present a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon under research (Creswell, 2013). This required presenting insightful treatment of data, with an appropriate balance between my comments on the data and illustrative extracts, in order to allow the reader to assess the relevance of my analysis.

With regards to the identity of the participants, it was important to respect their privacy and, therefore, to use appropriate procedures to assure that their identities would be kept anonymous (Willig, 2008; Creswell, 2013). In order to achieve that, I gave them fictitious names that would not allow anyone to track who they are, and at times this meant that some information had to be sacrified. For example, in some cases, the crossing of the socio-demographic characteristics or specific episodes involving the students with the identification of the course and institution could reveal their identities. When presented with such cases, my main concern was to maintain the anonymity of the students. Moreover, all the data were managed and stored securely, in accordance with The Open University guidance.

5.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I started by discussing my methodological approach, based on a social constructionist ontology and poststructuralist epistemology. Researchers who take a social constructionist approach: (1) do not claim to have any objective knowledge of reality as they cannot be separated from what is being observed; (2) consider human interests as the main driver of social science; (3) do not provide explanations that give access to a specific ‘truth’, aiming instead to increase general understanding of the situation; and (4) believe that research progresses through obtaining rich data, usually from a restricted number of cases, that generates ideas (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

Poststructuralism shares with structuralism the idea that the modern concept of individual is the result of specific historically situated structures or discourses, but the former does not have scientific pretensions and rejects structuralism's claims to objectivity. I pointed out that many poststructuralists are interested in deconstructing established truths and expert knowledge, and in revealing the power(s) behind them (Kenny et al., 2011). This study seeks to make a contribution to these endeavours, deconstructing the contemporary dominant constructions of English undergraduates as consumers.

I then outlined my research design, including all relevant information regarding the data collection and data analysis method. The data collection technique consists of qualitative (Braun and Clarke, 2008) and reflexive (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviewing was chosen because the participants' accounts obtained through them have the potential to show 'the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 120), which fits the aims and objectives of this study.

I interviewed 30 English undergraduates or prospective undergraduates, some more than once, in a total of 37 interviews over a period of four years (2016-2019). At the time of the interviews, the participants were between 18 and 23 years old and attended, or would soon start attending, different types (Pre-1992, including Russell Group, and Post-1992) of universities located in England and Scotland. The participants came from different socioeconomic (more and less privileged) and educational (comprehensive, grammar, and private schools) backgrounds. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2016; 2019). I finalised the chapter by addressing ethic issues.

In the next chapter, I analyse the participants' decision-making process regarding their future HE experience, namely why they wanted to study, and their deliberations on what subject to study and which HEI to study it.

Chapter 6 – The decision-making regarding higher education: why, what, and where to study

In this chapter, the first of three dedicated to present the results of data analysis, I analyse the participants' decision-making process regarding their future HE experience, namely why they wanted to study, and their deliberations on what subject to study and which HEI to study it. The analysis of the participants' accounts is presented and divided into different themes and subthemes. I start by exploring the role of the participants' families and their previous educational experience(s). Subsequently, I examine the impact of university rankings and league tables on prospective undergraduate students' decision-making.

6.1 The impact of students' socioeconomic and educational background

One of the themes that resulted from the data analysis was the impact of students' socioeconomic and educational

in the decision-making process regarding their HE studies. I follow Bourdieu in considering how the impact of socioeconomic background in individuals' discourses and practices is not direct but instead mediated through the structure of fields (Swartz, 1997). Hence, students' 'practices derive from the intersection of habitus with structure' (Swartz, 1997, p. 121). Moreover, the way in which the opportunity structure is perceived by the participants is considered by them as part of what in Bourdieusian terms can be understood as their habitus (Reay, 2004). This theme is presented in accordance with the different fields in which the participants have occupied positions: family, private school education, grammar school education and comprehensive school education.

6.1.1 Family

In different ways, the relevance of students' socioeconomic background in their decision-making process about pursuing HE studies, what to study, and where to do it was evident in all student's accounts. For example, Tim, a 19 year old first-year Management undergraduate student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), described himself as 'probably upper-middle-class' with ties to the financial sector, as most of his family members work or have worked in that sector. At the beginning of the interview, when questioned about his decision to study management at LSE, Tim mentioned his career aspirations in finance due to being exposed to that sector through his family:

> Basically, everyone in my family has worked in the financial sector, so I've kind of been shown that side of things from a very young age, and I just picked up a kind of aspiration to follow it up.

Although Tim noted his family had 'good ties to the financial sector', he did not mention any intention of using them in the future. This is relevant because 'from a neoliberal, individualistic, meritocratic viewpoint, relying on family networks to secure advantage does not fit because it implies that position influence outcomes' (Abrahams, 2017, p. 628). However, as we will see in chapter 8, this student is aware of the importance of having a good network (that is, social capital) to progress in our neoliberal capitalist society and puts a lot of effort in networking for himself. Being exposed to this social world through one's family is sometimes enough to develop an interest in following the same path, as Tim mentioned when asked if someone influenced his decision:

> I wouldn't say it was an influence. It was more I was just given that exposure, so I kind of developed an interest myself.

Although Tim said his family was not an influence, the account shows the opposite, that is, the influence of his family in the formation of his aspirations for the future. In this sense, by stressing that he had/has free will and is responsible for his own choices and destiny, Tim's discourse reproduces a neoliberal individualistic notion of the self. Yet, Tim's (re)construction of how his interest for working in finance has developed also demonstrates the interplay between agency and structure in the way he attempts to construct his identity. In his discourse, this student recognises, at least to a certain extent, what in Bourdieusian terms can be interpreted as the power of structure in internalising the specificities of habitus. This is consistent with Bourdieu's conception of habitus as being created and reproduced unconsciously, as 'all the practices and products of a given agent are objectively harmonized among themselves […], without any conscious concertation, with those of all members of the same class' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168).

All students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds mentioned that it was always assumed that university was the next step to them. For instance, Ernest, a 21 year old third-year History undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh who classified himself as coming from a middle-class background (both parents are doctors), reported:

> I think there was very much the expectation that I would go to university.

Ernest also mentioned that although his parents did not give him any advice and did not try to influence him explicitly in any way, he always felt the pressure to go to a high-status university (which he designated as a 'good university'):

> [My parents] never tried to influence me. They were always saying: 'Do what you want kind of, you'll make your own mistakes and then figure it out from there.' Yet I always felt pressure from my family. Not that they enforced me. In the sense that it was me sort of creating the pressure on myself because my elder

> sister did medicine [and] then a second sister went to Oxford. So, I never really thought of any other option, I thought I would have to go to a good university, you know, because everyone else in my family has. So, there was pressure in that sense, that definitely played into me wanting to go to Edinburgh because I was much more aware of the name of the university. So yes, family does definitely play a part, whether they enforce it, or you sort of create expectations from what your family is doing.

Ernest's account is consistent with Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) concept of 'normal biographies' used by Reay and her colleagues (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) to explain that middle-class students' decisions to pursue HE studies tend to be linear, anticipated, predictable and normalised to the point of being almost a 'non-decision' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 57). However, Reay and her colleagues (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) note that these 'non-decisions' do not mean that middle-class students are not aware of which options might benefit them in the future. Indeed, Ernest is aware of the benefits of attending a high-status university. As he explained:

> In the first year I really didn't like Edinburgh at all, and I wanted to move, transfer to a university closer to home. And my parents were very much like, if that is what you want to do then do it. But at the end of the day my trade-off was I thought of the name of the university, the Edinburgh sort of academic reputation was too important.

Ernest's accounts did not suggest any kind of 'active planning' promoted by parents that middle-class trajectories often imply (Reay et al., 2005), which consists of creating optimal conditions from an early age for students to develop the 'right capitals' (especially cultural and social ones) to 'succeed in life' (Bathmaker et al., 2013, P. 726).

However, some students reported a clear and direct influence from their parents in their decision-making. Emma, a first-year Medicine undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh who mentioned having had a very privileged upbringing, the first time I interviewed her, reported:

> It wasn't just me who made the decision. My parents hate research scientists and they told me that only over their dead bodies I would be a research scientist. Because they felt, and I saw it for myself as well, the kind of job they put in somany hours and the free time and the kind of payback they got through wasn't as great as that of their colleagues who are doctors. […] the best route would be to do Medicine. So, it wasn't just me who made this decision. I couldn't have made this decision without my parents.

Sometimes that influence worked in somewhat unpredictable ways. Gina, who classified herself as a middle-class individual, was a first-year History undergraduate at the University of Leeds the first time that I interviewed her. At the time, when questioned if she had analysed her options with her family in terms of which university and degree to choose, she replied:

> Mum and dad both did Medicine, and my granddad also did Medicine and my grandma was a nurse, so they all said I should do a proper degree, like Medicine or Law. So, I decided just to ignore them.

Gina was interviewed a second time two years later, when she was in the third and final year of her degree. Then, interestingly, she mentioned that she was waiting to finish the degree to start studying Law in Bristol, where she had already been accepted[24]. If initially

[24] It is worth mentioning that studying History at an undergraduate level is a common pathway to studying Law afterwards and going into the legal profession in England.

she had ‘decide[d] just to ignore them’, now, after experiencing studying what she wanted, she decided to get a degree that would allow her to maintain the tastes she had been used to while living with her family. In Gina’s words:

> I would like to live in a certain way and have a certain lifestyle and I also like the respect of being a Lawyer. It’s quite a big thing, like my mum and dad have pride in their jobs, and people respect what they do, and I quite like that as well. But you know, they’re like, I know it sounds bad, but they’re like proper professions, aren’t they? My grandad and my parents, that’s what they have always been part and I quite like that.

Gina’s comment exemplifies the power of habitus in producing an individual’s lifestyle. As mentioned in chapter 4, Swartz (1997), following and clarifying Bourdieu, observes that ‘habitus tends to shape individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated [and] aspirations and expectations […] are in turn externalised in action that tends to reproduce the objective structure of life chances’ (103). By choosing to study Law because she wants to have a ‘proper profession’ and ‘live in a certain way and have a certain lifestyle’, as her mother, father and grandfather, Gina’s perceptions and practices reproduce her family’s ones, showing that her perceptions and practices are consistent with the conditions under which her habitus was primarily socialised. In saying ‘I like the respect of being a Lawyer’, this undergraduate’s account suggests that she perceives a professional occupation’s ‘distinctive and distinct’ signs through her taste, which echoes her family’s taste, and, more broadly, her social class’ taste. In doing so, Gina contributes to transforming a classified practice into a classifying practice, that is, into a ‘symbolic expression of class position’ (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 170).

Moreover, this undergraduate explicitly manifests a concern with professional uncertainty, for which having a secure and stable professional position in the future, such as Law (according to her construction of it), appears as an attempt to secure her identity:

> There's so much uncertainty with jobs nowadays, like you bounce around from job to job […] really quickly and easily. Well, not easily, but you know, people aren't expected to stay in one job for very long anymore. And, I don't know, you'll always need lawyers and doctors and dentists and that sort of job, won't you? There's more security maybe. (Gina, History, 1st year, University of Leeds)

This preoccupation with future employability is explored in more detail in chapter 8, but it is worth noting its impact on students' decision-making. In Gina's case, a student coming from a privileged background, this concern seems more related to occupying a particular social position than directly with wealth through a well-paid occupation (although there is arguably a connection between wealth and social status). In this sense, it shows how Gina's attachment to a specific notion of the self (that is, a middle-class individual with what is socially constructed as a correspondent lifestyle) leads to insecurities grounded in one's expectations and others' judgments and validations. Moreover, Gina's account also demonstrates how, contrary to habitus, identities are 'a temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 6) always 'in process' (Coupland and Brown, 2012, p. 1).

Other students' accounts, however, somehow challenged extremely deterministic conceptions of habitus. Ralph, in contrast to Tim, Ernest, Emma and Gina, comes from a disadvantaged background. When asked if his family incentivised him, Ralph answered:

> My mum used to get slightly irritated by how much I read. She always wanted me to be a bit more normal than I am. […] When I got into the second half of

secondary school and I became my own person, I stopped valuing my mother's opinion. (Ralph, Classics, 1st year, University of Reading)

Although individuals' habitus results mainly from their early socialisation when external structures are internalised, the concept also designates 'a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214). Indeed, Bourdieu does not conceive habitus as totally deterministic, leaving some space for individuals to select other forms of conduct other than those that are internalised as most likely to succeed. As Ralph's account exemplifies, this is often the case when an individual from a disadvantaged background decides to go to university (see, for example, Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2009). Moreover, in contrast to middle-class students' 'normal biographies', working-class students' trajectories can be described as 'choice biographies' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), which are more fragmentary, discontinuous, and unpredictable. In this case, students' choices are far from normalised, resulting from a process in which they need to consider all the available options and then decide (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

However, the extent to which 'choice biographies' are fragmentary, discontinuous, and unpredictable varies considerably across individuals who described themselves as working-class. Barbara also comes from a disadvantaged background (she described herself as 'quite working-class, very low income'). Since she was 16 years old, she has worked part-time, sometimes sending some money to her family to help them, and she is the first person in her family to go to university. Differently from Ralph, she always felt supported by her family:

[My parents] have always fully supported me in whatever I wanted to do, and they knew I was intelligent enough to come to university and wanted me to go out and explore the world outside our little town and have fun. […] They sat with

> me and looked through brochures and websites and courses and things like that. Every step of the process was made with their help and advice. […] even though they didn't go to university themselves, they know what the real world is like. […] not having as many qualifications, they know it's a little harder. So, they really encouraged me to get as many qualifications as I could. (Barbara, American Studies, 3rd year, Keele University)

Asked when she had decided to follow HE studies, Barbara replied:

> I always wanted to go to university. […] What I wanted to do has changed quite a few times, but I knew I always wanted to go to university.

However, when asked if she found any obstacle during the decision-making, Barbara mentioned financial concerns:

> [My parents having a low income] was a little bit of an obstacle at the start because there was a big worry about how to fund things. But eventually we realised that I would actually get quite a lot of financial support because of the low income.

Barbara's family's lack of economic capital during the decision-making led her to think of a strategy that would allow her to occupy a position in the field of HE. The concept of strategy is essential in Bourdieu's theory of action because fields are set up through the practical strategies of agents with different skills and invested with different habitus and quantities of specific capital (Bourdieu, 2000). Moreover, the strategy that agents adopt to occupy a position in a particular field needs to consider the amount of relevant capital that they hold (Bourdieu, 1993, as cited in Naidoo, 2004).

Although there was a certain pattern across the accounts of the participants who described themselves as working-class, their families' influence manifested differently as notable, for example, in the accounts of Barbara and Ralph. Students' families' relevance in their decision-making process about pursuing HE studies and what to study and where to do it was clear in all accounts. However, the participants' accounts also show that such influence operated and was received in different ways according, to a large extent, to their socioeconomic backgrounds. For the participants from more privileged backgrounds, pursuing HE studies and attending a high-status HEI was almost taken for granted, to the point of being normalised, while the participants from less advantaged backgrounds, even when supported by their families, had to adopt a more conscious and reflexive attitude and think of strategies to occupy a position in the field of HE.

6.1.2 Educational background

Regarding their educational background, the participants' accounts are divided according to the three types of schools they attended: private, grammar, and comprehensive ones. However, it is relevant to mention beforehand that all privately educated participants attended academically focused private schools. The participants' comprehensive schools were somewhat eclectic, with some being more academically focused than others.

Private schools

All students originating from private schools described themselves as middle or upper-middle-class and mentioned that at their school it was assumed that they would attend HE:

> In our school there was an expectation that you would go to university. I guess in some schools that wouldn't be the case. I suppose that probably did influence me in just thinking it's the norm to go straight from school to university. (Gina, History, 1st year, University of Leeds)

This account suggests that attending certain types of schools, such as academically focused private ones, seems to contribute to, or act as a reinforcement of, the way privately educated students construct HE as the most common, or even only path available for them after secondary school. Emma, another participant, was interviewed twice for this study. She comes from a privileged background and studied in a highly academically selective London girls' day school. The following account is from her first interview:

> At my school, to be fair, it didn't come into my kind of options that university wasn't an option. […] it was never put to me 'you don't have to go to university'. In fact, when a friend of mine didn't apply to university, it was kind of a scandal to us. And that [option] it had never occurred to me. (Emma, Medicine, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

This discourse, as Emma's accounts shows, is open to being internalised by students to the point where no other option seems available to them. As mentioned previously, it is a 'non-decision' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 57). Academically focused private school educated students are often positioned by their educational institutions as HE students-to-be, as another excerpt of Emma's interview demonstrates:

> At school a lot of us wanted to be medics, and that was taught very well. And some medic societies have presented there very well. We had a lot of external speakers who were in the medical field and who were very inspiring. My school likes to present itself as a very forward-thinking all-girls school. To see some inspirational women who were doctors was a good help. (ibid.)

Most of the private school educated participants' accounts also reveal other ways that academically selective private schools use to actively encourage their students to pursue HE studies, namely the creation of specific departments whose main objective is to support (and, in some cases, somewhat influence or persuade) students in their decision-making regarding which HE degree to choose. Arthur, who had studied in a private school, was interviewed twice for this research. He was about to finish a gap year and had been accepted at the University of Glasgow to study Economics and Psychology the first time he was interviewed for this study. His account, among others, is revelatory of the investment made by some private schools in encouraging their students' access to university education:

> [My private school] has a big thing like a careers department, and they suggest us to go on for university [education] and stuff. It is quite a big deal to the high school to try to make sure that everyone who wants to go to university gets into that place, so they end up putting quite a lot of emphasis on it.

However, private schools educated students' accounts also reveal that some of these schools do more than just encouraging their students to go to university and supporting them all the way through the process. According to some students, their private schools have an interest in making sure their students go to specific types of university, that is, those that are highly ranked in terms of prestige. Among others, Charlie, a private school educated participant, who was taking a gap year the first time I interviewed him, mentioned this during the interview:

> In my previous school [there was] this fixation with Oxbridge. […] Oxbridge was like great, and we were expected to go there.

Indeed, the influence of studying in private schools in the construction of aspirations was often mentioned. Sometimes, the focus was on the social environment of the institution and, hence, on the opportunity to increase one's social capital through the relationships created there. Tim, for instance, mentioned that:

> Private school gives you almost that level of expectation to strive to do better and gives you exposure to certain individuals who perhaps have had a better background, and that gives you a certain aspiration to do better. (Tim, Management Studies, 1st year, LSE)

According to this student, by studying in private schools, one can interact with individuals who (also) come from a privileged socioeconomic background ('better background'), which he constructs as an incentive to achieve success ('that level of expectation [and aspiration] to strive to do better'). In this construction, therefore, private school education is positioned as a field where the privileged can acquire not only cultural capital, but also social capital. Tim further developed his thoughts on this issue, observing that the value of learning how to interact with other fellow students 'from all around the world' prevails over the teaching itself:

> The key benefit of private school isn't so much the actual teaching. Teaching is very standard, I think. The key thing is the extracurricular and being exposed to a certain kind of individual. My private school was very similar to the London School of Economics in it's very international, and that's very important, being able to learn how to engage and converse with people from very different backgrounds. I was in boarding school, so I got to live with people from China, Hong Kong, Europe, America, and I've seen that at the London School of Economics as well, and that's been really interesting. I think it's a key skill that may be useful, being able to engage with people from all around the world.

When someone operates in different fields, identities are expressed differently according to the field where the individual is operating in a specific moment, which usually implies the adaptation of the habitus (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2019). Tim's account suggests that in some cases, such as his own, the adaptation of the habitus is not necessary, as the process of identity formation has not implied as much change, development and renewal as it would have had if he had been operating in fields where the habitus was put into new conditions when transitioning between them. Moreover, although Tim emphasises how interesting it has been to interact with individuals from different nationalities and (cultural and socioeconomic) backgrounds, this account somewhat indicates a certain 'commodification of social relations' (Wittel, 2001, p. 52-53), as learning how to interact with fellow students 'from all around the world' is not constructed merely as an end in itself, but also as a 'key skill' that may be useful in the future. Brown and Tannock (2009) note that transformations in graduate labour markets caused by an increase in the number of HE institutions led privileged families 'to position their children in the most prestigious schools and programmes, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite' (p. 384).

However, not all individuals exposed to people from other nationalities and cultures adopt an approach as pragmatic as Tim's. Harry, a fourth-year International Business student at the University of the West of England, experienced both private and state education. Until he was 12 years old, he studied at an international (European) private school and, afterwards, at a state school. Harry also appreciated the opportunity to socialise with people from different nationalities, but for different reasons:

> I was socialising with a lot of European [students] because my school had an English section, a French section, an Italian section. Lots of different nationalities. So, it was nice to be able to socialise with people from different backgrounds.

In contrast, Harry's account suggests that he did not see his private school's international environment as a chance to acquire social capital, but to enjoy the possibility of interacting with his foreign colleagues, not merely as an end in itself.

Bob, another private school educated student, also constructs the private school where he studied as a space for privileged students, but he highlights the intelligence and cultural capital of those who attended his school:

> I suppose [my school] was not only a private school but also a kind of a selective one to an extent. There was a lot of emphasis on the academic side. I think more than a lot of other private schools, [mine] was full of people who wanted to pursue in terms of academic studies… Yeah, I think it was maybe a bit… not elite, but you know what I mean… The fact is that people were very intelligent. (Bob, Law, 1st year, University of Oxford)

Bob's account suggests a 'sense of distinction' (Bourdieu, 2010), as he directly defines a privileged intellectual position for those who attended his former private school (including himself) based on their cultural capital. Although he mentions that those who attended his selective school were not an elite (and it is not irrelevant that the expression 'elite' occurred to him, even if to deny it as a qualifying attribute), his discourse invokes ideas of privilege and prestige, especially through the way he uses expressions such as 'I think more than a lot of other private schools'. Therefore, Bob's construction suggests that studying at his school is a form of acquiring symbolic capital. However, those who do not respect the 'rules of the game' may need to abandon the institution – and, ultimately, the field. Alfie attended the same private school as Bob and was interviewed three times at yearly intervals for this study. In his first interview, this student mentioned that some students were 'invited' to leave the school when they did not achieve the results that were expected of them:

> I can think only of four people who didn't go to university. In a year of 120, that's 3%, isn't it? The school, at the end of year 11, when you are doing your GCSE exams, if you don't do well on the GCSE exams, you are not to continue

> at the school, so they had to do their A-levels at a different school. The school suggested they should leave, and they did. (Alfie, Mathematics, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

Moreover, Philip, a 3rd year English Literature student at the University of Leeds who attended a private school, mentioned an episode that is revelatory. His older brother attended a private primary school for a while but had to abandon it. In Philip’s words:

> It was year four, so my brother would have been about nine or eight. He was diagnosed with dyslexia. My primary school was very much geared to getting us into the best secondary schools, and that just wasn’t an environment that was particularly good for him. When someone fell behind in the class, they didn’t get that individual attention that he definitely needed. So they [parents] took him out of there, put him on a different path – a state school – and he has really done well.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, Alfie and Philip’s accounts exemplify the ways in which individuals acting in a specific field must share and respect a set of rules that specify the forms of action that are legitimate in the field (Swartz, 2013). These accounts also suggest that to maintain its status as a dominant institution in the field, the school needs to control the valued resources in the field (that is, the cultural capital materialised in students who achieve good results in their exams and, therefore, have the potential to go to university). Hence, students are inevitably caught in this struggle for power and failing is not an option for them, as the prestige of the school and the ‘success’ of its students are intertwined.

State grammar schools

Two of the students who were interviewed for this research studied in grammar schools. Despite being state schools, like comprehensive schools, the participants who attended them highlighted their selectiveness and prestige and constructed them as being superior to comprehensive schools and, in some cases, to private schools. For example, Steve, an undergraduate student who described himself as coming from a working-class family that had acquired 'quite a bit of money', directly mentioned the selective character of these state schools:

> My [grammar] school was quite selective. I think there were 120 places in all and there were about 800 applications. (Steve, Biological Sciences, 2nd year, University of Edinburgh)

This participant proceeded to explain why his parents wanted him to attend this school:

> They wanted me to go to the best schools in the area. So, there was the school I went to, which had a reputation as being the best school in the area. And then there was the private school as well, that had a very good reputation. But then there were also a lot of comprehensive schools that had a really bad reputation, so they didn't want me to go there. […] if I hadn't got into the school I was in, they would have put me in a private school in Liverpool.

