

# A Participatory Study into the Student Experience of First Year Under- Represented Students in a UK University

Stéphane Antoine Farenga (14114190)

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the experience of ten undergraduate students at Southeastern (a UK post-1992 university) as they transition into higher education (HE) during their first year. The research focuses on the widening participation (WP) agenda at Southeastern and across the sector, which aims to address inequalities in student outcomes and experience. Specifically, this research concentrates on students considered to be under-represented in HE, based on their socio-economic backgrounds, because local and national WP research point to under-represented students encountering difficulties during their transition compared to their peers, including higher non-continuation rates and lower attainment. This research helps address these inequalities by filling a knowledge gap at Southeastern concerning students' early university experience and offering practice-based recommendations to facilitate student-staff partnerships, which will result in tailored activity that better supports under-represented students' success.

A Participatory Pedagogy approach, underpinned by student partnership and co-participatory principles, provides a unique opportunity to explore the experience of under-represented students by engaging participants and providing a platform to share powerful testimonies of their experiences in HE. This co-participatory process ensured the research avoided a potential deficit-model construct by rebalancing the researcher-participant relationship and encouraging participants to co-generate aspects of the research. It was paired with an innovative artful inquiry methodology and collage making method to capture deep, reflective data on participants' transition into Southeastern.

Participants' experiences are analysed in relation to a conceptual framework, drawing on Bourdieusian notions, a capability approach and transitional models, which provides a more nuanced understanding of their experience at Southeastern by considering their behaviour and agency in relation to their habitus, values, capabilities and conceptions of transition. It also influences this research's contributions to future practice by informing discussion on how to support under-represented students at this institution and across the sector. This framework also accounts for the role neoliberalism plays in shaping students' performativity and transitional experiences, which little previous research on the student experience has sought to do.

Findings reveal that neoliberal attitudes and actions permeate participants' decision-making in accessing HE, which when considered in relation to Bourdieusian notions of social gravity and *illusio*, demonstrate these students exhibit a feel for the game that other WP research has not accounted for. However, participants then endured difficult transitional experiences during their first term at Southeastern, mainly due to mismatches in expectations. Although participants' experience improved as they formed friendship and support groups, this period highlights a form of

institutional misrecognition of their habitus and reinforces the deficit-model approach that is prevalent in institutional practices designed to support the student experience. A capability approach analysis of findings explains how students' choice, aspiration and agency in accessing and performing in HE can be reclaimed away from deficit-model discourses and instead positioned around what under-represented students value, such as financial independence and personalised opportunities to develop relevant skills and careers. This re-conception of the student experience towards a more individual understanding of needs and desired outcomes is a crucial step in providing more meaningful support for under-represented students.

The research's findings challenge institutional practitioners, leaders and researchers to think differently about the early experience of under-represented students in HE. Southeastern is encouraged to adopt a number of recommendations to address the transitional challenges participants faced, including an innovative, step-by-step guide for staff-student partnerships to develop meaningful forms of support, as well as specific practices, such as embedding the formation of peer groups and more focused career planning during induction. Finally, researchers across the sector seeking to carry out their own investigations of under-represented students' experiences can learn from this research's adoption of Participatory Pedagogy, both conceptually and practically, to uncover important reflections and experiences in their environments. The research suggests entering into co-participatory partnerships with under-represented students will develop practices that support individualised transitions into university, while ensuring students feel valued and retain ownership of their own HE experience.

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## Acronym list

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Full title</b>
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DES	Department for Education and Science
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EdD	Professional Doctorate in Education
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
KBE	Knowledge-Based Economy
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
UCAS	University and Colleges Admission Service
UoS	University of Sheffield
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening Participation

# 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, UK governments have enacted a widening participation (WP) agenda broadly focused on policies and practices aiming to increase higher education (HE) participation and successful outcomes of students from under-represented groups, so-called 'WP students' (Burke, 2012). However, sector data (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2013 and 2015; Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2017a, 2017b and 2017c; Keohane and Petrie, 2017) and research on the experience of WP students (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer, 2007; Gorard et al., 2007; Crozier et al, 2008; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011; Roberts, 2011; Burke, 2012; Christie et al., 2016; HEPI, 2017; Read et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2018) suggests these students do not enjoy equal outcomes compared with their peers. As a researcher and leader in WP at Southeastern University (hereafter Southeastern), I have dedicated my own career to better understanding the impact of policies and practices, both at sector and institutional levels, on the HE experiences of under-represented students. My publications in this field (Farenga, 2015b, 2017; Farenga et al., 2016) are focussed on institutional contexts, including Southeastern (Farenga, 2018b), and confirm that WP students can experience unequal outcomes compared to their peers.

This Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) represents my attempt at improving the student experience at Southeastern, and across the sector where applicable. The EdD's professional nature gave me licence to probe my own institutional context (Wisker, 2008; Perry, 2016), which I did on two levels: one, as a researcher I investigated the experience of WP students at Southeastern and deepened my understanding of their transitions at this university; two, as a leader, I will feed this knowledge back into my own institution to improve the experience of Southeastern students, while also disseminating my outputs to impact other institutions and influence policymakers at a national level.

I conducted this research within the recent tradition of avoiding deficit-model constructs of WP students (Burke, 2012; Thomas, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016), which deeply influenced my work, from how I label these students to my study's methodology. Social mobility rhetoric encourages WP students into HE and is intertwined with a commitment to increase HE access and supply graduates to labour markets (Walkerdine, 2003; Burke, 2012; McCaig, 2014; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016; Bowl et al., 2018). While such increases are pitched as potentially transformative opportunities to tackle social mobility by "level[ing] the playing field between the social classes" (Hoskins, 2013: 237), critics (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2011, 2012) are particularly vocal about potential deficit-model traps in researching WP and conclusions that WP students "remake" (Burke, 2007: 417) their identities to conform to more traditional profiles to secure HE success. These critiques

also debate the nomenclature around labelling students from WP backgrounds. For some (Burke, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016), describing students as WP, disadvantaged or non-traditional implies a deficit in relation to students positioned in opposition. To avoid such deficit-model traits in my research, I use the term ‘under-represented students’ to denote students from low income backgrounds and from geographic locations with low rates of participation into HE. Although I employ under-represented in this way, others use it to encompass different groups, such as those defined by certain personal characteristics (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity). In fact, there is little consensus amongst WP researchers or practitioners as to how to define such groups (Burke, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). I use under-represented because at the outset of my research, Southeastern’s institutional policy for supporting under-represented students centred on income and geographical participation data, rather than other characteristics (e.g. ethnicity). I provide further detail about this decision later in this chapter (section 1.4.3). In my context, under-represented refers to more factual data about student participation at Southeastern rather than exposing backgrounds or personal circumstance that could lead to assumptions or biases about their ability to access or succeed in HE and which, ultimately, could lead to deficit-model connotations (Burke, 2012).

I centred my research on the transitional experiences of 10 students, from under-represented backgrounds, at Southeastern, a low-tariff, post-1992 university located in South East England. The immediate experience of first-year under-represented students entering HE is pinpointed because according to literature and key statistics, they appear to face hurdles in their transition (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Krause and Coates, 2008; Johnston and Merrill, 2009; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Eccleston, Biesta and Hughes, 2010; Quinn, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Gale and Parker, 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016). These obstacles are linked to increased levels of withdrawal (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2009; Quinn, 2013), which are reflected not only in data at Southeastern (Farenga et al., 2016; Farenga, 2018), but across the HE sector (HESA, 2017a). This research uncovers students’ transitional experiences and perceptions of HE against the backdrop of wider WP and neoliberal contexts.

This chapter aims to briefly introduce the structure of this thesis, along with my research questions and a reflection on my roles as researcher and leader at Southeastern. I begin with the latter to provide a sense of how I have evolved my thinking and practice in relation to this research. Second, I set out the context of this research, both in relation to the HE sector and to Southeastern, and indicate my research questions. Third, I introduce the main theoretical lenses through which I will design my research and analyse my findings. Fourth, I propose that implementing a co-

participatory methodology is crucial (and beneficial) to undertaking my EdD, and research into the student experience more generally. I end with an overview of key findings and conclusions.

## 1.1 My journey as a researcher

My MSc in Higher Education prepared me initially for a role where I could carry out research to impact HE policies and practices. At the time, I did not aspire to complete a doctorate as I believed this MSc equipped me with sufficient knowledge of UK HE and a strong research foundation. However, several factors emerged during my first year working in Southeastern's WP department, as a Research and Evaluation Officer, that caused me to reflect on my role and potential contributions locally and nationally.

This role was part of a professional, non-academic practitioner team focused on delivering activities both to widen access into HE and to support the experience of Southeastern students from under-represented backgrounds. It carried out outreach and interventions typical of the HE sector (McCaig, 2018a). The team's practitioner focus influenced the nature of my role, which although denoted 'research' in its title, was centred on evaluating the delivery of programmes in order to fulfil monitoring obligations between Southeastern and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the regulatory body overseeing WP in HE during this period. I was not operating as an academic researcher, but as a programme evaluator in a team of practitioners, helping to inform their practice and contributing to the overall increasingly rigid professionalism of the HE sector associated with regulation (Olssen and Peters, 2005). During this initial year, I also realised with fascination how layered WP is as a field, combining political agendas, institutional strategies and the experiences of students from under-represented backgrounds. A year into my Research and Evaluation role, I took on the challenge of completing an EdD aimed at developing my knowledge and research skills, and at delivering meaningful new knowledge where I felt this was needed most: addressing inequalities in the experience of under-represented students.

In defining my research, I began observing an increasing reliance on quantitative student outcomes, over more qualitative measures of capturing students' experience, which was evidenced in Government policy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011, 2016), programme evaluations (Bowes et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2014; HEFCE, 2014; McCaig, 2014), research studies (Boliver, 2015) and even my own work (Farenga, 2015b). With pressure growing to concentrate on quantitative evaluations aimed at fulfilling monitoring duties, part of the purpose of my EdD was to contribute knowledge on ways of doing research outside of regulatory frameworks (OfS, 2018, 2019). I felt strongly that qualitatively researching the student experience could fill a growing gap locally and nationally. I intended my own research to achieve this by capitalising on an EdD's ability to provide feedback loops of contributions back into professional contexts (Wisker, 2008; Perry,

2016). In doing so, I committed myself to developing innovative qualitative research practices within WP research, such as Participatory Pedagogy (Burke, 2012) and artful inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008). I was, unwittingly, exercising a form of reflexivity of my professional role and personal attributes based on the environment around me. In what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as situated learning, I embodied the outlook of a reflective practitioner (Olssen and Peters, 2005) and began developing my professional position, knowledge of WP issues and research skills.

Professionally, I appreciated the clear role an EdD plays in transforming educational leadership (Buss et al., 2017; Tupling, Outhwaite, 2017) as I took on a leadership role within the same team at Southeastern during my studies. This led to greater emphasis on eventual contributions to local practice and national policy as I am now better positioned to influence other leaders across Southeastern and the sector. Woods (2016) and Rayner et al. (2010), through their work on leadership in HE, encouraged me to consider how to drive change at Southeastern and beyond. They consider how formalised knowledge, such as that gained from a doctorate, can lead to legitimacy of power and provide authority in addressing critical institutional challenges and solutions. In my context, this involves supporting the experience of under-represented students at Southeastern by using my findings and conclusions to directly implement new support practices within my team. While actual shifts in institutional policy are outside my immediate control, I can effect change by lobbying Southeastern's senior leaders and advocating for under-represented students, based on the findings of my research. At a national level, I believe my work can influence researchers, practitioners and policymakers by contributing knowledge on student engagement, experience and support for under-represented students. In this thesis, I will refer to my contributions in several ways: my own practice as a researcher and leader; institutional practice at Southeastern I can directly affect; and national policy through research dissemination. I have already achieved some of the latter, through conference presentations and journal publications, which I used to inform my arguments in this thesis.

While these aims are clear to me now, there are three key aspects of the EdD that developed during the research process that significantly affected its direction, scope and goals. First, despite a desire to move away from the quantitative, outcome-based research prevalent in WP, I began the EdD with a focus on withdrawal rates of first-year students from under-represented backgrounds, a prevalent issue in my initial literature review (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Roberts, 2011; Wray et al., 2013). It was difficult to divorce myself from institutionally pressing issues, which included higher withdrawal rates for under-represented students compared to their peers (Farenga, 2015b). Upon reflection, this outcomes-based approach not only ignored students' lived experience,

but also perpetuated a deficit-model culture whereby under-represented students were compared to their peers, and research conclusions, despite being well-intentioned in trying to support success, suggested remedial practices to transform these students and close performance gaps.

Second, a major breakthrough for me was the work of Burke (2007, 2010, 2012) and others (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Hoskins, 2013; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016) decrying the use of deficit models in research, practice and policies affecting the student experience. It was at this point that I became aware of the approach I (and Southeastern) tended to adopt in carrying out research on unequal student experience. To counter this, I took a strong position to focus on the first-year experience of students in my research cohort without comparisons to more advantaged students at Southeastern. Additionally, I adopted more appropriate nomenclature (i.e. the 'under-represented' label) and focused on implementing a qualitative methodology rather than relying on quantitative outcomes, such as withdrawal rates. More innovative qualitative methods, such as those using images, could extract new meanings to well-known phenomena, as well as encouraging reflexivity amongst participants (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Weber, 2008). This became important as I sought to use a co-participatory methodological approach, Participatory Pedagogy, to avoid a deficit-model construct and rebalance the researcher-participant relationship by allowing participants to co-generate aspects of the research (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017).

Third, as the doctorate progressed, I became more aware of neoliberalism's influence over UK HE. Its role in defining HE structures (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Wilkins, 2012) and the student experience (Zepke, 2014, 2015) suggested that my research should account for the possibility that it influenced my participants' experience.

The journey from debating whether to take on this EdD to submitting almost five years later was made considerably smoother by several key milestones that greatly impacted the overall project. The following four conference presentations, at the Society for Research into Higher Education's (SRHE) annual conference (Farenga, 2015a), at a joint conference organised by SRHE and OFFA (Farenga, 2016a), at an arts-based research conference at the University of Wolverhampton (Farenga, 2016b) and at a student transition conference at the University of Sussex (Farenga, 2018a), helped on two fronts: one, to validate my thinking and inclusion of different aspects of the work, such as the importance of understanding how neoliberalism affects the student experience, or, the adoption of Participatory Pedagogy as a co-participatory research framework to engage students and provide a platform for their reflections; two, they provided invaluable feedback at different stages of the research, such as questioning my reliance on Bourdieusian notions to explain agency and experience, which led me to include a capability approach (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003) that I believe strengthened my work and deepened my contribution to practice. A published article in the *Journal*

*of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* (Farenga, 2018b), one of the key journals in WP, cemented similar aspects of the thesis and the feedback from reviewers validated the focus of the EdD. Above all, these outputs contributed to my reflexivity as I developed my key arguments and understanding of my research's context (Boud, 2010).

Throughout this EdD, Foucault's own reflexivity reverberated in me: "when I write I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same as before" (1991: 27). This EdD is the product of a long research process during which I evolved my understanding of how unequal student experiences and outcomes are perpetuated and the role under-represented students have in shaping transformative policies and practices that influence their experience in HE. I hope the discussion of my findings, concluding institutional recommendations and calls-to-action for further research spur other researchers, practitioners and leaders to change their own practice by carrying out investigations into the inequalities facing under-represented students.

I continue this introductory chapter with an overview of the research's context, which revolves around the intersections between neoliberalism, WP and the student experience. Here, I introduce neoliberalism as a theory and briefly surmise its role in shaping Western society, including sectors like HE. I then concentrate on neoliberalism's influence on WP and the student experience, which has a direct impact on under-represented student participation and student engagement in HE, both key foundations of my research. I also argue that neoliberalism supports a deficit-model approach in WP research, which I further guard against as I contend this compromises the ability to provide a platform for under-represented at Southeastern to share their experiences.

## 1.2 Neoliberalism, widening participation and the student experience

Neoliberalism is a political, economic and philosophical theory that evolved during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Brown et al., 2003; McNally, 2014). Governments in the Western world, including the UK, have steadily drawn on its principles to shape society, particularly economies (Jones, 2003; Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Chitty, 2009; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012, Mavelli, 2014). At its core, neoliberalism embraces a positive form of state intervention in regulating economic markets, such as HE (Buchanan, 1975; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Zepke, 2015; McCaig et al., 2018). This regulation takes several forms, including fostering competition within markets rather than relying on liberal, free-market ideals (Buchanan, 1975). It encourages the development and deployment of managerial and entrepreneurial practices designed to incite individuals to engage with self-improvement and performance enhancing objectives (Williamson, 1975 and 1992; Olssen and Peters, 2005). People in neoliberal environments are positioned as being in control of their economic futures and self-interested in their personal gain

(McKean, 1974; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Zepke, 2015). Of most relevance to my work are the developments of knowledge as a form of capital and the evolution of labour markets as competitive spaces where individuals jostle to showcase a flexible set of attributes and skills, much of which tends to take place in HE (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1996; Burton-Jones, 1999; Brown et al., 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Wilkins, 2012; McCaig et al., 2018). These changes are key elements of the wider Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) that emerged as the major economic structure for most western nations (Burton-Jones, 1999; Naidoo, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Wilkins, 2012).

In the UK, successive governments, especially from the late 1990s onwards, focused on embedding neoliberalism in educational structures and policies, particularly in HE (Olssen and Peters, 2005; McCaig et al., 2018). The latter is considered a primary vehicle for supporting the KBE and economic growth, achieved by moulding HE as an environment where learners adopt skills, experiences and knowledge privileged by the KBE (Burton-Jones, 1999; Naidoo, 2003; Burke, 2012). At this stage, I detail how neoliberalism impacts aspects of HE directly linked to my EdD. First, I examine neoliberalism's influence in shaping HE WP policy (Ball, 1998; Mccaferty, 2010; Naidoo, 2010; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016), and second, I briefly explore its impact on the student experience, including student engagement (Zepke 2014, 2015). In both cases, I employ sector data to assist in arguing why the experience of under-represented students requires investigating. Although I show that the data at Southeastern supports these inequalities, it would be misleading to infer this led to me research this institution. As I will cover in section 1.4.3, my access to Southeastern and student populations made it an ideal case to research.

### 1.2.1 Neoliberalism and widening participation

In taking stock of HE and WP literature, I believe that underpinning the evolution of WP policy and practice, and the HE sector itself, requires a commitment between government and institutions on three levels. One, it facilitates the development and implementation of neoliberal structures and policies, designed to enhance regulation of the HE sector (Ball, 1998; Naidoo, 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Clarke 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Zepke, 2015; McCaig et al., 2018). Two, it forges deeper links between HE, the economy and labour markets (Barnett 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Smith, 2008; Levy and Hopkins, 2010; James et al., 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013). Three, it shapes student engagement and performativity around notions of self-development and improvement (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Mavelli, 2014; Zepke 2014, 2015). These developments are embedded in key government education White Papers released during this period (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003; BIS, 2011, 2016).

WP is one aspect of HE whose policies are continually shaped by this deep connection between neoliberalism and HE (Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Ball, 2008; Barr, 2008; Burke, 2012; Mavelli, 2014; Ingleby, 2015; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016; McCaig et al., 2018). This is most strongly felt in participation increases for the least advantaged socio-economic groups and the need to increase the output of HE graduates into jobs within the KBE (Naidoo, 2003; Ball, 2008; Williams, 2011; Burke, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; Bowl et al., 2018), which has a direct impact on the makeup of student populations at institutions like Southeastern. In fact, neoliberalism helps drive the continued expansion of student participation observed in the sector in the UK since the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Brown et al., 2003; Chowdry et al., 2008; BIS, 2011, 2016; Burke, 2012; Mavelli, 2014; McCaig et al., 2018).

During this period, undergraduate numbers expanded by over 250% (HESA, 2017b; Universities UK [UUK], 2017a), including an increase of over 30% since 2006 for first-degree entrants to about 500,000 (UUK, 2017b). Much of this growth took place under the banner of WP and its policies and practices aimed at promoting fair and equal access to HE (Ertl and Hayward, 2010; McCaig, 2018a). This widened access included individuals that do not traditionally participate in HE, such as individuals from under-represented backgrounds, including those from geographic locations with the lowest progression to HE rates (HEFCE, 2013a, 2013b), and who have a diverse set of personal characteristics, including ethnicity and socio-economic status (Archer et al., 2003; Burke, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016).

Sector data suggests that under-represented students make up a significant portion of increases in HE participation (HEFCE, 2013; UCAS, 2016, 2017). However, these students are more likely to be concentrated in lower tariff institutions (UCAS, 2016, 2017, 2018), which is corroborated by assessments of the sector (Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Burke, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; McCaig et al., 2018) and several research studies (Quinn, 2010; Mavelli, 2014; Antonucci, 2016; Vigurs et al., 2018). These access figures are tangible evidence that WP policies are not only drawing in historically under-represented students, but are also helping expand participation in the sector, particularly in lower tariff institutions like Southeastern, which counts over 40% of its undergraduate population as being under-represented (Southeastern, 2017, 2018). Within the context of my EdD, and coupled with my previous research (Farenga, 2015b, 2017, 2018b; Farenga et al., 2016), this helps establish a rationale for the research to better understand and support the experience of these students at Southeastern.

### 1.2.2 Neoliberalism and the student experience

Neoliberalism also affects the student experience by shaping student performativity and agency even before individuals enter HE (Ingelby, 2015). This is particularly evident in the culture of improvement that individuals adopt before and during transitions into HE (Barnett, 2009; Wainwright et al., 2011; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Zepke, 2014, 2015) and in the entrepreneurial discourse within academic structures that mould HE graduates (Trowler, 1998; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins and Burke, 2013). This knowledge is seen as compatible with the wider neoliberal demands of the KBE (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Barnett, 2009; Wilkins, 2012). This represents just one potential lens through which to understand the nature of HE. The reason I adopted this position is not because I support it and its resulting policies and practices—in fact I critique this stance in my literature review, findings and discussion chapters—but because I believe any assessment of major elements of HE, such as WP and the student experience, should acknowledge how entrenched neoliberalism is across the sector. In doing so, I might expose its influence of the student experience and supply more relevant institutional recommendations.

Upon entering HE, students are encouraged to focus their engagement on aspects of their experience that will net them perceived advantages in KBE labour markets (Walkerdine, 2003; Wilkins, 2012). According to Zepke (2014, 2015) student engagement manifests itself in an input-output model whereby students interact with learning on a transactional basis and expect successful outcomes (i.e. degree attainment and labour market progression). Knowledge that is entrepreneurial in nature, meaning steeped in practice-based and instrumental contexts with direct application to KBE workplaces, is especially valued by both institutions and students. Given my view that neoliberalism is pervasive in contemporary HE, this is crucial in understanding student engagement because it helps define expectations around outcomes for both sides: the learning environment and modes of knowledge developed by institutions reflect the needs of the KBE, which in turn encourage participation by positioning HE as the space where requisite skills and experience privileged by the KBE are developed. However, sector data indicates that despite this simple input-output style model of engagement, there is a stark discrepancy in student performance and outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged or under-represented students.

According to HEFCE data (2013, 2015), many under-represented students neither receive high-level degrees (First or Upper-second) nor end up in professions that require a HE degree. Specifically, disadvantaged graduates are less likely to obtain the highest degree classifications and secure graduate-level employment. In fact, the gaps in these outcomes grow as graduates become more advantaged. Non-continuation rates, between the first and second years of HE for full-time students, also reveal worrisome trends as the most disadvantaged young entrants are more likely to

withdraw than their more advantaged peers (HESA, 2017a, 2017c), suggesting that students accessing HE via WP initiatives are more likely to encounter challenges during their first year.

Progression data, showing levels of graduate employment, also intimate graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to bear worse financial outcomes, such as lower pay and likelihood of promotions, than more advantaged peers (Social Mobility Commission [SMC], 2017). A HEFCE report (2016) confirmed that “graduates from the most advantaged backgrounds have substantially higher professional employment rates than those from the least advantaged backgrounds” (3). These performance-related data substantiate the view that disadvantaged or under-represented students experience worse outcomes than their peers, suggesting more research is required to understand their experience and either develop or alter current learning and support practices to facilitate their success. According to Vigurs et al., (2018), this is especially pertinent for lower tariff institutions, whose under-represented students are less likely to showcase key knowledge about the labour market, less likely to report feeling confident about their graduate outcomes and more likely to display high levels of anxiety and desperation about their futures. Others also comment on the convergence of the increased concentration of under-represented students in lower tariff institutions and worsening outcomes for these students compared to their peers (Boliver, 2017; McCaig, 2018b). This has worrying implications for Southeastern, which is a low-tariff institution, and again demonstrates the need for research focusing on the experience of its under-represented students.

As numbers of students from under-represented backgrounds entering HE continue to rise, success and progression continue to show unequal outcomes, suggesting there may be explanations for these disparities in students’ experience. One of the drivers of my research was to complement existing data on performance outcomes with a qualitative account of the student experience. Although Southeastern reflects sector data on concentrations of under-represented students with lower outcomes, I primarily focused my research here because of my access to the institution and potential participants. However, by taking a deeper view of a group of under-represented students’ experience at my institution, I am able to contribute directly to my practice and draw conclusions on how Southeastern can support its students—outputs that may be applicable to similar low-tariff universities.

### 1.2.3 Avoiding neoliberal deficit-model research

I undertook this research with the intention of avoiding deficit-model approaches in which under-represented students are often compared to their peers. The consensus in such circumstances can be to devalue the experiences and embodied knowledge of under-represented

students in favour of more (seemingly) successful students, leading to the kind of expected readjustments some have commented on (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). In avoiding a deficit-model approach, I am influenced by the work of researchers seeking to develop co-participatory models of student engagement to involve students in the decision-making process surrounding their learning and experience (Neary, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016). I adopted a Participatory Pedagogy methodology (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017) that encouraged my cohort to take an active role in the research and to deeply reflect on their transitional experience, and on HE more generally, which I will introduce in more detail later in this chapter. The development of this model is potentially transformational in how researchers, academics, practitioners and institutional leaders conduct research or develop policies and practices because it represents a framework for involving students in the co-production of their learning and experience, especially those from under-represented backgrounds (Burke, 2012). I focus one of my research questions below around the usefulness of Participatory Pedagogy in achieving this with the aim that others in the sector might implement it in their contexts.

#### 1.2.4 Contributions to practice and research questions

The enhanced focus on the under-represented student experience at Southeastern, along with an awareness of how pervasive neoliberal attitudes and structures are in HE, represent my contribution to my professional practice and field. This includes identifying support I can directly action and extending institutional policy recommendations aimed at improving what may be a difficult transition into HE for some. These outputs are transferable to institutions across the HE sector, particularly for post-1992 universities with similar profiles to Southeastern. In doing so, I hope to increase the knowledge base in WP and student experience, influence policymakers and allow other researchers to build on my findings and continue investigating unequal gaps in outcomes of under-represented students. With that mind, my research questions are:

1. How is neoliberalism reflected in WP as well as in the student experience?
2. What are the transitional experiences of under-represented students at Southeastern?
3. What are the implications of these findings on the practices designed to support the student experience at Southeastern?
4. To what extent does Participatory Pedagogy represent a useful student engagement model for conducting WP research into the student experience in contemporary HE?

These questions can be broadly split into three categories. The first question on neoliberalism, WP and the student experience will be addressed in the literature review and through my own empirical work. It is essential to my research that I establish how reflective WP and the student experience are of neoliberalism because of its pervasiveness across the sector in shaping policies and practice that impact the student experience. Although there is literature exploring neoliberalism in each of these contexts (Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Ball, 2008; Barr, 2008; Burke, 2012; Mavelli, 2014; Ingleby, 2015; McCaig et al., 2018), there are few sources synthesising these interconnections and investigating their relationship with the student experience (Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Zepke, 2014, 2015). In this respect, my own review provides a positive contribution to the literature critiquing neoliberalism's influence on the HE sector. It is especially crucial to establish this foundation, as the current research base is limited in attempting to understand the experience of under-represented students within these contexts (Burke, 2012).

The second and third questions revolve around gaining a better understanding of the experience of a specific set of under-represented students at Southeastern. The second question focuses on unpacking these students' experience as they transition into HE at Southeastern and charts this throughout their first year—doing so highlights this liminal period of the student experience as a varied experience, both academically and socially. This investigation builds on previous research that suggests particular student demographics may find the first-year experience challenging (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Beard et al., 2007; Krause and Coates, 2008; Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011; Christie et al., 2016). The outcomes of this assessment are prompted by the third question and help drive my contributions back into my practice, both as a researcher investigating, and as a leader overseeing the student experience of under-represented students at Southeastern.

Finally, the last question is a methodological reflection on how student experience research is and could be carried out, particularly in a WP setting. I draw on notions of deficit-model constructions to argue, as others have (Archer et al., 2003; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2011, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016), that research within WP is too often bound by such models and does not account for the lived experience of potentially marginalised under-represented students. By reflecting on Participatory Pedagogy, I showcase how a research approach can be construed to elevate participants into positions where they can co-generate knowledge and help shape the research itself, which I argue serves as an antidote to deficit-model constructions. Part of my local and sector contribution is the practical application of Participatory Pedagogy as a co-participatory approach, intended for those dedicated to better understanding and improving under-represented students' experience to follow and in order to evolve.

Having presented the context for my research, from national, local and methodological vantages, and laid out my research questions, I now offer a brief overview of the theories and conceptual tools I used to analyse my findings. This is followed by a more in-depth consideration of my methodology (Participatory Pedagogy) and method (art-based inquiry), ending with a succinct overview of my research findings and conclusions.

### 1.3 Theoretical considerations

So far in this introduction, I have introduced the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in UK HE structures, policies and practices (Ball, 1998; Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Mccaferty, 2010; McCaig et al., 2018). I will outlay more fully in the literature review how deeply embedded neoliberalism is in WP and the student experience by arguing that neoliberal behaviour and actions are evident at an individual level, with HE students expected to embody self-improvement and performativity discourses linked to neoliberalism (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012).

I draw on several sociological theories to interpret the student experience of my participants, introduced here and detailed in Chapter 3. Bourdieu's notions of habitus, capital and field were an early influence on my thinking (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1994; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). There is a history of using Bourdieu's approach to detail individual agency in HE and in relation to WP research (Crozier and Reay, 2008; Quinn, 2010; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bathmaker; 2015; Reay, 2015; Bathmaker et al., 2016) and I explored more contemporary evolutions of his work, such as personal history as a subset of habitus (Reay, 2004) and institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2009). However, as I have narrowed my research focus, I have relinquished personal history as it was more useful for explaining HE participation, which is outside my scope. I concentrate on capitals and institutional habitus to better understand if the fit between my participants and Southeastern could explain their experience. In following the advice of Webb et al. (2017) to think "with and beyond Bourdieu" (138), I draw on *illusio* and *misrecognition* as less used but important Bourdieusian concepts in helping explain experience. I also critique the heavy reliance on Bourdieu in HE research by drawing on Sen's (1992, 1999, 2003) capability approach as an alternative to Bourdieu that emphasises what people value and their ability to achieve a meaningful life.

I analyse participants' student experience data within the context of different conceptions of educational transition, drawn from Gale and Parker (2014). Here, I explore how three different conceptions (induction, development and becoming) position transition as a phenomenon that is

principally considered from an institution's vantage (induction), the individual's position (development) and as a continual form of transformation (becoming).

At the end of Chapter 3, I reflect on the entire literature review and theoretical base for my research, coalescing my theoretical position into a conceptual framework that reflects my research questions. This framework assisted me in deepening my understanding of under-represented students' transition into HE and in formulating contributions to my practice and institutional or national policy. I will next introduce Participatory Pedagogy as a methodology, along with the artful inquiry method used to carry out my study.

## 1.4 Methodology

I used a Participatory Pedagogy approach that repositions participants as co-producers of knowledge (Burke, 2012, Harman, 2017), with a view to avoiding the deficit-model approach that can plague WP research. An artful inquiry methodology uses collage to help provide an outlet for students to tap into a rich vein of emotions and experiences (Neilsen, 2002; Davis, 2008; Vaughan, 2005; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010) and is part of an emerging trend to represent HE research more visually (Gröppel-Wegener et al., 2015; Vigurs et al., 2016). This innovative approach allowed me to consider a further methodologically orientated question that developed as I carried out the research: is Participatory Pedagogy, in combination with artful inquiry, a useful student engagement model for carrying out research into the WP student experience?

### 1.4.1 Participatory Pedagogy

Participatory Pedagogy is an approach to WP research championed by Burke (2012) as a means of addressing inequalities in education. It is predicated on engaging marginalised individuals by sharing their voice with a view to challenging existing structures, such as HE policies and practices. It is especially effective in contexts where the misrecognition of people's embodied characteristics and knowledge has occurred in favour of a more dominant group, which I argue occurs in neoliberal HE (Quinn, 2010; Burke, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; Mavelli, 2014). This gives Participatory Pedagogy an emancipatory quality, which is based on Freire's (1996) work exposing the struggle of oppressed peoples. Throughout this thesis, I describe Participatory Pedagogy as a co-participatory process because of its capacity to bring students and staff together as part of a research process, as well as, the space it allows students to co-develop practices that can support their student experience. I also use the term co-participatory to describe student and staff partnerships more generally, as well as, processes and practices that support these groups, such as co-evaluating current policies or co-developing new ways of supporting the student experience.

It is underused in the sector (Bhagat and O'Neill, 2011; Harman, 2017) but with great potential to redress imbalances in participation and reflect on “who is represented and/or silenced in pedagogical processes, relations and practise” (Burke, 2012: 152). I propose that it is well-suited to my research context where existing research highlights unequal outcomes and experiences of under-represented students (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer, 2007; Gorard et al., 2007; Crozier et al., 2008; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Roberts, 2011; Burke, 2012; Christie et al., 2016; HEPI, 2017; Read et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2018). Sector data also supports these inequalities (HEFCE, 2013, 2015, 2016; HESA 2016, 2017a and 2017c; Farenga et al., 2016; SMC, 2017; Farenga, 2018b) and provides further impetus for an innovative research model. I hope that by adopting a Participatory Pedagogy approach, my research will shed new light on and bring meaningful knowledge to student engagement methodology, useful for conducting research into the WP student experience.

#### 1.4.2 Artful inquiry and collage

Artful inquiry benefits from penetrating liminal, or transitional, spaces in individuals' lived experience (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008). By using a variety of art-based methods (e.g. photography, collage, dance, spoken work), it is capable of uncovering new experiences and emotions that may be more difficult to assess with more traditional qualitative methods (McNiff, 2003, 2013; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Eisner, 2008; Finley 2008; Weber, 2008; Allen; 2013; Kossak, 2013). Artful inquiry is also imbued with an activist quality that lends itself to challenging existing, dominant and oppressive social systems and institutions, including those bearing neoliberal traits (Adams, 2013). It does so by encouraging participants to reflect on and unpack the experiences that contribute to their marginalisation (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001; Finley, 2001; Mullen, 2003; Finley, 2008).

Collage is one of many potential artful inquiry methods (Weber, 2008). It has a natural ability to capture rich emotions and experiences that might otherwise have gone unnoticed while affording individuals the opportunity to deeply reflect on emotions and experiences (Vaughn, 2005; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010; Gerstenblatt, 2013; Roberts and Woods, 2018). It is particularly useful for exploring transitional periods in individuals' experiences (Neilsen, 2002; Davis, 2008). These qualities support collage and artful inquiry as methodology compatible with Participatory Pedagogy and the broader scope of my research attempting to identify the experience of under-represented students.

#### 1.4.3 Purposive sampling: selecting critical cases for the research

At this stage, I feel it is important to outline how I identified my participants, as my methodology chapter (Chapter 4) will concentrate on making the case for adopting artful inquiry and collage as a method. Defining participants at this point will also detail why I consider their backgrounds to be under-represented.

Patton (2002) indicates that purposive sampling and critical case selection "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (236). My interpretation of purposive sampling was to identify under-represented students as my critical cases, as they were more relevant to the goals of this study than other students. Miles and Huberman (1994) also indicate that critical case sampling "permits local generalisation and maximum application of information to other cases" (28). By focusing on under-represented students from Southeastern, such an approach allows for findings, conclusions and recommendations to be localised to Southeastern and applied to the rest of the under-represented student population. Furthermore, the resulting conclusions affecting Southeastern could be applicable to other institutions.

There was also an element of convenience sampling in my research, defined by Miles et al. (2013) as taking advantage of easily accessible data to save resources. Miles and Huberman (1994) state "you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything" (27) and the pressures on completing this doctorate within a reasonable timeframe, coupled with resources available to myself as the research student, meant I targeted students I could access. From this population, a sample of critical cases was drawn out. That access resulted in saved resources (mainly time), which is an element of convenience sampling (Miles et al., 2013). While this is convenient in terms of sampling, it also fulfils the aims of an EdD, to critically engage with local practice (Wisker, 2008; Perry, 2016). Convenience sampling's credibility or validity issues (Patton, 2002), are hopefully limited in my research, balanced out by my sample being critical cases and highly beneficial to better understanding a complex phenomenon (transition) from the experiences of a potentially vulnerable student population.

I followed Flick's (2014) encouragements to adopt a step-by-step approach to purposive sampling case selection, as opposed to relying on random sampling methods. In 2015/16, the academic year during which I collected data, a cohort of 368 students were identified as under-represented by Southeastern as part of policy to support their student experience and outcomes. At this time, identification was based on institutionally-defined geographic and income-related criteria, rather than other personal characteristics (e.g. ethnicity). At the start of the year a recruitment email was sent out to all 368 students, describing the nature of the research project, its aims and

why student involvement was crucial. This email is included in Appendix 1. Out of 16 interested respondents, 10 committed to the yearlong project. Table 1 provides information about this sample, including their pseudonym, gender and the academic faculty they belong to.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Academic School</b>
Steven	M	Creative Arts
Milly	F	Life and Medical Sciences
Ada	F	Computer Science
Ellora	F	Life and Medical Sciences
Eva	F	Business
Jasmine	F	Business
Buster	M	Humanities
Dawn	F	Life and Medical Sciences
Naomi	F	Life and Medical Sciences
Kiki	F	Law

Table 1: Participant information, including pseudonym, gender and academic school

I have limited participants' personal information to these characteristics to provide a short profile of each individual and the general composition of the group. I have not included other characteristics, such as ethnicity, because my research focused on then institutional priorities, which centred on supporting students from low income and low geographical participation, as well as from a variety of academic faculties. These priorities were evident in strategic documents, such as Southeastern's Access Agreements from 2015-2017 (Southeastern, 2015, 2016 and 2017). One of the aims of my research is to support institutional agendas and strategies to improve under-represented students' outcomes and experience at Southeastern. As such, I determined it was important to align my research sample with those key institutional under-represented groups. During the lifetime of this EdD, analysis of student performance data has revealed that students from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) backgrounds are less likely to achieve first and upper-second class degree outcomes (1<sup>st</sup> and 2:1s), as well as, progress to highly skilled graduate employment, compared to White students (UUK, 2019). This has shifted sector and institutional agendas of which groups in HE should be supported to include students from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, ethnicity has become a central theme to institutional access and success strategies, including at Southeastern (Southeastern, 2018). Going forwards, research investigating unequal student outcomes, with similar aims as mine, might be justified in focusing on ethnicity as a key demographic characteristic.

My approach to detailing the demographics of my sample balances providing some information on each student while not including characteristics that are outside the scope of this research's framework and analysis. This does not mean such traits are unimportant but only reflects

Southeastern's approach to supporting under-represented students at the time I conducted this research.

I next provide details of my study's ethical approval and ethical implications of my research.

#### 1.4.4 Ethical approval and participant anonymity

This study was awarded ethical approval by Southeastern's research ethics committee and complies with the British Education Research Association's guide on ethics. The protocol number is EDU/PG/Southeastern/00964(1). Participants were made aware of this and provided with official information sheets and consent forms, both approved by the same ethics committee, which explained the aims of the study and why their participation was required, along with the benefits and risks of participating. The documents also reinforced that they could withdraw from the study at any time, with their collected data discarded. Copies can be found in Appendix 5. All 10 students completed and signed the consent forms.

Participant anonymity was taken seriously, due to the potential sensitive, revelatory and personal nature of the data being collected. Participants were made aware that they would be anonymised in the thesis itself. In the spirit of developing a co-participatory environment, participants chose their own pseudonyms. While every effort has been made to preserve anonymity, participants were made aware that it may be possible to identify them. To mitigate against this, I have not included data around ethnicity or degree course, which could have identified individuals.

#### 1.5 Research findings and implications

In this final section of my Introduction, I present an overview of my findings and conclusions, presented here based on my four research questions. One, the neoliberal creep observed in policy development has filtered down to affect student engagement in HE. I determine this through a combination of literature review into neoliberalism's influence on the student experience and empirical data from my participants. Their conception of HE as a competitive arena, and of their transition as a very individual experience, are replete with neoliberal attitudes towards aspiration, participation in HE and agency at university in how they engage with learning and other practices. In a twist on Bourdieusian logic, I argue that in accessing HE, they showcased a feel for the game—meaning an inherent understanding of structures and unwritten rules—and an ingrained sense of what success in HE and beyond looks like. However, I warn that this feel for the game fluctuated as participants transitioned into university. While it appeared students' habitus at the point of entry into HE reflected Southeastern's institutional habitus, such analysis supports deficit-

model constructs of the student experience by privileging neoliberal performativity. I conclude that Southeastern, and similar institutions, should consider other ways of recognising and fostering student aspiration, choice and agency, such as adopting a capability approach to underpin pre-entry and transitional programming, repositioning the student experience away from neoliberal structures towards values and capabilities that learners self-identified.

Two, my cohort of under-represented students demonstrated an initial period of transitional difficulty as they entered Southeastern. This manifested itself in challenges adapting to independent learning styles and social integration. A significant change in performance and experience occurred later in their first year once friendship and support groups were established. A sociological analysis of this experience reveals that students' capitals and habitus are misrecognised when positioned against Southeastern's institutional habitus. However, I am uncomfortable with the deficit-model assumption this implies. Turning to a capability approach implies that rather than be in deficit, students have highly attuned values and capabilities that should be compatible with neoliberal structures in HE, including those at Southeastern.

Three, the conclusion that under-represented students at Southeastern are eventually successful at navigating the HE environment has implications for practices at Southeastern. I recommend changes that could positively affect under-represented students in their transition, including: providing early opportunities for students to access peer groups; acknowledging students' aspirations and career goals during induction by developing education and career planning; delivering wellbeing activities in halls of residence and other key first-year activities; involving students' families more in the student experience; increasing flexible learning opportunities to limit the effects of travel for those who travel home often. Although I devised these practices based on participants' experiences, I recognise it would be more effective to develop a process enabling institutions to engage in student partnerships to co-generate meaningful practices. I propose guidance that encompasses co-participatory principles and a capability approach to engage staff and students to develop new, inclusive practices. I then apply this guidance to my own practice to consider what local actions it might encourage and implications for my context.

Four, I argue that Participatory Pedagogy is a powerful approach for re-calibrating student engagement in research on the student experience. In my study, it acts as a platform, elevating participants to co-generators of knowledge and represents an example of how to achieve equity in student voice. As a result, institutional practices can be more balanced in meeting the needs of diverse groups. Beyond research, Participatory Pedagogy can impact the very nature of student engagement with its faculty for empowering students as co-producers. This can be used to identify

misrecognitions and redefine teaching, learning and support strategies to better reflect—and value—the embodied knowledge of under-represented students.

The rest of my thesis is devoted to a literature review (capped by the development of a conceptual framework), methodological considerations, a refinement of my research process, the presentation of findings, a discussion of findings in relation to my conceptual framework and my contributions to practice and conclusions on the research. The literature review consists of two chapters: a review of how neoliberalism shapes WP and student engagement and an account of how Participatory Pedagogy redefines student engagement (Chapter 2); a discussion bringing together different theories to explain the student experience and transition into HE (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses on methodology, an appraisal of artful inquiry and collage (and its suitability to my research) and refinements I made to my main study as a result of a small-scale study that preceded it. This chapter also includes the development and implementation of my research design, including an ethical discussion on carrying out participatory research. In Chapter 5, I present my findings using a thematic approach that aligns with my research questions. Chapter 6 is a discussion of data analysed, based on the research questions and positioned against key literature and theoretical concepts. It also includes my contributions to practice at Southeastern and policymakers across the sector. Finally, in Chapter 7, I offer final considerations on my research questions and reflect on the wider impact of my research on Southeastern and the HE sector, as well as contemplating my study's limitations and opportunities for future research.

## 2. Neoliberalism: shaping widening participation and the student experience

In the first chapter, I introduced key aspects of my research and touched on the pressure that neoliberalism exerts on HE, WP and the student experience, noting that it plays an important role in shaping policy and practice, as well as defining student engagement. I suggested that the outputs associated with neoliberalism, such as participation increases and low performance of under-represented students in HE, facilitate deficit-model research within WP, which I position my research in opposition to.

This chapter begins by briefly deconstructing the neoliberal paradigm that has played, and continues to play, a role in shaping Western society since the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This acts as a precursor to discussing the role neoliberalism plays in defining WP and the student experience by shaping individual agency and student engagement. This chapter helps address my first research question: how is neoliberalism reflected in WP and the student experience? Investigating these influences lays a foundation for my study to establish empirically how neoliberalism affects the student experience of my research cohort at Southeastern. It also helps define the rationale for my fourth research question by exposing how neoliberal HE supports deficit-model thinking in the sector and how student engagement methodology, such as Participatory Pedagogy, can redress this by more accurately portraying the under-represented student experience.

While neoliberalism is not the only lens through which to conceptualise HE, the hegemony it exhibits over national (and global) social, political and economic spheres makes HE difficult to discuss without accounting for the dominant role it plays in shaping these structures. My reading of the key policy documents in HE of the last thirty-plus years (Department for Education and Science [DES], 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998; DfES, 2003; BIS, 2011, 2016) suggests that successive UK governments have manipulated the HE sector, with the aid of neoliberal implements, which I believe further underscores the difficulty in decoupling HE and neoliberalism. Doing so could risk ignoring how and why certain policies and practices developed, such as WP. Its policies and practices are devised to expand HE and help meet neoliberal socio-economic outcomes, both in supporting a steady flow of economically productive graduates into new labour markets and in aiming to foster more equitable access to HE and social mobility (Burke, 2012; McCaig, 2015, 2018a). Despite such noble aims, I argue WP serves to generate new inequalities and marginalises under-represented students in HE, leading to deficit-model thinking across the sector and the privileging of middle-class learner personas. I review literature on neoliberalism in HE and WP in relation to potential unequal student experiences and explore how under-represented students experience and

conceptualise HE at Southeastern. In doing so, I heed the growing calls for co-participatory research into the student experience (Burke, 2012; Neary, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016) by using Participatory Pedagogy to empower my participants to extract these experiences, allowing me to develop contributions to institutional practice and sector policy based on lived experience.

Research focusing on WP as a neoliberal implement tends to favour discussion around market deregulation, institutional managerial culture or changes in the nature of knowledge and its effect on academic disciplines (Ball, 1998; Trowler, 1998; Marginson, 1999; Barnett, 2000; Naidoo, 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Clarke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Zepke, 2015; McCaig et al., 2018). It often does not highlight those at the heart of its policies and practices, the students. Even where well-intentioned, students' experiences of HE can be ignored in favour of a student consumer narrative (e.g. McCaig, 2018b) or presenting students statistically in outcomes-based studies (e.g. Boliver, 2015). For those, like myself, interested in charting the student experience from a WP perspective and arguing why and how it should form the basis of institutional policies and practices, alternatives do exist for how to do so within a neoliberal context.

This literature review critiques neoliberalism and its influence over HE and WP. I explore how neoliberalism permeates WP policies and practices, shapes student engagement in HE and facilitates deficit-model constructs of students' experiences. I conclude Participatory Pedagogy, as a co-participatory methodology, can counter potential deficit-model approaches to understanding and researching under-represented students' experience by placing them at the centre of the research process in order to privilege their voices and experiences.

## 2.1 Triangulating neoliberalism, the knowledge-based economy and higher education

Neoliberalism is an influential economic paradigm developed mainly in the Western world (Brown et al., 2003; McNally, 2014), which encompasses political, economic and philosophical theories under the banner of liberalism and free-trade (Naidoo, 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). Neoliberalism's contemporary roots are found in the socio-economic conditions following World War II (Jones, 2003; Chitty, 2009). The de-industrialisation of Western capitalist nations resulted in deep structural changes affecting the nature of economies, capital and labour markets, with the latter evolving a need for a more flexible, adaptable and highly skilled workforce (Brown et al., 2003; Wilkins, 2012). Other important neoliberal outcomes include a focus on accumulating capital, defining knowledge as a commodity, privatising industries and deregulating labour markets as new skills and working patterns emerged following crumbling trade union power (Wilkins, 2012). A key facet of neoliberalism is how it operates as a mode of governance and

regulates both commodity and labour markets (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Before engaging in the debate on the effect of neoliberalism on WP and the student experience—and its impact on my study—I will briefly outline neoliberalism’s political-economic theoretical base to provide a better sense of how it influences HE.

Neoliberalism appropriates classic forms of liberalism, particularly around individual agency, economic market forces and government economic intervention, by amalgamating several economic theories. Property Right Theory (McKean, 1974) positions the neoliberal individual as being in full control of their economic destiny and inherently self-interested in personal gain. Agency Theory and Transaction Cost Economics (Williamson, 1975, 1992) lead to managerial and entrepreneurial approaches, respectively, that afford individuals the opportunities to capitalise on performance-related incentives—opportunities enhanced by relevant technical skills and abilities. Public Choice Theory (Buchanan, 1975) suggests free market economics and a laissez-faire approach is somewhat curbed by positive state intervention in socio-economic matters in order to take advantage of economically intriguing circumstances. Neoliberalism builds on these tenets and evolves beyond them by conceptualising the state as an actor with a positive, rather than negative, role to play in incubating ideal market conditions—what Zepke (2015) defined as “positive power” (701). For example, HE in the UK is positioned as a free market in which institutions compete for students (Brown and Carasso, 2013). However, the sector is regulated by a Government body, the Office for Students (OfS), who introduce policy to manipulate and stimulate the market, such as removing caps on the number of students institutions can recruit (HEPI, 2013) or requiring institutions to provide Access and Participation Plans that detail measures to improve access and success for under-represented learners as a condition of charging higher tuition fee levels (OfS, 2019). Neoliberalism can be summed up as inciting much more “conscious action” (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 319) at both state and individual levels.

Neoliberalism plays a strong role in supporting the KBE, which no longer relies on industrial manufacturing (Brown et al., 2003; Naidoo, 2003). According to Olssen and Peters (2005), the most important aspect of these changes is the commodification of knowledge as capital within the KBE. This strengthens the call for lifelong learning to fill the skills and knowledge gap (Burton-Jones, 1999). The ability of the state to exert positive power is essential in fostering knowledge acquisition, be it education or other forms of skills development, and intervention is required to facilitate a marketplace to achieve this aim (Burton-Jones, 1999). Naidoo (2003) and Olssen and Peters (2005) comment on HE as the key arena for the production and transfer of economic knowledge, with the latter identifying HE as “a permeable interface between knowledge businesses and public sector education at all levels” (340). The New Labour government at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century seized on

this call to expand and promote HE as the environment best suited to transfer the knowledge and skills called upon by the KBE (Burke, 2012).

Literature charting neoliberalism's impact on HE suggests it does so on two levels. Although authors do not often differentiate between different levels of impact, I found that organising them into macro and micro strata helps to group together and differentiate these outcomes. Macro refers to neoliberalism's influence over the HE sector (Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Zepke, 2015), including implementing expansionist WP policy (Burke, 2012; HEPI, 2013; Hoskins, 2013, McCaig, 2018b), shifts in academic and managerial cultures (Barnett, 2000), legitimate types of knowledge (Burton-Jones, 1999; Bourner et al., 2000; Barnett and Coate, 2005; Codd, 2005; McMahon and Portelli, 2012) and the development of a cornucopia of performance and monitoring related tools (Ball, 1998; Naidoo, 2003; Biesta, 2004; Mccaferty, 2010; Clarke, 2012). Micro envelops changes to the individual (i.e. students) in terms of engagement (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Trowler, 2010; Brookfield and Holst, 2011; Hagel et al., 2011; Burke, 2012; Smyth, 2012; Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Zepke, 2014, 2015), behaviour (Bredo et al., 1993; Sharrock, 2000; Wilkins, 2012) and their understanding of the role they occupy in neoliberal HE (Barnett, 2009; Vandenabeele et al., 2011; Wainwright et al., 2011; Bryson, 2014; Neary, 2014).

Furthermore, and importantly for considering student engagement in HE, individual economic self-determination is cultivated because it is seen to ultimately benefit wider society (McKean, 1974; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Zepke, 2015). Members of society are encouraged to view professional and educational opportunities with enterprise and to embrace competition rather than simply relying on liberal free choice (Olssen and Peters, 2005). I will focus the rest of this chapter on these macro and micro forces as they relate to WP and the student experience, which will contribute to answering my first research question on how neoliberalism is reflected in these fields. This discussion will support the approach I took in this research of placing students at the centre of the research process in order to better understand the student experience and conceptions of HE.

## 2.2 Neoliberalism and widening participation

So far, I established that neoliberalism is a political-economic force that shapes the structures of society, including HE. In the previous section, I organised key literature on neoliberalism and HE around whether it influences wider elements, such as WP, or whether it impacts student behaviour and attitude at an individual level. The rest of this chapter is devoted to better understanding why neoliberalism is so vital a component in discussing WP and its impact on shaping student engagement. In this current section, I critique the interconnection between neoliberalism and WP as an explicit form of neoliberal positive state power. I draw on literature and

policy review to contend that WP is a form of expansionism designed by Government (and delivered by institutions) to increase participation to HE and ultimately serve the economic needs of the KBE. It achieves this by privileging ideals about educational pathways and individual success that favour more advantaged, middle-class learners, while often forcing under-represented students to match these identities. My criticism suggests that based on the data available and documented in my Introduction, while WP policy does facilitate participation for groups that might not otherwise access HE, it does not necessarily promote their success in HE and beyond.

WP and access policies did not originate at a specific moment in the UK's educational history but rather evolved over many decades, with more recent, sophisticated policy developing in conjunction with an increasingly neoliberal sector. The emergence of expansionist dialogues in HE targeting new student demographics can be witnessed as far back as the Education Act of 1944 and the Robbins Report of 1963. Later policy developments, such as the establishment of student loans (1990 Education Act) and the birth of new universities out of old polytechnics (1991 HE White Paper), were also influential in introducing new access routes (Trowler, 1998; Burke, 2012; Bowl et al., 2018). New Labour (1997-2010) is a particularly influential player in this development and conflated the economic KBE needs with the promotion of access and individual social mobility. It exercised expansionist policy by developing new pathways to HE based on the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and 1998 Green Paper, the latter promoting "a learning society in which everyone, from whatever background, routinely expects to learn and upgrade their skills throughout life" (Burke, 2012: 20). The establishment of a Government-funded regulatory body in 2003, OFFA, and its future replacement in 2018, the OfS, helped preserve access routes amidst increasing tuition fee regimes by promoting WP and committing institutions to supporting activity from aspiration through to admissions (Burke, 2012; OfS, 2019). Despite neither OFFA nor the OfS being completely free of Government interference, they are examples of neoliberal positive power, as they became increasingly capable of holding institutions accountable for their access measures (Burke, 2012; OfS, 2019), particularly as tuition fees increased to a minimum of £6,000 and a maximum of £9,000 per annum following the 2010 Browne Review (BIS, 2011). These core WP documents initiate a pattern of policy that blends expansionist rhetoric with social justice ambitions.

