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EMPLOYABILITY AND CAPITALS: THE ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

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by

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Abstract

Entry to higher education has increased substantially for economically disadvantaged groups in recent years, but historically disadvantaged groups have been proven to still face significantly poorer graduate outcomes than their more advantaged counterparts. This research applied a theory of capital development, to explore why this might be the case with an examination of the employability experiences of first-generation students at a UK Russell Group university.

An exploratory sequential mixed method was utilised. Data collection commenced with twenty-five interviews with first-generation students. These interviews were analysed thematically, inductively and then deductively with the application of the Graduate Capital Model. Findings from the first phase of the data collection were used to inform the creation of a survey for the second phase which was administered to 379 participants.

Capitals have been increasingly used to explore disadvantage; however, this theorisation of experience has not always been fully supported with empirical evidence. This research applied the Graduate Capital Model to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation students via both qualitative and quantitative data. Although the GCM had been applied in other contexts, to the author's knowledge this is the only research to apply the model to analyse the employability experiences of first-generation undergraduates within the UK. This study is also potentially unique in gathering quantitative data on this subject with the application of the Graduate Capital Scale.

Key findings include the high value attached by first-generation students to their human capital in the form of educational credentials, however they often felt excluded from the graduate labour market because of low social and cultural capital. The Graduate Capital Model proved valuable in understanding the students' experiences, but there was a need to look beyond the model in its current form to understand more about the foundational role of economic capital and how capitals co-evolve. Significantly, the research revealed first-generation and continuing-generation students to depend on different modes of career support. First-generation students were more likely to rely on university lecturers and less able to utilise their parents and careers services for employability capital development. The research includes recommendations for policy and practice to support first-generation students with their capital development before, during and after they transition from higher education.

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Definitions and Abbreviations

The following definitions are introduced as key terms which have been used throughout the thesis.

Agency..... The concept that individuals can enact choice to shape their own circumstances. Van Der Kolk (2015) describes agency as a ‘feeling of being in charge of your life [and] knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances’ (p. 94) In this study the agents are UK undergraduates.

Capital..... Described by Bourdieu (1986) as key thinking tools, capitals can take many forms including cultural, economic and social. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggested that the acquisition of capitals and the barriers to doing so were key to understanding the extent to which individuals can access competitive fields such as the graduate labour market.

Cultural capital (CC)..... Bourdieu (1986) suggested that CC existed in three forms: embodied (‘long lasting dispositions of the mind and body’), objectified (cultural goods such as pictures and books) and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). In the Graduate Capital Model, CC is defined as ‘the formation of culturally valued knowledge, disposition and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter’ (Tomlinson, 2017a, p.343).

Economic capital (EC) At its simplest level EC is access to money. Bourdieu (1986) suggested that EC was a foundational form of capital as those without money are unable to invest in acquiring other forms of capital.

Employability Definitions of employability are contested. One dominant definition by Yorke and Knight (2006), suggests that employability is constituted of ‘a set of achievements - skills understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits, themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’ (p.8). However, in this study, employability is conceived more broadly and is aligned with more processual approaches (see Graduate Capital Model below). Tomlinson and Jackson’s (2021)

Definitions and Abbreviations

definition of employability is perhaps helpful here: ‘within this perspective, employability is conceptualised as an active process operating over time and context. Correspondingly, employability is less about the acquisition and deployment of employability skills and more about personal and socio-cultural resources which are acquired through multiple contexts and which enhance the value of a graduate’s emerging profile’ (p.885). They go on to link this conceptualisation of employability to the acquisition of capitals, rather than skills.

Disadvantaged socioeconomic status

(DisSES)..... As definitions of disadvantage are often ‘contested and complex’ (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016), when results from previous research have been merged to include terms such as class, educational level, lower income, neighbourhood location and parental occupation, the term DisSES (McCafferty, 2022) has been adopted. In contrast to DisSES, Advantaged Socioeconomic Status has been used (AdvSES).

First generation students

(FGS) Chosen as a key population for this thesis to illustrate potential inequality within the graduate labour market, first-generation students are defined as those who ‘attend university and achieve a university degree (BA/BSc or higher) but whose (step) mother and (step) father did not.’(Henderson, Shure, and Adamecz-Völgyi, 2020, p. 734). These students contrast to the wider student population of non-FGS. (It should be noted that the terms first-generation students and first-in-family or FiF tend to be used interchangeably in published research.)

Graduate Capital Model

(GCM) Defined by Tomlinson (2017a), the Graduate Capital Model suggests that employability is constituted of five forms of capital which can be acquired through student experience. The model consists of five capitals: human, cultural, social, identity and psychological. This approach is developmental in nature and suggestive that students can and need to acquire a range of capitals beyond human capital (and specifically the skills and attributes more traditionally

Definitions and Abbreviations

associated with models of employability) to transition successfully into the graduate labour market.

Graduate Capital Scale

(GCS)..... A self-reporting scale, which invites participants to assess their capital development across the five domains of the GCM (Tomlinson et al, 2022).

Higher education (HE) Higher education, in this study, refers to education at degree-level and above provided by universities and institutes of higher education (HEIs) in the UK.

Human capital (HC)..... Initially described by Becker (1964) as about investing in key qualifications and attributes to purposefully enhance labour market outcomes, Tomlinson (2017a) specifically defines human capital in his model as the 'knowledge and skills which graduates acquire' (p.341).

Identity capital (IC) In the context of this study, Tomlinson's definition of career identity for graduates seeking employability has been adopted. Tomlinson (2017a) defines identity capital as the 'level of investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability' (p. 345). Central to Tomlinson's (2017a) definition is the need for undergraduates to not only arrive at a clear career identity for themselves, but to be able to define this to future employers.

Psychological capital

(PC) First defined by Luthans, Luthans and Luthans (2004), in this study Tomlinson's (2017a) definition is adopted in which psychological capital is about the capacity of students to 'adapt to challenging personal and job market circumstances and establish a relatively high locus of self-control and persistence' (Tomlinson et al, 2017, p. 31).

Reputational capital Strathdee (2009) suggests gaining a degree from an elite university confers labour market advantage beyond the academic qualification achieved by an individual, this can be theorised as reputational capital.

Definitions and Abbreviations

- Russell Group There are 24 Russell Group universities in the UK. They are high-tariff entry institutions of higher education and tend to have an emphasis on research (Russell Group, 2022). The university chosen for the data collection in this research was a Russell Group university based in the South of England.
- Social capital (SC) Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network’ (p. 21). Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that it is the sum of relationships and networks which graduates possess and mobilise which are important to them in navigating the graduate labour market.
- Social mobility The Social Mobility Advisory Group (2016) define social mobility as ‘people’s ability to improve on their own family social position or their own status through opportunities provided in their society.’ (p.10).
- Structure..... Structure is defined as 'objective, social institutions influencing how people live and act' (Tholen, 2015, p. 766). In this research, the structures studied include students’ educational backgrounds in the form of schools and colleges and their chosen university, as well as potential future employers and study opportunities.
- Widening participation
(WP)..... Government policy describes the purpose of widening participation to address ‘discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups of students’ (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018).

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

HAZEL ELAINE MCCAFFERTY

EMPLOYABILITY AND CAPITALS: THE ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:-

McCafferty, H. (2022) 'An Unjust Balance: a Systematic Review of the Employability Perceptions of UK Undergraduates from Disadvantaged Socio-economic Backgrounds'. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 27(4), pp. 570-593. DOI: 10.1080/13596748.2022.2110774

McCafferty, H., Tomlinson, M. and Kirby, S. (2024) 'You have to work ten times harder': first-in-family students, employability and capital development'. *Journal of Education and Work*. 37(1-4), pp. 32-47. DOI: 10.1080/13639080.2024.2383561

Signature:

Date: 27 November 2024

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Study focus

Since 1997, various governments in the United Kingdom, have sought to increase student numbers within higher education, with the specific aim of widening participation (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016). These governments have argued that increased participation in higher education should act as a lever for social mobility by allowing more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to secure degrees and consequently gain graduate-level roles (Department for Education, 2017). Despite students from disadvantaged backgrounds becoming increasingly likely to enter university, they still experience worse career outcomes than their more advantaged counterparts (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018).

Critically for this thesis, despite equal degree performance, evidence continues to grow that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged in their career development in several ways. They are less likely to go to the high prestige universities which tend to command the best graduate outcomes (Britton et al, 2019; Crawford et al, 2016). On graduation, they are less likely to gain employment in professional and managerial roles (Office for Students, 2021). Furthermore, on average, they earn less throughout their careers (Bridge Group, 2017; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016).

Despite, extensive investment in widening participation, socio-economic disadvantage continues to be 'a significant driver of inequality' (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016). Moreover, the Social Mobility Commission argue that widening participation initiatives have tended to focus on access to higher education and because of this, structural inequalities for students during their higher education and subsequent graduate destinations have often been neglected (2016). Recently, there has been a renewed interest in this topic, with universities required to measure graduate outcomes and specifically the progress made by disadvantaged students throughout the course of their degrees (Office for Students, 2021). Despite extensive data about graduate outcomes remaining less favourable for disadvantaged students, the reasons for this have not been fully established. This research aimed to explore the possible factors and mechanisms underpinning labour market disadvantage by examining the employability development experienced by UK students from both first-generation and continuing generation backgrounds at a Russell Group university.

This exploration of employability was undertaken with the application of the 'Graduate Capital Model' (Tomlinson, 2017a). The Graduate Capital Model suggests that students might benefit from developing their capitals across five domains: human, cultural, social, psychological and identity. The research evaluated whether the concept of capital development could help to explain how and why students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds perform less well in the labour market.

1.2 Summary of research outcomes

This research revealed first-generation students to be heavily dependent on their human capital in the form of degree credentials. It also demonstrated that social and cultural capital are key to understanding how disadvantage replicates within the graduate labour market and that crucially first-generation students can struggle to acquire these forms of capital. Another major finding was that half of all undergraduates struggle to form sufficient identity capital to enter the graduate labour market. First-generation students and non-first-generation students have equal levels of psychological capital; however, this research suggests that continuing-generation students are more likely to build their narratives around resilience with items which are more attractive to employers such as extra-curricular activities. Although the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) proved highly salient to understanding the participants' experiences, it was concluded that more attention needs to be given by policymakers to the foundational role of economic capital in students acquiring other forms of developmental capital associated with successful transitions to the graduate labour market. Importantly, this research demonstrated how capitals interact and serve to reinforce each other. So, students who arrive at university with low levels of relevant social capital in the form of networks for example, may struggle to understand the range of opportunities within the graduate labour market and consequently establish a career identity. This subsequently impacts upon their acquisition of human capital in the form of career management skills. A unique perspective provided by the research is the different ways in which first-generation and continuing-generation students accrue their employability capital. The study provided empirical evidence that first-generation and continuing-generation students rely on different modes of support for their capital development. For example, parents and family were shown to impact negatively on capital development for first-generation students. First-generation students were also more likely to depend on their university lecturers for capital development than their non-first-generation counterparts, whilst non-first-generation students were more likely to make use of the careers service to enhance their employability capitals. These significant findings are addressed with a call to action to policymakers and key actors for the systematic foregrounding of employability

capitals throughout the student lifecycle from applications to higher education through to transitions to graduate employability.

This chapter begins by briefly introducing the aims of the research and its research design. Next, the research context will be explored including the choice of first-generation students as participants for the study and a Russell Group university as a location for the research. The research significance will then be outlined with a particular focus on the importance of hearing first-generation student voices within research; why the topic of employability is valued, but also understudied; and how the application of the Graduate Capital Model could enable these topic areas to be understood more fully. After, a personal reflection will be shared. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be outlined.

1.3 Research aim

The overarching aim of this study was to explore whether the concept of capital development could help to explain why first-generation students perform less well in the labour market.

Phase 1 used qualitative methods to explore:

1. How do first-generation students within higher education understand the influences (including social and biographical) which act to shape their employability?
2. What are the perceived barriers and facilitators of first-generation students' career capital development?
3. What modes of support do first-generation students feel will equip them better for enhancing their future employment?

Phase 2 of the study used quantitative methods to measure:

4. Do first-generation students have differences in their capitals, when compared to the wider student population at the study's university?
5. Is there any correlation between capital development and specific experiences?

(It was initially hypothesised that first-generation students would report equal levels of human and identity capital, stronger levels of psychological capital and weaker levels of social and cultural capital. As the study developed, further hypotheses were created and included the hypothesis that first-generation and non-first-generation students might depend on different careers support and activities to mobilise their capitals.)

1.4 Research design

Conducted within a pragmatist philosophy, the research design was that of an ‘Exploratory Sequential’ mixed methodology (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Phase 1 of data collection was qualitative. In this phase, 25 first-generation students were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The aim of this phase of the study was to explore what it meant to be a first-generation student at a Russell Group university and how this impacted upon employability development. The results of these interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a) and used to inform phase 2 of the study. Phase 2 of the study was quantitative. In this phase, a survey instrument was designed which included variables developed from phase 1 and a pre-existing scale (the Graduate Capital Scale) which had previously been developed to measure the components of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson et al, 2022). The survey was administered to 379 students (the survey sample included UK undergraduates at a Russell Group university, including first-generation and non-first-generation students). Finally, the outcomes of both phases of the study were triangulated with literature in order that results could be reviewed and implications for practice proposed. A full account of the research design can be found in chapter 5.

It should be noted that before the main studies were conducted a systematic review of qualitative primary data was undertaken to understand how inequality is experienced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (McCafferty, 2022). This contributed substantially to both the literature review within this thesis (chapter 3), but also the subsequent triangulation process (chapter 9).

1.5 Research context

Next, the research participants and location for the study will be defined and their value to the study explored.

1.5.1 First-generation students as a population for the study

To understand more about social mobility and disadvantage in the context of higher education transitions, first-generation students were chosen as the population for this research. In 2021-22 almost half of all undergraduates (47.9%) were estimated to be first-generation (469 150 students; Office for Students, 2024b).

In this research, first-generation students were defined as those who:

‘attend university and achieve a university degree (BA/BSc or higher) but whose (step) mother and (step) father did not.’

(Henderson, Shure, and Adamecz-Völgyi, 2020, p. 734)

First-generation students have been shown to be disadvantaged at all stages of the undergraduate lifecycle from application through to graduation. They are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than continuing-generation students (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020). The likelihood of them attending university is 34% for first-generation students compared to 72% for students who have graduate parents (Henderson, Shure and Adamecz-Völgyi, 2022). First-generation students are less likely to attend elite universities even when early educational attainment has been controlled for (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020; Jerrim, 2021). They are less likely to study high-grade subjects such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (Office for Students, 2024b). Once at university, they have lower attainment rates than students whose parents have higher education qualifications (76.9% compared to 83.6%; Office for Students, 2024b).

The achievement of upward social mobility has been cited as a key reason for first-generation students to attend university (Lehmann, 2019). However, first-generation students often struggle to achieve upward mobility. They have a lower chance of graduating overall, even when other widening participation measures are controlled for (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020). First-generation students have also been proven to have significantly poorer employability outcomes than their continuing-generation counterparts as on graduation, they are more likely to work within roles which do not require their highest qualification and in smaller firms with less graduate opportunities (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2022).

Using first-generation students as the research’s population had benefits. First-generation students is a term that is widely recognised and accepted within universities, with 15 out of 24 Russell Group universities using it as part of their widening participation criteria (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson, Shure, 2020; Jerrim, 2021). Consequently, when the studies were advertised, they could be defined with some brevity to both gatekeepers and participants. It was however, noted that the use of first-generation as a terminology within some studies has been criticised as poorly defined and at times contradictory (the debates between the terms first-generation students and first-in-family are an exemplar of this; Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2022; Bukodi, Goldthorpe and Zhao, 2021; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018). Also, some have been critical of studies which fail to recognise the intersectionality of disadvantage, erroneously presenting first-generation students as an homogenous group (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2023). In this research these concerns were addressed by defining first-generation status before data collection commenced. Also, attention was paid to the differences between students via

the deliberate collection of additional biographical data. Recognition was made that first-generation students often face more than one disadvantage, with 40% facing three or more additional disadvantages, these including items such as income deprivation and being in receipt of free school meals (Adamecz-Volgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020). Finally, whilst paying attention to deficit can be an important part of understanding inequality, it is acknowledged that focussing solely on deficiency can pathologise and marginalise individuals (Belmi et al, 2023). In this study a mindful approach was taken to purposefully hear the voices of first-generation students, recognise their strengths and acknowledge their varying contexts. The participants became active contributors to the research. They were asked to give feedback about the interviews (including their content and processes) as well as contributing content in the form of survey questions to the second phase of the research.

1.5.2 Location of study

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection was conducted at a single university. The chosen university is one of 24 of the universities which form the Russell Group. It is situated in the south of England. Around 16,000 undergraduates and 7,600 postgraduate students attend the university (Russell Group, 2022). It has a reputation for high status research, with around a third of its research rated as world leading (Russell Group, 2022).