These accounts exemplify how grammar schools are constructed by those who attended them as prestigous institutions where only 'the best' students are accepted, that is, those who possess enough cultural capital. That acceptance is achieved through a selective process, which suggests that students are subjected, at an early age, to competitive processes where only those who are positioned as 'the best' can succeed.

Similarly, Joanna, who also described herself as belonging to a working-class family, when asked if she had studied in a private or state school, immediately pointed out:

> [I studied in a] state [school], but it was a grammar school. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

And when asked if she could explain in more detail why she made that clarification without being questioned about it, Joanna also started by mentioning the selective character of (her) grammar school:

> It's selective, so we had to do a test when we were eleven [years old], in order to get in. And well, if you passed, you got in; if you didn't, you would have to go to a different one, like a comprehensive school.

In this account, Joanna highlights both her cultural and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1977; 2010), positioning herself in a way that, in some respects, does not differ substantially from the way in which some private school educated students, such as Bob, positioned themselves. Indeed, her account reveals a 'sense of distinction', as she mentions that she was accepted at her grammar school through a highly competitive selection process (that is, the exam that she did when she was eleven years old) due to her cultural capital (that is, her intellectual capacities, that are not mentioned directly by her, but are implied in her construction). Joanna's construction also suggests a form of classification based on the cultural capital hold by each student, as those who did not pass the exam had 'to go to a different one, like a comprehensive school'. Moreover, Joanna directly constructs being educated at a grammar school as a superior form of education, one which implies more dedication from the students, elevating herself in relation to comprehensive school educated students:

> I would say that [studying at a grammar school] is hard work, and there is definitely a higher level of education. There is a focus more on [subjects] like humanities and sciences, whereas at a comprehensive school there is a lot of focus on practical subjects, such as sport, design and technology.

This student constructs grammar school education as a potential way of acquiring prestige, as her discourse suggests an understanding of grammar schools as sites where cultural capital may potentially be converted into symbolic capital.

In a similar way to private schools, grammar schools were also constructed by former students as encouraging them to pursue HE studies after concluding their secondary school studies:

> They would encourage us to go to university, helping us every step of the way. They would help us with our applications, and if we were struggling with something then they would ensure that we got the right support and would give us extra tuition. They would try to make sure that we wouldn't fail. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

And like private schools, they are also constructed as trying to influence the type of HEI that their students choose, sometimes at the expense of their wellbeing:

> They would pressure us into doing better and going to high-level universities. And some people were criticised if they wanted to go to a lower-ranked, even though it was their choice. It did seem that they cared more about the school than the pupils […], like they wanted to benefit the school's reputation more than the students' wellbeing. (ibid.)

Interestingly, a private school educated student constructed private and grammar school education as somewhat similar. As she mentioned:

> It was only me and another boy in my flat [who] went to private schools […] Actually, one of the boys went to a grammar school, so I feel that wasn't too far off anyway. (Olga, English and History, 3rd year, University of Leeds)

Yet, despite how the participants constructed grammar schools, Gorard and Siddiqui (2018) contend that they are 'no better or worse than the other schools in England once their selected and privileged intake is accounted for' (p. 921).

State comprehensive schools

In contrast to the accounts of private and grammar school educated participants, most comprehensive school educated HE students mentioned that most of their fellow students at the time did not progress into HE studies. Moreover, there was not necessarily an expectation that they would pursue HE studies, nor did they have much support from the school, as Barbara's account demonstrates:

> At my school, I would say probably less than half [went to university]. And then not many progressed on to college either […]. A lot of the times at school they focused on the ones who weren't doing very well or were troublemakers or things like that, rather than the ones who were excelling. So not much mention of university when we were at school. (Barbara, American Studies, 3rd year, Keele University)

However, some participants educated at comprehensive schools, such as Anna, constructed the influence of the comprehensive schools that they had attended as more interventive:

> I think there was a lot of pressure from school to get into university and everyone, all my peers, seem to think that they knew what they wanted to do. There were interventions, so we would have schooling on how to write your personal

> statement or how to do this, how to do that, and a lot of school life seemed directed to help us in further studying. (Anna, Psychology, 3rd year, University of York)

However, in contrast to private and grammar school educated students, despite the emphasis on HE, most participants from comprehensive schools did not mention that pursuing HE studies had been presented as the only available option for them:

> They did mention other options, such and apprenticeships and getting a job or internships, but that's about it. (ibid.)

There were a few exceptions, with participants who classified themselves as upper-middle-class, middle-class or coming from privileged backgrounds reporting that their comprehensive schools put significant emphasis in students going to high-status universities. For instance, Andrew, who classified himself as an upper-middle-class student and had recently finished his second year studying Classics at the University of Oxford, mentioned:

> My school was ranked 'outstanding' by Ofsted[25]. Academically and in terms of pastoral care it is a very good school. It always sends a handful of people to Oxbridge each year and is very keen on continuing to do it. […] To help us prepare for the exams, a teacher offered us Latin classes at school, at lunchtime and after the regular classes.

Andrew's account shows that his comprehensive school made available resources to help its students acquire cultural capital that would put them in a better position to take the

---

[25] Ofsted stands for the **Of**fice for **St**andards in **Ed**ucation, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted is the UK government department responsible for inspecting schools and other social care services for children. Ofsted inspects all state schools in England. There are four possible Ofsted ratings that a school can receive: Grade 1: Outstanding; Grade 2: Good; Grade 3: Requires Improvement; Grade 4: Inadequate.

exams and facilitate their admission at a prestigious university. In turn, those admissions seem to be used for the school to promote itself, and acquire capital of its own, and so on in a virtuous cycle. Moreover, it also shows how rankings pervade all parts of the educational system (and not just HE), such that students start to internalise the idea of rankings before attending university. The impact of university rankings and league tables on students' decision-making process is analysed in the next section of this chapter.

A comprehensive school educated participant, Ralph, mentioned an episode that, according to him, was especially memorable and influential in his decision to pursue HE studies:

> In year 9, we were studying an article that was written in *The Telegraph*, or something like that, which […] was suggesting that state educated [students] and children from poorer families just don't have an interest and don't have a reason to go into academics [sic] – it was quite patronising. I think that could have had an influence on me, a sort of stubbornness. I wanted to prove that the world was wrong. […] I wanted to show that I could be an academic. (Ralph, Classics, 1st year, University of Reading)

Ralph's account suggests that his decision to pursue HE studies was somewhat influenced by the social reproduction (via the newspaper) of a construction according to which state-educated students from less advantaged backgrounds did/do not want to pursue HE studies. Indeed, by refusing to occupy the position in the field that (he felt) was expected of him, this student's decision can be seen as a way of resisting a form of symbolic violence that manifested through the social classification and exclusion of the group he felt he belonged to. Ralph's account seems to corroborate Reay's (2004) observation that 'habitus operates at an unconscious level unless individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self' (p. 438). This account somewhat substantiates Swartz' (1997) criticism that some of Bourdieu's work (especially the earlier one) is still heavily influenced by the structuralist logic of binary oppositions, leading him to divide the use of agency between what is possible and what is impossible. This binary neglects the 'grey areas where uncertainties about life chances are internalised that do not fit the fundamentally dichotomous boundaries that Bourdieu's concept of habitus presupposes' (Swartz, 1997, p. 107). Moreover, as Threadgold (2020) notes, one's habitus also explains feelings that lead individuals to transform social inequalities instinctively or reflexively. Ralph's account suggests that feeling a victim of social injustice triggered a reaction against it.

Harry, a fourth-year International Business student at the University of the West of England experienced both private and state school education. For him, the teaching was better at the private school:

> [The private school] was much more structured than my state school. […] I thought that the teaching standard [at the state school] was not as good as at the private school […] There was more to offer at the private school in terms of subjects and things to study.

In this account Harry constructs his private school as a site where it was possible to acquire more cultural capital. Yet, having moved to a state school at an early stage of his educational experience, this student could not evaluate the impact of this period in his decision-making regarding HE. Regarding his experience at the state school, although Harry never considered the possibility of not pursuing HE studies (this student can be described as a middle-class individual with a 'normal biography'; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), he credited his personal tutor as having had a considerable impact on his choice of degree:

> I wasn't sure what degree I wanted to do […] so I remember going to visit my personal tutor at college. And she was the one that sat down with me and said: 'You're doing English, French, and Economics, so why not International Business?' So, I looked into it more from there on and then decided that was what I wanted to do. She had a big influence on that.

The participants' accounts show that their experiences in comprehensive schools are not homogeneous, as they have different social, geographical, and school experiences. The results of Crozier et al.'s (2019) empirical study also show this heterogeneity, although, differently from mine, his sample was constituted only by working-class participants.

6.2 The role of university rankings and league tables on prospective undergraduate students' decision-making

In the previous section, I presented a theme on the influence of students' socioeconomic and educational background in deciding to pursue HE studies and choosing a degree and a HEI. Yet, there are arguably other factors that influence students' decision-making, some of which are explored in this section. Some literature (for instance, Abbot and Leslie, 2004; Broecke, 2012a; 2012b; Gibbons et al., 2015) has shown that university rankings and league tables published by the government and accreditation agencies, research organisations, and specialised and popular media may impact student choice regarding HE, and that also resulted from my data analysis. Furthermore, somehow connected to the influence of these consumerist guides, HEIs' 'prestige' (as proxied, for example, by the Russell Group membership) has been somewhat credited with impacting on students' decision-making (for example, Abbot and Leslie, 2004). Finally, it also came across in data analysis that, in some cases, a HEI's geographical location may impact students' decision making. In sum, all these aspects relate to HEIs' position in the field of HE from different perspectives and have its impact on prospective undergraduate students' decision-making.

All the participants in this study were questioned about the impact of league tables and rankings on their decision-making regarding what degree to study and which university to apply for. A very significant majority of students mentioned that they had consulted them, but almost none knew very much about how they were developed or tried to interrogate their methodology and overall accuracy. These 'consumerist guides' (McCaig, 2018) often seemed to be used to validate a choice made considering other factors; for instance, the university's 'prestige' (that is, its symbolic capital) or, in a few cases, its geographical location.

Emma, who comes from a privileged background, studied at a private school and was interviewed twice for this study, was about to conclude her first year studying Medicine at the University of Edinburgh at the time of the first interview. When asked about why she had chosen to study at Edinburgh, she told me that it was 'an incredibly good university'. And when I requested if she could explain what she meant by 'incredibly good university', Emma replied:

> Well, I looked at the rankings. I hadn't originally thought of [the University of] Edinburgh, but one of my closest friends had picked Edinburgh, so I had a look at [the rankings] and Edinburgh ranks very well in comparison to Oxford and Cambridge – I applied to Cambridge as well. So, it ranks very well in comparison to them, and they had great satisfactory ratings on these league tables.

We continued to speak about university rankings and league tables, and I asked Emma which ones she had looked at and if she understood what their criteria were. She mentioned that she had checked for different parameters:

> I looked at The Guardian and […] a few others. And I had looked at the Russell Group as well. There were things like employment, satisfaction with teaching and things like that which were fairly well but I didn't go into any further detail to see how that was assessed. I kind of skimmed it. […] [The rankings] did vary, but it was kind of from top five to top ten, not from top 5 to top 50. It was notably coherent.

This account shows an aspect common to most participants: although they had looked at various league tables (not all of them valuing the league tables in the same way or prioritising the same 'quality' indicators, though), none had tried to analyse in detail how those indicators were calculated.

Miriam, a first-generation undergraduate who described herself as working-class, mentioned that although not knowing how its measures were obtained, The Complete University Guide had a decisive impact on her choice of HEI:

> It's really good, Forensic Science [at Keele University], in the league tables. So, its position, when I saw it, it was number two […], whereas now it's first, the best in the country for Forensic Science. (Miriam, Forensic Science, 3rd year, Keele University)

In this case, the symbolic capital attributed to the HEI is based solely on the position of the chosen subject on a specific league table.

In a few cases, the importance of university rankings and league tables in the decision-making was almost completely dismissed. For instance, when I asked Tim, a private-school educated undergraduate student who classified himself as coming from an upper-middle-class background, if he had consulted league tables and considered them to be relevant, he replied:

> [They were] not really [relevant], actually. Obviously, I've seen them. They always change. They all vary a lot. Say The Guardian; I know that they value student satisfaction very highly. So, LSE is regarded not in the top three for them, whereas the Complete University Guide ranks LSE at third. So, it varies a lot depending on what they regard as the most important aspect. But for me, actually, what was the most important is I value university brand, that is the best symbol for as how people in the street regard it. If you went to someone in the street and asked, 'what are the top three universities in the UK?' That's what I care about. (Tim, Management Studies, 1st year, LSE)

Tim's account is interesting at several levels. He started by mentioning that he had 'obviously […] seen them', as if not looking at university rankings and league tables was an unthinkable option. This aspect shows their impact on the public sphere, including among those who claim not to attribute them any or much relevance. Secondly, Tim observed that LSE was not included in the top three HEIs in terms of student satisfaction in The Guardian ranking when he looked at it. However, the (not so good) position occupied in that ranking was not an issue for him, as what he valued was the 'university brand'. Therefore, Tim's account suggests that how league tables position universities in the field in terms of reputation through a system of classification and stratification does not impact how some students positioned/position them. This means that although HE leadership is highly responsive to university rankings and league tables, using them in their strategic planning processes (Hazelkorn, 2008) and, therefore, often (re)configuring what they offer, and how they offer it to prospective students based on them, arguably not all students are responsive or respond to them in the same way. Tim presented his reasons to value more the LSE brand than its position in the league tables:

> When I was making my choices, […] a big phrase that I kept saying was 'university brand'. […] my key objective when it comes to university is job prospects; when you're building a CV, a key thing is the university brand.

Tim's account shows that for some undergraduates (and that was the case for many of the participants, although none put it as candidly or gave it the same level of relevance), HE is constructed as a bridge to employability. The question of future employability is analysed in chapter 8, but it is relevant to note that some HE students started playing the game and, therefore, adopting specific strategies regarding future employability before entering the field of HE. These decisions were made thinking about the position they wished to occupy in the field they will enter after leaving HE: the employment market.

Relatedly, there are measures about employability prospects in the league tables. For some students, such as Tim, these measures were not relevant. The critical aspect seemed to be how the HEIs they were considering applying to were publicly positioned in the field of HE. For that purpose, the league tables were in many cases just one variable among others, with the type of HEI being more relevant than their position in the league tables. Indeed, most of the students studying at Russell Group institutions and some other pre-1992 universities put less emphasis on rankings and league tables and highlighted how the 'prestige' of their institution, as a form of symbolic capital, positioned it in the field of HE:

> I think although obviously the Russell Group is the sort of highly regarded group, there are massive differences within the Russell Group. So I kind of tiered it off in my own head, and I know a lot of students do this, where you sort of apply to Oxford and Cambridge, then if you don't get into them you've got the four big London universities, UCL, LSE, Kings [College] and Imperial [College], but I didn't want to move to London because I wouldn't have had the funds to do it.

> Then you've sort of got Edinburgh, Warwick, Bristol and then I just sort of made a judgment call which city I like the best because I was like they're all sort of similar institutions in terms of you know name and reputation. So, I thought of I guess the primary concern was how good they are as an institution within the Russell Group and then secondary to that came which place I am going to enjoy the most. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, Edinburgh)

Other students mentioned that they did not look at employability measures because their choice of degree had not been motivated by job prospects. For instance, Caroline, daughter of a middle-class British and a working-class German (the social class classification was made by her), who studied at a private school from eleven years old onwards, mentioned that:

> I chose history, and I chose it not because of any kind of career that I wanted to go into. I chose it because it was what I loved. So, they [employability measures] weren't really that important to me. (Caroline, History, 3rd year, University of York)

But when asked which universities she had applied to, she mentioned the University of Cambridge, to which she had applied unsuccessfully, and the University of Bristol, the University of Edinburgh, and Durham University, all members of the Russell Group. She was also accepted at Durham and Edinburgh, but according to her, the University of York was a compromise between both: Durham's course was her favourite (she analysed the content of the different courses), but she did not like the place, and Edinburgh was her favourite place (she liked the city), but she did not want to study for four years (the duration of the course at the University of Edinburgh).

For some students, however, the employability measures were significant:

> I looked at the league tables […] so that's definitely an aspect which influenced me as well. Obviously, [University of the West of England] is not top 20 or 30, but for me it's a good university for employability and it's a good university for business as well – it's one of the best business schools in the country. (Harry, International Business, 4th year, University of the West of England)

Yet, when asked if the employability measures were more important than the type of university, Harry replied:

> [The Russell Group] was important to me, [but] I ended up doing an extra year at college because I didn't do that well in my first year of A-levels. So, I set the bar a little bit lower for myself. My brother went to a Russell Group university, my sister went to a Russell Group university. My mother was very keen for me to go to one but at the time I didn't think I quite hit the requirements for it. As it turned out, I actually did, I got higher grades than I was expecting [but] I had made up my mind that I was coming here and I had sorted out all my accommodation in Bristol […].

Harry's account reflects the importance of the Russell Group for some students, and their families and schools. Indeed, for most students studying at a university that is a member of the Russell Group and/or coming from a particular socioeconomic background where attending one is the norm, this type of university was (or would be) their first option, regardless of its position in the rankings and league tables. This suggests that despite some neoliberal systems of HE (as the English one) attempts to differentiate HEIs by introducing market mechanisms, such as rankings and league tables, some prospective students do not make decisions based only on these metrics. Indeed, certain students' habitus, usually those from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, only recognise the symbolic capital/power of HEIs according to their membership of specific groups.

However, it is essential to mention that most Russell Group institutions occupy a favourable position in the most influential league tables and rankings. Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to untangle to what extent undergraduate students would have the same opinion and would have made the same choice if their Russell Group institution was badly positioned in the league tables and rankings.

6.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I presented themes and subthemes based on the analysis of the participants' decision-making process regarding their HE. In different ways, the analysis of all students' accounts showed the relevance of their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. All middle and upper-middle-class students reported that it was assumed that they would pursue HE studies at a high-status university. For participants who classified themselves as working-class or coming from less advantaged backgrounds, the analysis of their accounts showed that they wanted to go to university from an early age. However, these participants had to face some obstacles, namely the lack of economic capital, which led them to strategise the best ways to enter and occupy a position in the field of HE.

Most of the participants who attended private schools reported that schools had an interest in making sure that they would go to specific types of universities, that is, to highly ranked ones in terms of prestige (Russell Group institutions; in particular, Oxbridge). For some participants, studying in private schools was described as a form of acquiring not only cultural capital, but also social capital through the relationships developed there. Many privately educated participants were positioned in a field where institutions involved in struggles of power to maintain or achieve a dominant status in that field actively promoted competition among individuals. Grammar school educated participants reported similar experiences. The accounts from comprehensive school educated participants varied considerably and many mentioned that most of their fellow students did not progress to HE studies, while others (usually from privileged backgrounds) mentioned that their comprehensive schools put a lot of emphasis in going to a prestigious university.

A very significant majority of the participants reported having consulted league tables and university rankings during their decision-making regarding HE. Yet, almost none had an understanding of how they were developed or tried to interrogate their methodology and overall accuracy. However, a few students (not attending Russell Group institutions) mentioned that the position occupied by their HEI's degree subject in the league tables had been determinant in their decision-making. In a few cases, their importance was almost completely dismissed, as the prestige of the university (or 'university brand') was the determinant factor in the choice of university. In such cases, the participants were more concerned with how attending an HEI would impact their future employability, and employability measures in the league tables were considered less relevant than the prestige of the university. A few participants not studying in Russell Group institutions pointed out that their university's position in terms of employability measures had a significant impact in their decision-making, but also reported that their first option would have been a Russell Group institution.

Chapter 7 – Higher education as an economic transaction? Fees, indebtedness, and the consumption of higher education

In this chapter, I analyse the participants' constructions of HE and themselves and their perceptions of indebtedness in the context of the payment of high fees by English undergraduates studying in English and Scottish universities. This analysis considers how their socioeconomic and educational background – their habitus – was influential. Arguably, such constructions have implications on the strategies they adopt in the field. Although the analysis of the participants' accounts is presented analytically divided into different themes and subthemes, they are highly interconnected and entwined.

I start the chapter by exploring the participants' understandings of having to pay for HE studies. I then progress to analyse how paying for HE impacts how they position themselves in the HE field and their relationship with academics. Subsequently, I examine the role of the academic strikes of 2018 in how students perceive their position in the field, followed by an exploration of students' accounts in terms of their fees subsidising other students/disciplines. Finally, I focus on how paying fees is sometimes constructed as an incentive to put more effort into their studies, before I explore the participants' constructions of their indebtedness.

7.1 Should HE be free or paid for?

When I asked the participants if pursuing an undergraduate degree should be free or paid for, their replies varied considerably. Some undergraduate students stated that they should not have to pay for their HE studies, others reported that they would not mind paying a certain amount, but the current cost was too high, while others did not object to tuition fees. Participants' accounts suggested that most of those who attended comprehensive schools tended to advocate for a free HE or not have an opinion on this matter. In contrast, the participants who studied in grammar and private schools seemed more inclined to accept – or at least, not oppose – tuition fees, although their justifications were not homogeneous. However, some private school educated participants advocated for a free HE. These results are more heterogeneous than those presented in Budd's (2018) study, in which all English participants (a total of seven) accepted that they – and not the state – should pay for tuition fees.

For instance, Ernest, a third-year History undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh, studied in a comprehensive school. This participant reported that pursuing HE studies – and, more generally, education – should not be subjected to the payment of tuition fees. Moreover, the way in which Ernest approached this issue suggested a developed political reflexivity:

> I think education should be free. I think the marketisation[26] of education is absolutely terrible and it's kind of symptomatic of the sort of the neoliberal world that we live in and the, you know, movement of the UK towards a more American-based system […]. I don't think it should be free because it's a massive burden on me but because […] I think it is the obligation of the state to provide education. […] Even if [HE] is free it'll still be, you know, endemic of a class system, but I feel like for working-class students, it's much harder to show aspiration to go to an institution where you're paying £9000 a year to get in.

Similarly, Chloe, a third-year Criminology and Psychology undergraduate at Keele University from a middle-class background, also based her understanding that HE should be free on the impact of tuition fees on (prospective) students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds:

[26] To clarify, I had never used the expression 'marketisation' during the interview.

Education shouldn't be a privilege. I think that anybody, no matter what class or financial situation they're in, should be allowed to study what they want […]. They shouldn't have to put themselves in £50000 worth of debt, they shouldn't have to struggle. I understand you get maintenance loans and all that sort of thing from student finance. But at the end of the day, like my friend who's graduated from UCL two years ago, his student finance debt is upwards of £60000, and he got maximum maintenance loan because his mum is just earning minimum wage, which to me is completely backwards, because my mum, who's very well off, I'm not going to get as much of a debt as him. Whereas I can actually afford to pay it back, he can't, which is completely backwards. Education shouldn't be a privilege at all.

In Bourdieusian terms, Ernest's and Chloe's accounts show that for them, as for some of the other participants, occupying a position and acquiring cultural capital in the field of HE should not imply a compulsory investment of economic capital. Moreover, although both Ernest and Chloe come from middle-class families, they manifested concern with the position of working-class students, who they constructed as having more difficulty in making such an economic investment. In a different moment of the interview, Ernest argued that HE should be 'a universal right […] to all people'.

As Ernest and Chloe, Ralph studied in comprehensive schools, but in contrast, he came from an underprivileged background. Similarly, this participant argued that HE should be free, a belief not based directly on his lack of economic capital, but on his political positioning:

I do definitely think it should be free. I'm of that sort of leaning, politically. I have been a socialist for a very long time and sort of known by people as an angry socialist. (Ralph, Classical Studies, 1st year, University of Reading)

However, Ralph made a direct link between his political beliefs and his socioeconomic background:

> I was brought up in a single-parent household, my mother was on disability benefits, I was her carer, and everything was telling me I couldn't go to university and become an academic. And it's just all of my life I've sort of had to defend myself and my ideals, and it's just resulted in me being very political.