New Labour worked hard during this period to promote the "raising aspirations" discourse, which became part of its justification for further HE expansion (Burke, 2012). Pupils, who were deemed to lack the impetus to progress to HE, despite their talent and attainment (Morris and Golden, 2005), were targeted with regionally coordinated outreach programming, such as summer schools, mentoring and shadowing, planned and delivered by dedicated staff and designed to engage young people with HE (Burke, 2012; Harrison, 2018). The very nature of such outreach is an

explicit manifestation of WP's duality in expanding both the HE sector and opportunities for less represented groups. As increasing fees helped drive marketisation within the HE sector (Brown and Carasso, 2013), WP policy has shifted away from access and towards ensuring student success and retention (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013; Farenga, 2015b; Bowes et al., 2016). This has the double effect of ensuring HE students gain the education and skills coveted by the KBE, while continuing to maintain the conveyor belt of graduates into KBE labour markets. It exemplifies how entrenched WP policy is in supporting the discourse that under-represented students not only should access HE but that they can be successful.

I now turn my attention to critiquing WP as a neoliberal tool serving the best interests of Government and institutions, rather than the students it aids in accessing HE. Ultimately, I propose that WP policy and practices serve to reinforce and perpetuate deficit-model constructs of under-represented students by positioning them as lacking the dispositions, skills and experience of their peers. These policies focus on increasing the participation and success of under-represented (and often disadvantaged) students while supporting the notion that a HE degree significantly improves social mobility compared to other educational pathways. This is a position that I struggle to reconcile with because as I exposed in Chapter 1, sector data and research reveal that despite improved access, under-represented students do not enjoy performance outcomes in-line with their peers.

Critics, such as Walkerdine (2003), Burke (2006, 2007, 2012), Woodrow (2001), Gewirtz (2001), Skeggs (2004), Archer et al. (2003), Archer (2007), Sellar and Gale (2011) and McCaig et al. (2018) went further than just considering this failed access policy and instead took aim at WP's neoliberal roots and linking these with the deficit model approach requiring under-represented learners to alter their identities. I will now more explicitly draw out the influence of neoliberalism on the development of this deficit-model approach. The need for under-represented students to remake themselves (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007) is crucial to my argument for avoiding deficit-model research and instead adopting a co-participatory approach. WP policy has consistently "pathologised" (Burke, 2011: 171) "deviant" (Archer and Yamashita, 2003: 130) under-represented students who are characterised as "failed" (Thomas, 2002: 425) and lacking key traits. Succeeding in neoliberal HE "requires particular forms of being a person, and is tied in with middle-class, white subjectivities and dispositions" (Burke, 2012: 142). Governments have used positive state power (Zepke, 2015) to shape WP policy and social mobility rhetoric to incorporate the neoliberal self-improvement project (Burke, 2012) and the tradition of individual neoliberal self-regulation (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Learners are encouraged to embark on transformations to embrace middle-class characteristics associated with participating

in HE and the KBE (Walkerdine, 2003, 2011; Burke, 2007; Raco, 2009; Sellar and Gale, 2011). Focusing on the failings of individuals is at the core of a deficit-model, and applied to a WP context, means that neoliberal policies, practices and even research are often directed at the causes for WP students' failure, rather than at the institution's role in supporting its students (Thomas, 2002) or wider societal failings (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Burke, 2012).

I positioned my research against deficit-models for two reasons. One, simply accepting that some individuals must transform themselves and match the identity or dispositions of others does little to expose inequalities in experience while in HE—it only ignores the lack of equality in outcomes that I sought to address in my research. Two, the makeup of Southeastern as a low-tariff university means it recruits under-represented students. As such, from a professional practice vantage, I want to ensure that the experience of these students is as fully understood as possible, so that their success is supported. I contribute to this by adopting a co-participatory approach to my research that redresses the imbalances in student experience caused by neoliberal policies and practices by providing a platform allowing participants to share their experience and shape the research. This methodology allows me to better investigate the relationship between WP students at Southeastern and how these students' backgrounds and brought experiences impact their transition into HE.

Before I end this chapter with a consideration for why engagement is crucial within this context, how it forms a central part of my methodology and what a participatory approach consists of, I make the case for needing to redefine student engagement within neoliberal HE.

### 2.3 Neoliberalism and student engagement

I use this section to expand on neoliberalism's influence at the individual student level and argue that student engagement is heavily predicated on neoliberal ideology (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Mavelli, 2014; Zepke 2014, 2015). Doing so supports my assertion that inequalities in HE are perpetuated within student experience discourses and that research into this field, such as my EdD, should embrace co-participatory student engagement methodologies to help redress this imbalance.

The pressure neoliberalism exerts on student engagement is visible in students' embodiment of self-improvement values (Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012), adoption of social mobility dogma (Walkerdine, 2003; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Barnett, 2009; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; Wainwright, 2013) and in their conception of HE as an environment that facilitates the realisation of aspiration (Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Ball, 2008; Barr, 2008; Burke, 2012; Mavelli, 2014). It is also evidenced in evolving modes of knowledge and

expected models of how students should engage with learning and other practices (Trowler, 1998; Bourner et al., 2000; Naidoo 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Mccafferty, 2010; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2014, 2015).

I argue that student engagement in HE should be grounded on co-participation between student and institution. Such a model should allow for students to play a more active role as partners in carrying out research into the student experience and in defining policies and practices that affect their experience—especially in relation to engaging under-represented students who have typically been marginalised in HE and who have been subjected to deficit-model constructs. After discussing how neoliberalism is embedded in current forms of contemporary student engagement, I offer a critique on the limitations of this model to support student partnerships and counter with several co-participatory approaches capable of better supporting the student experience. I adopt this position for my own research and conclude by focusing on Participatory Pedagogy as a framework that best suits my context for engaging under-represented students and understanding their experience at Southeastern.

### 2.3.1 Student engagement in higher education

There is a wealth of research on student engagement. Several authorship teams (Kuh et al.; 2006; Trowler, 2010; Nelson et al. 2011; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013) have conducted systematic reviews cataloguing hundreds of studies concerning student engagement and led some (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015) to comment on its conceptual “vagueness” (343). The vastness of this HE sub-field proposes that there might exist many variations on the subject (Kuh et al., 2008; Solomonides et al., 2012; Ramsden and Callender, 2014). Indeed, Lawson and Lawson (2013) argue there is no one size fits all approach to student engagement and that it is a “multi-faceted and contingent phenomenon that often varies according to person, context, place, activity and time” (461). However, I suggest that when viewed through a neoliberal lens, student engagement in HE is very precise in its structure, in the agency expected of students by institutions and in the actions students exhibit. In critiquing this form of engagement, I tap into the movement in HE for developing student-centric engagement models that prioritise giving students equal representation in defining their learning and experience, which I also find to be well defined, albeit less well established across the sector. This section breaks down student engagement within the neoliberal HE context, first examining notions of student performativity and then unpacking a basic, yet powerful model of engagement that supports neoliberal HE. My critique of this model continues in the following section as I lay the groundwork for adopting a more co-participatory, student-centred engagement model.

### 2.3.2 Neoliberal performativity

Wilkins (2012) outlines “neoliberal performativity” (199) as a model for considering the attitudes and agency of individuals in a neoliberal setting. Performativity is a term used “to demonstrate how identity and social action are produced as a ritualised repetition of socially circulating discourses rather than as an expression of prior identity” (198). In this case, those “circulating discourses” are the neoliberal standards elaborated on so far. Performativity, or agency, is supposedly reduced to an extension of these dogmas. In connecting this notion of performativity with neoliberalism, Wilkins (2012) proposes that its competitive ethos defines individuals operating within its boundaries: “neoliberal performativity refers to a set of discourses, functions and framings through which subjects are hailed (interpellated) as competitive individualists” (199). There is a deterministic undercurrent, qualified by Wilkins as a lack of agent spontaneity, who rather “re-enact” (199) socio-political norms. Crucially, with such an emphasis on the individual, learners are expected to self-regulate participation in HE and develop the skills and knowledge to compete in what are highly competitive labour markets (Walkerdine, 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016; McCaig et al., 2018). In relation to HE, Burke (2012) invokes “the neoliberal project of self-improvement” (30) as a means for engagement.

Two pieces of research investigating student engagement reveal how entrenched neoliberal attitudes and performativity are in HE. My interpretation of these findings signals why adopting alternative engagement models might be useful in countering hegemonic perceptions. Both Wilkins (2012) and Ingelby (2015) conducted research engaging learners, the former focusing on compulsory secondary school education and the latter on HE. Wilkins’ study contains classroom observation data analysed with the “spectre of neoliberalism” (Wilkins, 2012: 197), while Ingelby (2015) examines the effects of marketisation in HE, a key element of neoliberal HE, on teaching and learning with the help of staff and student interviews.

Wilkins (2012) found that the adolescents in his sample were encouraged to value autonomy and individual responsibility, while thinking and acting competitively as they pursued symbolic rewards (e.g. teacher’s praise). Pupils distinctly capitalised on each other’s failures in the classroom in order to better position themselves to be successful. However, this self-interested behaviour only extended so far, as some pupils stopped short of alienating classmates for their own benefit, which Wilkins suggests is evidence of learners’ ability to display contradictory behaviour even in a neoliberal context.

Ingelby (2015) sampled students from several post-1992 institutions to extract participants’ views on the impact of neoliberal policy in HE. Students support a neoliberal outlook of HE that includes conflating value with employability and skills development engagement. As one student

comments, “I know it [degree] will allow me to gain entry [to chosen profession] this will give me the skills to have an excellent career” (525). Even though participants explicitly linked HE education with employability and social mobility, they also acknowledged the potential of HE to facilitate self-transformation.

These studies reveal how learners embrace certain neoliberal forces, such as competition and personal development, while also reinforcing the role neoliberalism plays in shaping HE practices and student engagement, whether in compulsory education (Ball, 2008) or in HE. These findings do not necessarily allow for generalisation across HE, but they do underscore neoliberal actions that occur in education (McCafferty, 2010). If student engagement is to shift more dramatically away from its current neoliberal constraints, then a much stronger model of students as co-producers should be explored—one that builds on some of the models examined earlier (Barnett and Coate, 2005; Vandenaabeele et al., 2011; Zepke, 2014) but that places the learner much more at its heart. Such a model could potentially benefit under-represented students who, according to performance data (HEFCE, 2013, 2015; HESA, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Keohane and Petrie, 2017), achieve worse outcomes in HE and whose student experience is compromised at times by a sector that can fail to recognise their knowledge, characteristics and experience (Thomas, 2002; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2012; Burke and McManus, 2009; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016).

The discourse around student performativity hints that a kind of student engagement may exist within neoliberal HE. In the next section, I consider how modes of knowledge and HE structures support an input-output model of student engagement, highly conducive to achieving the kind of outcomes institutions and students are conditioned to expect in neoliberal HE. I dispute this approach as ill-suited to supporting the success in HE of under-represented students and contend that more co-participatory models of engagement should be considered, especially in research on the student experience, such as my own study.

### 2.3.3 Student engagement in neoliberal higher education

Student engagement in HE is shaped by neoliberal policy centred around behaviour and action that is useful to both students and institutions. My reading of the 2011 and 2016 UK Higher Education White Papers (BIS, 2011, 2016) places student engagement at the core of policy emphasising that learning communities be based around students’ acquisition of professional and utilitarian knowledge (Trowler, 1998; Bourner et al., 2000; Naidoo 2003; Biesta, 2004; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Clarke, 2012) that is useful for transitioning into the KBE (Kuh et al., 2006; McMahon and Portelli, 2004, 2012; Zepke, 2014), while supporting the success of institutions as measured by

various regulatory metrics (Hagel et al., 2011; Zepke, 2015). The notion that high student engagement leads to more positive student success outcomes is reinforced using tools designed to measure accountability, quality and performance (Zepke, 2014). In further tying student engagement in with neoliberalism, Zepke (2014) states “student engagement thrives in this [neoliberal] climate” (694), an environment that he associates with Olssen and Peters’s (2005) understanding of neoliberal HE: one that is permeated with students’ inputs (their characteristics, skills and performativity) and measurable outputs (their outcomes as measured by performance tools). Institutions encourage this type of binary input-output engagement because of the perceived causality between performativity and student outcomes (e.g. progression rates). These are fed back into the sector in the form of accountability measures like league tables or Key Information Sets, reinforcing this input-output, transactional nature of student engagement (Astin, 1999; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

When observed through a neoliberal lens, student agency and engagement are reduced to cogs in a sector primarily concerned with enabling competition amongst institutions and transmitting specific learning and skills to students. Neoliberal performativity sponsors a reactive, deterministic outlook of student agency heavily influenced by the circulating discourses of self-regulation and competition amongst learners to access the KBE (Wilkins, 2012). In neoliberal HE, students are bound to embody competitive natures and access opportunities to measure themselves against each other and common objectives (Yates, 2009; Wilkins, 2012). A transactional style of engagement lacks a consideration for individual student natures by not only positioning the institution at the heart of the model and expecting students to adapt to it in order to maximise outcomes (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2017), but also reducing all student engagement to a form of neoliberal performativity conducive with competition and positioning knowledge as content to be acquired (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Zepke, 2015). This input-output model of student engagement is challenged by authors who critique neoliberal HE and see the absence of a student-centred approach as evidence of a deficit-model conception of HE in which certain students are better positioned to interact and extract benefits (Thomas and Quinn, 2006; Reschly and Christenson, 2012; Bryson, 2014; Zepke, 2015; Tinto, 2017). Other critics form part of a movement accounting for neoliberalism’s influence on student engagement and countering it by reconceptualising student engagement as a partnership between students and institutional staff designed to engage students in the learning and experience (NUS, 2012; Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017). In the final section of this chapter, I introduce student partnership models of student engagement and explain how they critique neoliberal interactions, as well as how they

support research and policy development, such as my study, in aiming to better understand the experience of under-represented students.

## 2.4 Co-participatory models of student engagement

Zepke (2015) is sceptical that student engagement and neoliberalism can be decoupled due to strong incentives between participation, the acquisition of professional knowledge and success in KBE graduate labour markets (McMahon and Portelli, 2012). Nevertheless, there are loud calls across the HE research community for developing conceptions and frameworks for engagement that are more democratic and critical of existing models (Barnett and Coate, 2005; Brookfield and Holst, 2011; Burke, 2012; McMahon and Portelli, 2012; Smyth, 2012; Taylor et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Neary, 2013; Bryson, 2014; Zepke, 2015; Farenga, 2018b). Understanding how this is possible might positively impact research like mine, which seeks to account for neoliberalism's influence on HE and the student experience, but also attempts to provide student participants with a platform to reflect on their experience.

By adopting the principles of student partnership, a loose term encompassing different student-centric models (Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016) and employing a Participatory Pedagogy framework in my research, I aim to more deeply engage under-represented students at Southeastern and provide them with a platform to reflect on their experiences and help shape future institutional policy and practice. As I expand on later in this chapter, Participatory Pedagogy is a research framework that reflects student partnership values and principles (Burke, 2012). I position Participatory Pedagogy as a practical model for researching the experience of under-represented students, in a co-participatory style consistent with the student partnership movement, which activates the voice of those potentially marginalised groups and avoids a deficit model approach. As I addressed earlier in the Introduction, I consider Participatory Pedagogy to be a form of co-participatory research. I also use the term co-participatory throughout this thesis to designate student and staff partnerships, along with the practices that take place in these spaces (e.g. co-generation of new knowledge).

### 2.4.1 Student partnership models

The student partnership movement is highly applicable to my research context because it rejects neoliberal student engagement in favour of establishing a democratic and empowering platform allowing students whose voices and experiences are marginalised across the HE sector (Burke, 2012) to co-participate in establishing the terms of their learning and experience (Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather and Abbot, 2016; Healey et al., 2016). As Cook-Sather et al. (2014) describe,

partnership is a “reciprocal process through which *all* participants have the opportunity to contribute *equally* [...] to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (6-7). I added the emphasis in this quote to highlight the aspect of equal opportunity that engaging students in this way can have (Flint, 2016). I argue, as others do (Burke, 2012; NUS, 2012; Taylor et al., 2012; Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017) that student partnership recognises that students are experts, especially concerning policies or practices affecting their experience. This perspective reflects a student-centric approach to student engagement as it presupposes that an individual is the best evaluator of their own experience and life. As such, their knowledge should be accounted for and privileged when carrying out reviews of the student experience. If they lack knowledge, such as of institutional process, staff are well-placed to share their own expertise, provided they afford students the opportunity to reflect on this information and co-develop appropriate changes. The relationship within student-staff partnerships are crucial to this process. According to Neary (2014), engaging students in the research process helps re-set the relationship between staff and student, build trust and allow for deeper examinations of key issues and challenges facing the student experience. Treating students as experts and involving them in research could eliminate deficit-model constructs of student engagement by emphasising that students from a range of backgrounds can influence their experience, rather than limiting engagement to a dominant group.

In seeking to achieve Neary’s (2014) aim of providing a platform for co-research, I embrace Trowler’s (2015) challenge to researchers calling for resistance against the preoccupation with neoliberalism and HE and its conceptions of students as consumers, in favour of promoting a model taking an experiential view of the student experience. In doing so, more of a focus should be attributed to changes in students’ experience as they enter HE, rather than on their quantifiable outcomes (Ashwin and Trigwell, 2012). Instead of ignoring the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in HE, I attempt to acknowledge the extent of its influence and establish an inclusive research platform that can challenge it by unpacking the student experience. At a fundamental level, when students act as co-researchers, the nature of analysis shifts away from institutional and towards student perspectives, allowing for more pertinent conclusions (Welikala and Atkin, 2014). This could have powerful ramifications as I attempt to unpack the experience of under-represented students and ensure policies and practices at Southeastern are meaningful.

Within the spectrum of co-participatory engagement models are more nuanced definitions of student participation and inclusion, ranging from: Neary’s (2014) student as producer model focusing on research co-production; partnership that fosters an enhancement of teaching and

learning and that reflects an ethos or culture of co-production, co-design or co-inquiry between students and institution (Healey et al., 2014; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016); and student engagement as a formation of understanding, curricula and communities in which partnership plays an active role (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015). These models are critical of the neoliberal construct presupposing students as consumers and institutions as providers of knowledge (McGettigan, 2013; Neary, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Healey et al., 2016). There are limited examples of student engagement co-production models in the sector, but examples do include Bryson (2014), and, in particular, Neary's (2014) work at the University of Lincoln, which is based on the NUS's 2012 manifesto calling for more equal student participation in developing teaching, learning and especially research practices. The lack of implementation might reveal the difficulty in embedding potentially radical change in institutional culture (Neary, 2014; Seale, et al., 2014; Bovill et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017).

I finish this chapter by introducing Participatory Pedagogy and the basis for its potential as a student partnership model and counter-balance to neoliberal student engagement and as a research model, capable of activating the student voice and providing under-represented students with a means to co-participate in sharing their experience at Southeastern.

#### 2.4.2 Participatory Pedagogy

Earlier in this literature review, I note Burke's (2012) critique of WP policies and the prevalence of neoliberalism at their cores, which infects their effectiveness by exploiting student beneficiaries for the economic role they will play in the continued development of the knowledge economy. The hegemonic characterisation of WP students as lacking the successful traits and attributes of their peers (section 2.2) is also one of Burke's (2012) major critiques. Her evaluation is followed by attempts to redress this imbalance through research embracing a Participatory Pedagogy. The main advantage to this approach is that it is predicated by social justice convictions and an ethical commitment (Harman, 2017). A more equal, democratic relationship between researcher and participant, based on co-participation and co-creation of knowledge, is also at the heart of Participatory Pedagogy (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). This inclusive approach complements the aforementioned student partnership goals, such as engaging in deeper, more meaningful relationships with students predicated on their ability to co-participate in shaping research practices affecting their experience (Neary, 2014; Mapstone et al., 2017).

Participatory Pedagogy's student-centred, democratic framework is based on Paolo Freire's work on empowering marginalised groups. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) is concerned with the social emancipation of oppressed agricultural and working-class communities

across Latin America in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As Burke (2012) eloquently summarises, it is “those social groups whose knowledge and experiences have been socially, culturally and historically undermined by ‘the oppressor’” (185) that Freire writes for. Shaull (1996), cited in his foreword for *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, connects the lack of socio-political voice that the contemporary ‘oppressed’, the working-class, have in shaping society with Freire’s context of oppressed communities. I extend this connection with contemporary UK HE and accord under-represented students with a similar lack of voice in how their experience in HE is shaped. Furthermore, the deficit-model construction of under-represented young people exposed in section 2.2 features a Freirean rhetoric around denouncing embodied characteristics in favour of a middle-class ideal, constructed around hegemonic aspirations, educational experiences and graduate success (Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007, 2012).

Participatory Pedagogy mirrors Freire’s (1996) oppressed worker (and today’s marginalised under-represented student) in that it is “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (30). The balance of power is reconceptualised to do away with the traditional binary dynamics of relationships between “oppressor/oppressed, male/female, white/black and empowered/disempowered” (Burke, 2012: 185). In doing so, it breaks free from potential deficit models, which is why it is so useful for WP research. Indeed, Burke (2012) champions this Freirean code by explaining how such binary constructions of power have “shaped hegemonic assumptions of widening educational participation” (185). Participatory Pedagogy seeks to redress the imbalance of marginalised peoples and purge their disillusionment by reshaping educational relationships between teacher and student to more equal levels (Freire, 1996), much as student partnership authors advocate (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017). Participatory Pedagogy achieves this by infusing agency within students and explicitly exposing them to challenges they face. This problematisation of their experience allows the student to engage with their environment in a critical way. This was revolutionary in Freire’s context as he meant for this pedagogy to literally emancipate the working-class (1996). Participatory Pedagogy as a methodology could also be radical in WP research. Although it taps into the same co-participatory tradition of student partnership models (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017), it retains an emancipatory quality that enables previously marginalised participants to play a leading role in redressing inequalities. In my research, I argue that this co-participation should ultimately take the form of ensuring more equal student representation into policy, practice and research developments.

In a similar manner to how Participatory Pedagogy aims to confront the oppressed with their marginalisation and its causes, Burke (2012) sees today's version as a blueprint for "[engaging] with hegemonic practices and knowledge, so that students from under-represented backgrounds have the opportunity to access, participate in and critique them, as well as to deconstruct them to develop alternative ways of doing and knowing" (186). Burke (2012) also advocates that crucial to Participatory Pedagogy is its ability to "value and recognise the richness and diversity of experiences and perspectives that all students bring" (186). These ideals strongly resonate with student partnership literature (Neary, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017), giving authority to the value of using Participatory Pedagogy as a research framework capable of providing a platform for potentially marginalised under-represented students to share their experiences.

In this chapter I have made the case that neoliberalism's influence over HE extends beyond ensuring the sector reflects the needs of the KBE, such as by encouraging the adoption of utilitarian modes of knowledge. It is a deeper connection, fostered by successive Governments (NCIHE, 1997; DfES; 2004; BIS, 2011, 2016), which encompasses WP policy designed to facilitate expansion of the sector and an increase in graduates to the KBE. Student engagement is also heavily predicated on neoliberal performativity and notions of self-improvement that are part of societal neoliberal conceptions of the self. Both WP and student engagement policies and practices in HE contribute to unequal student experience and outcomes, thanks largely to the neoliberal traits they embody.

This assessment, based on policy underpinning WP and student engagement, leads me to conclude that, in relation to my first research question, neoliberalism is clearly reflected in these fields and contributes to perpetuating deficit model constructs for under-represented students. I believe this is an important contribution to my understanding and practice at Southeastern, to other institutions and to national policymakers: all of us need to understand how neoliberal HE sets the terms of participation and success for under-represented students in HE around adopting a privileged, narrow middle-class learner identity. Furthermore, once in HE, under-represented students are expected to engage with learning and support practices in much the same way as their peers, which reinforces deficit-model constructs of the student experience. Only by acknowledging this marginalisation can new approaches be considered and implemented to redress these inequalities.

With that in mind, I end this chapter by arguing that co-participatory models of engagement can help address deficit-model thinking. In terms of my fourth research question, which seeks to address whether Participatory Pedagogy represents a useful student engagement model for conducting WP research into the student experience, my examination of its literature base (Freire,

1996) and contemporary adaptation (Burke, 2012) in this chapter advocates that this model can support research seeking to counter inequalities in HE. This question also needs to be answered in relation to my empirical findings, which I will review in the Discussion chapter (Chapter 7). The next chapter continues the literature review by considering theoretical models for analysing the student experience, including Bourdieusian notions of habitus and capital, a capability approach and transition models. This chapter will help underpin my second and third research questions, which revolve around understanding the transitional experiences of Southeastern students as they enter HE and how this affects structures, policies and practices designed to support their experience.

### 3. Theorising the student experience

This chapter will review three sets of theoretical concepts: several of Pierre Bourdieu's well-known—and less established— notions; Amartya Sen's capability approach; and conceptions of transition. These concepts will be discussed in relation to the student experience and WP, including their application in research studies, and provide a foundation for tackling my second and third research questions, which seek to unpack my participants' experiences and reflect on what this understanding contributes to practice at Southeastern and elsewhere. At the end of the chapter, I develop a framework that accounts for these concepts in relation to the student experience. I am particularly attracted to contemporary applications of Bourdieu within HE and especially where authors further evolve his concepts, such as Reay's (2004) work on "individual history" (434) and Thomas (2002) and Reay et al.'s (2009) development of institutional habitus. In having to narrow the scope of my thesis, I have not included discussions of individual history here nor in relation to findings and analysis, as that topic is perhaps better suited to research focusing on access and the period prior to entering HE, such as decision-making. However, I would encourage researchers in that field to tap into this rich concept.

Bourdieu's approach is not without its limitations (Yosso, 2005; Walker, 2008) and researchers are beginning to reflect more deeply on their potential overreliance on his tools (Webb et al., 2017). Part of my re-assessment of Bourdieu involves returning to his writing and acknowledging that some of his more popular concepts (e.g. habitus, capitals) are often used out of context or without their original conceptual support (Webb et al., 2017). I will take care to consider the wider, and oft neglected Bourdieusian toolbox, including concepts such as *illusio* and *misrecognition* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), in relation to my research. It will also be important to go "beyond Bourdieu" (Webb et al., 2017: 138) and explore theories that are explicitly critical of his work and offer alternative ways of understanding agency and lived experience, such as Sen's capability approach (1992, 1999, 2003).

As part of this theoretical review, I will focus on transition as an important phenomenon of the first-year student experience. Within HE contexts, transition tends to be viewed in experiential terms, with students enjoying—or suffering—through different periods of their student lives, such as the first few weeks of an academic term (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Leese, 2010; Quinn, 2010; Scott et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016). As a concept, transition is underdeveloped (Gale and Parker, 2014) and I believe its theoretical application to student experience research is somewhat limited. It is important to capture under-represented students' experience as they transition into university and for me to consider these in relation to different understandings of transition. Doing so will lead to uncovering nuances in the student experience of under-represented students, which I have already

identified in the previous chapter as being unequal compared to their peers and offering a deeper understanding of how it might influence the experience of under-represented students.

### 3.1 Using Bourdieu to explain student experience

Bourdieu's sociological concepts have influenced educational and WP research for almost two decades (Sullivan, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Naidoo, 2004; Crozier and Reay, 2008; Quinn, 2010; Fuller et al., 2011; Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; Bathmaker, 2015; Ferrare and Apple, 2015; Gale and Lingard, 2015; James, 2015; Reay, 2015). His more enduring concepts of habitus, capital and field have provided authors with tools to analyse empirical research and further develop approaches explaining how individual identity, disposition and experience can influence and explain agency in different environments, especially educational institutions. His concepts have relevant implications within WP because they suggest why and how some individuals might experience disadvantage within educational institutions. Specifically, I will explore the concepts of habitus, capitals, field, illusio and misrecognition along with the way they influence the relationship between individual and institution. I will also draw on examples of contemporary student experience research applying Bourdieu's concepts to highlight how others have drawn on his concepts. Wary of being overdependent on Bourdieu, I will critique his work and examine other theories, which I coalesce into my own framework at the end of this chapter.

#### 3.1.1 A Bourdieusian recalibration of the student-institution relationship

Throughout his career, Bourdieu defined social, political and cultural practices by recognising the dualism that exists in the relationship between individuals and the social structures around them (e.g. laws, institutions) and the way both influence the other (Bourdieu, 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). To Bourdieu, dissecting individual agency and understanding the actions of those involved could be achieved by merging both personal and contextual issues, in which individuals deploy strategies, which can become trends over time, to maximise their outcomes in any given situation (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1994; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu identified the *logic of practice* to encapsulate the agency individuals display in deploying strategies to navigate environments and maximise their outcomes (1990b). Restoring this sense of individual agency to individuals' actions is crucial to unpacking Bourdieu's position because it rejects the assumption that agency is pre-determined or that life might be reduced to "tidy chronologies" (Grenfell, 2012: 11).

What does this discourse mean for my research on student experience? The logic of practice (Bourdieu 1990b) teases out more of the reasoning behind how students might experience transition at university. This suggests a certain degree of 'pushing' and 'pulling' between students

and universities, with mutual influence, rather than a simple cause and effect relationship. Students are not idle receptors of university life and their actions are not mere outputs of their interactions with university structures (e.g. regulations, teaching and learning styles, classroom dynamics), nor can they be seen as completely free agents experiencing HE. For example, students' actions might help shape policies and practices, while a university's decision-making might affect students' behaviour. The resulting 'experience' for the student is what Bourdieu would term the logic of practice: it is the deployment of strategies by the student, based on their needs, their agency and the constraints of university structures, to successfully navigate HE. Applying the logic of practice to students' transition into HE will help me unpack experience and factors that will allow for a greater understanding of under-represented students' experience at Southeastern and contributions towards potential policies and practice that impact their experience.

### 3.1.2 Bourdieu's concepts and contemporary usage

Capitals and habitus are Bourdieusian concepts applicable to my investigation into under-represented students' transition into HE at Southeastern. I use this section to explore how they interact with each other to affect my understanding of individual agency, especially within fields, which is Bourdieu's (1990b) formulation for the environment and social structures that individuals operate in, such HE institutions. It is especially important to discuss these terms in relation to each other and not in isolation (Webb et al., 2017). Doing so enhances their applicability to the kind of social experience research I am undertaking (King, 2002). It is vital to consider how field (i.e. an individual's environment) affects deploying habitus and capitals (Grenfell, 2008; Webb et al., 2017).

#### *Capitals*

Although capital manifests itself in many forms and can be reduced to almost any recognisable symbol within society or groups (English and Bolton, 2015), Bourdieu (1986) reflects mostly on three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural.

*Economic capital* represents money, currency and assets that contribute to personal wealth (Bourdieu, 1986), such as cash, financial stocks and property. As such, it is the "root of all other forms of capital" (Bourdieu, 1986: 252), allowing individuals to access societal spaces (what Bourdieu calls fields). Within certain educational contexts, such as tuition fee-based HE systems, economic capital can facilitate access into institutions, where other forms of capital (e.g. knowledge, qualifications) can be obtained.

*Social capital* embodies the networks people built up and maintain over time. These can be (relatively) simple and immediate (e.g. family and friends) or more sprawling, complex and

potentially less accessible (e.g. professional fields, social institutions). Much like economic capital, social capital must be mobilised to be effective (Bourdieu, 1986). As English and Bolton (2015) attest, social capital is the manifestation of the popular saying that it is 'not *what* you know but *who* you know [sic]', implying social networks can unlock otherwise closed groups; for example, admission to a high-tariff university may be facilitated by the applicant belonging to a social network with direct ties to the institution (Clarke, 2017).

Bourdieu (1993a) defines *cultural capital* as an inculcated form of knowledge allowing the individual to better navigate fields. There are three forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986): *embodied*, representing knowledge acquired actively (e.g. through learning) or passively (e.g. hereditary); *objectified*, consisting of material possessions (e.g. instruments) that require knowledge to use; *institutionalised*, which formally recognises cultural capital by legitimising it (e.g. academic qualifications). At its most potent, cultural capital is largely invisible, representing gained knowledge or ability allowing the individual to perform in their environment. Applied to HE, a student might acquire certain learning styles, sourced by their own means or even facilitated by financial and social capitals, increasing their chances of academic success. It is easily combined with other capitals and characteristically reproductive, allowing its owners to maintain or further their privilege and social power.

### *Habitus*

According to Reay (2004), *habitus* is complex and takes many forms in Bourdieu's writing. Habitus is made up of 'dispositions', characterised as the result of past actions, a current state of being (e.g. appearance) and future inclinations (Bourdieu, 1977). So, it accounts for the 'micro' in human interactions, such as speech (the choice of words and their delivery), as much as the 'macro', such as the way groups engage with each other and with fields in society. It is also "durable" in its persistence across a person's life, but it can be controlled and utilised in social settings (Bourdieu, 1993b: 87). A habitus is both "structured and structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1984: 170), meaning an individual's habitus is *determined* by past experiences (e.g. upbringing) but also *deterministic* of future practices. I interpret this as an example of the pushing and pulling between society and individual as the latter engages with the 'fields' around them (i.e. social structures and institutions, such as universities).

### *Logic of practice and feel for the game*

Capital, habitus and field are interconnected tools that allow an individual to exercise their logic of practice (Webb et al., 2017): it is a person's various forms of knowledge, their personal

characteristics, past experiences and understanding of the social structures they inhabit that allow them to effectively act and take advantage of their social circumstances (Bourdieu, 1990b). So, habitus and capital are intertwined (as dispositions and knowledge that are inherent or acquired but that can also influence each other), but individuals still retain some agency in terms of how these are deployed within their field (i.e. social structure).

Finally, underpinning these concepts is the notion that individuals have unequal experiences. Bourdieu establishes that dominant groups, even social classes, control fields (i.e. social institutions) throughout society. As a result, institutions tend to reflect the dominant culture in society since it is those groups that control and regulate them. Habitus and capital now become tools to navigate and regulate access to these fields. Individuals who are successful in their environment can be so because of their inherent understanding of its structures (the game) and awareness of how to operate in it (the rules). It is what Bourdieu (1990a) also calls the *feel for the game*. Therefore, belonging to a group either provides the inherent knowledge, experience and characteristics to access and be successful in these environments—or it does not. What occurs when entrants to fields possess the dominant habitus or, feel for the game, is akin to a fish being *in water*: they are unconstrained by their environment and move freely. Those who lack this feel or habitus are like fish *out of water* and appear ill suited to the environment (Bourdieu, 1992).

#### *Institutional habitus*

Bourdieu is acutely aware that institutional structures can greatly affect the agency and outcomes of those engaging with it and underscores the importance of considering field (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). More contemporary authors (Grenfell, 2008; Webb et al., 2017) pick up this refrain to remind researchers to ensure the local context is accounted for as this will influence individuals' habitus and ability to navigate their field. Several researchers in the field of WP expand on the concept of habitus, suggesting universities have their own habitus, what Thomas (2002), Reay (2004) and Reay et al. (2009) term *institutional habitus*. As explored above, the dominant social class applies their own habitus to major societal institutions: it is their cultural capital (i.e. norms, values, knowledge) that control institutional policies, practices and outputs. As such, they tend to implicitly favour individuals from the same social class because they share the same habitus. The previous authors are concerned with the 'fit' between institutions, and their dominant middle-class habitus, with that of under-represented students.

This fit or match that Thomas (2002) and Reay et al. (2009) describe is essentially students' habitus attempting to adapt to the institution's habitus. Thomas uses this mismatch as an opportunity to champion a more holistic approach to improving WP student retention, such as,

reducing the gap between academics and students by promoting inclusive teaching and learning styles, and implementing a wider range of assessments to take advantage of students' differing brought knowledge and experiences.

Reay et al. (2009) take a deep look at whether WP students feel they fit in at their university. They use interviews to unpack learner and institutional habitus and how the latter impacts the former. Their analysis of these habitus reveals a strong heterogeneity amongst WP learner habitus, even within institutions. Students from the same background in the same university could be either well or poorly suited to that institution because of their learner identity. Institutional habitus is particularly useful in considering my third research question, centred on establishing the transitional experiences of my participants. It will allow me to reflect on the fit between participants and Southeastern and how this potential (mis)match between habitus contributes to positive or discomfoting transitional experiences.

### 3.1.3 Illusio and misrecognition

Research tapping into Bourdieu's concepts tends to focus on the habitus-capital-field triumvirate (Webb et al., 2017) and yet Bourdieu himself intended these notions to co-exist with other aspects of his work, such as illusio and misrecognition. Although sometimes overlooked by researchers in education, illusio explains how inequalities are produced and reproduced, particularly in educational settings (France and Threadgold, 2015; James, 2015). Illusio helps bridge the gap between the logic of practice and the field individuals operates in. The way an individual navigates a field might be conditioned by their understanding of it, which itself is underpinned by their habitus and capitals, and how that field positions itself (Webb et al., 2017). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explained, illusio is the "tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game and the practical mastery of its rules" (117), meaning the awareness individuals develop of the rewards and value presented within a field, along with their ability to acquire those benefits.

Furthermore, illusio represents how the interests of both field and individuals can be interconnected (Webb et al., 2017). For example, in terms of HE participation, institutions position themselves to appeal to potential students' interest in gaining education to further their careers. Individuals who are successful in their environment are so because of their feel for the game (Bourdieu, 1990). Applied to a context like post-school transition, young people might make certain choices, adopting a trajectory, what Webb et al. (2017) term 'social gravity', based on their understanding of educational and career routes. In this example, as young people gravitate towards institutions and trajectories, their social gravity thickens as they journey further down their chosen path. The pushing and pulling (Hage, 2011) between the agency of the individual (their practice) and

the structures (fields) they encounter, such as colleges or universities, overcomes initial choice and agency to further tie the individual to fulfilling the desired outcomes of the field they are now committed to—switching trajectories is unlikely as time passes (France and Threadgold, 2015). Inequalities appear where *illusio* between individuals and fields are misaligned, as, despite engaging on a trajectory, the individual may lack necessary *habitus* or capitals to successfully navigate their chosen field.

Misrecognition also plays a role in defining inequality in society (James, 2015; Webb et al., 2017). It occurs between fields and individuals as the latter's practice comes into conflict with the former. Certain fields may be structured in a way that does not acknowledge the practice, *habitus* or capitals of an individual (Webb et al., 2017). In this situation, *illusio* never occurs. For example, a university may legitimise certain forms of knowledge that are more often inculcated in groups who reflect the practice (i.e. *habitus* and capital). Despite other individuals, outside these groups, accessing the institution, their own practice is not recognised, leading to a kind of symbolic violence against this group's inherited *habitus* and capitals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

As Bourdieu applied these concepts to his social research, which included studies into the inequalities found in educational institutions, he established the tension between social groups and classes that, according to him, explain why some succeed and some do not. The use of Bourdieu's concepts in contemporary educational research is widespread, particularly in WP, as authors aim to uncover policies and practices contributing to these tensions, false *illusio* and misrecognition of practice that ultimately support forms of institutional privilege (Webb et al., 2017). Bourdieu's tools prove useful for understanding the experience of WP students in HE (Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2004; Archer and Francis, 2005, 2006; Archer et al., 2007a, 2007b; Reay et al., 2009). I will now consider how a capability approach provides an alternative to Bourdieu in theorising the student experience. Juxtaposing these concepts helps shape my own assessment of how to position them within my conceptual framework, which in turn will guide my empirical study.

### 3.2 Besides Bourdieu: other ways of theorising the student experience

Despite the influence Bourdieu has on research exploring inequalities and experience in educational settings, his conceptions are by no means the only avenues available through which to understand phenomena and individual behaviour or agency. Authors who leant on his work and took a measured approach in its usage advocate "thinking with Bourdieu: thinking after Bourdieu" (Bathmaker, 2015: 61) and "thinking with and beyond Bourdieu" (Webb et al., 2017: 138). Some of Bourdieu's stronger critics, such as Jenkins (1992), also admitted Bourdieu is "good to think with" (319). Webb et al. (2017) argued that contemporary research contexts, such as WP, are very

different to the settings Bourdieu applied his work to. As such, they support authors who increasingly frame his concepts (mainly habitus, capitals and field) against other theories in educational research.

Naidoo (2004) contended that Bourdieu developed his concepts when HE was shielded from social change and market pressures, a position very different in today's landscape. The influences of neoliberalism on HE structures, particularly around funding, regulatory and monitoring changes, have perhaps realigned UK HE as a sector focused more on economic and performance outcomes (both for institutions and students) than on academic learning. I consider that Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and habitus have less influence on individual agency in such an environment, as success for some students in navigating challenging fields could be more reliant on economic inputs (e.g. their economic capital) and outputs (e.g. success in graduate labour markets). Rawolle (2005) firmly supported contemplating the wider socio-political setting, especially neoliberalism, when tapping into Bourdieu for research in HE. I have accounted for this potential shortcoming in using Bourdieu by exposing neoliberalism's influence on HE in Chapter 2 and incorporating it into my research design.

Several authors (Naidoo, 2004; Maton, 2005; Schatzki, 2005; Bathmaker, 2015) also argued that weaknesses in research employing Bourdieusian theory have less to do with its suitability than with the lack of focus on field. I have attempted to avoid this shortcoming by discussing Bourdieu's concepts in the previous section without losing sight of how field affects this thinking. Additionally, I followed the advice of certain authors (Schatzki, 2005; Grenfell, 2008; Webb et al., 2017), and Bourdieu himself, who decried studies failing to investigate how individuals perform in their fields, by drawing on institutional habitus as a concept and focusing on Southeastern as a field.

Criticism of Bourdieu largely falls in two camps (Webb et al., 2017), those who do not think enough *with Bourdieu* and those who do not extend themselves *beyond Bourdieu*. So far, I have shared the importance of the former and in doing so hopefully avoided the pitfalls of adopting a "Bourdieu-lite approach" (Gale and Lingard, 2015). Wacquant (1992), despite being a close associate of Bourdieu, supports this evaluation of Bourdieu's tools as: "an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required" (xiv). Even Bourdieu (1992) himself spoke of avoiding "scientific rigidity" (227) when reflecting on incorporating other theories, meaning to rely solely on one set of "thinking tools" (Gale and Lingard, 2015: 1) would limit the research's effectiveness.

With that in mind, I now explore more oppositional criticism of Bourdieu before settling on a capability approach as a theory to challenge and think beyond Bourdieu.

### 3.2.1 Critical Race Theory

Yosso (2005) was particularly in-tune with Bourdieu's potential shortcomings, suggesting that his approach and tools (especially cultural capital) can facilitate deficit-model thinking. This, she argued, is attributed to the positioning of research seeking to establish where inequalities persist in education by identifying individual characteristics, such as capitals, and whether the presence (or lack thereof) contributes to sustaining disparities in academic performance or outcomes. Using Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) to highlight which individuals succeed in educational fields may lead to assertions that those who do not embody these traits must acquire them to close perceived gaps and achieve desirable outcomes (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) maintained that it is often minority students, "People of Colour" (Yosso, 2005: 69), who are described as lacking certain habitus and capitals. She deployed Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has its roots in America's 20<sup>th</sup> Century civil rights movement (Moraga, 1983; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ellis, 1990), to counter potential deficit views of minorities, and established a new set of cultural capitals labelled "community cultural wealth" (78). Community cultural wealth was designed to directly rebalance Bourdieu's cultural capital, which she deemed as too "narrow" (77) and limiting in capturing individuals' positive contributions to their fields. She listed six new capitals in this grouping: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. There is a contemporary tradition of using CRT as a framework in educational research when considering racial inequality in schools and outcomes of students of colour (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Morris, 2001; Soloranzo and Yosso, 2002; Savas, 2013). Although CRT and community wealth capital are useful in diagnosing where research might adopt deficit views and question existing dominant structures, their foci on the lived experience of people of colour and racism in education would be more useful in research that deals explicitly with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. My study, with its 10 participants, did not attempt to draw in race as a consideration of experience at Southeastern.

### 3.2.2 Capability approach

Whereas Yosso (2005) offered a seemingly direct counterweight to Bourdieu, by explicitly rejecting his approach to how capitals are defined and instead accounting for the value of individuals' existing capital, Sen (1992, 1999, 2003) positioned his capability approach theory entirely outside of a Bourdieusian concept of the world. Sen established that individual agency can be explained, not by the acquisition (or accumulation) and enactment of certain types of capital within different environments, but by the capability of people to live valued lives (Sen 1992, 1999, 2003). In a capability approach framework, the everyday actions of people reveal what they value,

how much freedom they enjoy and the capability they exhibit in living self-assessed meaningful lives (Walker, 2005). If freedom is taken to be concurrent with agency and an ability to move through and be successful in environments, then a capability approach can reveal (dis)advantage (Saito, 2003). Sen's capability approach is compatible with participatory-orientated research, such as mine, and Walker (2005) hinted at Freirean undertones in a capability approach, with its ability to emancipate people, to educate them on social injustices and allow them to lead more valued lives.

A capability approach revolves around what Sen termed functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1999). Functionings entail "the various things a person may value doing or being (Sen, 1999: 75). Capability revolves around the freedom individuals have in accessing and reflecting on their functionings in order to delineate and engage in a meaningful life (Dreze and Sen, 1995)—in other words to obtain "freedom in the range of options a person has in deciding what life to lead" (10). By placing much more emphasis on a person's own belief about the value of their life, Sen (1992) rejected more established neoliberal assessments of success, such as socio-economic status, as too narrow in their ability to measure individual value and wellbeing. Although he acquiesced that "what people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers" (Sen 1999: 5), these potential limitations should not determine individual success. Rather, it is the person's judgement of their achievements that constitutes a capability approach.

Sen (1999) conceived the capability approach with educational research in mind as an alternative way of uncovering how and why individuals participate in education—not because of the self-interest involved in accessing greater socio-economic opportunities, but living more valued and fulfilling lives. According to Sen (2003), HE should push beyond its neoliberal ideals of social mobility and self-economic benefit, of "commodity production" (35), to promote equality to students from under-represented backgrounds concerning choice (to choose an educational path that will add value to life), aspiration (in acknowledging aspirations are diverse and not limited to HE and socio-economic gain), agency (in attitudes and engagements that may or not may lead to economic prosperity but are still valued) and wellbeing (in leading valued lives). Employing a capability approach in WP contexts reinforces the notion I established earlier (section 3.1.2) that institutional structures may contribute to poorer outcomes for under-represented students and that the distribution of HE outcomes and student experience is unequal (Thomson, 1999; Archer, 2007).

While a capability approach offers intriguing possibilities as a counterbalance to Bourdieusian notions of student agency and outcomes in HE, it could also be perceived as less relevant to HE and WP environments. I already detailed how pervasive neoliberalism is across HE and WP policies and practices, as well as how imbued individuals in UK society might be with neoliberal characteristics (see Chapter 2). A key hurdle in adopting a capability approach in WP

research like mine is to reconcile how it can be deployed in such neoliberal settings, if it explicitly rejects neoliberal conceptions (Walker, 2008). However, Sen (1992, 1999, 2003) does allow for the role neoliberal outlooks might play in motivating individuals to participate in HE and for wealth-based outcomes to provide people with a certain degree of freedom in their lives. Nonetheless, the dominance of neoliberalism in political and HE policymaking, along with the contamination of social mobility dialogues by neoliberal rhetoric, leads some, such as Archer (2007) to conclude the "fundamental and irreconcilable tension [...] to both an economic (neoliberal) and an equality agenda" (649). Such a view could potentially limit the influence of a capability approach if the weight of neoliberalism in HE is deemed too difficult to displace or challenge.

According to Walker (2008), challenging the neoliberal nature of HE with a capability approach requires careful positioning and fostering of new pedagogies able to reclaim key neoliberal discourses, such as student engagement and agency, which empowers students as strong evaluators of the choices, aspirations and actions in their lives. I contend that this approach is compatible with the broader co-participatory pedagogy model (Burke, 2012) I applied to my research, designed to raise awareness of neoliberal structures and outcomes in HE and provide a platform for participants to explore their experience.

Within WP research, Sen's work has mainly been deployed to explain participation and non-participation in HE (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006; Walker, 2006, 2008; Watts and Bridges, 2006; Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). This has proved useful in demystifying the golden trajectory of HE (Burke, 2012) and delivering an understanding of other pathways valued by individuals (Watts and Bridges, 2006). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) also tap into a capability approach to dispel the "poverty of aspiration" (122) thesis often found in WP policy: that deprived young people have low or lower aspirations than their more advantaged peers. Drawing on Walker (2006) and Nussbaum's (2006) framework of capabilities, Campbell and McKendrick (2017) proposed a HE specific set of eight capabilities that can be applied to young people developing aspirations and consideration for HE participation. I found this set useful in considering my findings within a HE-specific capability approach as it provides an alternative lens (to Bourdieu) through which to understand student experience. These HE capabilities are:

1. Practical reasoning: actions contributing to learning at school and to a sense that university is important to their future.
2. Educational resilience: overcoming obstacles that might otherwise prevent academic work from being considered high quality.
3. Knowledge and imagination: connecting academic knowledge with the world beyond school.
4. Learning disposition: learning new things and recognising academic knowledge is important.

5. Social relations and networks: getting involved with others and working in groups.
6. Respect, dignity and recognition: broadly respecting others and their opinions.
7. Emotional integrity and emotions: maintaining confidence and composure, even when challenged by others.
8. Bodily integrity: feeling safe and taking steps to preserve health.

In analysing data from pupil participants within this framework, Campbell and McKendrick (2017) confirmed previous research (Walkerdine, 2011; Hart, 2012) dispelling the poverty of aspiration thesis by linking pupils' positive association of aspiration and learning disposition, which is consistent with more recent research (Harrison, 2018). In thinking about deploying models to counter and go beyond Bourdieusian conceptions of HE and student agency or experience, a capability approach containing all or some of Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) capabilities might reveal a very different set of experiences and conceptions of the HE environment for under-represented students. While some literature has utilised a capability approach to measure the student experience, this has tended to be in very different national contexts, such as South Africa (Calitz, 2016) or with the intention to evaluate specific interventions, such as bursaries (Harrison et al., 2018). There is no research that picks up Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) thread of HE specific capabilities, presenting me with an opportunity to make a new, valuable contribution to a capability approach theory and the under-represented student experience.

Sen (1992, 1999) presents a useful theory in discussing inequality, one that takes a very different position to the capital-orientated approach of Bourdieu, and Yosso to a lesser extent. Rather than focus on skills, disposition and knowledge as elements that influence how successful a person is at navigating an environment, Sen positions the individual at the centre and qualifies success by measuring the freedom they have in living fulfilling lives. In this approach, disadvantage is potentially an external perception if the individual feels they live a life that is compatible with their values. As such, Sen calls into question the conventional measurements of what it means to be successful, eschewing income-related and status achievements in favour of personal satisfaction and wellbeing. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argue that a capability approach achieves this by taking account of the social fabric in which individuals experience education and focuses on what is valuable to the learner, rather than what factors might contribute to their success or lack thereof (as in a capital or habitus approach). They perceive a capability approach as a framework for researching education at an individual level, which could help research into the student experience prioritise the potentially ignored experience of under-represented.

In this chapter, I have introduced two significant theoretical positions to help explain individual agency and student experience in relation to their institution: Bourdieu's collection of

concepts, based around the logic of practice (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu 1986, 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1990) and Sen's capability approach (1992, 1999, 2003). At the end of this chapter, I develop a conceptual framework, drawing on these concepts to explain the first-year experience of under-represented students, especially their transition into HE. I will analyse my findings in relation to this framework and draw on it to deepen my understanding of under-represented students' transition into HE and to formulate contributions to my practice. I now explore how transition as a phenomenon affects the understanding of the student experience. Being specific about transition and the student experience will allow me to fully answer my research questions that focus on identifying the transitional experience of my cohort and the implications of their experience for institutional change at Southeastern. This in turn will support my greater understanding of the student experience and ability to make contributions to my practice and to local and national policy, which are core aspects of my research.

### 3.3 Transition into HE

The phenomenon of transition is central to my thesis because it encompasses students' early HE experiences. In this segment, I unpack transition as a concept and seek to define it within the bounds of HE, both in terms of institutions and individuals, drawing on Gale and Parker's (2014) typology to do so. An account of key student experience research shows how other researchers carried out research into transition and what outcomes they reported.

#### 3.3.1 Overview: transition in a WP context

Transition as a concept is fairly underdeveloped within HE and especially with regards to under-represented students entering university (Gale and Parker, 2014). However, most researchers in this field suggest educational transition comprises both moving into a new environment and a process in which individuals undergo some change at specific times (Ronka et al., 2003; Houston et al. 2009; Ingram et al., 2009; Ecclestone et al., 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014; Scott et al., 2014). For some, this movement is simple, reduced to "becoming a student, moving from student to graduate and graduate to employer" with just the barest hints at "fuzzy [...] blurred" boundaries and experiences (Houston et al., 2009: 147), while others suggest more "significant and defining moments of change" (Scott et al., 2014: 96). Gale and Parker (2014) encourage us to consider agency in transition with the student's "capability to navigate change" (734) but state that, ultimately, they do not have full control of this experience, which may be the source of potential challenges (Ecclestone, 2009; Ingram et al., 2009). WP literature often positions transition as including a certain amount of risk for the individual (Wakeford, 1994; Archer and Hutchings, 2000;

Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller 2004; Johnston and Merrill, 2009). In particular, Gale and Parker (2014) identified the first-year experience in HE as a wider transitional period fraught with trials—a view that is upheld by those operating within WP and who regard this period as especially critical (Gale and Parker, 2014) to students from diverse backgrounds (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift 2009).

In making sense of these definitions, I gravitate towards the latter formulations of transition within WP and HE contexts as a phenomenon in which students exert some degree of agency but are also subject to institutional structure. This complements the pushing and pulling within the student experience I identified earlier in this chapter (section 3.1) in relation to Bourdieu's logic of practice. At the end of this section (3.3.3), I will connect this literature on transition, and its focus on the importance of the first-year experience, to relevant student experience research. This will aid me in gaining an understanding of the under-represented student experience at Southeastern.

Transition in relation to under-represented learners is heavily positioned against well-defined, policy-backed outcomes, such as increased participation (Quinn et al., 2005; Biesta and Lawy, 2006), successful continuation (Quinn, 2010) and entry into the graduate labour market (Burke, 2012). These outcomes are rarely positioned as being undesirable for students, leading to a discourse of failure around not accessing HE, dropping out of HE and operating in non-graduate job markets. This is despite such outcomes being potentially beneficial to individuals. For example, time out of HE might allow for a reassessment of personal goals, a balancing of family, work and educational lives or preserving finances (Quinn, 2010).