The university was chosen for two reasons: its accessibility to the researcher, but also because it suited the aims of the research study as it has high reputational capital, high levels of employability, but relatively poor upward social mobility. Recent graduate outcomes (academic year 2020/1) showed 91% of students to be engaged in work or study, 4% in travel/caring/retirement and 5% as unemployed (nationally 5% of students were categorised as unemployed; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). 84% of the university's undergraduates (UK students only) who found employment were classified as entering highly skilled occupations (including managerial roles, professional and associate professional roles); this compared favourably with the national average for all universities which was 73% entering highly skilled occupations (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). However, in terms of upward social mobility, this university was rated as performing relatively poorly (The Sutton Trust, 2023). The university's mobility rating (which included a combination of factors such as student characteristics at intake as well as performance at graduation) was ranked as 92nd out of 111 universities (using data from the Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset; The Sutton Trust, 2023). The university's own Access and Participation Plan (2024-25 to 2027-28), records socio-economic intake as a matter for concern and notes that numbers of students accessing the university who were eligible for free school meals has fallen recently to 9.0% (University of XXXX, 2023).

The decision to undertake the research at a single site enabled the complex topic of employability, and the differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students' capital development, to be studied without any confounding factors associated with location and reputational capital. Most employers hiring for graduate schemes target just 10 to 25 of universities, choosing these on judgements made about institutional prestige (Ingram and Allen, 2018). The university in this study was one of those preferred by employers for their targeted hiring practices. This matters because it is one of the many ways in which social reproduction has been shown to operate within higher education, as employers act to target institutions for graduate roles and internships where they identify students who have similar backgrounds to themselves (Ingram and Allen, 2018; Tholen et al, 2013). Some have conceptualised this as reputational capital, which can be defined as the labour market advantage influenced by university attendance, beyond the academic qualification achieved by the individual (Strathdee, 2009). The value added status of some universities is often historical and linked to a variety of factors including past recruitment patterns and onward placement of graduates into occupationally elite roles. Research in the UK has shown that students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more strategically conscious in selecting those universities with high levels of reputational capital than their more disadvantaged counterparts (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). The first-generation students in this study had successfully applied for a Russell Group university with high reputational capital, by doing so, as Clegg (2011) suggests, they might already be seen as remarkable. How the participants had broken through the barriers to access a Russell Group university and their awareness of reputational capital is of interest in this study.

1.6 Research significance

This research was designed to collect empirical data in order that more could be learnt about how UK-based first-generation students experience their employability development. The research was also motivated by the need to add to knowledge in the fields of employability and social mobility and extend conceptual thinking about capital development with the application of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a). The significance of each of these areas will now be explored.

1.6.1 Hearing the voices of first-generation students

There have been repeated calls to hear student voices within employability research and in particular the perspective of equity groups (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022; Tymon, 2013). As previously demonstrated (see section 1.5), first-generation students face significant labour

market disadvantage and as such can be described as one such equity group deserving of research attention. However, despite their growing representation within higher education, there are limited studies in the UK about the employability development experiences of first-generation students (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020).

First-generation students are of value when studying employability and upward social mobility, as they have been shown to lack key insights into the graduate labour market inherited from parents who have previously attended university (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Pires and Chapin, 2022). However, whilst it has been identified that first-generation students lack key advantages such as networks and cultural insight, some have suggested that little is known about how they perceive and react to this (De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq, 2024; Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022). A specific objective of this research was to enable the voices of first-generation students to be heard. In doing so, first-generation student experiences of employability development were gathered, and specifically their perspectives on why they might experience worse outcomes. The research also enabled the facilitators of their employability development to be captured. This student perspective was key to understanding where activities might usefully be directed to best impact upon employability development. Phase 2 of the research enabled further empirical data to be collected to understand more about the employability development of undergraduates. Based on the empirical data collected in both phases 1 and 2 of the research, this thesis includes recommendations for key agents such as schools, universities and employers to prioritise activities in support of equitable employability outcomes for first-generation students. This is particularly important as first-generation students may be less aware of and have fewer resources to engage with the type of activities often valued by employers.

1.6.2 Employability and the need for empirical data

Interest in the topic of graduate employability is high with universities held increasingly accountable for the destinations of their graduates via league tables (Tomlinson, 2017b; Tomlinson and Nghia, 2020). Some have suggested that high levels of graduate employability are a key priority for economic growth in the United Kingdom (Tibby and Norton, 2020). Others have argued that higher education institutions have a 'moral duty' to ensure the employability of their students within a hotly contested graduate labour market (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017, p. 6). Although there has been extensive interest in and research output about employability, there are apparent gaps in the research, with some arguing that there is a heavy reliance on conceptual debates with limited empirical evidence as to what really enhances graduate employability (Baruch, 2015; Batistic and Tymon, 2017; Caballero, Alvarez-González,

and López-Miguens, 2021; Forrier, De Cuyper, and Akkermans, 2018). Furthermore, where evidence exists about employability outcomes for graduates, it is often obtained via single point in time and longitudinal surveys, often ignoring the student perspective (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018; Elias et al, 2021). These surveys have clear value as they prove that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face poorer outcomes in the graduate labour market (Office for Students, 2021). However, they do not speak to the experiences of individual undergraduates, or fully reveal the mechanisms underpinning disadvantage, or indeed how some individuals are able to overcome the structural forces they face (Crawford et al, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Hordosy and Clark, 2018). This study collected empirical data about these mechanisms and how the students overcame some of the barriers they faced. It had value in revealing which modes of support enabled first-generation students to develop their employability. This enabled specific recommendations for practice to be made in support of the employability development of first-generation students.

1.6.3 Social mobility and the need to understand underpinning mechanisms

Social mobility is of central importance to the UK economy, policy makers and individuals. In the past 25 years there has been extensive research on the topic of social mobility, with Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin (2022) describing research outputs in this area having 'proliferated over time' (p. 8). Despite a strong focus in policy and research, social mobility between classes has been shown to have largely stalled, as the UK continues to be one of the poorest performing countries for mobility in the OECD (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019). By increasing the numbers of students entering universities, governments had hoped to use widening participation in higher education as a lever for social mobility. However, social mobility has proven to be stubbornly difficult to alter through higher education participation alone (Burke, 2012; Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022; Reay, 2017). As Elliott Major and Machin (2018) suggest, education can only partly act to overcome the structural forces which exist in the UK economy where it seems that disadvantage is created at multiple stages throughout education and beyond for graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This matters for individuals who experience poorer employment returns and for society as talent is wasted and social and political divisions endure (Social Mobility Commission, 2016; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

While social mobility is of interest in this research it is acknowledged that the term itself can be deemed divisive and controversial (Maslen, 2023). Reay (2013) for example is heavily critical of the individualistic nature of social mobility, which she sees as a small consolation and excuse for the wider inequalities within society. Others have argued that no one level in society should

be seen as better than another (Maslen, 2023). However, there is evidence that parental education, occupations and income are key to determining children's outcomes and interest is strong in this, with some claiming the mechanisms behind this to be relatively understudied in the UK (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022). Furthermore, this topic has been shown to be of interest to first-generation students themselves via their own declared labour market aspirations (Lehmann, 2022). This research aims to contribute to knowledge within this field by exploring the experiences of first-generation students as they become potentially upwardly socially mobile by entering a Russell Group university. It also aimed to explore how first-generation students regard their onward mobility as they considered their transitions to the graduate labour market. Through the collection of interview data this research illustrated how a variety of mechanisms act against first-generation students becoming socially mobile, despite their own best efforts. In its second phase, the research enabled a direct comparison of the experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation students and how they might utilise different sources of help to aid their employability development.

1.6.4 A new conceptual approach: the Graduate Capital Model

Theories of capital development are dominant in research about inequalities in employability (Peeters et al, 2019), with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of economic, social and cultural capital applied most often to understand how resources including wealth, knowledge, connections and alliances are used to protect status within the graduate labour market (McCafferty, 2022). However, where capitals are used to explain employability disadvantages, authors have suggested that a 'major problem' exists in both their quantification and operationalisation (Ingram et al, 2023, p. 32). This is partly because most data about graduate employability is collected via the graduate outcomes survey, which whilst valuable for understanding graduate destinations, allows little room to focus on 'the construction of the graduate' and what it means to make someone employable (Ingram et al, 2023, p. 5). Furthermore, when empirical evidence is presented about how students develop their employability capitals there is often a methodological variance which aligns with researchers' own academic disciplines and epistemological beliefs. Consequently, when topics such as social and cultural capital are explored most of the empirical evidence provided is from qualitative studies, with an interpretivist stance (McCafferty, 2022). These studies are important because they give the student perspective, but do not allow for the findings to be generalised to a broader population. Conversely, when evidence is presented as to the value of psychological capital this is mainly via positivist studies with a heavy reliance on surveys and scales (Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu and Hirst, 2014). This results in researchers calling for more qualitative research to enable a more

in-depth understanding of how inequalities are reproduced, and capitals acquired (Ingram and Allen, 2018; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021).

This research aimed to overcome the issues with quantifying capitals by collecting empirical data about employability capital with the application of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a). The model addresses the application of capitals holistically and includes the acquisition of human, social, cultural, psychological and identity capitals. This thesis adopted multiple methods including qualitative and quantitative approaches. This allowed the complexities of employability and the contradictions of how students exercise personal agency within a competitive labour market to be studied. It also enabled a wider range of capitals to be considered (the Graduate Capital Model is relatively less used in the literature about disadvantage, meaning that concepts of identity and psychological capital are seldom addressed; Bathmaker, 2021b; Parutis and Howson, 2020). Capital acquisition for both first-generation students and continuing-generation students was studied. Phase 1 of the research enabled more to be learnt about whether first-generation students understood the importance of capitals in their employability development, their acquisition of capitals and the ways in which higher education served to develop employability capital. Phase 2 of the research enabled a direct comparison of the levels of employability capitals for first-generation students and continuing-generation students. Both phases of the study collected data about how capitals are formed and mobilised and the factors that facilitate and constrain their development. It was found that there are differences between how first-generation students and continuing-generation students acquire capitals. The reasons for this difference in capital operationalisation are explored in the discussion chapter, which includes recommendations for practice to support the development of capitals for first-generation students.

1.7 Personal context

This research endeavoured to illuminate a topic which I am passionate about. I had previously worked in the field of careers and employability. My interest in the topic developed from prior experiences which included the support of first-generation students via targeted mentoring projects. Prior to my PhD I had applied the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) as a conceptual framework to support students with their career development. I had also played a key role in the development of the Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022). However, there had been limited opportunity to test the model and its associated scale with empirical evidence.

Chapter 1

My own socio-demographic position was that of a rural, working class background. The daughter of a farmworker and housewife who had six children, I grew up in a tenanted cottage. Surprisingly, with no understanding or preparation, I passed the Oxbridge examination, but then failed the entrance interview miserably. I can vividly recall being questioned about the broadsheets read by my father (at the time my Dad read the 'Sun' tabloid) and the 'productions' I had attended (I was unfamiliar with the word productions and had not visited any theatres, although I read plays extensively). I now realise that my own cultural capital did not align with that of the professor's. Fortunately, I went on to study English Literature at the University of Southampton (they offered a place without an interview). As a first-generation student, I found the experience to be initially unsettling as I struggled to understand the language and expectations of degree-level study, as well as the seeming 'norms' of student society. However, I ultimately found my degree to be profoundly transformational, both professionally and personally. It enabled me to access opportunities to work within graduate-level roles and associated with this undertake extensive postgraduate study. I am mindful that this was at a time when grants were freely available and while I am profoundly grateful for the opportunities higher education afforded me, I am also conscious that this is not the case for all.

Professionally, I have worked in the field of careers and employability for 30 years; I have observed limited progress in terms of supporting disadvantaged students into the top universities and most prestigious occupational roles. I recognise many of the themes within my research from personal experience. (Although, I have endeavoured to be open to hear the voices of my participants with a sense of unknowing and preparedness to learn. More is said about my positionality, including my willingness to learn and the transparency of my methods within section 5.4.9.)

My experiences shaped my approach to this research both in terms of choosing it and how it has been conducted. For example, Pragmatism was chosen as my research philosophy because it fits with my 'worldview' (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) that research should have practical value which can be shared and lead to change. I believe that research is about connecting with participants and hearing their voices, and about potentially resulting in tangible benefits to improve lives. In this case, it is hoped that the research will have value for policymakers within higher education, which in turn will impact positively on the employability experiences of first-generation students. This approach has driven decisions throughout my working life and into this research project.

1.8 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of ten chapters. The literature review within this thesis is divided into two chapters. The first of these (Chapter 2) aims to contextualise the topic. It does this by introducing key concepts, debates and actors within the fields of widening participation and graduate employability. The second of these chapters (Chapter 3) seeks to understand the specific barriers faced by undergraduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds as they develop their employability and subsequent transitions to the graduate labour market. As well as exploring the barriers faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it also serves to introduce how this disadvantage is often conceptualised via capitals. Chapter 4 is a theoretical one which builds upon the literature review to further explore how capitals are used to conceptualise disadvantage and to introduce the Graduate Capital Model and its component parts (GCM; Tomlinson, 2017a). The GCM is the framework which will be tested in subsequent parts of the thesis. The philosophical and methodological approaches to this research are described in detail in Chapter 5. This chapter aims to show how methodological decisions were made strategically with an emphasis on rigour and transparency throughout.

The results chapters are presented in three separate parts. Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings from the qualitative phase of this research. Chapter 6 identifies six inductive themes which give us a sense of what it means to be a first-generation student studying at a Russell Group university. Next, Chapter 7 also presents qualitative findings, but does so deductively with the application of the Graduate Capital Model. The final results chapter (Chapter 8) presents the findings from the quantitative phase of the research. The next chapter (Chapter 9) is a critical discussion of the findings from this mixed method research; it acts to triangulate the findings from the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research and situates these within the literature. It also makes recommendations for policy and practice. Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 10), summarises the key findings and contributions of this thesis, presents a critical analysis of the limitations of the studies and makes proposals for possible areas for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review Part 1: Context

2.1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, successive governments have hoped that policies of widening participation would act as a lever for social mobility and subsequently result in enhanced employability outcomes for students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). However, intergenerational mobility has proven to be difficult to achieve through higher education participation alone (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022; Reay, 2017). Though government policy has positioned all graduates as able to make free and strategic decisions about their future careers (Hordosy and Clark, 2018), there is a growing body of evidence that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged in terms of securing high quality career destinations (Crawford et al, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Office for Students, 2021). While the lack of meritocracy within the UK labour market has been noted by some, the factors contributing to this remain partially understood (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022).

This chapter begins with labour market context, specifically the extent to which socio-economic disadvantage has been demonstrated to impact labour market outcomes. Next, the policy of widening participation is explored and how, despite extensive expenditure, disadvantaged students are still less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to attend the most elite universities. Finally, the concept of employability is introduced. A critical stance is taken towards dominant definitions which tend to position employment outcomes as the sole responsibility of the individual student, with limited attention paid to structural inequalities.

The nature of the sources used in this literature review are wide-ranging and reflect the complex nature of employability research which spans the disciplines of business, education, economics, psychology and sociology. In the case of contextual information, for example governmental definitions of widening participation, original documentation such as UK parliamentary briefings or commissioned reports have been used. In the case of data sets (for example graduate outcomes) recent UK versions have been consulted wherever possible.

2.2 Degree outcomes

Central to widening participation and employability agendas is the belief that by participating in higher education, young people will enhance their career prospects, with degrees traditionally viewed by governments and policymakers as a positive springboard into well-paid and secure

roles. However, Tomlinson (2012) contends that rather than mass participation in higher education acting to enhance social mobility, it has in fact acted to 'disrupt' 'future returns' (p. 415). A key debate is whether the UK can sustain growing numbers of graduates into high-level roles, which enable individuals to achieve the promised returns on their investments in education. This next section will explore whether a degree results in positive returns for individual students and whether these are shared equally between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Recent surveys of newly graduated students and their labour market returns revealed 82% of 2020/21 respondents to be in work or unpaid employment after graduation, with 73% of these in roles classed as professional level (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). Graduates can expect their prospects to improve over time with evidence that professional employment rates increased by 13.7% 40 months after graduation (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015). Added to this, studies have illustrated the central importance of degrees in terms of securing employment which is meaningful and valued by individual employees (Elias et al, 2021). Research also shows the potential of degree study to confer a 'graduate premium' (Britton et al, 2019; Elias et al, 2021). A graduate premium is defined as 'the extra earning power that can be attributed to having a degree' (Elias et al, 2021, p.2). Using anonymised tax returns from His Majesty's Revenue and Custom, Britton et al (2019) found a sizable pay gap to the benefit of graduates, with median earnings of £30,000 for male graduates and for non-graduates £22,000 (Britton et al, 2019). This gap is replicated for female graduates, although at overall lower levels of £27,000 for graduates and £22,000 for non-graduates. Some have also cited the value of degrees in terms of their ability to increase personal welfare, reduce crime, and enhance personal health (Elias et al, 2021; Green and Henseke, 2016).