Ralph's account shows how the habitus is not necessarily deterministic, sometimes leading to the development of a political reflexivity that translates into resistance against the structural conditionings. Such experiences, echoing Reay et al.'s (2005) findings, can be described as 'choice biographies', in which working-class students are forced to reflect on the available options and justify their decision' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998, p. 65). Arguably, Ralph's account suggests that his construction of HE as something that should be free results from a (political) reflexivity grounded in existing social inequalities and their reproduction, and he somehow constructed his biography as a form of affirmation and resistance against such reproduction.

Linda, another comprehensive school educated participant who applied to the University of Newcastle but had not yet started her Architecture undergraduate studies when I interviewed her, also expressed a critical view regarding the need to pay for HE:

> I think you could have the option of having to pay for it in private universities and not having to pay for it in state universities [but] I just think because you're still in education you shouldn't have to pay for it.

Linda's account suggests a view that HE is a public good rather than a private commodity. This seems to result from this participant perceiving HE as an extension of her previous educational experience – 'you're still in education' –, where she did not have to pay for it. Hence, there is an element of novelty in having to pay fees, as the exchange of economic capital for cultural capital is not a practice that she was used to in her previous educational field.

Although not expressing strong opposition to having to pay for HE, a participant who studied in a comprehensive school suggested that a free HE could be more positive overall, by mentioning accounts from people who attended free HE in other contexts:

> I have known people from Scandinavian countries, they have free university, and from what a friend was saying, it has been a good thing. More people have got into uni and have studied and it has been better. But ours it is what it is. (Anna, Psychology, 3rd year, University of York)

This account shows that the participant was aware (although only superficially) that there are other options regarding HE, that is, that the existence of HE fields where students do not need to invest economic capital to acquire cultural capital is not only possible, but potentially more advantageous for students and society in general. However, her account also suggests that she conformed to the system and felt somewhat powerless in the face of the structure ('ours it is what it is').

Another participant from the University of York, who studied at a private school from eleven years old onwards and whose father is German, also compared the existence of high tuition fees in English HE with the non-existence of such fees in other HE sectors, advocating against students having to pay for their HE:

> In an ideal world, I think higher education should be free, but we don't live in an ideal world. I don't think I should pay £9000 a year and I think […] it excludes a lot of people from higher education. Even with loans and stuff I feel like a lot of people can't access higher education […]. And a lot of the politicians who raised the fees,

> they all went to university for free. […] in Germany there's a very minimal price on higher education and I feel like there can be systems where it works, getting through higher education. So, no, I don't feel that I should pay £9000 a year. (Caroline, History, 3rd year, University of York)

Moreover, Caroline's account shows that some students go beyond individualistic concerns and consider social fairness and justice issues when assessing the existence of fees in HE. Such concerns were mostly found in participants from less privileged or working-class backgrounds and those from more privileged or middle-upper-middle class backgrounds who studied in comprehensive schools and reported having friends from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, a minority of participants who studied at comprehensive schools considered that it was legitimate to pay a certain amount of economic capital for their HE. This was the case with some middle-class participants who reported not being concerned with their debt, such as Colin. When I asked him if he thought HE students should pay fees, he replied:

> I think [studying at university] should imply the payment of a value, but I haven't experienced the system of paying it back. I only know that you pay them back gradually after you're earning a certain amount. So, it's not really the sort of thing I'm worried about at the moment, I guess. I don't think many people are particularly concerned about the fees. (Colin, Mathematics, 4th year, University of Edinburgh)

This student's account conflates the idea of putting a price on HE and having access to a loan to pay for it. Indeed, like some other participants, Collin does not mind investing economic capital to access HE because that operation is mediated through a loan that he will only start paying when employed and earning a certain amount of money. The participants' perceptions of their indebtedness are analysed further ahead in this chapter.

Like most participants who studied in comprehensive schools, a few students who studied at private schools also advocated for a free HE, mainly on the grounds of social justice. For instance, Philip, a third-year English Literature undergraduate at the University of Leeds, also mentioned how high fees made it more difficult for students from less privileged backgrounds to access HE:

> I like the idea of everyone being able to have access to education. Nine thousand a year is extortion. Certain people can’t afford and will not be able to support themselves. It’s a loan you take on probably for a good number of years, depending on how much money you make. But for some people, taking out that big of a loan is not really an option. I think education shouldn’t be a privilege.

Philip’s account does not explicitly suggest a political understanding of HE as a public good in the same way as some participants’ accounts mentioned earlier (such as, for instance, Ernest’s). Still, like Caroline’s account, it shows a concern with the possibility of some students not entering the field of HE due to not possessing enough economic capital and not wanting to have access to it through a loan.

However, almost all the participants educated at private schools concurred that although the cost of tuition fees was too high, they should pay for their HE, presenting different justifications – or, in many cases, no justification at all. For instance, Hugh, a third-year Criminology undergraduate at Keele University, mentioned that although the cost was too high, he favoured the payment of fees:

> I understand we have to pay something. I get that we have to pay something, just get that out there. I think it is a bit too much, I mean it's quite a bit too much, and when you consider how much it's grown in such a short period of time, it was £3000 only, what, ten years ago or something, wasn’t it? […] I don’t know the exact figures, but it's accelerated and kind of makes you think, ‘oh my God, how much is it going to be

> soon?', you know, and all that. Is it going to go up even more? But I think it is worth paying some kind of thing. (

When I asked this participant if he could develop his thoughts on this issue in more detail, Hugh explained:

> Because you get a fantastic education from people who are first-hand practitioners in their field of study, you know. You're being taught by experts, you're not just being taught by, like at school, just someone who's gone and studied teaching for two years and then, you know. […] And universities have to be kept running. […] I think that, like I said, we need to pay something to keep the universities going. We can't just have, I mean, how many students do we have here? 9000? we cannot have 9000 students squatting here for free. It's just not possible.

This account suggests an understanding of HE as a field worth investing economic capital in due to the 'high quality' of the cultural capital it is possible to acquire. The account also shows that some participants do not conceive of an alternative to the current funding system of English HE. Indeed, Hugh insisted that 'universities have to be kept running', and for that to happen, students 'need to pay something', that is, they must transfer economic capital into the field. However, there was an additional reason for Hugh to advocate for the existence of fees:

> My mum always says they let any bugger in back then [when she was a HE student]. They let anyone in, and I think it goes back to that idea that I said about university not being for everyone[27], you know. If it is just a venture for many, and it's free for anyone to come along, people are not going to think twice, is university for me? No, they're

[27] Previously during the interview, this participant had mentioned: 'It's not for everyone, university, because it requires so much level of knowledge. […] I think also it requires sort of a level of, how do I say, a level of, like, commitment or whatever.'

just going to go oh, it's fine, I'll just go along, whatever. […] If you have to pay, obviously you're going to think twice, aren't you? I know I certainly thought twice when I saw how much it was going to cost me.

This particpant's account suggests a construction of HE in which occupying a position in the field as an undergraduate student should be dependent on simultaneously having enough cultural capital and the willingness to acquire more. The need to invest economic capital to access the field of HE, contrary to some of the accounts presented earlier, does not seem to be mainly perceived negatively, that is, as an obstacle for students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, but, instead, as a filter that mediates individuals' admission into the field. However, a participant educated at a comprehensive school reported that one of the limitations of such an understanding was the reproduction of social inequalities:

> I know that there's the other argument that comes in, which is that fees get rid of… Well, they skim the herd a bit. That's great, but now what you're left with is a bunch of people who can afford to go to university, rather than a bunch of people who deserve to go to university. (Chloe, Criminology and Psychology, 3rd year, Keele University)

An upper-middle-class private school educated participant advocated for a rise in tuition fees as a potential way to support students from less privileged backgrounds:

> I believe that if the fees were actually to rise, the extra revenue that they would receive from those fees could be used to generate bursaries for those who are actually at the level to go into university. Say you had someone who's underprivileged but is very smart and intelligent, and they had the potential to study at Oxbridge, but they couldn't afford it. With extra revenues from most students, you could provide a bursary to fund that student, and that's what I believe in. (Tim, Management, 1st year, LSE)

Tim's account, apparently underpinned by social justice issues and supported by meritocratic principles, suggests creating a system in which a potential increase of more privileged students' investment of economic capital in the field of HE could be transferred to less privileged students. However, as mentioned in chapter 3, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argue that meritocracy is an ideological artifice whose rules are set by the dominant groups to conceal structural inequalities. According to Tim's construction, certain HEIs positioned in the field of English HE as elite universities would only be accessible to students with insufficient economic capital who were 'very smart and intelligent'. Importantly, this construction neglects prior structural inequalities underpinning access to cultural capital faced by students from less privileged backgrounds (see, for instance, Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

In most cases, private school participants constructed HE studies as something they should pay for without any particular justification, except the perception that their investment of economic capital in the field was necessary for its functioning:

> Personally, I think £9000 [per year] is too expensive for university anyway. But I don't think university should be free […] because the money, obviously, does go towards something. (Olga, English and History, 3rd year, University of Leeds)

However, when I questioned Olga if she knew what her HEI was doing with the money from the fees, she reported that she neither knew, nor had attempted to find out:

> I'd be quite interested to know where my money, specifically, is going; if it is going on my course or if it's literally going into the big part in the university. I'm assuming it's going into the big part. […] I don't think it would certainly be that easy to find, honestly. Obviously, it has crossed my mind – where is this money going? – but not to the extent that I would start properly researching it.

Expressed in different ways, not knowing and not trying to find out where the economic capital invested by students in HE went was a typical response among most of the participants, regardless of their educational background (that is, independently of the school they studied at prior to starting their HE studies). As analysed later in this chapter, this is somewhat connected to most of the participants' perception that some students (those studying courses with fewer contact hours) are subsidising other students' studies (those with more contact hours and a greater need of materials and equipment).

Finally, although not having an experience of paying for their education prior to attending HE, one participant who studied at grammar school constructed a somewhat ambivalent view of paying for HE. On the one hand, she said it should be free of charge for some students:

> I do think that you shouldn't have to pay for education if it's something you're truly passionate about, but in this society you have to pay for everything. I just don't think it's the best thing for students to be doing, like paying for something that they're passionate about. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

In this account, Joanna argues that the students committed and motivated to pursue HE studies should not have to invest economic capital to be able to acquire (more) cultural capital. However, she also suggests that every strategy in our contemporary neoliberal society involves an investment of economic capital ('in this society you have to pay for everything').

On the other hand, Joanna mentioned not having any issues with the existence of fees to attend HE. Indeed, by making her assessment of the fairness of the fees dependent on knowing where the economic capital invested by her and other students is spent, which she reported ‘not knowing’, Joanna constructed HE as something legitimate to pay for:

> I think if I knew exactly where it [the fees] was going, I could say it’s fair. Sometimes it does feel like it’s a bit much, but that’s because I don’t know exactly where it’s going. […] I’ve tried to find out, but it’s a bit difficult to find out exactly where it’s going. From what I understand, it just goes to university, pays lecturers, like gets resources for us, but I don’t know how much of that is actually being put into me, exactly. Well, the government is paying for me, but I don’t know how much of that’s being spent on me and my personal education.

Both former grammar school educated participants’ perception of how the existing loan system functions (and, therefore, their indebtedness) impacted their construction of HE. Although explored later in this chapter, it is worth mentioning that their understanding is based on having enough economic capital through a maintenance loan to cover a considerable amount of their expenses. This economic capital allows them to focus on acquiring more cultural capital in the field, which both reported (although not using Bourdieusian terminology) to be their strategy while studying at university:

> The value is not an issue because I’m not really paying it, so it’s not something that I particularly care about as long as I get the education that I need and want. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

> I think because it’s such a unique situation that I’m in, where I don’t have to worry about having a job, I can really just focus on my studies and dedicate all my time to that. (Steve, Biological Sciences, 2nd year, University of Edinburgh)

Steve, however, considered that his perception was influenced by his personal position in terms of the money he had available, reporting that the situation might be more complex for some of the other students:

> I can appreciate that if other people's parents are higher up on the spectrum [of earnings] and they don't get that much money [from a maintenance loan], they have to work hard at a job and have to work hard at uni as well.

Steve's account shows an understanding that the strategies and practices that students may adopt in the field of HE are dependent on the amount of economic capital they hold.

7.2 Consumers or Students?

Despite their constructions of how HE could or should be, most participants' accounts show that investing economic capital in the field of HE impacted their perceived position within it. To different degrees, most reported that paying tuition fees made them more interrogative and concerned. Emma's account from our first interview represents a typical response from the participants:

> The fact that I'm paying for it makes me slightly more critical. (Emma, Medicine, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

One of the participants, who reported not minding having to pay tuition fees, was highly critical of any faults in terms of teaching, due to the amount of capital he was investing:

> I don't have an issue with it [having to pay tuition fees]. There are some things I see in day-to-day when I think, wow, am I really paying £9000 for this? So, I mean, like, last week, a teacher showed up 15 minutes late to class. I was just thinking that was a lot of money wasted on my part. There's no compensation for that. One of my friends went to class this morning, and the teacher had no whiteboard marker and so couldn't

> write on the board, and he was saying, why am I paying for this? […] The lecturer to be there, I think that's the bare minimum you expect. (Tim, Management, 1st year, LSE)

None of the other participants reported such a detailed description as Tim. Still, many expressed the views that paying fees both raised their expectations and entitled them to be heard by their HEIs:

> I'd say that with paying fees, you expect a more professional service or professional situation. […] I haven't really had any problems with how the course is taught or with contact hours. But, if I did, I think paying would entitle me to have a strong opinion that should be listened to. (Steve, Biological Sciences, 2nd year, University of Edinburgh)

When questioned about HE tuition fees, the comparison of students to customers was mentioned by a few participants, based on their investment of economic capital in the field of HE and what HEIs offered to students. For instance, Tim reported that universities:

> […] are offering a product. Every university offers a different product, and for me the LSE product was the best catered towards my tastes in terms of what I wanted out of it, what it would provide to me in terms of future utility, and I think that is why I kind of went to LSE. Obviously, every university offers something different, and for me LSE was one that was best for my tastes. (Tim, Management, 1st year, LSE)

This account suggests an understanding of HE as a consumption good ('product'). According to this participant, each university offers specific goods, which he assessed in terms of prospective employability ('future utility') and considering his subjective ‘tastes’, somewhat suggesting a choice based on a sense of distinction in terms of the lifestyle he pretends for himself (Bourdieu, 2010).

In a couple of cases, the students’ position in the field was directly compared to that of a customer or consumer[28]. Alfie, for instance, compared his position to that of a customer the first time I interviewed him:

> For example, when you go to a restaurant, and you pay £50 for you and someone else to have a meal and drink, the waiters are really nice, aren’t they? I think that’s quite the same for us for paying £9000 per year because they see you as customers. (Alfie, Mathematics, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

This type of discursive comparison does not necessarily imply that students’ practices in the field were like those of a customer or consumer. Indeed, when asked to explain his position in more detail, Alfie’s response suggested that his idea was more related to his perceptions of the academic and non-academic staff’s practices in relation to students than to the practices adopted by the students in the field:

> The people who work at the university, academics and other staff, I think they feel like as you’re customers, and so they kind of try making your money’s worth, in my experience.

None of the participants reported having complained about their marks or any other issue related to the teaching they received at the university. In many cases, the participants reported considering themselves responsible for their academic results, as the following account shows:

[28] To clarify, I had not used such expressions during the interviews.

> I don't think I should have a right to complain when it's not their [that is, her lecturers and tutors] fault. […] If it's my fault, then I have no right [to complain] because I haven't done the work. (Joana, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

Another participant, Colin, directly compared his position in the field of HE to that of a consumer when asked whether paying fees made him more demanding. Although perceiving that he was entitled to it, he reported that occupying such a position did not translate in asking for more from his HEI, that is, in adopting practices and strategies usually associated with those of a consumer who acquires goods or contracts services in the markets:

> I don't think I would go about demanding more stuff from the university just because I'm paying. I think it probably kind of does entitle me in a way, it's definitely more of a consumer position. (Colin, Mathematics, 4th year, University of Edinburgh)

The accounts above echo Tomlinson's (2017) conclusions that most students' references to consumerism are 'largely notional and do not necessarily fully inform their approaches to, and behaviours within, higher education' (p. 464). Interestingly, when I asked Colin if he considered himself a consumer, he replied:

> I don't really think about it that much because don't really feel the impact of the fees at the moment. I'm sure I will when I start having to pay them back gradually, but at the moment, it's just a loan that I haven't had to pay back as of yet.

This participant's understanding of his potential position as a consumer (that is, not 'think[ing] about it that much') seemed related to how most HE students pay for their fees, that is, through contracting a loan. Colin's account suggests that his investment of economic capital in the field through a loan was viewed as a postponement of the compliance of his obligations, which translated in a certain limitation of his powers/rights as a consumer and the potential practices and strategies associated to such position.

A minority of the participants clearly and directly expressed the views that the interactions between HE students and HEIs and other agents in the field should not be ruled by business principles:

> I almost sort of try to forget that I'm paying for it because I don't want it to be like a business interaction; I don't like that idea. It's one of the reasons I don't like the idea of tuition fees in general, just because I don't think it should be like a business interaction. I don't think they should be trying to sell education, they should just be educating in the way that they see fit, and that's not necessarily the way that makes the most money. (Ralph, Classical Studies, 1st year, University of Reading).

Ralph's account shows that some HE students have, at least to a certain extent, a critical perspective on how HEIs have been managed. As mentioned earlier, Ralph was one of the few participants who had strong critical and political views regarding the current state of HE. Nonetheless, that understanding was also informed by a certain understanding of other agents' positions in the field of HE, such as academics, and the strategies and practices they have been adopting. Hence, when I asked Ralph if he could give an example of what he meant by 'they should not be trying to sell education', he reported something that one of his lecturers had told him and his colleagues at the previous HEI he had attended[29]:

> For example, I had a lecturer last year, who explained to us that because we were paying tuition fees it was more likely we were going to pass, and the module was

[29] Before studying Classical Studies at the University of Reading, Ralph studied at another university and course for one year. I do not reveal the course and the university's name here because adding that information could breach anonymity.

> going to be easier. […] He was a very direct lecturer, and he said that because he had a quota to fill in order to get paid, most of us would pass this module.

This participant's account helps to illuminate the extent to which managerialism may impact on academics' practices and, consequently, on students' perceptions of the functioning of the field, and it is in line with some concerns that have been raised in the literature (see, for example, Moleswoorth et al., 2009) and in policy documents (such as the Augar Review, 2019) regarding potential cases of grade inflation. Moreover, it also seems to confirm Naidoo and Jamieson's (2005) alert that the commodification of HE, which implies the valorisation of economic capital at the cost of the devalorisation of academic capital, would 'shift the underlying logic shaping academic practices' (p. 271), with the pedagogic relationship between academics and students assuming a form similar to the transaction of commodities in the market.

In any case, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, none of the participants, independently of their socioeconomic and educational background, how they constructed HE, and to what extent they (dis)agreed with the payment of tuition fees, reported ever having made any demands justified by the payment of high fees; for instance, in terms of the 'services' they had at their disposal in their HEIs, the way the lectures and tutorials had been delivered, and the marks they had been awarded. Therefore, the participants' accounts suggest that although the need to invest economic capital in the field of HE contributes to many students' understandings of themselves as entitled to adopt practices and strategies more associated with a business or commercial transaction, that sense of entitlement does not translate into adopting such practices and strategies.

7.3 Students' relationship with academics

Regardless of the number of contact hours offered by their courses, most participants complained about the lack of a closer relationship with their tutors and lecturers. In the case of those with degrees with fewer contact hours (such as, for instance, History or Literature), this was somewhat predictable. Still, it also came across in the case of participants studying degrees with significant contact hours (such as, for example, Medicine). The pattern across the accounts of those who reported missing a closer relationship was a comparison between their current situation with the one they had at their previous educational institution, especially those who studied in private schools, grammar schools, and comprehensive schools with a more privileged intake. For instance, Ernest (comprehensive school) reported that the relationship with his tutors and lecturers was:

> […] on a very superficial level. For example, I've met my personal tutor about two or three times [in three years]. And then my actual class tutors you see them at seminar, but you're in a seminar with, you know, twenty people and then you maybe see them in their office twice a semester, you know, to go and ask about whether you're including the right things in an essay and then ask about your results of an essay. But apart from that there's no real connection, you don't really feel like you get to know anyone on an actual personal level which I felt was super important at school. (Ernest, History, 3rd year. University of Edinburgh)

Joanna (grammar school) mentioned something similar:

> I miss the good relationship with the teachers. The class sizes were very small at A Level, but even before that, like, all the teachers would know who I was, whereas now they don't really know who I am. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

Interestingly, although being on courses with few contact hours, both Ernest and Joanna did not complain about a lack of academic support, but, instead, of a lack of closer personal ties with their tutors and lecturers. These accounts somehow suggest how the absence of an affective dimension between these students and academics creates nostalgic feelings for the former.

In some cases, the participants did not miss the affective dimension stated above, but the support they had at their school, reporting how this impacted their academic results. For instance, Emma (private school), studying a course with a significant number of contact hours, stated that:

> My relationship with my tutors and lecturers is not that great. My personal tutor, I have met him once in my first year at university. He is a very interesting gentleman, but I didn't receive a lot of support from him. There was no kind of continued relationship […]. That's the one thing about the course I didn't like. […] Those [lecturers] who had no time to answer our questions or to hang around or to do extra things, those were the modules I struggles the most with. (Emma, Medicine, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

However, this participant recognised that she was never denied help. The main issue seemed to be the difference between how the support was delivered at her private school and afterwards at university:

> I definitely could have asked if I needed help, I could have sorted my way down to them. It was just the case of… probably partly laziness, partly that it's not like school where the office was down the corridor.

Emma's account somehow suggests a certain difficulty adjusting the strategies and practices she was used to in her previous educational field to the rules of the new field.

7.4 Students' reactions to the academic strikes of 2018

The academic strikes of 2018 constituted an important backdrop to how students perceived their position in the field of HE. I was interviewing some undergraduates at the time, so it was an excellent opportunity to explore how they reacted to some of their lectures and tutorials being cancelled. I was particularly interested in understanding if the participants somehow attributed a monetary value to the lectures and tutorials which had not been delivered due to the strikes. In Bourdieusian terms, I wanted to better understand their perceptions and the strategies and practices adopted due to an event that somehow affected their acquisition of cultural capital for a certain period of time. Therefore, during the strikes and from that moment on, I included questions about the impact of the strikes on them in the interviews, meaning that approximately two-thirds of participants were questioned about it.

All the participants' accounts related to the strikes shared the participants' support of them. Nonetheless, their understanding of what had motivated the strikes and how they manifested their support for academics who took part in them varied. Some students, for instance, protested actively, joining the academics at the picket lines:

> I support them going on strike. I think I understand it completely, with their pensions and everything. I'm actually joining the picket line tomorrow morning, because they're doing one every day this week. […] Even if we don't achieve anything, I want to take part, because I don't think being passive is going to do anything. I mean, there is only so much of clicking on a petition online that can be done. I've done all that, but there's only so much that can do, you know. (Hugh, Criminology, 3rd year, University of Keele)

This account and others similar in content propose that HE students' practices are not motivated only by instrumental and strategic purposes, showing that there is a space for solidarity with the struggles of other agents in the field of HE.