This pejorative discourse is underscored by a language of failure, previously introduced in section 2.2 within the context of a deficit-model around individuals, particularly under-represented learners, failing to access or succeed in HE (Thomas, 2002; Burke, 2012). Within this vein, under-represented students are often attributed an inability to overcome testing emotional situations in HE, which contribute to their premature exit (Ecclestone et al., 2010). As a counterbalance, this narrative also underpins calls to support the transition of these students, which institutions may interpret differently from one another. This approach may present a deficit-model if it assumes under-represented students encounter difficulties because of deficiencies, such as a lack of knowledge or skills. My research could add new knowledge and understanding to this debate by guarding against a deficit-model approach and allowing participants to co-participate in the research and voice their own experience—doing so will follow in the footsteps of researchers seeking counter narratives around failing under-represented students (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007, 2011, 2012).

This initial overview of transition attempted to contextualise it within HE and WP. Early explorations of how transition is positioned in relation to WP policy and student experience revealed

a landscape ripe with deficit-model characteristics and a tendency to assume under-represented learners require support to counteract a lack of ability or emotional resiliency (Archer, 2003; Burke, 2012; Scott et al., 2014). I will now explore in more depth the relationship between transition and WP.

### 3.3.2 Towards a typology of transition

Although there are similarities in how transition is defined, most definitions observed only consider a specific aspect and do not offer more holistic accounts. A wider framework capable of encompassing the various types of transition, while considering students as agents capable of navigating an environment and undergoing change, would assist me in this regard. Gale and Parker (2014) suggested a tripartite understanding of the topic, with transition grouped as 'induction', 'development' and 'becoming'.

Transition as *induction* presents this phenomenon as a pathway lined with sequentially defined milestones (Gale and Parker, 2014). Within HE, this snakes throughout the first year and might include events, such as being accepted on a course, moving in to new accommodation, matriculating, participating in induction activities, completing the first academic assignment, receiving academic feedback for the first time, taking an exam and so on. Such a view is heavily based on the transactional, input-output engagement model (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2017) I critiqued in section 2.3, whereby the student benefits in various ways by their interaction with institutional processes. This model does not allow for students to deviate from the pathway that is laid out and managed by their institution. This may be problematic for students with diverse backgrounds who have little experience of HE (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift 2009) since the institution sets the "terms of transition" (Quinn, 2005: 119) and manages these (Nelson et al., 2006). As such, institutional pathways may privilege some over others (Gale and Parker, 2014). They may not be responsive to students' changing needs, particularly for those with more complex profiles who fall outside the mainstream of what a traditional student encompasses, which may exacerbate transitional challenges.

Transition as *development* prioritises individual student change and accounts for the myriad of student experiences that influence everyone (Gale and Parker, 2014). Whereas transition as induction emphasises linear progression along a pathway and working towards achieving pre-defined goals, transition as development is discontinuous by nature (Gale and Parker, 2014). It accepts that phenomena like the first year at university should encourage students to re-orientate how they learn and socialise based on their environment (Gale and Parker, 2014). Critically speaking, there is a danger this approach attracts deficit-model characteristics as students may need

to re-orientate their identity based on a dominant profile that is different to their own (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007, 2011; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). This can be especially troublesome for WP students for whom HE may present itself as an environment that challenges their identity and ways of doing and knowing (Gale and Parker, 2014). Such a process can lead under-represented students to feel uncomfortable and anxious, and to ultimately withdraw (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Reay et al., 2009, 2010).

The final type of transition, *becoming* springs from "perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience" (Gale and Parker, 2014: 737). Its nature may appear abstract, but it is connected to the sense that individuals are continually transitioning from one life event to the next. Conceptually, transition as becoming stems from current formulations of transition that do not account for the fluidity in learning experiences or in the everyday events that shape experiences (Quinn, 2010; Scott et al., 2014; Tett et al., 2017). Transition as becoming acknowledges that the experience of entering HE is individual: "while certain transitions are unsettling and difficult for some people, risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others" (Ecclestone et al., 2010: 2). Gale and Parker (2014) use this construct to critique HE for its lack of support towards under-represented groups and denounce institutions for positioning transition as a win/lose outcome that alienates the so-called losers. The authors insist institutions must embrace the multiplicity of student lives (e.g. students who are parents, carers, commuters or part-time workers), particularly as they identify under-represented students may be more likely to embody different roles or characteristics. Such diversity is often silent in HE transitional spaces as the most diverse individuals are stripped of this multiplicity and implicitly asked to conform to a more homogenous identity (Scott et al., 2014), in a way that encourages deficit-model constructs of success in HE (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007, 2011; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). Ultimately, institutions must challenge their curriculum, structure and culture in order to affirm the experience—and multiplicity—of all students.

In their extrapolation of research on student transitional experience, Gale and Parker (2014) identify three types of transition: induction, development and becoming. Induction and development tend to operate as polar opposites, the former reinforcing institutional structures and culture that may benefit the traditional student, while the latter affords the individual more agency in absorbing the HE experience. Transition as becoming, also identified separately by Scott et al. (2014), acts as a critique of the two models by suggesting institutions consider the lived experiences of all students, especially those who are under-represented, and adjust policies and practices related to transition and student experience to better reflect the needs of these students. The next section

highlights research regarding the transition of under-represented students into HE suggesting difficult early experiences are not uncommon.

### 3.3.3 Transitional student experience research

Gale and Parker (2014) remark that research into HE transition tends to incorporate wider views on the first year of study and a sense of belonging to new learning communities. This notation, along with the outcomes of the studies charted in this section, provided me with an insight into potential struggles participants might encounter in their first year at Southeastern. It is notable that research in this area tends to focus on challenging periods in under-represented students' experience rather than successful ones. I also discerned that these studies concluded under-represented students lack capitals and key knowledge deemed valuable to ensuring a smooth transition into HE. These outcomes can be interpreted as supporting deficit-model conceptions of how under-represented students should experience HE, especially when drawing on Bourdieusian notions. I reflect on both these observations in my discussion chapter in relation to my findings.

Studies on transition tend to concentrate on difficult periods in early university lives, often uncovering students' lack of preparation for HE (Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011), including struggles with independent learning (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Krause and Coates, 2008; O'Shea, 2014) and a perceived inability to come to grips with other key characteristics and skills (Read et al., 2003; Leathwood, 2006; Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Scott et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016). I identified two separate categories within this body of research, one noting how under-represented students are seen to lack a feel for the game, often due to a disparity in expected capitals, and, the other emphasising an idealised set of skills and characteristics which, if embodied, should lead to successful transitions into HE.

#### *Feel for the game*

The lack of capitals, established by Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986) as embodied cultural, economic and social codes allowing individuals to successfully navigate environments like HE, is sometimes cited as an important driver for awkward transitions into university (Gale and Parker, 2014). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) intimated this manifests itself as an expectations mismatch amongst students concerning the type of learning experience they assume awaits them, which if unresolved can trigger stress and a potential withdrawal from university (Leese, 2010). Students in such situations are said to lack a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990: 9), suggesting they are not aware of rules, codes or knowledge that would facilitate their transition into HE. These mismatches can be particularly acute for WP students whose needs may be less accounted for than for their

more advantaged peers (Read et al., 2003; Archer, 2007) and whose transitions are as a result more difficult, leading to higher levels of withdrawals (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2009; Quinn, 2013). Reay et al. (2009) noted, in their study of under-represented students at an elite British university, a disconnect between the success students wanted to achieve and a dearth of appropriate capital to enable those outcomes—leading the authors to confirm students did not have a feel for the game. My research will shed light on whether a similar disconnect and lack of capitals exists with under-represented students at Southeastern, a post-1992 institution.

#### *Characteristics and skills*

Christie et al. (2016) point to incoming WP students requiring a very specific skill set (advanced writing and critical thinking) to help them navigate difficult periods and become integrated members of learning communities. Their assessment is that this process is gradual and is eventually realised in the final degree year, thus avoiding any withdrawal. While this may have been the case for that study's participants, attending a research-intensive Scottish university, it may not be so for students elsewhere, such as Southeastern and other post-1992 universities. The acquisition of other characteristics has similarly been cited as important for ensuring a smooth transition. Motivation, self-discipline and determination are all characteristics inherent to successful HE transitions and are borne out of neoliberal formulations of individual interest, motivation and success observed earlier in section 2.3 (Olssen and Peters, 2005). More broadly, independent learning, as a learning style, dovetails tightly with wider neoliberal notions of self-interest as students “take full responsibility for their own lives as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals” (Leathwood, 2006: 612). There is, according to Read et al. (2003), an idealisation of the independent student, as a learner who requires little support and who progresses efficiently in their transition into and out of HE. This privileging of the neoliberal, independent, student type leads to a culture that favours individuals who either embody these criteria or who can quickly assimilate them, which can further exacerbate difficult transitions for those students who, according to their institutions, do not exhibit these profiles. This underscores the prevalence of deficit-model constructs of the under-represented student experience.

In my previous empirical research (Farenga et al., 2016), I found that first-year under-represented students at a post-1992 university were twice as likely to withdraw as their peers. This highlights potential difficulties for these students and suggests many of these students cannot rely on skill development and integration over several years as a preventative dropout measure, as Christie et al. (2016) suggested. Although withdrawal is a complex phenomenon, with many potential intersecting influences (Yorke and Longden, 2004; Quinn, 2013), a key factor in this

outcome in post-1992 institutions may be a student's lack of established social networks and general lack of social integration (Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Maunder et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2018; Read et al., 2018). This is especially pertinent for post-1992 universities, such as Southeastern, who have higher intakes of under-represented students.

In the face of data exposing growing inequalities of under-represented student performance outcomes (HEFCE 2013, 2015, 2016; HESA, 2017a, 2017c; SMC, 2017; Boliver, 2017; McCaig, 2018b; Vigurs et al., 2018) and despite studies tracking under-represented students across their HE lifecycle (Christie et al., 2016) or identifying key missing attributes (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Leathwood, 2006; Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Krause and Coates, 2008; O'Shea, 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016, Read et al., 2018), it appears that more knowledge is required about these students' first-year experience, which my thesis aims to provide. In developing my own conceptual framework, which sought to understand the transitional experiences of under-represented students with different theoretical models (Bourdieuian notions, a capability approach and conceptions of transition) within a neoliberal landscape, I identified new knowledge and understanding of the under-represented student experience, while considering implications for supporting these students at Southeastern. An innovative research process (detailed in Chapter 5) combining co-participation and artful inquiry also elicited a different set of experiences amongst my cohort, contributing to this new knowledge. I will now conclude this chapter—and my literature review—by sharing the development of my conceptual framework and how it will guide me in my empirical work.

### 3.4 Developing a conceptual framework

So far in this thesis, I have accounted for the pervasive presence of neoliberalism in HE and its role in shaping WP and student engagement. I argued in Chapter 2 that it is difficult to dissociate neoliberalism from HE, such is the influence it has on its structures, policies and practices, especially those affecting WP and student engagement. Neoliberal performativity permeates individual behaviour, especially around a sense of self-improvement, in terms of skill development, competitive outlook at university and access to graduate labour markets, that students, particularly those from under-represented groups, enact (Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). The competitive natures students adopt are reflective of the wider impact neoliberalism imposes on student engagement (Wilkins, 2012). I contended that rather than its impact embodying a positive force on these two fields, its influence perpetuates deficit-model constructs, especially concerning under-represented students' engagement and experiences. To counter this, I supplied a rationale for implementing a

co-participatory model for engaging students in the research process allowing them to help drive the study while providing a platform for their voice to contribute to institutional change.

Earlier in this chapter, I also reviewed several concepts that I argued are useful in interpreting the student experience. Bourdieu's notion of habitus and capitals (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986), and how they explain individual student agency and behaviour in WP and HE contexts (Crozier and Reay, 2008; Quinn, 2010; Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; Bathmaker; 2015; Reay, 2015), led me to consider whether potential mismatches in expected knowledge and fit might exist between under-represented students and their institution (Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2004, 2005; Roberts, 2011). My own concerns about potential deficit-model applications of Bourdieusian tools motivated me to look at other theorisations of agency and engagement. Capability approach (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003) is particularly useful as it considers the values and capabilities of an individual, and, how capable they evaluate themselves to be in achieving their goals. Leaning on a capability approach to help unpack under-represented students' experiences at Southeastern could avoid deficit-model thinking around what capitals or dispositions they lack and instead support participants to voice their own self-evaluations of their experience.

In thinking more deeply about the first-year student experience, I found it helpful to theorise around transition as a phenomenon. Notions of transition as a collective or individual phenomenon (Gale and Parker, 2014) suggest that students might adopt different conceptions of their experience, which could influence how their institution supports them. In Chapter 7, I suggest how positioning students' experience within this typology allows institutions to develop both greater awareness of under-represented students' experiences, and practices to support them. Research on the transition of under-represented students also suggested that their experience is affected by the development of a set of academic skills and characteristics (or the lack thereof) (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Archer; 2007; Wingate; 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Kift, 2009; Leese, 2010; Christie et al., 2016, Read et al., 2018). The notion that deploying a set of transitional characteristics might ease or smooth students' transition into HE provides tools to further unpack students' experiences but also hints at a potential deficit-model construct of the student experience that I aim to avoid.

Additionally, I set out to assess the ability of Participatory Pedagogy to redefine student engagement research and, through the research process, extract new, useful knowledge to support the under-represented student experience at Southeastern and in HE. Consequently, I have developed two frameworks: a conceptual framework reflecting the various theoretical lenses debated in the literature review, which will guide my empirical work and analysis; and a research framework accounting for the methodological role Participatory Pedagogy plays in this research,

which I introduce in Chapter 5 as the culmination of the work I did to refine my research process following my pilot study.

I adopt Woods's (2016) understanding of a conceptual framework and how I might apply it to my research. Following Woods's (2016) guidance, I intend my conceptual framework to fulfil three aims. One, to deepen my understanding and make sense of my participants' first-year transitional experience. Two, to provide an alternative way of understanding this experience and phenomenon, which avoids a deficit-model construct of under-represented students. Three, to contribute to my professional practice at Southeastern by facilitating the development of support practices, influencing my senior leaders to update or create policies and provide a research base for the sector to carry out other research and policy work. With this guidance in place, I will now finish this section (and chapter) with the development of my conceptual framework by taking its different components in turn and considering their roles in fulfilling these requirements.

In accounting for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, I address the influence it exerts on the individual student experience, both in terms of student agency and attitudes towards participation. Neoliberalism offers a socio-political overlay that could deepen my understanding of participants' experience. The lack of student experience research incorporating neoliberalism's influence leads me to conclude that my research could provide new ways of conceptualising under-represented students' experience, which could lead to more appropriate institutional practices and sector policies that better reflect students' neoliberal attitudes and agency.

Taking stock of participants' logic of practice will refine my understanding of their transition. Such clarity will benefit both students and Southeastern in understanding how they experience HE. These answers might also be crucial in determining the extent of the fit between students and institution, and whether this highlights a mismatch between them. Applying these approaches to student experience research can reveal contested spaces and inequalities in learners' experiences (Naidoo, 2004). The conception that disparities in cultural capital and habitus between dominant and under-represented groups can lead to difficult experiences within institutions for the latter is also reinforced by Reay (2005). Not losing sight of the importance of Southeastern as a field or environment could highlight if institutional practice plays a role in the student experience, which will provide an important feedback loop back into my practice. Although Bourdieu's notions are often used in HE and WP research, tapping into his lesser known concepts, *illusio* and *misrecognition*, will allow me to provide different explanations for students' transitions and experiences and ensure I build on the work of other researchers who used his more common concepts (Thomas, 2002; Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Reay, 2004; Read et al., 2007; Crozier et al, 2008; Reay et al., 2009; Burke and McManus, 2009; Mills and Gale, 2010; Roberts, 2011).

Including elements of capability approach (values, capabilities) establishes the value and belief individuals have in achieving their goals, outside the sphere of embodied capitals, knowledge and discussions around legitimate habitus or practice. A capability approach considers not the accumulation or lack of knowledge, skills or characteristics of individuals but rather their capacity to live a valued life. In doing so it can offer fresh perspectives on alternative pathways (Watts and Bridges, 2006) and disparities of experience and resulting inequalities (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). Sen's capability approach offers a completely different perspective on student experience and what might be considered desirable outcomes amongst my cohort, which not only enriches the knowledge gained in my study but provides an alternative to Bourdieusian research that can dominate my field. For instance, HE practices underpinned by a Bourdieusian approach might identify a lack of capitals or knowledge amongst under-represented students when compared against the habitus of other students. However, a capability approach might encourage the development of HE practices that acknowledge under-represented students' existing experience and that are tailored to enable them to achieve futures they value. The general lack of research into the under-represented student experience drawing on a capability approach also ensures contributions to my practice will include fresh perspectives that may lead to innovative programme and policy development.

A central aspect to the experience of first-year HE students is their transition into university (Gale and Parker, 2014). Many definitions of HE transition revolve around experience, including paths students take entering and leaving HE (Houston et al., 2009) and specific, identifiable moments that lead to change (Ronka et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2014). I find Gale and Parker's (2014) tripartite typology of student transition (induction, development and becoming) useful in considering transition as a concept, as each typology takes a central view of the student experience, which matches well with my research's ethos prioritising students' experiences. Analysing participant data in relation to this typology might reveal how students conceive of their own transition, which would illuminate contributions to practice and policy by potentially better tailoring these to under-represented students' needs. I am also intrigued by Gale and Parker's (2014) transition as becoming concept because it has the potential to redefine transition into HE by accounting for students' multiplicity of lived experience and avoiding potential deficit-model constructs of their transition. Two other transitional notions are also important to feed into this framework: the concept of transition as potentially distressing (Ecclestone, 2009; Ingram et al., 2009) and the confirmation that the first year in HE is considered the most decisive in achieving positive student outcomes (Gale and Parker, 2014). These considerations drew me to consider the

role key skills, characteristics, capitals and outcomes (like developing peer groups) might play in explaining the transitional experience of under-represented students.

I believe this conceptual framework is multi-faceted in drawing on different theoretical concepts not usually associated in WP research (e.g. *illusio*, misrecognition and a capability approach), leading to alternative ways of making sense of the student experience. Drawing on opposing conceptions of transitions will allow me to consider participants' transitional experience from different vantages, rendering my contributions to practice and policy more valuable. Finally, by accounting for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in HE I will offer fresh perspectives on student experience data that might not only refine knowledge in this field but influence how Southeastern and the sector tackle under-represented students' unequal outcomes.

The next chapter takes a closer look at the artful inquiry methodology I used to stimulate participants in producing deep, experiential and reflective data. First, I recap the over-arching Participatory Pedagogy research framework that bounds the research's co-participatory approach, methodology and methods. Second, I discuss the value of art as a form of knowledge and in doing so argue for the use of artful inquiry methodology as a means of accessing and unpacking the under-represented student experience of my cohort. Third, I settle on collage as the method for carrying out my data collection.

## 4. Methodology: artful inquiry, collage and the research process

The previous two chapters reviewed key literature in relation to my research questions. I discussed how neoliberalism shapes WP policy and the HE student experience, including moulding student performativity and engagement. I asserted that these neoliberal influences on HE contribute to deficit-model constructs of under-represented students, in terms of their performance and experience. I argued that developing co-participatory models of student engagement could serve as an antidote to deficit-models by enhancing the student voice and establishing parity between students and staff. This is especially relevant to WP research like mine, seeking to better understand inequality in the student experience. By adopting a co-participatory model for student engagement research, Participatory Pedagogy, I aim to privilege the student voice of a cohort of under-represented students at Southeastern and in doing so better understand their first-year experience.

The rest of the literature review was aimed at evaluating theoretical concepts and synthesising these into a conceptual framework that could support the development of my understanding of the student experience, my analysis of this student experience in relation to participants' experiences and contributions to my practice and the field. I debated the merits of Bourdieusian notions of habitus, capitals, *illusio* and misrecognition, the contemporary usage of which is helpful in explaining agency and outcomes in HE. However, I am concerned that these concepts may in fact perpetuate deficit-model understandings of the under-represented student experience because they tend to emphasise the deficiencies in students' agency. To counter this, I drew in a capability approach and found its assessment of individual values and capabilities complementary to supporting co-participatory research as it allows individuals to share their own knowledge, experience and notions of success, while avoiding comparisons with others.

In this chapter, I first bring together the different aspects of my methodology. First, in the next paragraph, I recap Participatory Pedagogy's role as an over-arching approach to conducting this research and I evaluate its role as a research process facilitating the sharing of students' experiences. I then consider the rationale for adopting artful inquiry and argue that collage is an ideal art-based method for exploring participants' transitions into HE. This chapter builds on the wider methodological discussion in Chapter 2, which outlined the importance of adopting a co-participatory framework, and I make the case that artful inquiry and collage are not only compatible with Participatory Pedagogy but also support the anti-deficit-model approach I champion in my work. After this discussion, I consider how I refined my research process by applying artful inquiry and collage principles and practices to my pilot study. The outcomes of this pilot, in terms of how

participants experienced artful inquiry and collage, aided me in reflecting how to further embed co-participation, artful inquiry and collage in the main study.

As covered in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2), I used Participatory Pedagogy as an overall approach for undertaking research into the student experience because of its ability to empower participants and provide under-represented students with a platform to share experiences (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). Participatory Pedagogy is premised on establishing a more equal and democratic platform for those involved in researching inequalities in students' experiences (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). This inclusive approach is congruent with the co-participatory aims of this research, as stated in section 2.4, particularly in allowing students to co-lead this research (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017). In doing so, Participatory Pedagogy challenges imbalances in student outcomes by offering a blueprint for engaging under-represented students, commonly marginalised in HE practices, and providing them with a space to access and critique key knowledge affecting their experience (Burke, 2012). In considering how useful Participatory Pedagogy is as a research framework for student engagement and experience research, I argued that its properties foster a co-participatory approach that prevents deficit-model research, while facilitating the collection of data needed to answer my research questions. My empirical research will support this assertion as I aim to answer my research question assessing Participatory Pedagogy's usefulness for this type of research. I next outline why I consider artful inquiry to be an appropriate methodology for my study, as it supports the collection of rich, experiential data.

In defending artful inquiry and collage as my choice of methodology and method, respectively, I consider the ontological and epistemological differences of art-based research compared to more traditional methodologies. I then explore the compatibility between artful inquiry and Participatory Pedagogy, including the latter's ability to not only support facilitating the extraction of under-represented students' voice and experience, but also counter neoliberal deficit-model constructs in HE. I advocate for the use of visual images, and specifically collage, as a method capable of eliciting participant reflections on their experience in HE.

#### 4.1 Art as a form of knowledge

Ontologically, my research is positioned around my belief that everyone has a unique experience of life. The literature review supported this in terms of the student experience and transition into HE, particularly a capability approach that highlighted individuals may value different aspects of the experience that affect their choice, aspiration and agency in HE (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003; Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2008) and conceptions of transition into HE that point to potentially

very individualised experiences (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014; Scott et al., 2014). There are almost certainly many 'realities': different habitus and capabilities leading to different transitional experiences for different students. Furthermore, it is not simply this diversity that is important to capture, but the potentially new or alternate responses to an experience that has been much researched already, which I captured in my conceptual framework (section 3.4). While there exists a range of qualitative methodologies and methods capable of embracing multiple realities and extracting student experiences (e.g. phenomenography, ethnography, interviews, focus groups, observation), an artful inquiry approach offers some unique advantages.

Creswell (2003) argued that artful modes of inquiry can support a multiplicity of realities. Not only might different forms of knowledge suit varying degrees of research methodology, but assorted methods also allow for new and changed interpretations of knowledge, such as the transitional experiences of students. Eisner (2008) suggested that language limits our understanding and interpretation of knowledge but that an artful inquiry approach can counter this if research aims to expose feelings, emotions or responses to a specific phenomenon: "the life of feeling is best revealed through those forms of feeling we call the arts" (7). If transitioning into university provokes a varying range of emotions and different experiences from students, then Eisner (2008) believed this approach will provide dividends because of the capacity of the arts to deliver sensory tools through which emotion-inducing phenomena can be understood.

#### 4.1.1 Artful inquiry: an epistemology for human inquiry

McNiff (2008) defined artful inquiry research as "the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions [...] as a primary way of understanding and examining experience" (29). He advocated for the use of an "artistic process" as the main way for representing and understanding knowledge. Perhaps the key words in the above quote are "systematic" and "the actual making" since they not only insist upon the presence of an art method but also reinforce the creation and use of art as representations of emotions or responses. Artful inquiry literature (Eisner and Barone, 1997; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Eisner, 2008) suggests that this inquiry is ontologically compatible with research trying to expose different realities and that artful inquiry can expand these possibilities. Artful inquiry could legitimately be used to access under-represented students' experiences, previously established as highly individual, rather than relying on more linear, conventional research approaches, by "forcing us to consider new ways of seeing or doing things" (Kapitan, 2010: 165).

Davis (2008) and Finley (2008) contended that artful inquiry naturally probes liminal and contested spaces. This ability to delve into liminal spaces is enticing to me because it is those

transitions into HE that I seek to unpack. Previous research into HE transitions and student experience supported the notion that transitional experiences at university could be smooth or difficult (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Krause and Coates, 2008; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010; Quinn, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Gale and Parker, 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016). That potentially renders my research well-suited to artful inquiry that at its core focuses on untapping new experiences and knowledge. Next, I explore the fit between artful inquiry and Participatory Pedagogy. I conclude that artful inquiry's capacity to uncover highly individualised understandings can support Participatory Pedagogy's aim to provide a platform for previously marginalised individuals to voice their experience.

#### 4.1.2 Artful inquiry and Participatory Pedagogy

At this point, I want to draw artful inquiry within the sphere of Participatory Pedagogy and reinforce their compatibility. Participatory Pedagogy is based on the premise of inclusivity and setting out a platform for participants to share experiences, especially in the context of marginalised under-represented individuals (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). Cole and Knowles (2008) urged researchers to engage with art alongside their participants, using their methods as a reflective exercise. The researcher is in fact an 'artist-researcher' and can use this engagement to explore questions and issues that arise within the research process (Davis, 2008; Eisner, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2008). Furthermore, artful inquiry literature suggests it is an effective method for supporting co-operative research (Finley, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Rumbold et al., 2012). Finley (2008) asserted that part of the researcher's duty is to integrate into a community and deconstruct the conventional researcher-participant relationship from one where they are perceived as an outsider-expert, to one where both parties are equals and co-create knowledge. Mullen (2003) encouraged researchers to operate as research-activists, identify culturally oppressed minorities and use research to challenge authoritative structures. There are strong parallels here, not just with the equitable nature of Participatory Pedagogy, but also with the social justice drive of my research, which hopes to improve the experience of under-represented students.

It is worth considering at this stage that artful inquiry is also a recognised approach for research dealing with—and seeking to counter—neoliberal contexts by tapping into participants' natural and intrinsic creativity, affording them the space and means to explore topics from new perspectives (Adams, 2013). Researchers found that artful inquiry is compatible with studies seeking to address inequalities of experience of oppressed participants (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001; Finley, 2001, 2008; Mullen, 2003). This activist quality of artful inquiry further underscores its

suitability to being embedded in a Participatory Pedagogy process and to supporting my research investigating unequal HE experiences from the vantage point of those who are traditionally marginalised in HE (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Burke, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016).

#### 4.1.3 Considerations in doing artful inquiry

As I introduced earlier, there is a potential natural fit between artful inquiry and research that strives to uncover emotional responses to phenomena (Eisner, 2008). However, authors in this space (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2003, 2008) cautioned that although such methodologies might trump conventional forms of research (by exposing subtleties, complexities or synthesising new conclusions out of traditional issues), they might not be immune to misinterpretations. Much like with traditional approaches, researchers need to refine their skills by practicing methodological techniques in an environment where feedback is provided. This was an important part of my own research journey as I was exposed to artful inquiry in a doctoral workshop. I was able to trial and engage with several alternative methods, such as collage, applying them to my own experience as an EdD student, which enabled me to investigate this methodology. I then applied it to a pilot study and further developed my understanding of how to execute it with participants (I detail this process and its outcomes in the next chapter).

Vaughan (2005) commented that artful inquiry covers a wide spectrum of research, from studies where art is a form of data, to where it is inherently linked to the creation of art—I position my research as part of the former. In terms of art as data, I grounded my research in Piantanida et al.'s (2003) categorisation of art as self-reflection and as representing knowledge: participants reflecting on their experiences of transitioning into university. Artful inquiry literature instructs that collected emotions and feelings should be observable as manifestations of an experience with the studied phenomenon (Eisner, 2008). Cole and Knowles (2008) also observed that artful inquiry should produce “more than good stories” (66) and is a reminder of Eisner’s (2008) warning to be aware of the “anything goes” (9), carte balance mentality. Artful inquiry requires the same rigorous methodological considerations as other forms of research, such as interviews, focus groups or statistical approaches (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Cole and Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2003, 2008).

McNiff (2003, 2008) also dealt with a potentially significant argument about the validity of artful inquiry in tackling issues and questions deemed to be ‘outside’ the art world. He offered clear advantages to employing art methodologies, the most powerful of which I list here: by virtue of being an alternative approach, they foster an environment conducive to unlocking new ways of understanding problematic issues, even traditional ones; working with a group (as is often the case

in artful inquiry) sparks a “slipstream of group expression [that] can carry us to places where we cannot go alone” (32).

Finally, in terms of creating art as part of research, Cole and Knowles (2008) dispelled the myth that data must retain aesthetic qualities. In fact, the aesthetics of an art piece are not determined by how well artistic theory is applied, but by how well it promotes the research’s goals. It is a position close to McNiff’s (2008) own view, that a lack of artistic skill can be a positive bias, as in his experience experts are just as likely to resist new forms as beginners. This served as useful contextual information to translate to my own participants who might have been novices themselves to artistic mediums.

This introduction to artful inquiry laid the foundation for its use as a relevant methodology for examining the transitional experiences into HE of potentially marginalised under-represented students. Artful inquiry has the capacity to explore liminal spaces in people’s experience (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008) and is effective at drawing out new meaning to previously well-researched contexts (Kapitan, 2010; McNiff, 2013). This means artful inquiry is not only well-suited to exploring students’ transitional (i.e. liminal) experience as they enter HE, but, that such an approach could provide new knowledge to a field (transitions to HE and student engagement) that has been researched by others (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Kuh et al., 2006; Archer, 2007; Crozier et al, 2008; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Nelson et al., 2011; Price et al., 2011; Christie et al., 2016). Methodologically, there are well-defined commitments to adhere to: a systematic approach to creating art as a way to understand human experience; fostering an environment that is conducive to creativity; empowering participants to take an active role in the research; striving to break down barriers for a wider dissemination of the research beyond academic confines. I also challenged some myths about the necessary aesthetic qualities of art in my research and the validity of artful inquiry to tackle questions outside the art world. I will next move on to more specific forms of artful inquiry that I used in my study and discuss why collage was my preferred method for eliciting responses to student transitions into HE.

#### 4.2 Collage: a visual, reflective tool

Visual methods are well-suited to my research because images support a multiplicity of layers that influence the representation of a given phenomenon, an aspect that is well referenced across the field (Rose, 2001; Diaz, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Esiner, 2008; Weber, 2008). Visual methods are compatible with my wider research approach, Participatory Pedagogy in several ways. They validate how the experience of one individual resonates among those of a group (Kapitan, 2010). They are also conducive to research challenging inequalities in society by conveying

concepts and experiences normally difficult to express verbally (Diaz, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Weber, 2008; Kapitan, 2010; Adams, 2013). Their democratic, accessible nature means visual-based outputs encourage reflexivity and equity amongst participants (Weber, 2008), while impacting wider audiences (Cole and Knowles, 2008).

Collage is one of several image-based methods to choose from, such as painting, drawing, photography or film (Weber, 2008). While it may be possible to argue the usage of any of these, Neilsen (2002) promoted collage for its capacity to operate in “liminal spaces” and to “listen visually” (2008), an insight reiterated elsewhere in the literature (Davis, 2008). Much as I highlighted the ability of artful inquiry to function in liminal, transitional environments as reason for adopting such an epistemology, collage’s aptitude for doing so as a method made it particularly attractive for allowing participants to explore their transitions into HE. I will now continue discussing and evaluating collage in relation to my research in the following three sections: first, I will cover its tradition as a visual tool, the process of how collage is made and what interpretations can be observed; second, I will explore different types of collage technique that I could adopt; third, I will reflect on the challenges of using collage in research.

#### 4.2.1 Defining collage: tradition, process and interpretation

What roots does collage have as a research tool? What does collage consist of? Davis (2008), Vaughan (2005) and Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) traced its origins and broke down the steps involved in creating a piece. Collage comes from the French verb *coller*, meaning ‘to stick’. Making collages consists of using found—as opposed to created—materials that are cut up and placed (or simply placed directly) on a flat, canvas-like surface. There is a rich history of collage as an art technique, dating back 1000 years to Japanese culture, and more recently, to Cubist artists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Contemporary collage has shifted to portraying different realities while focusing on the day-to-day, or ‘real’, experience of human life (Vaughan, 2005). This current tradition is well-suited to my research as it acknowledges the everyday experience of students to explain phenomena, such as their transition into HE.

The materials used to make collages can vary greatly. Davis (2008) found in her work that the ubiquitous nature of media images (i.e. from printed sources) was both already used widely in educational contexts and resonated with her young adult participants. In broad terms, collage allows the user to manipulate image fragments and consciously or otherwise create new meanings and understandings (Davis, 2008). As Vaughan (2005) outlined, the juxtaposition of materials that up until the collage making were disconnected is key: “[the] interplay of fragments from multiple sources, whose piecing together creates resonances and connections that form the basis of

discussion and learning” (13). It is not the definition of a fragment or object (i.e. the words used to describe it) that creates new knowledge, but rather it is the way the author positions them within the collage and the resulting connections—both clear and ambiguous—that add meaning to the collage and advance knowledge (Vaughn, 2005; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Furthermore, the connection between fragments may allow for emotions to “seep” through, highlighting another layer of understanding between the fragments themselves and their relationship with their creator (Davis, 2008). This assessment of collage strongly resonated with my work, which sought to understand how the experiences of individuals within a group can not only relate to one another but also to wider institutional practice and to other student experience research.

Collage’s natural ability to account for new interpretations and knowledge has a democratising effect in two separate ways. First, the access collage provides to deeper insights, hidden up until its creation, assist in making experiences more commonplace, potentially lending a voice to the marginalised (Vaughan, 2005). An under-represented student’s collage on their experience in HE not only adds a new piece to the overall puzzle of student experience, but also heightens the awareness of issues facing similar students. Second, the practical nature of creating collages reveals a technique that is accessible to many (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Even a novice can grasp the techniques involved in collage because of the basic skills used in the cutting and placing of fragments (Davis, 2008). This accessibility could be empowering for under-represented students who are traditionally marginalised in HE and who may feel further disenfranchised by academic practices, such as writing, that can be transposed into research contexts. This is supported by my previous consideration that aesthetics in artful inquiry are deemphasised in favour of the ways they answer the research’s aims (Cole and Knowles, 2008; McNiff, 2008). In that sense, it is up to the researcher to create an environment that allows participants to engage with the research in the appropriate manner. In this regard, it is also worth considering equity and accessibility issues of collage. In affording each participant the space to explore their own experience, as well as a platform to share their work, collage helps mitigate any issues around equity and the perceived importance of one participant’s work versus another. Although collage is praised for its accessibility in terms of the skills required to create a piece (Vaughn, 2005; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010), it relies on the participant being able to physically manipulate and move clippings or artefacts. However, this could be addressed by allowing a participant to dictate to someone else where collage pieces should be placed or even encouraging them to express their experience with more suitable artful inquiry methods. Once more, these characteristics of collage are reflected in the broader commitments of artful inquiry and Participatory Pedagogy, which points to collage as a suitable

method for my research investigating the under-represented student experience. The next section introduces different collage techniques and my assessment of their suitability for my research.

#### 4.2.2 Ways of doing collage

The process of creating collage differs from conventional, text-based methods. According to Butler-Kisber (2008), traditional research relies on crafting ideas during the research process and then continually refining these through writing. As such, there are often many drafts that grow progressively clearer and deeper in meaning. The reverse is true for collage, so that feelings and emotions are initially explored (in the doing of collage) followed by a period of analysis. Collages can go through an iterative process as well before they are finalised.

Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) offer several approaches to using the method that are useful in shaping my methodology. One approach is for collage to function as a tool for elicitation. A collage's composition can contain many different fragments and materials, potentially arranged by its creator in a seemingly infinite number of ways. The juxtaposition of these elements can uncover new connections and knowledge unknown until this point (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008). Adopting this style seemed appropriate as I attempted to unpack my participants' experiences. A key facet here is in the availability of a variety of materials to use in collage, allowing participants to create new meanings and understandings (Davis, 2008).

Collage can also conceptualise experiences or phenomena (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). This involves using collage to respond to a research question. What should follow is a "kaleidoscopic representation" (Butler-Kisber, 2008: 272) of a phenomenon and the teasing out of nuances, interpretations and understandings, which might otherwise not have emerged. The results of this work can be subsequently analysed in several ways. Discussion between researcher and participant(s) can then expose commonalities, differences and nuances of the phenomenon (Butler-Kisber, 2008). This approach is especially relevant to my work as my second research question (What are the transitional experiences of under-represented students at Southeastern?) explicitly sought to access participants' knowledge and as such it benefited from being directly linked to collage-making sessions during which they explored their experiences.

Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) also introduced a variant of collage, called 'Artcards', which proved adept at deciphering phenomena, such as transition into HE. The principle is that participants explore a phenomenon by producing three or four small collages, Artcards, in which the collage's surface is limited to roughly an A4 size. Each Artcard explores a different facet of the phenomenon. By being restricted in this way, Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) asserted that a stronger structure emerged because participants thought more carefully about placing materials and

using space. Once a cluster of Artcards is completed, they can be analysed together, producing a richer understanding of the given phenomenon. This technique seemed appropriate for my research because applied to student experience and transition into HE, being able to separate out different themes in collage was ideal in helping participants to structure and translate their experience.

One of the aims of my research was to offer new understandings around the experience of under-represented students at Southeastern. In evaluating collage, I concluded that it has the potential to unpack experiences and offer new insights in a way that previous research, relying on more conventional methods, has not—this complements my conceptual framework, which tried to uncover new meanings of HE experience. The benefit of this was using these potentially new perceptions to develop policy and practice implications at Southeastern, which could ultimately improve the experience for under-represented students at Southeastern and across the HE sector. In the last section of this chapter, I focus on challenges of adopting collage as a research method.

#### 4.2.3 Challenges in doing collage

One of collage's strengths, the ability to incorporate a multitude of materials within the frame, can also be a hindrance if not properly managed. Reflecting on materials is important: different materials could bias or engage participants in different ways (Davis, 2008). For example, in thinking about this dilemma for her research on teenage anorexia, Davis (2008) concluded that her participants would better engage with popular media imagery found in magazines and newspapers. In selecting the 'right' materials, collage may facilitate participants' ability to tap into their experience and effectively represent it (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Another challenge is the resistance participants might exhibit to taking part in an exercise they deem requires a high-level of creativity (Gerstenblatt, 2013). The next chapter explores how my pilot study accounted for this and how the lessons learned helped mitigate issues in the full research.

A key challenge is to ensure making collages reflects the research's aims by attempting to answer its key questions (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Here, Vaughan (2005) reinforced the researcher's role to facilitate participants' work within a bounded landscape by focusing their gaze on the research topics. In my research, I employed Participatory Pedagogy and allowed participants to shape the research and their collages within the research's scope. Butler-Kisber (2008) poses several more challenges to researchers engaging with collage, two of which I now reflect on: How should collage be evaluated? And how can it be done ethically?

Evaluating compositions based on aesthetics, such as unity, colour, semblance or the integrity of the piece, seems to edge towards the artistic 'trap' I raised earlier (Cole and Knowles, 2008), in which the need for such skills was dismissed (McNiff, 2008). During my research I thought

of collages as 'useful', based on the interplay of its fragments and the extrapolation of meanings, rather than 'good', based on aesthetic materials and their eye-pleasing placement. It was more helpful to evaluate collages based on how well they represented my research questions (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). These challenges are not necessarily any greater than what more conventional qualitative research like interviews might encounter, such as mitigating against limited or less relevant answers from participants to posed questions.

The very nature of engaging with participants in artful inquiry over a period of time exposes ethical dilemmas, including using collage in research. Naturally, there is a desire to build trust between researcher and participants so that the latter are comfortable during research and can raise issues (Butler-Kisber, 2008). Slivka (2015) noted that caution must be taken when forming relationships with participants where the researcher is not indigenous to the research environment. Significant power dynamics might exist, in terms of who is doing the research, while consideration should be given to exploiting participants for the researcher's gain. While her situation of doing artful inquiry with Native American peoples was very different to mine, I still considered myself an outsider to the student group I worked with during my study. I was unknown, not involved in their direct experience, and, despite agreeing to participate in my study, they might have felt unsure about my motivations. To overcome mistrust, Slivka (2015) engaged in the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity with her participants, which is an approach established on maintaining reciprocal relationships with participants (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008). This is designed to avoid potential exploitation of participants by reinforcing that their beliefs and experiences remain valid and not distorted by the researcher's own subjectivism or relativism (Noddings, 1988). The ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity were highly applicable to my context in two ways. One, building trust and reciprocity with under-represented students could be important if they have been previously marginalised, either in HE or in other environments (Burke, 2012). Two, this form of ethical research supports Participatory Pedagogy as it helps privilege participants' voice and experience, while allowing them a degree of control of the research, both of which build trust between them and the researcher. This reinforces a commitment to understanding their experience without diluting it with the researcher's own bias.

Simply employing an ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity does not erase all ethical challenges. Despite affording participants the opportunity to shape research and produce collages that reflect their experiences at Southeastern, the analysis of this data still fell to me as the researcher as I had the final say in analysis and discussion of participant data. However, I believe this was overcome through a combination of developing trust with participants and a commitment to the principles of Participatory Pedagogy. Carter (2004), in a study he conducted with participants

of a different ethnicity to his own, initially struggled to extract meaningful data, as participants disputed his authenticity as an independent researcher. He eventually overcame this by gaining legitimacy once participants were satisfied he would truthfully represent their views. The importance of developing this trust is evident when comparing Carter's (2004) approach with Slivka's (2015) prioritisation of establishing reciprocal relationships. Participatory Pedagogy also mitigates against the kind of mistrust Carter (2004) experienced. Some of the key aspects of Participatory Pedagogy I covered in the literature review (section 2.4.2) revolved around empowering participants by exposing them to the research context and providing them opportunities to shape the research process and co-generate research (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). My pilot study allowed me to reflect on these ethical issues and test some of these elements, before refining them for my main study, which I cover in the next chapter.

This chapter has introduced this research's artful inquiry methodology in a layered fashion: making an ontological case that the multiplicity of student experience would benefit from an artful inquiry; supporting the epistemological basis for research featuring an artful inquiry foundation; championing the use of collage as a visual method; discussing some of the techniques and potential ethical challenges to employing collage and doing artful inquiry more generally. In the next chapter, I review a small-scale pilot study that preceded my research's main study and allowed me to test various aspects my research. I will cover how this pilot's aims supported the main study, how it was set up, its outcomes and the impact it had in further shaping my methodology for the full study, including designing a research framework. Based on this learning, I developed and implemented a more robust methodology. In clarifying this, I will focus on a stronger commitment to embedding Participatory Pedagogy and co-participatory principles, a deeper comprehension of elicitation as inquiry in relation to collage and group discussions and also debate the inclusion of symbolic constructivism as a means of supporting a more rigorous methodology for the main study. Finally, I contemplate research ethics and reflect on my own experience during this research process.

### 4.3. Refining my research process

Having established the epistemological underpinning behind artful inquiry and the methodological reasoning for adopting collage as the primary data collection method, I next set out how I refined my research process, based on the outcomes and my reflections on the pilot study I conducted prior to the main research. First, I will outline the pilot study in detail, including its aims, implementation and outcomes. Second, I will apply the knowledge gained from the pilot to further develop my research process, including a greater commitment to Participatory Pedagogy, establishing an interpretative framework as part of a more robust methodology and reflections on

ethics and my own reflexivity. I believe it was important to devote a whole chapter to how I refined my research process because it was imperative that it provided an effective, democratic platform for participants to produce deep, reflective and experiential data, which I could use to answer my research questions. My aims for this pilot were to experiment with the Participatory Pedagogy process and artful inquiry approach, including using collage as a method to extract meaningful experiences. I will discuss the aims and the practical set-up of the research process, its outcomes and what aspects were carried over into the main data collection phase. Reflections on artful inquiry and on collage will take place throughout the writing, as necessary, in order to provide a critical reflective element on the process.

The principle aim of the pilot was to test the applicability of a Participatory Pedagogy research process and of collage making to extract meaningful experiential data. It was important for me to not only engage participants in the research process but witness collage making, while also engaging with the art form myself. As emphasised in the literature on student engagement (section 2.4.1), and in the previous chapter on methodology (section 4.1.2), it is imperative to foster an environment where researcher and participants are co-creators and peers (Cole and Knowles, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017). This aim underpinned the pilot study because of its importance to Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry. For the purposes of this pilot, it was important to try and extract meaningful data, not because I was interested in answering research questions, but to get a sense of whether collage data could contribute to research outputs, as Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) suggested is possible. The outcomes of the pilot, and my ensuing reflections, gave me a greater understanding of how to implement these methodologies in the main research and support my research questions, which I further cemented by developing a research framework around Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry. I felt the best way to achieve this was to explore themes with participants, but without explicitly setting out to answer research questions and gain new knowledge on the experience of under-represented students at Southeastern, as doing so might detract from the methodological aims I prioritised. So, while topics on participants' transitional experiences at Southeastern were explored, these data did not contribute to any conclusions on the student experience, but instead primarily facilitated testing the collage as a methodological tool and the wider Participatory Pedagogy process. Finally, I considered some important ethical issues around engaging with participants, building trust and dealing with topics that may have caused personal anguish and discomfort. To recap, the main aims of the pilot were to:

1. Set-up a co-participatory data collection environment

2. Test principles of artful inquiry and collage
3. Consider emerging ethical and reflexivity issues

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first is a brief account of how I planned and carried out the pilot. The next three sections will follow the stated aims of the pilot and the final section will detail the development of a research framework for the main study.

#### 4.4 Conducting the pilot study

In planning the pilot, I considered different facets of the research process: participant recruitment; logistical, material and documentation issues; a self-reflective element; being mindful of ethical considerations.

In trying to create an environment that would mimic the actual research process as closely as possible I recruited two participants who would match the demographic characteristics of the main research's eventual sample population: under-represented first-year students at Southeastern (based on institutional definitions of low family income and their expected HE participation based on their household postcode). I sent 54 students who matched these criteria an email (see Appendix 1) introducing myself, the nature of the study, promoting the importance of garnering their views on the issue of transition into HE and logistical details of the study. Students were invited to reply with their name and age if they were interested. I deliberately heeded Gerstenblatt's (2013) advice of limiting details on collage to limit participants' preconceptions about what that might entail (be these positive or negative).

In conducting the pilot, I considered three aspects: location and materials; format (including co-participation) and data collection. The pilot took place in an art and design classroom at Southeastern on August 4 2015 and lasted about two hours. This location was chosen for practical reasons as art and collage materials were stored here, making accessing them a smooth experience. Running the collage session in a HE and student environment also fulfilled one of Finley's (2008) criteria that artful inquiry should take place in indigenous spaces to the participants. Although I did not measure the impact of this space on participants, research on ethics suggests that utilising spaces familiar to participants builds trust (Slivka, 2015). In using the art and design classroom, I hoped to mitigate any potential negative associations with more traditional teaching spaces that these students might have had. In terms of collage materials, I was guided in the literature to use physical objects and images (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Roberts and Woods, 2018), especially popular media images (Davis, 2008). I had access to magazines and a range of craft materials (e.g. small objects) as I followed Davis's (2008) reasoning that media images would better engage young adults and learners.

The format was a 10-minute introduction during which we introduced ourselves and I supplied information sheets and participant consent forms to be signed, indicating that participants were not obliged to stay and could withdraw at any time with no repercussions. I also explained the aims of the session, the methods we would be using, and, as Participatory Pedagogy suggests, discussed the research context and themes we would be discussing so that participants could familiarise themselves, ask questions and generally engage with the topics before starting their collage. The mention of doing collage did seem to unsettle them, momentarily at least, much as Davis (2008) intimated it could.

The initial Participatory Pedagogy inspired discussion lasted 30 minutes and proved useful at getting to know the two participants (two first-year males studying different subjects). They both seemed to gain confidence as we talked about the research context and the challenges facing under-represented students, including their background, aspirations and choice in attending university, as well as their transition into Southeastern and the level of support they received from the university during this time. I initiated the discussion by considering my background and experience studying at Southeastern, which helped put the participants at ease and set the tone for a co-participatory environment. I then took each discussion point in turn and facilitated a conversation with the students. This engagement seemed to establish some immediate trust and counter some of the relationship and trustworthy issues Carter (2004) faced. I felt this discussion contributed to more reflective collages while also building confidence for participants and avoiding the creative block they might feel (Gerstenblatt, 2013).

The collage session followed, lasting about 45 minutes, and took on a 'group' format in order to elicit interaction between us all and attempt to create a group dynamic, much as Diaz (2002), McNiff (2008) and Gerstenblatt (2013) proposed. The participants each completed two separate collages, one of which was the Artcard style championed by Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010). I requested the collages not be 'fixed' and invited participants to review and evolve collages by moving items and clippings around, in what Roberts and Woods (2018) refer to as physicality in collage making. Doing so might add a layer of reflexivity as they considered their own experiences and development throughout their first year.

The first collage reflected the first few discussion items from the focus group: I asked them to think about their aspirations and motivations for accessing HE—I emphasised that they did not have to cover each point but rather could work on a specific aspect. The second collage was based on the Artcard format and focused on their transition into Southeastern. I explained they should create three to four smaller collages, each focusing on an aspect of their transition. The entire cluster would then represent their wider transition into Southeastern, similarly to how Butler-Kisber

and Poldma (2010) envisioned unpacking different aspects of a given phenomenon. I participated in the collage session and created my own work based on my experiences, in order to familiarise myself and reflect on the method (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010).

The students were debriefed for about 20 minutes in order to draw out explanations of their work, resulting in a group discussion. I videoed their collages in order to record how they constructed their work, which was possible since the collages were not fixed. Finally, there was a 10-minute wrap-up in which I asked them to provide feedback on their involvement, including their recruitment, in a focus group style setting.

In conducting the pilot, I tested out planning elements, such as participant recruitment, the location of the study and materials to use in collage making. I successfully recruited two participants. I relied on artful inquiry and collage making literature (Diaz, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2008; Davis, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010; Gerstenblatt, 2013) to guide the pilot and I was successful in having participants produce different types of collage. I also implemented some basic principles of Participatory Pedagogy, such as introducing the participants to the research context. I reflect below on the aims of pilot and evaluate how well I established a co-participatory environment, the ability of collage to produce meaningful data and some important ethical issues related to co-participatory research and artful inquiry. I then discuss how this learning influenced the design of the main study, including the application of further methodological tools.

#### 4.5 Establishing a co-participatory environment

The pilot was able to establish a co-participatory environment—to a certain extent. The research environment I set up proved adequate at engaging participants in the research and fostering a sense of co-participation. However, I had reservations about the ability to create a similar setting for the main study, mainly because of the larger size of the participant group and the year-long commitment required of them. I felt it necessary to deepen the usage of Participatory Pedagogy principles and devise techniques to foster a high level of student engagement. Following a short review assessing the pilot's research environment, I will discuss the further implementation of Participatory Pedagogy in the main study.

##### 4.5.1 The pilot's research environment

The main aim of the pilot was to follow a Participatory Pedagogy process and create a co-participatory environment capable of engaging participants in collage, both of which it achieved. Discussing potentially difficult topics around the experience of under-represented students, including their own, did not intimidate participants. Their feedback at the end of the session

indicated that they appreciated being able to discuss the research's topics before engaging in collage. The group aspect of the session, including my participation, seemed to enhance their view that we were all engaging in research. This co-participation is one of the important tenets of Participatory Pedagogy (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017), stronger student engagement (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017) and artful inquiry research (Coles and Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2008). Both pilot participants remarked that my involvement in creating collages put them at ease and that by not continually observing their progress they were able to focus on their work. This reinforced the importance of building relationships and trust, as Slivka (2015) suggested, in order to counter the outsider perceptions and resulting setbacks that plagued Carter (2004).

This dual nature as co-participant and researcher came naturally to me after having engaged with the relevant literature on co-participation and artful inquiry. However, I was conscious that both the small size of the participant group and the one-off nature of this research session potentially made it easier to focus on my own collage and to establish trust. In setting up the cohort for the full study, where I sought a year-long commitment from participants, I had to do more to establish positive relationships and keep the group's engagement at a high level. Additionally, a larger group might require me to play a greater role facilitating the collage-making process than it did with just two students. Ultimately, I sacrificed some of my own reflexivity during the main study, in terms of making collages reflecting my own journey, to ensure the participant cohort was engaged and relationships were strong enough to keep their commitment at a high-level—instead I channelled my reflexivity through participants' work and the research process.

#### 4.5.2 A deeper commitment to co-participatory research

While the pilot study did foster a co-participatory environment, this success was tempered by the pilot's very small participant group. It was important to deeply embed co-participatory principles in the main study, beyond just an initial introduction to the research, to maximise engagement with a larger group and maintain their commitment for the whole academic year. This was achieved by going beyond the literature on artful inquiry and collage in supporting co-participation, and instead, concentrating on how Participatory Pedagogy could be further implemented.

Although the literature on artful inquiry supported co-participation in the research process (Mullen, 2003; Coles and Knowles, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2010), it did not bridge the gap between theory and practice. Despite offering useful guidelines around a more equal researcher-participant

relationship and the need to actively calibrate this, neither Finley (2008) nor McNiff (2008) provided a deeper level of detail on achieving this and their considerations remained superficial and overarching. In assessing the pilot, it was evident that collages were produced in silo and participants had little influence over topics since I proposed these to them during the initial focus.

Welikala and Atkin (2014) advised overhauling the “entire process of coordinating, planning and conducting [research]” (394). They discussed needing to familiarise students with the research’s contexts, both topical and methodological, which is very similar to Burke (2012) and Harman’s (2017) considerations on Participatory Pedagogy. Welikala and Atkin (2014) also encouraged participants to engage in critical dialogues between themselves and the authors to capture the multiplicity of experience. This dovetailing between artful inquiry and Participatory Pedagogy gave me confidence that I could build on my experience of the pilot to deepen the co-participatory characteristics of the full study.

Drawing on the following example from Burke (2012) on implementing Participatory Pedagogy in a research project helped me apply this theory. Researching the learning styles of under-represented HE students could include an “explicit plan of the ways [researchers and students] will work together ethically, critically and inclusively” (Burke, 2012: 185). The research process could also be re-defined to encourage interaction, not only in the production of knowledge (data) but also in shaping the direction of what is being researched. In this example, students might engage with the research earlier in the process, before participant data is typically collected. Empowering participants is another cornerstone of Participatory Pedagogy and is not simply limited to their newfound status as co-creators but includes a deeper acknowledgment of their ability to engage with the research’s parameters. So, students in this example might be introduced to various teaching and learning theories and encouraged to think about how their own experiences are impacted by these. They might also critically engage with elements of the research’s context: research questions, background, methods, participant selection and impact of research. However, as I reflect on later in this chapter, there were limits to how far this co-participation extended. The deeper application of Participatory Pedagogy in the research is important in relation to providing an answer to my fourth research question, which questioned to what extent Participatory Pedagogy is useful as a student engagement model for conducting research in WP. With this mind, the next section is devoted to a practical discussion of how I embedded a Participatory Pedagogy approach in the main study.