Taken together the above surveys would seem to indicate that degrees have significant benefits for individuals in terms of career progression, earning potential and health and well-being. Critically, Ball (2018) is optimistic that the graduate labour market can continue to sustain high levels of degree entrants, arguing that in the 10 years since 2006, the Annual Population Survey (APS) showed 'that the UK economy has added over 2.475 million new jobs in managerial, professional and associate professional roles' (p. 64). The Social Mobility Commission (2021) reinforced this finding, suggesting that 75% of the growth in UK roles since 2012 has been in professional jobs. However, and in contrast, some authors contend that the graduate labour market is structurally congested with demand for graduate jobs outstripping supply, leading to more graduates occupying lower-level and less well paid roles (Tholen and Brown, 2018). Evidence from the Office for National Statistics (2019) would seem to support this, as they found that 31% of working age graduates were in jobs which they were over-educated for, contending that this was a waste of resources for both individual and economy. Furthermore,

the report's authors argued that this was not a temporary problem, but one that affected 29.2% of graduates five years after graduation. Green and Henseke's (2016) research supports this, as they found evidence that underemployment increased in the UK between 1992 and 2006 (they defined underemployment as the level at which 'educational achievement exceeds that required for the job', p. 515). Using the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills, Green and Henseke (2016) estimated that more than 30% of UK graduates could be classed as underemployed, this is important because underemployed graduates have registered more dissatisfaction than non-graduates and experience less of the benefits associated with degree study including returns on health and well-being.

2.2.1 Socio-economic disadvantage

The evidence for graduate returns could be described as mixed, however surveys of graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more cohesive. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds consistently have poorer outcomes in terms of their career destinations than their more advantaged peers (McCafferty, 2022). With research in this area illustrating that 'those who start out ahead are the ones most likely to succeed' (Friedman and Laurison, 2019, p. 40). This pipeline of advantage starts at primary education and flows through to graduation and beyond. Whether you get a degree in the first place is heavily associated with socio-economic background (Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Klein, 2021; Social Mobility Commission, 2020). When students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do attend university, they are less likely to go to high status universities which have the best employability outcomes (Britton et al, 2019; Crawford et al, 2016; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2021). This is partly because family background has a significant impact on whether students transition to A level studies (Bukodi, Goldthorpe and Zhao, 2021), but is also related to how students make their choices about universities and universities' recruitment practices which appear to favour more well-off students (Aubrey and Riley, 2017; Bathmaker, 2015). (The barriers faced by disadvantaged students applying to university will be scrutinised in more detail in Chapter 3.)

There has been an assumption that once at university 'disadvantage will automatically level out' (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016, p. 14), however surveys of graduate destinations would suggest that this is not the case. Data reveals Quintile 1 students (the most disadvantaged) to have the lowest chance of entering highly skilled employment (71%) compared with Quintile 5 having the highest proportion entering highly skilled roles (75%); whilst this difference is marginal it is not fully attributable to variables such as degree classification (Office for Students, 2021). Research from Crawford et al (2016) adds to this finding. Tracking the outcomes of around 40,000 students who enrolled in higher education between 2006 and 2011, Crawford et al (2016) established that socio-economic background has a significant impact at each stage of

the student lifecycle. They found that even when students from poorer backgrounds attended the same university, took the same subject and gained the same degree class, they were still less likely than their advantaged peers to access top professions. They concluded that 'a good degree from an elite university is not enough to equalize career opportunities to the professions and prime age earnings for those from different socio-economic backgrounds' (Crawford et al, 2016, p. 571). Friedman and Laurison (2019) also found significant discrepancies in outcomes, noting that when they tracked the outcomes of students from Russell Group universities who obtained a first-class degree, 64% from privileged backgrounds went into elite roles, whilst only 45% of students from a working class background did so. This may be partly driven by access to postgraduate study, as Wakeling (2018) found that students defined as working class were half as likely to progress to postgraduate study than students from social class group 1 (National Statistics Socio-economic Classification; NS-SES). They argued that this can have a profound impact on mobility, as many postgraduate qualifications can be linked to professional and managerial roles. Studies have also found evidence that whilst students from lower socio-economic backgrounds might be able to access graduate entry level roles, progression once in these roles is more difficult (Elias et al, 2021; Social Mobility Commission, 2021) with Friedman and Laurison (2019) describing this as a 'class ceiling'. Research has also established that family background in terms of parental income has a significant influence on graduate earnings persisting long after graduation, with students from poorer backgrounds expecting a considerably lower income than their more affluent graduate colleagues (Britton et al, 2019; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Friedman and Laurison (2019) found that attending a Russell Group university can come with a significant earnings premium of around £4,000 per year. However, they also found that students who attended Russell Group universities from working class backgrounds earned consistently less (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Furthermore, they found that amongst students who achieved a first class honours degree, students from more privileged backgrounds earned £7,000 more per annum than working class students with the same degree classification.

2.2.2 Impact of Covid-19

In addition to the inequalities described above, it should be noted that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds faced and continue to encounter disproportionately negative effects from the Covid-19 pandemic. The Social Mobility Commission (2021) described the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'once-in-a generation crisis' (p. vii). One which they, and others, predicted would impact most severely on young people aged 16 - 25, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who lost the most time in education and work (Blundell et al, 2020; Holt-White and Montacute, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). While students from more

advantage backgrounds were able to make use of their financial resources to ride out dips in the economy by 'disproportionately returning to education', students from lower socio-economic groups had to access the labour market when it was at its most precarious (Social Mobility Commission, 2021, p. 32). A significant decline in work experience opportunities impacted students from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly harshly (Holt-White and Montacute, 2020; Mason, 2021). Employers exacerbated the issues encountered by students from lower socio-economic groups by increasingly offering internships with no pay (62% of university students undertook unpaid work experience in 2020/1 compared to 41% in 2018; Mason, 2021). Research suggests that the negative impact of Covid-19 will last long into the future with this generation experiencing 'scarring' in terms of financial returns, but also in terms of psychological and social impacts as they lose networks, work experience and ultimately positional advantage in the labour market (Tomlinson, Reedy and Burg, 2022). It seems highly likely that those students who lack economic and social capital will feel these scarring effects for longer (Social Mobility Commission, 2021; Tomlinson, 2023).

2.3 Policy context: widening participation

As already described, (see section 2.2.1), it is essential for students to have equal access to high-status universities if they are to gain equal access to high-status work and postgraduate opportunities. In this section, widening participation will be defined and contextualised. Evidence will be presented, that despite substantial expenditure, widening participation has failed to lead to substantially increased social mobility. The latter half of this chapter will attempt to explore how inequalities in graduate outcomes have been addressed, with various success, via employability policies and strategies.

2.3.1 Background

Widening participation is a contested term with no single definition (Burke, 2012), but recent government policy describes its purpose in addressing:

'discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups of students.' (Connell-Smith and Hubble – House of Commons' Briefing Paper, 2018)

These under-represented or disadvantaged groups include low-income households, care-leavers, mature students, disabled students, and students from minority ethnic groups. Widening participation has been described as a 'fragmented' set of activities (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). It is generally delivered by higher education institutions through outreach

activities, summer schools and master classes, monitored by the Office for Students (OFS) and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Widening participation has its roots in the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), which explicitly charged universities with a responsibility for equality of opportunity and the provision of places for 'all those who are qualified by ability and attainment' (p.8). The widening participation agenda gained momentum under the Labour Government in the 1990s with a manifesto target of 50% of 18- to 30-year-olds entering higher education (Burke, 2012; Burnell, 2015). This rapid expansion was supported by the introduction of new funding mechanisms including fee payments and loans. Cunningham and Samson (2021) argued that this new 'market model' not only shifted the costs of higher education away from the state towards the individual, but importantly also acted to directly raise the expectations of students that a degree would act as a means of 'economic elevation' via improved labour market returns. Widening participation has been central to governmental policy until recently, with a target to widen participation by doubling the proportion of disadvantaged students in higher education between the years of 2009 to 2020 (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). More recently, governments' attitudes towards the expansion of higher education have been less clear. The Conservative Government's Secretary of State for Education announced in 2021 that 'higher education is critical to levelling up', but they also stated that 'encouraging more and more students onto courses which do not provide good graduate outcomes does not provide real social mobility and serves only to entrench inequality' (Williamson, 2021). The current Labour Government's manifesto suggests the need to break the 'pernicious link between background and success' (Labour Party, 2024, p.77). However, the manifesto itself contains limited information about how this will be achieved in higher education, especially in a system which is described as 'in crisis' due to funding settlements which do not work for taxpayers, universities, staff, or students (Labour Party, 2024). Earlier commitments from the Labour Party suggest that they want over 70% of young people to move onto higher education opportunities by 2030, although they propose this could be from enhanced training opportunities as well as education (Labour Party, 2023).

2.3.2 Impact of Widening Participation

Participation in higher education has changed dramatically over the last half-century. In the 1960s, student degree numbers were around 110,000 (The National Archives, 2021). Whereas in 2018-19, Universities UK (2021a) listed 2.38 million students as enrolled at UK institutions, with around 1.8 million of these registered as undergraduates. However, whilst participation in higher education has increased, students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are still less likely to gain a degree. Government annual statistics of participation in higher education, by

widening participation characteristics (including POLAR disadvantage and free school meals), show that pupils from the 'most advantaged quintile are more than twice as likely to progress to a degree as those from the most disadvantaged quintile at 57.8% compared to 27.3% in 2018/19' (Department for Education, 2021). Concerningly, this gap widens when exploring entrance to higher tariff institutions, where the most advantaged students are five times more likely to enter, than the most disadvantaged students (Department for Education, 2021).

Despite extensive investments, including annual expenditure of £833.5 million in 2017/18, some authors have suggested that the lack of change in student mobility, especially within high tariff institutions, must point to a policy failure for widening participation (Burke, 2012; Reay, 2017). This failure has been brought to the attention of government via a briefing paper to Parliament which described the access of higher education for under-represented groups as 'stubbornly difficult' to achieve, particularly in high tariff institutions, where 'gaps in equality of representation are largest' (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). Reay (2017) has been particularly critical of government policies towards widening participation, suggesting that they are a form of 'cruel optimism' (p. 101). She suggests that they act to gloss over the profound impacts of inequities in society and seek to blame individuals for their lack of apparent success in a system which consistently works against them. Her research found that more affluent students will consistently understand the need for and garner those resources (financial and cultural) which enable them to cluster around the most prestigious universities, whilst disadvantaged students consistently fail to have equality of access. Such access to degree studies and high-prestige universities, matters profoundly for students as it has consequences for their long-term employment outcomes through the mechanisms associated with reputational capital.

2.4 Policy context: employability

The next section explores why employability has garnered increasing interest from government, universities and students. It will also seek to explore contested definitions of employability and why these might not suit an increasingly congested graduate labour market. The extent to which individuals can enact agency to influence their graduate outcomes will also be debated.

2.4.1 Background

Wallis (2021) suggests that the notion of employability was born from the economic turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s, where episodes of recession led to mass unemployment. As the UK labour market shifted away from production to a more financially orientated and digitalised economy, individuals were increasingly charged with the need to take responsibility for their employability. This might be associated with concepts of boundaryless and protean existences,

whereby employees no longer climb an occupational ladder with one employer, but are expected to proactively manage a portfolio career (Baruch, 2015). Boundaryless careers are distinct from 'bounded' or organised careers, where individuals might expect a lifelong career in return for their commitment (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). In this discourse, employability became the responsibility of the individual, rather than the responsibility of state, education or employers. This potentially heralding less job security, but arguably more opportunity for individuals.

It was Dearing's seminal report of 1997, which acted to establish a specific link between higher education and employability, by asserting the responsibility of universities to prepare their students for employment through the acquisition of key skills. Furthermore, with the recommendation of fee payments (Dearing, 1997), degrees were linked to an increased marketisation within the sector, with individual students encouraged to expect a return on their investments (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017b; Wallis, 2021). Since Dearing (1997), interest in employability has been described as having 'exploded' (Tomlinson, 2017b). This explosion was partly generated by the pressure on graduates to secure roles in a highly competitive labour market (Tholen, 2012; Tomlinson, 2017b), but also because both employment and employability have become key metrics for judging the value of degree outcomes (Department for Education, 2019; Tibby and Norton, 2020). The reasons why governments, higher education institutions and individuals have all become stakeholders in employability will be explored in more detail next.

2.4.2 Employability and national policy

Graduate employability has been positioned as a 'priority as it is vital to the UK's economic growth – regionally, nationally and internationally – and supports both social and cultural development' (Tibby and Norton, 2020, p.6). Tomlinson (2017b) suggests that this focus is driven by Human Capital Theory (HCT) which is 'predicated on the notion that educational systems effectively drive the economy' (p. 3). As evidence of this, he gives the example of the mass expansion of higher education, which is increasingly focussed on skills-based and vocationally orientated degrees resulting in work-ready graduates who are keen to secure employment to pay off their debts (Tomlinson, 2017b). Graduate employability has been a declared government priority for some time, however what is required to make graduates employable and how this might lead to social mobility remains relatively obscure (Baruch, 2015; Tholen, 2012). The lack of empirical evidence has led to the adoption of poorly defined concepts which have often borrowed content from one another (Holmes, 2013) or as others have suggested the introduction of theories post-hoc to explain observations (Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2018).

2.4.3 Employability and universities

With the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and associated league tables, universities have been held increasingly accountable for their employability outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017b; Tomlinson and Nghia, 2020; Tymon, 2013). Universities are not only expected to demonstrate excellence in graduate outcomes to secure funding, but also be active in delivering and monitoring initiatives aimed at enhancing graduate employability (Department for Education, 2017). The increased pressure on universities to actively encourage employability development, has resulted in a wide range of initiatives in support of employability since 1997 (Tomlinson, 2017b). Advance HE have declared that 'student success can be significantly enhanced by embedding employability into the curriculum and into the culture of the whole institution' (Tibby and Norton, 2020, p.5), however others have been critical of this over-reliance on the 'magic bullet of employability' (Harvey, 2001). Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne (2017) reason that several problems might arise because of a too heavy focus upon employability, including: a reduction on academic focus and integrity; an enhanced emphasis on higher education's responsibility for vocational training; and the reinforcement of the discourse that students and graduates are paying consumers who are entitled to specific employability outcomes in return for fees. We might add to this, the lack of empirical evidence about the efficacy of institutional-wide employability developments (Holmes, 2013) and issues of whether academics are the best placed to teach employability in an already over-stretched curriculum (Tymon, 2013). However, Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, (2017) also argue that it is possible to frame employability as 'a moral duty for higher education' (p.6) and that there is a need for each university to address the employability of its students via their own specific 'institutional lens' (p. 37). Moreover, in their systematic review of 187 items relating to employability they found evidence that employability taught in the curriculum, extra-curricular activities, connections with employers and activities to enhance self-efficacy, could all be beneficial to students navigating a congested labour market.

2.4.4 Employability and students

For many graduates, the drive to secure employment has been identified as understandably strong, especially considering the investment higher education demands in time and money and the increasingly precarious nature of the labour market (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; Tymon, 2013). Students have been led to believe that they can expect a 'significant premium in lifetime earnings' by engaging with higher education (Holmes, 2013, p.539). Undergraduates are aware of the competitive labour market and the need to signal their worth by providing correctly packaged skills and credentials (Tomlinson, 2007). Some have found that students are concerned about a potential over saturation of the graduate labour market (Groves, O'Shea and

Delahunty, 2022). Studying undergraduates' perceptions of employability Tymon (2013) found that students' employability mattered a 'great deal' or 'massively' (p. 852) and understandably they wanted support in developing their employability. However, what support is needed and the extent to which universities can and should support employability development remains an understudied area.

2.4.5 Contested definitions

Employability may be seen to be a priority in higher education, but literature on the topic highlights the difficulties of defining it. It has been described variously as multifaceted, contextual, and complex (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Burke et al, 2017; Tholen and Brown, 2018; Tymon, 2013). Time, location and disciplinary focus can have profound consequences for how it is conceived (Caballero, Alvarez-González and López-Miguens, 2021; Tholen, 2012; Williams et al, 2015). Where attempts have been made to define employability, there seems to be a general agreement that it is not about securing a job, but rather about the longer-term ability to secure and sustain graduate-level employment over time (Bennett, 2019; Tymon, 2013; Wallis, 2021). However, how this ability might be measured is uncertain.