However, supporting their tutors and lecturers does not mean that students did not reflect on the implications of the strikes for them:

> Well, I think a lot of things came out of the strike because I missed, basically, my last four weeks before the Easter holidays to the strike. And that was like my last four weeks because we don't have any teaching this term, so I lost my last four weeks of teaching, basically, ever of my undergraduate degree to the strike. And I think a lot of people were very angry at that especially because we pay £9000 per year and people felt like they lost out on a lot and obviously when you're paying money and you're not getting things people are angry. (Caroline, History, 3rd year, University of York)

As Caroline's account shows, the strike's impact on students, that is, the loss of opportunities to acquire (more) cultural capital, was assessed with relation to the students' investment of economic capital. According to this participant's understanding, which echoes most of the other participants' (who were questioned about the impact of the strikes), paying high fees legitimated students' expectation of receiving something they perceived as having paid for. Another participants' account, in this case one who reported not having been affected by the strikes, shows how paying fees contributes to raised students' expectations regarding what they consider to be entitled to receive from their HEIs:

> I think, they should but depending on the disruption they face. I think for some people, the disruption was really detrimental and really, really, really, really troublesome, which is what it's meant to be, obviously. […] I think that they should be reimbursed, first of all, with an alternative form of education but obviously there are people who

> are in their last year, who are never going to get that time back. There should be some form of compensation, possibly an economic one. (Emma, Medicine, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

In this case, the participant raised the possibly of returning part of the economic capital invested in the field in those cases where it would not be possible to give students the possibility to acquire cultural capital by delivering lectures and tutorials.

However, the understanding that HE students should be compensated in some way did not translate into a lack of solidarity concerning the academics' struggle:

> I feel like a lot of the anger was directed at lecturers and professors. But it was interesting in the strike, we had a lot of teach-outs and open things where lecturers could talk to us about the issues that they had with the administration and the fact that they have huge demands on their time and how long hours they work. (Caroline, History, 3rd year, University of York)

The strikes and the events connected to them seem to have opened up a space for communication between the participants and their tutors and lecturers, allowing the former to acquire a broader understanding of the issues that affect the managerialised university, that is, the struggles that occur in the field of HE and their impact on its agents, namely in terms of the position they occupy in it:

> And I thought that was interesting that it opened up a dialogue with students and lecturers for the first time, when I think a lot of students realised that maybe a lot of their anger at lecturers and stuff was misplaced. And that there needs to be more systematic change at universities, and the marketisation of education that's happening, what the actual impact on us is. (ibid.)

However, some participants also mentioned that, although not disagreeing with the academics' actions regarding the strikes, they felt powerless to support their struggle. For instance, Colin, a fourth-year Mathematics undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh, reported:

> I completely agree with the motivation behind it. I completely see why… I completely think that the lecturers deserve to have good pensions, but at the same time I don't really see what I can do about it. So like, if I could give them a decent pension I'd be like yes have a pension and I can see why they're doing it, but I'd still prefer to have the lectures.

And when I asked this participant if it had occurred to him to take any action regarding the missed lectures and tutorials, he replied:

> I'm not hugely bothered about it. I do think that maybe they should reimburse us, but I'm not losing sleep over the fact that they're definitely not going to. There are lots of people in the same boat as me, I guess.

Colin's account shows that, although considering that he should recover the economic capital he invested in the field, establishing a direct link between the payment of fees and what he was entitled to receive from the university in terms of teaching, this participant did not show a propensity to initiate any action regarding recovering that economic capital. Again, this kind of passiveness, which translated into inaction instead of action, was typical of most participants' accounts.

Some participants' accounts suggest that their perception of the academics' actions in terms of the strikes was clearly positive in part due to a 'tacit compromise' between them and their lecturers and tutors, that is, between different agents occupying positions in the field:

> […] they accommodated for it quite well in History, you know, changing exam structures and doing essays only on certain topics. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

> I think I completely understand why they were striking. They were in a really unfair position and my course was really good at dealing with it. […] we were in the middle of our dissertation then, and so the tutors were still willing to help us. So, they were involved with the strikes, but they'd do it in a way that they were still able to support us, which was really helpful. And so, for me, I didn't feel like I was put in an unfair position. […] my dissertation tutor and other staff were very involved in the strikes but still helping us. They would have their sort of official times that they were striking and then after hours they would still help us, so they were available without compromising the strikes. (Audrey, Fine Art with History of Art, 3rd year, University of Leeds)

In some cases, the impact of the strikes was assessed by the participants in terms of the amount of contact time they received. Ernest, for instance, did not perceive the strikes as having a considerable impact on him:

> It didn't really affect me purely by virtue of not having many contact hours. [..] it did obviously disrupt some degrees quite heavily […] I suppose you feel entitled to receive your money back because you paid for a private service which you've not been given. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

When I asked this participant if he could elaborate more on his understanding of HE as a 'private service', Ernest justified it with the payment of tuition fees:

> I think you'd have to define universities as private if you're paying £9000 a year, although they are still obviously associated with the state. I don't know, it's quite

> difficult to define, isn't it, whether tutors are private or public sector jobs. But I think I would define universities as private sector now.

This participant's construction of HE as being part of the private sector of the economy suggests that it may be difficult for HE students to understand something that they have to pay for as being a public good/service. In other words, the need to invest economic capital to have access to the field of HE may alter the perception of those occupying a position within it (and most probably of those outside it, but that is outside the scope of this study) regarding its nature. Other participant was very clear in constructing HEIs as businesses:

> Because if you look at it as a business, which universities generally are, we are paying, I think it was, somebody said, like, £300 a week to be here, and we've missed out on three weeks of education, or about two and a half or whatever it is, which is like £1000 nearly, which we've just been paying for and not been given. (Miriam, Forensic Science, 3rd year, Keele University)

Arguably, such perceptions may influence the practices and strategies that the agents consider legitimate to adopt within HE. For instance, in regards to the strikes, and based on her investment of economic capital, Miriam reported having signed a petition requesting a partial refund of the fees:

> I think we should get a refund. I think it'd be fair to get it, but, as I say, I don't think we will. (ibid.)

Finally, the two students studying at the University of the West of England, the only post-1992 HEI represented in this study, reported no impact, as the academics at the University of the West of England did not participate in the strikes.

7.5 Subsidising cultural capital for the Other?

All participants studying subjects with a reduced number of contact hours (those studying subjects like languages and literature, arts, and social sciences) reported that they were subsidising students with a considerably higher number of contact hours (those studying STEM subjects). In Bourdieusian terms, the undergraduates with fewer contact hours considered that STEM undergraduates were acquiring cultural capital partially due to the economic capital non-STEM students were investing in the field of HE. For instance, Gina, a first-year History undergraduate at the University of Leeds at the time of our first interview, mentioned:

> I have six hours of contact time a week, and I'm paying £9000 a year. But if you are doing medicine you are in from 9 am to 5 pm every day. It's hard to see where the money is going. I feel I'm subsidising people who are doing more intense degrees.

And another History undergraduate, but at the University of Edinburgh, reported somewhat ironically that for undergraduates studying courses with fewer contact hours like him, the investment of economic capital through the payment of tuition fees was returned in the form of 'a glorified library card':

> I think in terms of, I think it's very different for a science student because they obviously have access to facilities they never had access to before and they're in sort of 25 hours per week or whatever. But for History and English or Politics or anything like that you're literally sort of paying for a glorified library card a lot of the time. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

In keeping with the idea, some students, like Emma, a first-year medical student at the University of Edinburgh when we had our first encounter, reported:

> I don't mind paying £9000 per year. […] I know that in my parents' days they received a grant and it was all free, and I think that for people who are less privileged than me

> – I have a very privileged background – it would be incredibly difficult, but I think £9000 per year to do medicine is fair enough. […] I think if I was studying Geography and I saw someone studying Medicine who is also paying £9000 per year – that's a bit unequal.

Gina's, Ernest's, and Emma's accounts show similarities, but their approaches vary according to their positions within the field. While Gina and Ernest reported (in other words) that their economic capital was being used to allow other students' acquisition of cultural capital, Emma was happy with paying fees because she perceived that she was getting an adequate return on her investment of economic capital. Brink (2018) notes that since 'the real cost of a course in sociology is a fraction of the real cost of a course in medicine […] students therefore end their studies with much the same level of debt, but with quite different levels of value for money' (p. 141).

However, when I questioned the participants as to whether universities should charge tuition fees according to the number of contact hours of each course, the expenses associated with the teaching delivered (such as, for instance, the materials involved) or any other possible justification, the opinions were more divided, although only one of the participants, a comprehensive school educated working-class student, explicitly expressed the views that tuition fees should vary because of that:

> I think that degrees that have a lot of lab work – mainly the sciences, basically – should have higher fees than mine, because, you know, I've got friends who are in the sciences and, you know, they have a full timetable per week. They have, you know, labs and lectures and field trips and things like that, and they always have to be in the lab. So they are using up a lot of the universities' resources and, you know, manpower and things like that. Whereas I have ten hours a week in classes and the rest of it is my own study, is my own research and my own reading and things like that. So yes, I

don't think I should be charged as much, considering I use a hell of a lot less of the university's resources than, say, people in the sciences. (Barbara, American Studies, 3rd year, Keele University)

In some cases, the participants' concerns revolved around potential issues related to the impact of social inequalities on prospective HE students' decision-making. For instance, an undergraduate from a working-class background reported that that would make it more difficult for prospective HE students from less privileged backgrounds to apply for courses charging higher fees:

> It is a good idea, but as I say, it's going to stop a lot of people going for the higher end degrees, especially if you're from a low income family. You're not going to want to go for a degree that's going to cost more. You're going to go for the lower degree. I wouldn't go for one that was £20000 even if it was going to possibly get me a job at the end, because you wouldn't take the risk if you didn't have the money to risk it. (Miriam, Forensic Science, 3 rd year, Keele University)

In other cases, the participants' accounts seem to be also related to some students' construction of HE as a public good – and, therefore, free of charge. Indeed, that understanding led to the perception that charging differentiated fees would result in a system even more distant from that ideal. That was the case of Ernest, who had earlier advocated for a free HE:

> I think if you do that then more students would just, you know, they'd just want to do degrees with lower fees which shouldn't be the case. And I think education should be a universal right to not only all people but to apply to all subjects. So I think it's difficult because personally you get annoyed at the lack of what you're getting for your money, but then I can appreciate that we are subsidising the medics, which are

> very important for society, and you know that their course is more expensive and requires to be paid for. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Tim, a participant who held strong views about HE as something that should not be free and potentially even more expensive for students from more privileged backgrounds, also expressed the opinion that tuition fees should not vary according to the type of course. Yet, Tim's reported understanding was based exclusively on his perspective regarding the varying importance of different degrees for society:

> That would be a bad idea because you then would get a lot of people studying history, even though that doesn't actually provide them any skills for a practical job. You have medicine, which can cost a lot more per student, but they still pay £9000 per year. Many students subsidise many other students, which is a good thing in terms of getting more doctors and nurses into hospitals in the UK. […] offering people a different tuition fee would be a bad idea. (Tim, Management, 1st year, LSE)

Another aspect that some participants raised was the significant increase in tuition fees in recent years, with a few reporting not understanding the reason for such growth and questioning the lack of changes in the structure of the courses afterwards:

> I feel like with History, it works in a way you have few contact hours and there is a lot of work that you are expected to do outside of your contact hours, like the reading for seminars and obviously doing essays and stuff. But I think, definitely, that maybe the system needs to change, reflected on the fact that fees have risen, because I feel like it is still the same. Like the amount of contact hours and the way things are structured is still the same as when we were paying £3000 per year. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Ernest's account shows an association between the cost of the course and its contact hours, not by comparing courses with different contact hours, but by comparing the (unchanged) number of contact hours before and after the rise of tuition fees in England. Another participant, interviewed three times for this study, also associated the payment of fees and the number of contact hours the third time we spoke, but by complaining about still having to pay (reduced) fees (that is, investing economic capital in the field) during a six-month placement he was doing at the time:

> I'm on placement. Why should I be paying fees while I'm on placement? I don't have any connection to the university. They come and visit me once and that's it. And I'm paying £2250 to have an email address, basically. So that's really annoying. Because that's the second time I've had to do that. (Bill, Business, 3rd year, University of Bath)

Although presenting different examples, both Ernest and Bill established a connection between the payment of fees and the quantitative aspects of teaching supplied by their HEIs.

7.6 The payment of fees as an incentive?

The payment of high fees was mentioned by some participants as a potential source of motivation, functioning as an incentive to put more effort in achieving good results in their studies. This was raised, among other participants, by Emma – during our first interview – and Philip:

> I’m a lot more responsible for my education because I’m paying quite a lot of money for it. If I miss a lecture, it’s entirely on me, whereas if I wasn’t paying, maybe I would feel different about that. (Emma, Medicine, 1st year, University of Edinburgh)

> Paying fees does stop me from say missing a class and not catching up, that kind of thing. (Philip, English Literature, 3rd year, University of Leeds)

In these accounts, the need to invest a considerable quantity of economic capital when occupying a position in the field of HE is constructed by the students as having a significant impact on their practices and strategies in the field.

The Scottish undergraduate students were often positioned by the (English) participants studying in Scottish universities as not investing as much effort as them, due to their presence in the field not involving an investment of economic capital, that is, the payment of tuition fees. In this way, these participants established a clear differentiation between the strategies adopted by Scottish and English students in terms of how they played the game, as the following account exemplifies:

> I think I've probably got the same attitude for wanting to achieve highly as I did when I wasn't paying in sixth form or high school. In the same way that a lot of the Scottish students and the EU students, they don't really… You know, they miss a lot of lectures, and they don't go to tutorials because you don't get chased up about it. Whereas I feel like my money's going towards me having that contact time so if I miss it then the only one who suffers is me. So, I think that the only thing that money really has an impact is me just trying to make the most of what the university gives me. (Edna, German, 1st year, University of Edinburg)

Arthur was interviewed twice for this study; first during his gap year and afterwards when he was a first-year undergraduate in Economy/Psychology at the University of Glasgow. The following account from our second encounter echoes Edna's words:

> I'd say I am not too fussed about it [Scottish students not having to pay], like it's a good thing, I think. […] But you definitely get students who then go to university because they don't necessarily know what they want to do and therefore they simply go because they don't know what they want. So, they end up going and then maybe dropping out or not doing necessarily very well in their degree. I have friends who

have, sort of, just been coasting along, very happy to get a low, just a pass, just because they are there and having fun and they don't really know what else they want to do, and they can go there for free. (Arthur, Economics/Psychology, 1st year, University of Glasgow)

Some of the participants studying at Scottish universities also perceived Scottish students' position in the field as more flexible in terms of mobility due to not having invested economic capital and not having to face the pressure of indebtedness:

> I think it puts them [Scottish students] under quite a bit less pressure than English students. I think when English students come, they don't feel that they can drop out or leave university, they have to carry on to the end because they have this monetary debt around them. But quite a few Scottish students I know, they easily dropped out or changed courses or went to a different university because they hadn't invested too much money into what they were doing. So, they could easily drop it and leave or go home or change. […] a few Scottish students […] might just come to university, but they don't really want to come, they're just doing because it's free and then they're suddenly dropping out because it's not really what they want to do. […] [English students] have to make a more serious decision about what they want to do because they're paying a lot more. (Steve, Biological Sciences, 2nd year, University of Edinburgh)

In one case, one participant mentioned that Scottish students should not be at university, that is, they should not be allowed to occupy a position in the field of HE due to what he perceived as a lack of motivation:

> There are two people who I am friends with who are Scottish and they're not on my course. […] they literally never go to university. They could never fit in and I feel that they should not be at university because they have no motivation for learning

> whatsoever, and I have no idea why they are there. And if they had to pay £9000 [per year], I'm fairly sure they would not be at university. […] I think there are definitely quite a few people who basically don’t have any motivation for their subjects and are only there because it's free and it's what their mates did. (Alfie, Mathematics, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh, 2nd interview)

However, there were exceptions to the discursive construction of Scottish students as lacking motivation due to not having to invest economic capital to occupy a position in Scottish HE:

> No, from my experience that’s not true. In fact, some Scottish students I’ve met have worked much harder than I have because they felt more like they must prove themselves here because it’s a predominantly English – and especially southern English – like posh university. So, they feel like they have to, you know, I guess that it’s competitive in a sense, so they have to, you know, be at that level. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Moreover, some students’ accounts, such as Bernard’s, a comprehensive school educated participant from middle-class backgrounds who advocated a free HE, presented a more developed political reflexivity, considering how the absence of tuitions fees for Scottish students was the result of Scottish people’s political choices:

> It’s excellent for them. It feels slightly unfair, but they have their devolved administration and they vote for parties that give them what they want. And we don’t, so we can’t really complain. (Bernard, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Bernard, Ernest, Alfie, and Steve were all friends and shared the same flat, showing that even within more close-knit social groups, different members exhibit different perceptions and understandings about a particular issue.

7.7 Students' constructions of indebtedness

The introduction of the high tuition fees in the UK HE sector has raised concerns about its impact on students (Bates and Kaye, 2014). However, there is little qualitative research about students experiences of indebtedness due to the introduction of loans for tuition fees, with the existent research suggesting that students' attitudes, understandings, and experiences of indebtedness are not homogeneous within or between socioeconomic categories (Harrison et al., 2015). In this section, I analyse the data to obtain a more in-depth and broader knowledge of the participants' perspectives on this issue.

One pattern among many of the participants' accounts was the understanding that the UK government was subsidising them through the loan system. According to this understanding, the investment of economic capital in the field is not made directly by students but mediated by the government. As a result, to apply Harrison et al.'s (2015) typology, the participants were often 'debt-oblivious'. For instance, Joanna, who had studied at a grammar school and described herself as coming from a working-class family, expressed such an understanding:

> […] with the tuition fees, because the government pays it, when I come to pay it back I don't see the money that they're taking away from me, if that makes sense. Because when I start earning enough they just automatically take the money away, so I never actually see the full amount, so I don't really care about the tuition fees. […] the value is not an issue because I'm not really paying it, so it's not something that I particularly care about as long as I get the education that I need and want. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

The other grammar school educated participant, who also reported coming from a working-class family, expressed a similar understanding:

> [I] have the opinion that they're more of a tax than a loan, because it's only paid back by future earnings. So, it doesn't really bother me. I don't really see it as that much debt […] because it comes off my future earnings. So, maybe, it's more of an investment. (Steve, Biological Sciences, 2nd year, University of Edinburgh)

Some participants from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds who were educated at comprehensive schools also reported not being significantly concerned with being indebted. However, the reactions of these participants suggested that, in terms of Harrison et al.'s (2015) typology, they were usually more debt-resigned than debt-oblivious. This was, for example, the interpretation made by Barbara:

> That was one of the concerns about doing a Master's, that it's another £10000 worth of debt on top. But it's one of those things that as much as, yes, it's going to take money out of my income, again, I don't ever see that money. It gets taken out straightaway. I don't have to worry about paying it myself. It's just done. So, it's not a major worry for me, even though it is a lot of money. (Barbara, American Studies, 3rd year, Keele University)

Although Barbara reports some concern regarding the amount of debt, her account suggests an understanding that she is somehow removed from the investment of economic capital in the field through a loan and its repayment (that seems particularly evident in expressions such as 'I don't ever see that money' and 'I don't have to worry about paying it myself. It's just done'). In a certain way, it is almost as if not having to deal directly with the money, that is, not having to be involved in the transactions and transfers of capital disembodies the debt from her.

However, some other participants from less advantaged backgrounds educated at comprehensive schools tended, according to Harrison et al.'s (2015) typology, to be more debt-anxious. For instance, Ralph reported:

> Well, I'm going to end up with, after just my bachelor's I think it's something like £70000 worth of debt, because of my extra first year. And then because of the interest rate, it's going to keep going up, even after I've finished studying, which is kind of horrifying. (Ralph, Classical Studies, 1st year, University of Reading).

Ralph's account indicates that his main concern was the amount of debt he would have to pay back due to his investment in the field of HE through student loans. Moreover, Ralph's account also shows that he was aware of interest rates and how this would place him in a position of indebtedness for an extended time. Although it would perhaps be an exaggeration to classify this participant's awareness of the interest rates and how they function as debt-savvy, he nonetheless exhibited more knowledge on this issue than most participants. (It is worth mentioning that this somewhat contrasts with Harrison's (2015) findings, as while most of the debt-savvy participants in his study were from urban areas, Ralph is from a rural area in England.) Nonetheless, despite empirical evidence showing that it is more difficult for undergraduates from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds to move to a different degree (see, for instance, Clark et al., 2019), Ralph was the only participant in the study who had moved to another degree and a different HEI after one year of study, having reportedly achieved good results.

Ernest, a middle-class and comprehensive school educated participant, reported not being concerned with his indebtedness, but with the economic and political implications of the existing loan system:

> I know a lot of students, you know, that don't think about it. They're sort of like: 'Oh, this is going to be a fee, you know, that's just on my wage bill. It doesn't really matter. I'm never going to be able to pay it off, so why bother worrying about it.' But I'm worried that we're moving to an economic system where they might sell off the loans to private companies, especially because moving the fees from £9000 to £9250, they

> tried to do that retrospectively, which in business terms is illegal but for the government to do it whilst it's obviously highly immoral is technically not illegal. (Ernest, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Ernest's view is consistent with his understanding of HE as a public good/service which should not be subjected to market mechanisms. In particular, this participant's account suggests that his concern with the entry of private loan companies in the field of HE is related to a view of such moves deepening the commodification of HE. Ernest's account also suggests that at least some students are aware of the transformations operated in HE through the implementation of market mechanisms (Naidoo et al., 2011) and express belief that such practices are potentially more problematic when used by the government, than by private business due to the power of the former.

Some participants' accounts indicated to varying degrees that concluding their studies whilst becoming indebted was a reason for concern. For instance, Bernard, a comprehensive school educated participant from a middle-class background who mentioned that 'in an ideal world, HE should be free', reported that although he would not mind paying a 'graduate tax', the total amount of debt and the existence of interest on students loans was worrying and could alienate some prospective HE students:

> I don't think it's right. I would be happy to be able to pay a graduate tax. The fact that I'm paying interest on a loan and have that debt hanging over me is not a nice way to start my career. I think it's definitely a disincentive to a lot of people regarding university. (Bernard, History, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Bernard's account shows that in some cases having to invest economic capital to be in the field of HE is not in itself some participants' primary concern. Although in a different moment of the interview Bernard expressed the view that HE should ideally be a public good, he did not object to investing some economic capital. What made him more unconfortable was being in the position of an indebted subject, which impacts students' lives long after they leave the field of HE. Moreover, this participant added that being in the position of an indebted subject could function as an obstacle to some potential individuals interested in entering the field.

However, in terms of how he reacted to debt, Bernard, as most participants from a more privileged socioeconomic background, was, according to Harrison et al.'s (2015) typology, somewhere between debt-oblivious and debt-resigned, which echoes Harrison et al.'s (2015) findings. Indeed, Bernard confirmed that his concerns were mainly in regards to individuals from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, admitting that, in his case:

> [Debt] isn't something that keeps me up at night, because I don't think it's ever going to force me into a dangerous position, or it's ever going to bankrupt me.

The reduced debt expectations and anxiety among students from wealthier backgrounds, such as Bernard, echo Bachan's (2014) findings. However, it was also clear that participants with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (as much as I could appreciate with the information that I had), especially those from less privileged ones, presented different understandings regarding their indebtedness, echoing the findinding of, for instance, Christie et al., 2003; Harding, 2011; and Harrison and Agnew, 2016.

Similarly to many participants in Bates and Kaye's (2014) empirical study, although the level of knowledge varied across the participants, none of those in my study reported knowing the repayment system's functioning in detail. Indeed, as with the participants in Clark et al.'s (2019) study, students' decisions seemed to have been made intuitively, that is, without consulting available data. These results conflict with the assumption, which contributes to supporting policymakers' preferences for a market-oriented approach to HE, that students make informed decisions about their university choices (ibid.).

Finally, participants' accounts also showed a connection between their constructions of indebtedness and their expectations regarding prospective employability, analysed in the next chapter (chapter 8).

7.8 Chapter summary

While some participants stated that they should not have to pay for HE studies, others reported that they would not mind paying a certain amount, but the current value was too high, while others did not object to tuition fees. Participants' accounts suggested that most of those who attended comprehensive schools tended to advocate a free HE or not have an opinion on this matter. In contrast, the participants who studied in grammar and private schools seemed more inclined to accept tuition fees, but some advocated for a free HE. Some state educated participants seemed to perceive HE as an extension of their previous educational experience, where they did not have to pay for it. However, most participants seemed to conform to the system and felt somewhat powerless in the face of the structure. Some participants went beyond individualistic concerns and considered social fairness and justice issues when assessing the existence of fees in HE.