#### 4.5.3 Implementing Participatory Pedagogy in the main study

Producing a practical, explicit plan for participant engagement in the main study, as Burke (2012) suggests, allowed my cohort of under-represented students to more confidently engage in debates on their experience and critique issues affecting them. It also empowered them to be reflective about their experience at Southeastern and their engagement in this research, which Burke (2012) also advocated. Adopting Participatory Pedagogy more fully also enhanced my relationship with participants and further moderated power dynamics while fostering trust. I also drew on the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity to achieve these aims.

The following sections consider how my actions before and during the research contributed to this greater commitment to Participatory Pedagogy, which I then reflect on more deeply while also considering the ethics of my relationship with participants.

##### *Pre-research*

The pilot study exposed potential risks with the main study, particularly around building a rapport with the larger participant cohort, establishing trust between myself and them and maintaining their commitment throughout the year. This led me to consider how I could further apply Participatory Pedagogy principles, as well as draw on the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity. I identified the period before data collection as a crucial one for establishing these bonds.

Following a recruitment process conducted by email, like the pilot, 16 students were invited to attend a one-hour briefing session in early November 2015 (see Appendix 1). The session was billed as an opportunity to find out more about the research, meet fellow interested students and start co-shaping the research project. This was the first step towards developing a participatory cohort and was my interpretation of Burke's (2012) suggestion to plan explicit ways to develop the research critically, ethically and inclusively.

The session itself was divided into several segments: two artful inquiry activities, introductions, a presentation I delivered, opportunities for discussion and further information about the research. The activities were designed to introduce potential participants to artful inquiry methods and their capacity to uncover and validate experience and emotion. Despite the temptation to include collage as an activity, in order to start building familiarity with the method, I took a conscious decision not to do so, instead preferring to strike a balance between presenting artful inquiry as an approach and keeping future sessions fresh.

As students arrived to the pre-research session, I tasked them with creating a representation of themselves using moulding clay, in which I also took part. Practically, this gave students

something to do as we waited for everyone to arrive, but it also encouraged them to start expressing themselves artistically. The models also served as a proxy for introductions to the group, while fostering co-participation and building trust.

I followed this with a presentation to the group about my research, including context around neoliberalism, inequalities in society and HE, deficit-models of WP and how these link to unequal student outcomes, the benefits of co-participatory research and artful inquiry, along with the aims and research questions of my doctorate (Appendix 2). This was a crucial step in implementing Participatory Pedagogy, as envisioned by Burke (2012). My aim was to not only fully immerse students in the study's topics and materials, but to engage them in discussions and conceptions of society, HE and WP, based on the literature review I conducted. This would hopefully provide a foundation on which participants could build by further engaging with the study's topics during future research (i.e. data collection) sessions. A question and answer session ensued before moving on to the final artful inquiry activity.

This exercise involved looking at a set of 22 images that I pinned to a wall ahead of students' arrival. The images were varied in terms of colour and content: landscapes, representations of daily life and abstract pictures. Students were encouraged to select one that best represented their transition to date at Southeastern. The aim of this activity was to use visual images to interpret a given phenomenon (Weber, 2008), in much the same way collage might do in future sessions and introduce students to the notion that the arts can translate experiences and emotions. Following their selection, in which I also chose an image representing my experience of beginning this research process, each student shared why they had chosen their image. This initiated a group discussion on how students had experienced university so far.

To close the session, I handed out an information sheet that recapped the aims of the research (Appendix 3), the impact participants could have on my study and the commitments anticipated. It also included a list of incentives, which I discussed with the group. These incentives represented my practical application of the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008; Slivka, 2015), which was to embrace this reciprocal approach to both provide participants with tangible benefits that might have a lasting effect, while also making myself available as a resource for them to use. I felt incentives delivered around care, empathy and reciprocity could play a role in establishing a co-participatory environment if deployed in more creative ways than just providing financial reward. Although a £10 gift voucher was offered (the maximum financial award dictated by Southeastern's ethical guidelines), other incentives included: badging participants as 'student consultants'; encouraging them to include their participation in their CVs; utilising myself as a possible referee where appropriate; encouraging them to request any

mentoring from myself. The latter is an example of offering myself as a resource while the other incentives represent more tangible benefits. I felt these offers were important, not only as a sign of gratitude on my behalf for taking part in the study, but also to embed a caring, empathetical and reciprocal approach to ethics and co-participation. It also served to underpin Participatory Pedagogy by being explicit about inclusivity in the shaping the research process (Burke, 2012).

Although some might question the ethics of such a relationship, I believe this approach is more justifiable than more traditional research relationships. I felt a sense of duty at supporting students throughout the year-long research, not only to reciprocate their commitment, but to offer guidance if students revealed personal or troubling experiences, as I identified in my ethical approval submission. I stressed that these incentives would not be forced upon them and that while I would remind them of my support throughout the research, it was up to them to request any mentoring or references. An information sheet regarding how to badge themselves as 'student consultants' in CVs and what aspects of the study they might want to reflect on is included in Appendix 6 and was handed out to the 10 students who participated in the research upon its completion. All students accepted the financial voucher. In the intervening years, some kept in touch and requested job references and assistance with their own research projects, which were rewarding experiences and reinforced the ethical approach I took.

This pre-session data could have been used in the research, especially since some of the key topics, such as transition, were explored. However, I took the decision not to record any discussion or include any of the potential data from this session, primarily because I wanted to purely focus on building trust with participants and allowing them to find out about each other—without the thought of 'doing research'. In order to be transparent about this I did not require participant consent forms at this stage.

### *Running sessions*

Out of the 16 students who attended the information and briefing session, 10 committed to participating in the research and took part in all the sessions, which indicated that the pre-session was successful at building a sense of how important the group was to the research. After discussing communication methods with the group, I set up a closed messaging group for myself and all 10 participants with the smartphone app WhatsApp, called "Transitions Research @ Southeastern". Having a means to communicate quickly and in a format that was readily accessible suited students and helped to foster a group spirit, which Figure 2 illustrates. In this example, a session date was being arranged and a fun and friendly dialogue ensued.



Figure 2: Screenshot from a WhatsApp group thread (identifiers have been blacked out)

There were four main data collection sessions throughout the 2015/16 academic year. Table 3 lists when the sessions took place, what topics were covered and the session code that I will use in the findings chapter as a reference tool for linking quotes to sessions.

Date	Time	Topic	Session code
18 November 2015	5pm – 7pm	Student journeys into HE	S1
25 November 2015	5pm – 7pm	Student journeys into HE	S2
16 March 2016	5pm – 7pm	Transition and experiences	S3
23 March 2016	5pm – 7pm	Transition and experiences	S4

Table 3: List of data collection sessions

Sessions took place in the same classroom as the pilot and the information and briefing session, which facilitated access to collage supplies. Students responded well to the environment and it provided consistency throughout the year, helping build a group sense of belonging. At students' request, sessions took place at times avoiding clashes with classes or extra-curricular activities. Sessions were grouped into two pairs, taking place in the first and second terms. Each pair was held within a two-week period in order to maintain momentum. The decision to frame each pair of sessions around a main topic loosely reflected the research questions and allowed participants time to reflect deeply on topics over several weeks. This complemented the use of collage, allowing users space to delve into their experiences and emotions (Butler-Kisber, 2007,

2008, Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). I was also aware of the need to prioritise the making of collages and subsequent discussions and therefore felt sticking with one major topic for two sessions would allow students time to become comfortable with collage and perhaps even re-visit their own work.

Each of the four sessions followed a similar schedule. The schedule from the first session is available in Appendix 4 as an example. The initial task took the form of a group activity in which students had to work together to solve a challenge, unrelated to the research. This helped foster a sense of belonging to the group, while enjoying themselves and getting to know each other, rather than starting to do research immediately. Following on from this, I explained the aims of the session, including what the main topic was (e.g. transition). The group was then split into two, each with a flipchart, and worked to answer or brainstorm on a few broad questions related to the main topic. These questions were intended to get students thinking about their experiences, but without being too leading. For example, questions posed in the first session included: What motivates you? What is important to you? How does your background influence/motivate/define you and your goals? The two groups transferred their thinking onto the flipchart and talked through their answers to the rest of group and myself. An example of this work is provided below in Figure 4.

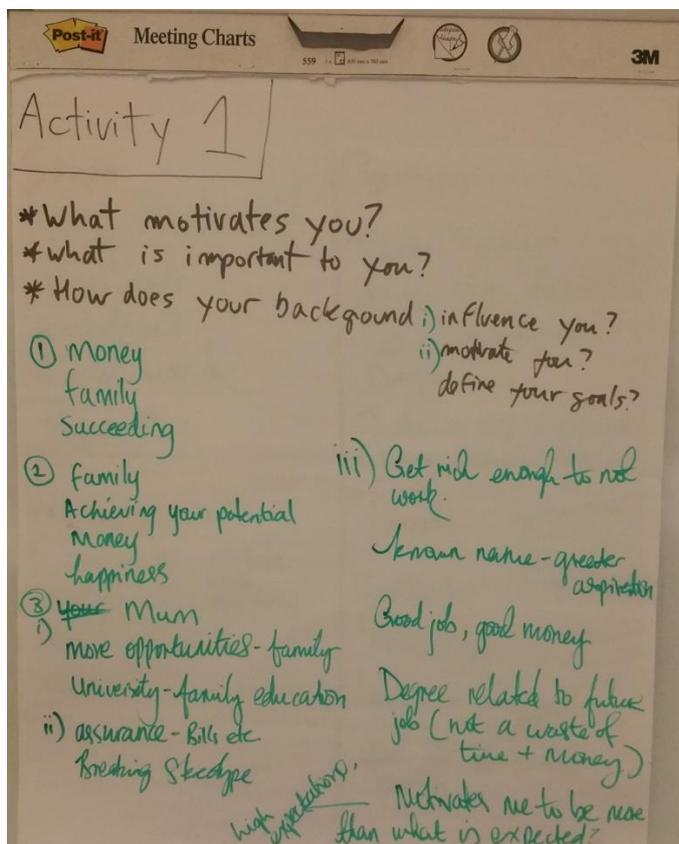


Figure 4: Image of a flipchart from a research session (S1) showing initial questions to generate reflection and conversation

The ensuing discussion was driven by participants commenting on each other's thoughts. As a facilitator, I allowed discussions to flow but ensured that all topics were covered and that all were given a chance to speak and reflect on this content. This discussion was recorded and formed part of analysed data. This was another practical example of implementing Participatory Pedagogy, especially in relation to developing inclusivity in the group and allowing them to help co-shape the research (Burke, 2012).

Once discussion points were exhausted, participants made an individual collage based on an aspect of the discussion that they wished to explore further. Materials were available and laid out on tables. I supplemented existing stocks with a mix of gossip, popular science, film, music and sport magazines, addressing the issue of too many magazines being already cut up, which was a point raised by the two pilot participants. Diaz (2002) and Davis (2008) indicated that critics feel providing specific collage materials is deterministic as participants could be guided by what images and text are available to them. However, collage literature is not specific with regards to this challenge (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). It seemed more important to engage participants with materials they might find interesting rather than have no control over what was available to them.

As students completed collages, I recorded their explanation for why materials were used and what they represented, in a similar manner to the pilot. Engaging students as they finished their collage was a productive way of making the best use of time and diffusing potential silence, where students might get distracted, as they did during the pilot. I then facilitated a group discussion in which students were encouraged to comment on each other's work by identifying commonalities or differences. This discussion was also recorded.

At this point, participants were split back into two groups and tasked with each working on a group collage based on what was produced in the starter activity. Groups were encouraged to use flipcharts to note down ideas before negotiating the creation of their collage. Part of doing a group collage was agreeing on what to display—or not display. In this way, group collages were more representative of common experiences. However, this did not preclude participants from sharing specific accounts when it came to discussing collages. Examples of these tasks are shown below in Figure 5. Once both groups were finished, they described their work, which was recorded. In some cases, as they explained their collages, I wrote these explanations down around the collage itself, which served as validation from participants. A discussion followed along the same lines as those emanating from the individual collages, which was also recorded.

I was not strict in choosing when to end sessions. I tried to balance participants' original commitments to attending and wanting to extract as much valuable data in that moment—rather

than risk picking up the same thread in the following session. However, Barry (1996) deals with this issue aptly: to stop when both researcher and participants have reached a “good enough” (413) level of understanding intellectually and emotionally, which proved a useful barometer.

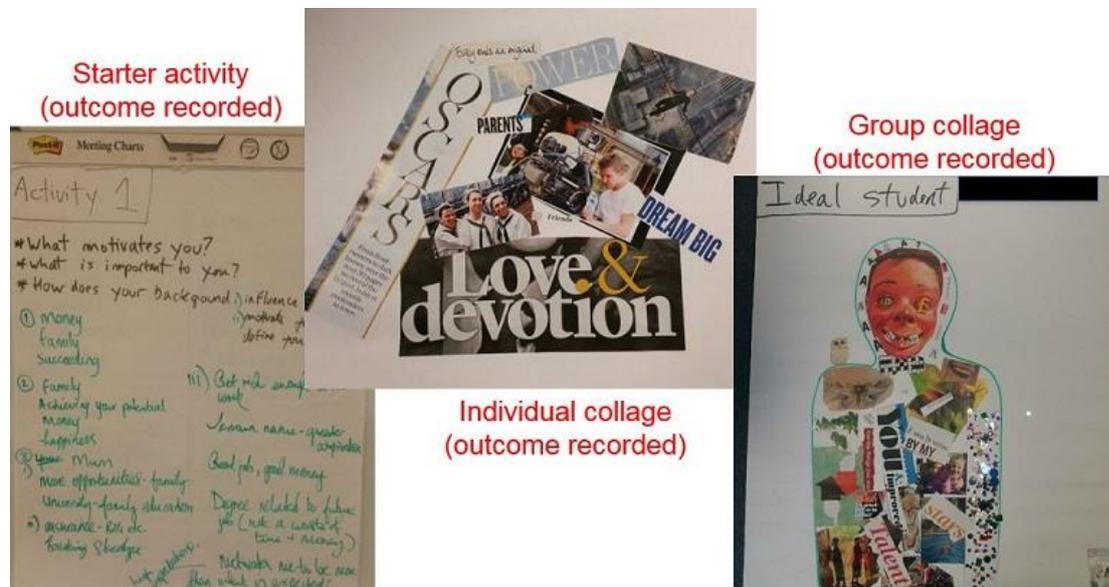


Figure 5: Examples of tasks completed by participants during research sessions

#### 4.5.4 Reflecting on the sessions: co-participation and student engagement

I have already gone to significant lengths championing a co-participatory research model. The initial information and briefing session engaged and challenged students to confront the research’s context and the problems it addressed, much as Burke (2012) claimed was necessary when developing a Participatory Pedagogy involving WP participants. Co-production of knowledge should be a natural result of a successful Participatory Pedagogy. It is for that reason that much of the sessions were driven by participants themselves, primarily by the topics they discussed during starter activities, which then formed the basis for individual and group collages. It is important to remember that these initial topics were based on my research questions and literature review and so assisted in keeping the research focused in this regard. I did not believe there was a correct way to employ Participatory Pedagogy—my approach represents my interpretation of Burke (2012) and other authors who champion co-participation in student engagement (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016).

Important to fostering this environment was my role as a research *bricoleur*, who “choos[es] questions, materials and methods that make sense locally” (Barry, 1996: 412). By embodying this role during research sessions, focusing on providing engaging materials, supporting participants in collage making and prodding where necessary during group discussions in order to tease out further



asking them to reflect on the sessions, students spoke of benefitting from participating, especially in relation to making collages that translated their experiences and emotions and being able discuss these in a group, as the following conversational thread shows:

“You make collages and you can see images that actually relate to what you think, it gives a bit of a deeper like meaning as to actually like why you’re actually here.” (Ellora, S4)

“Yeah, I was thinking that as well, [...] I’m now able to [...] make sense of it all so I think that’s how it’s benefited me.” (Dawn, S4)

“Yeah, it’s nice to talk about things and hear everyone else’s experience [...] you wouldn’t have thought like half the images would actually relate, but then when you think about it, they do.” (Naomi, S4)

One aspect that suffered in these sessions, compared to the pilot, was my own participation in making collages. My role as facilitator, in supporting participants with their collage making, proved too time-consuming to permit making my own collages, whether in relation to technical tasks (e.g. recordings), answering questions about materials or generally engaging with students. However, being able to participate in the pre-session with the methods helped bridge the researcher-participant divide and signalled that all members of the research could take part. Additionally, making myself available as a support during the sessions was another practical example of embracing the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity and further underpinned the co-participatory ethos of the research, which I will explore at end of this chapter in a section devoted to ethics and reflexivity.

Despite efforts to embed co-participation in all phases of the research, I acknowledge that there were aspects of the study with little to no direct collaboration between myself and participants. I developed research questions, methodology and methods myself based on literature and local context. As I expand on later in this chapter, I alone thematically analysed recorded discussions. Participants did not contribute to developing and writing this thesis. Despite the apparent lack of co-participation in these steps, participants still influenced them to some degree: by providing feedback on research topics and methods or by having collages included in this thesis. There may also be potential for future collaboration. Participants could contribute commentary as part of journal publications or co-present at conferences. Next, I will consider the second aim of the pilot study: the efficacy of collage at engaging participants and generating meaningful data.

#### 4.6 Testing collage as a method

Another important aim of this pilot was to test artful inquiry and collage, as a methodology and method, as capable of producing useful data. I am not suggesting the collected data itself

should be analysed and answer any research questions, but it was important to evaluate the potential of collage as a rich source of experiential data and to validate artful inquiry as a methodology capable of supporting Participatory Pedagogy to produce research outputs. In this section, I will first reflect on collage's ability to represent meaningful experiences during the pilot, including sharing my own experience. Then, I will consider gaps in artful inquiry methodology around stimulating participant discussion and reflection, as well as data quality that the pilot exposed. Finally, to counter these shortcomings, I will introduce Symbolic Constructivism (Barry, 1996) as an interpretive framework for supporting artful inquiry in the main study.

#### 4.6.1 Collage: a promising method for extracting experience

In general, the two pilot participants were very positive about their engagement with collage. They suggested that not revealing they would be making collages in the recruitment emails was beneficial, mainly because of the perceived stigma around being creative and making 'art' in front of others (Gerstenblatt, 2013). In fact, they enjoyed collage making and appeared to have no reservations in producing their collages. This juxtaposition between the stigma of art-based activities and the enjoyment of engaging with them is captured by one of the participants: "it's actually fun when you're doing it, but it's not cool".

In order to assess collage's potential as a rich data source, I used the pilot to test its ability to represent experiences and emotions by asking participants to create pieces based on aspects of my research questions, such as their transitional experience into HE. Figure 7 is an example of a participant's collage representing his transition into Southeastern.



Figure 7: An Artcard collage from the pilot study representing transition into Southeastern

In this Artcard cluster, the participant put together four collages describing his journey towards and transition into HE. In the top left quadrant, he recalled the “battle” of his unknown future, further underscored by feeling like being on a “road to nowhere” and “hoping something better will come along”. His confidence is low, indicated by the small metal spring in the very top left corner. He exposed family tensions in the bottom left, as he was caught in-between his parents to one side and his wider family to the left. He saw himself as a “trendsetter” for reaching university and ultimately inspiring his cousin to aim for HE. His confidence grew once at Southeastern (the number of small metal pieces has multiplied) and as he followed his own path (“it’s me”). His relief at reaching university (top right) was palpable, as he finally felt “comfortable” living and experiencing university on his own “7 days” a week. Finally, he described the delayed difficulty in adjusting academically to university with the two-coloured shapes—their difference corresponded to the increase in difficulty between the first and second terms.

While much more analysis could be done on this collage, the previous description highlighted the potential for collage to transmit highly emotional and experiential data. Additionally, the different approaches to making collages by the two participants resulted in distinct angles to explore. While one had a narrative style (as seen in Figure 7), the other was more introspective in his work. So, while the former expanded on the tensions in his family and strongly links his poor grades with needing to find an alternative route (Figure 7), the latter’s collage (not pictured) centred more on his lack of interest and distrust of schooling structure as a reason for not pursuing a traditional route to HE.

These different approaches reflected the flexibility and ability of collage to draw out experiences in a way that is comfortable for the user (Vaughan, 2005; Davis, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). It was also a sign of collage’s capacity to foster multiple responses to the same phenomenon and juxtapose these, thereby allowing participants and researcher alike to identify and compare responses either individually or as a group. The pilot’s collages displayed a multiplicity of experiences that supported the benefits advocated earlier in my exploration of collage methodology (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). The Artcard technique also proved useful at exploring transition into HE from different angles. Practically, it also ensured the session remained fresh and innovative rather than potentially stale if participants had to complete two collages in the same style.

#### 4.6.2 Overcoming the pilot’s shortcomings: practical solutions for the main study

Despite some promising collage results, I deemed the method could be refined further in order to elicit higher levels of participant engagement and richer data. As part of this reflection, I

will next consider practical solutions I applied to collage making in the main study, such as altering the format of data collection sessions, which led to improved collage results. However, I also believe a significant issue limiting the effectiveness of collage in the pilot study was the lack of a more robust interpretative framework underpinning artful inquiry, which could then better support collage in extracting experiential data. So, I will also consider gaps in artful inquiry methodology and introduce Symbolic Constructivism (Barry, 1996) as an interpretative framework that bridged these shortcomings and improved data capture in the main study.

Although the pilot collage session produced intriguing data, a critical issue I needed to address in planning the main study was facilitating greater co-participation and more discussion amongst the group to foster a co-participatory environment (Burke, 2012) that was vibrant and energetic (Diaz, 2002). The pilot session felt too angled towards focusing on one student at a time, eliciting responses and moving on. I addressed this in two ways: by conducting focus groups during data collection sessions and by having participants work together to produce group collages. The focus groups followed collage making and allowed for collages to be viewed by the group, sparking dialogue and leading to deeper insights, as Gerstenblatt (2013) suggested group settings can achieve. Aside from increasing engagement, a more participant-driven session could expose a greater number of commonalities and differences between students' experiences, the multiplicity of which is a major factor in choosing to use collage in the first place. Group collages presented an opportunity for participants to focus on different aspects within a larger collage. Different groups could be tasked with working on separate themes, with each group member focusing on an aspect of it. This required more support from myself, but increased engagement and discussion amongst participants. There were new issues to consider here, such as ensuring a group member did not dominate, and balancing representations of experience of a group versus that of an individual, but I mitigated these by incorporating both group and individual collages.

#### 4.6.3 Limitations of artful inquiry in the pilot

The collages in the pilot showed promise in translating emotions and experience, notably uncovering family tensions around education routes, personal motivations shaping participants' decisions to enter HE and transitional experiences. However, based on the discussions that followed the collage making, the collages perhaps did not convey the depth of emotions felt by the participants at key moments of their educational lives, especially as they transitioned into university. These collages may not have surpassed what Coles and Knowles (2008) described as good stories. For example, in the Artcard cluster collage displayed earlier (Figure 7), the participant indicated his confidence was low as he transitioned from school into university but that it grew during his first

year—yet the reasons for this were fuzzy. He suggests that living on his own, with the independence that generated, and the feeling of having achieved a place at university by his own means transformed his confidence. However, did any specific events, and his responses to these, trigger this growth?

Rather than participants being at fault for any lack of depth in their work, I identified methodological challenges for this limitation—and a solution to improve this outcome in the main study. The literature on artful inquiry states that, methodologically, it is subjected to the same rigorous assessment as traditional approaches (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Cole and Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2003, 2008). McNiff (2003, 2008) also conveys the importance of ensuring the validity of artful inquiry to examine and interpret important phenomena that normally sit outside the art world, such as the student experience. If the outputs of my artful inquiry are to withstand critical commentary, then I had to ensure the robustness of the research process and the ensuing validity of the data. Despite the assertion of researchers that artful inquiry can explore liminal experiences (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008), I did not consider the pilot study to have fully achieved this. My solution was to apply an existing interpretative framework, Symbolic Constructivism (Barry, 1996), that could provide methodological tools to support collage making in achieving these artful inquiry aims.

#### 4.7 Developing an interpretative framework

In my assessment of the pilot, several pitfalls emerged surrounding data quality. Participants' collages tended to be driven by narratives rather than deeper reflections on their experience. This not only limited the data's ability to fully explore participants' liminal experience but also left the overall research open to critique as to why steps were not taken to ensure data validity and review the methodology. Issues also emerged around data analysis. Interpreting the collages proved awkward: should my position as the researcher influence deductions and conclusions? What role can and should participants play in analysing their own work? At the beginning of this chapter, I cited a lack of analytical tools at my disposal in the pilot as I perhaps relied too heavily on informal means of inferring meaning. Adopting an interpretative framework for the main study provided an analytical blueprint for myself—and future artful inquiry researchers—to follow.

##### 4.7.1 Symbolic Constructivism

Barry's (1996) work on Symbolic Constructivism answered these potential criticisms by supplying such a framework. According to Barry (1996), a 'Symbol' "designat[es] something that

*seemingly* has determinable, sign like form(s), meaning(s), and use(s) and that acts as a gateway to other understandings [sic]" (415). Applying this to collage reveals a similar nature: collages are made up of many elements (i.e. symbols), each of which can contain its own meaning and the sum of which can lead to making new sense and interpretations, leading to those "kaleidoscopic representations" (Butler-Kisber, 2008: 272) I detailed earlier in chapter 4. So, Symbolic Constructivism appeared to reflect the tenets of artful inquiry, suggesting it was suitable for underpinning my research. It was Symbolic Constructivism's capacity to account for elicitation as inquiry, within artful inquiry research, that rendered it highly suitable to helping extract participants' experience.

#### 4.7.2 Elicitation as inquiry

Barry (1996) considered three types of inquiry under the umbrella of Symbolic Constructivism, one of which, 'elicitation', was very appropriate for my methodology. 'Revealing' focused almost exclusively on what is held within the participant's unconscious and was firmly positioned within Psychology and the domain of art therapy, which was outside the scope of my research. 'Transforming' inquiry tended to challenge existing structures and was more useful as a vehicle for organisational change in situations where the researcher was designated as an agent of change—which was not the case in my study.

However, elicitation as a mode of inquiry, retained an ability to draw knowledge out of art and "get us to say more than we would otherwise" (Barry, 1996: 423). There was an inherent ability in this inquiry to create dialogue between artistic representations and interpretation, in order to gain a deeper understanding. Barry also encouraged the use of elicitation for framing participant narratives. In all these elements, there seemed a natural confluence between elicitation, collage and my attempts to coax meaning out of the pilot's collages. What this inquiry provided was a foundation on which to extract understanding from the main study's eventual collages and allow for the construction of structured new meaning. Barry's (1996) positioning of elicitation as a tool for extracting interpretation from artful inquiry, and collage in my research, led to a breakthrough in what I considered to be valid participant data that could be analysed.

#### 4.7.3 A breakthrough in collage validity and interpretation

Although I did not immediately recognise it, the pilot study collected two forms of data: collages created by participants and the recordings of their interpretations and ensuing discussions. Despite placing collage at the centre of the pilot's methodology, it became apparent that it acted as a springboard to discussion that could enrich the research. Far from being a detractor to deploying

collage, these discussions complemented participants' work. I interpreted this as an elicitation of data that, based on Barry's (1996) Symbolic Constructivism, was vital to cementing the validity of artful inquiry data (McNiff, 2003, 2008). Applied to my context, I determined that although collages represented the experience of students in HE, the discussions and interpretations they elicited were equally valuable—if not more so—to understanding their liminal experiences.

I established that participants' self-interpretations of their collages acted as elicitations and should be considered key pieces of data. This alleviated my concerns around how to analyse participants' collage. Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) skirted around the challenge of evaluating collage and failed to offer significant tactics or strategies beyond what was previously stated, such as avoiding any aesthetical commentary (Butler-Kisber, 2008). With little literature to guide me in this respect, this resulted in the pilot collages lacking more robust analysis and trending towards a discursive approach. As part of a Symbolic Constructivism framework, I applied a methodological base to build on elicitation as inquiry and support the use of conversation—and language—in collage interpretation. Barry's (1996) interpretative loop considered what actions to take once participants completed collages. These included directly encouraging discussion with simple prompts, such as "what else might this suggest?" (422). So, I had an impetus to use discussion as a means of feeding interpretations and either re-positioning the collage (as Barry suggests) or ultimately moving beyond it into new knowledge. In my opinion, this did not devalue participants' collages, which remained powerful, permanent visual symbols of students' experience, but built on them to deepen understanding and ultimately help answer my research questions.

Using Symbolic Constructivism's elicitation as inquiry method for interpreting collage also allowed participants to lead analyses of their own work. This strongly reflected the Participatory Pedagogy principle of inclusivity and providing a platform for participants to share their voice and co-shape the research. By using collages as a springboard to rich data (in the form of discussions), this emphasised students as insiders with valuable knowledgeable. This not only supported a Participatory Pedagogy approach but also diminished traditional researcher-participant power dynamics, by de-emphasising my interpretations in favour of inquiry and debate between participants (Barry, 1996). In practice, those participant interpretations formed the basis for the recorded discussions and supported my role as more of a facilitator during sessions.

#### 4.7.4 Research trustworthiness

The constructivist underpinning of Symbolic Constructivism supported a stronger methodological foothold for the research. Barry (1996) invoked some of the tenets of constructivism to encourage authenticity, including using purposive sampling to target population

samples known to embody relevant experiences and legitimising multiple ways of knowing in order to recognise new understandings. These aspects of elicitation and constructivism formally cemented some of the rationale for doing artful inquiry and allowed for rigorous data analysis of collages. They also helped strengthen my research against potential criticisms of qualitative research from positivist and other qualitative arenas (Anfara et al., 2002), namely around: internal validity, generalisability (or external validity), reliability and objectivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is worth pointing out how Symbolic Constructivism provided what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as research trustworthiness, or in simpler terms the ability of research to speak with authority.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative research should replace those methodological considerations mentioned above with more appropriate concepts, which I will now apply to my research. In ensuring transferability (instead of generalisability), I acknowledged that although my research's context was unique, I should ensure that collected data and research outputs carried enough description so others could reasonably apply similar methods or test conclusions in their environment. In confirming dependability (for reliability), I posited that participant data represented experiences that could lead to a transfer of knowledge. Concerning confirmability (for objectivity), I contended that data could be traced back to participants as a kind of audit trail. In supporting credibility (for internal validity), I engaged with participants over a period and consistently drew out and validated collage data participant interpretations.

Barry (1996) continued in this vein by eschewing the positivist custom of triangulating data, meaning an analysis of multiple data points in relation to each other, in favour of an analytical "crystallisation" (419) of data supporting a seemingly infinite number of interpretive angles to consider, in the same way a crystal contains innumerable angles. While I was careful of not being drawn into potentially infinite analyses, having an awareness of such issues and implementing a Symbolic Constructivism framework added robustness to interpretations and conclusions, while shielding the study from potential critics.

I will now complete this extended methodological discussion around Symbolic Constructivism and the elicitation of data by clarifying what data was captured in the main study and how it was analysed.

#### 4.7.5 Data analysis in the main study

To recap, there were two types of raw data in my research, collages and recorded discussions, which were linked by the former eliciting conversational data. In accordance with the ideals of co-production in artful inquiry (Coles and Knowles, 2008; McNiff, 2008) and the value Symbolic Constructivism placed on participant interpretations (Barry, 1996), I facilitated students'

analytical discussion of collages. These recordings formed the basis of analysable data, while collages, far from being cast aside, provoked discussion in the way Barry (1996) intimated that artful inquiry should enable elicitation. I argued that deploying collage in this way enhanced the robustness of artful inquiry methodology by ensuring it was underpinned with an interpretative framework, which provided the rigorous backbone demanded by leaders in the field (Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Cole and Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2003, 2008). This process of elicitation, and the resulting interpretive data, also addressed the potential lack of validity and generalisability that McNiff (2003, 2008) and others (Anfara et al., 2002) warned artful inquiry and qualitative researchers to guard against. As such, my study privileged student-led interpretations of their collages, which enhanced the research's overarching Participatory Pedagogy approach. In the next chapter, findings will be laid out as a mix of participants' explanations, observations and understandings, supported by their collage(s).

All recordings were transcribed and coded based on Flick's (2014) thematic coding, which is well-suited to participants-led data interpretations. An example of a transcribed session can be found in Appendix 8. Flick (2014) suggested collected data is combed for common themes—in this case experiences and emotions related to accessing and transition into HE—before proceeding to a deeper analysis. However, he also encouraged case-by-case analysis, which I did not deem appropriate to my study. While comparing participants (cases) against each other may have resulted in new understandings of their experience, I argued this would have reflected a deficit-model approach by inferring differences in embodied characteristics that could be used to highlight deficiencies, leading to the kind of remaking I criticised in the literature review (section 2.2). The coded findings are first and foremost used to answer the research questions and examples of my coding sheet are in Appendix 7.

Before finishing this discussion, I will address final issues regarding generalisability as it is strongly linked to my contribution to practice. I indicated at the outset of my thesis that I adopted a purposive sampling strategy study focusing on Southeastern as a research environment and 10 participants. In considering the generalisability of my research, meaning its ability to share outcomes that are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), some authors would consider sampling of this size to lack any potential in this regard (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). However, others acknowledged that purposive sampling can increase an understanding of a phenomenon and positively impact generalisability (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Flick, 2014; Punch, 2014). Additionally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocated for the adoption of transferability in place of generalisability for research contexts like mine that rely on purposive sampling. While generalisability offers the ability to compare cases, transferability prefers to shift, or transfer, the

knowledge outcomes from this study into a different research environment (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I feel it is important to make this distinction clear because it solidifies the impact a very focused, purposive and critical sampling approach will have not only on my practice but on the wider HE sector, which I argue for at the end of this thesis.

So far in this chapter, I focused on my pilot study's first and second aims, which were to establish a co-participatory environment and test collage efficacy at extracting meaningful data. I was effective at fostering a co-participatory environment, thanks to the application of basic Participatory Pedagogy principles. I acknowledged that a deeper implementation of Participatory Pedagogy was necessary for the main study in order to account for a larger participant group and a much greater level of commitment on their part. Although I was pleased that collages in the pilot delivered experiential data, I criticised their heavy narrative focus and noted a lack of depth. I mainly attributed this to limitations in artful inquiry methodology and the lack of an interpretive framework capable of supporting deeper experiential accounts. Drawing on Symbolic Constructivism (Barry, 1996), I took advantage of collage's ability to elicit deep discussions around experience in HE amongst participants and myself. It became clear to me that rather than collage being the primary data source for the main study, it would instead provide an initial medium for participants to reflect on their experience, while ensuing discussions between the group, facilitated by myself, would provide rich analytical data. I argued this approach enhances research trustworthiness, including data validity, while promoting transferability to other contexts. This ability of Symbolic Constructivism to support participants in interpreting their own experiences highly resonated with my wider Participatory Pedagogy approach, which prioritised developing participants as co-researchers. As Burke (2012) advised, when doing research with under-represented students in HE, they must be empowered to reflect and contribute their own knowledge in redressing inequalities they have faced. I argued that Symbolic Constructivism provided the methodological robustness to support this principle.

I end this chapter by focusing on the pilot's final aim, which was to consider ethical concerns and my own reflexivity. I will consider the ethics of engaging in co-participatory research and explain the role the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008) played in allowing me to build stronger bonds with the group, improve trust and mitigate against potential ethical issues in the main study. Regarding my reflexivity during the pilot, I discuss my role as an artist-researcher, my own experience with collage and reflect on the perspective Symbolic Constructivism offers researchers.

## 4.8 Ethics and reflexivity in co-participatory and artful inquiry research

In this last section, I will cover issues I encountered in the pilot and main studies regarding ethics and reflexivity. In dealing with ethical issues in co-participatory research, I drew on the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008) in considering how to build trust and positive relationships with participants, while relying on Barry (1996) to mitigate against abuses of researcher power. Then, in reflecting on reflexivity throughout the research, I will discuss the dual nature of the artist-researcher in artful inquiry and review my own journey with collage and supporting my research cohort in doing artful inquiry.

### 4.8.1 Initial ethical considerations

I highlighted in my doctoral ethical approval submission a concern that reflecting on one's experiences and emotions at a time of potential stress could cause anxiety and discomfort among participants. Although the pilot sample was small and clearly unrepresentative of the wider student population, there were no signs of such distress amongst the pilot participants, despite some personal issues being brought to the surface, such as family tensions and less than ideal school experiences (e.g. lack of friends, poor performance). That is not to say I was complacent going forwards about the potential for angst amongst participants, but it was promising to see the pilot students discuss their experiences with such ease and freedom. I believed this reflected my approach to building trust and fostering an open, honest environment by implementing specific aspects of Participatory Pedagogy, such as a contextual briefing of the research and confronting any difficult topics (i.e. unequal student outcomes) as advocated by Burke (2012).

This seemed to foster a positive participant-researcher relationship along the lines recommended by Slivka (2015) and Carter (2004), while further cementing a co-participatory setting that encouraged student engagement (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017). However, I was cautious of these outcomes, knowing that setting up a larger research cohort for the main study, and maintaining their commitment for an entire academic year, might require more effort in considering relationship dynamics and trust. In fact, it would mean engaging even more with an ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008).

### 4.8.2 Building trust and relationships in the main research

Carter's (2004) research on organisational change contained a valuable lesson in gaining participants' trust. Although Carter eventually gained his participants' trust and developed good relationships with them, he lamented the time lost in having to downplay his outsider perception.

There were some parallels with my research, as Southeastern sponsored my EdD. In my situation, I could not have afforded such a delay as very the nature of my study, to explore students' first-year experience in HE, meant that any early setbacks would result in missed opportunities to capture valuable data about students' early experience. Conscious that I did represent an outsider to some extent, by virtue of being a staff member at Southeastern, I mitigated this by implementing Participatory Pedagogy elements, such as getting to know students, introducing them to the research, explaining my aims as a researcher, their roles in the study and the benefits they would accrue in participating (see section 4.5).

Despite the inclusive nature of Participatory Pedagogy, I did not believe it was enough to completely account for my outsider status nor to build a strong enough bond with participants that would underpin their yearlong commitment. With no real applications of Participatory Pedagogy in research to lean on, I turned to the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008), along with Slivka's (2015) application of it in his research. This ethics framework is compatible with a Participatory Pedagogy approach because it positions the participant at the centre of ethical considerations (Wilson, 2008), much as Participatory Pedagogy is centred on participants' role in the research (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). My interpretation of this ethics framework is to nurture relationships with participants by supporting their own development within and beyond the research (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008; Ratcliffe, 2012). This is achieved by nurturing the needs of participants, empathising with their circumstances (in relation to or outside of the research) and enacting "appropriate signs of reciprocity" (Noddings, 1988: 223) by respecting and rewarding their involvement and commitment with meaningful support or benefits (Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008; Ratcliffe, 2012).

In Slivka's (2015) context of doing research with Australian aboriginals, this amounted to having conversations beyond the bounds of his research and providing gifts as part of reciprocity for their engagement in the research. In taking a lead from Slivka, I formulated my own 'reciprocal package' for my participants, which I outlined earlier in this chapter (section 4.5.3). Central to my implementation of an ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity was to provide support to participants, not just during the study, but throughout their student lives at Southeastern. This support was occasionally formalised in the form of a job reference, but also took the shape of informal conversations and requests for advice, which I did my best to supply. Although difficult to assess how useful such an ethical framework was in improving the outputs of research, I preferred to divorce this reciprocity from such considerations as I believed it was my duty to support these students who had committed themselves to my project.

#### 4.8.3 Alleviating researcher power

In the previous chapter on methodology, I advocated for the role of the artist-researcher to play a central part in the research, both in integrating the art form into the research (Coles and Knowles, 2008) and in taking an active role as co-creator (McNiff, 2008). The pilot study attempted to adhere to that instruction, with some success: I supported my two participants in their collage making, while also producing my own collage. However, I recognised in my reflection on the pilot study, that the capacity of participants to connect with collage, as well as the wider contextual issues of the research, would have to be prioritised in the main study, which ultimately impinged on my ability to continue creating my reflective collages. However, by combining elements of Participatory Pedagogy with a researcher as bricoleur approach (Barry, 1996), the main research took on a different dimension compared to the pilot—one that was more fruitful in terms of data and co-participatory roles. So, in the pilot, both the participants and I created collages and interpreted them. However, in the main study, the participants created collages, which we co-interpreted. These two models are both part of a set of Symbolic Constructivist templates that Barry (1996) lays out for the researcher.

This has positive implications on power dynamics within the research process. When conducting artful inquiry, there is a risk of researcher-participant roles becoming skewed, as a result of insecurities about the art created, both in terms of participants feeling threatened by criticism (from the researcher or peers) and of the researcher being unsatisfied with creations (Barry, 1996). To guard against this, I recalled how artistic talent was not a factor in terms of producing data (Coles and Knowles, 2008; McNiff, 2008), which I emphasised several times during research. Equally important, was to embrace some of the key tenets of co-participatory research, especially to allow—and foster—participant-driven interpretations (Barry, 1996; Diaz, 2002; Gerstenblatt, 2013).

Following on from this, the spaces during sessions *after* collage making revealed how successful the research had been at implementing a co-participatory environment. Barry's (1996) interpretive framework stressed co-reflections on collages, interpretations and potential re-positioning of representations, followed by new reflections and interpretations, and so on in a spiral manner. The layout of the session allowed for such cycles to occur as collages were followed by participant explanations (reflections) and co-interpretations by the researcher and other students. This process was repeated throughout the study and helped nurture a co-participatory environment, successfully deemphasising power dynamics between participants and myself.

I conclude this chapter with a reflection on my own reflexivity during the pilot and main studies, further drawing on Barry's (1996) bricoleur approach.

#### 4.8.4 Being reflexive with collage

My own experience with collage was extremely limited prior to the pilot, so an initial session during a doctoral workshop on innovative methods afforded me with an important insight into the process of collage making, as did the pilot in which I completed a piece alongside participants. Aside from the various lessons learned on how to structure a collage session, the experience of making collages and working on the same themes as the participants was invaluable. I related to their feedback on the session much more actively than I would otherwise have because I could comment on my own experience during our feedback discussion after the session. I also understood the issues they raised around the materials and possibly working in a group setting because I was similarly frustrated by the lack of diverse resources and engagement. However, despite these benefits, I did not continue with my own collage making in the main study. As explained previously, I had to dedicate much more time during the main research sessions to supporting my participants than I did during the pilot, which made it impossible to produce my own work. Despite this disappointment, I believe that my initial experiences of collage making allowed me to better support participants during the main study and to cement positive researcher-participant relationships, which was supported by an ethical approach to care, empathy and reciprocity introduced earlier in this section.

#### 4.8.5 Symbolic Constructivism and reflexivity

Finally, Symbolic Constructivism offered me guidelines on considering my own researcher reflexivity. For Barry (1996), the researcher is a bricoleur (taken from the French word meaning someone who builds, tinkers with and adds to objects or works), who “choos[es] questions, materials and methods that make sense locally” (412). In evaluating the outcomes of the pilot, and the lack of depth in participants’ collages, I adopted this profile to better engage with participants on the main study and in doing so enrich the data. Barry (1996) engaged with the potential dilemma of how much involvement the researcher should have in analysing participant artwork. He favoured a downgrading of the researcher’s interpretations, in favour of “interplay between inquiring parties” (412), which was not unlike Diaz (2002) and Gerstenblatt’s (2013) suggestions for doing research with groups in order to encourage discussions and richer data. When considering my own researcher reflexivity between the pilot and the main study, I reflected on this interplay and decided to become more involved in facilitating my participants’ interpretations. However, in so doing, I was aware of the potential power dynamics and the possibility of abusing my position as a researcher, which would go against the co-participatory ethos I sought to establish.

Barry (1996) is sensitive to the power dynamics that can exist between researcher and participants and favoured an environment of collaboration, in which participants adopted various

creator and interpreter identities. It was not unlike the underlying principle of Participatory Pedagogy that prioritises spaces of knowledge co-production (Burke, 2012), which reassured me that I could adopt a more active role. Barry (1996) also described what research incorporating Symbolic Constructivism might look like, in a practical sense, by drawing in a reflective, interpretive, loop. Here, participants created symbols or art pieces based on their experiences, emotions or beliefs. When representations were deemed complete, reflection would begin as researcher and participant provided interpretations, some of which may even have resulted in the re-positioning of participants' original intentions. This cycle continued as the various symbolic layers were peeled back. Rather than being purely cyclical and contained in a closed loop, its spiral nature suggested circular movement and yet progressed outwards: the research framework allowed for this back-and-forth between researcher and participants in a way that promoted new knowledge rather than being constrained. Symbolic Constructivism allows for these interpretative spirals to sprout one after the other, as new cycles of creation, interpretation, re-positioning and re-interpretation occur. This was a powerful notion for me as I adopted a bricoleur approach in the main study. It supported the co-participatory nature of the research, while enabling the kind of deeper, richer experiential data that was lacking in the pilot.

The second half of this chapter (sections 4.3 to 4.8) focused on refining my research process, crucial in establishing the foundation for my research. While I understood the theory behind artful inquiry and collage, introduced in the first half of this chapter, the experience of the pilot study caused me to reflect on my overall methodological approach. The pilot provided an opportunity to test out my methods and the research process, including co-participatory elements and collage. I embedded more deeply the principles of Participatory Pedagogy, devising practical applications to engage my student participants, such as running a pre-session to the main research during which the group started to bond, sharing the research's context and aims, and highlighting their role in helping drive the project. It also concerned testing collage's capacity to extract meaningful data on participants' experience in HE. I reflected on the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity, which I employed more fully in the main research to alleviate potential concerns on power dynamics between myself and participants, ensure students were supported throughout the research and help build trust between me and the group.

Looking back on the pilot research session, I underestimated how much discussion would take place and had expected the collages to represent the bulk of collected data. Instead, collages elicited in-depth discussions in the focus group after they were created, in much the same way Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) intimated. I also expected collages to be analysed by participants, prompted by my own querying and observations, and for this to be the main data collected.

Although participants did explain the meaning behind clippings and materials used, this ended up being more confirmatory in nature—a record-keeping exercise that was still useful in ensuring I understood what the collages represented. Collages were springboards for further, deeper discussion around the topics covered. While they were occasionally referenced, discussion often went beyond what was represented in the collages. I was excited to tap into this richer vein of experience and it was clear that using collage to elicit further discussions, based on their representations, would lead to rich data collection in the main study.

Based on the pilot's outcomes, it appeared this study could benefit from an interpretive framework capable of supplying more robust interpretations and analysis. Symbolic Constructivism provided such a foundation and had the advantage of residing within a tradition of artful inquiry. Its very nature as a framework capable of accounting for different ways of knowing and new forms of meaning made it especially pertinent for helping unlock participants' collages in the main study. Barry (1996) even stated its suitability for delving into "liminal spaces" (416), such as transitions, so it was particularly encouraging to underpin my methodology with such a framework.

Having reflected on my methodology as a result of the pilot study's outcomes, I was confident that the resulting findings represented a very deep, reflective and accurate account of my participants' experience as under-represented students transitioning into HE at Southeastern. The next chapter will impart these findings in relation to my research questions.

## 5. Findings

In the previous chapter, I undertook a detailed reflection of my methodology following the outcomes of my pilot study, which aimed to assess levels of co-participation, the efficacy of collage as a method for doing research into the student experience and to consider ethical issues, as well as my own reflexivity. I concluded that while I did establish a co-participatory setting in the pilot, I had to further commit to instilling Participatory Pedagogy into the main study in order to account for a larger participant cohort and ensure their commitment levels remained high throughout the year-long study. Concerning collage, I found the method to be very relevant to teasing out emotive, experiential data. However, my evaluations of pilot data confirmed that they focused too much on narrative and lacked enough depth to reflect the complexity of transitioning into HE. To amend this, I turned to Symbolic Constructivism and its interpretive framework that encourages elicitation as inquiry (Barry, 1996). This uses participants' collages as a springboard to rich discussions, facilitated by me, which engaged the whole participant group. This allowed for the collages to act as reflective pieces participants could reference, while discussions served to deepen my understanding of their student experience, explored in much more depth than in the pilot. Finally, I drew on the ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008, Ratcliffe, 2012; Slivka, 2015) to foster trust with participants and develop positive relationships. These bonds, solidified as the research went on by a continual reciprocal process in which I offered my support to participants, helped ensure commitment levels among participants remained high. In terms of my own reflexivity, I adopted a bricoleur approach for the main study to increase my interplay with participants in relation to facilitating their interpretations of collage and their discussions. Mindful of power dynamics between us, I drew on Barry (1996) and Burke (2012) to ensure this facilitation was grounded in a co-participatory ethos. The previous chapter represented my journey as a researcher, between the pilot and main study, as I critiqued my own methodology, resulting in a much more robust and rigorous approach. This greatly benefited the main study, which is reflected in the deeply reflective collages and the rich interpretive discussions that I will now present as findings in this chapter.

This chapter presents the research's findings as a series of themes that, while linked to research questions, are not yet discussed in relation to key literature and theoretical concepts. That assessment will occur in the following discussion chapter. I felt more comfortable with this structure than weaving in analysis, primarily because I wanted to provide a platform for participants' experiences to be initially displayed independently from those considerations. I considered this a more appropriate stance given the co-participatory ethos of the research and my aim to create a space giving primacy to the voice of under-represented students who may have been previously

marginalised (Burke, 2012). Also, given how much participants committed to the research in time and effort, I felt it was a form of reciprocity on my part to present their experiences in this way. Participants' collages represented a rich view of their first-year experience at Southeastern and their own interpretations of these compositions brought many topics to the surface, which were refined through ensuing group discussions. As outlined in the previous chapter, collected data was thematically organised, the result of a coding exercise in which the transcriptions were mined, yielding a multitude of codes, based on the topics participants had raised in discussions. I then clustered these codes into themes, with emphasis placed on their frequency. Doing so meant the participants influenced the findings considered in this chapter as the frequency of codes—the amount of times they raised certain topics—led to an amalgamation of data into themes. This is another signal of the participant-driven nature of this doctorate. Screenshots of my coding spreadsheets can be found in Appendix 7.

Findings in this chapter are positioned in relation to my first, second and fourth research questions, which I have repeated and emboldened below:

- 1. How is neoliberalism reflected in widening participation, as well as in the student experience?**
- 2. What are the transitional experiences of under-represented students at Southeastern?**
3. What are the implications of these findings on the structures, policies and practices designed to support the student experience at Southeastern?
- 4. To what extent does Participatory Pedagogy represent a useful student engagement model for conducting WP research into the student experience in contemporary HE?**

Section 5.1 on motivations and hyper-awareness, reflects the empirical findings linked to my first research question on the presence of neoliberalism in WP and the student experience. Here, I focus on the performativity, self-improvement and competitive aspects of neoliberalism at an individual level (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012) as discussed in the literature review (section 2.3). Financial difficulties and career aspirations appeared to influence their motivations for entering HE and their perceptions of this environment, namely an understanding of how competitive life at university—and beyond—is and will be. Sections 5.2 and 5.3 focus on providing findings to my second research question exploring the transitional experiences of my participants at Southeastern. Struggles in transitioning to university life were not uncommon amongst these participants, especially around making friends and being successful academically. Establishing friendship and support groups seemed like a catalyst at which point academic success and social integration came more easily. Although participants acknowledged that in transitioning

into university, they shared common experiences with other new starters, their conceptions of this phenomenon drifted towards more individual representations of their own personal development, including acquiring new skills and experience that could aid them during and after university. Section 5.4 presents data to help consider my fourth research question and the usefulness of Participatory Pedagogy in researching the student experience. My third research question is not represented in this chapter as it focused on the implications of these findings on the student experience at Southeastern—this will be considered in Chapter 7 as part of my discussion of findings in relation to key literature and my conceptual framework.

Although participants shared their individual experiences during research sessions, I have represented these as common findings because they very often reflect a group experience. This became evident as I carried out my thematic coding and was able to pool individuals' experiences together. Quotes are explicitly labelled as either students' interpretations of their collages or part of group discussions. Due to the wide-ranging topics collages often touched on, I have added emphases on collages in order to focus the reader's attention on participants' interpretations. However, it is imperative to note that these emphases are based on participants' interpretations and are linked to their accompanying quotes. This is my own interpretation of the literature surrounding co-participation (Burke, 2012) in relation to artful inquiry (Finley, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010; Rumbold et al., 2012). I also drew on Barry's (1996) interpretive framework and positioning of the researcher as a supporter or facilitator for participants to make sense of their own experiences. I was very careful not to overlay my own interpretations on students' meanings of their collages, which is why I add emphases and make explicit connections between collages and relevant quotes.

Finally, participant collages and quotes are coded in this chapter using a simple referencing system. Individuals' collages are coded as C1, C2 or C3 depending on which collage it is, or as G1, G2 or G3, if it is one of the group collages that were created. C1 refers to the first collage participants made; C2 represents the next iteration of this collage as participants revisited their initial work and evolved it; C3 represents participants' Artcard collage format (cluster of four collages exploring the same theme in different ways). Research sessions are coded as S1, S2, S3 or S4 depending on which of the four sessions the quote was extracted from.

## 5.1 Motivations and hyper-awareness

Participants cited financially orientated motivations for attending university or detailed highly aspirational goals with a clear vision of what success was. It appeared that personal struggles and a self-improvement narrative helped shape a precise vision of the future. This segment on

motivations for participating in HE and hyper-awareness of the HE environment provided further empirical evidence for considering the influence of neoliberalism on the student experience, which I will consider in relation to key literature in the discussion chapter.

### 5.1.1 Motivations: financial and career

#### *Financial*

Jasmine's quote, "the world revolves around money" (S1), was an apt encapsulation of why participants felt HE is such an integral part of their future: a university degree was a gateway to a more financially stable, and in their eyes, more desirable future. Ada made this explicit in her C1 collage (Figure 8), using the headline "Could your laptop make you rich?" to translate her reasoning for pursuing a Computer Science degree.



Figure 8: A collage referencing the importance of university degree (Ada, C1, emphasis added)

Ada further emphasised this rationale in her collage interpretation: "I wanna do [my subject] to get a lot of money" (S1). It was a sentiment that resonated with the group. When asked how much of a motivator accessing wealth was, as well as being financially independent, the group were emphatic in their affirmations: "Yeah" (Eva and others, S1) and "A big one" (Naomi, S1), which Ellora underscored when she commented it was "Probably the main one, to be honest" (S1).

Being financially independent played an important role in this arena, particularly in relation to having dealt with financial difficulties during their lives, as the following quotes from a group discussion around this topic conveyed.