Dominant definitions of employability in the United Kingdom tend to be skills-based, with an emphasis on graduates as responsible for gaining the correct skills, experiences, attitudes and behaviours to secure positive graduate outcomes and in turn make them employable for life (Tomlinson, 2017b; Cole and Tibby, 2013). The most widely used and influential definition of employability (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017) was published in 2006 and is as follows:

'A set of achievements - skills understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits, themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.' (Yorke and Knight, 2006, p. 8)

In this understanding of employability, the primary aim of higher education is to develop human capital. Human capital was initially described by Becker (1964) as consisting of education and training. He suggested that an educated and highly trained workforce would be more personally productive and consequently this would lead to higher productivity and wages generally. For undergraduates the achievement of a degree is the most obvious form of human capital acquisition. In higher education, definitions of human capital have often been extended to include skills acquisition such as teamwork and communication (Caballero, Alvarez-González and López-Miguens, 2021). Human capital theory remains highly dominant in the field of

employability (Peeters et al, 2019). In their systematic review of 580 peer reviewed articles on the topic of employability, Dalrymple et al (2021) found that human capital theory was still held as the 'mainstream view' (p.13). Studies have illustrated the important role skills play in acting as a strong signalling device for employers seeking to recruit (Ng and Feldman, 2010; Souto-Otero and Białowolski, 2021). There is also strong evidence that students are familiar with and confident in the use and application of the language of human capital when applying for roles such as internships (Benati and Fischer, 2021). The value of Becker's theory (1964) was further supported by Ng and Feldman's (2010) meta-analysis of 395 empirical studies, in which they found evidence that human capital had been robustly and consistently related to returns on salary, promotions and job offers perhaps proving the functional utility of education and training and its transfer value within the labour market.

Critically, in this view of employability, responsibility lies with the student to make sound and strategic choices to invest wisely in their careers. Arguably, a skills-based approach enables graduates to flex their applications to the changeable demands of the labour market. It is also perhaps tempting to think that employability approaches which give precedence to skill development are particularly suited to the UK labour market where as Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney (2022) have described there is a 'disconnect' between degrees and occupations. However, the success of this approach is perhaps constrained by the level of demand for specific skills or how flexible the skills being offered are. Some studies have questioned Becker's (1964) neo-liberalist understanding of the labour market, which assumes free choice for the individual. Some have argued that even in highly educated workforces (such as Russell Group graduates), skills deficits still exist, despite considerable efforts to address these (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). From the recruitment perspective, it has been found that employers rarely make rational recruitment decisions (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic and Kaiser, 2013) and information in the recruitment process is often asymmetric with employers knowing less than candidates about their human capital (Souto-Otero and Białowolski, 2021). Even Becker has come to recognise the importance of structural inequalities by more recently acknowledging that 'socioeconomic inequality and intergenerational persistence are strongly positively correlated' (Becker et al, 2018, p. S7). However, he narrows this to the stronger investments which wealthy parents can make in their children's education, rather than any broader structural barriers.

Critics of human capital theory suggest it lacks an understanding of structural inequalities, as it is not a deficit on the behalf of individuals as much as an oversupply of graduates caused by the massification of higher education which has led to the real problems in individuals securing graduate level roles (Burke et al, 2017; Morrison, 2019; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). Further, Clarke (2018) argues that human capital

theory dissociates students from actual experiences of finding work which have more to do with social class, gender, ethnicity, networks and university status than education and skills. In this individualistic narrative there is a risk that those who fail to make progress can be described as somehow lacking talent or the wherewithal through no fault of their own (Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2018; Tholen, 2012). The extent to which individuals can negotiate the labour market to enact personal 'agency' and overcome structural forces is a key debate within the literature and one which will be explored further in the next section.

Skills-based conceptualisations of employability have been further criticised as inadequate and mis-suited to the graduate labour market (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017b). This is partly because lists of skills and attributes can be lengthy and confusing, with some reviews finding as many as 88 components (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Williams et al, 2015), but also because a skills-based approach is seen by many as too mechanistic (Bridgestock, 2009; Holmes, 2013; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017b). Bennett (2019) is critical of narrow definitions, which lack understanding of the processes, which allow graduates to become employable over time. Others have suggested that employability is not something which can simply be 'enumerated and ticked off' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.564).

Researchers are also critical of how the skills lists have been created, conceptualised, and audited, as they have often been developed from weak methodologies whereby employers have been surveyed on presupposed skills shortages (Harvey, 2001; Holmes, 2013). Unfortunately, this approach assumes that employers are clear on their skills needs and fully able to formulate them in discrete lists for graduates (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). Such employer driven lists, can contain unwanted, duplicate, or missed items and as Bridgestock (2009) concludes often 'do not address the full picture of what is required by the graduate facing the prospect of the labour market' (p. 35). Finally, and critically for this PhD, skills-based approaches to employability lack context in the way in which skills are acquired, validated and applied, therefore failing to address why students at a socio-economic disadvantage can struggle to secure work when their skills and attributes are apparently equal to their more advantaged counterparts (Holmes, 2013; Tholen, 2012).

More recently there has been a shift away from skills acquisition in the employability literature towards capital development (Williams, et al, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017a). Tomlinson (2017a) has suggested that capitals may be more useful in understanding students early labour market experiences. However, whilst there is some evidence of an increasing focus on capitals to understand employability, research on the topic has been limited, with Souto-Otero and Bialowolski (2021) arguing that this is attributable to the heavy emphasis on skills 'credentialism' within the literature. More will be explored about this topic in chapter 3.

2.4.6 Agency versus structure

As mentioned above, the extent to which an individual can act to overcome structural barriers is key to understanding the experiences of students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds. Ingram et al (2023) argue that the ‘discourse of aspiration’ is inextricably linked with that of social mobility in higher education (Ingram et al, 2023). Like others, they recognise the keen and ongoing debate as to whether employability outcomes are agentic or shaped by context (Harari, McCombs and Wiernik, 2021; Tholen, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017b). Some have been critical of this dispute suggesting that it is rarely backed by empirical data, especially evidence that probes the experiences of the individual and their lived context (Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2018; Tholen, 2015). Despite the lack of evidence, the debate itself is important as it lies on the fault line of whether socio-economic factors act to pre-determine choice or can individual aspiration act to overcome disadvantage.

Agency is about ‘individual choice and intention’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 16) or as Van Der Kolk (2015) helpfully describes ‘the feeling of being in charge of your life [and] knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances’ (p. 94). Structure can be defined as ‘objective, social institutions influencing how people live and act’ (Tholen, 2015, p. 766). In this study, undergraduates are the agents and the extent to which they feel they have influence and choice over their career outcomes is of interest, whilst the structures studied are their socio-economic backgrounds, choice and location of their higher education studies and the graduate labour market.

Several authors have described mainstream views of employability more critically. They suggest that mainstream views tend to position graduates as individual actors rationally consuming education and strategically investing in their futures by gaining key skills and experiences, consequently downplaying the impact of wider socio-economic factors (Burke and Christie, 2018; Tholen, 2015, Tomlinson, 2017b). Alternative views tend to focus on lack of individual choice, suggesting that future outcomes are determined by factors such as family background, which are beyond the individual’s control (Merrill et al, 2020; Morrison, 2014).

The tension in the debate exists in defining the relationship between agency and structure, how they impact on each other, and how individuals navigate their role in this. There are a range of responses to this within the literature. Heavily on the side of structural forces are authors such as Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans (2018) who argue that definitions of employability which are heavily orientated towards meritocracy have a ‘dark side’ and that employability is always ‘contextual’ and ‘relational’. Their concern is that dominant conceptualisations of employability are more likely to place a moral responsibility on individuals to achieve positive labour market outcomes, with no account of circumstances taken. There is a risk that such approaches blame

the individual for any perceived failures, rather than acknowledging the possible structural forces which make these 'failures' more likely. Still structural, but hinting at the value of agency, authors such as Clegg (2011) suggest that while individuals can act to overcome significant barriers their choice is heavily dependent on existing networks and connections and so is inevitably unequal. Balanced more finely in the middle of the debate are Tholen (2015) and Tomlinson (2017b). With Tholen (2015) affirming that individuals can have an 'ability to invent and improvise within the structure of their routines' (Tholen, 2015, p. 777). Tomlinson (2017b) argues that there is 'no neat dichotomy' between structure and agency and that individuals act to use their 'agential capacities', whilst anchored or 'bounded' by their social structures (p.6). Tomlinson (2010) argues further that graduates are active and reflexive in constructing their identities within the labour market and that 'their actions are meaningful and purposive' (p.83). Also supporting the key role which agency plays, we find Holmes (2013), who reasons that individuals are not 'pawns' or 'victims' and that their employability outcomes can be determined by the decisions and actions they choose to take (p. 548). Firmly supporting the role of agency are Super, Savickas and Super (1996) and Vanhercke et al (2014) who argue for the centrality of the individual in choosing and managing their career.

First-generation students who have succeeded in applying and transitioning to a high-status university are not only able, but might be seen as remarkable in terms of exercising considerable personal agency in terms of their resource and resilience. Hearing their accounts of how they have overcome structural barriers was of central importance to this study.

2.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter began by evidencing the overall advantage that degree-level study seems to confer on individuals in terms of tangible benefits such as access to professional roles and postgraduate study and improved salary prospects, as well as less obvious benefits such as better health. However, the data also illustrated that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds are consistently disadvantaged in terms of accessing graduate opportunities and this in turn results in them receiving a lower overall graduate premium.

In response to this apparent inequality in higher education outcomes, numerous governments have attempted to widen access to high education. There have also been explicit attempts to improve employability outcomes with an enhanced focus on graduate destination surveys and their association with the Teaching Excellence Framework. Despite an increased focus on employability by government, universities and students, this chapter showed employability to be at times poorly defined and often lacking in empirical research. Current definitions are often strongly predicated on human capital theory, a theory which relies heavily upon personal

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agency and takes little account of structural inequalities in the labour market. This chapter has suggested that more research is needed to understand employability and why despite its dominance in the field human capital theory is insufficient to fully understand the experiences of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter 3 Literature Review Part 2: Barriers

3.1 Introduction

As described, successive governments in the United Kingdom have based their higher education policy on the notion that increased participation will result in better employment outcomes for disadvantaged students and consequently drive upward social mobility. Yet, as shown, statistical analysis would seem to point to outcomes as not being equal for all students. The mechanisms which act against some students during the lifecycle of their studies from application through to graduation will be explored next. The chapter concludes with a summary and indication of research needs.

The content of this chapter is partially based on a systematic review of qualitative primary data which aimed to understand how inequality is experienced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in their transitions to the UK graduate labour market (McCafferty, 2022). The review found that despite students from disadvantaged backgrounds being more likely to engage in degree studies than ever before (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018), they still faced multiple obstacles when transitioning to the UK labour market. As in the case of Merrill et al's (2020) research, this review also found an accumulated 'history of denial and restricted access' for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (p.168). The 'massification' of higher education (Tomlinson, 2017b) may have resulted in increased access to higher education, however undergraduates fear an increasingly competitive labour market with complex and often hidden barriers. Patterns emerged throughout the review of students becoming painfully aware of the barriers facing them (such as a lack of funding or access to essential networks), but often working from a position of deficit consequently finding themselves unable to act sufficiently. In contrast, more economically advantaged students could act quickly, utilising their advantages (financial and social) throughout their degrees to build what Morrison (2019) describes as an 'attractively packaged narrative of employability' (p. 342). In summary, the dominant discourse in higher education might be one of a meritocracy (Burke, 2012), but this is not always the reality for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This accumulative disadvantage is described in Figure 1.

Contrasting Experiences—An Unjust Balance		
DisSES Students		AdvSES Students
Perceive the graduate labour market as a meritocracy. Focus on studies to the detriment of engaging in extras valued by employers.	<p>Labour Market: Meritocracy versus Game</p> 	Perceive the graduate labour market as a game. Degrees are a starting point only. Strategically building capitals from the start of their degrees to ensure successful labour market outcomes.
Work from a position of deficit, lacking ready connections to find work experience.	<p>Connections: Deficit versus Hot Knowledge</p> 	Use hot knowledge and networks to secure advantageous connections for work experience and permanent roles.
Because of lack of connections and finance, internships are secured less often and via formally advertised channels.	<p>Internships: Lack versus Ready Access</p> 	More often secure internships by making use of connections. Tend to gravitate towards high status summer internships.
Need to work part time for money.	<p>Outside of studies: Work versus Extras</p> 	Take part in extra-curricular activities to knowingly generate social and cultural capital.
A transitional space with high levels of discomfort. It takes time to settle.	<p>University: Transitional versus Familiar</p> 	A familiar space introduced by prior experiences.
Need to act quickly on graduation to secure paid work.	<p>Finance: Exposed versus Protected</p> 	Buffered, more easily affording post-graduate study and career breaks.

Figure 1: Contrasting Experiences - An Unjust Balance, McCafferty (2022)

Making use of the findings from the systematic review and additional literature (including quantitative and international studies), this chapter begins with a note on sources and language to enable the reader to navigate its content. Most of the chapter is dedicated to understanding how the literature combines to reveal the mechanisms which act against disadvantaged students building their employability throughout their undergraduate studies. These mechanisms include applications to university, inductions, lack of networks and limited opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities. Next, the theorisation of these mechanisms will be explored via the application of capitals (predominantly social and cultural capital). Finally, the specific experiences of first-generation students will be considered before the chapter concludes with a note on the questions which might usefully be addressed by future research.

3.1.1 Note on sources and language

Four bibliographic databases (IBSS, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts and Scopus) were searched for journal articles during the systematic review and more recently. Searches were confined to titles, abstracts, and key words because search terms such as graduate were found too commonly within the main body of articles. Boolean search terms were developed as follows:

- Population of the study (undergraduate* / “HE”/ degree/ “university student* AND “first generation”/ “working class” / “social class”/ class)
- Phenomena of interest (“social mobility”/inequality*/ “social inequalit*”)
- Context (career*/ employability/ employment/skill*/ capital*/transition*)

Complementary search strategies comprised hand citation and searching the author’s own files, as well as consulting with two colleagues and a specialist subject librarian for additional relevant papers. Google Scholar UK and Open Grey were used as a further way of collecting literature. The initial systematic review used research from the UK, however this chapter has been extended to include international studies. These perspectives were important to supplement the data, especially as only one paper in the original review focussed specifically on the experiences of first-generation students (Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsopp, 2020). As the graduate labour market has changed rapidly with the growth of higher education student numbers, most of the empirical data presented is confined to the last 15 years.

Academics, policy makers and researchers use a wide range of markers to define disadvantage. These markers may include: class, parental income and education; eligibility for free school meals; coming from or living in locations of deprivation; as well as subjective perceptions such as language and accent (Adamecz-Volgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020; American Psychological

Association, 2021; Jerrim, 2021). Terms used to describe social status are often used loosely and without verification (Jerrim, 2021). Moreover, the Social Mobility Commission (2016) have been critical of the variety of indicators of deprivation which seldom align. Although the focus of this study is first-generation students, to enable a sufficient depth of understanding broad indicators of socio-economic disadvantage have been included within the literature review such as working class background and low socio-economic status. For the purposes of this review, when multiple findings have been merged the abbreviations of DisSES (Disadvantaged Socioeconomic Status) and AdvSES (Advantaged Socioeconomic Status) have been adopted (McCafferty, 2022). The next section will explore DisSES students' experiences of building their employability throughout the lifecycle of their higher education experience.

3.2 Limited choices

The dominant discourse in higher education is that of meritocratic access (Burke 2012), but there is strong and repeated evidence that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are relatively less successful in their applications to elite universities, even when they have achieved suitable grades to do so (Crawford et al, 2016). This is important, because the growth in higher education has resulted in employers becoming more selective in targeting elite universities, seeing this as a form of educational credentialism (Ingram and Allen, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017b; Tholen and Brown, 2018).

The reasons why DisSES students are less likely to study at elite universities are complex. In their research on the topic of employment and training, Fevre, Rees and Gorard (1999) found that decisions to pursue education are often made normatively rather than rationally, and because of this, if a social circle pursues an option, an individual is more likely to do so. The authors argued that collective 'class wisdom' may in fact drive disadvantaged students to reject educational options, even when the consumption of education might be of positional good (Fevre, Rees and Gorard, 1999, p.126). In an extensive study across four universities, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) found that DisSES students often chose to study locally, both to save money, but also to feel more at ease with their surroundings. This costed the students in terms of both their academic experience and subsequent growth. In two of the universities studied, the authors found evidence that the students' university experience were non-transformational and that the students had become acclimatised to mediocrity in terms of their academic challenge (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

Even when students apply to higher status institutions, Bathmaker (2015) argues that DisSES applicants are disadvantaged for several reasons, including their inability to draw on examples of attractive extra-curricular activities to complete lengthy personal statements. Evidence from

the current application system would seem to support Bathmaker's (2015) claim, as engagement with clubs and societies such as sport and music feature highly in terms of recommended content for personal statements (UCAS, 2021). Other research studies have emphasised how universities prioritise some cultural activities above others, essentially acting in favour of AdvSES students. In their study of selection interviews for entry to degree-level art and design, Burke (2012) observed how DisSES students were rejected when they were unable to articulate appropriate interests and reading. One such student was rejected for being too 'hip-hop' or urban in her thinking to fit in with the culture of the university (Burke, 2012, p.131).