Most participants' accounts show that investing economic capital in the field of HE impacted their perceived position within it, making them more interrogative and concerned. The comparison of students to customers and consumers was directly mentioned by a few participants, however, this type of comparison did not necessarily imply that students' practices in the field were like those of a customer or consumer. Indeed, most students' references to consumerism were notional and did not fully inform their approaches to HE.

Regardless of the number of contact hours, most participants complained about the lack of a closer relationship with their tutors and lecturers, either because they missed the affective dimension they had at school or felt less supported academically.

All the participants' accounts expressed support for the academic strikes of 2018, showing that there is a space for solidarity with other agents' struggles in the field of HE. Moreover, the strikes and the connected events seemed to open up a space for communication between the participants and academics, allowing the former to acquire a broader understanding of the issues affecting the managerialised university. However, supporting academics did not preclude students from reflecting on the implications of the strikes for themselves.

The construction of HE as being part of the private sector of the economy was mentioned, suggesting that it may be difficult for HE students to understand something that they have to pay for as being a public good/service. All participants studying degrees with a reduced number of contact hours reported that they were subsidising students with a considerably higher number of contact hours. However, many did not support the payment of different tuition fees.

The payment of high fees was mentioned as a potential source of motivation; an incentive to put more effort in achieving good results in their studies. Moreover, Scottish undergraduate students were often Othered by (English) participants as not investing as much effort as them, for not having to pay tuition fees.

Regarding their indebtedness, many participants were not significantly concerned with being indebted because they understood that the government was subsidising them through the loan system. None of the participants reported knowing the repayment system's functioning in detail. Finally, participants' accounts also showed a connection between their constructions of indebtedness and their expectations regarding prospective employability, which are analysed in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 – Higher education and graduate employability

In this chapter, I analyse the participants' constructions and discourses around the relationship between HE and graduate employability and its implications regarding students' positioning in the field of HE. Traditionally, excluding medicine, law and other vocational courses, employability was a by-product of most HE degrees, but that relationship has changed with the advent of the knowledge economy underpinned by the human capital theory (see, for instance, Brown et al., 2011), which contributed to the dominant construction of students as consumers (Nordensvärd, 2011; Brink, 2018). Arguably, such theories and constructions have implications for HE students, in terms of the discourse of employability on offer and the strategies they adopt. As in the two previous data analysis chapters, although the exploration of the participants' accounts is analytically divided into different themes and subthemes, they are highly interconnected and entwined. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the participants' reasons to choose their degree and its relationship with the job market. In the second section, I analyse their strategies to increase their future employability.

8.1 Following one's heart, playing safe, or aiming to have it all?

Many participants mentioned that their choice of degree was a pragmatic option influenced by what they intended to do professionally and, therefore, the need to obtain the necessary credentials; these participants mostly studied STEM or business and management degrees. Other participants, usually those studying arts and humanities and social sciences, reported that their decision had not been made mainly considering potential career prospects, being more a personal preference for some subjects, that is, a matter of taste. However, this cannot be reduced to a binary, such as pragmatism versus pleasure. Indeed, some of the former manifested pleasure in studying their chosen degree and some of the latter had aspirations and expectations regarding their future professional occupation – they simply did not have any specific idea of what that occupation would be.

For instance, the first time I interviewed Gina, she mentioned that contrary to what her parents and grandparents did, she chose History not thinking about a future job, but because it was a subject that she wanted to explore intellectually:

> My mum, my dad, my granddad, and my grandma, they all went to university to have a career, whereas I was going to study something I enjoy studying. (Gina, History, 1st year, University of Leeds)

Likewise, Caroline, who was also studying History, but at the University of York and more advanced in her studies (third year), mentioned explicitly that her decision did not take into consideration future employability, only her passion for such subject:

> I chose history, and I chose it not because of any kind of career that I wanted to go into. I chose it because it was what I loved. […] Probably I'll not have a career directly connected to my degree.

Nonetheless, Caroline reported being aware of the importance of having HE qualifications to have access to certain occupations:

> My mum didn't go to university. She did two A levels and she works as a journalist at a good magazine. She got her first job having basically no qualifications. But she interviews a lot of people for their graduate scheme and stuff and always says, 'If I had the same kind of qualifications and experience that I did when I got my first job, I would never get a job now.'

Some participants specifically reported that they did not make their choice of degree based on future earnings, that is, on the economic capital they would potentially be able to acquire in the job market, or on their future social positioning:

> I was sort of more worried about choosing a degree that I was interested in, than a degree that would get me a good job. […] I wasn't really worried about the money I would earn or the sort of status I would get, it was more about what I would get to study, and what I would get to learn. (Ralph, Classics, 1st year, University of Reading)

Moreover, perceiving that his previous student peers' main reason for doing a degree was to obtain a particular type of job in the future – one that was fairly well-paid and prestigious – contributed to Ralph's decision to abandon a Mathematics degree at a Russell Group HEI and start studying a different subject at another university:

> I went from doing Mathematics [at another university], which is very employable, and everyone on my course wanted to get rich and retire by the time they were forty years old, whereas that was one of the reasons I left, was because I just wasn't there for that reason, and it wasn't really designed for me.

In some cases, the participants rejected the idea of reducing the purpose of an undergraduate degree to obtaining academic credentials (that is, a HE degree), reporting that the possibility of acquiring knowledge was important, not only in the form of cultural capital, to use a Bourdieusian concept, but also for acquiring some self-awareness:

> I'm not going to do a degree because of a job I might eventually get because of it. I'm going to do it because, almost certainly, I'll learn much more about myself and my academic interests and gain a lot more knowledge that is going to help

> me in my life. I think a degree is not a means to get a job – it's an end in itself. (Charlie, on a gap year)

Other participants mentioned the importance of studying a subject whose acquired capital cultural would open the possibility of better understanding contemporary issues:

> I just wanted to study it. I've loved History for as long as I can remember, I'm just really fascinated by the past. I just like to know about it and finding out how the past can affect the present, like, looking at past events, and seeing the sequence of events that led to, well, now. […] That's definitely necessary, in my opinion, to actually understand the modern world. (Joanna, Ancient History and History, 1st year, University of Reading)

But when I asked Joanna how she thought that would work in terms of her future employability, she reported some concerns:

> I think it might be limited, like my options are limited for careers actually using my degree, but I think I could probably get a job if it involved analysing things, or just putting my critical skills to the test. But I think trying to get a job in which I'll actually use History, it might be a bit difficult. [...] I do want to try and use it, so maybe working in archives, or at a museum, but I know that the money might not be as good. It's the money that I'm more concerned about, to be honest.

Joanna's concern with future job earnings was a common thread among students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds studying arts and humanities subjects. Although most of these participants had decided to do a degree they felt passionate about, in Bourdieusian terms, they were unsure regarding how easy/difficult it would be to convert the acquired cultural capital into economic capital. For instance, Barbara, an undergraduate who classified herself as ‘quite working class, very low income', reported that her concerns in terms of future employability were related to having the economic capacity to pay her regular expenses:

> I just would like to live comfortably, not to have to worry like my parents do each month. You know, ‘have we got enough for rent?’, that kind of thing. To just be able to pay bills, pay my rent, and have a little bit left over to do what I want with. That's what I want. I don't want anything big and extravagant, just comfortable. (Barbara, American Studies, 3rd year, Keele University)

Most participants from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, such as Tim, who had studied in a private school, also reported that being well paid in their future job was essential, but for a different reason:

> I’m probably very career minded. Obviously, I want to make money. I want to be very successful. That’s probably my thought when it comes to university: how it can work in relation to my career. […] And I think I have been very fortunate with my upbringing, so I’ve probably developed a certain kind of… I like expensive things. I would like to be able to provide that for myself as well as my children when I’m older. (Tim, Management Studies, 1st year, LSE)

The second time I interviewed Emma, an undergraduate whose previous educational experience was at a highly selective all-girls private school, she also mentioned the importance of acquiring enough economic capital to one day provide her children with a privileged education:

> I think I want to allow my children to have the same education that I’ve had, which has been really good and very expensive, and that’s my key… That’s

> where I'd want to spend money on, really. (Emma, Medicine, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

And when I asked her 'would you like them [her children] to follow your steps?', Emma replied:

> I think so. I very much followed my parents' steps. I think I'd like them to [follow mine], yes.

In Bourdieusian terms, Barbara's, Tim's, and Emma's accounts show the significant role of habitus in shaping students' expectations for their future selves in the field of work. In the three cases, the importance of acquiring economic capital in the job market was associated with the need to satisfy what was perceived as most relevant through their socialisation process and familial everyday lives. Moreover, Emma's account also suggests the importance given by students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds to the acquisition of cultural capital as a means to reproduce their social position.

Some participants studying arts and humanities reported that although they did not choose their degree thinking of a specific career, they believed that it would prepare them for the demands of the job market, that is, it would allow them to acquire the cultural capital valued by potential employers. For instance, Andrew, who classified himself as an upper-middle-class student and had recently finished his second year studying Classics at the University of Oxford, mentioned that:

> It seemed like a good degree that would cover a lot of areas. Learning Classics teaches you how to think. It is a very broad subject that teaches you not necessarily a huge amount of that one area but teaches you how to approach everything, which is quite handy in life.

I asked if he could elaborate more on the idea of Classics as a 'good degree' and the importance of learning 'how to think', to which Andrew responded:

> I thought it would be a very good skill to have, especially because I'm not entirely sure what I'm going to do after university, so having something which I can then say: 'Okay, I did Classics, which involved learning two languages, the mathematics of grammar, how to approach various historical sources, you need to learn how to be sceptical and empirical […]' It seemed a very analytical subject.

Andrew's account shows that for some students, especially those who have not yet decided what they want to do professionally, acquiring cultural capital is not restricted to learning specific skills that would be useful only to exercise certain professional activities. Indeed, it is precisely the opposite: for him/them, it is essential to learn something that will be useful in any future professional pathway. This student's strategy is to study a subject that allows him to keep his options open. It is perhaps interesting to note that in some cases, students seem to have a heightened perception of the importance of Arts and Humanities, not only for society but also for their future professional occupations, than policymakers and the HE sector 'leadership'[30].

Yet, some participants presented an understanding of HE studies uniquely as a means for employability. For instance, Tim tied his decision to study Management at the London School of Economics and Political Science to his career aspirations in finance:

[30] Here I am using the concept 'leadership' in a broad sense to name all of those with executive power within the HE sector. To clarify, I would have many doubts about using that term in a proper sense to designate some of the individuals currently in charge of certain English/UK HEIs.

> I've chosen LSE due to my career aspirations in finance. Obviously, I've got a lot of good ties to the financial sector, and that's kind of my key ambition. That's where I want to get out of university. (Tim, Management Studies, 1st year, LSE)

Tim's account shows that HE is constructed as a bridge to employability for him because the primary reason to pursue HE studies (and obtaining a degree) is future employability. Emma, a first-year Medicine undergraduate student at the University of Edinburgh the first time I interviewed her, reported a similar understanding of HE studies as a means to exercise a professional activity, making going to university and studying a specific vocational degree the only possible strategy to follow:

> I want to be a doctor and to do that the only way was going to university, so that was my only option.

In Emma's account, however, a significant element of enjoyment in studying the chosen subject is also present:

> I have always wanted to do Medicine. […] I have been very scientifically inclined all my life. As I grew older, things just seem to fit with Medicine. I enjoyed learning about the human body, I enjoyed all those aspects of Biology, I learned about doctors' work experience and I liked it.

In some cases, the participants' choice of degree was pragmatic, taking into consideration the desired future occupation, but there was also an awareness that it is crucial to do rewarding professional work from an emotional point of view. If that did not happen, the possibility of studying a subject that would lead to it was not discarded, especially in the case of students from a more privileged background. That was, for instance, the case of Bill. The first time I interviewed him, Bill reported:

> You need to go back to the beginning if you realise what you have studied is not what your passion is. Because I think work is pretty much the majority of your life. So, if you are doing something, you might as well bloody enjoy it. Otherwise, that is like 60% of your life you are not enjoying. (Bill, Business, 1st year, University of Bath)

However, Bill's concerns were different the third and last time I interviewed him. He was then in the second half of the third year at university, and he reported feeling very disappointed regarding the contents of his Business degree. From this participant's perspective, the chance to do a couple of placements in the industry had given him the possibility to assess the relevance of the subjects he had learned at university, and his evaluation was far from positive:

> Everything I learn... Like, it's just not correct for what I'm doing or anything in the workplace. […] Like, what we learn, it's just textbook stuff. You don't see how it is applied. And it is never applied, so it's not interesting. I'm learning something that's useless and isn't, like, motivating.

And when I asked this participant if he could give some examples, Bill explained:

> So, for my first placing I did, like, corporate finance investment appraisals. And then I did asset management, where that is like really, really applicable. And no one I worked with ever did anything I learned, let alone me. So, what's the point? None of what I learned is applicable. So, it's like, I learn it and I think, 'Oh, it will be really applicable to my job. And that's why I get hired for a job because they, like, see, oh, you've got really good modules in your CV. It will be really applicable.' And then none of is applicable. So, it's really quite frustrating. I found it really frustrating the first four weeks of my first placement. It's like, I knew nothing and thought I had learned quite a lot.

Using a Bourdieusian approach, Bill's account shows that for this undergraduate, and contrary to his expectations, the university is not providing him with cultural capital in the form of knowledge or, at least, transferable skills to the job market. The reported disconnection between what he had been learning- the capital cultural acquired through his HE studies, and his placement's requirements in terms of skills, led Bill to question the need to pursue HE studies:

> It's like a waste of time for me. I wouldn't go to university if I was 18 now.

But when I asked Bill if he could do what he did on the placement in the future without a degree, he replied:

> No, I couldn't. I need it. […] But it's like, it's a lot of money to have something written on CV versus, like, an education. It's like, in this day and age you can learn anything anywhere and then apply it. And that's a better way of learning and using it. And let's say I wanted to learn anything about investment banking. I could read for a day, apply it for a week, and I'd be really prepped for an interview. Versus having to do a whole module. [But] I need a degree to apply for a job. I wouldn't even get, like, through the first round if I didn't have a degree.

Bill's account shows that the participant constructs the cultural capital in the form of knowledge and skills acquired through his HE studies as not (directly) relevant – or, at least, not necessary – for a potential future occupation in which the professional content is similar to one of his placements. Nonetheless, Bill considers a HE degree essential to get a graduate job. In this sense, the cultural capital that this participant is interested in acquiring is merely the certificate that will allow him to occupy the position he desires in the job market. To a certain extent, this account also shows the potential frustrations that may arise when one chooses a degree exclusively based on prospective employability.

8.2 Undergraduate students' strategies to increase future employability

One of the themes that I identified while analysing the data was how the participants had different understandings regarding what would make them more employable after concluding their degrees. These understandings, which somewhat varied according to the participants' socioeconomic background, translated into the adoption of different strategies. Most reported giving importance to their credentials, namely by concluding their degree with a good final classification. In one case, the importance of networking to increase social capital was also mentioned.

8.2.1 Higher education credentials: the importance of a good classification

Most of the participants reported a significant concern with their degree's final classification. The goal was to finish the degree with a good classification (that is, a first class or upper second class honours), as this was understood to be an essential condition (although not the only one) for some students to be in a strong position when transitioning to the job market.

Although there was also an element of self-satisfaction involved in many cases, the main reason seemed to concern future employability and, therefore, the need to compete with other fellow students, although very few students constructed it so candidly as competition. Indeed, most participants understood that achieving a first class or upper second class honours would place them in a better position when applying for a job in the future – in other words, when moving to the job market. This is consistent with Tomlinson's (2008) qualitative study with undergraduates in a pre-1992 HEI in England, which concludes that students perceive that they need to add value and distinction to their HE credentials to secure a positional advantage in the job market, through, among other strategies, their grades.

For instance, Philip, a third and final year English Literature undergraduate at the University of Leeds who had been accepted in a master's programme starting in the next academic year, reported a desire to pursue an academic career in the future. According to this student, it is essential to achieve good results and be better than the other students from the same cohort for competitive reasons:

> If you compare yourself to others, say in my area, English Literature, and they all want to do something similar to me, you kind of have to compare yourself to other people and you have to try and be the best out of that group because not everyone can get a PhD and not everyone can move forward in that sort of area.

To achieve his goal, Philip's strategy consisted in putting effort into his studies and trying to finish with first class honours, although at the time of the interview he was not confident that he would accomplish such outcome:

> I'm aiming for a first, but it will probably be a high 2:1 at this point. I would love to have gotten something a bit higher. I would love to have gotten a first because I did work really hard.

Steve, a second-year Biological Sciences undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh, reported valuing a good final classification for competitive reasons, but also for his personal satisfaction, showing how his identity construction combines both identity regulation (he understands that he needs to have a good classification to be able to be occupy a position in the field ahead – the job market – and allowed to play the game) and identity work (his sense of self is to some extent dependent on being classified as a 'good student'):

> It's for personal achievement, to show that I can do it, that I can attain something that's quite difficult. And to be competitive, I guess, in a really competitive field,

> especially if you want to do research and stuff. Very competitive. And you must have a good classification.

Similarly, the second time I interviewed Emma, she mentioned the importance of achieving well academically:

> This year, so far, I'm just above 70%. But still got a lot of marks to get back, touch wood. Hopefully, for this year, I'll have either a high 2 or a lower first, so we'll see. I think it's quite important that I put a lot of time into this year, a lot of effort into this year. (Emma, Medicine, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

And when I asked Emma if she could elaborate more on why performing well academically was so important to her, she replied:

> I think I want it to reflect the effort that I've put in while I've been here and the work that I've done, and I think if I had a lower mark, it would suggest that I hadn't worked hard, or I hadn't put in time and effort, which I definitely have. […] going forwards in my career, it's important to have the highest mark possible, especially classification-wise. The higher the classification, the more points I will get as a doctor and the higher-ranked doctor I will be.

Emma's accounts show how discourses around competition are embedded in undergraduate students' practices. Indeed, this participant established a direct connection between the strategy adopted in the field of HE and the strategy to be adopted in the development of her future career as a doctor. Therefore, the strategy adopted in the field of HE by some students seems to be an anticipation of strategies usually more associated with the job market. As mentioned in chapter 3, Marginson (1997) observes that 'attributes of self-transformation, such as self-reflection, 'lifelong learning', and career management are largely formed in education […] to ground the formation of self-managing individuality in Homo economicus' (p. 122). In our contemporary neoliberal society, students, like everyone else, need to demonstrate their use-value constantly (Bauman, 2005) in an attempt to secure stable identities (Collinson, 2003) through a context-sensitive, dynamic, ongoing, complex and unstable process of identity construction (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Coupland and Brown, 2012).

Emma reported that she acquired the habit of working hard to achieve good results before starting her undergraduate studies:

> I work every day and then when it comes to near exam time, I devote all my time to revising and working. […] When I sit down to work, I tend to work for quite long periods of time and I tend to work quite a lot at night, which isn't great. But I've always worked like that. [...] my parents always worked a lot and my school as well encouraged us to work through and through. (Emma, Medicine, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

This student's account suggests the power of habitus, especially in a student who comes from a family with high levels of cultural capital. Emma's practices and strategies regarding her studies seem to reflect, to a large extent, what she observed her parents doing during her socialisation process and what she was encouraged to do during her previous educational experience.

However, this extreme dedication to studying may impact students' well-being. Emma was the only participant who openly mentioned feeling anxious due to the constant necessity of putting effort in to achieve good results:

> I had really bad anxiety. It would manifest itself the night before my exams, I couldn't sleep. I had really bad insomnia and in my first year at university, obviously being away from home, that was really hard. The second year was quite hard, but this year has been really hard because I think it's different topics,

> I think it's a different exam style. So, anxiety this year was through the roof. (Emma, Medicine, 3rd year, University of Edinburgh)

Yet, putting less effort was not considered an option, regardless of the impact that could have on Emma's mental health:

> If anything, it's putting more effort in I would say I needed to do. […] I think I find my stress and anxiety stops soon as the exams stop. So, if it means that I have to sit down and be anxious and worry for a week to finish my exams, it's not the worst thing in the world and I can deal with it after. That's the way I look at it, at the moment. […] I don't think I'm coping with it, but I've learnt to live with it.

Emma's account exemplifies the somewhat extreme ways in which some undergraduate students 'develop learning strategies, monitor the process and evaluate the results' (Nordensvärd, 2011, p. 161). In some cases, like Emma's, these strategies are an adaptation or progression of habits that started before students entered the field of HE. Moreover, applying these control mechanisms to her learning process at the expense of her well-being seems to be a form of identity work, through which Emma seems to be trying to secure and maintain a stable identity: the successful student/future professional. That identity is rooted in her parents' example and previous educational experience, both of which can be understood as a form of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Emma's, Steve's and Philip's accounts also show that contrary to what is sometimes suggested in the literature (see, for example, Nordensvärd, 2011), these students – as, in different ways, all the participants – did not consider the possibility of simply 'paying for their diploma'. Moreover, all students mentioned that they needed to work hard to achieve good academic results. In most cases, although in varying degrees, the main objective seemed to be acquiring cultural capital in the form of knowledge and transferable skills that are valid within the job market.

However, the emphasis on achieving good results was questioned in a few cases, mainly by undergraduates studying arts and humanities. For instance, Caroline, who was educated at both state comprehensive and private schools, interrogated what assessing students' academic results based on their marks says about them as citizens:

> Nowadays, especially, there’s a lot of focus and onus put on grades and exam results and people achieve good grades so that they can go to university, so that they can get certain grades to get a certain job in order to succeed. […] Rather than either learning for learning’s sake or to make you a better, more rounded person, skills that will be important in your life after university or even at university, it’s all very much about achieving certain grades in exams rather than necessarily becoming a well-rounded person or a good citizen. (Caroline, History, 3rd year, University of York)

Caroline’s account, like some others, shows that despite students being often constructed as instrumental consumers of HE both by policymakers and in the literature, they are not a homogeneous group. Indeed, some students use their reflexivity to question the neoliberal highly competitive context of HE, the job market, and its impact on social life. This is somehow related to how each student has their own expectations regarding their professional life. For instance, Caroline’s understanding of stability is related to ‘knowing that you can feed yourself.’ Apart from that, this participant is ‘not that concerned with being stable in one place or doing a job that is the same every day.’

8.2.2 The importance of social capital: networking and internships

As mentioned earlier, one of the participants, Tim, reported the importance of having networking, that is, the relevance of holding social capital to get the desired position in the job market. Other than his family's acquaintances (see chapter 6), he also mentioned his own strategies to increase his social capital:

> LSE offers a lot of networking sessions, so it gives you the opportunity to meet a lot of people in the financial sector to kind of build a contact base, and it'll be really helpful in the future. (Tim, Management Studies, 1st year, LSE)

Like Abrahams' (2017) middle-class participants, Tim's account suggests that he is well aware of the existence of an 'opportunity trap' (Brown et al., 2011), and in a context of 'increasing positional competition' (ibid., p. 134), his habitus is attuned to the rules of the game in the job market, in which holding a degree may no longer be enough (Abrahams, 2017). From a Bourdieusian perspective, Tim has 'a feel for the game and a willingness to engage in it' (Abrahams, 2017, p. 637).

Although Tim mentioned his family's ties to the financial sector as a circumstance that had somewhat impacted his decision-making process, he never explicitly said that he would use them to achieve a position in the job market. In a different moment of the interview, he reported his efforts to build that network through (applying for) internships:

> This year I've been doing a lot of interviews and applications [for internships], and just being around these kinds of offices is really good for meeting other people and networking.

This account shows that Tim is trying to acquire social capital by himself. Although Tim did not mention if he would make use of his family's acquaintances, it is perhaps interesting to observe that middle-class students in Abrahams' (2017) study express a sense of guilt and point out that they have never used their social capital. However, they do not exclude the possibility of doing it if necessary (Abrahams, 2017).