"I wouldn't say I come from nothing, but I come from having a lot less than others [...] money is a worry and hopefully one day it won't be and I'll be able to afford all these nice things [...] I'd never want to have to rely on anyone else for money." *Milly, S1*

"I just want to support myself and my family." *Jasmine, S1*

“My mum’s raised us on her own and she has always been financially independent [...] so I’d never want to have to rely on anyone else for money.” *Naomi, S1*

This motivation for pursuing financial security was confirmed by most in the group. There was an acknowledgement of background and of a financial disadvantage that needed rectifying. Having relied on others in some way, be it family members or other forms of welfare, contributed in this instance to a desire for financial independence. The previous quotes also began to point towards a connection between this monetary aspiration and participants’ relationships with their family and the sacrifices parents made for wellbeing, which Kiki and Steven summarised:

“Mum’s dedicated her own life to looking after like me and my brothers, and I think I owe it – the least I owe to her is to do well.” *Kiki, S1*

“I want to be at that point where I can support myself, support my kids, when I have ‘em, support my mum and dad when they’re older. I mean they’re not that well off, so whether it’d be helping with their rent or just things like, paying for the car if it needs fixing.” *Steven, S1*

Financial motifs were common in collages too, as participants often used simple means of conveying how much a motivator accessing wealth is. In Figure 9, a group collage (G1), pound signs have been placed over a representation of a student: “money signs in their eyes for motivation to do well” (as described by Eva in S2).



Figure 9: A group collage (G1) denoting the importance of money

Jasmine had the words “money edit” in her C1 collage (Figure 10) and explained “the ‘money edit’ [is there] because I feel like everything—the world revolves around money. So that’s what the collage is called” (S1).



Figure 10: A collage representing financial motivations (Jasmine, C1, emphasis added)

Eva used an image of Chanel perfume to illustrate why financial freedom is important to her:

“The Chanel thing was really more like money and stability and being able to buy what you actually want to buy, ‘cause I come from a big family [...] if [I] earned money [...] I used it to get my little brother clothes and that just to help out.” *Eva, S1*

Ellora (Figure 11) and Kiki (Figure 12) simply used clippings of the words “cash” and “bank” in their collages to represent part of an ideal future.



Figure 11: A collage highlighting the importance of money (Ellora, C1, emphasis added)



Figure 12: A collage highlighting the importance of money (Kiki, C1, emphasis added)

Dawn used the tagline “from rags to riches” in her collage (Figure 13) to emphasise:

“I come from, not necessarily disadvantaged background but not very advantaged and I’m aiming to get to that point where I have money and stability.” Dawn, S1



Figure 13: A collage cropped to highlight future financial stability (Dawn, C1, emphasis added)

Ada perhaps coalesced the group's thoughts on money and attaining financially related goals when she stated "money has a big part in happiness" (S1).

### Career

A second motivator for accessing HE, alongside financial independence, was a clearly articulated vision for what success entailed for most of the group. As Steven affirmed with his use of "Oscars" in his collage (Figure 14), "my aspirations are set pretty high" (S2), and as film student, he said about his use of "Oscars", "it's pretty simple really, that's the dream to have something shown at the Oscars and to win an Oscar" (S2).



Figure 14: A collage cropped to show aspirations of future success (Steven, C1, emphasis added)

Steven and Milly displayed a longer-term vision for their career and how their present HE experience fits into that:

"Thinking about what you're doing now [at university] and how it's gonna affect what you're doing in the next few months or next 20 years." *Steven, S2*

"I did research into the job I wanted to do [criminal psychologist], I have to get a degree to do that job, so then I was like, right, I want to do the job so I'm going to do whatever it takes to get the degree [at university]." *Milly, S2*

Dawn was similarly concrete in her vision of success, with the use of the clipping "Business" in her collage (Figure 15): "my ultimate goal is to have my own [physiotherapy] clinic" (S2).



Ellora picked up the thread, using the shop worker example and included her own goal of being a scientist. She also juxtaposed that success with a sense of what failure might resemble, providing another angle that was perhaps implicit throughout this discussion:

"I think the status is quite important because when somebody asks you, 'Oh, what do you do as a career?' like 'What do you do as a job?' I want to be able to say my job title. I want to say 'I'm a biomedical scientist,' instead of just saying, 'Oh, I just work in a shop,' no disrespect to people who work in shops but, you know, I want an actual title to the job that I'm in, so I just think that's quite an important thing." *Ellora, S2*

"There's nothing worse than finishing three or four years at uni with a degree and just feeling like you're not even going to end up in a job that you needed that degree for." *Ellora, S2*

Milly was emphatic when she stated "I want a career not a job" (S2), which Ellora supported by suggesting that a career should be "skilled work, not just like...menial work" (S2). The group were practically in total agreement to these points, although Milly offered a twist on the benefit of getting a university degree by suggesting there was wider value in a degree beyond economic benefits, regardless of what career is taken up—although there was still a strong emphasis on rejecting an unfulfilling job:

"I thought [about going to university], well, I can either just not do well in my A-Levels, get a full-time job, and spend the rest of my life in a job that I probably don't like, paying taxes, or I can go to university, study something that I know I enjoy, and then either go into that field or not, and if I choose to not go into that field, at least I know I had a really good three to four years having fun and like getting experiences that I wouldn't have got anywhere else." *Milly, S2*

Eva also provided a variant of the view that a degree is a way to differentiate one's self from others, particularly those around her:

"I wanted to come to uni as well just to get out there more and represent myself instead of being known as 'so and so'." *Eva, S2*

She also considered how her freedom of choice in making the decision to enter HE was a motivating factor, perhaps as much as or more than the economic and status rewards that the rest of the group were so focused on:

"Well, it [freedom of choice] made me want to come here like more [than money or status], just to prove that I have got the freedom." *Eva, S2*

Jasmine was the only other participant who touched on this sense of freedom, when she commented that "I wouldn't have gone to uni if I hadn't wanted to." (S2), suggesting that the economy and status were powerful motivators amongst the wider group of under-represented students.

To conclude on motivations, Kiki suggested that wider societal forces were responsible for the drive to be successful. Here, she drew in the other motivational factors discussed in this section, money and family, along with status:

“The way that society measures success is through your job, your money, your family, your status, so I think that’s got a lot to do with it. That’s why I know personally I have certain things in mind, such as like my economic status, my job, the people I know, all those things.” *Kiki, (S2)*

The motivations of the group to access HE revolved around themes that were often intertwined: the desire to be financially independent, to financially support family, to avoid the perceived unfulfilling careers of those around them. They also took account of what they believed society expects young people to achieve, or at least how society will reward them once they have completed their degree and begun their careers—and used that as a driver for accessing HE. This complemented their awareness of the wider HE landscape they found themselves in, one that they recognised was steeped in competition and powered by a race to success.

#### 5.1.2 Hyper-awareness of HE and beyond

In considering empirical findings for the influence of neoliberalism on WP and the student experience (my first research question), participants’ displayed a heightened awareness of the competitive landscape at Southeastern. Participants conceived of university as a kind of arena in which they were jostling with peers to stand out and ultimately to be more successful than others in the graduate job market. It was a perception that had been initially articulated to them by teachers at school, which Jasmine and Buster reflected on in their collages and in the accompanying quotes below. Jasmine used an image of a person exercising (Figure 16) along with the words “Drive to succeed”, while Buster simply used the phrase “How to get ahead in...” (Figure 17):



Figure 16: A collage suggesting the notion of competition in HE (Jasmine, C2, emphasis added)

"We were told [at school] that our choices would be limited if we didn't have a [university] degree." *Jasmine, S2*



Figure 17: A collage cropped to highlight the competition between students at university (Buster, C2, emphasis added)

"We were told [at school] that you won't get a job if you don't get a [university] degree." *Buster, S1*

That awareness of how competitive the labour market might be seemed to lead to a heightened awareness about their new HE environment, particularly with regards to competition from peers at university. The need to differentiate one's profile from others to secure their desired future is at the forefront of their minds:

"Beating my rivals [...] it's quite strong competition [at uni]. It's all about how you need to take those extra steps to make sure that you've got that extra thing that will make you stand out, and without that, you might not get to where you want to be." *Dawn, S2*

"I think for me coming to university, you spend your whole life competing with other people and I think a lot of people have the attitude 'Why go to university and get a degree when so many other people do it and are at university now [compared to] a few years ago?' If you're competing against someone with a degree, you've bettered yourself." *Milly, S2*

Notions of competition seeped through in participant collages, such as Steven's (Figure 18), which used sport and running a race as a metaphor for getting ahead of peers:

"It's all about how you need to take those extra steps to make you stand out, without that you might not get to where you want to be. I'm always thinking [of how to stand out and] take on extra work." *Steven, S2*

The tightrope imagery in the same collage also represented Steven's awareness for the difficulty of accessing his chosen industry (see accompanying quote).



Figure 18: A collage with elements of competition (Steven, C2, emphasis added)

"In an industry like this you don't get to start again. You fail, pretty much." *Steven, S2*

Figure 19 and the accompanying quote took this one step further, as Ada revealed her decision to study Computer Science in order to take advantage of a lack of women in that field.



Figure 19: A collage positioning a computer science degree as a successful future (Ada, C2, emphasis added)

“That’s why I did Computer Science because I’m one of few girls and they’re all looking for girls at the moment, [...] I think I’m guaranteed more of a job than any other person.” *Ada, S2*

Competition and getting ahead of peers were also expressed in terms of the marks participants could achieve at university, with the top marks unsurprisingly being seen as an important facet of attaining future success. For example, participants dotted the grade “A” all around the G1 group collage (Figure 20) to reflect the need to be academically successful and increase labour market chances after university.



Figure 20: A group collage (G1) denoting the importance of being academically successful



## 5.2 Transitional experiences

This next section explores empirical data aimed at answering my second research question, which sought to unpack the transitional experience of these students at Southeastern. They tended to experience transition in a linear manner, initially struggling to adapt academically and socially in the first of two terms. But difficulties eased as students engaged in peer groups. These seemed to be a catalyst for smoother experiences, including academic success and social integration, which mainly occurred in the second term.

### 5.2.1 Early struggles and expectations

The group referenced initial difficulties in adapting to university life, both academically and socially. Some described a mismatch between expectations about university and the reality they experienced:

“I think that when you start uni, you get told so many different things by so many different people and it’s not like [what you were told].” *Milly, S3*

“Sort of at the beginning there were times when I felt really low and was questioning whether I wanted to continue with the transition.” *Dawn, S3*

Feeling underprepared was one of the elements that students focused on when recounting the first few weeks of their student lives.

“You feel as if everything’s going against you those first few weeks, it’s such a struggle. And you think, do you carry on fighting against it or do you just drop out and leave.” *Steven, S3*

Milly, in one of her collages (Figure 22), displayed an awareness that being in a new, unpredictable environment at university is directly in contrast to being at her family home, which for her is a known, safe and comfortable environment. She used a clipping of the actress Julia Roberts, who resembled her mother, to reflect this:

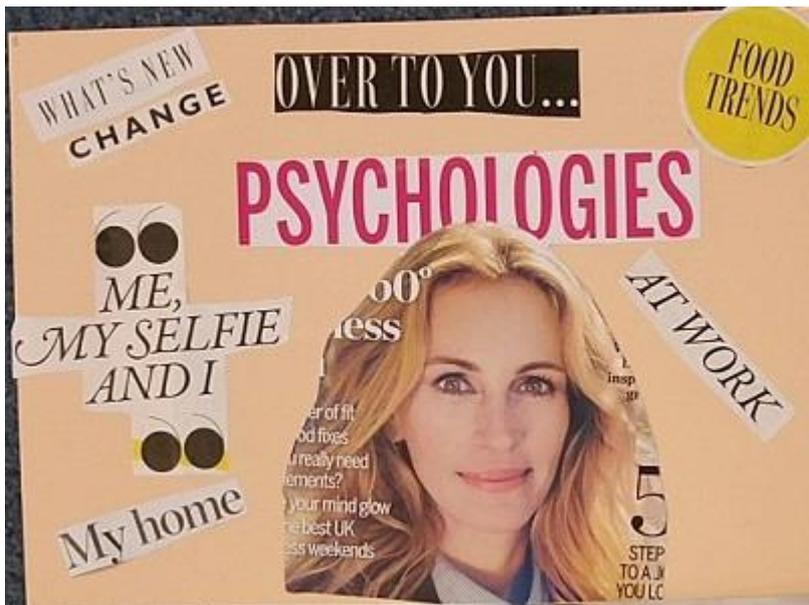


Figure 22: A collage representing family life (Milly, C3)

“Leaving the environment you’re used to, you know what’s gonna happen in your own home, to where you don’t really know what to expect [...] you’ve got to learn everything all over again, things you didn’t even know you needed to know.” *Milly, S3*

Being unprepared for university life was perhaps best encapsulated by part of a group collage (G2) on the wider transition into HE. Here (Figure 23), students explicitly included the clipping “going in blindfold” when recalling their experiences at Southeastern. Buster, on behalf of the group, simply stated the clipping referred to “[going] in [starting university] blind ‘cos you don’t really know what it’s going to be like. [sic]” (S3).

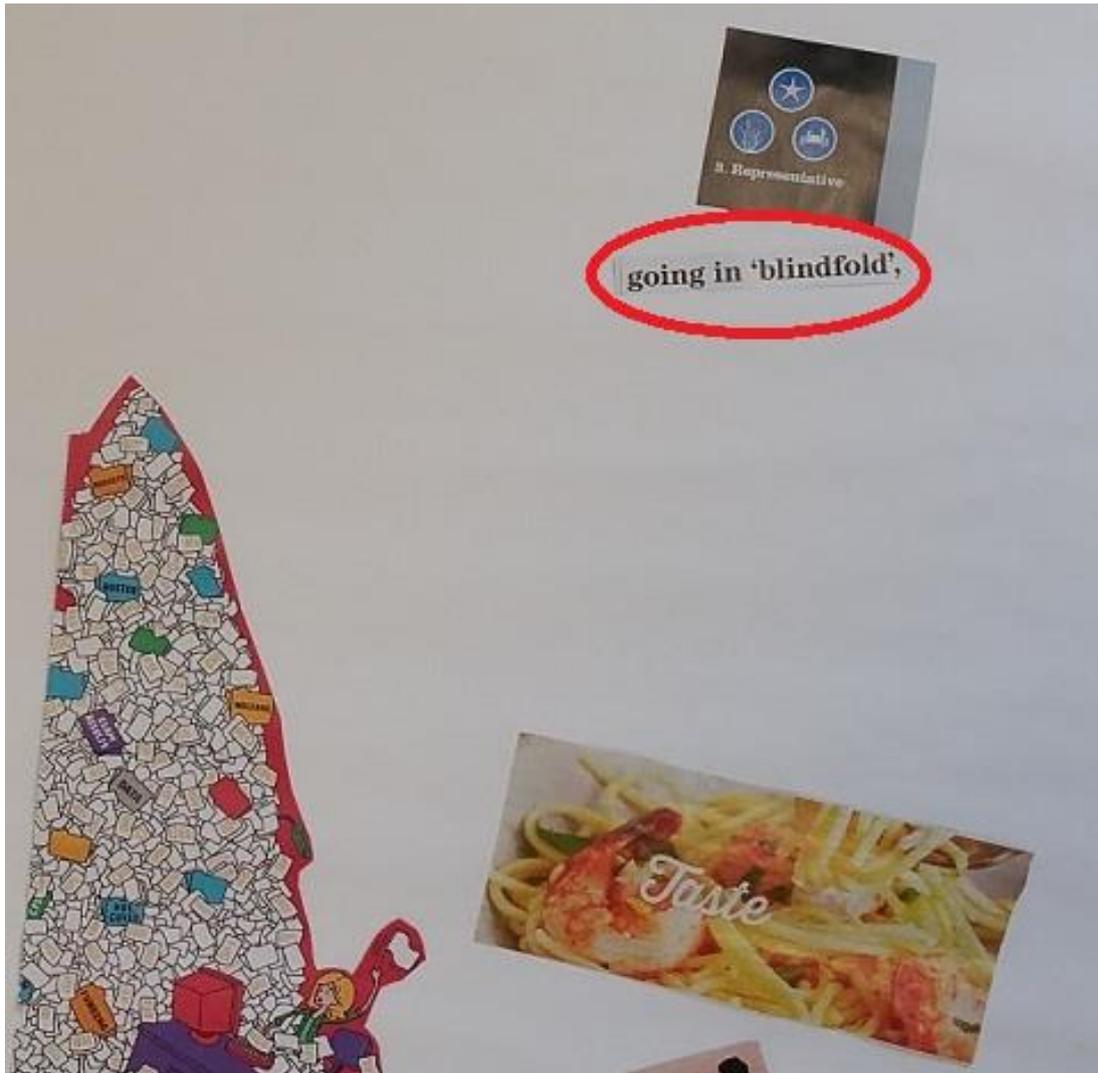


Figure 23: A group collage (G2) denoting being unprepared for university (emphasis added)

In discussing this lack of preparedness, or awareness of what a university experience would be like, participants initially suggested that students with family experience of HE might be more aware of what to expect:

“Some students might be more [...] prepared for it [university] than others, I mean say if their parents went to university they might know somewhat what to expect, whereas like people who had parents who didn’t go to university might be completely blindfolded.” *Ellora, S3*

“Nobody else [in my family] had been to university before, so nobody knows what to expect.” *Steven, S3*

However, upon reflection, the group (almost entirely comprised of students who are first in their family to access university) agreed having that potential experience to call upon would not present an advantage. There was a feeling that should parents have attended university there would be more expectations placed on participants, which could complicate the transition into university by adding more pressure. Ellora and Dawn explained in conversation:

“Say your parents did go to uni, their expectation of you might be higher, so say for example they went to uni and they got a first they would probably most likely expect you to get a first as well, they would expect you to not get any less. So, if your parents didn’t go to uni, there’s not really that expectation to begin with.” *Ellora, S3*

[Following on]

“Yeah, I think linking onto that it’s like when if you went back [home] and were telling them about certain things that had happened, they can’t really judge you in effect about what’s happened because they don’t have anything to compare it to from their own experience; so then you’d feel more comfortable, I know I would feel more comfortable talking to them about the struggles you’ve had because they don’t know whether that’s a struggle that everyone has so...” *Dawn, S3*

[Following on]

“Yeah, because then they can’t turn around and say, ‘oh that didn’t happen when I went’, or ‘we didn’t have these problems’, and maybe that would make you feel worse or that would make you feel bad.” *Ellora, S3*

Participants felt there was little to gain from that potential familial experience of what university would be like because of the uniqueness of their present circumstances, of being at this university, at this moment in time:

“I don’t think you could really prepare, even if you had [family] that went because everyone’s experience is going to be different, like they could tell you the basics, like ‘oh this is how your course is going to be laid out, you’re not going to get as much [academic] support’, but like in terms of social life and the actual uni, if they haven’t been to that specific one and they’re not there at that time like they’ll have probably gone years ago as well, it wouldn’t really help. I don’t think you’d be at much of an advantage [*laughs*].” *Naomi, S3*

Still, despite that acknowledgment, a sense of inevitability about their early university experience, especially concerning difficult beginnings, pervaded the group. Dawn pointed to the amount of personal change required when transitioning into HE and highlights some of the specific obstacles to overcome: being in a new environment, not knowing anyone and adapting to a new routine.

“I think because it’s such a big change, you don’t know anyone, it’s a new way of life, new people, new place, it’s all new; so I think for me that was going to be hard to put myself into that [environment] and feel comfortable with it. I was expecting it [transitioning into university] to take a long time and be very difficult.” *Dawn, S3*

Steven highlights how fragile students were during this initial transition by suggesting that as expectations morph into the reality of being at university, the magnitude of their journey sets in:

“At first everyone is like ‘great I can’t wait’, and after a few weeks everyone is like ‘wow, I’m really struggling with this’. *Steven, S3*

He further underscored the inevitability of rocky beginnings at university by intimating that difficult transitions were part and parcel of the student experience:

“I think the people who say they found the transition into uni very easy—I think they’re lying, they’re trying to cover something up, I don’t think anybody could find the transition to university easy.” *Steven, S3*

Steven summed up this feeling rather crudely in one of his collages (Figure 24) with the clipping “I crapped my pants”, in reference to his first few weeks at university. He explained how once the initial excitement of being at university wore off, he was “really struggling” (S3).



Figure 24: A collage showing difficult early student life (Steven, C3, emphasis added)

Participants’ expectations of HE hover around being unprepared for university, linked to their difficult start at Southeastern—it seemed part of their experience to expect to struggle, “‘cause it’s like you can’t really prepare for coming to uni [sic]” (Lauren, S2). Discussions veered towards an early HE experience that would invariably be peppered with trying moments. In fact, little appeared to prevent this tentative period of adaptation for those first in their families to attend university, certainly not the lack of family HE experience and their potential assistance in smoothing out transitions. This recognition of uncertainty was bound up in participants’ narratives of early transition into Southeastern with accounts of difficult adaptations to academic and social life.

### 5.2.2 Early struggles and academic mismatch

Adjusting to a new way of learning and academic life in general contributed to challenging transitions into Southeastern. For some, a sense of futility pervaded how much they could expect to succeed, while others struggled to get to grips with autonomous learning, as Milly reflects: “I think

like for me, personally, I think there'll always be a bit of um, uncertainty [about academics]" (S3). She explored this further as part of a group discussion around having to adapt to new teaching and learning styles and the perception that other students seemed better equipped to succeed on their course:

"There's always someone better than you—which I know isn't a great attitude—but everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, with assignments and just got on with it. I found it quite daunting whereas they seemed to get on with it." *Milly, S3*

Participants pinpointed the expectation that they needed to be independent learners, less reliant on their educators, as a key reason for this tricky adaptation.

"There's not quite as much guidance [at university] on what to do. At [sixth form] college you have guidelines for modules, but at uni you're given a sheet of paper with the learning objectives and you have nothing to go on and you have to do it. [...] The lecturers aren't allowed to tell you if this is right." *Steven, S3*

Students often recalled their experiences in compulsory education and compared the reliance they had on teachers to help them achieve with the newfound expectation of being an independent learner.

"Like, nobody particularly cares if you do [your] assignment [at uni] or not but like, whereas before [at school], you know, teacher everyday would ask, 'How's your assignment going?' You know, 'get that done.' [sic]" *Buster, S3*

"And when I draft my essay [at school], I know I can miss a lot out so I went to her [teacher] can you have a look at this? And she was constantly there if I needed her. Like, we could ring her and she was really good. So we all [...] did really well because she was constantly helping us whereas you don't really have that support here [at uni] like, you've got to get on, you got to do it on your own." *Milly, S3*

This uncertainty and the pressure students put on themselves to succeed generated varying levels of stress amongst participants, as Naomi explained:

"I think that puts pressure on you, so like you're expected to become an independent learner. It kind of felt like you were being thrown into the deep end and you had to like be able to manage yourself and like become more independent like that, so I think that it was kind of a battle at the start." *Naomi, S3*

Coming to terms with these expectations produced a range of emotions, which Naomi brought together in one of her collages (Figure 25). She reported "panicking", being "freaked out", "insecure" and feeling "under pressure to prove yourself".

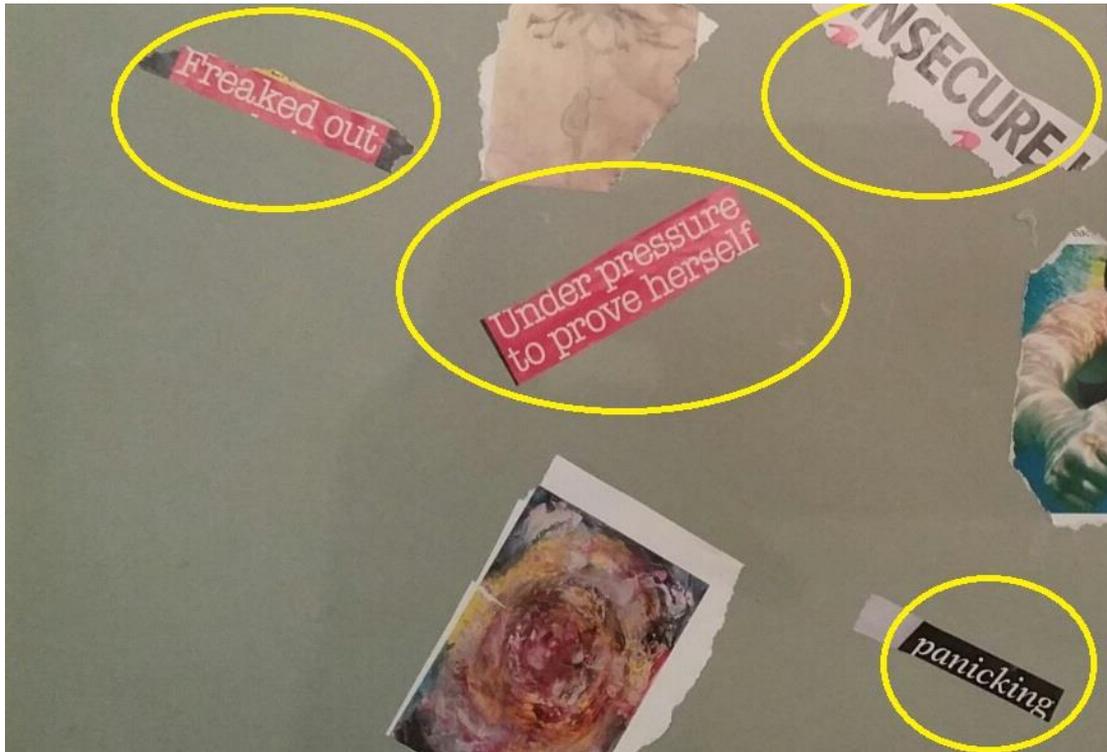


Figure 25: A collage representing transition into university (Naomi, C2, emphases added)

The sheer amount of work participants were expected to do at university also contributed to a sense that student life was stressful. The following group collage (Figure 26) captured this feeling of being overwhelmed by academic workloads (pile of papers).

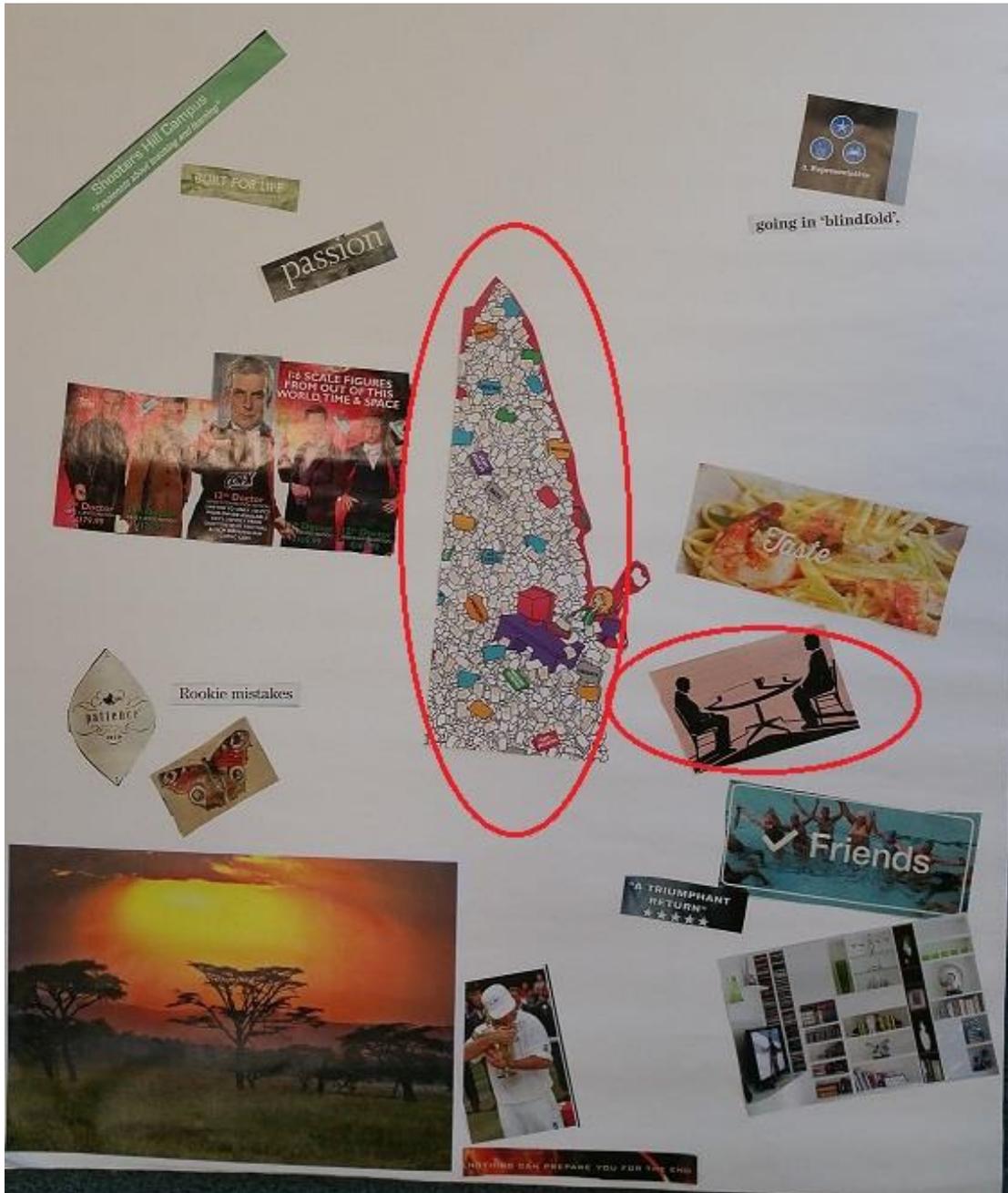


Figure 26: A group collage (G2) representing stressful and lonely student life (emphases added)

Participants also included in that collage (Figure 26) a representation of the loneliness they often felt during their early student lives (two people at a table not interacting), which is further explored in the next section.

### 5.2.3 Early struggles and social integration

Participants devoted a lot of their collage work, and subsequent discussions, to their social experience at the start of their student lives. Wrapped up in this is a pervading feeling that university was not quite what they expected it to be, at least socially. Several layers were exposed:

loneliness, differences between the family home and university environments (participants represented a mix of living at Southeastern or in their family home), a difficulty in relating to peers and a conscious separation between ‘home’ and ‘university’ personas.

#### 5.2.4 Loneliness and being away from home

Participants acknowledged that part of encountering this initial sense of loneliness stemmed from simply being in a new environment with a lack of familiar faces. Steven recounted his early experience (Figure 27) with the help of the collage clipping “anger, heartache & loss”:



Figure 27: A collage highlighting loneliness and being away from home (Steven, C3, emphasis added)

“Leaving people behind [at home and school] I’ve got NO immediate family around here [...] it hit quite hard when everyone missed their families—I missed mine a lot, more than I was expecting [sic].” *Steven, S3*

Ellora, in speaking directly about the group collage piece above (Figure 23) and its two lonely diners, similarly connected the change in environment between her family home and university and her newfound loneliness:

“I feel like my whole life I’ve always eaten dinner with my family, it’s just like such a normal thing, and then obviously [I’m at] uni and then I just like end up eating dinner like in my room alone, so that’s kind of sad, but that’s what that picture [two lonely diners in group collage] represents to me, somewhat of a loneliness.” *Ellora, S3*

Naomi also picked up on how social difficulties might originate from no longer being in the family home environment. She used a collage clipping (Figure 28) of a person in a bush to express how:

“Leaving home, at the start I kind of felt like I was being thrown into the wilderness which is why [the person is] in the bushes. ‘Cos it’s like you can’t really prepare for coming to uni and staying in the halls, like you might have stayed away for like a week or two but it’s a bit different [sic].” *Naomi, S3*



Figure 28: A collage representing feeling lost away from home (Naomi, C3, emphasis added)

Participants commented that although establishing themselves socially was awkward, there was an initial surge of extroversion at the start of university, which perhaps gave a false sense of security that it would be easy to make friends, before the reality of this difficulty set in.

“But I think that [meeting new people] wears off in like the first couple of weeks. I think the first like couple of weeks, you talk to everyone because you want to meet new friends but then when everyone’s set in their friendship groups, it gets kind of harder [...] like [people say] in Freshers’ Week, that you meet your best friends in that. Because then when you don’t, it’s a bit disheartening like, ‘Oh God.’” *Eva, S3*

“I thought it wouldn’t be that hard because I think I quite easily make friends wherever I go but then I just come here and it’s like I have no friends.” *Milly, S3*

During this discussion on the difficulty in settling in socially and making friends, Ellora did try to temper expectations and suggested the comparison between home or school and university when it comes to having friends was not necessarily a fair one:

“When you’re in college or high school or upper school, you’ve known those people for a good, like, four, five years up until that point so you know them really well. And then obviously, the people that we met at uni, we’ve only known them for about six months. I think that’s quite important; I think it takes time. I think it takes time to like open yourself up to people like that.” *Ellora, S3*

However, that did not prevent participants from feeling as though the result of this early social peak and trough was, as Steven suggests, “feeling rejected and alienated. I was worried about not fitting in.” (S3). This sentiment kicked off an assessment of their social networks to date and the reflection on a lack of friends and social integration seemed a source of anxiety for many of the participants.

“It’s really strange. I tend to clash with people more at uni than I ever did in my whole life at school.” *Ellora, S3*

“I expected to come in and everyone was on the same boat like in my flat and just to make friends like that.” *Naomi, S3*

This early disparity in making friends is perhaps best summed up by an interchange between Milly and Eva, which touched on several aspects previously covered in this chapter: expectations being unfulfilled, a sense of loneliness and an element of despondency.

“[Milly] See, like everyone says you make friends for life at uni... [Eva] I ain’t found them friends for life, yet [sic].” *Milly and Eva, S3*

Participants were keen to find answers as to why their early social experience had been disappointing. Ellora mentions “clash[ing]” (S3) with people at university and participants expressed a sense of being different in some way from their peers around them. Naomi spoke of living “in the shadows” (S3) during the first semester because of how she and her flatmates have not become friends:

“I felt like I was the one that was constantly trying to get people in my flat to be friends, I was like making more effort and they didn’t really care ‘cos they already had their friends so that was a bit of a negative. In semester A I felt like I was kind of in the shadows still because we were still settling into university life.” *Naomi, S3*

Similarly, Milly used the clipping “me, my selfie and I” in one of her collages (Figure 29) to articulate her isolation at university and the variation between her experience and that of others, such as having the same freedom to take part in activities because of existing responsibilities.

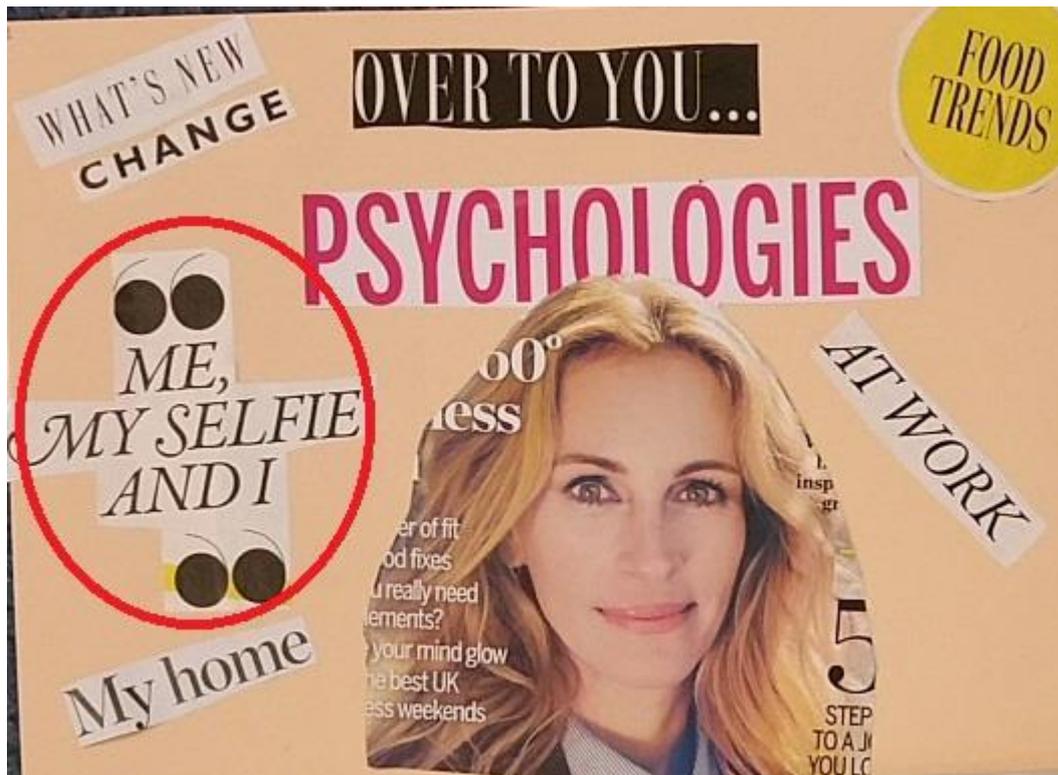


Figure 29: A collage suggesting isolation at university (Milly, C3, emphasis added)

“You feel alone, not alone, but you’re away from everything that’s familiar to you. For me and my home, I’m used to being surrounded by people that I enjoy being around [sic]. A lot of people I’ve met at university are really pleased to be away, but I enjoy being around my family.” *Milly, S3*

“My family we all do everything together, at moving-in day my whole entire family was there, my flatmates said ‘we saw your whole family but we didn’t get to see you’, their mom and dad just dropped them off and then they went, whereas my mom was like ‘I’ll stay the whole day with you’ and I was like ‘no go home!’. There was like four cars of us piling in, anyone would think the Queen was coming in.” *Milly, S3*

“But coming here [Southeastern] I’ve found it hard to make friends because here no one I met had any rules, they’d be like ‘oh do you want to do this’ and I’d be like ‘I’m working that day’, they don’t seem to have any responsibilities whereas I consider myself to have responsibilities.” *Milly, S3*

Being away from home and enduring challenges at university led some participants to visually represent their wellbeing, which was often linked to their physical health and feeling the need to survive their first year. Buster used the headline “scalpings, gangrene, crushed limbs” (Figure 30), Jasmine introduced an image of a first aid kit (Figure 31), while Milly simply used the clipping “survived” (Figure 32).



Figure 30: A collage representing survival at university (Buster, C2)

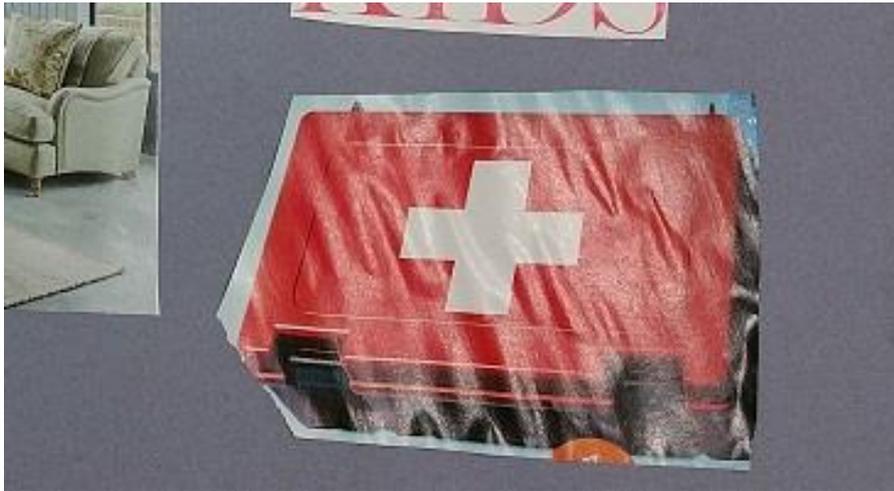


Figure 31: A collage representing survival at university (Jasmine, C2)

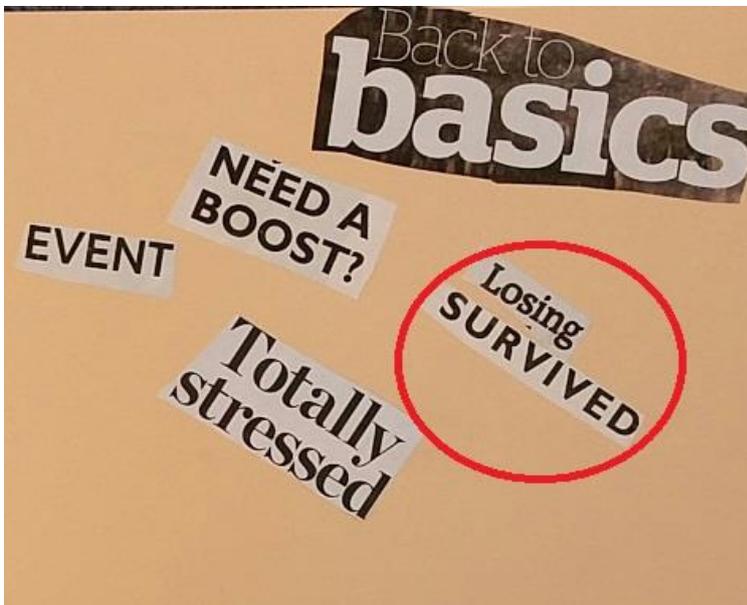


Figure 32: A collage representing survival at university (Milly, C3, emphasis added)

With participants focusing so much on the difference between their family homes and their new university environment, as well as linking this with their experience of loneliness as they begin their student lives, it was worth further unpacking the relationship between home and university. In

doing so, it appeared that most participants developed a separate university persona, while keeping alive their home equivalent.

### 5.2.5 Home vs university: split personas

The juxtaposition of the family home and university permeated students' narratives of their early experience at Southeastern. Collages and subsequent discussions brought these two milieus into conflict with one another. Ellora explored this theme in one of her collages (Figure 33).

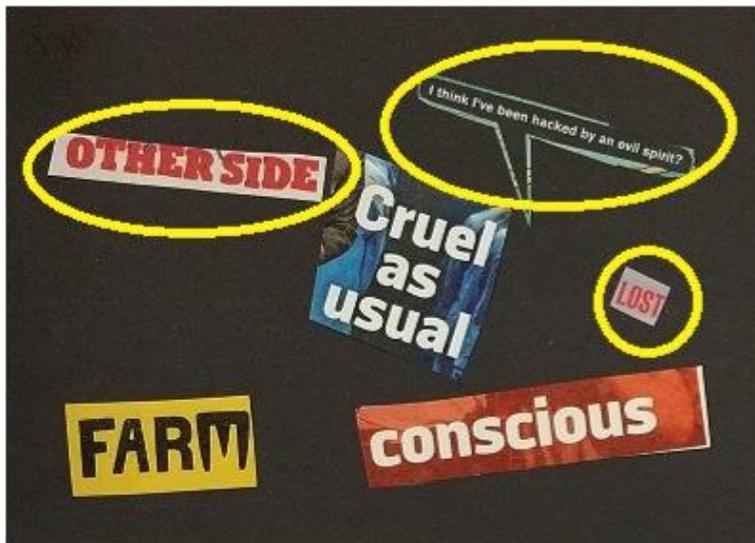


Figure 33: A collage juxtaposing home and university lives (Ellora, C3, emphases added)

In Figure 33 she described being “hacked by an evil spirit” while at university, which highlighted the tensions between how she saw herself at home and at university. According to Ellora, even the use of the black canvas for her collage represented “all of the negatives things that I’ve experienced since the start of university” (S4). In speaking about keeping her home and university ‘selves’ separate, she added: “all the things that I do at uni would conflict the person that I am at home” (S4). Finally, she went into more detail in explaining the use of the clipping “other side” in describing how she differed as a person between home and university:

“When I’m at university I feel like I’m one sort of person and then when I go home I’m like who I was before, so like I feel like my personality or who I am kind of changes when I get to university, so here I’ve got like the ‘other side’ that’s representing like the two different personalities.” *Ellora, S4*

Others also reciprocated this incompatibility between home and university selves:

“There’s like a face you have for your [university] friends [and] for your family.” *Kiki, S4*

“I feel like, like when I’m here [at university], I don’t really have a purpose.” *Milly, S4*

“I feel more comfortable [at home].” *Eva, S4*

Some participants suggested that not having family members or close friends who had experienced university necessitated them reverting to a pre-existing home self, partly because there was a lack of common experience with regards to university and partly out of guilt for having left home (as with Steven):

“None of my friends got into uni [laughs].” *Buster, S4*

“I think because none of my family have been to uni they don’t really, like they don’t really get all the work and stuff that goes into it as much.” *Naomi, S4*

“I’ve got a home self. When I’m home, when I’m not writing essays or doing work, I’ll spend the majority of my time with mum and brother or grandparents [all with no HE experience]. For the first day or two we talk about uni a bit but after that we sort of leave it be.” *Steven, S4*

Milly explored these factors further in her collage (Figure 34) with the clipping “my home” and subsequent interpretation, revealing how spending so little time at home made her feel guilty at being away. She also reinforced just how different her personality or self is between the two settings:

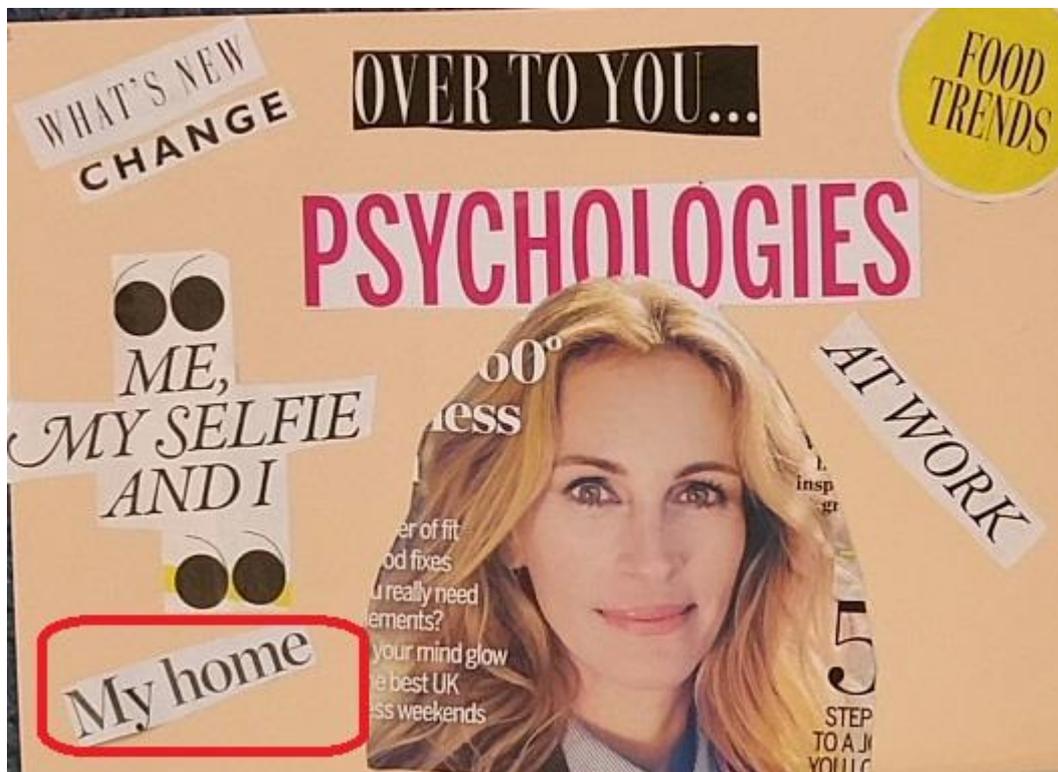


Figure 34: A collage highlighting being away from home (Milly, C3, emphasis added)

“I’ve got quite a supportive family, but none of them have been to uni so I’m completely on my own, they can’t really relate. [...] At home I’m myself, my full self, my friends know me for who I am.” *Milly, S4*

The tension between being at home and at university, and of the respective clashing selves, was a source of anxiety for some participants. They appeared to struggle in reconciling these personas and associate this opposition with their early struggles at Southeastern. However, this arduous beginning gave way to eventual success.

#### 5.2.6 Semester B: eventual success

As their first year progressed, participants signalled a turning point in their transition to university somewhere between the first and second terms. Kiki captured this change in experience in one of her collages with two coloured clippings or “panels”, as she called them, which represented the first and second semesters (Figure 35).



Figure 35: A collage representing the different experience during the academic year (Kiki, C3, emphasis added)

“I’ve got two panels, there’s the red one [which] is kind of a bit blurred and you see it as a danger so I put that as Semester A. Semester B is kind of like a really light blue so it’s calm and there’s less tension there.” *Kiki, S4*

Although participants did not identify a specific date or location for when they felt more successful at university, their narratives of being successful often centred around the formation of friendship and support groups, either academically or in social settings. Engaging in peer groups seemed to act as a trigger, which Kiki stressed in her collage on transition (Figure 36) and in her analysis of it:

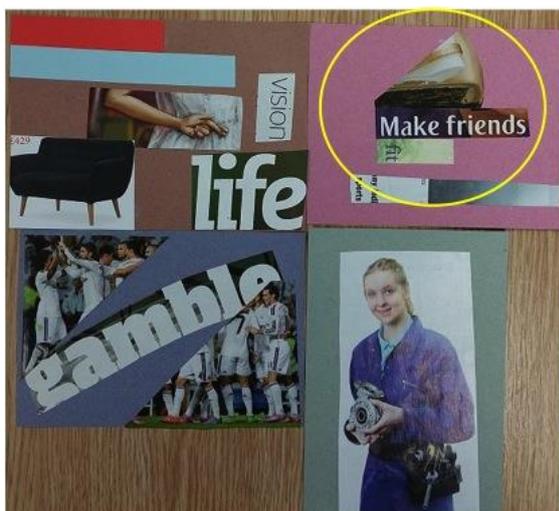


Figure 36: A collage representing transition into university (Kiki, C3, emphasis added)

“I think the best way to ensure [...] that you have a good smooth transition is to make sure that you have a good group of friends that you can have and just speak to in any aspect, whether it’s university or personal life.” *Kiki, S4*

In speaking about the difference between the first two terms, she also referenced in Figure 36 the hesitation students might have in making friends early on in their first year with the clipping “gamble” placed in between the image of a football team who represent potential friends. Kiki said:

“Sometimes things [making friends] might not come together so that’s why I’ve got a picture of a team cut in half, that can be representative of friends [...] you’ve just got to take a gamble and sometimes things will work for the better.” *Kiki, S4*

Naomi suggested having access to peer groups was crucial when she used the clippings “wannabe in my gang” and “life in the shadows” to describe the loneliness of her first semester (Figure 37).

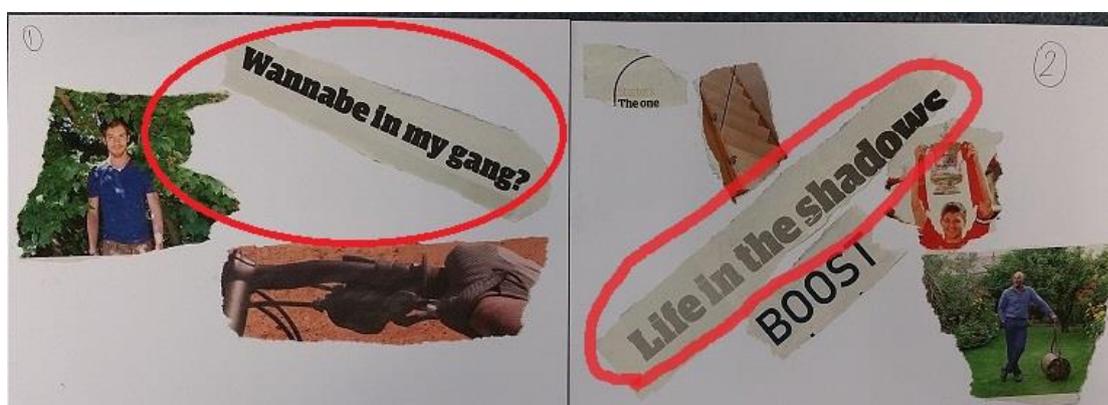


Figure 37: A collage expressing the desire to be part of peer groups (Naomi, C3, emphases added)

She then explained the importance of developing peer groups as a precursor for success and a smooth transition:

“If you’ve made friends like peers then if you’re struggling with something you can ask them, they can help you like feel more confident about the piece of work you’re struggling on, whereas if you didn’t build them social relationships in the first place you’d feel quite isolated [sic].” *Naomi, S4*

Dawn was particularly explicit about the difference having friends made to her experience of her first two semesters. In Figure 38, she showed how in the first term she was just “one person”, “suffering”, while in the second term, she had “one team [friends]” and she “enjoy[ed]” university.

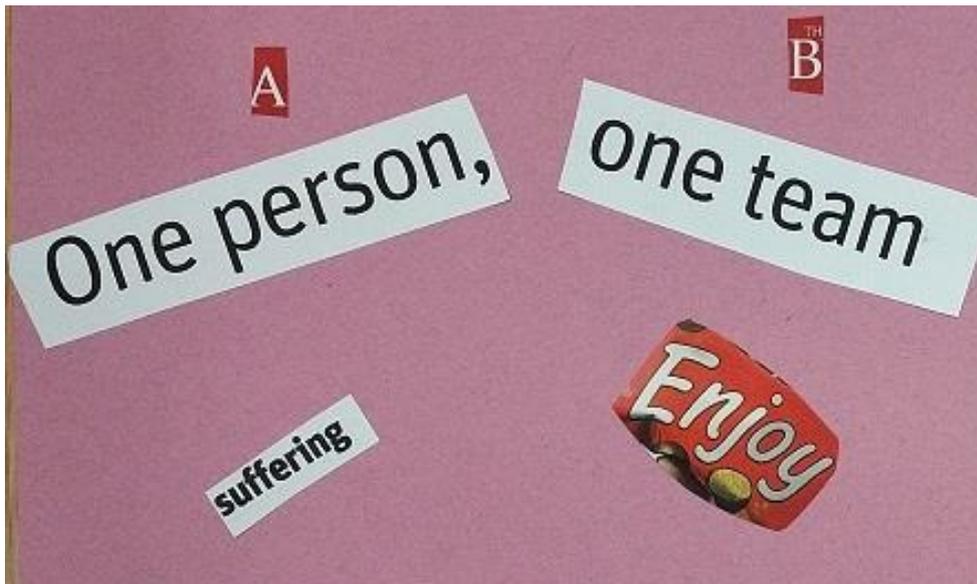


Figure 38: A collage revealing the impact of peer groups on the student experience (Dawn, C3)

She summed this collage up by explaining it was not until Semester B that she felt part of a friendship group:

“I felt like I was sort of dealing with a lot on my own, suffering a lot [...] but now this semester [Semester B] I’ve sort of found a solid group of friends [...] so I feel like I’m working with more of a team now [...] and therefore I’m enjoying it more.” *Dawn, S4*

Other participants used clippings in various ways to represent having or needing friends to ensure a better university experience. Steven used this imagery in several of his collages (Figures 39 and 40).



Figure 39: A collage underlining the importance of friends at university (Steven, C2, emphasis added)



Figure 40: A collage suggesting peer groups are crucial to success at university (Steven, C3, emphasis added)

In Figure 40, he clarified that “choose your winners” was about choosing the right group people to help you enjoy university and “benefit your life”:

“You’ve got to choose your friends [who are] gonna help you along the way. Don’t choose friends who are gonna just buy you drinks—you gotta choose friends who are friends—‘friends friends’, people that are gonna benefit your life.” *Steven, S4*

One of the group collages made a similar point in having the right group of friends with a clipping of the word “friends” accompanied by a tick (Figure 41).