3.3 Feeling like outsiders

How quickly students settle into their university surroundings is also highly pertinent to the understanding of DisSES students' experiences of becoming employable. If students find the university experience unfamiliar, destabilising and intimidating (Bathmaker, 2021a; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Ivermark and Ambrose, 2021; Lehmann, 2014), then it is not surprising that these students struggle to engage with the type of extras sought after by employers (such as engagement in extra-curricular activities and internships), preferring instead to focus on establishing themselves within their academic studies (Parutis and Howson, 2020). This sense of disconnect or feeling like a 'fish out of water' was defined by Bourdieu as 'Hysteresis' (Dean, 2017). It is important, because if students feel themselves to be in a state of tension, whereby they struggle to fit in naturally, they have less time and energy to apply themselves to their studies and the additional tasks required for building narratives of employability which are acceptable to potential employers. Research by Ivermark and Ambrose (2021) illustrated this. Coding students as 'Adjusters', 'Strangers' and 'Outsiders', Ivermark and Ambrose (2021) found evidence that FGS experienced strain when settling into their studies, experiencing the 'dominant values, manners, cultural codes, language, and even sense of humour they encounter at university as foreign and at times intimidating' (p.197). In contrast, AdvSES students have often been found to have an innate and habitual understanding of higher education born from a lifelong exposure to its languages and practices. Exploring the tangential theme of how working class students experience and respond to failure, Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) found students often to be in a state of 'tension'. In this study, working class students experienced university as a transitional space where mental discord made them feel unable to fit in fully and failure led them to question their choice to undertake degree study.

Vitality, because DisSES students can take longer to settle into their studies, they may miss out on those opportunities which are designed to support their employability development. In a study of both DisSES and AdvSES students, Parutis and Howson (2020) found that the

disadvantaged students were less likely to engage with employability classes, as they struggled to understand the need to develop a clear employability strategy from the beginning of their degrees. They observed that ‘being generally overwhelmed by the university experience, DisSES students prefer to focus their efforts on their studies rather than think about the world after university which seems very distant’ (Parutis and Howson, 2020, p. 388). For the DisSES students’ employment interventions seemed to be constituted of vague concepts, which did not make sense to the students until long after they were delivered. The authors suggested that employability interventions might in fact exacerbate inequalities by diverting attention away from studies for these students. Care needs to be taken in interpreting the findings of this small-scale study, as larger scale studies such as Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne (2017) suggest that targeted employability interventions can be beneficial. However, the extent to which DisSES students are ready to engage with and feel supported by interventions to enhance their employability merits further investigation.

In contrast, AdvSES students have been shown to make earlier decisions about choosing to study degrees and settle more quickly into their studies (Parutis and Howson, 2020; Waller et al, 2012). This enables them to establish themselves earlier and apply more quickly to those extras which they recognise as improving applications to roles within the graduate labour market. It also provides them with the luxury of having additional time to explore opportunities and consider which might suit them best, this was described by Wright and Mulvey (2021) as AdvSES students having the benefit of being able to ‘pull away’.

3.4 Labour market as a meritocracy

Studies have revealed that students often recognise the competitive nature of the labour market and the need to secure extras such as work experience to compete against their peers in securing graduate roles (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Parutis and Howson, 2020). However, DisSES students have been shown to be more likely to believe in meritocracy and the pure value of their degree (Abrahams, 2017; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Merrill et al, 2020). Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2020) suggested that DisSES students tend to have a ‘naïve’ or ‘linear’ understanding of the labour market; these students believe in the power of ‘Scholastic Capital’ whereby a degree would be ‘life-changing’ with a ‘guaranteed link between a degree and graduate employment’ (p. 1715). Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) gave further evidence of DisSES students (this time on Education degrees) believing fully in the ‘political rhetoric’ (p.816), that students are on a ‘full and equal playing field’ once they have succeeded in entering university (p. 818). Like Bourdieu (1977), these authors found that DisSES students are unaware of and hence unable to ‘play the game’ (more

will be said about Bourdieu in section 3.9 ‘theorising disadvantage’). Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2020) suggested that this over-reliance on degree outcomes might be due to the pervasive influence of Human Capital Theory, whereby higher education study is conventionally presented as a positive future investment. They further argue that this is exacerbated by the necessity for competitive marketing by universities in an increasingly crowded market. They also noted the over-reliance DisSES students have on their degree outcomes as they lack other forms of capital to trade for positional advantage.

In contrast to DisSES students, some have found AdvSES students to be deliberately and consciously strategic in their approach to career development by building capital beyond their degrees to stand out in a crowded market (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). These students have advantages from the start of their degrees and act quickly to build upon these deliberately using ‘opportunity stacking’ to result in an ‘accumulation of advantage’ from first year through to graduation (Wright and Mulvey, 2021).

AdvSES students’ tactical understanding of the graduate labour market is often explored with the application of Bourdieusian theoretical concepts such as ‘Agent’ and ‘Field’ (Aubrey and Riley, 2017; Dean, 2017). Bourdieu suggested that each social setting (including universities) have their own rituals and rules, with the ‘elite’ designing the rules of the game and even having the ‘power to decide what winning might look like’ (Dean, 2017, p.24). AdvSES students not only understand that there is a game to be played, but are ready and willing to engage in it from the start of their degrees (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020). AdvSES students are part of the dominant group who not only set the rules, but ‘are attuned to keep up with the changing nature of the game’ (Abrahams, 2017, p.631). Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) commented on AdvSES students as having an instinctive approach to the ‘game’ with the rules of engagement internalised long before entry to university; in contrast, they found that DisSES students lacked primary socialisation and tacit knowledge resulting in them becoming overly reliant on university as a meritocracy, where they believed those with the best results would get the top jobs.

3.5 Deficits in connections

In a highly credentialed workplace, such as the UK, an individual’s ability to secure and utilise their social networks for labour market advantage has been shown to be crucial (Morrison, 2019; Tholen et al, 2013). These networks and connections are often described in terms of social capital and numerous studies have exemplified the importance of this in understanding how the UK labour market operates (Abrahams, 2017; Allen et al, 2013; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Hunt and Scott, 2018; Tholen et al, 2013; Waller et al, 2012). These studies illustrate how

undergraduates, with highly formed connections born of pre-existing networks, can find opportunities and market themselves more readily in a crowded market and expend less time and effort than their colleagues while doing so.

Such networks can allow students to gain positional advantage within the graduate labour market. AdvSES students have been shown to be repeatedly aware of the processes of networking and the value of practical and contemporary advice about options and routes to careers within a competitive market (Abraham, 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Bathmaker, 2021a; Bathmaker, 2021b; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Parutis and Howson, 2020). AdvSES students often have confidence that they or their family 'must know someone' (Dylan participant quoted in Abrahams, 2017, p. 629). As a result, AdvSES students can act upon their former knowledge of higher education, gained through the lived experiences of family and friends, to gain a positional advantage from the start of their degrees. In contrast to AdvSES students, DisSES students begin from a position of deficit (McCafferty, 2022). Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2020) proposed that whilst DisSES students might be actively encouraged by their families, unfortunately these families lack resources to give targeted advice and form relevant labour market connections.

The picture of how students respond to the deficits in their networks is mixed. Some have suggested that as DisSES students lack connections, they frame their social network as unimportant to them and consequently come to understand that they must rely more heavily on themselves rather than other sources of social support (De Schepper, Kyndt and Clycq, 2024). This aligns with findings from Abrahams (2017) who suggested that DisSES students might reject the use of contacts and prefer to 'make it themselves' (p. 631). However other research has shown DisSES students to be innovative in their networking and more likely to seek contact via unfolding content on their courses in lieu of ready access to parents in professional roles. For these students, relevant information is sought from lecturers, employer seminars and job fairs (Parutis and Howson, 2020).

3.6 Lack of internships

Work experience and especially internships are an essential part of the recruitment cycle for employers as they act to differentiate students and demonstrate enthusiasm for potential work roles (Hunt and Scott, 2018). Equally, internships have value for students as they can enable networks to be built and weaknesses within applications to be addressed (Hunt and Scott, 2018). However, whilst both AdvSES and DisSES undergraduates might be clear on the benefits of securing work experience, not all students are able to access such opportunities equally (Allen et al, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Roberts and Li, 2017). Furthermore,

there is evidence that AdvSES students act knowingly to choose experiences which are the most advantageous to their futures, whilst DisSES students are consistently unable to do this (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Roberts and Li, 2017).

In their survey of creative and communication students, Hunt and Scott (2018) found that even when grades and institutional reputation were controlled for, in contrast to AdvSES students, DisSES students struggled to access paid internships. Importantly, they found that 'having a parent who was a graduate increased the odds of having a paid internship by nearly double' (Hunt and Scott, 2018, p. 200). It also increased the likelihood of securing any type of internship from 19 per cent to 32 per cent (Hunt and Scott, 2018). This study focussed on only one occupational area, but studies exploring other areas have also indicated that DisSES students face multiple barriers in accessing internships including a lack of connections to secure unadvertised positions and insufficient personal funds to take unpaid work (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Wright and Mulvey, 2021). Consequently, although DisSES students might recognise the value of internships, for them they may be classed as luxury items, because of the associated costs (Roberts and Li, 2017; Wright and Mulvey, 2021).

Crucially, Waller et al (2012, p. 336) found that working class students lacked 'hot knowledge' and so were unable to fall back on family resources to find work experience. As a result of this, securing placements functioned as an additional burden for DisSES students, this contrasted with AdvSES students who saw work experience as an opportunity to differentiate themselves more easily in a competitive job market (Allen et al, 2013). DisSES students might use significant personal agency and creativity to secure work experience (Waller et al, 2012), but overall, they were obliged to apply more effort. An example of this was found in Allen et al's (2013) research in the creative industry where working class students had to engage in time-consuming and frustrating cold calling to arrange course related experience. This contrasted with their middle class counterparts who could call upon their existing and relevant networks more readily.

The systematic review revealed a further significant topic to be the developing hierarchy of what counts as the best experience. Many students appreciated the value of work experience, but AdvSES students were more strategically orientated towards high status employers, placements, summer internships and a year abroad from the beginning of their degrees (Parutis and Howson, 2020; Wright and Mulvey, 2021). Wright and Mulvey (2021) found that AdvSES students had gained an awareness of the value of internships from their families long before their degrees had commenced. These students could draw on family connections to secure the most sought after opportunities or in extreme cases afford to pay agencies to secure prestigious and international internships (Wright and Mulvey, 2021). When working class students did secure internships, Wright and Mulvey (2021) found this was often through formal channels

such as advertised positions within careers services, furthermore the internships were often in less impressive sectors and companies. Allen et al (2013) argued that placements were one of the specific mechanisms acting to reproduce disadvantage, in some cases creating a 'filtering site' (p.447). They suggested that this was particularly unfair, when DisSES students were classed as somehow lacking effort if they fail to secure unpaid and unadvertised work experience (Allen et al, 2013).

3.7 Extra-curricular activities

The massification of higher education has opened more opportunities to study, but the resulting competition for employment heightens the need for individuals to self-differentiate via supplementary items such as extra-curricular activities and internships. This is shown to be the case across numerous countries including the UK (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Ingram and Allen, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020). Ingram and Allen (2018) argue that employers increasingly expect students to create a 'personal brand.' (p. 734). A brand that can typically include elements such as leadership, business acumen, entrepreneurship, and global awareness (Ingram and Allan, 2018, p. 734). Ingram and Allen (2018) are critical of employers who expect students to demonstrate qualities such as passion, proactivity and natural curiosity, suggesting that these can be demonstrated most easily through a variety of extra-curricular activities most readily associated with middle class culture, rather than lower-level part-time jobs aimed at paying the bills.

Several studies have shown that DisSES students are generally unaware of the importance of extra-curricular activities in signalling to employers that they have the desired experiences and qualities needed to be recruited to graduate level roles (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). Even when, DisSES students are aware of the importance of extra-curricular activities for future applications, they report themselves as unable to engage in them due to financial and time constraints (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). Consequently, DisSES students are more likely to work part-time to fund their studies, this being in contrast with AdvSES students who more often engage in unpaid activities (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Parutis and Howson, 2020; Roberts and Li, 2017). DisSES students often take part-time jobs to fund their studies; with the students categorising these roles as mostly about effort and learning to keep 'your head down' (Roberts and Li, 2017, p. 746). In contrast, AdvSES students could choose those experiences which allowed them to develop skillsets which were more 'advantageous to managerial positions' (Roberts and Li, 2017, p. 746). Overall DisSES students were often aware of and frustrated by the barriers they were obliged to overcome (Allen et al, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller,

2013) and the ‘hierarchy of employment’ described by authors such as Roberts and Li (2017, p. 744).

3.8 Insufficient funds

Families have been shown to transmit ‘significant advantage’ from one generation to the next through wealth alone in terms of education, employment outcomes, health and housing (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022). Finance impacts upon the choices which DisSES students can make during their studies and the decisions they make upon graduation, thus money can both confine options while at university, but also drive career choices well into the future.

Merrill et al (2020) tracked class inequalities across six countries and found clear evidence that lack of financial resources acted to stop DisSES students participating in unpaid opportunities such as relevant work experience. Unpaid internships are the industry standard in fields such as media and law (Allen et al, 2013; Friedman and Laurison, 2019) and yet DisSES students are often excluded from them, as they need to prioritise part-time work to fund their studies (Roberts and Li, 2017; Wright and Mulvey 2021). In Allen et al’s (2013) interviews with undergraduates they found numerous examples of students facing exclusion from the creative industries because they were unable to juggle the demands of paid and unpaid work. Allen et al’s (2013) study addressed a single occupational area, but Roberts and Li’s (2017) research across two universities supported her results and found that while DisSES students understood the importance of internships, they positioned them as luxury goods because of the associated costs. These costs including not only loss of pay, but potentially moving to expensive areas such as London where internships are often located.

Upon graduation, research has repeatedly shown that DisSES students need to make more rapid and confined decisions about their graduate career choices in comparison to their AdvSES counterparts, especially in the light of student loans to be re-paid (Bathmaker, 2021b; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). Adverse to accumulated debt, DisSES students may decide to hold off from postgraduate study, even when they recognise that this could be to the detriment of their career goals (Bathmaker, 2021a; Hordosy and Clark, 2018). Furthermore, DisSES students face constraints on their geographical movement to secure both paid and unpaid roles because of the associated costs of moving (Hordosy and Clark, 2018). In contrast to DisSES students, AdvSES students have often been found to have parents who can afford to play a ‘cushioning role’ especially in a turbulent graduate labour market (Roberts and Li, 2017, p. 745). Importantly, whilst DisSES students, with accumulated debt and lacking parental income on graduation, might feel pressurised to secure work immediately upon graduation, AdvSES

students were found to be able to afford to sit at home and 'do nothing else but apply for jobs... until they found a job they like' (Parutis and Howson, 2020, p. 384).

3.9 Theorising disadvantage

Disadvantage in employability literature is consistently theorised with the application of 'capitals', with Bourdieu's theory of social capital (1986) the most frequently used, but cultural capital also often referred to (McCafferty, 2022). This is perhaps partly because Bourdieu's own work was prolific, spanning the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, philosophy and literary theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), but can also be attributed to the deliberate way in which Bourdieu set out to design thinking 'tools' to interpret and challenge the complexities of social inequality (Aubrey and Riley, 2017; Bathmaker, 2015). This next section will describe how Bourdieu defined social and cultural capital and explain how these have application in understanding disadvantage. It will also briefly explore how other forms of capital (including psychological and identity) have started to be applied conceptually within the literature about employability and social equity.

Bourdieu (1986) described capitals as aggregated resources possessed by individuals (and their families) which could be accumulated over time. Capitals could take many forms including, social, cultural and economic, and for Bourdieu (1986), acted as a key means of explaining why 'perfect equality of opportunity' (p. 15) was impossible to achieve. Importantly for employability research, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) bridged the divide between structure and agency. They commented on how an individual's background was key to their personal development and subsequent ability to invest in opportunities such as education, training and employment within their surrounding structure (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). In effect, individuals might act rationally and agentially, but they would do so within the boundaries of their social milieu.

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as:

'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network' (p. 21)

Social capital was central to Bourdieu's application of capitals because he believed it to have a 'multiplier effect' on other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Bourdieu (1986) proposed that social capital was secured over time via durable relationships gained through familial connections. As already described, DisSES students often have deficits in their relevant social connections and because of this struggle to secure relevant work experience and graduate roles. Some research has shown DisSES students to be not only aware of the importance of

such deficits in their networks, but also using the language of social capital to describe these (Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020).

Empirical studies have proven there to be a strong link between networking and social connections and employability outcomes; however, a gap exists in knowing whether networking behaviours can be deliberately taught or enhanced (Batistic and Tymon, 2017).

Bourdieu (1986) argued that cultural capital was ‘the best hidden and socially most determinant’ of all capitals (p. 17). He described it as existing in three forms: embodied (‘long lasting dispositions of the mind and body’), objectified (cultural goods such as pictures and books) and institutionalised (which in this context of this research could be described as higher education) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). Cultural capital was described as a key construct to enable understanding of why some students might have unequal outcomes, despite having the same academic success or talent (Bourdieu, 1986). This was especially true of embodied capital which he saw as cultivated over time and passed on by familial connections, and consequently not readily or easily developed.