Tim reported having been rejected many times when applying for internships, which suggests that he did not use his family's social capital to try to be accepted:

> I got rejected [by JP Morgan] this year, but I will try again next year. A lot of people at LSE do go onto Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Morgan Stanley, those kind of high calibre banks. [..] this year I applied to seventy internships, and I only got one, and obviously that's a new thing.

And when I asked Tim how it felt to be rejected, he replied:

> It's a new experience for me. Obviously, I've been quite successful to get into the London School of Economics. […] I think a lot of people have different ways of dealing with rejection. I was fine. It has motivated me to keep applying to more and more banks, and eventually I got one. It just opens your eyes to actually how competitive the real world is, and it makes me thankful that I actually did come to the London School of Economics. I think, if I didn't get it, how would my chances be if I was only at Bristol, Nottingham, that kind of university? They're still Russell Group, but not the top tier.

This participant accepts that being rejected is part of the game and his strategy is to keep competing. Since endless competition is one of neoliberalism's features, this somewhat shows how it is difficult for individuals to think or act outside of its dominant discursive practices (Young, 1981). Simultaneously, Tim points out that being accepted at the London School of Economics was a significant achievement, which somehow suggests the need to maintain his sense of self by pointing out his successes.

8.3 Chapter summary

Many participants mentioned that their choice of degree was a pragmatic option influenced by what they intended to do professionally and, therefore, the need to obtain the necessary credentials; these participants mostly studied STEM or business and management degrees. Other participants, usually those studying arts and humanities and social sciences, reported that their decision had not primarily been made considering potential career prospects, being more a personal preference for some subjects, that is, a matter of taste. However, this cannot be reduced to a binary, such as pragmatism versus pleasure. Indeed, some of the former manifested pleasure in studying their chosen degree and some of the latter had aspirations and expectations regarding their future professional occupation – they simply did not have any concrete idea of what that occupation would be. Some participants specifically reported that they did not make their choice of degree based on future earnings. In several cases, the participants rejected the idea of reducing an undergraduate degree to a means to obtain academic credentials, reporting that the possibility of acquiring knowledge was important.

Most students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds studying arts and humanities subjects reported concerns with future job earnings, unsure of how easy/difficult it would be to convert the acquired cultural capital into economic capital. Most participants from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds also reported that being well paid in their future job was essential, but for a different reason: maintaining their lifestyle. The importance of acquiring economic capital in the job market was associated with the need to satisfy what was perceived as most relevant through these participants' socialisation process and familial lives. Moreover, the acquisition of cultural capital was constructed as a means to reproduce their social position.

Most participants reported a significant concern with their degree's final classification, as this was understood to be an essential condition when transitioning to the job market.

Other than an element of self-satisfaction, the main reason seemed to concern future employability and competition with other fellow students. Indeed, most participants understood that achieving a first class or upper second class honours would place them in a better position when moving to the job market. In some cases, the competitive strategy adopted in the field of HE seemed to be an anticipation of strategies usually more associated with the job market.

All participants mentioned the need to work hard to achieve good academic results, although in varying degrees, and the main objective seemed to be acquiring cultural capital in the form of knowledge and transferable skills. However, the emphasis on achieving good results did not go unquestioned, mainly by arts and humanities undergraduates, showing that English undergraduates are not a homogeneous group. Indeed, some students reflexively questioned the neoliberal and highly competitive context of HE, the job market and its impact on social life.

Finally, a specific participant's account was analysed to show the importance given to networking, that is, to holding social capital to get the desired position in the job market.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the data analysis presented in chapters 6, 7, and 8 in relation to the literature (see chapters 2 and 3) and the theoretical framework (see chapter 4) of this study.

Chapter 9 – Discussion

In this chapter, I start by revisiting the aim and the objectives of this study. Subsequently, I discuss the data analysis presented in chapters 6, 7, and 8 in relation to the literature (chapters 2 and 3) and the theoretical framework (chapter 4).

9.1 Revisiting the aim and the objectives of the study

The main aim of this study is to explore English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in the field of HE; specifically, if and how they enact the dominant construction of their subjective positions in the field as consumers of HE. I sought to explore this problematic by considering their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, that is, their family and educational habitus.

The analysis of the participants' accounts in chapters 6, 7, and 8 allows me to pursue the objectives of this study:

1. To examine how, if at all, the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of English undergraduates shape their understandings of HE.
2. To explore how students construct their experiences and struggles within the field of HE, particularly how they conceptualise their positions and dispositions in relation to it.
3. To appreciate how English undergraduates' aspirations and expectations for the future, specifically regarding employability, relate to their discourses on and practices in HE.

9.2 Discussion

9.2.1 How the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds shape undergraduates' understandings of HE

In chapter 6, I analysed the data related to the decision-making regarding HE. It was the first of the three data analysis' chapters, exploring the 'why, what and where to study', and the participants' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds helped to illuminate the data analysed in chapters 7 and 8. In the case of the participants who classified themselves as working-class or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, the analysis of their accounts showed that all of them wanted to go to university from an early age[31]. However, these participants had to face some obstacles, namely the lack of economic capital, which led them to strategise the best ways to enter and occupy a position in the field of HE. Moreover, even when families were supportive, which was most often the case, they often lacked the cultural capital necessary to actively support participants in their decision-making, which resonates with the conclusions of Reay et al.'s (2005) and Reay et al.'s (2009) studies.

My findings show how participants' decision-making is consistent with Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) concepts of 'normal biographies' and 'choice-biographies' used by Reay and her colleagues (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005). Hence, middle-class students' decision to pursue HE studies tends to be linear, anticipated, predictable, and normalised to the point of being almost a 'non-decision', while working-class students' trajectories tend to be more fragmentary, discontinuous, and unpredictable, with students' choices being far from normalised (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) due to socioeconomic constraints.

Indeed, Bourdieu (2010) observes that 'different conditions of existence [tend to] produce different habitus' (p. 166). As Swartz (1997) notes, habitus results from early

[31] It is important to point out that I only interviewed participants who were pursuing HE studies, or who were taking a gap year and already knew that they had been accepted by a specific university at the time of the interview.

socialisation experiences in which existing opportunity structures are internalised, shaping aspirations and expectations that turn into actions that tend to reproduce those opportunity structures. Moreover, the practices of agents of the same class tend to be consistent because all are the product of systematic 'transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168). Yet, the habitus is not deterministic, leaving space for individuals to select forms of conduct that were not internalised as the most likely to succeed (Bourdieu, 1977). In relation to HE decision-making, Reay and her colleagues (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005) note that students' embodiment of social structures happens only to a certain extent, allowing for a degree of agency. This is consistent with the trajectories of working-class and less privileged participants who went beyond their '*opportunity structures* and different [social, spatial and temporal] *horizons of action*' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 55).

The construction and alignment of English undergraduates as consumers is arguably linked, at least in part, to the increased investment of economic capital through tuition fees by English undergraduates studying in the UK (Tomlinson, 2017). This increased payment of fees was justified by the principle of cost sharing (Clark et al., 2019), intended to present tuition fees as 'a portion of future earnings […] with the emphasis on benefits similarly lessening the perception of the cost' (p. 713)[32]. However, the payment of tuition fees was perceived differently based on the participants educational habitus.

Indeed, most participants educated at comprehensive schools tended to advocate for a free HE or had no opinion on this matter. In contrast, those who studied in private and grammar schools seemed more inclined to accept tuition fees, although some advocated for a free HE. These findings are more heterogeneous than those presented in Budd's

[32] I will return to the principle of cost sharing when I discuss the participants' constructions of graduate employability

(2018) study, in which all seven English participants accepted that they, and not the State, should pay for tuition fees. My results suggest that in relation to this issue, although the socioeconomic and the educational habitus are arguably intertwined, the educational habitus might be more powerful than the socioeconomic one, as the participants from a more privileged socioeconomic background who studied at comprehensive schools tended to advocate for free HE. Arguably, being subjected to pay for one's education before occupying a position in the field of HE contributed to creating an identity closer to that of consumers, who are used to paying to have access to services or goods. In this sense, being privately educated served as a prior form of identity regulation in students' processes of identity construction, restraining their worldview regarding the political options available regarding HE, partly positioning them as consumers of (higher) education. In Bourdieusian terms, 'different conditions of existence [in this case, being privately educated] produce[d] different habitus' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 166), as the participants' habitus internalised the practices of the external structures (private schools) they were exposed to; that is, the normalisation of the notion that one has to invest economic capital to occupy a position in the field.

There is a body of literature on how participants' previous educational experiences also shape prospective undergraduates' decision-making, strategies, and practices regarding the type of HEI to attend (see, for instance, Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2009; Mangan et al., 2010; Baker, 2019). Official figures show that high-status universities make more offers to privately educated students (Green and Kynaston, 2019), with private schools playing a significant role in producing and reproducing social inequalities in England (Green et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018; Green and Kynaston; 2019). Indeed, most of the privately educated participants in my study – together with the two participants educated at grammar schools – reported that their schools had an interest in making sure that they would go to high ranked universities in terms of prestige (that is, Russell Group institutions and, in particular, Oxbridge). Ball et al. (2002) refer to this influence as the 'school effect' or 'institutional habitus', which I contend serves as a form of identity regulation in the process of attempting to secure and construct particular identities. In contrast, the comprehensive school educated participants' accounts were less homogenous. Still, it was noticeable that those from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds usually attended comprehensive schools where there was also a concern with the type of HEI their students would attend. In those cases, there was a similar form of identity regulation to the one operated by attending private and grammar schools. However, identity regulation was not operated only through the participants' educational habitus, as rankings and league tables also had an impact on the participants' decision-making. Brankovic (2021) observes that reputation proxied by rankings 'cut so deep into the social fabric that it becomes almost impossible to ignore or even see beyond it' (p. 3). In this sense, they 'give the appearance of certainty and avoid the complexities of truth' (Brink, 2018, p. xvii). Indeed, most of the participants mentioned that they consulted rankings and league tables during their decision-making, which is consistent with some of the literature (Abbot and Leslie, 2004; Broecke, 2012a; 2012b; Gibbons et al., 2015), although most reported that they did not interrogate these 'consumerist guides' (McCaig, 2018), that is, they took them for granted as being representative of some kind of discursive 'truth'.

However, for most participants studying at Russell Group institutions and/or coming from a particular socioeconomic background where attending one is the norm, this type of university was their first option, regardless of its position in the rankings and league tables. This suggests that despite how the English neoliberal HE system sought to differentiate HEIs by introducing market mechanisms, such as rankings and league tables

(Salmi and Saroyan, 2007; Espeland and Sauder, 2016; McCaig, 2018), the participants from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds did not tend to make decisions based solely on these metrics[33]. Indeed, within some undergraduates' habitus the symbolic capital/power of HEIs is recognised according to their membership of specific groups (such as the Russell Group) and, therefore, they tried to occupy their position in the field of HE accordingly. In some cases, their strategy seemed to be to construct their identities through a form of identity work which consisted of branding themselves by attending a certain type of institution. A notable example was a participant who mentioned that the most important aspect in his decision-making was the 'university brand' (see 6.2). By doing this, the participants were trying to convert the cultural capital acquired at their HEI into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990a), that is, a form of capital in which power is perceived as 'legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others' (Swartz, 1997, p. 43).

However, it is notable that most participants from privileged backgrounds studying arts and humanities at high-status universities did not report anything that suggested an intentional attempt to brand themselves through their HEI, or any type of consumerist practices. In such cases, the decision to attend their HEI was the result of their family habitus, as in most cases their parents and siblings had attended/were attending the same type of institutions. This is consistent with Ball et al.'s (2002) assertion that choice of university is 'a choice of lifestyle and a matter of *taste*' (p. 53) somewhat 'delimited [by] *opportunity structures* and different [social, spatial and temporal] *horizons of action*' (p.55), which may be material or perceptual. In this sense, social class plays a significant

---

[33] However, since most Russell Group institutions occupy a favourable position in the most influential league tables and rankings, it is difficult to untangle to what extent undergraduate students would have the same opinion and would have made the same choice if their Russell Group institution was badly positioned in the league tables and rankings.

role in the decision-making process because university choice seems to be, to some extent, a question of 'class-matching' and 'social closure' (Parkin, 1974). Moreover, it also suggests that the family habitus also operates as a form of identity regulation, as many participants worked on their identities by reproducing their family's choices and practices.

9.2.2 Undergraduates' understandings of and position(ing)s in higher education

A body of literature on HE argues that undergraduates are encouraged to 'view the act of learning as a commercial transaction' (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p. 272) and are therefore positioned as purchasers, that is, consumers with rights (McCulloch, 2009; Maringe, 2011; Brink, 2018). While the comparison of students to customers and/or consumers was directly mentioned by a few participants, this type of comparison did not imply that students' practices in the field resembled those of a customer or consumer. In common with Tomlinson's (2017) study, most participants' references to consumerism were notional and did not fully inform their approaches to, or practices in, HE. For instance, although some students mentioned that paying fees raised their expectations regarding the professionalism of the institution and entitled them to be heard by the university, none reported having complained about their marks or any other issue related to the teaching they received at university.

Within a fee-paying context, some scholars have suggested that the traditional hierarchical relationship between lecturers and undergraduates, in which lecturers represent the authority[34], has been reshaped and it is not clear (Williams, 2013), or that it may even disappear or be inverted (Lorenz, (2012). Nixon et al. (2018) observe that

[34] To elucidate, I do not subscribe to 'role theory'. For a detailed approach to this theory's main features and criticisms, see Biddle (1979; 1986) and Jackson (1998).

students may even engage in exploitative interpersonal relationships with their lecturers and tutors. My analysis does not support Lorenz's (2012) and Nixon et al.'s (2018) findings. Indeed, although a few participants compared undergraduates' position in the field to that of a consumer, when asked to explain their remarks in more detail, they said that their idea was more related to their perceptions of the academic and non-academic staff's practices in relation to students than to the practices adopted by them or other undergraduate students. On the contrary, in many cases the participants reported considering themselves responsible for their academic results.

Indeed, in common with the English undergraduate students in Budd's (2017a) study, but in contrast to Nixon et al.'s (2018) undergraduates, most participants felt responsible for their degrees, putting effort into succeeding in their studies. Many mentioned the existence of tuition fees and their indebtedness as one of the motivations, showing that the need to invest economic capital to occupy a position in the field and acquire cultural capital had a significant impact on their practices and strategies in the field. To some extent, there seemed to be a process of subjectification in which tuition fees and debt operate as a disciplinary technique of power (Lazzarato, 2012; 2015; Chomsky quoted by Hartlep and Eckrich, 2013). Therefore, undergraduate students must act as 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Foucault, 2010) and 'self-managing economic consumer-investors' (Marginson, 1997, p. 122). Arguably, tuition fees and debt influenced undergraduates' identity work, functioning as a form of regulation in their attempts to construct identities that are embedded within a market economy.

This led to some English undergraduates who were studying at Scottish universities to Other Scottish undergraduates. Indeed, Scottish students were often positioned by English students as not investing as much effort as them, due to Scottish students not having to pay tuition fees (that is, due to their presence in the field not involving an investment of economic capital). These participants discursively established a clear differentiation between their own strategies and practices as compared with the Scottish students, in terms of how they played the game. This suggests that the development of an 'ongoing sense of the self' and the 'other' in interaction with their social environment' (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 300) was being enacted, where the social environment is a considerably neoliberalised HE field. In this field, some English undergraduates appeared to be taken in by the game (*illusio*) and concurred their belief in it (*doxa*) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) to the extent of not imagining forms of action beyond those they understood as possible and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1990a). In extremis, one participant mentioned that Scottish students should not be allowed to occupy a position in the field. This is predicated on what Bauman (2005) referred to when he observed that we can only have access to consuming life (being consumers) if we are simultaneously able to demonstrate our own use value (being commodities). However, not all the participants studying in Scottish universities expressed such views, showing that 'power/knowledge effects on subjectivity do not remove the agency of subjects to mediate, interpret, negotiate and resist the meanings and relations surrounding their subjection' (Knights and Clarke, 2017, p. 338).

Somewhat paradoxically, many participants, especially those from more privileged backgrounds, reported not being significantly concerned with being indebted because they understood that the government was subsidising them through the loan system, which is consistent with Esson and Ertl's (2016) findings. The existing literature suggests that students' attitudes, understandings, and experiences of indebtedness are not homogeneous within or between socioeconomic categories (Harrison et al., 2015). While this understanding of being subsidised by the State was consistent across my participants from wealthier backgrounds, making them 'debt-oblivious' (Harrison et al., 2015), the undergraduates from less privileged backgrounds presented different understandings, with some being more debt-anxious (Harrison et al., 2015). In common, almost all seemed to ignore the repayment system's functioning in detail, confirming the existing empirical evidence (Dodds, 2011; Brooks, 2018). This is problematic, as policymakers' preferences for a market-oriented approach to HE assumes that students would make informed decision (Clark et al., 2019) about their HE. This may be explained, at least partially, precisely by students' understanding of themselves being subsidised by the state and perceiving it as a responsibility that they will need to deal with only in the future.

However, paying tuition fees impacted the participants' discourses on HE. Brink (2018) notes that since 'the real cost of a course in sociology is a fraction of the real cost of a course in medicine […] students therefore end their studies with much the same level of debt, but with quite different levels of value for money' (p. 141)[35]. Notably, all participants studying degrees with a reduced number of contact hours (those studying subjects like languages and literature, arts, and social sciences) had a similar understanding, reporting that they were subsidising students with a considerably higher number of contact hours (those studying STEM subjects). In Bourdieusian terms, the undergraduates with fewer contact hours considered that STEM undergraduates were acquiring cultural capital partially due to the economic capital that non-STEM students were investing in the field of HE. In this sense, they were not positioning themselves merely as 'consumers-investors' (Marginson, 1997), a concept associated with an understanding of (higher) education as a market in self-investment, but somehow as investors for others' studies. Yet, with only one exception, all participants studying non-

[35] I must say that it is my understanding that a statement like this, in which the levels of value for money of attending different degrees are assessed, although unintentionally, somewhat reifies the construction of HE as a consumer good/service.

STEM subjects mentioned that tuition fees' value should not vary according to the cost of the different courses. The justifications reported varied but were mainly related to the construction of HE as a public good, the potential impact on prospective students from less privileged backgrounds, and the importance of some more expensive courses (such as, for example, medicine) to society. This shows that despite all the existing constraints in terms of identity regulation, the ways in which the participants attempted to construct their identities went well beyond the image of the self as a mere consumer of HE.

Most participants in this study complained about the lack of a closer relationship with their tutors and lecturers, either because they felt less supported academically or because they missed the affective dimension they had at school – or both. They reported how this absence of an affective relational dimension between students and academics evoked feelings of nostalgia in some participants who were used to having more attention/support and, therefore, experienced difficulty in adjusting their educational habitus to the rules of the new educational field. This seems difficult to reconcile with the idea of an entitled 'sovereign student-consumer' (Nixon et al., 2018) and again strongly suggests that undergraduates' discourses and practices go beyond those of a mere consumer of HE. Nixon et al. (2018) mention that they identified in some of their participants an 'unconscious ideal of a wished-for love relationship with their tutors' (p. 937), concluding that the participants aimed for narcissistic gratification. While it is always challenging to try to establish comparisons between studies that follow different qualitative approaches (Willing, 2008), particularly since I did not analyse my data through psychoanalytic lenses, nothing in my analysis suggested such an aim from the students' side.

The academics strikes of 2018 in England were an opportunity to illuminate some aspects of the relationship between undergraduates and lecturers and showed its potential to go beyond pragmatic and instrumental interests. All the participants interviewed during or after the strikes reported their support for the academics' struggle, including joining them on the picket lines, a practice more typical of a comrade than of a consumer. Although many students reflected on the consequences of the strikes for them, considering that they were paying for a service that they did not get (discussed further later in this chapter), their accounts showed that the strikes and interrelated events organised by academics opened a space for communication between students and academics. This communication allowed the former to acquire a broader understanding of some of the issues that affect the neoliberal university and to use their reflexivity to decide which practices to adopt in the field. This reflexivity appeared to be based on short-term strategies characterised by a certain degree of spontaneity (Lahiri, 2011), in which the participants' affinities produced context-specific practices (Threadgold, 2020). This is a potentially enlightening notion for the purportedly transactional relationship, for as Reay (2004) observes, when individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, 'habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self' (p. 438).

The participants' practices during the strikes were not the ones usually associated with consumerism, as undergraduates were not moved by any instrumental objectives, wishing only to be in solidarity with the academics on strike. These findings are noteworthy for they offer a perspective of English undergraduate students beyond the individualistic and instrumental practices often described in the literature (see, for instance, Maringe, 2011; Nordensvärd, 2011; Nixon et al., 2018) and challenge monolithic constructions of them merely being transactional consumers of HE. Indeed, although it is often argued that the construction of students as consumers 'reinforces individualism at the expense of community' (McMillan and Cheney, 1996, p. 9), acts of resistance are both possible and visible. This is consistent with Alvesson and Willmott (2002) understanding of identity construction as a dynamic and ongoing process in which, despite the normative control exercised upon them (identity regulation), the participants were able to shape and transform their sense of self through a reflexive process (identity work).

However, many participants simultaneously reflected on the strikes through the optic of their investment of economic capital in the field of HE. Since the English HE sector is guided by the principle of cost sharing (see 3.2.2), which implies that students must invest economic capital through the payment of tuition fees to acquire cultural capital and obtain HE credentials, some participants felt entitled to be reimbursed. In this sense, the existence of tuition fees contributed to their understanding of occupying a position in the field of HE as somewhat similar to a commercial transaction (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). However, despite their discursive claims, most undergraduates revealed that they did not initiate any action to recover that economic capital, which again shows that their discursive practices did not always translate into material ones within the field of HE.

9.2.3 How undergraduates' expectations regarding employability impact on their discourses on and practices in higher education

The advent of the knowledge economy underpinned by the human capital theory (see, for example, Brown et al., 2011) contributed to the construction of undergraduates as consumers (Tomlinson, 2008) and had an impact on English undergraduates' discourses on employability and the practices and strategies they adopt in, and before occupying a position in, the field of HE. While most of the participants studying arts and humanities and social sciences courses reported that their decision-making did not consider potential career prospects, those studying STEM and business and management mentioned that their choice of degree was to a large extent influenced by what they wanted to do professionally and the need to obtain the necessary credentials, with a few constructing HE as a mere bridge to employability.

Yet, although feeling passionate about their degrees and aiming to acquire cultural capital in the form of knowledge, most of the participants from less privileged backgrounds studying arts and humanities reported concerns with future job earnings, as they were unsure of how easy/difficult it would be to convert the acquired cultural capital into economic capital. At least to some extent, this was responsible for some of these participants feeling more 'debt-anxious' (Harrison et al., 2015) than the others. Although it is not my intention to reduce a HE degree to its potential conversion (or not) into value for money, their concerns seem justified from a pragmatic point of view. Relatedly, as the Augar Review (2019) acknowledges, 'at age 29 some graduates in some subjects from some universities earn less than their peers who did not embark upon or complete study for a degree' (p. 87). Moreover, some studies show that students from less advantaged backgrounds have worse graduate earning prospects (Green and Kynaston, 2019) – see, for instance, Britton et al. (2016) – and need more time to find a destination after concluding their undergraduate degrees (Bradley and Waller, 2018).

Similarly to Bates and Kaye's (2013) findings, the large majority of the participants in this study held expectations that having a degree would present them with better employment prospects. However, the participants were aware that the job market is a competitive field in terms of graduate employment due to credentials and jobs being positional goods (Brown et al., 2011), so they started adopting strategies to occupy the best possible positions within it after concluding their degrees. Most of them did not directly construct their practices as competitive, but their accounts show that they started competing among themselves for the best position in the HE field, namely through the importance given to achieving high marks and ending their degrees with top classifications, that is, to acquiring cultural capital in the form of credentials. Although there was an element of self-satisfaction involved, it was reported by most participants that such credentials would put them in a better position when applying for a job. This shows how the neoliberal transformations in English HE, with a focus on competition (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Naidoo et al., 2011), have introduced a form of student neoliberal subjectivity grounded in competition, with undergraduate students deploying competitive mechanisms typical of the job market in the HE field (Marginson, 1997).