Figure 41: A group collage (G2) cropped to accentuate the importance of having friends at university

Ellora also found space in her collages to place clippings of people enjoying time together (Figures 42 and 43).



Figure 42: A collage highlighting the importance of friends at university (Ellora, C3, emphasis added)



Figure 43: A collage underscoring the importance of friends (Ellora, C3, emphasis added)

Buster relied on the film characters Bilbo and Gandalf from the *The Lord of the Rings* movies to relay the importance of friendship and “standing together” (Figure 44).



Figure 44: A collage revealing the importance of friendship at university (Buster, C3, emphasis added)

This delay in making meaningful connections was difficult to attribute to anything. It could have stemmed from feeling unprepared for university, as evidenced in section 5.2.1 on “going in blindfold”, or feeling “initially on their own”, as Steven put it. In any case, Jasmine, in talking about being surprised by the importance of socialising at university, recapped how crucial having friendship or support groups were: “uni is company, really [sic]” (S4).

The impact of peer groups on students' experience was more easily understood when Kiki praised the efforts of her Law course for attempting to foster such groups early on:

"One of the lecturers was kind of hell-bent on making sure that we had two other people that we studied with [...] because that's how you're more likely to succeed." *Kiki, S4*

So, as early transitions into HE were often fraught with difficulty, with students struggling to adjust academically and make friends, engaging with peer groups seemed to lead, or at least accompany, positive experiences. Perhaps delving into how participants conceptualised transition into university will shed light on why the student experience appeared to jostle between an individual or group-based experience.

### 5.3 Conceptions of transition

In the literature review, I considered how transition as a phenomenon could be perceived from different vantage points (Gale and Parker, 2014): as an institutionally orientated experience; a personal development journey; a continual process of change. Participants were encouraged to consider these positions when reflecting on their transitional experiences at Southeastern during collage making and discussions. The resulting findings supported my consideration of the second research question, which centred on unpacking the transitional experiences of my participants.

#### 5.3.1 Collective transition

Participants initially gravitated towards a conception of transition that encompassed the collective experience of their peers. It is a perception that positioned the common student experience at its centre.

One of the group collages used the clipping "representative" (Figure 45) to translate how all students share commonalities as they enter HE. Ellora elaborated on the collage below.



Figure 45: A group collage (G2) cropped to indicate commonalities in the student experience (emphasis added)

“We had this picture up here that says ‘representative’, so that’s basically saying that we thought all students [have] the same sort of problems and coming to uni with the same sort of worries, like about job concerns and academic concerns, that’s what we got.” *Ellora, S4*

The notion of a homogenous transition into university was described by several participants as akin to being “in the same boat” (Naomi and Milly, S4). This often revolved around the kind of struggles they faced early on, such as not having friends or navigating a new academic system, which was reflected on earlier in this chapter: “everyone has a rough ride transitioning into uni” (Steven, S4). Specific aspects of transitioning into university, into new academic years and even out into the job market, were felt to be widely shared, as Eva explains:

“You think about first year, you got to move out from home. Second year, you got to move to your own home. Third year, you could be like studying abroad or in your final year and then you’re out in the big wide world.” *Eva, S4*

Participants pointed out that certain structures or practices are put in place to facilitate transition, such as matriculating in-person for their degree. Completing initial assignments could also be interpreted as part of transition. These elements were deemed to be “official” (Kiki, Ellora, Dawn, Jasmine) transitional practices and aided students’ to settle into university:

“There are certain steps that I think the university creates for us to... kind of help us accommodate our learning, initially there’s certain things that we must do that are compulsory [such as registration] but I think that’s just to help us with our transition.” *Kiki, S4*

In the same vein, Naomi added that the university also imposed its own conceptions of how students should transition academically or socially:

“You’re expected to become an independent learner and you’re expected to make friends when you’re at uni.” *Naomi, S4*

Despite this sense that transition was intertwined with university structures and that all students experienced similar practices or had initial experiences that were homogenous, transition became increasingly seen amongst the participant group as an ultimately individual, personal process or journey. Kiki explained how this juxtaposition was represented in a group collage (Figure 46):

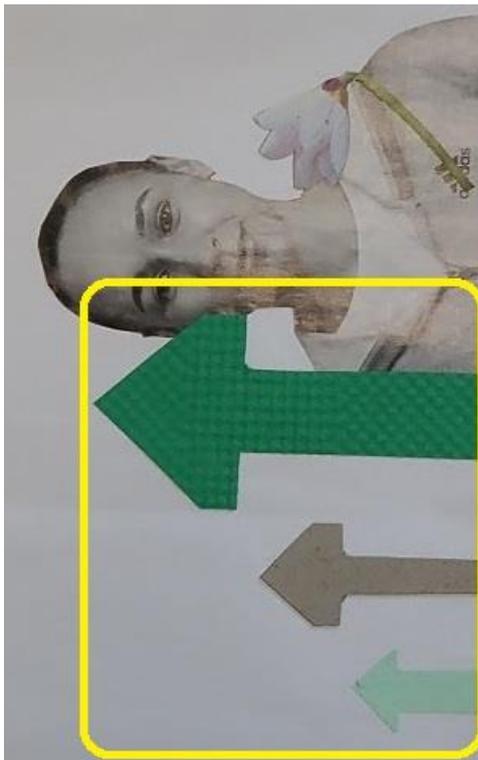


Figure 46: A group collage (G2) cropped to show different student experiences (emphasis added)

“[There are] three different arrows because of course we’re speaking about transition [...] these three arrows have different textures, and so this one’s a bit rough, [that one is] smoother, and that’s like the smoothest [...] Everyone goes through a different path just to get to the same place [...] we all get a certificate [degree upon graduating] but then that certificate says different things so it’s [the transitional student experience] personal.” *Kiki, S4*

In Figure 46, the arrows represented student transitions and experiences that were essentially similar in nature. However, the use of different textures on the arrow clippings shifted the conception of transition towards a personal one: the parameters of the transition might be similar (i.e. moving into new accommodation or completing registration) but the way this was experienced was unique to each student. Dawn further encapsulated this dichotomy with a clipping of seemingly unique and different individuals in a group photo (Figure 47).



Figure 47: A group collage (G3) cropped to focus on a group of people (emphasis added)

She contested that “[the people] in it are very different, so although you’re like all going through a transition everyone’s [transition is] different” (S4). So, students might have shared “basic transition problems” (Dawn, S4), such as adapting to new teaching styles, but to these participants, the notion of transition being a collective experience was overridden by the significant individual experience it afforded them—particularly with regards to how it facilitated personal development or growth as a student and person.

### 5.3.2 Individual transition

In discussing conceptions of transition, participants juxtaposed their somewhat similar physical transitions into university, such as moving away from home or taking part in standardised practices, with how their individual experiences played out. They largely concluded that although transition could be perceived from a cohort perspective, they understood it as a personal phenomenon:

“We thought that [Southeastern] might expect you to have a particular transition [...] But we didn’t personally think that there was any official transition. It was more down to individuals and how their previous experiences would affect. We didn’t think that there was any set transition.” *Ellora, S4*

“Everyone may be heading in the same direction but everyone goes through a different path.” *Kiki, S4*

In terms of what transition meant to them, participants focused on the benefits university afforded their own development and of the personal journey that transitioning into Southeastern took them on. In one group collage, this was symbolised by a butterfly clipping (Figure 48), which Ellora clarified:



Figure 48: A group collage (G3) cropped to represent student transition (emphasis added)

“It’s the analogy that we all start off as caterpillars and develop into butterflies like later on. So yeah that’s why that’s there, like the wings represent, you know, developing into something else, like developing as a person, that’s what that is.” *Ellora, S4*

Using their transition—and wider university experience—as a space to develop as a person and develop new skills was acknowledged by Steven, Jasmine, Kiki and Dawn:

“It’s developing you, the university experience is you finding out who you are, what you want to do.” *Steven, S4*

“The opportunities are more like developing me as a person.” *Jasmine, S4*

“It’s you as an individual that influences it. [...] If you want to develop yourself individually [...] focus on yourself as an individual and where you want to be, kind of be a bit more selfish.” *Kiki, S4*

“I think it is mainly internal [personal] and it’s tactically using assignments, socialising, things like fresher’s [week], group work [...] to get to where you want to be and kind of using them to aid you, like instruments. I kind of see university like that, just make use of what you have [around you].” *Dawn, S4*

The language used in these quotes, such as “focus on yourself” (Kiki) or “get to where you want to be” (Dawn), harked to the competitive outlook participants exhibited in their conceptions of

university. So, it was perhaps unsurprising that transitioning into university—and the wider student experience—was predominantly seen as a developmental opportunity. Dawn, drawing on a group collage, recapped how the ups and downs of a transition ultimately resulted in personal development (Figure 49):

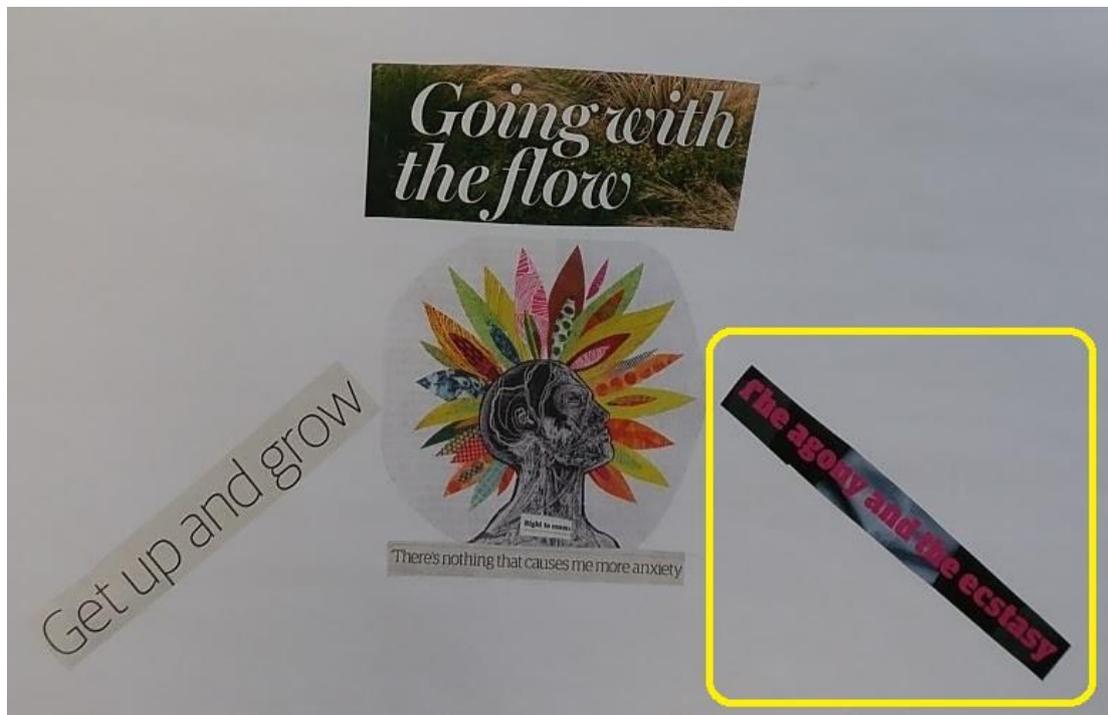


Figure 49: A group collage (G3) cropped to highlight the varied nature of transitioning into HE (emphasis added)

“The agony and the ecstasy. So, we were talking about [transition], it’s not always going to be necessarily smooth, so that’s that bit [agony]. ‘Get up and go’, because we were saying about how you develop as a person through a transition.” *Dawn, S4*

In thinking about transition as more of a developmental phenomenon, rather than a series of institutionally defined practices or events, participants prioritised their individual paths:

“I see it [transition] more as a personal thing because each person is doing it [going to university] differently for a different reason.” *Dawn, S4*

“I think at the university level it’s [transition] completely independent. I think university is completely down to the person [...] At university it’s more the individual that is responsible for their success.” *Steven, S4*

Participants spoke of using their transition, and the new experiences it afforded them, to challenge themselves with the specific intention of developing their resilience and skills. For Steven, this took the form of a difficult assignment question, while Jasmine focused on socialising in environments she normally would not:

“I chose the [assignment] question that would challenge me the most [...] Proving to myself that I can do it. I don’t want to write about something that I wrote about at College. I want to write about a topic that I hadn’t written about before, a different side of the [film] industry I didn’t know about. It was much a learning objective as a personal challenge.” *Steven, S4*

“Normally I would never do that kind of stuff [having to meet new people]. You have to adapt yourself to different people and I’ve kind of learnt to do that, especially as there’s so many different people at uni and you have to know how to talk to other people differently, so I’ve definitely grown as a person in that sense.” *Jasmine, S4*

These last two quotes highlighted just how carefully participants considered and curated their transitions, as both students put themselves in uncomfortable situations— “normally I would never do that” (*Jasmine, S4*). Participants were aware of the challenge university might pose to them, of the potential difficulties in adapting to academic work, which was no longer at “College” (*Steven, S4*) level, and to new social spheres. The quotes also represented the awareness participants have of the competitive nature of HE and the need to differentiate oneself as a means for future success: “you have to adapt” (*Jasmine, S4*). Framed in this way, transition appeared to be interpreted as a useful space for sparking development, for “personal challenge” (*Steven*), both in terms of skills and “growing as a person” (*Jasmine, S4*), rather than just a collective experience shared by many.

The last findings to be considered in this chapter relate to the methodological challenge set out in the final research question, which partly considered how capable collage is as a method of translating students’ HE experience.

## 5.4 Reflecting on co-participatory research

Participants provided feedback on the research’s methodology in two ways, first in terms of making collages and the co-participatory elements of sessions, and, second in how it benefitted their own development. These reflections supported and provided evidence for dealing with my fourth research question, which explored the extent to which Participatory Pedagogy, supported by artful inquiry, was useful for examining the student experience. This final section provided participants’ reflections on their involvement in the research, while the following discussion chapter will consider that research question in relation to these findings and key literature.

### 5.4.1 Making collages

Participants had limited memories of collage making from when they were children and seemed surprised at its ability to connect thoughts and experiences with the physical art:

“I’ve made collages, but not in this sense, not about feelings and opinions. It’s quite nice to see it on paper, see how other people did it. Not what’s on there but how it’s shown.”  
*Steven, S4*

They were perhaps equally impressed at using clippings of images or words to effectively represent their thoughts:

“It’s been good doing it in a kind of abstract way because you wouldn’t have thought like half the images would actually relate, but then when you think about it [they do].” *Naomi, S4*

“Yeah, whether you use a word or a picture and how you feel that word or picture tells what you’re wanting to tell, I think that’s quite interesting, it’s been really interesting.” *Steven, S4*

Letting participants be introspective and consider their experiences, as well as drawing on images, allowed Ellora and Kiki to tap into rich representations:

“When you actually sit down and think about [your experiences] and you make collages and you can see images that actually relate to what you think it kind of, it gives a bit of a deeper meaning as to actually like why you’re actually here.” *Ellora, S4*

“I definitely liked the collages because everyone and everything that was in the collage was like a symbol, symbolism throughout all of it.” *Kiki, S4*

Kiki reflected on the sessions and emphasised how their structure encouraged group participation and allowed participants to drive the research forward based on what they shared. Fostering this atmosphere led to group discussions and interpretations, which added deeper meaning to the collages, as well as encouraging participants to share their voice and experiences:

“Everyone else would interpret [your collage] it in a different way as well and that kind of shows just how diverse everyone is and just kind of shows you how everyone has a different outlook on things and that really made me think.” *Kiki, S4*

“I also liked it when we brainstormed as well, that was really good, everyone, the ideas—there was lots of ideas flowing, that was really good. I definitely liked that, just going around, taking it in turns to speak about things and how ideas are put forward—I like it when everyone has a voice. I really felt that and everything was taken into consideration. Each session was quite versatile, there were different things and everyone was able to do something just to get across what they wanted to—I really like that. I think that was the best way to find something about someone...of course there’s asking them but looking at something they’d created, because everything they do you read into it and you see how that’s symbolic for them and how it tells a little bit of their story so far, I really like that.” *Kiki, S4*

#### 5.4.2 Engaging in Participatory Pedagogy research

Engaging in co-participatory research appeared to better participants’ understanding of themselves by providing a vehicle for introspection and contemplation of thoughts and experiences

that they might otherwise not have considered as much, or even at all. The following conversation between Kiki, Ellora and Dawn captured this:

“It’s been beneficial for me because it’s helped me to understand myself a bit more ‘cos sometimes when you verbalise what you’re thinking it makes things a bit clearer and it puts things into perspective for you, so it’s kind of helped me understand myself and also understand the experience of other people around me.” *Kiki, S4*

“Like what Kiki said, I feel like it’s quite interesting sort of like talking about it because you kind of think about it in a deeper way than you would’ve if you were just on your own, like I wouldn’t think about half of these [on my own]. *Ellora, S4*

“Yeah, I was thinking that as well, like thinking deeply but also then it makes it clearer, so although sort of like I’ve had these thoughts, I’m now able to almost put them in an order and make sense of it all so I think that’s how it’s benefited me.” *Dawn, S4*

Steven felt the impact of the collages beyond the sessions and reflected on how rare it is to discuss experiences like transition in a group:

“Cool to talk about it, there’s not many people you feel you can talk to about your transition. I feel it’s been good to talk about it and to see how other people feel as well [...] I suppose a few times, I’ve been thinking about what we talked about, moving away and how other people feel, the transition. There’s been a couple nights after sessions I’ve just been thinking out, it’s been so much fun [...] Sometimes I say something and then I walk out and think ‘oh yeah, I never thought about that before—it’s takes a few minutes to clock it.’” *Steven, S4*

Kiki echoed these sentiments:

“There’d be times when I was taking the [university] shuttle bus and I’d be thinking about it [the research]. I’d pick up on something that I heard or said myself during the project and that would kind of help me and it would be a bit of advice that I would give myself—maybe something that I said or someone. [...] It helps you in a very positive way, helps you to get where you want to be, to achieve what you want. So that really helped, the project overall was very, very good.” *Kiki, S4*

Although Kiki was admittedly unsure of participating at first, she revealed how important the research became to her. Feeling that the university was listening to her through this project, and being part of the participant group, made her feel less isolated and gave her confidence that she could succeed at university. Engaging with the research’s wider WP context also seemed to motivate her to be even better at university.

“I was really sceptical because it’s something that, I’ve never taken part in any research on transition and it was a very big step [coming to uni].” *Kiki, S4*

“I think when you’re away from home, it’s not as easy because you don’t have that support system [...] so knowing that there were other people there in a similar situation and that it’s all completely normal—that provided comfort—and that allowed me to try out more things whether it was join a club or other activities where you get to know other students and just become part of this community, it really helped with that.” *Kiki, S4*

“I remember the first couple of weeks, oh my god...you didn’t know where you were, you were in a new town, you didn’t know anyone [...] It really helped me root myself down, this project, it helped me build my confidence as well [...] knowing that your peers are all going through the same thing [transition to uni] or at least something similar and it kind of helps you.” *Kiki, S4*

“I just thought this is something for the benefit of the uni but also for the benefit of me. [...] And after this research project, I know I count and what I say counts and what I feel counts.” *Kiki, S4*

“It [the research] kind of motivated me, to go against these facts and figures saying that we kind of struggle more coming from a certain background and I want to challenge that, get a first degree and make sure that whatever I try and pursue, I do well in.” *Kiki, S4*

It would appear from participant feedback, that collage making had a profound impact, not only on their awareness of their transition and student experience, but also on their development as individuals. It seemed to mirror their wider student experience in HE, in which they continually sought out opportunities to grow, learn and acquire skills that might aid their success at university and beyond.

This chapter on findings shared important data that directly related to my research questions. In displaying collages and extracting participants’ interpretations of their work, as well as capturing subsequent discussions, I covered four main themes. One, they display motivations to access HE, an awareness of the very competitive nature of HE and the importance of continual self-improvement in the form of acquiring skills, knowledge and experiences. This highlighted the influence neoliberalism had on individual performativity of these under-represented students and their experience at Southeastern. Two, participants’ transitional experiences into Southeastern could be broadly summed up as initially struggling, due to expectations, academic mismatches and difficult social integration, before rebounding later in the academic year, thanks largely to having established supportive peer groups. Three, participants’ conception of transition oscillated between a sense of collective experience and a highly personalised outlook. Four, participants reflected on their time spent in the research, especially in relation to co-participation and making collages. Their feedback and reflections supported the usefulness of Participatory Pedagogy in researching their student experience. These themes will help me consider implications for supporting under-represented students at Southeastern.

The next chapter will consider these findings and themes in relation to key literature and theoretical concepts. In carrying out this analysis, I will focus on neoliberalism’s influence in the student experience, debate whether students in my study display a feel for the game (Bourdieu, 1990a; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), explore what a capability

approach to these findings might mean for my understanding of the student experience and, lastly, reflect on the implications of this discussion on my practice at Southeastern.

## 6. Discussion

The following chapter considers my findings in relation to three of my four research questions (RQ 1, 2 and 4), conceptual framework and key literature, including relevant student experience research. I have structured this discussion chapter around the following research questions:

RQ1: How is neoliberalism reflected in WP as well as in the student experience?

RQ2: What are the transitional experiences of under-represented students at Southeastern?

RQ4: To what extent does Participatory Pedagogy represent a useful student engagement model for conducting WP research into the student experience in contemporary HE?

In-line with pursuing a practice-based doctorate aiming to impact on professional practice (Rayner et al., 2015; Woods, 2016; Buss et al., 2017; Tupling and Outhwaite, 2017), my third research question (RQ3: What are the implications of these findings on the practices designed to support the student experience at Southeastern?) is particularly important as it will weigh up the implications of my findings on Southeastern. I integrate an assessment of how this knowledge might impact my own practice at Southeastern and how my research could influence my senior leadership to evolve policy at Southeastern, as I indicated was necessary in my Introduction (section 1.1). I will discuss RQ3 as part of my final chapter, which details my conclusions and recommendations.

In this current chapter, I reflect on RQ 1, 2 and 4 by analysing findings in relation to the knowledge I gained from evaluating concepts and sector research in my literature review (Chapters 2 and 3). In doing so, I also critically appraise the value of my conceptual framework (section 3.4) in explaining my findings. Before taking on each research question in separate sections, I will briefly outline the outcomes of each section.

As I explored in my literature review, neoliberalism permeates HE as a policy driver, especially in WP and HE participation, and, heavily influences student engagement. While some (Zepke, 2014, 2015) considered how these changes alter student engagement, there was a gap in research around how the student experience might be affected, which I addressed through this research study. Neoliberal performativity (Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012) appeared to shape participants' conception of HE as a highly competitive environment and was strongly connected to societal social mobility narratives that are reinforced in WP and HE participation policies, leading me to consider the influence of these on students' behaviour and in their choice to access HE.

I then contemplate how my findings on participants' transitional experience can be understood when positioned against Bourdieusian concepts, a capability approach and transitional models. I draw on Bourdieu's concepts, including capitals, habitus, field, *illusio* and misrecognition to better understand the underlying elements of these students' difficulties. However, I also call into question the nature of this Bourdieusian outlook as one that facilitates, or lends itself, to potential deficit model constructions of under-represented students' experience. In doing so, I invoke a capability approach as I attempt to balance this supposedly difficult period in my participants' experience at Southeastern. Interestingly, unlike some of the studies cited earlier, students in my research felt they enjoyed success later in their initial year and I postulate on why their fortunes seem to transform. Then I analyse findings against the concept of transition as becoming (Gale and Parker, 2014) as the basis for a different way to conceive of student transition, one that allows for the multiplicity of students' experience and accounts for the different needs, skills and experience under-represented students bring with them into Southeastern.

At this point, I evaluate the implications of these analyses and their implications on my direct practice and on wider policies at Southeastern. I debate whether under-represented students at Southeastern are appropriately supported in their first year and highlight potential acts of misrecognition and deficit-model approaches. I also include implications on the HE sector in this section.

Throughout this thesis, I have advocated for Participatory Pedagogy, supported by artful inquiry, in conducting research into the student experience in order to eliminate deficit-model constructs. Having considered my findings, I argue in the final section of this chapter that it is an innovative approach for achieving these aims and engaging under-represented students because of its capacity to empower participants, offer reflective spaces and provide a model for co-development in research. Based on my participants' feedback, I make recommendations for the implementation of Participatory Pedagogy in student engagement work with under-represented HE students' at Southeastern and across the sector.

## 6.1 Neoliberalism's influence on the student experience and WP at Southeastern

In this first section, I propose that neoliberalism pervaded the student experience of my participants. My findings reflected that this is embedded within students' neoliberal performativity, their motivations for accessing HE and conception of the HE environment, which mirror the wider social mobility rhetoric found in WP and HE policies. A Bourdieusian analysis, followed by a critique using a capability approach, focused on minimising deficit-model constructs around the perceived fit between students and institution, as well as the choice students make in accessing HE. This

highlights an opportunity to develop a contribution to outreach programming that can address the imbalance found in the choices and agency students display in accessing HE, which could feed into my own practice and the wider sector. I end this section by considering how my conceptual framework contributed to this new understanding and contribution.

In my literature review (section 2.3), I identified a discourse around self-improvement within a neoliberal context. According to Burke (2012) and Wilkins (2012), the behaviour and agency of individuals in neoliberal contexts is explained within this self-improvement culture by being heavily influenced by neoliberal WP policies, inciting individuals to access HE and compete with their peers for graduate outcomes. In deliberating over my first research question—the extent to which neoliberalism moulds the student experience in HE—I supposed that if UK HE has developed such rich neoliberal structures, as many suggest (Ball, 1998; Barnett, 2000; Naidoo, 2003; Biesta, 2004; Mccaferty, 2010; Clarke, 2012), then this could be reflected in students' attitudes and degrees of agency. As I argued at the beginning of this thesis, it is important to understand neoliberalism as a dominant force in society (Brown et al., 2003; Naidoo, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; McNally, 2014) that has shaped the HE sector over the last 20 years (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Mavelli, 2014). Therefore, if I am to reflect on policy or practice changes at Southeastern, then I should do so with the knowledge of neoliberalism's influence on the student experience. Southeastern, with its legacy as a post-1992 university, harbours a neoliberal culture typical of contemporary HE, such as expansionist WP practices that heavily recruit from under-represented groups, and a managerial culture that underscores its large staff base and adherence to sector performance monitoring, such as the Teaching Excellence Framework, and the OfS's regulatory frameworks. I considered Southeastern to be a typical neoliberal university—but would its students reflect neoliberal behaviour, such as self-improvement and competitive attitudes? If so, what implications would this have on my practice?

I will discuss neoliberalism's influence on my participants by drawing on my conceptual framework. I will use both a capability approach and Bourdieusian concepts of capitals, *illusio* and the logic of practice to consider the extent to which participants exhibited neoliberal performativity. Doing so within the context of neoliberal performativity will offer new insights into the under-represented student experience at Southeastern and provide implications for my practice, which might have otherwise remained hidden. I will discuss this in relation to choice, aspiration and agency within HE, which was deployed by Sen (2003) as part of a capability approach, but which I will initially use to highlight neoliberal performativity in my participants. I will then draw on a Bourdieusian analysis and a capability approach to reflect on what the 'neoliberal student' means for my practice.

### 6.1.1 Aspiration, choice and agency

I will first discuss aspiration and choice because they appeared intertwined in my findings and, conceptually, there is a degree of overlap in choosing an educational path that can fulfil aspirations (Sen, 2003). Aspirations around professional success were a clear motivator for participants choosing to access HE: “I want a career not a job” (Milly, S2); “[professional] status is quite important” (Steven and Ellora, S2). The group are highly aspirational as a result: “my aspirations are set pretty high” (Steven, S2); “my ultimate goal is to have my own clinic” (Dawn, S2). These motivations were interconnected with aspiring for financial independence for themselves and their families: “I wanna do [my subject] to get a lot of money” (Ada, S1); “[I] never want to have to rely on anyone else for money” (Naomi, S1). Participants’ collages included many financial motifs that support aspirations of acquiring greater wealth, including the clippings “cash” (Ellora, Figure 11, C1), “bank” (Kiki, Figure 12, C1) and the group collage (Figure 9, G2) depicting a face (representing themselves) accompanied by pound signs.

In fact, such perceptions were instilled in participants while still in compulsory education, as Buster explained “We were told [at school] that you won’t get a job if you don’t get a [university] degree.”, which he referenced with the collage clipping “how to get ahead” (Figure 17). This perspective is not unique to this cohort and corroborates studies done in UK compulsory school education (Wilkins, 2012; Ingleby, 2015), suggesting students are well-versed in neoliberal language and behaviour upon entering HE. The need to get a job, to ‘get ahead’, is complemented by participants being driven to improve their socio-economic position, to “do whatever it takes” (Milly, S2), certainly in financial terms through enhanced professional aspirations, which is realised through choosing to complete a university degree.

In terms of agency, the degree to which neoliberal outlooks are embedded in participants was evidenced by their hyper-awareness of Southeastern (and HE in general) as a competitive arena in which they actively contested for positive outcomes, academically and in the job market. Participants spoke of “beating my rivals” (Dawn, S2), “[taking] extra steps to make you stand out” (Steven, S2) and being opportunistic about which degree they studied, “they’re all looking for girls” (Ada, S2), all of which is language that embodies neoliberal competition and self-improvement.

### 6.1.2 A Bourdieusian analysis and a capability approach critique

These findings support the various neoliberal traits individuals can exhibit, such as Olszen and Peters’s (2005) self-interested person, Wilkins’s (2012) self-improvement model and Burke’s (2012) notion of the neoliberal self-improvement project. They reflected my participants’ drive to improve their socio-economic position, certainly in financial terms, through enhanced professional

goals, which is made possible in their choice of accessing university. A Bourdieusian analysis using capitals, habitus, logic of practice, *illusio* and institutional habitus was useful in deepening my understanding of how aspiration, choice and agency are linked within a neoliberal context.

Viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, well-defined motivations around professional and financial success can be explained by a discourse of low economic capital and habitus orientated towards HE participation. Findings in the previous section implied that socio-economic disadvantage played a role in motivating participants to embody self-improvement characteristics as they accessed HE and sought to fulfil professional and economic goals. It appears that as Bourdieu (1986) intimated, economic capital is the “root of all other forms of capital” (252) as economic motivation led to accessing new capitals, such as social networks and professional knowledge. However, this ignores the nuances and complexity of engagements and agency in HE. I argue that a more comprehensive analysis of neoliberal performativity should combine these aspirations with a set of existing capitals and dispositions (e.g. skills, knowledge and qualities). This suggests participants embodied a highly-tuned neoliberal habitus and logic of practice disposed towards behaving and engaging in strategies to create a life around financial, educational and professional success, which was conducive with participation in a neoliberal institution like Southeastern. This was reflected in their eventual strategy, or choice, of accessing HE and their agency of engaging in intense competition with peers once at university.

It is tempting to suggest that this analysis is contrary to the typical Bourdieusian notion that socio-economically disadvantaged individuals, such as under-represented students, struggle in institutions like HE because their habitus and logic of practice do not align with the dominant habitus of more advantaged peers and of the institution itself (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2004; Reay et al., 2009). However, the concepts of *illusio* and institutional habitus helped clarify why participants’ habitus and logic and practice appear compatible with Southeastern. *Illusio* represents the awareness individuals develop around the context and rewards of an environment along with a feel for the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In a neoliberal HE context, I perceive this to be the understanding of the benefits of HE coupled with the ability to maximise success by engaging in competition within it. A key facet of *illusio* is the positioning of institutions as attractive to individuals—in other words institutions account for the desires and needs of potential students in order to appeal to them. Based on my cohort’s understanding of HE and its social mobility potential, they seemed to display a feel for the game. There appeared to be a high level of compatibility between Southeastern and these students—a strong social gravity between the two (Webb et al., 2017). This suggests there was a compatible fit between Southeastern’s institutional habitus and my participants’ habitus, which diverges from Thomas (2002) and Reay et al.’s (2009) research on

habitus. I contend that this is explained by neoliberal performativity and self-improvement traits that permeated participants' habitus and logic of practice and that were reflective of the neoliberal structures in Southeastern's institutional habitus.

However, there are two caveats with this analysis. One, it only highlights that habitus might be aligned at the point of accessing HE. In considering my second research question in section 6.2, I will show that participants' habitus do not conform—at least initially—to Southeastern's institutional habitus, leading to a form of misrecognition. So, it is not simply a case of aligning student and institutional neoliberal habitus. Two, engaging in this Bourdieusian analysis facilitates the deficit-model construct I aimed to avoid in this thesis. As I will now argue, a capability approach emphasises this outlook and supplies alternative means of understanding neoliberal performativity in aspiration, choice and agency relating to HE experience.

Limiting analysis to the fit between participants' and Southeastern's habitus, and then extending this to other contexts either locally or nationally, has the potential to fall into a deficit-model trap because it implies that the student must display a habitus capable of fitting with the institution. This hides possible institutional failings around how it presents itself to potential students. The strong *illusio* and social gravity I observed earlier between participants and Southeastern may have facilitated their access to this institution, but that may have been reliant on these individuals embodying certain characteristics, capitals and habitus. Although my research did not set out to identify a set of capitals and dispositions symptomatic with choice and agency in HE participation, I noted one attribute that participants seemed to prioritise in accessing HE. The entire participant group identified resilience as having developed throughout their lives, often based on school and personal experiences, which could signal its importance as an element of neoliberal performativity. Ellora summed this up when she stated that overcoming financial challenges and schooling difficulties “required a lot of resilience” (S1). Stevenson (2016), in reviewing literature on this topic, described resilience as a process of coping with challenges through the development of internal resources, such as determination, endurance, adaptability and recuperability [sic]. She warned institutions that defining under-represented students as being resilient invariably positioned them as lacking capitals and embodying deficient habitus that they then must overcome. Whether or not resilience is a key trait in neoliberal performativity—which is beyond the scope of this thesis—relying on students to display resilience would mask structural inequalities that result in deficit-model constructs of under-represented students.

Applied to my research, a capability approach diffuses the potential deficit-model construct of a Bourdieusian analysis by reclaiming the concept of choice away from neoliberal performativity (Walker, 2008). Choice, as in choosing to access HE, is a facet of neoliberal performativity grounded

in self-improvement (Walker, 2008; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). However, I exposed in section 2.2 that WP policy fosters a lack of genuine choice in presenting possible futures to young people as it is too interconnected with HE expansionist policies (Walker, 2008; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). This dovetails with Burke's (2012) assessment that neoliberal HE offers a "golden trajectory" (22) funnelling under-represented students into HE and that is part of wider expansionist policymaking aimed at individuals from under-represented backgrounds. The commitment to accessing HE that my participants displayed not only reinforces a self-improvement discourse but also underscores the connection between participation and WP policy identified by Walker (2008). While these students may benefit from HE, their agency could be seen as determined by external policy and rhetoric. This supports Wilkins's (2012) assertion that individuals in a neoliberal environment ultimately lack agency and instead "re-enact" (199) socio-political norms—in this case striving to access HE and develop professional careers, which is reflected in his and Ingelby's (2015) work on neoliberal attitudes to education being developed at a young age. I am not formulating an argument on whether these students at Southeastern will in fact be successful or prove that golden trajectory is true after all. Rather, I argue that simply taking a Bourdieusian analysis of their neoliberal performativity in accessing HE is consistent with those expected of under-represented students within HE and WP policies. I challenge this assessment, not only because of its deficit-model overtones suggesting an idealised form of neoliberal performativity, but because it reduces under-represented students to "rational fools and cultural dopes" (Walker, 2008: 276) with little agency over their future.

To counter this, I propose adopting the value-centric tenets of a capability approach to reclaim student agency in the following ways (Sen, 2003): promoting choice and educational paths that will add value to life; acknowledging that aspirations are diverse and not limited to HE and socio-economic gain; fostering agency and attitudes that may or not may lead to economic prosperity but that may still be valued; encouraging individuals to prioritise leading valued lives. I also urge institutions to shift practices away from encouraging an idealised trajectory into HE and develop students as expert evaluators in choosing futures that offer them the most valued life (Walker, 2008). I will next reflect on how this assessment of a capability approach, as it relates to students' neoliberal performativity, informs my practice at Southeastern.

### 6.1.3 Implications of neoliberal performativity and choice on my practice

So far, in contending with my first research question examining neoliberalism's influence on the student experience, I argued that my participants were particularly in-tune with the kind of neoliberal behaviour Burke (2012) and Wilkins (2012) identified in self-improvement discourses,

namely aspiration, choice and agency. Seen through a Bourdieusian lens, this implied that students' habitus and Southeastern's institutional habitus were in sync, yet I exposed the danger in conceding to this analysis, especially as it facilitated deficit-model thinking of what an ideal student might be. Instead, I recommended adopting a capability approach that would challenge this embedded expansionist policy of HE as a golden trajectory and confer a deeper sense of choice for young people to evaluate. This has significant practice implications for leaders of WP practitioners, such as myself, that I will now explore. Shifting this approach requires a commitment from institutions like Southeastern and points to the difficulty practitioners and policymakers have in fostering choice, aspiration and agency for under-represented students.

Reflecting on outreach programming is appropriate as I am primarily concerned with reclaiming, as Walker (2008) intimates, WP access. Furthermore, I support Walker's (2008) assertion that developing choice, at least initially, is crucial to doing so. I have reached this assessment through my understanding of the literature dispelling the myth that under-represented students have lower aspirations than their peers (Archer et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2014; Harrison, 2018). Drawing on possible selves theory to develop outreach practice could help promote choice in access activity. Possible selves theory positions under-represented young people as embodying strong aspirations but having low expectations of realising these (Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019). In order to raise expectations, young people must have belief in their ability to succeed at a task and feel in control of their life's direction (Papafilippou and Bathmaker, 2019), which is achieved by improving the confidence a young person has in influencing their future versus being subjected to luck, social constraints or their own lack of ability (Harrison, 2018).

Outreach programming plays a vital role in developing this confidence and expectation. Activities with a possible selves theoretical base delivered by WP practitioners should provide young people with opportunities to succeed, based on their hobbies or educational interests, and to be successful in completing tasks in order to foster confidence (Harrison, 2018; Papafilippou and Bathmaker, 2019). This can be achieved by facilitating participants to develop strategies and roadmaps that will lead towards achieving their goals, whether this involves HE or other pathways (Harrison, 2018). By working with the same young people over several years, this roadmap can be actioned, which will result in participants enhancing their agency and control over their lives. As a leader of WP practitioners, I will challenge my team to develop a longitudinal programme based on possible selves theory that does not position HE as an idealised goal. However, I will not ignore the strong neoliberal performativity that my participants exhibited in my research by actively limiting neoliberal traits, such as self-improvement. Despite Sen's (2003) and Walker's (2008) critique of neoliberalism and its pervasiveness in WP policy and individual performativity, my research has

shown that young people did embody these traits. Ignoring or working against this view seems antithetical to trying to engage young people. Therefore, part of my contribution to practice at Southeastern and across the sector would be to develop outreach programming, using a possible selves base, which also appropriates elements of neoliberal performativity. It might appear controversial, but by guarding against deficit-model formulations, I will hopefully tap into young people's embodied sense of self-improvement that could be fostered and directed at pathways they believe offer them the opportunity to live valued lives. Evaluations of such activities could be used to lobby senior leaders at Southeastern to expand the reach of this programming, as well as being disseminated across the sector in conferences and journals as a way of influencing other practitioners and policymakers.

In considering this first research question, I relied on my conceptual framework to guide me, by using different theoretical concepts, Bourdieu's notions and a capability approach, to analyse the findings related to neoliberal performativity. I did so without losing sight of neoliberalism's pervasiveness across HE and WP. I believe the framework was successful in deepening my understanding of neoliberal performativity and exposing new knowledge around accessing HE, which proved to be an important aspect of the under-represented student experience but was perhaps not as visible in my thesis prior to this chapter. The framework has also allowed me to consider contributions to my practice by using its concepts as a theoretical base. I feel these are strengths of the framework and that by positioning different concepts against the same data, it can produce new, even somewhat unforeseen insights. In the next section, I will tackle my second research question and reflect on my participants' transitional experience in relation to my conceptual framework.

## 6.2 Understanding participants' transitional experiences

I will now turn my attention to answering my second research question, which focused on understanding the transitional experiences of my participants. The findings suggest that participants encountered challenging early periods in HE, punctuated by mismatches in expectations and academic skills and low social integration. These difficulties dissipated throughout their year as they formed peer groups and acclimated to academic and student life. I will now analyse my findings on students' transitions, by drawing on participants' data, in relation to the three main conceptual inputs that I indicated in my conceptual framework: Bourdieu's notions of capitals (1977, 1984, 1986), habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1993b), misrecognition (James, 2015; Webb et al, 2017), Sen's capability approach (1992, 1999, 2003) and Gale and Parker's (2014) transitional models.

### 6.2.1 A feel for the game?

As I considered in the literature review (section 3.3.3), previous research into the experience of under-represented students uncovered challenging periods of early university life (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Krause and Coates, 2008; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Leese, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Gale and Parker, 2014; O'Shea, 2014; Christie et al., 2016). These studies all pointed in some form to students' lack of knowledge, understanding and expectations as relevant issues in explaining their experience in HE. Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986) was often referenced for his work on the importance of embodied capitals, such as cultural and social capitals, with the lack of these among research populations considered a strong contributor to difficult experiences, transitions and outcomes (Reay et al., 2009; Leese, 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014). Some researchers (Reay et al., 2009) built on the role of such capitals by continuing to draw on Bourdieu (1990) and debating individuals' "feel for the game" (9)—that inherent ability to navigate environments because of a tacit understanding of underlying structures and unspoken rules. Reay et al.'s (2009) study on the experience of working-class students' acclimatisation to university life found navigating HE to be problematic, expressing that they "grop[ed] towards rather than grasp[ed] a 'feel for the game'" (1113). A lack of appropriate capital was viewed as holding students back from enjoying smoother experiences. Some of these studies explicitly identified students' lack of preparation (Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011) and difficulty developing a new academic toolkit, such as independent learning (Kember, 2001; Krause and Coates, 2008; Leese, 2010; O'Shea, 2014) and key skills like essay writing or critical thinking (Christie et al., 2016), as factors explaining problematic transitions into HE. In a Bourdieusian sense, my findings confirmed how interlinked capitals, expectations and the feel for the game (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) are determining elements in the experience of students from under-represented backgrounds and how embodying or deploying these can ease transitions. I will now explore my participants' transition into HE in relation to this literature and in doing so draw on my findings.

#### *Mismatches in expectations and capitals*

In considering that body of research, I hypothesised in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3) that my cohort of under-represented students could experience some discomfort during their transition into Southeastern. My findings showed participants dealt with an immediate hurdle in adjusting to university and cited that their expectations of academic and social life were not met, substantiating the outputs from Reay et al., (2010) and Price et al., (2011). Naomi confirmed "being thrown in at the deep end" (S3) and the group as a whole reflected starting university was like "going in

blindfold" (G2 in S3, Figure 23). Part of these difficulties revolved around getting to grips with what participants felt were new academic learning styles, including having to learn and produce coursework independently, compared with their experience in secondary school. This self-assessment supported studies in which students similarly pointed to struggling with independent learning (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al.; Krause and Coates, 2008; Leese, 2010). While they were aware of lecturers' expectations of them to become independent learners (Naomi, S3) and "to do it on your own" (Milly, S3), not having "guidance" (Steven, S3) or "support" (Milly, S3), led them to question their academic abilities and if they were "doing it [assignments] right" (Steven, S3). This tied in strongly with similar research elsewhere (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003.; Reay et al., 2009). While participants recognised the importance of independent learning, they seem disconnected from how to develop skills that would help them achieve this expectation. This might contribute to the general sense that my participants did not reflect on any specific academic skills that might have been important in being successful academically, as those in Christie et al.'s (2016) study did.

Socially, my cohort were slow to form friendship or study groups, much as previous research emphasised (Wingate, 2007; York and Longden, 2007; Read et al., 2018). A sense of loneliness in the first term aggravated students' transition: "I end up eating alone" (Ellora, S3); "I clash with people more at uni" (Ellora, S3); "I ain't found them friends for life, yet [sic]" (Eva, S3). Social expectations in the group appear to have played a role in feeling as though their early experiences were challenging: "I thought it wouldn't be that hard [to make friends]" (Milly, S3); "you can't really prepare for coming to uni and staying in the halls [...] I expected to come in [...] and just make friends like that [sic]" (Naomi, S3). The result of lacking a strong friendship group from the start of university was feeling "rejected and alienated" (Steven, S3).

This early period of students' experience at Southeastern, which broadly spanned the first term, with its difficult and unexpected struggles, appeared to mirror the previous research that I highlighted above and that centred around mismatches in capitals, as defined by Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986), such as an inability to work independently, deploy key skills and capitalise on new social networks. My findings revealed that lacking certain capitals not only affected under-represented students at elite institutions, as in Reay et al.'s (2009) and Christie et al.'s (2016) studies, but also entrants at post-1992 universities, such as Southeastern. Although participants did display some awareness around certain expectations—the need to learn independently—there was a disconnect between this awareness and enacting it, which was broadly in-line with other research (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Krause and Coates, 2008; Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011; Christie et al., 2016). Expectations around forming friendship and support groups

were skewed, corroborating Wingate (2007) and York and Longden's (2007) work on social networks in HE. Taking the sum of these experiences together, I claim that although my students did display a feel for the game in accessing HE and understanding its competitive nature, this dissipated once they had transitioned. This lack of inherent awareness once at university compromised their transition, as was reported elsewhere (Reay et al., 2009). However, based on my findings around the forming of friendship and support groups, there was a sudden shift in experience. As peer groups become established in this term, participants enjoy positive experiences much more quickly than for students in previous studies (Reay et al.'s 2009; Leese, 2010; Christie et al., 2016).

#### *Feeling the game with peer groups*

My findings confirmed that, notwithstanding a difficult first term, Southeastern students eventually settled more quickly into university than those reported elsewhere (Reay et al., 2009; Leese, 2010; Christie et al., 2016), a feature that helped refute the deficit-model outcomes of previous research implying that under-represented students do not overcome testing emotional circumstances (Ecclestone et al., 2010). Although participants did not identify specific academic skills, as in Leese (2010) and Christie et al. (2016), they were explicit in asserting that developing supportive peer groups underpinned the positive experience they enjoyed as they progressed through their first year.

While they could not pinpoint the moment they felt a sense of belonging to a specific peer group, it seemed to occur between the two terms—or at least by the first data collection session of the second term (S3). That the formation of peer groups should be a critical point in Southeastern students' first year is supported by previous research (Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Maunder et al., 2013; Read et al., 2018). Beard et al. (2007) also found that some students reached a turning point in enjoying more positive experiences, with established peer groups representing one aspect of this change, along with improved academic outcomes. With membership of friendship and support groups in place, students reported feeling less anxious about having to be successful academically and socially: "they can help you like feel more confident about the piece of work you're struggling on" (Naomi); "I was sort of dealing with a lot on my own, suffering a lot [...] but now I've found a solid group of friends [...] and therefore I'm enjoying it [university] more" (Dawn). Whereas loneliness was a recurring theme in the first term, participants' collages in the second term included clippings depicting friendship (Figures 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43 and 44) and represented the drastic change in social life (Figures 37 and 38).

It is tempting to try and fill the perceived gaps in participants' experience and explain when and how peer groups are likely to form, but that was beyond the scope of this study. However,

questioning students more deeply on social group formation and identifying institutional practices that could promote smoother transitions could form the basis of future research into this area. Interestingly, just one participant indicated that their course actively attempted to generate peer groups for their students (Kiki and her Law course) and it was perhaps not surprising that she was a strong believer in friendship groups leading to success: “the best way to ensure [...] a good smooth transition is [...] to have a good group of friends.”

Despite having highlighted the differences between students’ experience in my research versus those in previous studies, I am not suggesting that my findings should necessarily supersede other researchers’ outcomes. That my cohort did not identify key skills as a factor in their transition, as reported in Leese (2010) and Christie et al. (2016), does not suggest that institutions should ignore development of critical thinking and writing skills in favour of fostering peer groups, but rather that the latter should be considered when designing first-year course modules or general student support. Similarly, where findings support other research, such as with differing expectations around independent learning (Kember, 2001; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Read et al.; Krause and Coates, 2008; Leese, 2010), I do not intimate that peer groups act as a panacea capable of overriding these gaps. Even though my participants appeared to accept that early transitions might include struggles in adapting to academic learning style, as those in Leese’s (2010) study did, their worries and anxieties around developing these could be relieved through a range of supportive practices. Despite my participants suggesting they were more academically comfortable now that peer groups were in place, many other elements, both intrinsic (e.g. assessment feedback) or extrinsic (e.g. family life) could also explain this change. Other areas of student experience could also help explain the improvement in participants’ experience. In their research on international students, Brown and Holloway (2008) found that students faced culture shock in new environments. Drawing on the U-curve model of emotive experience (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960), they showed students’ outcomes being subjected to dips and increases. Future research could concentrate on tapping related fields. However, there was significant overlap between my cohort’s association of expectations of independent learning with a lack of institutional support at Southeastern, which was reflected in previous research (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2009). There would seem to be enough research, in similar contexts, to advocate for policies and practices to be developed that can better support students during their transition, especially at Southeastern. A starting point might be to acknowledge Leese’s (2010) assertion that universities consider the embodied learning styles of their students and pair this with enhanced opportunities for students to develop friendship and support groups.

### *Misrecognition and the role of institutional habitus*

Earlier in this chapter, I considered how participants' formulations of HE and neoliberal performativity helped them develop a habitus and logic of practice highly tuned to Southeastern's institutional habitus. Students in my research were also aware of the competitive nature of HE, the importance of succeeding on their course and positioning themselves in the graduate labour market in order to reach their professional and financial goals. Yet, the previous section detailed that, despite this apparent compatibility with HE, students struggled to adapt to the differences HE presents, in terms of academic learning and teaching styles and the lack of social peer networks. The argument that this could be the result of a lack of capitals, skills, knowledge and/or an expectations mismatch started to lean towards a deficit-model understanding whereby potentially failing institutional structures were ignored in favour of implementing remedial-type support to fill perceived gaps in knowledge or skills. This resembled the discourse of failing students (Thomas, 2002) and attempting to re-make identities based on pre-established notions of successful, class and ethnicity-based profiles (Archer et al., 2003; Burke; 2012). The temptation could be to explore why these gaps exist rather than how the institution could evolve to better understand the needs of its students (Thomas, 2002; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016).

In identifying a deficit-model construct around choice, aspiration and agency at the onset of HE participation in section 6.1.2, I drew on *illusio* to initially highlight what seemed like strong social gravity between participants and Southeastern, which resulted in their entering HE. However, I hinted that this reasoning was flawed, based on neoliberal discourses of choice and performativity, and that these habitus might be less well matched as participants transitioned into Southeastern, which I exposed in this section. Misrecognition can help unpack supposed gaps that appear once they transition into university. Despite what appears as a high level of compatibility between Southeastern and these students (that strong social gravity), I showed how their experience did not translate or reflect this supposed complicity. This suggested that rather than the existence of *illusio* between students and institution, there was instead a misrecognition of these students' practice, in a Bourdieusian sense. When misrecognition occurs, the very structures, policies and practices of an institution clash with the practice, habitus and capitals of those navigating it, resulting in both experiential and societal inequality (Webb et al., 2017). Applied to my study, I concluded that despite my participants embodying compatible attitudes and performativity to be successful in HE, their habitus and Southeastern's institutional habitus were less aligned and that some aspect of the institution had de-legitimised their resulting practice. In terms of experience, it might explain the initial difficulties in transition and could result in longer-term outcomes, such as lower academic performance, social exclusion or withdrawal, that other studies discussed (Reay et al., 2009; Christie

et al., 2016). This misrecognition has important considerations for policy and practice at Southeastern that I will explore in my final chapter (section 7.2), focusing on implications of my research.

This misrecognition revealed a serious flaw in the student experience at Southeastern that, in aiming to avoid deficit-model thinking, I attribute as a failing of the institution. Although I will review implications to practice more formally in the next chapter (7.2), I acknowledge the importance of this outcome now with a contribution to my practice and Southeastern's institutional policy. My assessment of misrecognition suggests a mismatch between Southeastern's habitus and the habitus of my participants. The positive impact of peer groups on participants' student experience appears to alleviate this mismatch in habitus, leading me to conclude that actively supporting social ties early in students' first year, such as during induction periods, is crucial. Yet, in my study, only one of the participants' courses cultivated friendship or support groups for its students during induction. This does not necessarily mean such practices were not delivered in induction periods, but if so, they were not visible to my participants. Similarly, there might be centralised provision to facilitate forming peer groups, such as a welcome week, societies and clubs, but participants noted a lack of involvement in these as well, perhaps hinting at wider habitus mismatches. Given the positive impact the formation of peer groups had on my participant cohort, facilitating their creation across Southeastern might disproportionately benefit under-represented students. In my own practice, I could both better promote centralised activity to under-represented students, while influencing senior leaders in academic schools to institute peer group building activities in their induction plans. While this might lead to positive developments for students, it does not eliminate the misrecognition between student and institution, which reinforced deficit-model constructions of HE and remedial practices. To counter this, alternative theoretical lenses to Bourdieu's should be employed, such as a capability approach, which I will now apply to my findings to better understand how Southeastern might support its under-represented students.

### 6.2.2 Applying a capability approach to the student experience

In using my research data to "[think] with and beyond Bourdieu" (Webb et al., 2017: 138), I embraced how a capability approach challenged me to go beyond Bourdieu by stepping out of a capital accumulation framework altogether and disputing the need to measure individual outcomes along socio-economic lines (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003). Instead, a capability approach unpacks what aspects of their lives people value and considers their ability, or freedom, to carry out actions that lead to living self-appraised meaningful lives (Walker, 2005, 2008). In discussing my findings with a capability approach lens, I will first broadly determine the functionings and capabilities my cohort

display, that is those “things” a person values (Sen, 1999: 75) and the freedom they have in accessing these to live a meaningful life (Dreze and Sen, 1995). I then apply Campbell and McKendrick’s (2017) HE capability framework to my findings to ascertain whether this approach can yield any new insights about the student experience, within an HE context. Lastly, in weighing up a capability approach, I reflect on wider questions surrounding its suitability to supply significant new knowledge in a sector that is so ingrained with neoliberal ideals and behaviours.

### *Functionings and capabilities*

In contemplating a capability approach, my first step was to examine the functionings and capabilities expressed by my cohort. Sen (1999) advised proponents of his approach to list participants’ functionings—all the “various things a person may value doing or being” (75). Functionings—what students’ value in their lives—came through strongly in their motivations for accessing HE. They value HE participation and its ability to facilitate their future ambitions, particularly around their career aspirations, as evidenced by Steven and Milly:

“Thinking about what you’re doing now [at university] and how it’s gonna affect what you’re doing in the next few months or next 20 years.” *Steven, S2*

“I did research into the job I wanted to do, I have to get a degree to do that job [...] so I’m going to do whatever it takes to get the degree.” *Milly, S2*

What participants valued conflated with opportunities they perceived to be available to them. Not only was it the opportunity to progress to prosperous careers that was valued, but other outcomes associated with such possibilities, such as making their parents proud and supporting their existing or future families. Kiki and Jasmine epitomised this when they stated, respectively, “making your family the happiest you can” (S1) and “I just want to support myself and my family” (S1), in relation to their opportunities of studying at university. Participants’ also valued their wellbeing at university and were conscious of the potential deleterious effects of living away from home and of student life in general. Buster and Jasmine’s C2 collages contained images linked to medicine and health (Figures 30, 31), while Milly talks of having “survived” (S2) university so far.