The impact of cultural capital on employment post-graduation can be illustrated by research about the hiring practices of employers. Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) found that though employers might strive to make decisions objectively based on the capabilities of potential employees, they in fact generally made them subjectively on what they saw as their perceived acceptability. This in turn advantaged those with insight into the hiring practices of employers who knew how to ‘play’ selection processes. How cultural capital operates in favour of social reproduction, was also studied extensively by Friedman and Laurison (2019) who found that social reproduction was sustained and endemic in some professions. This was partly because of the strong chance of children following their parents into the same profession (one which they were highly familiar with), such as medicine and law, but also because firms acted to recruit candidates who they saw as fitting their profile and using interview practices which favour candidates with the strongest cultural insight. Overall, although fairly limited in scope, literature on the topic of bias in hiring practices suggests that employers are likely to recruit based on notions of merit identified with class, rather than on objective measures of talent (Reay, 2021).

This literature review has shown that while AdvSES students can draw on their cultural capital to both apply to university and settle quickly into their studies. Cultural understanding can also enable student to accrue the extras they know to be desired by employers. This is often in contrast to the experiences of DisSES students. Cultural capital can also explain the value attached by employers to certain activities such as extra-curricular activities. Wallis (2021) argues that the significance of cultural capital ‘cannot be overestimated in a context in which

non-standard, informal recruitment practices remain the norm' (p. 7). Although critical of some aspects of Bourdieu's work, Lamont and Lareau (1988) class cultural capital and its ability to unravel some of the hidden mechanisms of social exclusion as amongst the most important and original aspects of Bourdieu's theories. However, Lamont and Lareau (1988) have found evidence that although cultural capital is used extensively within literature, its application is not always supported with empirical data. This may be because as the most 'hidden' of all the capitals (Bourdieu, 1986), cultural capital is difficult to measure (Burke, 2015). There may also be a discomfort in exploring cultural capital, especially as it is often connected to the 'highbrow' (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015).

Subsequently, the concept of capitals and the principles of resource acquisition have been extended to include psychology and identity, (see for example Benati and Fischer, 2021; Cote, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017a; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). The systematic review revealed cultural and social capital as the main drivers of inequality, however some studies mentioned psychological capital. Psychological capital may be defined as the way in which students apply their personal resilience and flexibility to cope with a challenging graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2017a). Some authors have suggested that enhanced psychological capital might result in better labour market returns (Luthans, Luthans and Luthans, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017a), however whether DisSES students have heightened psychological capital because of any additional challenges they face, is a contested area within the literature. Authors such as Abrahams (2017) and Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) suggest that DisSES students develop heightened resilience in the face of multiple challenges, but Parutis and Howson (2020) argue the opposite. Their research found that AdvSES students can draw upon additional psychological resources born of a confidence that their employment trajectories will be easier (Parutis and Howson, 2020). However, these studies were not designed to measure psychological capital specifically.

A limited range of studies have begun to consider the relationship between identity formation and socio-economic disadvantage (McCafferty, 2022). Identity capital has been described variously by Cote (2016), Holmes (2013), Jackson (2016) and Tomlinson and Jackson (2021), as an individual's ability to cultivate an image of their future graduate self in relation to work and then be able to communicate this to others in the form of a meaningful narrative. This is key as it enables a future identity to be invested in and personal resources to be mobilised in meeting career objectives. Cote (2016) argues that identity capital is key to navigating a labour market where roles are no longer strictly ascribed, and students need to 'individualize their identities' to stand out and break through structural barriers (p. 5). Whereas Bennett (2019) argues that identity development has been a 'central and neglected component of employability development' (p.39).

Arguably identity capital in relation to socio-economic disadvantage is an understudied area of employability research because studies to date have found disadvantage to not impact upon identity formation (Cote, 2016). With some suggesting that in fact all undergraduates are often 'novices' when it comes to career thinking (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). Research by Cote (2016) suggests that there is no detrimental effect on identity capital associated with DisSES background. In a longitudinal study of Canadian students, Cote (2016) was able to establish that the identity capital acquired before university is a strong predictor of identity capital during and after higher education. Importantly, they found that parental background had no significant influence on the acquisition of identity capital after 10 years. They also found evidence that less affluent students seem to use their time at university more directly to acquire assets associated with adult identity. Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) also found that background demographics collected on the students within their study were not predictors of identity formation. Though, the same study also found that high levels of social and cultural capital corresponded with increased identity capital (as previously described, these forms of capital tend to be more readily acquired by students from more advantaged backgrounds).

Identity formation can be critical to employment outcomes and crucial to students' wellbeing. For example, using reflective diaries with 86 final year students in Australia, Benati and Fischer (2021), found that IC was critical to understanding student aspirations, with 20% of the students commenting (without prompting) that indecision about their futures was a major challenge. This became not only a practical issue, but a highly emotive one for the students as their degrees progressed. Praskova, Creed and Hood's (2015) research supports this finding. Analysing data from surveys with 667 young adults in Australia (the majority of whom were undertaking degree studies) they were able to show that career identity was a 'central driving force' for 'positive career outcomes' (Praskova, Creed and Hood, 2015, p.152). Furthermore, they demonstrated that having a clear identity was associated with reduced career uncertainty and consequently acted to reduced anxiety and stress. Overall, more research is needed to understand the role which identity plays in career outcomes for all students and especially students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

3.10 Experiences of first-generation students

As described in Chapter 1, the specific focus of this research is the experiences of first-generation students. So far, this literature review (Chapter 3) has considered socio-economic disadvantage broadly with the application of the term, DisSES, but the experiences of first-generation students will now be explored in more depth. Research in the UK about the specific experiences of first-generation students which reveal the mechanisms underpinning

disadvantage is limited (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020), but there have been extensive longitudinal projects in other countries (for example Lehmann, 2022; O'Shea et al, 2018).

As in other research about disadvantage, Bourdieu's concept of capitals has been used often to conceptualise the experiences of first-generation students. Numerous authors have suggested that there is a clear link between a lack of economic, cultural and social capital and the difficult transitions faced by first-generation students both into and beyond higher education (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Lehmann, 2022; Pires and Chapin, 2022). As inequality has increased in the graduate labour market, employers have placed more importance on additional capitals such as social and cultural capital. Unfortunately, these types of capital can be the most difficult to access by first-generation students who lack appropriate networks and cultural insight into employer practices (Lehmann, 2019).

First-generation students often see university as an opportunity for betterment and a place where they can actively seek upward social mobility through the acquisition of human capital (Lehmann, 2022; O'Shea et al, 2018). Some have suggested that FGS are naïve in their thinking and rely more heavily on academic achievement, as they lack access to alternative capitals such as the networking advantages to be found within social capital (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; De Schepper, Kyndt and Clycq, 2024; Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Lehmann, 2019). FGS often believe strongly in educational credentials and may almost assume a guaranteed link between their studies and employment and because of this pay little attention to other forms of development such as extra-curricular activities (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; De Schepper, Kyndt and Clycq, 2024). In contrast to first-generation students, second-generation students are more likely to engage in extra-curricular activities, study abroad and secure internships which create those capitals which are most highly valued by employers (Lehmann, 2022). The extent to which first-generation students in the UK understand university as a meritocracy merits further research. Whether first-generation students are more dependent on human capital as a foundational form of capital and less able to participate in extra-curricular activities in comparison to the general student population is also of interest.

A study in Australia has shown first-generation students to be aware of the value of social capital and the deficits in their connections (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022). As in other studies about disadvantage, first-generation students often struggle to secure career-related internships and work experience because they lack connections and networks relevant to their areas of interest (Lehmann, 2019). In response to their lack of social capital, some have argued that first-generation students are more likely to reject networking and become more reliant on both themselves as well as more formally advertised employment opportunities (De Schepper,

Kyndt and Clycq, 2024; Lehmann, 2019). More research is needed to find out whether first-generation students in the UK understand the relevance of social capital and whether they act strategically to grow their networks via campus-based networking events and online resources such as LinkedIn. The extent to which FGS feel comfortable in creating and exploiting contacts also merits investigation.

First-generation students have also been shown to lack access to the type of cultural capital such as extra-curricular activities valued in higher education and by employers (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022). Some have suggested that this is because first-generation students do not appreciate the additional value attached to extra-curricular activities, whereas 'knowing' students more often stress the importance of extra-curricular activities as a form of signalling capital (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020). However, others have shown first-generation students to be fully aware of the value of participating in 'value-added extra-curricular experiences such as an internship abroad or unpaid work placements in doctor's offices or law firms', but lack the social and economic capital to do so (Lehmann, 2019, p.351). Further research is needed to understand more about first-generation students' perceptions of cultural capital, including whether and how they see themselves as fitting into university and future employment opportunities and whether and how they feel they can engage with the type of extra-curricular activities valued by employers.

As in research about disadvantage generally, there is limited evidence about the impact of identity and psychological capital upon employability for first-generation students. However, Lehmann (2022) suggests that a lower socio-economic background can impact upon identity formation and that first-generation students inevitably arrive at university with a narrower range of occupational goals than students who have been exposed to the graduate labour market via their parents. Pires and Chapin (2022) argue that first-generation students are inevitably resilient as they have consistently 'pushed forward' and repeatedly 'navigated the barriers' which university presents (p.9). More research is needed to understand the role which identity and psychological capital play in first-generation students' employability development and whether there are any measurable differences between identity formation for first and second generation students.

3.11 Chapter conclusion

This literature review has sought to understand the structural inequalities which exist in higher education and employability and how these impact upon individuals. It has shown that while students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to engage in degree studies than ever before, they still face poorer labour market outcomes. Previous research would seem to

Chapter 3

indicate that this is partly because DisSES students experience higher education as a more precarious and challenging space than their more advantaged counterparts, but also because they lack the finances and networks to engage with necessary experiences such as internships and extra-curricular activities. The multiple barriers faced by students has been theorised with the application of capitals and in particular the work of Bourdieu (1986). Managing higher education and subsequent entry to the graduate labour market is not wholly a result of natural ability or aptitude, but can be heavily dependent on capital acquisition. Crucially students who are the first in their families to acquire degrees may lack the forms of capital valued by universities and employers (in the form of social and cultural capital) and consequently be more reliant on their human capital. In contrast, AdvSES students engage in a process of building relevant capitals before and throughout their degrees to gain advantage in a competitive market.

This literature review has established a need for further research to understand the experiences of first-generation students as they develop their employability at university. It has suggested that there is a need to understand more about the influences which shape the employability of first-generation students. Of interest is to what extent UK first-generation students' capital development aligns with the wider research and whether these students are more heavily dependent on human capital as they lack access to social and cultural capital. Also, what is the role of identity and psychological capital in employability development. Key to the study is the need for empirical evidence to understand any differences in capital development between first-generation students and the wider student population. An important and original element of the study will be understanding more about the barriers and facilitators of first-generation students' career capital development and whether specific experiences can act in support of these students. This element of the research will potentially enable good practice to be identified and shared.

Chapter 4 Conceptual Framework

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 illustrated that while widening participation had expanded access to higher education, this had not generally served to improve the employability prospects of DisSES students as anticipated. Chapter 3 showed why this might be the case with the presentation of multiple factors underpinning disadvantage. Often these mechanisms were theorised via capitals within the literature, the application of capitals acted to illuminate the hidden nature of these disadvantages and the extra work required by first-generation students to secure employment (McCafferty, 2022; O'Shea, 2023). This thesis will seek to understand how FGS develop their employability capitals by applying the concept of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a). This chapter will begin by introducing the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson 2017a) and its associated elements. Next, it will describe why the Graduate Capital Model was chosen and its value to this study. It will conclude with a summary of some of the ways in which the model has been utilised in employability research to date and the ways in which the research within this thesis differs to existing studies.

4.2 The Graduate Capital Model

The Graduate Capital Model (GCM) describes employability as 'constitutive of the accumulation and deployment' of five capitals (Tomlinson, 2017a, p. 339). The five elements which combine to form the GCM are human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital (see Figure 2). Tomlinson et al (2017) define capitals as 'key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto individuals' (p. 28). Each resource can be applied to achieve benefits within the labour market. Each capital can have separate value for the individual; however the theoretical model suggests that they may also interact, serving to reinforce each other (Tomlinson, 2017a). Empirical evidence of how multiple capitals might work to reinforce or negate each other is of interest to this research. Tomlinson et al (2017) suggests that there is a fluidity between the capitals, this representing not only the resources possessed by the individual, but also their understanding of and response to the labour market whereby students may need to respond variably to the demands of different vocations. Significantly, Tomlinson et al (2017) suggest that a key benefit of the GCM is the scope for its vocabulary to be shared with students, with the aim of encouraging them to develop their capitals via purposeful interventions. This fits with recent research in the field of education which suggested that individuals can actively seek to conceal deficits in one capital, by actively accruing other types of capital (Hall et al, 2021).

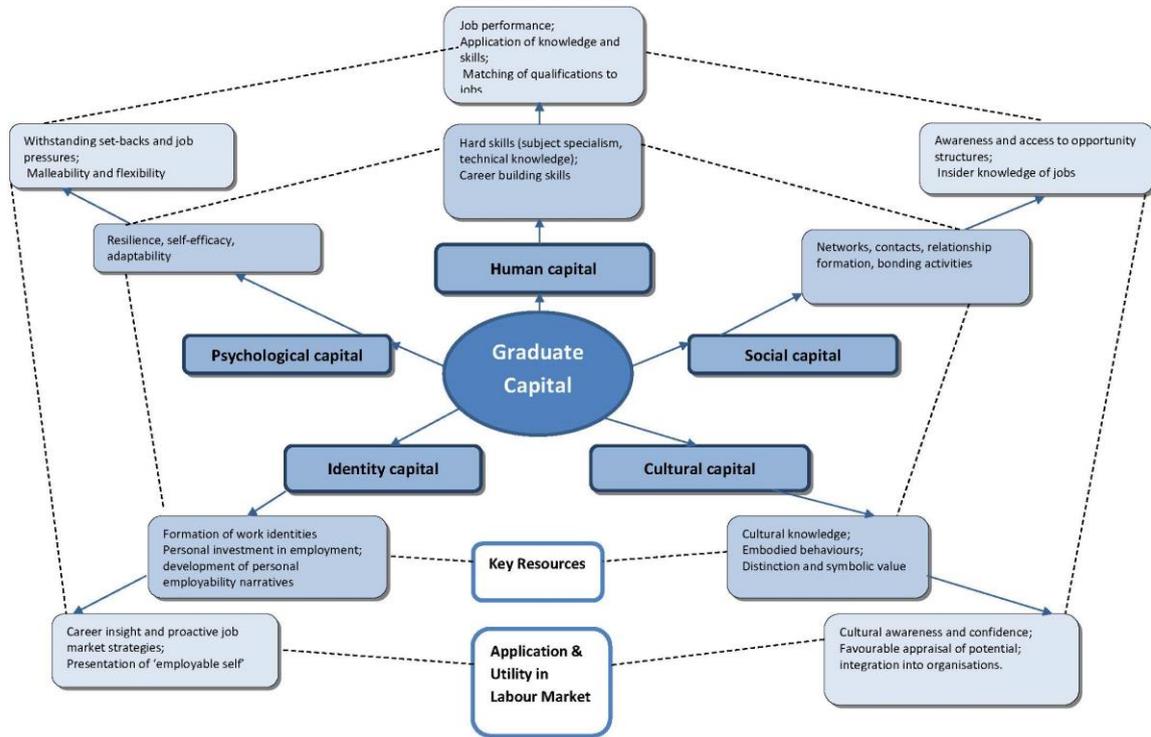


Figure 2: Graduate Capital Model, 2017

Next, the specific elements of the GCM will be defined briefly and their relation to this research project will be explored.

4.3 Human capital

Tomlinson (2017a) defines human capital (HC) as combined of ‘the knowledge and skills which graduates acquire’ which act as a foundation for their labour market outcomes (p. 341). Here he acknowledges more traditional theorisations of employability development which are most closely aligned with skills-based approaches. (Such approaches were introduced in sections 2.4 and 3.4.) Tomlinson (2017a) extends his definition of HC to include career-building skills, these skills including familiarity with trends in the labour market and knowing how and when to apply for work. Tomlinson (2017a) draws on the work of Bridgestock (2009), who recommended that students be taught career management skills to enable them to confidently navigate the graduate labour market and exercise some level of agency over their choices. Bridgestock (2009) defines career management skills as the ability to ‘proactively navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process’ (p. 36). Tomlinson (2017a) suggests such skills might include the ability to understand and interpret labour market knowledge as well as the practical skills necessary to apply for work including curriculum vitae development. Career

building skills have at times been weakly defined and delivered patchily, but there is evidence that they can be developed via purposeful interventions consequently enabling individuals to navigate taxing market conditions (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017). It has been argued that the acquisition of learning and skills (including career management skills) may be essential for all students to navigate a rapidly changing and globalised market (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015).

HC is most closely aligned to mainstream views of employability (Dalrymple et al, 2021), which suggest that it is the responsibility of the individual to enact personal agency and invest in those skills, attributes and behaviours which are in most demand by employers. In defining HC, Tomlinson (2017a) acknowledged the influence of Becker (1964) who conceptualised education and training as the most important investments an individual might choose to make in their future labour market outcomes. Undergraduates with high levels of HC would be expected to demonstrate subject knowledge and transferable skills relevant to their chosen labour market (Tomlinson et al, 2017). Furthermore, they would be able to demonstrate career building skills via an understanding of their chosen labour market and the ability to make high-quality applications for vacancies (McCafferty and Port, 2022). As already described (section 3.10), FGS may be more dependent on their HC in the form of educational credentials and skills, as they lack access to alternative forms of capital. However, their understanding of HC in the form of career management skills merits further investigation.