In this sense, the neoliberal transformations in HE introduced forms of identity regulation that impact undergraduates' processes of identity construction, somewhat restricting their options in terms of identity work if wanting to adopt a strategy that will lead to future employability. In Bourdieusian terms, undergraduates must start playing the employability game in the field of HE to occupy the desired – or merely a – position in the job market field; indeed, 'players agree, by the mere fact of playing […], that the game is worth playing […], and this collusion is the very basis of their competition' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 98). Nonetheless, a few students reflexively questioned the excessive focus on marks and final classifications, showing how there is always space for resistance even to tendentially hegemonic discursive practices.

The focus on competition and individualism is often grounded in meritocratic principles (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). From a Bourdieusian perspective, meritocracy, a contested concept at least since it was criticised and satirised by Young (1958), is an ideological artifice whose rules are set by the dominant groups to conceal structural inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) by 'converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities' (Reay, 1998, p. 1). Concerningly, dominated groups are more willing to accept the meritocratic principle that achieving one's goals only depends on ones' hard work (Abrahams, 2017). Regardless of their socioeconomic and educational background, most participants mentioned the importance of working hard to achieve their objectives and in some cases, such hard work was clearly embodied in the participants' habitus. In this study I explored in more detail one participant's (Emma's) account, which showed how her strategies in the field resulted from both her family habitus and educational habitus. Being exposed from a young age to a competitive environment, both at home and at school, Emma developed what could be labelled a neoliberal habitus. I suggest that such habitus, functioning as a 'structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168), operated as a form of embodied normative control (identity regulation) that exercised a considerable influence on the reflexive processes through which she attempted to develop her sense of self (identity work).

Despite most participants' emphasis on HE credentials and meritocratic achievement through hard work, one of the participants mentioned the importance of social capital acquired through networking and internships. My analysis of this participant's account suggested that, like Abrahams' (2017) middle-class participants, he was aware of the existence of an 'opportunity trap' (Brown et al., 2011) and how HE credentials may not be enough (Abrahams, 2017). This participant's strategy was to acquire and accumulate as much social capital as possible while positioned in the educational field (he reported that he started doing it at his private school), which he would later transfer to the job market field. Arguably, his process of identity formation has not implied as much change, development, and renewal as it would have if he had been operating in fields where the habitus would have to face new conditions when transitioning between them (Crozier at al., 2019). Indeed, this undergraduate had been transferring 'the same schemes of action from one field to another' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 168) by adopting an inter-field strategy, which indicates a certain 'commodification of social relations' (Wittel, 2001, p. 52-53). From a Bourdieusian perspective, his habitus is more 'prepared to perceive [the constraints and demands of the game] and carry them out' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 63) in a context of positional competition (Brown et al., 2011).

9.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I started by revisiting the aim and the objectives of this study. Subsequently, I discussed the data analysis presented in chapters 6, 7, and 8 in relation to the literature (chapters 2 and 3) and the theoretical framework (chapter 4). The discussion shows that my findings are noteworthy since they offer a perspective on English undergraduate students that challenge and go beyond the individualistic and instrumental practices often described in the literature. Rather, my findings enabled me to present their identities as nuanced, and their discourses and practices as heterogeneous. In the next chapter, I present my conclusions and contributions, as well as the limitations of my research and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 10 – Conclusions

In this chapter, I return to my research questions, which I address by summarising my significant findings. Subsequently, I emphasise the empirical and theoretical contributions of my study to the existing literature. Finally, I highlight some limitations of my research and make recommendations for future research.

10.1 Addressing the research questions

In 1.6, I presented the two research questions of this study:

1. How, if at all, do English undergraduate students enact their positioning as 'higher education consumers' in the UK
2. How, if at all, do English undergraduate students' discourses on and practices in HE vary according to their socioeconomic and educational habitus?

I now present my answer to these research questions underpinned by my data analysis and subsequent discussion.

English undergraduate students have been pervasively constructed as consumers of HE in academic literature (see, for instance, Maringe, 2011; Nordensvärd, 2011; Brooks, 2018; Nixon et al., 2018), in official policy documents (for example, in the Augar Review, 2019), in marketing actions led by UK HE institutions (see, for instance, images 1 and 2 presented in 2.4), and in the media. I argue that this construction, especially when operated by policymakers, can be considered an operation of codification (Bourdieu, 1990a) that attempts to reduce other potential forms of action, behaviour, and discourse to a marginal position within the field of HE. In this sense, the codification of undergraduates as consumers operates as a form of identity regulation, in which normative control is exercised upon individuals within the context of power relations

(Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), constraining undergraduates' options in terms of their identity construction and the positions which they might occupy in the field of HE. However, there are other forms of identity regulation that impact English undergraduates' discourses on and practices in the field of HE.

I contend that university rankings and league tables also function as a form of identity regulation, as they have become influential and normalised to the point of not being possible to ignore them (Brankovic, 2021). The normative control operated by ranking and league tables is so pervasive that most English undergraduate participants, although consulting them, did not interrogate them, perhaps also because they give an appearance of sedimentation or reification. However, university rankings and league tables do not exercise such a totalising form of normative control on undergraduates from more privileged backgrounds as the prestige associated with some universities, such as those part of the Russell Group. The reason for this is that their family habitus and educational[36] habitus is more attuned to recognise the symbolic capital and power of these HEIs. In this way, both the undergraduates' previous educational institutions and their habitus as an embodied structure and a mediating entity exercise a normative control upon the students' process of identity construction, influencing their identity work.

A significant contribution of this thesis is that it incorporates the accounts of English undergraduates studying at Scottish universities. These participants Othered students not paying fees (Scottish undergraduates), constructing them as less motivated and applied in their studies and, in the limit, less deserving of occupying a position in the field of HE. Moreover, many participants reported putting more effort into their studies due to their investment of economic capital in HE. In this way, to an extent, undergraduates enact

[36] What Ball et al. (2002) designate 'school' or 'institutional' habitus.

their positioning as self-managers and self-investors as the result of a process of subjectification in which tuition fees and debt operate as a disciplinary technique of power (Lazzarato, 2012, 2015), that is, as a form of identity regulation. However, many participants, mainly those from more privileged backgrounds, seemed to be 'debt-oblivious' (Harrison et al., 2015), seeing it as an investment since they understood that the government was subsidising them through the loan system. In a way, it is as if not having to be involved in the transactions and transfers of capital disembodies the debt from the undergraduate students. For English undergraduates from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, where holding economic capital was not taken for granted, it was more challenging to be oblivious regarding their state of indebtedness.

But do the mentioned forms of identity regulation imply that English undergraduates enact their positioning as consumers of HE? It is essential to consider that subjects are not necessarily 'docile bodies' dispossessed of agency and reflexivity (Clarke et al., 2007), and that English undergraduate students, including the participants in this study, are a heterogeneous group, which includes students with different habitus and capitals studying distinct subjects at different HEIs. Indeed, most undergraduates enacted their positioning as consumers of HE to an extent, but, at the same time, many of them advocated for a free HE, rejected the idea of tuition fees varying according to the cost of different courses, showed concern with fellow students from less privileged backgrounds, and supported the academics during the academic strikes of 2018. The accounts of a few participants even showed that they had developed critical reflexivity regarding the current state of HE, considering that it is now closer to being a private service than a public one. This suggests that HE is in a phase of transition in terms of the public construction of its nature, with the perception of HE as a public service giving way to a private conception.

In this context, what should perhaps be surprising is how most undergraduates' discursive practices did not materialise into consumerist practices, as their references to consumerism were mostly notional and did not fully informed their practices in HE. English undergraduates often seemed to be in a liminal space, not knowing very well what position to occupy and strategies to adopt in the field. Their discourses and practices during the strikes of 2018 are a good example of this kind of liminality, as although they engaged in embodied encounters with the academics, they could not ignore their investments of capital in HE.

The participants' discourses and strategies in relation to graduate employability also contributed to deconstruct how they are dominantly constructed. Although the advent of the knowledge economy contributed to their construction as consumers (Tomlinson, 2008), undergraduates' discourses, strategies, and practices were far from homogeneous. While the participants studying arts and humanities and social sciences courses reported not choosing their degree considering potential career prospects, those studying business and management were significantly influenced by the need to obtain academics credentials to pursue their chosen professional activity. Still, many of the latter felt passionate about their chosen subject, so the choice of degree was not purely instrumental, and HE was not seen merely a bridge to the job market. However, the majority – but not all – adopted competitive strategies to achieve the desired professional position, such as trying to obtain distinctive academic results through high marks. It was also clear, through the analysis of a particular account, that some undergraduates from privileged backgrounds understand the importance of social capital, which suggests a certain 'commodification of social relations' (Wittel, 2001, p. 52-53).

All the aspects mentioned so far show that despite the various forms of identity regulation operating, the English undergraduate students who participated in this study were far from enacting their construction as consumers in a homogeneous way. The degrees to which they presented aspects of consumerism, individualism, instrumentality, and passiveness varied considerably and were enacted in different combinations. It was clear that the participants' family and school habitus, as forms of identity regulation, impacted considerably on how they worked on their identities and, consequently, on their discourses, strategies, and practices. Therefore, although the student-consumer metaphor may contribute to our understanding of HE policies through its simplification (Tight, 2013), English undergraduate students are not a homogeneous group and some are able to contest, at least to a certain extent, how they are dominantly constructed. I contend that the dominance of the metaphor of students as consumers has been marginalising alternative forms of occupying a position in the field of HE, leading to an oversimplification of English undergraduates' discourses and practices.

A final consideration regarding the targeting of English undergraduate as consumers is as follows. Under the dominance of neoliberalism, there has been as shift from the public and political to the private and economic (Taylor, 2004), in which the subjugation of the public sphere to the logics of market has turned many citizens into individual and passive consumers of politics (Needham, 2003). Some argue that consumer culture allows individuals to define and project their identities both individually and collectively, leading to more autonomous practices (Clarke et al., 2007). Applying this to English undergraduates' constructions as consumers, it could be assumed that they are being empowered while occupying positions in the field of HE. However, this is arguably a form of identity regulation underpinned by discourses that seem not to materialise in more autonomous forms of action. Moreover, in a consumerist neoliberal society where every citizen may be constructed as a consumer of public services (for instance, in health and social care) (Clarke, 2005), the construction of undergraduate students as consumers is mundane at the very least. And in this context, singling out and targeting students as consumers, especially when made by academics, is arguably an act of Othering.

10.2 Contributions to the literature

The first contribution of this study to the literature is theoretical. Bourdieu conceived the theoretical concepts developed by him as tools at the service of empirical research (Swartz, 2013). By complementing a Bourdieusian theoretical framework with a poststructuralist understanding of identity through empirical research, I have established a bridge between both literatures, one helping to illuminate the other and enriching the understanding of the interrelationship between individuals and social structure(s). Indeed, it is often mentioned that the Bourdieusian concept of habitus is excessively deterministic, so a joint analysis with a poststructuralist understanding of identity allowed me to take into consideration the participants' identities as a dynamic set of construction whose formation processes are complex (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas, 2008; Coupland and Brown, 2012). Moreover, it allowed me to understand and demonstrate the impact of habitus as an embodied 'structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 2010) on undergraduates' identity work, namely as a form of identity regulation in the process of identity construction. I believe that with this study I have modestly contributed to extend the Bourdieusian literature, proposing/offering an alternative form of understanding agents' identity processes and the impact of habitus in their discourses and practices.

A second contribution of this study is the exploration of English undergraduate students' experiences and practices in HE by combining two strands of literature: the literature on the impact of undergraduates' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (see, for example, Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al. 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Baker, 2019; Crozier et al., 2019;) and those more focused on analysing English undergraduate students' constructions as consumers of HE (see, for instance, Budd, 2017a; Tomlinson, 2016; Nixon et al., 2018). It is relevant to mention that Budd's (2017a, 2018) studies also considered both dimensions, but all his English participants studied at the same university.

As a result, this study also makes a contribution in extending the empirical literature on undergraduates' decision-making, social inequalities in HE, and students' constructions as consumers, showing that English undergraduate students' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds impact the degree to which they enact consumerist discourses on and practices in HE. In this way, it provides a more nuanced and heterogeneous construction of contemporary English undergraduate students' identities. In particular, this thesis offers two original empirical contributions by showing that: 1) English undergraduate students who studied at comprehensive schools tend to advocate for a free HE, while those privately educated seem more inclined to accept the payment of tuition fees; 2) English undergraduates studying subjects with a reduced number of contact hours believe they are subsidising students with a higher number of contact hours.

Finally, this thesis also extends the existing literature on undergraduate debt (see, for instance, Hardin, 2011; Bachan, 2014; Bates and Kaye, 2014; Harrison et al., 2015; Harrison and Agnew, 2016; Bradley, 2017; Brooks, 2018; Clark et al., 2019), by introducing new insights and complementing existing research.

10.3 Limitations of my research

The pilot project showed me the limitations of convenience sampling, as I just got access to privately educated students, but I sought to address that limitation in the main study. Still, the main limitation continued to be the difficulty involved in securing a wider variety of participants. For instance, from the 30 participants, only two were educated at grammar schools, and it would have been interesting to explore more accounts from English undergraduates who studied at such educational institutions, to have more insights on how this specific educational habitus impacts English undergraduates' processes of identity construction and how they enact their construction as consumers of HE. Moreover, only two of the participants were studying at a post-1992 university (University of the West of England), so it would also be interesting to explore more accounts from participants at this type of HEI, to try to understand to what extent it impacts their processes of identity construction and how they enact their constructions as consumers.

10.4 Suggestions for further research

One of my suggestions for future research is connected to two of the limitations mentioned in the previous section. Given the very limited number of students educated at a grammar school (two) and studying at post-1992 universities (two), it would perhaps bring new insights and contribute to the possibility of presenting a deeper multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon under research (Creswell, 2013) to interview more students educated and attending these types of educational institutions.

Another suggestion for future research would be conducting a qualitative study with both Scottish and English undergraduates studying at Scottish universities to comparatively analyse their discourses on and practices in HE. That was out of the scope of this study, but given my findings (that is, how the Scottish undergraduates were othered by the English ones studying in Scotland), it would be relevant to interview both of these groups and analyse their accounts.

A final suggestion is related to the practices adopted by some English universities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, some institutions (for instance, the University of Manchester) adopted practices that restricted undergraduate students' freedom of movement, namely by trying to lock them in their halls of residence, in ways that go beyond symbolic forms of violence. It would be interesting to explore how, if at all, those practices had an impact on students' discourses on and practices in HE, and in particular as 'consumers with rights', given how they were treated during this time.

A final consideration

Doing this study has impacted my identity as a research student in English HE in ways I could not have anticipated when I started it. Indeed, reflecting on the forms of identity regulation that English undergraduates are subjected to has made me think about the ones I myself have experienced as an international postgraduate student in England. The current configurations of English HE makes it very difficult for any agent (undergraduates, postgraduates, and academics) occupying a position in the field to completely avoid engaging in competitive and instrumental discourses and practices. As a research student, I have often felt a normative persuasion to acquire social capital by networking in academic conferences, seminars, and workshops, although these sites have also been opportunities for genuine emotional encounters. Moreover, research students are incentivised to adopt self-promotional practices, such as publicising our research and our 'successes', namely in institutional platforms (such as Internet sites and social media) that HEIs use to promote themselves. Although I have tried to preserve what I consider to be some core ethical principles, I have sometimes adopted neoliberal discourses and practices. Being critical of the current state of English HE, as I am, while occupying a position in the field and trying to remain within it, namely by getting an academic job, has often been a personal challenge. Still, I believe that if we cannot wholly avoid enacting this neoliberal subjectivity, we can at least recognise it and aim to be much more than that.

References

Abbot, A. and Leslie, D. (2004). Recent Trends in Higher Education Applications and Acceptances. *Education Economics*, 12(1), 67-86

Abrahams, J. (2017). Honourable mobility or shameless entitlement? Habitus and graduate employment. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(5), 625-640.

Abrahams, J. and Ingram, N. (2013). The Chameleon Habitus: Exploring Local Students' Negotiations of Multiple Fields. *Sociological Research Online*, 18 (4) 21.

Adnett and Davies, P. (2002). Schooling Quasi-Markets: Reconciling Economic and Sociological Analyses. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 47(3), 221-234.

Akerlind, G. S. and Kayrooz, C. (2003). Understanding Academic Freedom: The views of social scientists. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 22(3), 327-344.

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Sage.

Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K. L. and Thomas, R. (2008). Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies. *Organization*, 15(1), 5-28.

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002). Identity Regulation as Organisational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 619-644.

Altbach, P. G. (2001). Academic freedom: International realities and challenges. *Higher Education*, 41, 205-219.

Ashwin, P. (2020) *Transforming University Education: A manifesto*, London, Bloomsbury.

Bachan, R. (2014). Students' expectations of debt in UK higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 848-873.

Baert, P. and Carreira da Silva, F. (2010) *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, London, Polity.

Baker, Z. (2019). Priced out: the renegotiation of aspirations and individualized HE ‘choices’ in England. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(3-4), 299-325

Ball, S. J. (2003) *Class Strategies and the Educational Market: The middle classes and social advantage*, London, Routledge.

Ball, S. J. (2013) *Foucault, Power, and Education*, New York/London, Routledge.

Ball, S. J., Davies, J., David, M. and Reay, D. (2002). 'Classification and Judgement': social class and the cognitive structures of choice of Higher Education. *British journal of sociology of education*, 23(1), 51-72.

Barnett, R. (2003) *Beyond All Reason: Living with Ideology in the University*, Milton Keynes, SRHE and Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (2011) The marketised university: defending the indefensible’ in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

Barr, N. and Crawford, I. (1998). Funding Higher Education in an Age of Expansion. *Education Economics*, 6(1), 45-70.

Bates, E. A. and Kaye, L. K. (2014). “I’d be expecting caviar in lectures”: the impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students’ expectations of Higher Education. *Higher Education*, 67 (5), 655-673.

Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N., Hoare, T., Waller, R., Abrahams, J. and Bradley, H. (2016) *Social Class, Higher Education and Mobility: A Degree Generation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N. and Waller, R. (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5-6), 723-743.

Battilana, J. (2006). Agency and Institutions: The Enabling Role of Individuals' Social Position. *Organization*, 13(5), 653-676.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bauman, Z. (2005) *Liquid Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore, Washington DC, Sage.

Becker, G.S. (1993) *Human capital:Theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education* (3rd ed.), Chicago, Chicago University Press.

Biddle, B. J. (1979) Role Theory: Expectations. Identities and Behaviors, Academic Press, New York 1979.

Biddle, B. J. (1986) "Recent Developments in Role Theory". Annual Review of Sociology. Annual Reviews. 12 (1): 67–92.

Blair, T. (2010) *A Journey*, London, Hutchinson.

Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?. The British Journal of Sociology, 64(2), 344-364.

Boliver, V. (2018) 'How meritocratic is admission to highly selective UK universities?' in R. Waller, N. Ingram and M. R. Ward (eds.), *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University admissions, experiences and outcomes*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1980) *Questions de Sociology*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The forms of capital' in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson, 241-258, New York, Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1987) 'The Biographical Illusion' in P. du Gay, J. Evans and P. Redman (eds) (2000) *The Identity: A Reader*, London, Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo Academicus*, Oxford, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990a) *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990b) *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). 'Le champ littéraire.' *Actes de la Reserche en Sciences Sociales 89* (September), 4-46.

Bourdieu, P. (1993a) *Sociology in Question*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

Bourdieu, P. (1993b) *The field of cultural production*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*, Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2010) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, 2nd Ed., London and New York, Routledge Classics.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Bowers-Brown, T., Ingram, I. and Burke, C. (2019) Higher education and aspiration, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(3-4), 207-214.

Bowes-Catton, H., Brewis, J., Clarke, C., Drake, D. H., Gilmour, A. and Penn, A. (2020). Talkin' 'bout a revolution? From quiescence to resistance in the contemporary university. *Management Learning*, 51(4), 378–397.

Bradley, H. (2017). 'Should I stay or should I go?': Dilemmas and decisions among UK undergraduates. *European Educational Research Journal*, 16(1), 30-44.

Bradley, H. and Ingram, N. (2013). 'Banking on the Future: Choices, Aspirations and Economic Hardship in Working-Class Student Experience' in *Class Inequality in*

Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering, W. Atkinson, S. Roberts and M. Savage (eds.), London, Palgrave.

Bradley, H., and Waller, R. (2018) 'Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work: How the unequal playing field is constructed, maintained and experienced' in R. Waller, N. Ingram and M. R. Ward (eds.), *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University admissions, experiences and outcomes*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

Brankovic, J. (2021). Why Rankings Appear Natural (But Aren't). *Business & Society*, 1-6.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, London, Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2016). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297-298.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597.

Brink, C. (2018) *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is not Enough*, Bristol, Bristol University Press.

Bristow, A., Robinson, S., Ratle, O. (2019). Academic Arrhythmia: Disruption, Dissonance, and Conflict in the Early-Career Rhythms of CMS Academics. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 18(2), 241-260.

Britton, J., Dearden, L. and Waltmann, B. (2021) *The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity*, London, Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Britton, J., Shephard, N., Vignoles, A. and Dearden, L. (2016) *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*, London, Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Brooks, R. (2018). The construction of higher education students in English policy documents. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(6), 745-76.

Broecke, S. (2012a). University selectivity and earnings: Evidence from UK data on applications and admissions to university. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(3), 96-107.

Broecke, S. (2012b). University rankings: Do they matter in the UK? *Education Economics*, 1–25.

Brown, A. (2015). Identities and Identity Work in Organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17, 20-40.

Brown, P. (2013). Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5-6), 678-700.

Brown, P. and Hesketh, A. (2004) *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2003). Employability in a Knowledge-driven Economy. *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(2), 107-126.

Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Ashton, D. (2011) *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes,* Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press.

Brown, P. and Tannock, S. (2009). Education, meritocracy and the global war for talent. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24 (4), 377-392.

Brown. W. (2006) *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Browne, J. (Browne Review) (2010), *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*.

Bryman, A. (1984). The debate about quantitative and qualitative research: a question of method or epistemology? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35(1), 75-92.

Budd, R. (2014). *Students as neo-institutional actors: A comparative case study of how German and English undergraduates understand, experience and negotiate higher education*. University of Bristol.

Budd, R. (2017a). Undergraduate orientations towards higher education in Germany and England: Problematizing the notion of 'student as customer'. *Higher Education*, 73, 23-37.

Budd, R. (2017b). Disadvantaged by degrees? How widening participation students are not only hindered in accessing HE, but also during – and after – university. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 21(2-3), 111-116.

Budd, R. (2018). Eliciting the Institutional Myth: exploring the ethos of the university in Germany and England. *European Journal of Higher Education,* 8(2), 135-151.

Budd R. (2020) Looking for Love in the Student Experience. In: Hodgson N., Vlieghe J., Zamojski P. (eds) Post-critical Perspectives on Higher Education. Debating Higher Education: Philosophical Perspectives, vol 3. Springer, Cham.

Burawoy, M. (2012). The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci. *Sociology*, 46(2), 187-206.

Burr, V. (2015) *Social Constructionism* (3rd ed.), London, Routledge.

Butler N, and Spoelstra S. (2020). Academics at play: Why the "publication game" is more than a metaphor. *Management Learning,* 51(4), 414-430.

Cassell, C. (2005). Creating the interviewer: identity work in the management research process. *Qualitative Research*, 5(2), 167-179.

Christie, F. (2017). The reporting of university league table employability rankings: a critical review. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(4), 403-418.

Christie, H. and Munro, M. (2004). The Logic of Loans: Students' perceptions of the costs and benefits of the student loan. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*,24(5), 621-636.

Clark, T., Hordósy, R. and Vickers, D. (2019). 'We Will Never Escape These Debts': Undergraduate Experiences of Indebtedness, Income-Contingent Loans and the Tuition Fee Rises. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(5), 708-721.