If these functionings represent some of the aspects of their lives that participants value, then what were their capabilities and the extent to which they could convert these possibilities into achievements? As stated above, functionings appeared intrinsically linked to aspirations in life and the opportunity HE affords to achieve these. So, HE participation was a core capability to realising these functionings and to obtaining a meaningful life. It would also seem that developing friendship and support groups greatly facilitated a positive student experience and enhanced the ability of

being successful in HE and attaining these participants' capabilities, as Kiki reiterated: "the best way to ensure [...] a good smooth transition is to make sure that you have a good group of friends" (S4).

The freedom students displayed in participating in HE was congruent with their agency in reaching those capabilities (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005). Whether or not they could achieve their capabilities (and aspirations) was dependent on how well they navigated the HE environment—and a lack of achievement could expose inequalities or disadvantage in this experience (Saito, 2003). In my research, students' initial struggles in HE could be construed to centre around an inability to reach desired capabilities. Taking into consideration participants' functionings, contributions to my practice at Southeastern should reflect on practices that would better allow under-represented students to fulfil their capabilities. For example, students' high aspirations and the weight of their career and financial expectations could be considered as they transition into Southeastern, perhaps through modified induction workshops that help them manage and plan their university journey. Ignoring under-represented students' functionings and capabilities may exacerbate transitional challenges. For example, induction programmes could include sessions helping students map out HE and career paths, which would improve their capability. Similarly, if wellbeing presents a core value, then practices or support that underpin students' mental and physical health should be adopted and tailored to other functionings, such as aspirations. Strategies for improving wellbeing could be woven into careers-based activities, which would support the value students place on career aspirations and health and improve their capability to achieve goals. Finally, if, as my findings suggested, peer groups were central to realising capabilities, then institutional practices should also be implemented to foster these from the very beginning of students' transition, including induction. I will reflect on these possibilities in the next section (7.3) that concentrates on my research's implications on institutional and my own practice. Ultimately, my research had a narrow timeline focusing on just the first year in HE and it may be that to fully benefit from a capability approach—and generate changes in institutional policy or practice—a longer data collection period should be implemented. This might allow for students' functionings to evolve and for capabilities to further emerge.

#### *A HE capability framework*

Analysing these findings through the lens of Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) HE inspired capabilities framework might bear further relevant discussion and lead to potential developments to my practice and policy at Southeastern, especially concerning under-represented students. To recap, their framework consisted of outlining eight capabilities, specific to a context in which aspirations to HE could be contemplated (see section 3.2.2 for details). This framework is itself an

evolution of Nussbaum (2006) and Walker's (2006) work on defining an original set of capabilities. Although Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) set was derived in a different context, it could still be relevant to the HE student experience and research attempting to do so has yet to be undertaken. The eight capabilities are: practical reasoning; learning disposition; educational resilience; knowledge and imagination; social relations and networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional integrity and emotions; and bodily integrity.

Practical reasoning (those actions contributing to learning at school and to a sense that university is important to their future) and learning disposition (learning new things and recognising academic knowledge is important) were particularly strong capabilities amongst my cohort, as evidenced by the importance of HE degree knowledge in obtaining desired careers. Aspirations around professional success were a clear motivator for participants choosing to access HE: "I want a career not a job" (Milly, S2); "[professional] status is quite important" (Steven and Ellora, S2). Once at university, the cohort persisted with displaying capability around practical reasoning, especially during a difficult transition. During this time, participants did not question the benefit of HE or consider leaving HE for other options despite difficulties in adapting to new academic contexts (Figures 25, 26), loneliness and lack of social networks (Figures 27, 28, 29), and expectations that were perhaps incongruent with their experience (Figures 22, 23, 24). Ada emphasised the connection between HE and a potential career with her assessment (Figure 8) of her degree as a gateway to a career: "that's why I did Computer Science [...] I think I'm guaranteed a job" (S2).

Educational resilience (overcoming obstacles that might otherwise prevent academic work from being considered high quality) was another well-established capability in this cohort. Ellora and Milly were explicit in having educational resilience in their assessment of their abilities at school: "I got to A-Levels and found things really difficult [...] I had to re-take my A-Levels" (Ellora, S2); "I wouldn't say I'm someone who's naturally intelligent" (Milly, S2). The embodiment of this capability was echoed in students' HE experience as, despite some early struggles around academic expectations and adaptation, all participants persisted with their course during their first year. Such displays of educational resilience help refute suggestions in the literature that under-represented students fail to overcome difficult experiences (Ecclestone et al., 2010)

Knowledge and imagination (connecting academic knowledge with the world beyond school) was another capability strongly associated with this student group. I have evidenced the overt connections participants make between their HE degree and both career and earning potential in the future (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15), which underscores their re-enactment of neoliberal social mobility norms and highlights the influence neoliberalism has in shaping their performativity in relation to choice and aspiration.

Social relations and networks (getting involved with others and working in groups) was a capability that participants eventually actualised, later in their first year at Southeastern. Where peer groups were strong while at secondary school (“you’ve known those people for a good, like, four, five years”, Ellora, S3), participants find social integration at university difficult as they “[leave] people behind [at home]” (Steven). In what could be a lonely transition, Eva summarised the group’s sentiment of not having “found them friends for life yet”. Many visual motifs around friends, loneliness and the social transition were found in Figures 27, 28 and 29. Turning to Campbell and McKendrick’s (2017) findings, I suggest that one possible explanation for this socially difficult period in the student experience is the result of a continual downgrading of peer relationships stemming from a transitional period out of secondary school. The authors found that pupils relied less on their friends at school during this key decision-making and pre-entry to HE period, while increasing their reliance on their parents and families. This disengagement of some peer groups, coupled with the sudden departure from the home to HE (during which relationships may have recently strengthened), could account for some students’ initial challenges around social integration. It could also help explain the split personas my cohort revealed about themselves as they navigate between university and their homes (Figures 33, 34), which previous research also highlighted (Christie et al., 2008; Gibson et al., 2018; Scanlon et al., 2019). Participants spoke of “struggling” (Milly) away from home as they balanced separate home and student lives. Maintaining separate characters or personalities was common among the group (“I’ve got a home self”, Steven (S4); “there’s like a face you have for your [university] friends [and] for your family”, (Kiki, S4) and led to tension in balancing “two different personalities” (Ellora, S4), which other research also confirmed (Gibson et al., 2018). In contemplating contributions to practice at Southeastern, adapting induction practices to acknowledge that students (including those under-represented in HE) may experience conflict in social transitions to HE could alleviate some of these early challenges. For example, if students have recently relied on their families to help them access HE, a specific event early in the first term inviting students’ families to university could help bridge this gap. Based on my findings, accessing this capability—establishing peer networks—was crucial to my participants’ transition and appeared to have a knock-on effect of enhancing other capabilities, such as educational resilience, learning disposition and emotional integrity: once friendship and support groups were established, my cohort report increasing confidence socially and academically (Figures, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44). By “standing together” (Buster, S4) in peer groups, participants felt more capable in facing the challenges of HE life: “I’m working with more a team now”, (Dawn, S4); “they can help you like feel more confident”, (Naomi, S4).

I did not have enough data to fully examine the remaining three capabilities (respect, dignity and recognition; emotional integrity and emotions; bodily integrity), but that should not discount their potential importance to the student experience. Regarding bodily integrity (feeling safe and taking steps to preserve health), participants did include imagery concerning wellbeing in a few collages (Figures, 30, 31) and they spoke about surviving student life from a physical and mental health perspective. The HE sector in the UK is currently experiencing a mental health crisis amongst its students as the number of undergraduates disclosing a mental health condition has risen by 485% between 2007/08 and 2017/18 (Universities UK, 2018). If students felt that preserving their health was an essential capability, then Southeastern should respond by either implementing wellbeing initiatives, better tailoring current activity to students' needs or targeting students more effectively. For example, Southeastern could institute wellbeing clinics or drop-in sessions for first-year students in halls of residence and at key events in the student calendar, such as students' union activities (e.g. Freshers' Fair).

Campbell and McKendrick (2017)'s HE capability framework provided a unique capability approach platform from which to reflect on student experience data. Although they initially conceived of the framework in relation to young people's post-compulsory schooling educational aspirations, it was highly relevant to discussing the HE student experience, at least with regards to the under-represented students in my sample. Further research into the HE student experience could entirely focus conceptual frameworks on a capability approach and in doing so craft the research's design and data collection around Campbell and McKendrick (2017)'s eight capabilities. This might result in more in-depth analysis around students' priorities at university, how they expect to live their lives and how institutions can, in turn, support their experience.

#### *Rational fools, cultural dopes or human agents?*

Breaking down the student experience of my cohort in-line with Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) capabilities framework was useful in isolating positive and negative aspects of their experience and linking these with possible changes to practice at Southeastern. However, it was potentially a constrained and deterministic exercise as it could have been tempting to identify data in order to meet the framework's criteria. I attempted to limit this by linking my findings and inferences to previous assertions in this chapter and with conclusions other researchers have reached. Another way to mitigate this approach is to pull back once more and consider a capability approach with the wider angle of environment and agency. Walker (2008) discussed that a capability approach allowed individuals to reveal their potential as evaluators of their environment, their situations and their ability to achieve, which restored their agency rather than limiting students

to “rational fools or cultural dopes” (276) influenced by neoliberal WP policy. In this regard, the under-represented students in my cohort enjoyed successful experiences. Through their motivations to access HE, they demonstrated a clear understanding of HE, especially in a neoliberal sense. They drew connections between the conversion potential of parlaying HE participation into careers that might allow them to be financially independent. Once in HE, they displayed an acute awareness of the competitive nature between students and the importance of securing positive outcomes and differentiating themselves in crowded graduate markets. These attitudes and behaviours were reflective of the marketised nature of modern HE, as defined in UK Government policy since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007; Smith, 2008; Levy and Hopkins, 2010; BIS, 2011, 2016; James et al., 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013; McCaig et al., 2018).

Walker (2008) also linked the ability to evaluate with wider discourses of reclaiming choice, agency and aspiration, in terms of accessing educational and future pathways. Doing so can reject damaging narratives, either perpetuated in society or in personal lives, that might lead to inequalities. In a WP context, this could help break the golden trajectory narrative that leads the kind of sector stratification and unequal spread of skills and outcomes across institutions and between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2012). Reflecting on my cohort’s aspirations and perceptions of HE, it appeared as if these students, by persisting in reaching HE and in holding clear aspirations around HE and beyond, were seeking to break through both societal and more personal narratives around their potential for success. Kiki eloquently recapped how HE participation, and subsequent positive experience and outcomes, could alter wider societal narratives around who should succeed:

“[I] see [university] like, in a race, everyone starts off at the same point, but there are certain people who might be starting a few metres back and might have to run a longer race to get to the same place as someone else, and that’s why I need to go out there and find opportunities, make opportunities, and go and grab them, not just wait for something to come to me because that will be very unlikely.” *Kiki, S2*

While this evaluative quality was important in ascertaining students’ understanding of their environment, a core aspect of a capability approach is being able to convert this knowledge into achievements—into a meaningful life (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003; Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2008). Whether my participants have done so was debatable. In accounting for neoliberal performativity (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012), as I suggested earlier in this chapter, these students did embody neoliberal characteristics around self-improvement, competition and motivations. However, students were fairly clear that achievement in this sense revolved around HE and graduate outcomes, both of which will not be evidenced until they progress out of HE. While all students in

this study continued to their second year at Southeastern—and in fact all reached their final year, with several having completed their degrees—I recommend other researchers apply my conceptual framework and carry out research in their own contexts and in subsequent year groups in HE. This would continue establishing a knowledge base on the under-represented student experience outside of a purely Bourdieusian perspective. Using a capability approach to better understand the student experience beyond their first year in HE would be beneficial, as despite continuing in HE or even completing their degree, students may or may not feel they are living valued lives, which is a key concept to a capability approach. Their functionings, meaning what they consider meaningful, may also have shifted in the time since their first year. Further research, which uses a capability approach as its framework and builds on my evidence of the first-year student experience, is required to further understand whether students (under-represented or otherwise) convert their motivations, understandings and values into desired outcomes.

So far in this chapter, I have analysed participants' transitional experiences in relation to the theoretical concepts in my conceptual framework, including Bourdieu's capitals, misrecognition and institutional habitus and a capability approach. I determined that a Bourdieusian analysis revealed my participants initially displayed a feel for the game in accessing HE—conversely to previous research on the under-represented student experience—which then dissipated as they transitioned into university and experienced challenges. I remained uncomfortable with the eventual deficit-model connotations that explaining experience with these concepts leaned towards. Employing a very different conceptual approach in my framework has allowed me to reconsider this data. In using a capability approach lens to analyse my findings, I have found it a very useful tool to combat deficit-model constructions of under-represented students' experience in HE. It effectively pushed discussion outside of a Bourdieusian conception of individual agency and their environments. However, I have found it difficult to reconcile it within a HE environment that is subjected so intensely to neoliberal structures, attitudes and actions. For instance, under a capability approach banner, could I suggest that these participants have definitively reclaimed discourses around aspiration, participation and success in HE? Their language might have suggested this is the case—or that it is in progress. However, it could also be argued that participants' accounts were reflective of both neoliberal performativity and wider influences around HE participation. Such an assessment could serve to reinforce existing, damaging discourses and perpetuate inequalities in access and outcomes across the sector (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2012).

Although Sen (2003) did account for this neoliberal context by allowing for extrinsic wealth-related motivations to result in educational participation, I also agreed with Archer's (2007) assessment that neoliberal and equality agendas were irreconcilable. Despite this view, I contended

that my participants are only responding to their (neoliberal) environment in a way they understand. This might be perceived as a neoliberal response but in building aspirations, participating in HE and challenging the societal tropes levied at them, I argued they are fulfilling their capability of living meaningful lives. Walker (2008) concluded that in reclaiming such discourses away from neoliberalism, current policies could reposition students from under-represented backgrounds away from being unwitting “rational fools [or] cultural dopes” (276) in the wider marketised HE sector and towards “human agents” (276). I believe this is a worthy goal and a key step in achieving it is conducting research like mine that allowed the student voice, especially of those traditionally marginalised, to dictate terms and express their experience with a view to challenging institutional structures and practices, along with wider sector policies. Further longitudinal research on the student experience, building on my work and with a capability approach, could ease some of these concerns. In adopting this position in my research, I have contributed to a movement denouncing the use of deficit-models in HE to explain the student experience. I will ensure that my contribution goes beyond completing my research and this thesis by adapting practices at Southeastern and influencing practitioners and policymakers locally and nationally by disseminating the results of my research and the evaluations of these impending new practices. I will detail these contributions more fully in the final chapter (section 7.2).

### 6.2.3 Student conceptions of transition

In formulating my conceptual framework, I included Gale and Parker’s (2014) transition typology that supplies three concepts pertaining to the nature of transition. The induction model reflects the common institutional viewpoint that transition is an experience needing to be managed structurally. Students have little say in how they transition and are focused on reaching specific milestones during their first year, such as course registration, assessment points or exams. I noted during this evaluation that students from under-represented backgrounds may clash with institutional structures as there is little to no room for deviation from a pre-set student experience (Kift 2009; Kift and Nelson, 2005; Quinn, Gale and Parker, 2014). The development approach takes a more individualised account of transition and experience and is predicated on individual development of personal characteristics, skills and outcomes (Gale and Parker, 2014). In doing so, students in early HE transitions are encouraged to embrace potential changes in their academic and social lives, which, as some authors comment, can be problematic for under-represented students if this institutional encouragement fails to account for any differences in their ways of learning or acting (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Krause, 2005; Burke, 2007; Burke, 2011; Burke and McManus, 2011; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016; Read et al., 2018).

Finally, transition as becoming recognises that transition into HE is uniquely individual and that everyday features in students' lives account for a multiplicity of experiences across the first year (Quinn, 2010; Maunder et al., 2013; Tett et al., 2017). Far from commonplace in HE, Gale and Parker (2014) used this model to criticise institutions for how their rigid structures (i.e. an induction model of transition) and misrecognition of under-represented students' behaviour and agency contributed to the challenging transition they can experience. I now explore my findings in relation to Gale and Parker's conceptions of transition. Doing so will allow me to further frame recommendations for Southeastern to consider in its approach to supporting the experience of its under-represented students.

The question of how students perceived their transition is important to understanding how I, in my practice, can affect students' experiences directly and how Southeastern can more broadly develop institutional policy that best supports under-represented students. Participant data in my study revealed students conceived of transition as both an induction-type model, in which transition displayed common features for all students, and a highly individual experience, consistent with a development and becoming approach. Participants recalled feeling part of a wider collective—being “in the same boat” (Naomi and Milly in S4)—with similar experiences (Figure 45), especially pertaining to difficult early periods: “everyone has a rough ride transitioning into uni” (Steven, S4). They were very aware of the “official” (Kiki, Ellora, Dawn, Jasmine in S4) practices put in place by Southeastern, designed to facilitate transition. Yet, the overwhelming sense from my cohort was that beyond some of these communal aspects of early HE life, transition was highly individualised, which was highlighted by the group collage (Figure 46) and Kiki's explanation of it that “everyone just goes through a different path [...] it's personal” (S4). Students might have engaged with common structures, such as going to lectures or participating in social activities, but the way they do this was individual. They might have even shared “basic transition problems” (Dawn, S4), but the response to these were unique and individual. This experience confirmed the research Quinn (2010) conducted on transition, which highlighted students do not experience transition in a normative, homogenous manner, as it is perhaps predicated in institutional policy. His statement that “rhythms of the young people's learning lives do not synchronise with the set time frames offered to them” (122) mirrors Kiki's quote about students seeking different paths. Such a perception echoed the view that transition into HE is inherently risky because it must be ultimately managed by the students themselves (Brine and Waller, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009).

Part of my participants' ability to seemingly successfully navigate their first year could be down to the neoliberal characteristics discussed earlier in this chapter. Juxtaposed against Gale and Parker's (2014) conceptual transitional model, students' self-interested and competitive outlook to

differentiate themselves from their peers all contributed to a neoliberal performativity I associated with the transition as development model and its strong focus on personal development. In addition, being economically motivated and embodying socially mobility discourses in a neoliberal context (Olssen and Peters, 2005) appeared compatible with the need to invest in personal education and skills (Scott et al., 2014). Participants in my study could be seen to have adopted these outlooks alongside a conception of transition revolving around personal development. This might account for why this group experienced positive outcomes, despite literature suggesting under-represented students tended to encounter perceived negative experiences (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Archer, 2007; Kift, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Leese, 2010; Reay et al., 2010; Price et al., 2011). From a Bourdieusian perspective, this led me to consider that participants did have a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990b: 9) and that this was linked to their perception of transition as an opportunity for personal development, which also reflected neoliberal performativity. This tripartite observation of under-represented students’ transitional experience could form the basis of future conceptual frameworks in WP research.

This sort of reasoning and reliance on students having an inherent feel for the game—both in terms of conceptions of HE and transition—and specific neoliberal outlook or skillset only serve to underscore deficit-model constructions of the student experience that other WP researchers have commented on (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Burke, 2011, 2012; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). Although outcomes of my research might suggest this deficit-model is more nuanced, as it does not pit under-represented students against their peers, it nonetheless assumes that under-represented students should adopt certain characteristics or re-make narratives to better position their HE transition. I stand firm that this thesis strives beyond deficit-model research outcomes and this conclusion confirms that thinking only with Bourdieu facilitates analysis conducive of such unwanted approaches. Research into the under-represented student experience should prioritise evaluating their condition, needs and experience independently of peers who have not been subjected to societal or educational structural inequalities. However, positioning participants’ conceptions of HE and transition against a capability approach might yield a different perspective.

Considered through a capability approach lens, I have argued that participants’ conceptions of HE and transition were less evidence of a feel for the game, but more a suggestion that they value the independent nature of HE and the desire to grow and develop personal characteristics and skills. The attitudes and actions that make up neoliberal performativity (competitive and self-improvement mentality, economic independence) could be downplayed and seen as functionings—those elements of experience that are highly valued. The capability of achieving these is then central to

understanding students' experience. Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) HE capability framework revealed that achievement in HE can be recognised outside of a neoliberal framework. In this way, participants' overall experience could be understood as successful if they felt HE afforded them the environment to achieve these goals and perform their capabilities. If participants engage with notions of personal development during their transition, this could signal Walker's (2008) evaluator persona is at play as students consider their learning and opportunities in achieving desired capabilities.

In terms of my contribution to practice, I will explore drawing on transition as becoming as an institutional model for defining transition and facilitating students' valued capabilities. The ability of transition as becoming to account for different experiences in transitions—both positive and challenging—presents an opportunity to take a more individualised approach to supporting students. This is highly compatible with students' own perception of transition and their HE experience as an opportunity to develop personal goals and fulfil capabilities. Taking a more diverse approach to support transition would, as Gale and Parker (2014) argued, specifically benefit the multiplicity of under-represented students' lives. For my participants, this was expressed through split personas between university and home environments, the latter they particularly valued. In terms of direct contributions to practice, I will focus on developing transitional activity that embraces this multiplicity while focusing on developing students' functionings and capabilities.

In reflecting on participants' transition, my conceptual framework has been effective in positioning findings against different concepts, with each additional layer providing a more nuanced understanding of their experience, as well as the role I and Southeastern can play in supporting them. A Bourdieusian view revealed students initially displayed a strong feel for the game in accessing HE and in their conception of university as competitive environments, which seems like a positive outcome compared to other research on the under-represented student experience (Reay et al., 2009; Christie et al., 2016). However, in my context, I argue the resulting difficult experiences they expressed not only highlight how fleeting a feel for the game can be but are also symptomatic of misrecognition between participants' and Southeastern's habitus, which ultimately led to deficit-model constructs of student support. A capability approach addresses this by drawing a HE framework accounting for the aspects of experience students' value, such as personal development and a successful career.

In terms of institutional practice, support should instead focus on providing students' the agency to fulfil these capabilities. This is better understood within conceptions of transitions, specifically transitions as development and becoming. While students clearly perceived of transition and HE as a period of intense personal development of skills and knowledge that will allow them to

reach their goals, Southeastern—and professionals like myself—should orientate support to ensure the multiplicity of under-represented students' lives are accounted for in order for programmes to be tuned to their capabilities. These contributions to practice will be fully explored in the next chapter (section 7.2), in which I summarise my contributions to local and wider practices and policies, in connection to my findings so far on neoliberal performativity and participants' transitional experiences. I focus the last section of this chapter on exploring my fourth research question, the extent to which Participatory Pedagogy represents a useful student engagement model for conducting research into the student experience and for developing inclusive student engagement practices, such as those I outlined in this section. Other institutions may find this useful as they seek to develop their own guidance underpinned by Participatory Pedagogy.

### 6.3 Embracing a Participatory Pedagogy approach in WP research and student engagement

In defining my research's methodology, I was heavily influenced by the deconstruction of UK WP policy and its neoliberal core, which profits wider economic conditions while limiting, or even exacerbating inequality between under-represented students and other groups (Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012; Neary, 2014; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016; Bowl et al., 2018). Drawing on Freire (1996), Burke (2012) championed a redressing of relationships within HE, between students and their institutions, to ones that provided a more equal platform for under-represented students to voice their experiences. In doing so, she promoted the emancipatory nature of Freirean pedagogy and its ability to empower marginalised individuals through knowledge acquisition, reflective spaces and an equal share in creating new structures (Freire, 1996). Burke (2012) applied this approach to HE as Participatory Pedagogy—a model for engaging WP or under-represented students that are side-lined in their institutions, or previously in schooling and social experiences, because they do not espouse dominant, middle-class traits, capitals and knowledge. I applied Participatory Pedagogy as my methodological research process because of its ability to recognise the experience of marginalised individuals in HE (Burke 2010, 2012), such as under-represented students. I argued it was important to promote their voice because research indicated they consistently experienced unequal outcomes compared with their peers (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer, 2007; Gorard et al., 2007; Crozier et al, 2008; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Roberts, 2011; Burke, 2012; Christie et al., 2016; HEPI, 2017; Vigurs et al., 2018).

Given the under-represented nature of my sample group, and aforementioned literature, I committed to implementing a Participatory Pedagogy research process. I use this section to consider my final research question and campaign for further inclusion of participatory approaches: to what extent does Participatory Pedagogy represent a useful model for conducting research into the student experience in contemporary HE? I will also reflect on what this means for my own practice as a researcher and leader at Southeastern. Employing Participatory Pedagogy in WP research is a novel approach (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). Some institutions have developed participatory practices in teaching and learning spaces that seek to redefine student-teacher relationships along more equal lines to mitigate against possible biases and embrace the brought experiences of all students (Scott et al., 2014; Tett et al., 2017; Harman, 2017). However, student experience research with a Participatory Pedagogy approach is lacking in WP, which is why I centred my research process around Participatory Pedagogy. This process represents another contribution to my practice and to the wider sector as I applied Participatory Pedagogy with the intention that I, and others, could apply it to their contexts when researching and engaging students.

I argue in this last section that three outcomes of adopting Participatory Pedagogy are especially conducive to researching the under-represented student experience. One, it fostered reflective spaces for participants, while allowing for varied and innovative methods to tease out their experiences. I concur with Burke (2012) that a Participatory Pedagogy approach to research can reinforce equity in terms of whose voice is heard. Two, when combined with innovative artful inquiry methods, such as collage, it further allowed participants to explore and share their experiences. Three, by nurturing an environment where participants co-generate research and help shape its direction, the implementation of Participatory Pedagogy helped counter deficit-model constructs, which positively contributed to understanding and better supporting under-represented students' experience. Finally, in relation to evolving policy and practice at Southeastern, Participatory Pedagogy could serve as a model for redefining student engagement, both in teaching and learning environments, as well as in student support contexts. In discussing these three outcomes of Participatory Pedagogy, I will also weave in contributions to my own practice as a researcher and leader at Southeastern.

### 6.3.1 Reflective, co-researchers

At its deepest, Freirean level, Participatory Pedagogy embodies an emancipatory quality that supports individuals to share experiences and counter hegemonic assumptions, policies and practices. In applied terms, this is achieved by sharing knowledge and establishing reflective spaces (Freire, 1996), an approach that I adopted in my research process. Before data collection began, I

engaged my participants in debates around neoliberalism, WP and student outcomes in HE. This provided them with new knowledge around the student experience of under-represented students in HE and was a first step in providing them with a platform to voice experiences and seek more equitable outcomes. This is akin to the flipped engagement and educational model Freire (1996) advocated for in supporting the emancipation of repressed peoples in Latin America. I achieved similar outcomes by designing reflective spaces in my research, which at a basic level, others in the sector should take note of, and attempt to implement similar engagement practices. Not only did the research process encourage reflection on topics relating to participants' HE experience, but it allowed them to consider the impact of Participatory Pedagogy on their own first-year experience. Kiki noted the equitable aspect of all participants sharing their voice and helping co-shape our sessions: "I like it when everyone has a voice. I really felt that and everything [people's experience] was taken into consideration" (S4). Several participants commented on how participatory reflection allowed them to better understand themselves and their experience: "it's kind of helped me understand myself and also understand the experience of other people around me" (Kiki, S4); "it's quite interesting sort of like talking about it [transition] because you kind of think about it in a deeper way" (Ellora, S4); "thinking deeply but also then it makes it [transition] clearer [...] I'm now able to almost put them in an order and make sense of it all" (Dawn, S4).

In considering the reflective quality of this research process, I offer two contributions to practice, applicable to my own context and to the sector. One, by taking on this co-researcher role, participants not only shaped data collection sessions, but they added a layer of credibility, in the manner advocated for by Lincoln and Guba (1985), to the data itself—the experiences they shared were the result of sessions they co-planned, by discussing initial topics that formed the basis for collages and discussion. Participatory Pedagogy enabled the engagement of under-represented students in this reflective process, especially in relation to supporting their experience in HE. Two, the quotes above highlighted the transformative process participants experienced as part of a Participatory Pedagogy process. Not only did it afford them the space to reflect on their experiences, but this introspection appeared to positively impact their transition, perhaps even easing it, as they better understood themselves in an HE context. This is an important implication for practice as transitional activity should incorporate Participatory Pedagogy in order to incite this deep reflection. Not only could I ensure activities delivered by my team capture this feature but by disseminating my research (and resulting outcomes of Participatory Pedagogy inspired institutional activity) others in HE could adopt similar practices.

### 6.3.2 Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry: natural partners

In Chapter 4, I introduced the merits of artful inquiry and collage as means of extracting deeper, richer emotions and experiences (McNiff, 2003, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008). Both artful inquiry and collage were very effective as data collection methods within a Participatory Pedagogy framework and helped enhance the dependability and confirmability of data to convey experiences, which I argued was necessary in developing research trustworthiness (section 4.7.4). Collage offered natural, reflective opportunities for participants (Neilsen, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010) to explore their student experience. In doing so, it enabled potentially untapped experiences to be shared, which I argued advocated for more meaningful forms of student support. My participants agreed that collage lent itself to deep reflection and extracting important aspects of their student experience: “When you actually [...] think about [your experiences] and you make collages [...] it gives a bit of a deeper meaning as to actually like why you’re actually here” (Ellora, S4). Kiki tied together collage’s ability to translate experience but also the participatory element to creating, sharing and discussing experiences with the participant group: “Everyone else would interpret [your collage] it in a different way as well and that kind of shows just how diverse everyone is [...] you see how that’s symbolic for them and how it tells a little bit of their story so far, I really like that” (S4). Steven also astutely expressed the duality of deep meaning that is extracted from collage and combined with a participatory element: “It’s quite nice to see it on paper, see how other people did it. Not what’s on there but how it’s shown” (S4). Overall, my research design pointed to the compatibility between Participatory Pedagogy and the use of artful inquiry methods. Other, more traditional qualitative methods like interviews, might also be compatible with Participatory Pedagogy, especially more experimental styles, such as students interviewing each other. Yet, I felt my outcomes underscored the potential Participatory Pedagogy has for integrating highly reflective methods because it fosters spaces for participants to practice and explore their experience.

The methodological pairing of Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry is an important implication to both my practice and the wider HE research community. Participatory Pedagogy, supported by collage, is specifically orientated at engaging under-represented students, who are not only more likely to experience worse outcomes compared to their peers, but whose voices, knowledge and experiences have been marginalised and misrecognised across HE. The research process I developed is essentially a platform to address this by formally acknowledging these deficit-models and carving out spaces that enabled under-represented students to access this knowledge, share experiences and co-design further research or practices. Once more, both my own practice

and that of other researchers could embed this approach to research seeking to explain and redress existing inequalities in HE.

### 6.3.3 Avoiding deficit model research by re-defining student engagement

Participatory Pedagogy presents an opportunity for research to challenge deficit-models that contribute to inequalities in HE. It does so by rejecting the typical student engagement model observed in neoliberal HE, which favours binary, input-output and assimilation-recognition types of agency (Astin, 1999; Harman, 2017). Instead, Participatory Pedagogy democratises the research environment by empowering participants with key knowledge pertinent to their context, allowing them to co-generate research and laying the foundation for reflective sessions (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017). Based on my study, the implications of this approach on the student experience at Southeastern and across the sector are threefold.

First, this environment allowed diverse and individual experiences to surface in my study. This is especially important if participants have been previously marginalised as it allows their experience to be heard and valued. Within the context of neoliberal HE, the voices of the under-represented students may lie unheard as discourses of choice, aspiration and agency become increasingly homogenous (Walker, 2008). In carrying out Participatory Pedagogy research, new narratives and experiences have now been shared that can challenge existing policies and practices at Southeastern and elsewhere.

Second, Participatory Pedagogy enabled deep reflection on personal and collective experiences. This was confirmed in the reflective quality my participants displayed and commented on. In this specific context, students' perception of HE and transition were very individualised, and, combined with a capability approach and different models of transition, uncovered new notions of how under-represented students perceived their university experience. Participatory Pedagogy was perhaps particularly compatible with these approaches as participants were afforded the space to consider their experience more deeply than they might in other research designs. This in turn lent itself to analyses, such as with a capability approach or Gale and Parker's (2014) transition models, that were able to consider both individual and collective experiences. The individual nature of student transitions, coupled with the different institutional contexts across HE, mean that further research adopting my research process would continually reveal new insights into the student experience.

Third, Participatory Pedagogy offered an alternative to conducting research that could otherwise fall into a deficit-model trap. A possible danger in conducting WP research is that, faced with inequality in the student experience, as research suggests (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al.,

2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2012; Burke and McManus, 2009), there might be a temptation to explain disparities in the context of what some students lack. This is a pertinent issue in HE, which is a sector heavily defined by its neoliberal structures and that often forces under-represented students to re-make or re-orientate themselves to match expected neoliberal discourses of choice, aspiration and agency. Doing so may contribute to unequal outcomes both in HE and beyond for under-represented students. Research positioned in this way could contribute to a negative feedback loop that reinforces a stratified sector. However, bringing students together in a research group, underpinned by Participatory Pedagogy principles, enabled them to engage with inequalities found in HE and society. It also fostered a creative space where they could reflect and explore on their experiences. That participants did so in relation to neoliberal conceptions of HE—and gained an awareness of those inequalities—validated their experience within that discourse, which again enhanced my research’s trustworthiness through confirmability, dependability and credibility. Institutions across HE, including Southeastern, could adopt my proposed co-participatory guidance as a means of engaging students to reflect and analyse their own transitional experience in relation to choice, aspiration, agency and current institutional structures.

In this vein, Participatory Pedagogy has significant implications on re-thinking wider student engagement at Southeastern—beyond research and into teaching, learning and support spaces. A few UK institutions have attempted to use Participatory Pedagogy as a methodology for re-evaluating those environments by involving students in conversations around potential changes to policies and structures (Bhagat and O’Neill, 2011; Harman, 2017). This democratisation encourages students to reflect on experiences and help shape discussions and co-generate outputs that will affect their experience. By prioritising student representation, a Participatory Pedagogy approach to evolving the student experience can achieve greater equity in participation and eventual outcomes (Sellar and Gale, 2011). This would ensure that damaging neoliberal student engagement models are discarded and would stop institutions from simply considering the experience of a dominant group (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015). Kiki, who became passionate about her experience during this research project, summarised the benefits of a Participatory Pedagogy approach in relation to student engagement:

“I just thought this [research project] is something for the benefit of the uni but also for the benefit of me. [...] And after this research project, I know I count and what I say counts and what I feel counts. It [the research] kind of motivated me, to go against these facts and figures [literature on under-represented students in HE] saying that we kind of struggle more coming from a certain background and I want to challenge that.” *Kiki, S4*

In this quote, Kiki connected the awareness she gained of neoliberalism and its impact on HE—a key aspect of Participatory Pedagogy—and how this impacted her experience in HE. She also positioned the reflective nature of the research and how sharing her experience benefitted her and Southeastern. This pointed to Participatory Pedagogy’s ability to engage participants and extract experience that can be used to challenge and evolve institutional policies and practices. Finally, saying that because of the research, Kiki feels she “counts”, suggested feeling previously marginalised, an important aspect that Participatory Pedagogy attempts to redress.

This quote highlighted the damage deficit-models enact in understanding under-represented students’ experience by focusing on what students’ lack, rather than what they bring and what ‘counts’. Future research into the student experience, both at Southeastern and beyond, should apply my research process to help unpack students’ embodied characteristics in order to validate their experience as they transition into HE. Additionally, drawing on my conceptual framework and applying a capability approach would also give students agency to decide what they value as experiences and goals.

This chapter discussed my findings in relation to my conceptual framework and research questions. I determined that participants’ neoliberal performativity had implications on the narratives of aspiration, choice and agency they exhibited in relation to HE. I have warned of the danger in assuming that their HE participation at Southeastern was emblematic of aligned habitus and suggested instead that their difficult transitions highlighted a form of misrecognition that is common in under-represented students’ experiences across the sector. Similarly, in terms of their transitional experiences, although a Bourdieusian analysis signalled participants’ exhibited a feel for the game at times, this also reinforced a potential deficit-model in that institutions might rely on students’ resilience to overcome challenges instead of acknowledging the individual nature of transitions and tailoring appropriate support. In terms of implications for practice, I developed guidance that encourages institutions to engage students in co-participatory partnerships while drawing on a capability approach to account for the values and capabilities of under-represented learners. The guidance ensures that institutions follow a process platforming students’ voice and affording them space to co-design transitional practices. In reflecting on my research process, I confirmed that embracing Participatory Pedagogy offers a powerful opportunity for researchers and practitioners to formally address inequalities in under-represented students’ experience. Acknowledging institutional misrecognition of under-represented students’ experience is a first step towards then engaging them in a reflective process leading to the co-generation of practices tailored to support their transition in HE. Not only can I adopt this process in my research and support my practitioners to do the same in their programming, but I can influence other professional services

and academic faculties to do the same through networking and lobbying at a senior institutional level. The dissemination of my research beyond Southeastern will encourage other institutions to adopt this co-participatory process to support under-represented students in their contexts.

## 7. Conclusion and recommendations

Throughout this research I have maintained that unequal outcomes in the experience of under-represented students across the HE sector (HEFCE, 2013, 2015; HESA, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Keohane and Petrie, 2017) require investigating in order to provide solutions to redress this imbalance. While there has been a significant amount of WP research into this field, I identified three limitations. One, there is little exploration of neoliberalism as a socio-political force shaping the student experience. Two, I am critical of the overreliance on Bourdieusian concepts to explain these difficulties and of the resulting deficit-model conceptions that position under-represented students as lacking certain characteristics valued by their institutions and especially of not recognising the knowledge, skills and experience they have accumulated. Three, despite a body of literature advocating for student partnerships in both research and the development of teaching, learning and support practices, few studies adopted a co-participatory model seeking to provide under-represented students with a platform to share experiences and co-generate new knowledge.

My research makes a significant contribution towards these concerns by engaging a cohort of 10 under-represented students at Southeastern and together co-researching their experiences during their first year as they transition into university. My research questions focused on: the influence neoliberalism had on students' experience, attitudes and agency; better understanding the experiences these participants had in transitioning into Southeastern; the implications of this understanding not only on my practice at Southeastern, but wider institutional and sector policy supporting under-represented students; and the usefulness of Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry as a process for engaging and co-researching the student experience. I developed a conceptual framework that positioned Bourdieusian concepts against a capability approach in order to guard against falling into a deficit-model understanding of participants' experience. The framework also explored different conceptions of transition as a phenomenon while accounting for neoliberalism as an external force affecting students' experience. Analysing findings using this framework has allowed me to consider participants' experience more deeply—in ways not previously attempted in WP research—and draw out important contributions to my practice, institution and the HE sector. I have also developed a research process, incorporating Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry, which was successful in allowing participants to co-generate research. This process could be adopted as an institutional student partnership approach when designing practices and policies shaping the student experience. A key goal in completing this EdD was to make a significant professional contribution to my practice. As I conclude this thesis, I will reflect on the research's major strands and explicitly discuss contributions and recommendations to my practice, while considering its limitations and ways for others to think beyond its scope.

## 7.1 A deeper insight into the student experience

The findings confirmed that under-represented students at Southeastern encountered challenging early transitions, citing both a slow adaptation to independent learning and a lack of social or support groups, both of which could be evidenced by an initial mismatch between expectations, embodied capitals, an awareness of HE and their university environment. A Bourdieusian analysis of this data, similar to other studies (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Reay, 2004; Reay et al., 2009), initially contended that once they had transitioned into university, participants' habitus were not suited to Southeastern, reflecting perhaps both conflicting student and institutional habitus, and, participants' fluctuating feel for the game. However, in considering participants' neoliberal performativity around aspiration, choice and agency, which previous research on the student experience has not tended to engage with, I revealed they did display a feel for the game in relation to their conception of HE. They expressed a heightened sense of the neoliberal HE environment, especially in associating and valuing HE participation with future career or personal success, and by proxy, the competitive nature of university. Viewed against the HE's sector continual adoption of neoliberal policy conflating participation with success in the labour markets (NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007; Smith, 2008; Levy and Hopkins, 2010; BIS 2011, 2016; James et al., 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013), participants' own neoliberal performativity seemed to mirror institutional expectations of students' outlook, which I contended underlines this feel for the game in terms of accessing HE, as opposed to navigating HE structures. There exists a contradiction—or at least a gap—in the awareness participants displayed in acknowledging the benefits and competitiveness of HE, with their difficult transitional experiences.

I have two conclusions to offer in this respect. First, my research uncovered that the turning point in this cohort's first-year experience revolved around the formation of social and support groups. Similarly to how participants in Christie et al.'s (2016) study indicated it all "clicked" (478) once certain skills were acquired, my participants confirmed feeling less stressed and anxious, while gaining more confidence both academically and socially. Perhaps, as authors state (Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Maunder et al., 2013; Read et al., 2018), forming certain peer groups is particularly important for students in post-1992 institutions, such as Southeastern, compared to other types of institutions, including more research-intensive universities. Higher levels of withdrawal for under-represented students at post-1992 institutions (Burke, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; HESA 2016, 2017a) and at Southeastern (Farenga, 2015b) suggest that, unlike the students in Christie et al.'s (2016) study, they do not have the luxury of settling into university over the course of their degree. Although initial struggles for my cohort did not lead to any withdrawal from

Southeastern, this could still result in non-continuation for other under-represented students, either at this institution or elsewhere.

Second, a closer examination of Southeastern's institutional habitus, in relation to participants' experience, offers explanations for this cohort's early struggles. The concept of institutional habitus is used in other research (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2009) to explain gaps in experience and outcomes for under-represented students. In relation to my participants, I argued that despite illusive producing strong social gravity between participants' neoliberal performativity and Southeastern's adoption of neoliberal policies (resulting in HE participation) there is a deeper misrecognition of students' habitus, evident in mismatches in expectations and capitals, that explains their initial difficulty in transitioning into Southeastern. Misrecognition occurs when students' practice and habitus is de-legitimised in relation to an institution's structures, policies and practices. I claimed this presented a serious flaw in the student experience at Southeastern as it showed under-represented student transitions were not being supported—in fact, the institution might have been relying on students embodying a set of idealised skills and characteristics, such as resilience, to overcome this early period. The danger of habitus misalignment, and the resulting lack of institutional support, is highlighted elsewhere as contributing to deficit-model constructs of under-represented students' experience (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2012; Burke and McManus, 2009). This misrecognition was further underscored at Southeastern by participants' conception of transition as a very individual phenomenon based on personal development, which did not appear reflected in institutional transition practices.

These outcomes suggested to me the importance of pushing beyond Bourdieu to gain fresh perspectives on the student experience (Webb et al., 2017). A capability approach does not consider what an individual may lack, through acquisition or inheritance, but instead what they value and aspire to, and if they can achieve this (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2003; Nussbaum, 2006; Walker 2006, 2008; McKendrick and Campbell, 2017). What participants value is positioned in connection to their aspiration, choice and agency and is manifested by the value they place on HE participation, career success and financial independence. In adopting a capability framework for HE (McKendrick and Campbell, 2017) to help identify if participants could achieve these aspirations, data revealed strong support for many capabilities: learning disposition, social relations, knowledge, educational resilience and practical reasoning. Taking a capability approach supports the notion that these participants are well-suited to HE and not necessarily lacking in qualities. Rather, if what they value (future success) is obtainable via HE participation, which sector policy supports, and students display

capabilities in trying to achieve their aspiration, then it could be suggested that the responsibility of smoothing out early challenges lies with Southeastern.

Adopting a conceptual framework that accounts for neoliberalism, Bourdieusian concepts, a capability approach and transition models emphasises the complex nature of student transitions into HE. Despite embodying neoliberal performativity and enacting some of the attitudes and agency valued by HE, participants' habitus was still misrecognised by an institution that expected them to tap into specific skills and characteristics in order to see them through their transition. My participants espoused a highly individualised conception of transition, based on their own personal development. Their aspiration, choice and agency in relation to accessing and performing in HE was directly linked to their future career achievement. This has important contributions for my practice, which I identified around pre-entry and transition programming. I established that adopting a possible selves (Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019) theoretical base for this activity would ensure that students' neoliberal performativity could be accounted for and developed around strategies and roadmaps for accessing HE and succeeding immediately upon entry. I also drew on student partnership literature and a capability approach in devising guidance that specifically supports students' values and capabilities while allowing them to co-design meaningful support.

In this next section, I will discuss the implications of my research's findings, considered in relation to my conceptual framework, and offer recommendations for my practice and the wider student experience at Southeastern.

## 7.2 Recommendations for my practice and the student experience and at Southeastern

This section will address my third research question concentrating on the implications of these findings and recommendations for my practice as a leader of WP practitioners at Southeastern and on the institution's wider student experience and support practice and policy. In doing so, I will summarise my analyses from the previous two sections on participants' findings in relation to my conceptual framework, especially in terms of neoliberal performativity, a capability approach and conceptions of transition, while sharing forms of student support and practice that could be adopted at Southeastern. Where applicable, I will also expand on contributions that are relevant to the wider HE sector. Before I share this summary and specific contributions to practice, I will reflect on the broader implication of needing to recognise under-represented students' transition as a highly individual phenomenon that should reflect a capability approach, rather than Bourdieusian conceptions of experience. This will help fulfil my conceptual framework's aim of deepening my understanding around transition as a phenomenon and lay a foundation for my practical

contribution. In doing so, my conceptual framework will facilitate the wider goal of this thesis to add to a growing body of knowledge around understanding the under-represented students' experiences outside of deficit-model conceptions.

### 7.2.1 Implications of an individually orientated transition

Although my participants' experiences improved throughout their first year, performance and outcomes data from both Southeastern (Farenga, 2015b) and the wider sector (HEFCE, 2013, 2015; HESA, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Keohane and Petrie, 2017) clearly demonstrated gaps in degree attainment and graduate progression. The challenge for practitioners and policymakers, both at Southeastern and elsewhere, is to devise practices that can support all students. My conceptual framework not only provided more clarity on under-represented students' experience but also what implications this has on my practice at Southeastern and beyond, which I will now explore in relation to transition models, Bourdieusian concepts and a capability approach.

Drawing on transition models, such as those my conceptual framework presented (Gale and Parker, 2014), can be helpful, along with the experience of different groups, such as my cohort. However, the danger in relying on institutionally orientated approaches, such as the induction model (Gale and Parker, 2014) is policies and practices tend not to account for students' individual experience and so can reinforce perceptions that student success is restricted to narrow, pre-defined pathways (Quinn, 2010). Kiki (S4) hinted that this institutional pathway did not represent students' experience: "Everyone may be heading in the same direction but everyone goes through a different path". My Bourdieusian analysis of the student experience did not support this individual nature of transition as requiring certain habitus or capitals in order to enjoy successful transitions. Further research could certainly shed light on potential misrepresentations of habitus. Other researchers concerned about deficit-model constructs of the student experience could consider how my conceptual framework positioned Bourdieusian concepts against a capability approach, which I found more useful in bringing to the surface the motivations, values and abilities of students to succeed.

In my research, the use of a capability approach illustrated how a non-deficit model orientation could reveal deep understandings of the student experience. It provided clues to students' learning disposition, educational resilience, social networks and other capabilities, which in turn could help Southeastern better understand what students consider valuable to their experience and what they hope to achieve while at university. Adopting a capability approach would encourage transition to be conceived as a development opportunity (Gale and Parker, 2014) and would highlight how all students, regardless of their functionings and capabilities, could be supported in

their aspirations and achievements. Walker's (2008) assertion that agency, aspirations and choice should be reclaimed by students, especially those from under-represented backgrounds, would be maintained and even supported by their institution.

From an institutional point of view, including reflecting on my own practice, it might be useful to further conceive of transition as Gale and Parker's (2014) becoming approach, whereby individuals are thought to be in a constant state of transition and flux. Quinn (2010) strongly backed institutional action that considered students' everyday agency and multiplicity, which transition as becoming allows for (Gale and Parker, 2014). For example, such an approach from Southeastern might account for the split personas (home versus university), which participants displayed during their first year, and facilitate family involvement at university or even allow students greater freedom in learning off-campus. A few participants hinted that transition should be considered in a much more fluid way: "I think it [transition] is a continuous experience [...] so like once you've settled into uni you're like 'okay, that's that part of the transition done' [...] but I think it is a continuous journey, sort of you're always transitioning" (Dawn, S4).

There is a tradition in WP research pointing to the continual misrecognition levied at under-represented students in accepting their background, embodied knowledge and characteristics (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Burke, 2011, 2012; Sellar and Gale, 2011; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). Institutions like Southeastern play a leading role in achieving fair outcomes for students and I argued they should conceive of transition less as a common experience and more as an individual one. In doing so, the variance and multiplicity of students' lives, especially those from under-represented backgrounds, will be accounted for. This is especially prevalent for an institution like Southeastern and other post-1992s with a large population of under-represented students (McCaig et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2018). Far from being a homogenous group, this under-represented population is fractured into many different sub-groups based on ethnicity, age, family income, care leaver status and other characterisations. Conceiving of transition using my conceptual framework revealed that adopting a conception of transition focused on the individual, rather than collective groups, would better serve to support the different needs of these various sets of under-represented students. If students' experiences do overlap to some degree, then tailored support will still have a positive impact—whereas the opposite, support designed with one, or a few, experiences in mind will allow students with more complex profiles to slip through this net. Such an approach avoids a deficit-model that many researchers lament is too prevalent in HE (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer et al., 2003; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2007; Burke, 2011; Burke and McManus, 2011; McCaig and

Stevenson, 2016). Even well-intentioned institutions, which Southeastern may well be, can fall into this trap by adopting narrow conceptions of transition and student experience.

By using my conceptual framework to investigate transition from different vantage points—institutionally and individually—and within a Bourdieusian or capability approach understanding, I conclude that perceptions of student transitions in my own practice should be much more student-centric. Drawing again on my framework, I will now explore this implication for my practice (and Southeastern) more fully by considering specific guidance and recommendations, within the boundaries of neoliberal performativity and a capability approach, to support under-represented students' transition into HE.

### 7.2.2 Turning findings into practice: guidance and recommendations to support under-represented students' experience

I have argued that, based on my findings, neoliberalism shaped the attitudes and actions of my participants' experience in HE in a way that was expected by Southeastern. This manifested itself along notions of performativity and self-improvement that permeate institutional and national WP policy, as well as education and social mobility rhetoric more widely. However, participants' embodiment of neoliberal traits and performativity surrounding aspiration, choice and agency suggest that Southeastern must account for this behaviour and the effects it may have on the student experience—while accounting for the multiplicity of transitional experiences that I explored in the previous paragraphs. In this section, I outline practical guidance to support the future development of appropriate and relevant institutional practices at Southeastern. This guidance represents a form of dissemination and my attempt to maximise the impact of my research by translating findings into a proposed set of steps that teaching and support staff can draw on to review and implement more meaningful practices that support under-represented students' experience. In addition to this guidance, I will offer more concrete recommendations of student support practices, based on my findings, for Southeastern to consider. While these outputs may be appropriate for other universities similar in profile to Southeastern, I am deliberately focusing this section on Southeastern in order to emphasise the impact I intend to make to my future practice and to the student experience at my institution.

My assessment that participants were subjected to neoliberal forces shaping their attitudes and agency, with regards to their HE participation and performativity, has important implications for policy and practice at Southeastern—and by extension my own reflexivity as a researcher and institutional leader. In contemplating this, it is crucial that Southeastern acknowledge under-represented students' performativity, which revolves around their choice, aspiration and agency in accessing HE within neoliberal and social mobility rhetoric emphasising personal development and

individual future success. In supporting these students, I advise Southeastern review practices designed to support or enhance their experience and outcomes both in and beyond HE. Doing so would enable the institution to better meet their needs which, according to my findings, should revolve around providing opportunities to develop key career skills and experience, but also to improve under-represented students' transition into HE both academically and socially. To underpin this process, I propose stakeholders involved in student support, such as leaders, practitioners and academics, consider the guidance below, which will enable them to self-assess how they support under-represented students' performativity and then to review how institutional policies and/or practices could be tailored.

#### *Developing guidance to support new practices*

This guidance represents an attempt to convert my research's findings into a practice-based form of student engagement. The different steps reference the importance of: engaging students in co-participatory partnerships within a Participatory Pedagogy approach to improve their experience; acknowledging the role neoliberalism plays in shaping students' aspiration, choice and agency; identifying and challenging existing deficit-models of support; accounting for how a capability approach can address those deficit practices by encouraging students to evaluate their values and goals in HE (and beyond) and the likelihood they can currently achieve these; applying these principles to a participatory process in which students and staff co-design new practices to support students' capabilities and aims. I acknowledge that different contexts at Southeastern might mean the steps in this guidance require reviewing and debating by staff and students in those environments, which might result in changes to these steps. Rather than interpreting this as an obstacle to its dissemination, I believe the democratic nature of Participatory Pedagogy would give everyone involved a voice to share opinions and define the scope of their partnership together. This guidance is designed to be implemented in a cyclical process and consists of the following steps:

1. Form student-staff partnerships, based on Participatory Pedagogy, to share with students the unequal nature of student outcomes at Southeastern. Review the student experience in relation to those inequalities and their own neoliberal performativity around aspiration, choice and agency.
2. Identify any teaching, learning or support practices that rely on deficit-model constructs of skills and knowledge that under-represented students are expected or assumed to have but that are not explicitly referenced.

3. Apply an individualised and capability approach to student experiences by, a) allowing students to self-evaluate their values and goals in HE (and beyond) and the likelihood they can currently achieve these; and, b) assessing current curricula and practices to determine how (or if) they support the achievement of educational, career and professional goals.
4. Co-develop practices designed to enhance individual performativity, the student experience and the ability of students to achieve personal goals, especially during HE transition.
5. Undertake evaluations of ensuing practices and the overall co-participatory process. Disseminate these outputs to key student experience committees to gain further institutional buy-in. Maintain established partnerships to review new practices and/or identify new areas to review.

This guidance proposes using my research's findings to develop a process that key stakeholders and students can engage with in order to co-review and develop more meaningful and relevant student support. It addresses the need I identified to challenge Southeastern's misrecognition of under-represented students' performativity and experiences by reviewing deficit-model practices that reinforce this. Crucially, the guidance supports the need for an individualised approach sought by my participants by embedding principles of Participatory Pedagogy, a capability approach and conception of transition as a personal development opportunity. When applied, this guidance draws on Participatory Pedagogy to empower under-represented students by exposing them to the unequal experiences and performance outcomes between students at their institution, and then providing a platform for them to share experiences and voice opinions. Incorporating a capability approach furthers this individualised approach by allowing each student to reflect on and self-evaluate their own goals, how likely they are to achieve these given the institutional context and what steps can be taken to address this. Allowing under-represented students to co-generate practices to support their success will de-emphasise existing deficit-models and allow students to reclaim aspiration, choice and agency in terms of what they value and expect to achieve, especially within a professional context of neoliberal performativity.