4.4 Social capital

Tomlinson (2017a) defines social capital (SC) as:

‘the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates’ existing human capital and bring them close to the labour market and its opportunity structures’ (p. 342).

In defining SC, Tomlinson (2017a) references Putnam’s (1999) analysis of bonding and bridging ties. Bonding ties constitute the tight interactions within a group, whilst bridging ties relate to connections made external to the group. Like Bourdieu (1986), Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that it is both the volume and quality of connections, and the ability to exploit these, which is of salience in securing work opportunities and gaining insider knowledge about organisations and opportunities. Students with high levels of SC might demonstrate this through the active creation of networks, including reaching out to key influencers in their chosen field and building an effective online presence (McCafferty and Port, 2022).

Some have suggested that social capital is the most determinant of all the capitals and central to understanding how advantage replicates in the graduate labour market (O'Shea, 2023).

Social capital has been shown to be key in enabling students to gain positional advantage within the graduate labour market (Morrison, 2019; Tholen et al, 2013). As demonstrated in section 3.5, relevant networks can enable students to secure prestigious opportunities such as internships and expend a smaller amount of energy than less advantaged students while doing so.

Importantly, FGS have been shown to lack access to such connections and opportunities (section 3.10).

Unlike Bourdieu, Tomlinson (2017a) believes that individuals can enact agency to build SC and that universities can support this through high levels of employer engagement activity (including work experience, networking opportunities and mentoring activities). Tomlinson et al (2017) also suggest that universities have a role in disrupting the influence of connections made through existing networks with family and friends and replacing these with emergent relationships formed with targeted employers.

4.5 Cultural capital

Cultural capital is conceived by Tomlinson (2017a) as:

‘the formation of culturally valued knowledge, disposition and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter’ (p.343).

Tomlinson (2017a) acknowledges the concept as originally developed by Bourdieu (1986), but positions his application of CC to understand the graduate labour market more specifically. In his description of CC, Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that the notions of distinction and embodied capital are of particular importance in understanding how graduates might act to differentiate themselves in a congested labour market.

Like Bourdieu, Tomlinson (2017a) acknowledges that CC may have a key role in explaining why ‘graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds may have different understandings of field rules’ (p. 344). However, Tomlinson (2017a) questions the pre-determined nature of CC within the context of mass higher education, where there is potential for the dilution of these rules. Further, Tomlinson et al (2017) suggest that CC may be consciously acquired through cultural exposure including targeted contacts with employers, coaching and mentoring.

Tomlinson (2017a) argues that as CC must be referenced against specific sectors and roles, students need to be able to interpret the needs of each sector and demonstrate that they have the required interpersonal and behavioural skills. How this connects with the narratives which students have developed about the labour market in the form of identity capital, will be of

salience here. Crucially in a mass higher education system where degree qualifications have ‘declining cultural currency’ (Tomlinson, et al, 2017), Tomlinson suggests that graduates must act strategically to acquire wider achievements which serve to differentiate themselves from others. These achievements might include the demonstration of additional value added skills and attributes via extra-curricular activities (McCafferty and Port, 2022). A limited range of studies have shown FGS to have reduced access to CC (these are described in section 3.10), although the reasons for this remain contested and merit further investigation.

4.6 Identity capital

Tomlinson (2017a) defines identity capital (IC) as the:

‘level of investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability’ (p. 345).

Tomlinson et al (2017) contend that it is not only the development of a career identity which is important, but also the ability to articulate this through the development of strong and personalised career narratives. These narratives can potentially be delivered through traditional means such as applications in the form of curriculum vitae and online profiles, or through more creative avenues such as portfolio creation (Tomlinson et al, 2017). This accords with the work of Meijers and Lengelle (2012), who in their creation of a model for the development of career found that the narration of identity via articulation, performance and negotiation was key. Like Bennett (2019), they suggest that such identity formation might be transformational for both learning and career progression.

In his exploration of IC, Tomlinson (2017a) refers to Cote’s (2016) definitions, Holmes’ (2013) work on graduate identity and Jackson’s (2016) analysis on ‘pre-professional identity’. Their combined thinking shows several important themes: IC has a central role to play in navigating a labour market where occupations are no longer strictly ascribed and there are high levels of competition born of mass entry; professional identities in higher education can often be emergent, fragile and in need of development and testing; IC may have value in strategically penetrating structural barriers (Cote, 2016; Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2016). Like Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011), Holmes (2013) and Jackson (2016), Tomlinson (2017a) believes that graduate identity is malleable and can be developed over time. Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that students can act purposely to develop this capital; it being imperative for students not only to gain work related experiences, achievements and skills, but be able to project a narrative about the importance of these to specific employments. Communities of practice, mentoring, work related learning and engagement with gatekeeping services such as careers departments in

universities may have a key role in enabling undergraduates to develop their identities (Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2021). Tomlinson et al (2017) suggests that the extent to which students feel enabled to form their IC is key to their employability outcomes as it can impact upon goal-setting strategies and managing plans for entry to the labour market.

Importantly, IC can be seen to have a mediating role in relation to other capitals (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). This was exemplified by Tomlinson's study (2007), where he illustrated a clear connection between investment in careers and high levels of IC. In effect, students who possess high levels of clarity about their future, can act strategically to channel experiences and opportunities to align with their future career goals (Tomlinson et al, 2017). Research suggests that students can be actively encouraged to accumulate and reflect upon their IC and use this to both understand and be able to articulate the value of different capitals for onwards recruitment (Bennett, 2019; Souto-Otero and Białowolski, 2021). Furthermore, several studies have argued that universities should have a role in developing IC narratives via career counselling, work integrated learning, industry-based consultancy and projects (Bennett, 2019; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). This is perhaps particularly important to note for FGS who may have more limited and fractured career identities as they lack previous exposure to the graduate labour market (Lehmann, 2022; see section 3.10).

4.7 Psychological capital

For Tomlinson (2017a), psychological capital (PC) can enable graduates to adapt and respond to the challenges they might face within a changeable and testing labour market. He defines PC as:

‘The capacity for individuals to adapt to challenging personal and job market circumstances and establish a relatively high locus of self-control and persistence.’

(Tomlinson et al, 2017, p. 31).

Components of PC include having a proactive and flexible mindset, self-efficacy and the resilience to cope with pressures and disruptions. Tomlinson is supportive of the view that individuals with growth mindsets and clear work identities will be more likely to gain employment and remain employable (Tomlinson et al, 2017). Tomlinson recognises that PC developed from the work of positive psychologists such as Seligman (1998) (cited in Tomlinson, 2017a). Although not named, the work of Luthans, Luthans and Luthans (2004) is also of salience here. Luthans, Luthans and Luthans (2004) recognised the importance of PC as something which could be ‘invested and leveraged for future return’ (p. 388). Like Tomlinson (2017a), they recognised the importance of self-efficacy and resilience. They argued that the

concept of PC must be ‘grounded in research’, be supported by valid measures and be able to be developed through ‘training and intentional practice’ (Newman et al, 2014, p. S122). Crucially, they created interventions which they believed showed how PC might be purposely developed. Students with high levels of PC, might be expected to manage work-place uncertainty, adapt to changes, setbacks and transitions, and deal with stress effectively (McCafferty and Port, 2022).

Meta-analytical reviews have shown that individuals with high levels of PC have positive expectations about the future and are more able to pursue career goals; however, many of the studies have been conducted within the workplace, rather than focussed on graduates aspiring to enter it (Newman et al, 2014). There has been some limited research on PC and graduate employability. Calvo and Garcia (2021) adapted scales drawing on work including employability skills from Jackson (2016) and perceived employability from Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell, (2008) to understand more about the relation between PC and the employability skills of undergraduates studying business across three universities in Spain. They were able to evidence that a positive relationship exists between PC and perceived employability and that importantly employability skills may be increased by enhancing the PC of students. Further support for the importance of PC to the graduate labour market can be found in Benati and Fischer’s (2021) study, where they showed undergraduate business students to be ‘underprepared in terms of their psychological capital’ when facing a turbulent Australian labour market (p.160). The authors suggested that further research might be necessary in this area to understand more about possible interventions to support PC development in the higher education context. As previously argued in section 3.10, more research is necessary to understand whether FGS have higher levels of PC and whether this can be applied to their advantage in the graduate labour market.

4.8 Value to study

As already discussed, there has been a steady move in the literature from purely skills-based definitions of employability to models increasingly focussed upon broader capital development (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019; Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2018; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Peeters et al, 2019; Williams et al, 2015). The Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) has been part of this development. Formulated within a university and extended to include learning outcomes and a scale (Tomlinson et al, 2017; Tomlinson et al, 2022), the GCM has been adopted for this research for several reasons, including: its alignment with graduate employability; its holistic and processual nature; and the availability of an associated scale to test its outcomes. Each of these benefits will now be explored.

The GCM was initially conceptualised to understand graduate employability (Tomlinson et al, 2017). As previously explored, conceptualisations of employability have been heavily dependent on skill acquisition (see section 2.4.5). Tomlinson (2017a) rejected these skills-based definitions, preferring to see employability as constituted of dynamic and interactive forms of capital. Like others (Clarke, 2018; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011), Tomlinson (2017a) believed that models of employability had been previously oversimplified, relying too heavily on human capital theory (Becker, 1964). By formulating a model which cut across a range of dimensions and disciplines (education, social, cultural and psycho-social), he hoped to overcome this and invite employability practitioners and students to think more deeply in their consideration of the complexities of employability (Tomlinson et al, 2017). In particular, that a degree alone is not enough and that students need more than skills to survive the graduate labour market. The adoption of the model within this research will enable a range of capitals to be explored and tested, including those commonly used to theorise disadvantage (social and cultural), but also how individuals approach the labour market with the application of identity and psychological capital. The GCM assumes that both structural and agentic forces are important in prescribing graduate outcomes. The application of this model will enable these forces to be explored more fully.

Holistic in nature, the Graduate Capital Model was designed to both recognise the challenges faced by students and facilitate their graduate transitions via active career management (Tomlinson et al, 2017). Tomlinson suggests that capital can be ‘acquired through graduates’ lived experiences’ (2017a, p.340). (This being more akin to a processual approach to employability whereby individuals may enact agency to enhance their personal employability outcomes over time, Holmes, 2013). The GCM has been described as ‘highly practical’ and one which can be applied to capital development activities by universities, employers and students (Tomlinson et al, 2017, Wallis, 2021). Within this research, the application of the model will enable the role of interventions in capital development to be assessed more fully.

A further and important benefit of the GCM is that an associated scale has been developed which aligns closely with each of its elements and has been shown to have validity for the chosen study cohort. Other scales exist to assess employability capitals (including that used by Caballero, Alvarez-González and López-Miguens, 2021 and nine listed in the study by Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019), however these have not been specifically developed with the GCM in mind. The Graduate Capital Scale (GCS) (Tomlinson et al, 2022) has been developed to enable each element of the model to be measured objectively. It has been designed to test whether undergraduates are sufficiently equipped with capital resources to secure employment upon graduation. A weakness of the scale might be seen to be its self-reporting nature, but perceived employability (defined as the extent to which an individual believes they could obtain

employment) has been shown to be essential in giving individuals competitive advantage and strongly correlated to capital development in a meta-analysis of 202 studies (Harari, McCombs and Wiernik, 2021).

4.9 The Graduate Capital Model applied in research

Although conceptualised relatively recently, there is evidence of the GCM being used in a range of literature about employability. The GCM has been shown to have value in exploring the experiences of students encountering disadvantage (for example, Pesonen et al's, 2022 study about autistic graduates); understanding more about how employers recruit (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021); and opinion pieces about how curricula might be developed in support of students' employability development (Tomlinson, et al, 2017; Wallis, 2021). However, the author is only aware of three studies, which use the GCM as a tool to analyse the experiences of students from DisSES backgrounds. All these studies were qualitative in nature and only one was conducted within the United Kingdom. These papers are summarised below.

Parutis and Howson (2020) applied the GCM in a UK-based qualitative study to understand more about how undergraduates from different socio-economic backgrounds perceive their employability. They found that overall students from high socio-economic status backgrounds have a significant advantage in being able to 'mobilise various forms of capital' and this enabled them to exploit their capital strategically and rapidly in support of their employability development (Parutis and Howson, 2020, p. 387). In contrast, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds had to take a 'wait and see' approach to their employability development (Parutis and Howson, 2020, p. 385). Such students struggled to see the benefit of employability interventions at the beginning of their degrees, as they lacked the insights necessary to settle quickly into their studies. The GCM proved helpful in understanding that their lack of career identity could be directly attributed to their lack of social capital. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were found to be more reliant on lecturers, employer seminars and job fairs to build their social capital.

Gleeson et al (2022) used the GCM to explore the outcomes from a co-curricular scholarship programme in Australia. Their findings suggested that their study participants were highly aware of the importance of social and cultural capital, seeing them as strong signalling devices for future encounters with employers. The students also valued the opportunities afforded by the widening participation programme in acquiring these social and cultural capitals. Although small scale, crucially, this study suggests that capitals have the potential to be developed through high-quality targeted interventions.

Most recently, De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq (2024) applied the GCM in their qualitative study based within a Flemish university. Their aim was to compare the experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation students to understand the impact of background characteristics on perceptions of employability. Students were categorised according to both their first-generation status and the extent to which they felt they had higher levels of career management skills based on a screening questionnaire. The FGS showed a strong belief in the value of degree credentials. They found that whilst both FGS and non-FGS understood that social capital could confer advantages in the graduate labour market, FGS saw themselves as less dependent on networks as they had grown up in a context where such connections were unavailable to them. Contrary to other research, De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq (2024) suggested that agency plays a stronger role in accruing social capital than parental background. However, consistent with previous studies, the researchers found that narratives surrounding cultural capital were mostly strongly determined by socio-economic background, with non-FGS more likely to focus on the benefits of accruing extra-curricular activities. Like Gleeson et al (2022), these authors suggest that capitals can be purposively acquired in higher education.

Overall, the authors within these studies described the GCM as enabling them to achieve a more fine-grained and comprehensive insight into the employability development of students. The GCM also enabled the impact of employability interventions to be analysed. These studies might suggest that capitals can be acquired in support of employability development, but the extent to which this differs for FGS and non-FGS and which interventions are most impactful would benefit from further examination (De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq, 2024; Gleeson et al, 2022). Only one study specifically applied the GCM to the experiences of FGS and that study was outside of the United Kingdom (De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq, 2024). This suggests that more research is needed to understand the experiences of FGS UK-based students specifically. Furthermore, none of the published studies included quantitative analysis conceptualised with the GCM to compare the experiences of FGS and non-FGS.

4.10 Chapter conclusion

This section has explored the GCM and each of its five elements (Tomlinson, 2017a). The previous application of the model to research and its potential value to this study have also been presented. Tomlinson's (2017a) model is potentially beneficial because it both acknowledges human capital theory and associated skill development, but also moves beyond it. It suggests (and research would seem to support this) that social and cultural capital have value in understanding the structural forces impacting students. Additionally, with the application of identity and psychological capital, agentic responses can be explored.

Chapter 4

This project will aim to explore the framework and its constructs via the collation of both quantitative and qualitative data. It is hoped that via the application of the GCM, that new perspectives will be gained such as the interplay of agency and structure and their effects on graduate outcomes. FGS will be invited to share their experiences of employability development, and these will be analysed through the lens of capital development. The extent to which capitals can be purposely accumulated and applied by FGS will be explored and the extent to which this varies for FGS and non-FGS will be examined.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the chosen methodology which enabled this research to proceed. The main aim of this research was to understand more about the experiences of FGS and their acquisition of capital in support of their employability development. In support of this an exploratory sequential design was adopted. This approach enabled the views of FGS to be heard and analysed fully before the participants' responses were utilised to develop a survey. This survey then enabled the experiences of FGS and non-FGS to be compared directly.

This chapter begins by presenting the underlying philosophy behind the thesis. The selection of a pragmatic paradigm with its emphasis on creating recommendations to address real world problems will be explored. Next, the research design will be introduced with an associated rationale for and challenges associated with the choice of a mixed method design. The qualitative phase of the study will then be presented. Detail will be given about how the data was collected via semi-structured interviews and then subsequently analysed with the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). After this, the quantitative phase of the research will be introduced including the data collection measures, sample and procedure and associated analysis. Finally, a triangulation protocol will be presented. Throughout, explanations will be given as to why the design choices were made and the implications of these choices.

5.2 Philosophy

This research was conducted within a pragmatic paradigm. Paradigms being defined as 'systems of beliefs and practices that influence how researchers select both the questions they study and methods that they use to study them' (Morgan, 2007, p.49). Commonly used within social sciences in support of mixed methods research, pragmatism prioritises research questions, making use of any research methods to gather data if they are fit for the purposes of the enquiry and align closely with the research questions (Biesta, 2010; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Heba, 2019).