Clarke, C. and Knights, D. (2015). Careering through academia: securing identities or engaging ethical subjectivities?. *Human Relations*, 68(12), 1865-1888.

Clarke, C., Knight, D., and Jarvis, C. (2012). A Labour of Love? Academics in UK Business Schools. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 28(1), 5-15.

Clarke, J. (2005). New Labour's citizens: activated, empowered, responsibilised, abandoned?. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4), 447-463.

Clarke, J., Newman, J., Smith, N., Vidler, E., and Westmarland, L. (2007) *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Changing Publics and Changing Public Services*, London, Sage.

Collins, R. (1979) *Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, New York, Academic Press.

Collinson, D.L. (2003). Identities and insecurities: selves at work. *Organization*, 10, 527–547.

Competition and Markets Authority (2015), *Advice to UK Higher Education Providers on Consumer Protection Law. CMA Response to Consultation: 12 March 2015, London:* CMA.

Coupland, C. (2015). Entry and exit as embodied career choice in professional sport. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 90, 111-121.

Coupland, C. and Brown, A. (2012). Identities in action: Processes and Outcomes. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 28(1), 1-4.

Creswell, J. W. (2013) *Qualitative Inquire & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Sage.

Crimmins, G. Casey, S. and McIntyre, J. (2021). Neoliberal performativity in higher education: ethical dilemmas encountered when reporting on the lived experience of women living in drought-affected regions. *Gender and Education*, 33(6), 757-772.

Crozier, G., Reay, D. and Clayton, J. (2019). Working the Borderlands: working-class students constructing hybrid identities and asserting their place in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2019.1623013

Cuthbert, R. (2010). Students as customers? *Higher Education Review*, 42(3), 3–25.

Davies, E. and Lea, S. (1995). Student attitudes to student debt. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 16, 664-679.

Davies, P., Mangan, J., Hughes, A. and Slack, K. (2013). Labour market motivation and undergraduates' choice of degree subject. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(2), 361-382.

Dean, M. (1999) *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society*, London, Sage.

Deem, R. (1998). New Managerialism and Higher Education: the management of performances and cultures in universities in the United Kingdom. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8(1), 47-70.

Deem, R. and Brehony, K. (2005). Management as Ideology: The Case of "New Managerialism" in Higher Education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31, 217-235.

Deem, R., Hillyard, S. and Reed, M. (2007) *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Deleuze, G. (1995) *Negotiations 1972-1990*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Dent, M. and Whitehead, S. (eds.) (2002) *Managing Professional Identities: Knowledge, Performativities and the 'New' Professional*, London, Routledge.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (2011) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4^{th} ed.), London, Sage.

Di Maggio, P. (1979). Review essay on Pierre Bourdieu. American Journal of Sociology, 84, 1460-1474.

Dill, D.D. and Soo, M. (2005). Academic Quality, League Tables, and Public Policy: A Cross-National Analysis of University Ranking Systems. *Higher Education*, 49, 495-533.

Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018). *'Home and away': Social, Ethnic and Spatial Inequalities in Student Mobility*. The Sutton Trust.

Du Bois-Reymond, M. (1998). 'I Don't Want to Commit Myself Yet': Young People's Life Concepts. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1(1), 63-79.

du Gay, P. (2007) *Organizing Identity: Persons and organizations 'after theory'*, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore, Sage.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P.R. (2008) *Management Research* (3rd ed.), London, SAGE.

Edgerton, J. D. and Roberts, L. W. (2014). Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality. *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(2), 193-220.

Emirbayer, M. and Johnson, V. (2008). Bourdieu and Organizational analysis. *Theory and Society*, 37, 1-44.

Eriksson, P. and Kovalainen, A. (2008) *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*, London, Sage.

Espeland, W. and Sauder, M. (2016) *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability*, New York, Russell Sage.

Esson, J. and Ertl, E. (2016). No Point Worrying? Potential Undergraduates, Study-Related Debt, and the Financial Allure of Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(7), 1265-1280.

Finn, K. and Holton, M. (2019) *Everyday Mobile Belonging: Theorising Higher Education Student Mobilities*, London, Bloomsbury.

Flick, U. (2014) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (5th Edition), London, Sage.

Foskett, N. (2011) 'Markets, government, funding and the marketisation of UK higher education' in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

Foucault, M. (2010) *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

Friedman, S. and Laurison, D. (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Gabriel, Y. (2010). Organization studies: a space for ideas, identities and agonies. *Organization Studies*, 31(6), 757-775.

Gamsu, S. (2020). From assisted places to free schools: subsidizing private schools for the Northern English middle classes. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(8), 1093-1114.

Gibbons, S., Neumayer, E. and Perkins, R. (2015). Student satisfaction, league tables and university applications: Evidence from Britain. *Economics of Education Review*, 48, 148-164.

Gibbons, S. and Vignoles, A. (2011). Geography, choice and participation in higher education in England. Regional Science and Urban Economics, 42(1–2), 98–113.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self Identity*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Giddens, A. (1994) *Beyond Left and Right*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2014) *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, Chicago, Haymarket Books.

Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2018). Grammar schools in England: a new analysis of social segregation and academic outcomes. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(7), 909-924.

Green, F., Anders, J., Henderson, M. and Henseke, G. (2017) *Who chooses private schooling in Britain and why?*, London, Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies.

Green, F., Anders, J., Henderson, M. and Henseke, G. (2017) *Who chooses private schooling in Britain and why?*, London, Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES). Research Paper 62.

Green, F. and Kynaston, D. (2019) *Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem*, London, Bloomsbury.

Gruening, G. (2001). Origin and theoretical basis of New Public Management. *International Public Management Journal*, 4, 1-25.

Guthrie, J. and Neumann, R. (2007). Economic and non-financial performance indicators in universities. *Public Management Review*, 9(2), 231-252.

Gutting, G. (2001) *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: principles in action* (3rd ed.), London and New York, Routledge.

Harding, J. (2011). Financial circumstances, financial difficulties and academic achievement among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 35(4), 483-499.

Harrison, N. (2018) 'Patterns of participation in a period of change: social trends in English higher education from 2000 to 2016' in R. Waller, N. Ingram and M. R. M. Ward (eds.) *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University Admissions, Experiences, and Outcomes*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

Harrison, N. and Agnew, (2016). Individual and Social Influences on Students' Attitudes to Debt: A Cross-National Path Analysis Using Data from England and New Zealand. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70(4), 332-353.

Harrison, N. and Chudry, F. (2011). Overactive, overwrought or overdrawn? the role of personality in undergraduate financial knowledge, decision-making and debt. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 35(2), 149-182.

Harrison, N., Chudry, F., Waller, R. and Hatt, S. (2015). Towards a typology of debt attitudes among contemporary young UK undergraduates. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 39(1), 85-107.

Hartlep, N. D. and Eckrich, L. L. T. (2013). Ivory Tower Graduates in the Red: The Role of Debt in Higher Education. *Workplace*, 22, 82-97.

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hayek, F. A. (1973) *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 1: Rules and Order*, Chicago, The Chicago University Press.

Hazelkorn, E. (2008). Learning to Live with League Tables and Ranking: The Experience of Institutional Leaders. *Higher Education Policy*, 21, 193–215.

Heffernan, T. (2021). Sexism, racism, prejudice, and bias: a literature review and synthesis of research surrounding student evaluations of courses and teaching. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2021.1888075

Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2015). University Choice: what do we know, what don't we know and what do we still need to find out?. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(3), 254-274.

Hilgers, M. (2013). Embodying Neoliberalism: Thoughts and responses to critics. *Social Anthropology*, volume 21(1), 75-89

Higher Education Act 2004.

Hodkinson, P. and Sparkes, A.C. (1997). Careership: a sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29-44.

Holdsworth, C. (2006). "Don't you think you're missing out, living at home?" Student experiences and residential transitions. *The Sociological Review*, 54(3), 495–519.

Hood, C. (1995). Contemporary public management: a new global paradigm? *Public Policy and Administration*, 10(2), 104-117.

Hoy, D. C. (2005) *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique*, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, The MIT Press.

Huisman, J., Meek, V. L. and Wood, F. (2007). Institutional Diversity in Higher Education: A Cross-National and Longitudinal Analysis. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(7), 563–577.

Independent Panel Report (Augar Review) (2019), *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, London, HMSO CP 117.

Jackson, A. Y., and Mazzei, L. A. (2012) *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*, London/New York, Routledge.

Jackson, J. (1998). Contemporary criticisms of role theory". *Journal of Occupational Science*, 5(2), 49-55.

Jones, D. R., Visser, M., Stokes, P., Örtenblad, A., Deem, R., Rodgers, P. and Tarba, S. Y. (2020). The Performative University: 'Targets', 'Terror' and 'Taking Back Freedom' in Academia. *Management* Learning, 51(4), 363–377.

Jones, S. (2016). Expressions of student debt aversion and tolerance among academically able young people in low-participation English schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), 277-293

Jones-Devitt, S. and Samiei, C. (2011) 'From Accrington Stanley to academia? The use of league tables and student surveys to determine 'quality' in higher education' in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

Johnson, R. N. and Deem, R. (2003). Talking of students: Tensions and contradictions for the manager-academic and the university in contemporary higher education. *Higher Education*, 46, 289–314.

Johnstone, D. B. (2004). The economics and politics of cost sharing in higher education: Comparative perspectives. *Economics of Education Review*, 23, 403-410.

Kehm, B. M. and Erkkilä, T. (2014). The Ranking Game. *European Journal of Education, Research, Development and Policy*, 49(1), 3-11.

Kenny, K., Whittle, A. and Willmott, H. (2011) *Understanding Identity & Organisations*, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore, Sage.

Knights, D. and Clarke, C. (2014). It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work. *Organizations Studies*, 35(3), 335-357.

Knights, D. and Clarke, C. (2017). Pushing the boundaries of Amnesia and Myopia: A Critical Review of the Literature on Identity on Management and Organization Studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 19, 337-356.

Knights, D. and McCabe, D. (2000). 'Ain't Misbehavin'? Opportunities for resistance under new forms of 'quality' management. *Sociology*, 34(3), 421-436.

Knights, D. and Willmott, H. (1989). Power and Subjectivity at Work: From Degradation to Subjugation at Work. *Sociology*, 23, 535-558.

Kuhn, T.S. (1996) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.

Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S. (2009) *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, Los Angeles, Sage.

Lahiri, B. (2011) *The Plural Actor*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press.

Lazzarato, M. (2012) *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Amsterdam, Semiotext(e).

Lazzarato, M. (2015) *Governing by Debt*, Amsterdam, Semiotext(e).

Leuze, K. (2011). How structure signals status: institutional stratification and the transition from higher education to work in Germany and Britain. *Journal of Education and Work*, 24(5), 449-475.

Locke, W. (2011) ‘The Institutionalization of Rankings: Managing Status Anxiety in an Increasingly Marketized Environment’ in J. C. Shin, R. K. Toutkoushian and U. Teichler (eds.) *University Rankings: Theoretical Basis, Methodology and Impacts on Global Higher Education*, Springer.

Locke, W. (2014). The Intensification of Rankings Logic in an Increasingly Marketised Higher Education Environment. *European Journal of Education*, 49(1), 77-90.

Lorenz, C. (2012). ‘If You’re So Smart, Why Are You Under Surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism, And New Public Management’. *Critical Inquiry*, 38(3), 599-629.

Loveday, V. (2015). Working-Class Participation, Middle-Class Aspiration? Value, Upward Mobility and Symbolic Indebtedness in Higher Education. *The Sociological Review*, 63(3), 570-588.

Mangan, J., Hughes, A., Davies, P., and Slack, K. (2010). Fair access, achievement and geography: explaining the association between social class and students’ choice of university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(3), 335–350.

Marginson, S. (1997) *Markets in Higher Education*, Sidney, Allen and Unwin.

Maringe, F. (2011) ‘The student as a consumer: affordances and constraints in a transforming higher education environment’ in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

Mason, J. (2018) *Qualitative Research*, Third Edition, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne, Sage.

McCaig, C. (2018) *The Marketisation of English Higher Education: A Policy Analysis of a Risk-based System*, Bingley, Emerald Publishing.

McCulloch, A. (2009). The Student as Co-Producer: Learning from Public Administration about the Student-University Relationship. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(2), 171-183.

McMillan, J.J. and Cheney, G. (1996). The student as consumer: The implications and Limitations of a metaphor. *Communication Education,* 45, 1-15.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London and New York, Routledge.

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E. and Scullion, R. (2009). Having, being and higher education: The marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(3), 277-287.

Morgan, G., and Smircich, L. (1980). The Case for Qualitative research. Academy of Management Review, 5, 491-500.

Mutche, A. (2003). Communities of practice and habitus: A critique. *Organization Studies*, 24, 383-401.

Naidoo, R. (2004). Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 457-471.

Naidoo, R. and Jamieson, I. (2005). Empowering participants or corroding learning? Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 267-281.

Naidoo, R., Shankar, A. and Ekant, V. (2011). The Consumerist Turn in Higher Education: Policy Aspirations and Outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(11/12), 1142-1162.

Nash, R. (1999). Bourdieu, 'Habitus', and Educational Research: Is it all worth the Candle? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 175-187.

Needham, C. (2003) *Citizen-Consumers: New Labour's Marketplace Democracy*, London, The Catalyst Forum.

Nixon, E., Scullion, R. and Hearn, R. (2018). Her majesty the student: marketised higher education and the narcissistic (dis)satisfactions of the student-consumer. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(6), 927-943.

Nordensvärd, J. (2011) ‘The consumer metaphor versus the citizen metaphor: different sets of roles for students’ in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of HigherEducation and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

O’Reilly, M. and Parker, N. (2013). ‘Unsatisfactory Saturation’: a critical exploration of the notion of saturated sample sizes in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 13(2), 190-197.

Parkin, F. (1974) ‘Strategies of social closure in class formation’ in *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, London, Tavistock.

Paterson, L. (1997). Trends in Higher Education Participation in Scotland. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51(1), 29-48.

Patton, M. Q. (2002) *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.), Thousand Oaks, Sage.

Peck, J. (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2017). Individualising the future: the emotional geographies of neoliberal governance in young peoples' aspirations. *Area*, 49(3), 288-295.

Power, S., Edwards, T. and Wigfall, V. (2003). Education and the Middle Class. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(4), 427-428.

Reay, D. (1997) ‘The double bind of the “working-class” feminist academic: The success of failure or the failure of success?’ in Mahony, P. and Zmorczek, C. (Eds.), Class Matters: “Working Class” Women's Perspectives on Social Class. London, Taylor & Francis.

Reay, D. (1998) *Class work: Mothers’ involvement in children’s schooling*, London, University College Press.

Reay. D. (2004). ‘It’s all becoming a habitus’: beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 25(4), 431-444.

Reay, D. (2015). Habitus and the psychosocial: Bourdieu with feelings. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45(1), 9-23.

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, Education, and the Working Classes*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Reay, D., Ball, S.J., David, M. and Davies, J. (2001). Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Social Class, Race and the Higher Education Choice Process. *Sociology*, 35(4), 855-874.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009) Clayton 'Strangers in Paradise'? Working-class Students in Elite Universities, *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121.

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S.J. (2001). Making a Difference?: Institutional Habituses and Higher Education Choice. *Sociological Research Online*, 5(4).

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S.J. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race, and Gender in Higher Education*, London and Sterling, Trentham Books.

Riessman, C. C. (2008) *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Los Angeles, CA, Sage.

Robinson, S., Ratle, O. and Bristow, A. (2017). Labour pains: starting a career within the neo-liberal university. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 17(3), 481-508.

Rowlands, J. and Rawolle, S. (2013). Neoliberalism is Not a Theory of Everything: A Bourdieuian Analysis of "Illusio" in Educational Research. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(3), 260-272.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with "the student experience"? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(5), 657–667.

Sabri, D. (2013). Student Evaluations as 'Fact Totems': The Case of the UK National Student Survey'. *Sociological Research Online*, (18 (4) 15).

Saldana, J. (2003) *Longitudinal qualitative research: Analyzing change through time*, Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford, Altamira Press

Salmi, J. and Saroyan, A. (2007). League Tables as Policy Instruments: Uses and Misuses. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19, 1-38.

Santos, B. de S. (2016), Epistemologies of the South: justice against epistemicide, New York, Routledge.

Saunders, M. N. and Bristow, A. (2019) 'Understanding Research Philosophy and Approaches to Theory Development' in M. N. K. Saunders, P. Lewis and A. Thornhill (Eds.), *Research Methods for Business Students* (pp. 128-171), Harlow, Pearson.

Saunders, M. N. and Towsend, K. (2016). Reporting and Justifying the Number of Interview Participants in Organization and Workplace Research. *British Journal of Management*, 27, 836–852.

Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in human capital. *American Economic Review*, 51, 1-17.

Scullion, R., Molesworth, M. and Nixon, E. (2011) 'Arguments, responsibility and what is to be done about marketisation' in Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as a Consumer*, London/New York, Routledge.

Shattock, M. (2012) *Making Policy in British Higher Education: 1945-2011*, Maidenhead, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education.

Shattock, M. and Horvath, A. (2020) *The Governance of British Higher Education: The Impact of Governmental, Financial and Market Pressures*, London, New York, Bloomsbury.

Shore, C. (2008). Audit culture and Illiberal governance: Universities and the politics of accountability. *Anthropological Theory*, 8(3), 278-298.

Sieweke, J. (2014). Pierre Bourdieu in management and organization studies—A citation context analysis and discussion of contributions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 30, 532-543.

Suddaby, R. (2006). What Grounded Theory Is Not. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(4), 633-642.

Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing Managerial Identities: Organizational Fragmentation, Discourse and Identity Struggle. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1163-1193.

Swartz, D. (1997) *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, London and Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Swart, D. (2013) *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals: The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press.

Tarabini, A. and Ingram, N. (2018) (Eds.) 'Setting the scene for the analysis' in *Educational Choices, Transitions and Aspirations in Europe: Systemic, Institutional and Subjective Challenges*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

Taylor, C. (2004) *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press.

Threadgold, S. (2020) *Bourdieu and Affect: Towards a Theory of Affective Affinities*, Bristol, Bristol University Press.

Tholen, G. (2013). The Social Construction of Competition for Graduate Jobs: A Comparison between Great Britain and the Netherlands. *Sociology*, 47(2), 267-283.

Tholen, G. and Brown, P. (2018) 'Higher education and the myths of graduate employability' in R. Waller, N. Ingram and M. R. M. Ward (eds.) *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University Admissions, Experiences, and Outcomes*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

Thurbon, E. (2012) 'From Developmentalism to Neoliberalism and Back Again? Governing the Market in Australia from the 1980s to the Present' in Kyung-Sup C., Fine B., Weiss L. (eds) *Developmental Politics in Transition*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Tight, M. (2013). Students: Customers, Clients or Pawns?, *Higher Education*, 26, 291-307.

Tolich, M. and Davidson, C. (2003) ‘Collecting the Data’ in Davidson, C. and Tolich, M. (eds.) *Social science research in New Zeland*, Auckland, Pearson Education.

Tomlinson, M. (2008). 'The Degree Is Not Enough': Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1), 49-61.

Tomlinson, M. (2016). The impact of market-driven higher education on student-university relations: investing, consuming and competing. *Higher Education Policy*, 29 (2), 149-166.

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Student perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(4), 450-467.

van Andel, J., Pimentel Botas, C. and Huisman, J. (2012). The consumption values of and empowerment of student as customer in higher education: Taking a rational look inside 'Pandora’s Box'. *Higher Education Review*, 45(1), 62-85.

Verhaeghe, P. (2014) *What about me? The struggle for identity in a market-based society*, Victoria and London, Scribe Publications.

Vlachou, M. (2017). Researching experience in global higher education: A study of international business students in the UK [Unpublished PhD thesis]. University of Leicester.

White, N. R. (2007). ‘The customer is always right?’: Student discourse about higher education in Australia. *Higher Education*, 54, 593–604.

Williams, J. (2013) *Consuming Higher Education: Why Learning Can’t Be Bought*, London and New York, Bloomsbury

Willig, C. (2008) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Maidenhead, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education.

Winter, E. and Chapleo, C. (2017). An Exploration of the Effect of Servicescape on Student Institution Choice in UK Universities. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(2), 187-200.

Wittel, A. (2001). Toward a Network Sociality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 51-76.

Ybema, S, Keenoy, T, Oswick, C, Beverungen, A, Ellis, N, and Sabelis, I. (2009). Articulating identities. *Human Relations*, 62(3), 299-322.

Young, M. (1994 [1958]) *The Rise of Meritocracy*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers.

Annex 1 – Questions and prompts for the interviews

The questions/prompts below are indicative and do not cover all the questions I raised during the interviews, as each interview was unique and developed in its own way.

- Name, age, gender, place of origin.
- What and where are you studying?
- In which year?
- Why did you choose your university?
- Why did you choose your subject?
- Did you consult your family and friends?
- Did you consult university rankings and league tables? Why? Do you know how they are built?
- Did you consider prospective employability?
- Is future employability important to you? If so, why?
- How would you define your socioeconomic background/social class?
- Which type of educational institution did you attend before HE?
- Could you describe your educational experience before HE?
- Did you consult your teachers or anyone at school about your choice of subject/university?
- Did your school give you any advice or suggestion regarding what university to apply to?
- How much do you pay in terms of tuition fees?
- What do you think about paying for your HE?
- Do you agree with the amount? Why?
- Did you get a tuition fee loan?
- Did you get a maintenance loan? If so, what is the amount?
- What are your thoughts on the loan(s)?
- Do you like to study and learn? What are your methods? Do you prefer to study alone or in a group?
- Do you like to engage socially with other fellow students? How and why?
- Would you like to have more contact time? If so, why?
- Could you describe your relationship with your tutors and lecturers?
- What are your expectations/plans for the future?
- Questions regarding the strikes of 2018 from that moment on.

Annex 2 – Information sheet for interviewees

An exploration of students' discourses on and practices in higher education

I am a doctoral research student at the Open University Business School. The general objective of this study is to develop an in-depth insight into understanding the effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism in students' approach to higher education, namely in their relationships with academics and other students. The main data collection technique will consist of qualitative one-on-one interviews and I would like to interview you to obtain further insight and to understand your experience in higher education, i.e., your motivations, expectations and views as a higher education student in the UK.

The interview will be informal and may last up to an hour. It will be audio-recorded to ensure that the contribution is accurately captured. However, if you prefer, written notes can be taken instead and you will have the possibility to have a look at these and at the final written transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflect your views. Extracts from your interview may be included in reports to be submitted by me for examination at the Open University and may also be used in papers for publication, but your responses will be confidential and any such extracts will be carefully anonymised, unless agreed otherwise. This research will follow the Open University research ethical guidelines. At the end, a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to you if you request it. The data generated will be stored at Open University and will be destroyed after five years.

Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research project at any time until the point of completion of the initial report. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data you have provided. In the unlikely event that you should feel unhappy about anything you said and would like me to remove it from the records, you can contact me on the email below and I will remove all or part of your words.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance.

Carlos Azevedo
Doctoral Researcher
Department for People and Organizations, Open University Business School
Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
carlos.azevedo@open.ac.uk

If you wish to talk to a third party about this research, you can contact my research supervisor Dr Caroline Clarke at caroline.clarke@open.ac.uk.

Annex 3 – Consent form

An exploration of students' discourses on and practices in higher education

Name of participant:

Name of principal investigator: Carlos Azevedo

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me. I have been provided with a written information in plain language to read and keep for future reference.

2. I understand everything that is stated in the written information, namely that my participation will involve being interviewed and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the written information.

3. I acknowledge that:

   a. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from me until the point of completion of the initial report. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided.

   b. The project is for the purpose of research.

   c. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements.

   d. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored at Open University and will be destroyed after five years.

   e. If necessary any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research.

   f. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.

I consent to being audio-taped/video-recorded ☐ **yes** ☐ **no**
(Please tick)

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings ☐ **yes** ☐ **no**
(Please tick)

Participant signature: Date:

Carlos Azevedo
Doctoral Researcher
Open University