I acknowledge there are potential challenges in disseminating this guidance, such as engaging stakeholders, assisting staff to set up partnerships, ensuring this process is not perceived as bureaucratic or formulaic and supporting the authenticity that my participants valued in taking part in activities not only designed to improve their experience, but which they played an active, equal role in shaping. I found Reed's (2016) handbook for maximising research impact, along with several practical impact planning and dissemination toolkits (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC],

2019; University of Sheffield's [UoS], 2019) valuable in prompting myself to consider how to publicise my work and maximise its impact. In formulating an impact and dissemination plan, I will focus on three core principles, as described by Reed (2016): engagement, early impact and reflection. Reed states (2016) engaging stakeholders is the most important principle and researchers should take a dialogic approach and account for local contexts and challenges. Based on his guidelines, and other impact toolkits (ESRC, 2019; UoS, 2019) I will identify key staff at Southeastern with a mutual interest and agenda in supporting the experience and outcomes of under-represented students and for whom this guidance will impact their area of work. I anticipate stakeholders to include leaders of student support departments and academic schools. As guidelines suggest (Reed, 2016; ESRC, 2019; UoS, 2019), I would develop a dissemination plan to include a brief of my research findings, an overview of how my proposed co-participatory process will impact the students they support, training opportunities for their staff and an evaluation programme for measuring the effectiveness of these new partnerships. Training, which I would deliver, will play an important role in achieving the early impact Reed (2016) advocates for by empowering staff to seek out partnership opportunities and minimise the risk of the process being perceived as formulaic. Formulating an evaluation plan supports Reed's (2016) commitment to reflecting on the process and making changes to future dissemination based on feedback and new contexts. I believe the beneficiaries—to use the UoS's (2019) toolkit language—of this process are both the staff and students who form partnerships.

In adopting a Participatory Pedagogy approach, both staff and students will engage with important policy, data and research highlighting unequal outcomes and the benefits of co-participatory engagement to address these. I strongly believe that my participants benefitted from this type of engagement and that it contributed to how much they valued taking part in the research. Exposure to this content could resonate with staff and students forming new partnerships and this will hopefully not only empower them to follow through on my proposed guidance but ensure all involved feel valued in playing an active role. Lastly, one of the strengths of this process is its cross-disciplinary nature and ability to be applied to different contexts within an institution, such as academic environments (school, degree or module level), non-academic support services (e.g. careers services, students' unions) or social groups (e.g. student societies). The Participatory Pedagogy principles of the guidance, namely staff and students' exposure to unequal outcomes and practices, will help emerging partnerships in these contexts establish co-participatory styles of working to identify relevant challenges, review existing practice and develop more meaningful activity. I envision playing an active role in supporting these partnerships, by delivering Participatory

Pedagogy workshops aimed at training partnerships to identify outcomes, challenges and practices, as well as lobbying key stakeholders to support this process.

*Grounding this guidance in my findings and professional practice*

The practical, step-by-step guidance I am proposing will serve as a process for student-staff partnerships to co-reflect, review and devise practices and is meant to be applied to existing activity, as well as to planning future provision. To illustrate this, I will now apply the above guidance to plan my own future practice, which will not only highlight how this process might be implemented, but also provide contributions to my own context. Table 50 presents this guidance alongside actions that are the result of applying each step to my own professional practice. The context I identified in my own practice concerns the pre-entry and transitional support that I previously identified as benefitting from my findings. Following Table 50, I will connect each step of the guidance with the knowledge and evidence gained from my research and express my rationale for how this results in actions in my own pre-entry and transitional context.

Guidance	Resulting actions
1. Form student-staff partnerships, based on Participatory Pedagogy, to share with students the unequal nature of student outcomes at Southeastern. Review the student experience in relation to those inequalities and their own neoliberal performativity around aspiration, choice and agency.	A. Set up a working group of practitioners, pre-entry to HE learners and current Southeastern students and embed Participatory Pedagogy principles into practice. Deliver a session(s) aimed at: exposing inequalities in access and early HE experiences relating to students' aspiration, choice and agency; fostering a shared understanding of the group's aims in addressing these issues and improving students experience.
2. Identify any teaching, learning or support practices that rely on deficit-model constructs of skills and knowledge that under-represented students are expected or assumed to have but that are not explicitly referenced.	B. In a follow-up session(s), review existing pre-entry and transitional programming to identify any deficit-model constructs underpinning access or transitional support activity, such as relying on learners' resilience.
3. Apply an individualised and capability approach to student experiences by first, allowing students to self-evaluate their values, goals in HE (and beyond) and the likelihood they can currently achieve these; and second, assessing current curricula and practices to determine how (or if) they support the achievement of educational, career and professional goals.	C. Allow students to explore their values, goals and capabilities in relation to their own personal development and existing support. Continue the review from step B by establishing how valuable existing pre-entry and transitional programming is in supporting their aspiration, choice and agency.
4. Co-develop practices designed to enhance individual performance, the student experience and the ability of students to achieve personal goals, especially during HE transition.	D. Co-develop pre-entry outreach and transitional induction practices based on possible selves theory that enables learners to roadmap and plan their futures within HE and career contexts.
5. Undertake evaluations of ensuing practices and the overall co-participatory process. Disseminate these outputs to key student experience committees to gain further institutional buy-in. Maintain established partnerships to review new practices and/or identify new areas to review.	E. Evaluate both students' and staff's experiences of this process. Carry out programme evaluations once new activity is delivered and disseminate results to key stakeholders. Maintain these partnerships to continually review practices.

Table 50: My proposal for how guidance in developing student-staff partnerships would be applied to a pre-entry and transitional support at Southeastern

Step 1 of the guidance is supported by a Participatory Pedagogy approach, effective at providing a platform for under-represented students to share experiences and co-direct reflective sessions (Burke, 2012). Findings in my research underscored that participants felt the process encouraged them to reflect on their experience in new ways. They confirmed its co-participatory nature made them feel accounted for and that their experiences and opinions were validated by the institution. In considering future application to my context, I would draw on my Bourdieusian analysis in this research suggesting that Southeastern relied on a superficial alignment of student

and institutional habitus around accessing HE during participants' transition. Once participants transitioned into Southeastern, this gave way to a misrecognition of their experience and exacerbated early challenges. Forming student-staff partnerships, as suggested as an action in step A, and exposing this misrecognition would be a first step in addressing unequal transitional experiences.

Step 2 reviews existing activity to expose deficit-models that might underpin support practices and contribute to inequalities in student performance and experience, which is widely commented on in WP research (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Archer, 2007; Burke, 2007, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; McCaig and Stevenson, 2016). I have argued in this thesis that the misrecognition of participants' practice was attributed to Southeastern's reliance on participants' resilience to see them through challenging early experiences. Supported by the literature around resilience (Stevenson, 2016), I have challenged this as a deficit-model construct of the student experience as it positions some students as successful and others as lacking. In terms of my future practice, step B attempts to uncover misrecognition between institution and students, which would help avoid spawning deficit-models around under-represented students' perceived lack of skills and knowledge, or conversely, relying on their resilience to overcome challenges accessing HE and during eventual transitions into university (Stevenson, 2016).

Step 3 applies a capability approach to ensure under-represented students' functionings and capabilities (meaning what they value and their self-evaluated ability to achieve these) are represented (Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005, 2008). Drawing on elements of Campbell and McKendrick's (2017) HE capability framework, I confirmed learning disposition, practical reasoning, educational resilience, as well as knowledge and imagination, as important capabilities in my sample fostering the ability and belief in learners to formulate a future that fulfils ambitions related to education and careers. I also argued that a capability approach was compatible with students' conception of transition as a highly individualised personal development process (Gale and Parker, 2014). To address the potential for misrecognition at Southeastern identified in step B, I argue in step C that a capability approach should be used to allow students to explore their values, goals and capabilities in relation to their own personal development. Once this is established, action can take the shape of partnerships building on the initial review of pre-entry and transitional support (in step B) but do so in relation to students' self-expressed values, goals and capabilities.

Step 4 builds on students' self-identified and evaluated capabilities and goals by engaging the whole partnership in co-designing appropriate forms of support. Although co-developing support activity was outside the scope of my research, I contend that Participatory Pedagogy should still underpin this stage. The importance and value that my participants attributed to the research

process in helping them reflect and share experiences suggests to me that a similar process could be applied as an action at this stage. However, I believe that applying it to a pre-entry and transitional context (step D) requires a practical theoretical base to support the development of relevant activity. I asserted earlier in this chapter that possible selves theory helps take a learner-centric view by identifying expectations and then co-developing strategies with students to help them achieve their goals (Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019; Papafilippou and Bathmaker, 2019). At this stage, partnerships could action goal-setting sessions to enable students to plan their upcoming transition into HE, or their early university experience, in order to incorporate the values, goals and capabilities expressed in the previous step. This would ensure that pre-entry and transitional periods offer meaningful opportunities to learners to develop skills and experience relevant to their own educational and professional futures.

Step 5 covers the importance of evaluating this co-participatory process and any practices that are developed from it. Disseminating the outputs of this process and practices would help spread best practice to other areas of the institution who might benefit from adopting a co-participatory approach to supporting under-represented students. It would also help alleviate some of the concerns outlined earlier on needing to dispel notions of this guidance as prescribed and bureaucratic by promoting any evidence linking this process with improved student experiences. Finally, this stage also encourages the institution to maintain partnerships and repeat this guided cycle. The literature on student partnerships (Neary, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016; Mapstone et al., 2017) supports continual engagement between staff and students in order to ensure that practices remain meaningful, which is why I would advocate for its persistence as an action in my own context (step E).

#### *Other practice-based recommendations*

I have outlined how I envision a practical set of guidance might be implemented at Southeastern to review and generate new support activities in different contexts, including my own pre-entry and transition practice environments. I now make several recommendations of a wider set of practices that Southeastern could adopt in order to support the transition of under-represented students, based on my findings that a capability approach and Participatory Pedagogy principles address the challenges my participants faced. Where the previous guidance represented a process that can ultimately generate new activity, the following contributions are more fully formed practices. These could serve as the start of partnership conversations within the above guidance—rather than be simply actioned by myself or other departments at Southeastern.

Pre-entry activity delivered by teams at Southeastern can incorporate learning disposition, practical reasoning, educational resilience and knowledge and imagination capabilities by utilising a possible selves theoretical base that does not assume aspirations are low, but instead concentrates on helping learners devise strategies to achieve goals in relation to their future (Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019; Papafilippou and Bathmaker, 2019). Goal-setting sessions, co-led by students to ensure their relevance, could take place during induction periods at Southeastern, to capitalise on the personal development outlook students exhibit in HE and in relation to future careers. Implementing the latter might require me to influence and lobby other leaders at Southeastern, such as academic deans, to adapt policies in their academic departments. Evaluations of such programmes would help in this respect and dissemination via journal publications and conference presentations could facilitate the transfer of knowledge gained from applications of my research's findings and outputs at Southeastern to the wider sector.

Transitional induction activities could also be developed based on the following capabilities identified by Campbell and McKendrick (2017) and that I linked to participant findings in section 5.2.2: social relations and network, bodily integrity and emotional integrity. Forming friendship and support groups was key, both in the literature (Wingate, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Maunder et al., 2013; Gibson et al, 2018; Read et al., 2018) and in my findings. Once established, participants drew on these to combat loneliness, support each other academically and face other challenges. Greater attention to fostering peer group formation should be prioritised by transitional programming at Southeastern, which other recent research has also called for (Scanlon et al., 2019). Pre-entry activity designed to bring new students together before induction, allowing them to form peer groups they can immediately draw on once university starts, could facilitate early social integration. Likewise, peer-to-peer mentoring with more experienced students could ease transitions as the latter share experiences and even facilitate introductions to existing social networks.

My findings also exposed a tension between participants' home and university lives. Although students' felt these were not always compatible, they leaned on family and friends from home to help support their transition. If these groups do play a large role during transition, then Southeastern might wish to encourage them to be more involved, perhaps by inviting them on campus or allowing students greater flexibility in learning away from the physical university environment if initial transitions are proving difficult.

There are potentially many ways to develop support programmes based on these capabilities. My strong inclination was to not expand on these in this thesis and instead draw on the guidance I envisioned to create partnerships in which students can co-investigate transitional issues

and co-design their own support. At Southeastern, my findings and analysis could form the basis of these partnerships. Participatory Pedagogy encourages the sharing of contextual data that affects individuals' experience and would allow students and staff to reflect and use this guidance to develop support that was appropriate to them.

Conceiving this guidance—and applying it to one of my professional contexts—was a further reflexive step, enabling me to consider practical implications of my conceptual framework. While my framework sought to better understand under-represented students' experience in relation to neoliberalism, Bourdieusian concepts, a capability approach and a transition model, this guidance will allow me to apply what I learned to my practice (and potentially the HE sector). The guidance recognises under-represented' neoliberal performativity in accessing and experiencing HE. It also guards against deficit-model conceptions, brought on by a Bourdieusian analysis of learner habitus (including skills like resilience). Finally, it advises that co-participatory partnerships and a capability approach could more effectively engage learners and involve them in developing pre-entry and transitional programming that reflects their aspirations and capabilities.

In this section, by drawing on my findings, I have debated the extent to which participants' experience is connected to embodied neoliberal characteristics, highly individualised conceptions of transition and the aspects of their HE experience they value enough to focus on achieving (their functioning and capabilities). The implications for institutional practices and sector policy supporting under-represented student transition is to avoid Bourdieusian assessments of students' ability to transition successfully and instead accept the multiplicity of students' lives, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds. In terms of my own practice, I have applied step-by-step guidance based on my findings and the understanding of transition as an individual experience in which students' neoliberal performativity and capabilities are prioritised. The guidance I developed seeks to facilitate appropriate practices by engaging staff and students in a Participatory Pedagogy process allowing all members, but especially students, to co-explore and design challenges affecting their transition and how to ease these. Although I suggested several specific practices based on my findings that could support under-represented students' transition, both at a pre-entry and induction level, I argued that these should only serve as the beginnings of conversations with students. I believe the key to understanding under-represented students' experience is adopting a Participatory Pedagogy process. Throughout this thesis I advocated for the adoption of student partnerships and I will now offer conclusions around my implementation of Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry as a means for co-participatory engagement.

### 7.3 Participatory artful inquiry: a new student engagement model?

In designing this study, I felt it important to adopt a methodology that could support the exploration of new knowledge but that prioritised accessing the voice of under-represented students who, according to the literature, can be marginalised in HE (Burke, 2012). Two approaches emerged: Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry. Participatory Pedagogy is held up as a methodological platform allowing greater equity in extracting student voices (Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017), which is crucial when research takes place in a sector like Southeastern HE that exacerbates social inequalities (Burke, 2012). I find its benefits to revolve around three elements: the space it grants participants to reflect on their experience, the increased awareness it affords participants on social justice and the recalibrating of participants as co-researchers. Although there is very little in methodological literature on implementing Participatory Pedagogy (Harman, 2017), my experience in working with the same cohort over time played a role in exploring participants' experience. It is especially relevant for those researchers needing to build strong relationships with participants and it complements ethical approaches to achieving this, such as ethics of care, empathy and reciprocity (Noddings, 1988; Slote, 2007; Wilson, 2008, Ratcliffe, 2012; Slivka, 2015). As Kiki expressed, it takes time to develop trust amongst participants and between them and myself ("I was really sceptical at first [of participating in the research]", Kiki, S4).

Nurturing a cohort mentality is conducive to Participatory Pedagogy and favours this development, evidenced by participants commenting on the insights gained in learning from each other's experience. Participatory Pedagogy is especially innovative in the way it challenges participants on the existence of inequalities in their contexts. Dedicating time early in the research process is crucial in achieving this and allowing participants to reflect on this (new) knowledge. Explicitly positioning participants as co-researchers had several benefits in my research. It led to their commitment early on to the project and helped them retain some ownership towards it. As the data collection period continued, participants' ability to co-shape the direction of the research not only meant further buy-in to the process, but ensured data was relevant and reflective of their reality—a crucial point if my research is to have any institutional impact. I argued that by better understanding under-represented students' experience, more meaningful practices can be developed. In considering the research's conceptual framework, Participatory Pedagogy is in fact highly compatible with a capability approach as both seek to support what individuals' value and how they feel their aspirations can be achieved.

Participatory Pedagogy on its own did not indicate how to collect data and I instead applied it as a research process in which I incorporated artful inquiry, including collage making, and facilitated group discussions. Participants found that in producing collages, "you can see images that

actually relate to what you think, it gives a bit of a deeper meaning” (Ellora). Artful inquiry, using collage, proved to be very compatible with Participatory Pedagogy, as its core principles of democratising the research experience and allowing for deep reflection (Diaz, 2002; Neilsen, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Davis, 2008; Finley, 2008; Gerstenblatt, 2013) are very much aligned with Participatory Pedagogy. The success of this research process and method at extracting experiences, eliciting rich discussions and providing participants with a reflexive outlet suggested that, much as the literature on Participatory Pedagogy (Bhagat and O’Neill, 2011; Burke, 2012; Harman, 2017) and artful collage inquiry (Diaz, 2002; Butler-Kisber, 2008; Davis, 2008; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010) promote, there is a role for this type of research within educational contexts, which was one of my main research questions. My application of Participatory Pedagogy as a research process represents my contribution to methodological practice and I encourage other researchers interested in adopting Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry to draw on this framework and adapt it to their contexts.

#### 7.4 Research limitations and further theoretical considerations

This doctorate offers a contribution through its approach to conducting research into the experience of under-represented students. Despite a plethora of student experience research (Kuh et al.; 2006; Trowler, 2010; Nelson et al. 2011; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013), as well as studies focusing on the challenging experiences under-represented student face (Thomas, 2002, 2012; Archer, 2007; Gorard et al., 2007; Crozier et al, 2008; Burke and McManus, 2009; Reay et al., 2009, 2010; Price et al., 2011; Roberts, 2011; Burke, 2012; Christie et al., 2016; HEPI, 2017; Read et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2018), there appears to be no research combining these fields and examining a group of under-represented students’ transitional experiences during their first year at a post-1992 institution, while accounting for HE’s neoliberal context and using a co-participatory and artful inquiry methodology. This is somewhat surprising given the following three well-researched notions that I outlined in this thesis. One, it is well-established that under-represented students can struggle to adapt to HE and they tend to concentrate in post-1992 institutions (McCaig et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2018). Two, researchers have commented on neoliberalism’s influence on WP policy and practice (Trowler, 1998; Burke, 2012; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Bowl et al., 2018), as well as individual performativity in HE (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Burke, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). Three, there are loud calls in the sector to develop student-staff research partnerships (Neary, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Flint, 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016). My adoption of artful inquiry and collage to capture experiences was especially important to counter the traditional qualitative and quantitative methods used by those WP researchers stated earlier in this paragraph

and offer new insights into the student experience. Although I welcome the chance to debate my research and consider other approaches and methodologies, I would strongly support further co-participatory studies that draw on innovative, artful inquiry, by disseminating my own research at conferences and joining existing research communities at Southeastern and in the sector, interested in developing this agenda.

In terms of limitations to my research, I would accept that other studies may wish to focus on different sample populations. I deliberately focused on a small cohort of 10 students in order to maximise the participatory character of the research, opting to foster a strong sense of belonging to the study across an academic year, which a larger cohort might dilute. However, in working with a larger group of students, there might be opportunities for deeper analyses around personal characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity or even academic subject. In choosing a small cohort, such work is limited—for example my sample contained only one student from a Black African or Caribbean background. Although I do have a spread of academic disciplines across the group, I did not set out to offer any generalisations based on experiences of certain ethnicities, age groups or other demographics, opting instead for transferability of findings and conclusions to other contexts. Other researchers may find that working with larger sample populations affords them wider generalisability across institutions. Although I purposefully limited the scope of my research to students' first year in HE, others may integrate subsequent years of study, which could deepen understandings of experiences and behaviour in students' first year, such as in Christie et al.'s (2016) study.

Theoretically, other sociological concepts could contribute to further understanding the under-represented student experience. In disseminating my own research at conferences and through publications, I hope to influence researchers to develop conceptual frameworks that position concepts often relied upon in their field, such as Bourdieu and HE, with other approaches that critique these, such as a capability approach. I argued that by doing so, my framework offered a much deeper exploration of transition into HE as a phenomenon while allowing me to develop practical contributions to my practice and the wider sector. In thinking with and beyond Bourdieu, I would welcome research that taps into the work of Yosso (2005) and Critical Race Theory, as this is an opportunity to further challenge Bourdieu within research discussing capitals, misrecognition and ethnicity in educational contexts.

In the final section of my thesis, I will recap my conclusions and offer final thoughts on my contributions to knowledge and practice.

## 7.5 Final considerations of the under-represented student experience

In this thesis, I have explored the experience of under-represented students at Southeastern with a view to feeding back into my practice and providing not just these students, but all students, with more meaningful forms of support. In taking stock of the UK HE landscape, I brought together different aspects of literature pointing to inequalities in the sector, both in students' experience and outcomes. In concluding my thesis, I present a final reflection on how my research contributes to wider debates of WP and social justice, as they pertain to student experience.

In the Discussion chapter, I warned of important misconceptions and misrecognitions. Although my participants exhibited a neoliberal performativity highly suited to accessing HE, this did not translate to a smooth transition, despite Southeastern being emblematic of a neoliberal university and seemingly suited to offer the kind of utilitarian, professional learning participants sought to support their aspirations. In fact, I argued a form of misrecognition occurred as Southeastern perhaps over-relied on participants' self-described resilient natures to see them through early challenges. The individual nature of the student experience I refer to in the last chapter does highlight the issue of how to support the transition and experience of students who consider their needs to be very individual and expect HE to support their personal development. Throughout the Discussion chapter I also considered different practices Southeastern should consider on this basis, such as: provide early opportunities for students to access friendship and support groups; acknowledge students' aspirations and career goals during induction; deliver wellbeing activities in halls of residence and other key first-year activities; involve students' families more in the student experience; increase flexible learning opportunities to limit the effects of travel on those students who travel home often; adapt induction activity to include more educational and career planning.

However, simply listing these recommendations ignores the question of how to develop and implement practices when experiences are so individual. I would argue that these practices are relevant based on the experience of this cohort, but that considering their relevancy on a wider population scale requires mimicking some of the methodological approaches I adopted. Specifically, Participatory Pedagogy and its ability to democratise the student voice could be the next step in pursuing changes in institutional policy and practice. The guidance I envisioned to establish learning and support practices provides a process for institutions like Southeastern to shift the ways they support under-represented students. This guidance instead engages them in co-participatory partnerships, while drawing on a capability approach to account for the values and capabilities of under-represented learners. Resulting practices would reflect the multiplicity of students' experience and help reduce tensions between their habitus and the habitus of their institution.

In relation to WP, HE has a role to offer opportunities to all students to access the education and experience they need to lead fulfilled lives, which in turn positively impacts society. I support conceptions of HE as spaces where knowledge should flourish (Habermas, 1989) and be accessible to all who believe accessing university will benefit them (Burke, 2012). In discussing equality in HE, Walker (2008) commented HE has a responsibility to contribute to a society that is "free, fair and equal in the way it provides for each individual to realise his or her fullest potential reflectively to choose and lead a good life" (269). She posited this within a capability approach context that individuals are best placed to value what is important to them and to seek out ways to achieve this—a point that is validated by the performativity of both my participants and the sector, which I argued can be addressed with my co-participatory guidance.

Walker (2008) emphasised the importance of universities in developing students as evaluators who are then better positioned to contribute back to society: "all students are educated to be critical and active participants in democratic life [...] they contribute to more just societies and the fairer distribution of knowledge, skills and the capability to be a strong evaluator" (277). However, the neoliberal and stratified nature of HE can affect the ability of HE to support students' success in this way. Naidoo (2003, 2018) and Mavelli (2014) warned against the commodification of HE, both in terms of access, regulatory monitoring and utilitarian modes of learning, all key aspects of the marketisation of contemporary HE (Olssen and Peters, 2005), because of the potential to distort equitable student experiences at institutions who are very active in recruiting under-represented students, such as those post-1992 institutions like Southeastern. Mavelli (2014) insisted this neoliberal creep on HE is at odds with WP's "progressive, inclusive and egalitarian" (867) social justice backbone and ultimately reduces the students to an economic player, rather than a learner.

I am not as pessimistic about the conflation of neoliberalism and WP in HE. I propose that the feel for the game my participants displayed in accessing HE, along with the choice, aspiration and agency embodied in their performativity contributed to their eventual successful transition into Southeastern—a transition that hopefully allowed them to access and gain the learning and experiences they valued to be successful beyond HE. While my research has not identified all gaps in knowledge around the understanding of the student experience at Southeastern and elsewhere, I am confident that my assessment of the misrecognition students faced, along with my development of a co-participatory guidance, will positively impact the establishment of more equitable, student-centred and meaningful practices at Southeastern. Having conducted this research, I will use my access to senior leaders at Southeastern (e.g. through my membership on committees and working groups) to disseminate my conclusions and lobby for a greater awareness of under-represented students' experience. I will also attempt to shape institutional strategy that is underpinned by a

capability approach in order to ensure that all students' values and ambitions are accounted for. I will direct new support activity based on my conclusions and then evaluate the effectiveness of these practices, which I will disseminate to senior leaders at Southeastern, as well as across the sector so other researchers, leaders and practitioners can apply this learning to their contexts.

My development of a conceptual framework accounting for neoliberalism (as a source of inequality in HE and as a driver of student performativity), for differing theoretical concepts (explaining students' aspiration, choice and agency in accessing and performing in HE) and for transitional models (underscoring the highly individualised nature of university) is also an important contribution. I argued this will not only expand the knowledge base on the under-represented student experience, but also provide other researchers with the conceptual means to investigate their own contexts. Finally, I have championed the implementation of Participatory Pedagogy and artful inquiry as ways of deeply investigating unequal student experiences. The outcomes of my research underscored the important benefits in promoting students as co-producers of research knowledge. By engaging participants on the nature of their student experience, challenging contemporary neoliberal structures in HE and adopting theoretical conceptions that promoted their embodied values and characteristics, my research has performed a vital role in better understanding the under-represented student experience, redressing entrenched inequalities and offering contributions to support all students to realise their ambitions and live meaningful lives.

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## Appendix 1

### Recruitment email for pilot to 54 students

Dear Southeastern student,

Some of you may know me, I work in the [REDACTED] team, mainly evaluating and trying to make sure it's the best possible programme for students!

I am also doing my EdD here at Southeastern and I am researching the transitions into uni for students who are under-represented at uni (here at Southeastern). I'm really interested in the experience of these students and how they get on during their first year. It's an important group of students that doesn't often get a lot of attention!

I'm emailing you because you identified yourself to [REDACTED] as someone who is from an under-represented group at university. If this is the case than please consider participating in my research—this work is really important to me and I would love to hear about your experiences as a Southeastern student.

It will require being on-campus for a few hours in mid to late June. I can pay your travel expenses if you do not live nearby but would like to take part (and provide food!).

**If you're interested, all you need to do is reply to this email with your full name and age.** I will be in touch in early June with more details about where the research is taking place and what is involved.

Thanks for your time!

Stephane

### Recruitment email to all 368 Year 1 students

Dear [first name]<sup>1</sup>,

We're offering you the opportunity to take part in some cutting-edge research happening right here at Southeastern. We want to know about your experience transitioning from school/college/further education to life at university. Your story will help shape the future of student support at Southeastern.

We're carrying out a 1 year study and we would like you to take part. Your input is incredibly valuable to us and we want to hear your story!

There are only 20 places available so act fast.

---

<sup>1</sup> Email software auto-populated first name

Don't let this chance pass you by! [Follow this link to register your interest](#)

See you soon!

Stephane Farenga, *Lead Researcher for the 'Transitions' project*

#### Invitation email to briefing and information session

Hello!

Thank you all very much for registering your interest in this research! This is a really important project and it will benefit you and especially your fellow peers 😊

I've attached a PDF info sheet so you can find out more about the research and how you'll be involved.

The next step is for you to come to a welcome session **Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 5-6pm on [REDACTED]**. This is a chance for you to meet me and for you to get to know your fellow peers who are also taking part. **There's 16 of you**, all first years and there's a really good spread of subjects from Business, Sciences, Creative Arts, Humanities, Law, Education and Computer Science so I'm sure you'll meet likeminded people.

During this session I'll fill you in on more details and you will start to drive this research project—after all this is your chance to make a big impact on the first-year student experience at Southeastern.

**Email me back confirming you can attend this session.** Do ask any questions you might have 😊

Looking forward to working together,  
Stephane

## Appendix 2

### Presentation slides from initial pre-session meeting



Slide 1: Title slide, with EdD thesis title

Context  
Neo-liberal society

Public ownership → private ownership



Capitalism  
GDP  
Growth  
Profit  
Shareholders

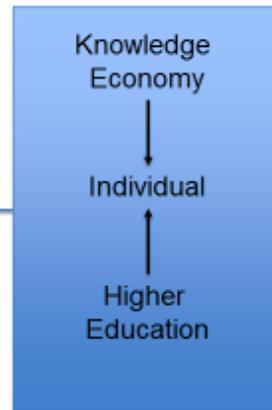
[redacted]

Slide 2: Economic context of a neo-liberal society

## Context Neo-liberal individual



Benefits  
~~DELETED~~



Education = personal investment, ROI

Slide 3: Political background of a neo-liberal society, including the emphasis on education as a personal investment

## Context Neo-liberal higher education

Higher Education?



Tuition fees

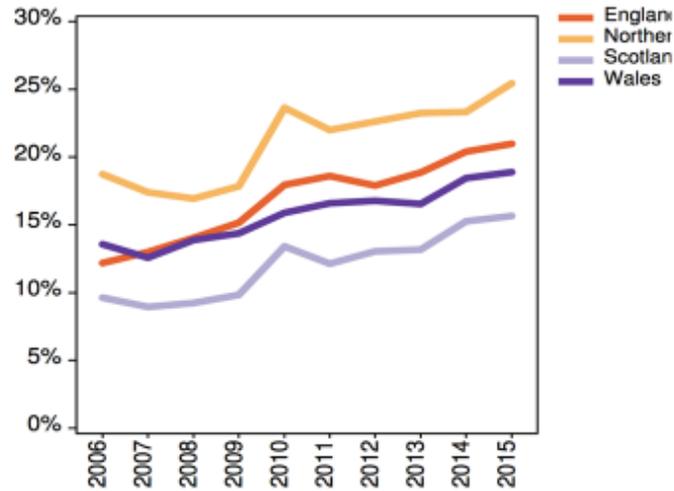
Student debt

Place in the Knowledge Economy

Slide 4: Role of HE in a neo-liberal society

## Context

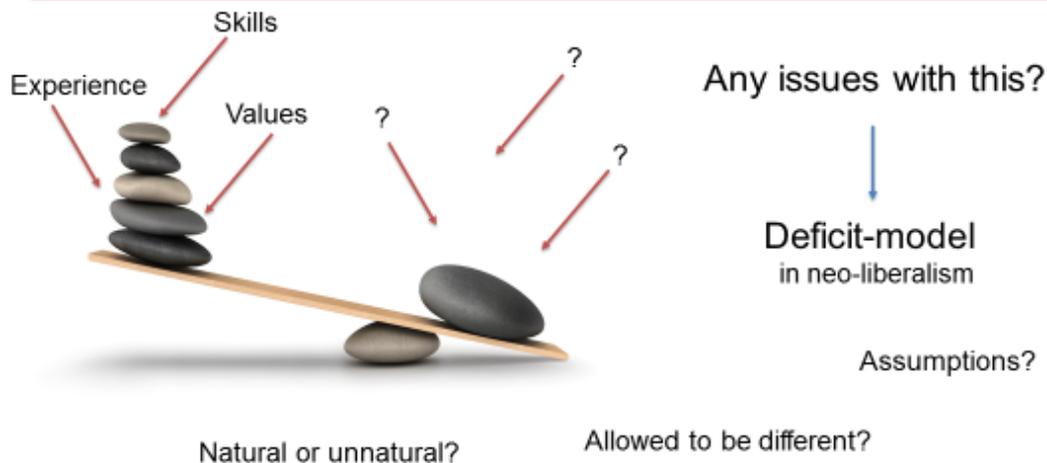
### Neo-liberal higher education



Slide 5: (cont.) HE participation rates

## Context

### Widening Participation



How do you support people if you don't acknowledge differences?

Slide 6: WP and deficit-models

## Breakdown title

A collage of "transitions":  
Arts-informed personal  
histories of incoming non-  
traditional students at the  
University of  
Hertfordshire

Collage

Personal history

Transition

Non-traditional  
student

Slide 7: Introduction of EdD research with breakdown of title

## Personal history



Habitus: all the dispositions  
you accumulate through life

- Traits, accents, look
- Experiences
- Capital

Personal history:

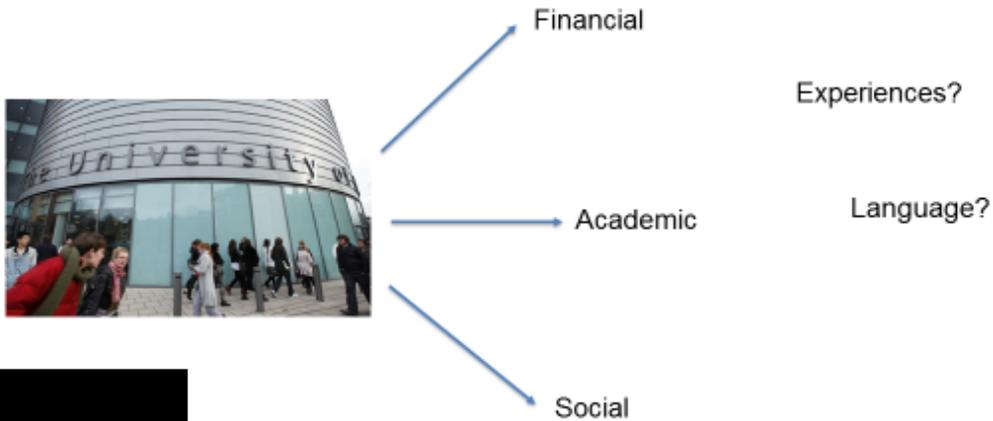
- Experience
- Identity

Determine behaviour &  
how we experience new  
environments...but always  
changing

Slide 8: Introduction of Bourdieu and notions of habitus and personal identity

# Inequalities

Inequality across society ...habitus can help expose/explain these.



Slide 9: How habitus can expose inequalities across society

# Transition

Early years → School → Post-compulsory school → Work/FE/HE → Work

Looks like movement...but actually about changing/developing identity



Pathway (set by others) vs Your personal journey

Slide 10: Introduction of transition as a concept/phenomenon

## Transition Higher education

1. Pathway/induction in institution
  - a) Fixed points/milestones – pre-determined
  - b) 'Terms' set by university...deviation?
  - c) Space for alternative views?
2. Personal trajectory
  - a) 'becoming somebody' over time
  - b) Identity changes as you experience
3. Life-as-transition
  - a) Maybe always transitioning??
  - b) Fluid, not restricted by time or place
  - c) Develop multiple sides to your identity...not 'just a student'



Slide 11: Different models of transition in HE

## Transition Higher education

- Always smooth?
- Does it depend on the point of uni is?
- Is it individual or collective?
- How long or short is it? Stages?
- Who or what influences your transition?
- Is there an 'official' transition?

Slide 12: Key questions around transition in HE

## Why collage?

- Why use art-based methodologies?
  - Explore experience, emotions and feelings
  - Don't just rely on words/language
- Why use image-based/collage methodology?
  - Collage: conceptualise different aspects of a phenomenon
  - "new connections"
  - Each participant can explore a phenomenon in their own way
  - Visual, constructivist tool
  - Limit power issues

Slide 13: Introduction to art-based methodologies, collage and their benefits

## Why is this important?

- Researching inequalities...whether we find them or not
- Audience: UH & research communities & you
- Implications, recommendations (e.g. Herts Success)
- Take an anti-deficit approach
- Your contribution...unique experience vs generic

Slide 14: Recap of presentation and the role participants can play in this study

## Appendix 3

### Information sheet on the study

#### 'Southeastern Transitions': student-led policy development

##### Welcome!

Thank you for registering your interest in this research project. Please read this information sheet to find out a bit more about this research and how you can get involved.

##### What is it?

The University is committed to better understanding students from under-represented groups and locations across the UK and this includes recognising the ups and downs of transitioning into Southeastern. The research is all about getting to know who you are, how you are getting on at Southeastern and what kind of impact university is having on you!

Most research includes a lot of (boring) interviews and focus groups—but not this time! We are developing a new style that includes fun, interactive sessions.

##### What's in it for you?

This is a brilliant opportunity to be involved in ground breaking research. Most research does not give students such a **prominent role** but this project places YOU at the centre of it. As a **student consultant**, your views will be taken seriously and you will drive the project, deciding as a peer group what topics to investigate and what recommendations to make to the University. As the lead researcher I'll help guide you and provide templates for the different activities we'll be doing.

This kind of **consultancy experience** will look great on a CV and you will receive a certificate upon completion of the project at the end of this academic year. You will also get the chance to present the research's findings and recommendations to senior members of the University, as well as attend and present at conferences with the lead researcher—a very rare opportunity for students.

Plus, there's the added benefit of **meeting new people** from different degrees and finding out more about yourself and each other.

##### What's the commitment?

There will be an information session to attend on Wednesday November 11<sup>th</sup>, 5-6pm, followed by 2 mandatory sessions in Semester A and 2 more in Semester B. These will last up to 2 hours on either [REDACTED] and every effort will be made to schedule them at convenient times—you can help decide when is best to meet. During these sessions you will be expected to contribute to the various activities, but don't worry it will be friendly and supportive environment 😊

See you soon!

Stephane Farenga, *Lead Researcher for the 'Transitions' project*

**Small print:** this research has been given ethical approval by the University: EDU/PG/Southeastern/00964

## Appendix 4

### EdD Session 1, 18/11/2015 5-7pm

This is the first data collection session. There are two main aims:

1. To introduce students to some of the methods and initial topics of the research
2. To begin answering the first two research questions: “What are the personal histories (i.e. background, previous experiences) that define WP students at Southeastern?” and “How do personal histories of WP students shape student identities?”

Activity	Aims/questions	Time
<b>Ice-breakers:</b> Chair game & sheet flipping	To get students re-acquainted with each other and to build trust.  To foster a fun & creative environment.	5-10 mins
<b>Flip charts: “Who are we?”</b> → 2 groups with 1 flip chart each, thinking about key questions → Get students thinking about what makes up their identity	To start getting students to think introspectively about themselves by answering some key questions that will later inform and help them frame their representations of their identities & experiences:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is important to you?</li> <li>• What motivates you?</li> <li>• How does your background influence/motivate/define you &amp; your goals?</li> <li>• SWOT tables <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats/fears?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>These questions are meant to be answered generally, rather than focusing specifically on being a student and their transition into uni.</p> <p>The 2 groups will share their answers to the other group and a discussion will ensue, focusing on commonalities and differences (moderated by me) – if necessary I will guide discussion towards pinning down aspects that make up their identities (based on what they’ve written on flip chart)</p>	20mins
<b>Individual collage: “I am a student”</b> → Individual collage focusing on putting	To introduce students to collage (and how it can be used to visually represent identities and experiences) by getting them to make representations of themselves based on what	30mins

<p>your student identity in a collage</p> <p>→ Get students engaging with their 'student identity'</p>	<p>they wrote on flip charts and discussed in previous activity <u>BUT</u> within the context of being a student—specifically with regards to their background, behaviour, skills, knowledge, goals, achievements.</p> <p>Students will share their work to the wider group with a discussion ensuing.</p>	
<p><b>Group collage: “the ideal student”</b></p> <p>→ 2 groups making a collage based on their interpretation of the ideal student</p> <p>→ Get students to think about wider environment and traditional (or not) conceptions of what a student is</p>	<p>To introduce students to making collages as a group by getting them to consider what makes an 'ideal uni student': background, behaviour, skills, knowledge, goals, achievements.</p> <p>Get the 2 groups to compare their collages and look at differences/common points. Can we define an ideal student? A typical student? Are the 2 different?</p>	30mins
<p><b>Collage comparison: “me versus the ideal student”</b></p> <p>→ Students in pairs compare their individual collage with the group collages</p> <p>→ Get students to challenge their own interpretations of themselves/others</p>	<p>To get students thinking about the differences/commonalities between the collages and how they see themselves vs how they see others, and why.</p> <p>They will do this in pairs and then report to group in a discussion style. Encourage discussion around what is a typical vs ideal student vs their interpretations of themselves</p>	20mins
<p><b>Individual collage: “Add-on”</b></p> <p>→ A chance for students to add to and evolve their original student identity collage</p> <p>→ Get students to reconcile any issues between them as individuals and their peers</p>	<p>Based on the last activity, students can add to their individual collages and evolve these.</p> <p>They will then explain any changes and why.</p>	10mins

<b>Wrap-up</b>	A chance for final reflections and introduce next session on 25/11/15, which will be about transition.	5mins
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## Appendix 5

### Participant information sheet

UNIVERSITY OF [REDACTED]

ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR STUDIES INVOLVING THE USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS  
(‘ETHICS COMMITTEE’)

## FORM EC6: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

### Title of study

A Bourdieusian investigation into the role personal histories play in enabling transition amongst incoming first generation students at the University [REDACTED]

### Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a study. Before you decide whether to do so, it is important that you understand the research that is being done and what your involvement will include. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Do not hesitate to ask us anything that is not clear or for any further information you would like to help you make your decision. Please do take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. **The University’s regulations governing the conduct of studies involving human participants can be accessed via this link:**

[http://sit\[REDACTED\]secreg/upr/RE01.htm](http://sit[REDACTED]secreg/upr/RE01.htm)

Thank you for reading this.

### What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the transitions into higher education of first year students who are the first members of their family to go to university at the University of [REDACTED] (Southeastern). More specifically, the study will examine the role that students’ previous experiences (e.g. from school, home, work, etc...) play in enabling them to transition into their first year at Southeastern. The University’s role in welcoming new students and supporting them during this transition will also be explored to ascertain how well it facilitates this period of students’ university life.

### Do I have to take part?

It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. Agreeing to join the study does not mean that you have to complete it. You are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part at all, will not affect any treatment/care that you may receive (should this be relevant).

### Are there any age or other restrictions that may prevent me from participating?

You must be 18 years or older to take part in this study.

### How long will my part in the study take?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be involved in it for approximately 12-15 months from July 2015 to October 2016. Please note that further contact with the Researcher may be necessary beyond this end date. However, you will be notified of this ahead of time.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be asked to participate in several data collections sessions (along with other participants) starting in July 2015 and throughout the 2015/2016 academic year. You will be notified of these sessions ahead of time and the Researcher will make every attempt to make them as accessible as possible to you. Depending on your circumstances it may be possible to arrange a one to one session instead of participating in a group session. The first group session will take place during July and August 2015, the second will be during Semester A and the third towards the end of Semester B. During these sessions, you will be asked to complete several collages using magazine/periodical clippings and other craft materials. These collages will be based on topics that the Researcher will assign the group at the start of the session. After you complete a collage, the Researcher will ask you a series of questions about your work, including how and why you chose to construct it. You will be asked to move the components of your collage into place as you explain your decisions. Your hands will be filmed and audio will be recorded during this part so that the Researcher can review how you made your collage later on.

In between collage sessions, you may be asked to write at least two—but no more than six—short blog posts (300-500 words) on a website created by the Researcher. You will be prompted by the Researcher to write these posts and be provided with enough time to do so. You can write these posts on your personal computer or device. Your posts will appear anonymously on the blog website and the URL of this site will not be made public.

### **What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?**

It is possible that while completing collages or writing blog posts you may recall experiences or situations that caused you distress in the past. These may be of value to the study but it is up to you whether you want to share these.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

In exploring your transition into university you may find that reflecting on various experiences helps to better understand yourself and past actions. This may improve your experience at Southeastern as well as help you identify academic or personal areas you would like to develop further (the Researcher can help signpost you to relevant support). Your involvement will also potentially help inform future development of student support services at Southeastern.

### **How will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

Only the Researcher and his supervisory team will have access to your personal data. This will not be shared with anyone. Your identity will be anonymous in the dissemination of the study. Every effort will be made to preserve anonymity, but it cannot be guaranteed that it will be impossible for you to be identified in the final dissemination of the research.

### **What will happen to the data collected within this study?**

The results of this research will form the basis of a doctoral dissertation in the School of Education at Southeastern. The research may also be presented or published in other

formats, such as in academic journals. If you wish to obtain a copy of the dissertation and any other published results, please inform the Researcher.

Your data will be stored on the Researcher's password protected work and personal computers, accessible only to him. It will be held throughout the length of the study and also afterwards should it be of use for academic journal articles, longitudinal or comparative research purposes.

### **Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed by:

The University of ██████████ Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority

The Southeastern protocol number is aEDU/PG/Southeastern/00964(1) and ethics was approved by Dr Tim Parke of the Social Science, Arts and Humanities ECDA

### **Who can I contact if I have any questions?**

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me, in writing, by phone or by email:

Stephane Farenga

[s.farenga@██████████](mailto:s.farenga@██████████)

01707 286442

**Although we hope it is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar.**

**Thank you very much for reading this information and giving consideration to taking part in this study.**

UNIVERSITY OF [REDACTED] – ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR STUDIES INVOLVING THE USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ('ETHICS COMMITTEE')

**FORM EC3  
CONSENT FORM FOR STUDIES INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

I, the undersigned [*please give your name here, in BLOCK CAPITALS*]

.....  
of [*please give contact details here, sufficient to enable the investigator to get in touch with you, such as a postal or email address*]

.....  
hereby freely agree to take part in the study entitled [*insert name of study here*]

**A Bourdieusian investigation into the role personal histories play in enabling transition amongst incoming first generation students at the University of [REDACTED]**

**1** I confirm that I have been given a Participant Information Sheet (a copy of which is attached to this form) giving particulars of the study, including its aim(s), methods and design, the names and contact details of key people and, as appropriate, the risks and potential benefits, and any plans for follow-up studies that might involve further approaches to participants. I have been given details of my involvement in the study. I have been told that in the event of any significant change to the aim(s) or design of the study I will be informed, and asked to renew my consent to participate in it.

**2** I have been assured that I may withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage or having to give a reason.

**3** In giving my consent to participate in this study, I understand that voice, video or photo-recording will take place.

**4** I have been given information about the risks of my suffering adverse effects. I have been told about the aftercare and support that will be offered to me in the event of this happening, and I have been assured that all such aftercare or support would be provided at no cost to myself.

**5** I have been told how information relating to me (data obtained in the course of the study, and data provided by me about myself) will be handled: how it will be kept secure, who will have access to it, and how it will or may be used.

**6** I understand that my participation in this study may reveal findings that could indicate that I might require medical advice. In that event, I will be informed and advised to consult my GP. If, during the study, evidence comes to light that I may have a pre-existing medical condition that may put others at risk, I understand that the University will refer me to the appropriate authorities and that I will not be allowed to take any further part in the study.

**7** I understand that if there is any revelation of unlawful activity or any indication of non-medical circumstances that would or has put others at risk, the University may refer the matter to the appropriate authorities.

**8** I have been told that I may at some time in the future be contacted again in connection with this or another study.

Signature of participant.....Date.....

Signature of (principal) investigator.....Date.....

Name of (principal) investigator STEPHANE FARENGA

## Appendix 6

Follow-up information sheet provided to participants after completing the research

### Your participation in the Transitions research project

#### Put it on your CV!

Research Consultant, University of [REDACTED], Sept 2015 – May 2016

- Recruited as a student consultant on a University-sponsored research project focusing on student experience and generating new policies and practices
- Part of a collaborative team working with Lead Researcher
- Shaped direction of the research
- Attended sessions, completed research tasks and generated feedback

#### Reflect on your experience with this research

- Why did I get involved in this research?
  - Gain skills? Experience?
  - Make a difference? To who: students? The University?
- Why is this research important?
  - Southeastern and national statistics tell us that students from non-traditional backgrounds can have worse outcomes at uni (retention and achievement)
  - Important to know students' experiences so we can change this phenomenon
  - Transition into first year is an important part the student experience that isn't researched enough
  - This research aimed to gather experiences in order to better understand how students from non-traditional backgrounds experience uni → this knowledge can then be used to influence new policies and practices at Southeastern and other unis
- What did I learn about myself that I didn't already know?
  - What was my experience like?
  - Did I grow as a person at all?
- What did I learn about others?
  - How did I engage with the other students on this research?
  - Did I learn more about other people?
- How did my participation impact my experience this year?
  - Influence my academics or social life? Overall outlook on uni? Life?
- Did I, or will I, behave and do anything different in the future as a result of this project?
  - Do you feel different as a person having engaged in this research?
- What skills did I develop during this project? How can I apply those in my student life or future career?
  - How is my experience/skills gained during this project relevant to my studies/career I want/job I'm applying to

## Appendix 7

Below are two screenshots from my coding spreadsheet illustrating the thematic coding I completed. Participants are listed in column A along with the activity they took part in or the specific collage they produced. In the first screenshot, codes are included along row 2 and these are amalgamated into the category 'initial transition', in row 19. In that example, participants indicated most often that social integration was the most difficult aspect of their initial transition into Southeastern.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1									
2	<b>Names/Codes</b>	<b>Initial negativity</b>	<b>Withdrawal</b>	<b>Unprepared</b>	<b>Socially hard</b>	<b>Freshers Week</b>	<b>Expectations</b>	<b>Negative lang.</b>	<b>Lecturers</b>
3	<b>Starter activity</b>	3	2	3	12	3	3	4	3
4	<b>Group Collage</b>	2		2	3		2	2	
5	<b>Total</b>	5	2	5	15	3	5	6	3
6	<b>Collage 1</b>								
7	SW/Steven	6	1	3	2		4		
8	AM1/Milly	1		7	3		1		
9	AW/Ada								
10	AM2/Ellora	1					3		
11	ES/Eva								
12	KB/Jas		1						
13	CC/Buster								
14	SF/Dawn	2			1				
15	LC/Naomi	1		1	1		1		
16	KA/Kiki	2		1	1				
17	<b>Focus group S4.3</b>	1			1		1		1
18	<b>Total</b>	19	4	17	24	3	15	6	4
19	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Initial transition</b>							

This next example focuses on the category 'delayed success' and reveals that peer groups were mentioned the most in these sessions.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
22	<b>Names/Codes</b>	<b>Sem B &gt; Sem A</b>	<b>Overcoming challenges</b>	<b>Academic success</b>	<b>Day-to-day</b>	<b>Smooth/Good</b>	<b>Confidence</b>	<b>Peer group</b>	<b>Reassurance</b>
23	<b>Starter activity</b>	5				4	7	8	9
24	<b>Group Collage</b>		3			1	3		1
25	<b>Total</b>	5	3	0	5	10	8	10	4
26	<b>Collage 1</b>								
27	SW/Steven		2	1				2	1
28	AM1/Milly	2	2					1	
29	AW/Ada								
30	AM2/Ellora							1	
31	ES/Eva								
32	KB/Jas							2	
33	CC/Buster								
34	SF/Dawn	1		1				1	
35	LC/Naomi			1	1		2		
36	KA/Kiki	2	3			3	1	1	
37	<b>Focus group S4.3</b>			1				1	
38	<b>Total</b>	10	10	4	6	13	11	19	5
39	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Delayed success</b>							

## Appendix 8

In this appendix, I have copied an extract from a transcription of an interpretive discussion following a collage making session.

### SESSION 3

Fac: Facilitator (Stephane)  
Dawn  
Kiki  
Naomi

Fac: So what exactly kind of stuff have you put down?

Dawn: I think mainly looking at the, is there an official transition. At first I thought sort of no because each person is on their own journey, they all go through their own thoughts and feelings and, to get there but then I suppose in terms of stages it, there is an official transition in that there's deadlines with UCAS and then once you get here you've got deadlines with assignments and things which set that but I still think mostly everyone's doing, like they're getting out what they're putting in. So I think it is, for me I see it more as a personal thing because each person is doing it differently for a different reason. So that's my thoughts on that.

Fac: What did you think about that, something similar or different?

Kiki: Oh me? I thought that was quite similar initially, I think it's a bit of both. I think there are some official transitions such as registration but then there are some that aren't really official such as fresher's week, you've got co-curricular activities that you join after a couple of weeks studying and then you've got societies, things like that, those are part of the transition but it really does vary. Some are official that it's compulsory you must do but others aren't so official. And I think also in terms of transitions some people may like go through a transition quicker than others and I think it's just all down to adaptation really.

Fac: But do they have equal weight, sort of the official milestones that the university wants you to go through versus what you're personally going through?

Kiki: I think the official transitions are kind of weaker in terms of, the unofficial ones they develop you more as an individual because you choose to do that and it's not something that's kind of written down for you to do, whereas official ones it's just kind of there on paper really. I think that's just there for that, but when you choose to develop yourself those are the other transitions that you go through.

Naomi: I think there's expected ones as well like that put more pressure on you, so like you're expected to become an independent learner and you're expected to make friends when you're at uni but then you also can have personal ones that you think of throughout the year such as "I'm struggling with this, I need to work a bit more on it". And so you have, I think you have less pressure on them type of ones because it's personal.

Fac: Is that more important then to achieve your own kind of personal goals you set?

Naomi: No. I wouldn't say it's more important, no. I think once you've, once you've completed the transitions that are set out for you, you get more confidence to achieve your personal ones as well maybe.

Dawn: I think it depends as well sort of why you've come to uni because if you've come because that's sort of the natural progression say in your family, sort of everyone goes to uni, then you probably would focus more on the official ones because you don't necessarily know why you're here to develop personally, whereas if you've come with the specific goal then you'll use the unofficial ones that meet sort of what you wanted to do. So I think it depends on, yeah, why you've come to uni and what you're expecting to get out of it.

Fac: You've all come with a special goal I think, right?

Kiki: Yeah.

Fac: So because you've got that goal at the end...

Kiki: It makes it smoother.

Fac: Does it make it smoother?

Kiki: The transition. Well I think personally for me it makes it much smoother because certain things that might be a bit tough, like getting an assignment done and you're like "oh my god, it's so difficult, I'm going to get nowhere" and then you think back to your goal, it motivates you and then you can carry on, hand it in, probably get a good grade and then, yeah, that's done.

Fac: You think it will make it easier then if you've got fixed idea of where you're trying to go?

Dawn: Yeah. I think once I got here it definitely did but in terms of getting here it didn't really because I knew this is where I had to go and it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do to begin with. I didn't want to come to uni so I think with having that goal and thinking "okay, the only way I can do that is to go to uni", to begin with would have made it a lot more difficult because I really didn't want to. So, but then once I got here, yeah, it's like you know "okay, I need to do this to get there so that's what I'm going to do".

Fac: And if you've got that really specific goal and that's almost like a reason for coming to uni, is it then really important to make sure you sort of tick off all those, those kind of boxes that the university puts in front of you in order to get that goal, you know, sort of whether that's something to do with your course or any other kind of hurdles that you have to overcome?

Kiki: Yeah. I think there's indicators there to see how far you've gone through your transition and how far you've got and for example of course you've got registration stuff but what I often see myself doing is when you have assignments due in I just look at the previous ones as well and I'll compare my marks and I'll see where I'm going, or if there's a certain part where I kind of struggled in getting over a barrier and the other ones, it kind of helps me see how smooth my transition has been. And that's why I think my transition was smooth because...