In this thesis, pragmatism aligns with the author's worldview, including the construction of knowledge (ontology), creation of knowledge (epistemology), and the value of research (axiology). A pluralist view of research (Heba, 2019; Morgan, 2007), which recognises that valuable knowledge can be gained from both subjective insights and objective data is key to this

mixed methods research. Pragmatism has the potential to enable the complex interaction of structural forces and agency to be studied from more than one perspective. At times, employability research has failed to do this, tending to focus on either the structural through large quantitative projects or the role of agency via qualitative research (Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2017; Tholen, 2015).

In terms of epistemology, pragmatism accepts that reality can be both subjective and objective, and consequently, can and ought to be studied via combined designs including quantitative and qualitative methods (Bishop, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Pragmatism encourages researchers to move between induction and deduction, using qualitative results to illuminate quantitative output and vice versa (Morgan, 2007). In this version of research, the social actor's perceptions of reality can be studied and how these developed within their wider biographical framework. Theories can then be developed and tested productively by quantitative research without conflict (Heba, 2019; Morgan, 2007). Crucially and in line with my axiology, pragmatism seeks to understand how theories and concepts relate to lived experience and is orientated towards solving practical real-world problems (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Heba, 2019; Legg and Hookway, 2021). This aligns well with a value system which believes research can and should act to benefit participants and that participants have a role in contributing to knowledge. In the case of this research, it is hoped there will be benefits for undergraduates in the form of recommendations informed by research data, which can be shared with universities and employers to impact upon FGS employability development.

Some might be critical of pragmatism for its seeming failure to address the differing assumptions and traditions underlying two incompatible research approaches (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Heba, 2019). However, others argue that an artificial divide exists between subjective and objective descriptions of knowledge within the social sciences (Morgan, 2007). Furthermore, where differences exist, it is possible to work in a dualistic way whereby the researcher relies on abductive reasoning if care is taken in research design (Heba, 2019). Crucially, when researchers design mixed methods studies with care, deeper insights may be gained (Heba, 2019). In the next sections, more will be said about how care was taken within this research to guard rigour and quality in both the qualitative and quantitative phases.

5.3 Research Design

A two-phase mixed methods design was chosen for this research. Mixed methods are defined as a 'type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches' (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007, p. 123).

5.3.1 Exploratory Sequential Design

This research is largely based on Creswell and Plano Clark's 'Exploratory Sequential Design' (2018). In this design, the qualitative phase comes first with the aim of exploring the phenomenon of interest in detail (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). In phase 1, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with FGS at a university based within the south of England. The sequential nature of the study design necessitated that the qualitative results were analysed fully before the quantitative phase. In phase 2, the qualitative results were used in order that a 'contextually appropriate quantitative feature' could be built to understand the experiences of FGS further (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p. 240). Phase 2 of the study used a survey design to understand more about how students had developed career related capital and whether there were any variances between FGS and non-FGS in their capital development. The mixed methods point of 'interaction' was the creation of a quantitative survey from the qualitative data (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins, 2011), but also the final triangulation of the results from the two phases of the study.

The overarching aim of this study is to explore whether the concept of capital development can help to explain why first-generation students perform less well in the labour market.

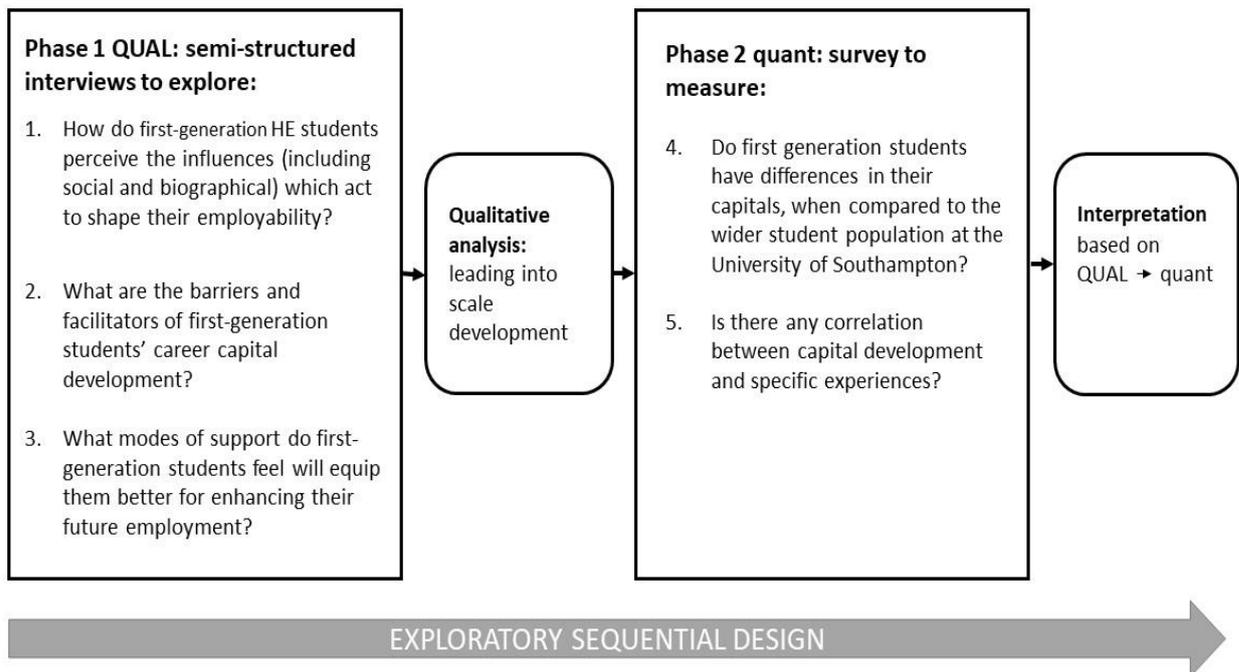


Figure 3: Study Design

Mixed methods were chosen for this research, because despite the potential for qualitative and quantitative studies to have sufficient value on their own (Morse, 2005), by combining methods there was an opportunity to understand the phenomenon of capital development more

completely (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Heba, 2019). The first qualitative phase enabled a detailed understanding of the perspective of FGS to be gained subsequently guiding the content of phase 2. Phase 2 generalised this understanding to a wider population illuminating the results of phase 1 further. In effect, the complementary strengths of both methods acted together to amplify the results. The Exploratory Sequential Design was chosen because Plano and Clark (2018) suggest that it would be well placed to study specific phenomena, within specific settings, where variables and emergent theory needed to be tested. In this case, this related well to the need to understand the experiences of FGS and the role which capital development plays within their employability development.

It is perhaps worth noting that alternative mixed method designs were considered. These included an explanatory method which would have started with a quantitative phase and a three-phase research project. The former was eventually rejected because it would have relied heavily on a pre-existing scale of capital development (Tomlinson et al, 2022) with no opportunity to expand the scale to include representation from FGS. The latter was rejected because it was deemed to be too unrealistic within the scope of this research.

5.3.2 Challenges

Mixed methods studies may have their benefits, but it is acknowledged that they pose numerous challenges. There are dangers that studies may be poorly designed, with contradictory elements put together with little regard as to how their output will be analysed or integrated or their rigour maintained (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2018). These pressures are particularly felt as mixed methods studies have the potential to make additional demands on the researcher in terms of time to complete phases and skills in terms of meeting the demands posed by qualitative and quantitative methods. Several strategies have been utilised to guard the integrity of both the qualitative and quantitative phases while purposefully combining their results in alignment with the research questions. From the beginning of this research, there was a clear intention to use the qualitative results to directly inform the development of the quantitative content. Creswell and Plano-Clark's framework of an 'Exploratory Sequential Design' (2018) was selected in response to this. This design was chosen once it had been firmly established that it would be best suited to meeting the research questions. Where results merged this was reported in full and where discrepancies existed this was noted with interest. Care was taken to attend to both the qualitative and quantitative research elements in order that the research could be judged to be of sufficient quality. It was hoped that these strategies would enable each element of the research to have integral value and consequently maximum worth for the research outcomes (Creswell, 2010; Morgan, 2007). More will be said about how the quality of the research was maintained for both

qualitative and quantitative elements in the next sections of this chapter, where the design for each study phase will be explored in detail.

5.4 Phase 1: Qualitative Study

5.4.1 Introduction

In phase 1 of the study, undergraduate FGS were invited to share their insights into how their employability had been shaped through a range of experiences and influences (including social and biographical). They were also asked to reflect on the barriers and facilitators of their career capital development (although the language of capitals was not used directly within the questions). A holistic approach was taken to career planning, whereby participants were invited to reflect on key episodes from the past (such as choosing their degrees), present (engaging with their degree studies), to the future (career aspirations). This approach recognised that future career trajectories are impacted by past experiences. Acknowledging that employability is not just about getting a job at the end of a degree, but should be seen rather as the sum of all the transitions throughout life in pursuit of work, education and training.

5.4.2 Data Collection: semi-structured interviews

To fully understand the perspective of FGS about their career transitions, qualitative data was collected through 25 individual semi-structured interviews conducted in an online space. This approach encouraged interviewees to give first person accounts about how they had navigated their life courses in the structural settings of education, home and work (Holloway and Jefferson, 2004; Lichtman, 2013; Singer, 2004).

Interviews were chosen as they enabled the students to use their own words when describing their personal experiences and perspectives about choosing their educational pathways and subsequent career planning. Semi-structured interviews were used as they enabled a schedule to be covered which aligned with the needs of the research, but also gave participants an opportunity to raise their own issues (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This approach to data elicitation had several benefits. The act of speaking within an interview gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on and order their priorities (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The interviews were contextually rich, enabling patterns and unconscious meanings to be revealed (Elliott, 2005; Holloway and Jefferson, 2004; Reissman, 2008). As the participants engaged in storytelling they reflected on points of tension and their personal role in navigating any difficulties they had faced (Singer, 2004). The interviews also enabled the temporal and causal nature of career planning to be explored (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Elliott, 2005).

Finally, through the collection of stories about support and overcoming adversity the researcher was able to gather information about the career resources which served to help FGS with their career planning, this fitted well with the pragmatist nature of this research.

Interviews focussed on collecting stories are not without their issues. Reissman (2008) argues that participants will understandably mediate and regulate their language and stories depending on their listener. Furthermore, they suggest that ‘the assumption that there is a story wanting to be told can put pressure on participants’ (p.25). This may particularly be the case for undergraduates who are at the beginning of their career planning. With this in mind, attention was paid to organising, introducing, and setting an appropriate tone within the interviews. Every-day language was adopted to encourage participation and interview questions were organised in such a way as to guide students through the story-telling process from beginning to end with the application of semi-structured interviews (Elliott, 2005; Reismann, 2008). Non-verbal and verbal queues were also adopted to encourage students to continue speaking (Elliott, 2005). There is a danger that semi-structured interviews might interrupt the flow of the story (Elliott, 2005), however this was overcome by balancing between the needs of the interviewee and responding to the answers given.

5.4.3 Content of interviews

An interview guide was created prior to the interviews being conducted and included a pre-defined list of semi-structured questions with prompts. These questions were formulated to focus on transition points and key decisions, people and events as well as giving background information to enable some understanding of contextual disadvantage to be gained. The interview schedule was deliberately constructed without direct reference to the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) in order that interviews might be initially analysed inductively. The four stages of each interview are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interview Schedule

Background and contextual information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What degree are you studying? 2. And what year? 3. I know your parents didn't go to university – but what about any siblings? 4. Before coming to university were you in receipt of free school meals at any point? 5. Would you mind tell me your age?
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	<p>6. What gender do you identify with?</p> <p>7. How would you describe your ethnicity?</p>
<p>Understanding past career decisions</p>	<p>8. You're studying xxx, how did you choose that? [Prompts: Why xxx Uni? Did anyone help you with your choices?]</p>
<p>Understanding present situations</p>	<p>9. What's it like studying xxx? [Prompts: highpoints? low points?]</p> <p>10. How do you spend your time outside of your studies? [Prompts: During term time? During the holidays? Work? Interests? Why chosen?]</p>
<p>Looking towards future employability plans and decisions</p>	<p>11. Where do you see yourself going after your degree? [Prompts: Any particular jobs? Employers? Further study? How did you choose this?]</p> <p>12. You mentioned that you plan to enter xxx can you tell me how you've come to that decision? [Prompts: Any contacts? How did you find the contacts? Work experience? How well do you think you will fit into the workplace you mentioned? How are you building your profile for that future?] <i>Alternative question 12 for those participants who are undecided about their plans upon graduation.</i> You mentioned that you are not sure about the future – can you tell me more about that? [Prompts: What's made the decision difficult? What if anything would you value in a future career?]</p> <p>13. Have you had any experiences dealing with employers? [Prompts: applying for work experience? Internships? Experiences of applications and interviews? What were the employers looking for? How did you feel about their</p>

	<p>requirements? To what extent did you feel you fitted into their requirements?]</p> <p>14. Do you have any worries about the future? [Prompts: how will you cope with these?]</p> <p>15. Overall, has anything helped with your career planning? [Prompts: Clarity of ideas? Resilience? Knowing how employers operate? Contacts? Having the right skills and knowledge?]</p> <p>16. Overall, has anything held you back with your career planning? When you think about these barriers how do you manage them? [Prompts: Clarity of ideas? Resilience? Knowing how employers operate? Contacts? Having the right skills and knowledge?]</p> <p>17. Is there anything which you would like to add about your career story?</p>
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While the order of the questions within the interview guide was generally followed, additional questions were added as necessary depending on the natural flow of the conversation. Probes were also used to encourage participants to move beyond the descriptive. The story of how the students arrived at university was as important as their future plans, in order that the full lifecycle of employability could be captured.

Three pilot interviews were conducted to assess the proposed questions. These interviews were then transcribed and discussed with supervisors before further participants were recruited. The interviews worked well with a rapid rapport being built between the interviewer and participants. The participants described their career stories in detail. After the pilot interviews had been fully conducted and transcribed, it was decided that all the current questions would be maintained, but further prompts would be added to tease out participant’s thoughts about the future and any challenges they might face. Additional practical questions were added to the interview schedule to support future recruitment. The questions were moved to index cards to help manage the interview and maintain eye contact during online interviews. The interview schedule is available in full in Appendix A.

5.4.4 Location of interviews

In the case of this research, the choice of location was key as a flexible method needed to be found which would guarantee maximum attendance by participants, allow for safety during an ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and ensure the highest quality of exchange possible. Video interviews were chosen to ensure that visual interaction was possible throughout the interviews, this enabled the conversations to flow more naturally and rapport to be established more readily (Hanna and Mwale, 2017). Microsoft Teams was chosen as the package via which to conduct the interviews because it was a university supported package which was free for all students to access within the university; it was familiar to students, as they had previously used it for on-line meetings with tutors; and its contents were secure and confidential with password protected platforms available for only the participant and researcher to access.

Video interviews proved to have several benefits. In practical terms they were relatively easy to schedule (some FGS attended them in lunchtimes or in the evening). Attendance was high with only three students re-scheduling interviews and one never attending. Some students preferred the opportunity to be interviewed within their own chosen space, consequently avoiding issues around feeling invaded as the interviewer entered their space (Elwood and Martin, 2000; Hanna and Mwale, 2017). One participant summarised why this was important for him:

‘You're in an environment where you know when you feel comfortable in... I feel more comfortable and calm, which I think is very good when you're trying to maintain your composure to answer the questions that are being asked of you.’ (Luke)

There were occasional disruptions (for example family members coming into rooms), however participants were able to press mute and keep their privacy. An additional benefit of Microsoft Teams was the ease of data capture which it afforded. Once the interviews were completed high-quality downloadable recordings and transcripts were readily available via password protected university sites.

Online interviews may be a more accessible, convenient and cost-saving medium, but they are not without their challenges. Content may be lost through poor internet connections (Hanna and Mwale, 2017) and rapport may be more difficult to build remotely (Weller, 2017). In this study, only one interview was completely disconnected and had to be restarted. Most interviews were conducted with very high levels of internet connectivity which perhaps reflected the nature of the participants who had needed to adjust to their education and social lives being delivered online during a worldwide pandemic (De Villiers, Farooq and Molinari, 2022). Rapport (the sense that trust has been built and that the interview can be moved beyond the transactional to a place of connectivity and productivity) was established with several strategies: including

professional and welcoming communications prior to the interviews; greetings as participants entered the virtual room; eye-to-eye contact maintained via a professionally set up camera with talking heads positioning; and distractions limited (Weller, 2017). It also helped that my counselling skills could be fully utilised in structuring the interviews, actively listening and encouraging the participants to expand their stories with the application of techniques such as summarising and paraphrasing. Though the interviews were conducted remotely, students seemed to engage fully as the length and quality of the transcripts illustrated.

5.4.5 Recruitment

Participants were recruited purposively (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), as this was in line with the needs of the study where FGS were to be interviewed. A variety of gatekeepers at the university were approached to advertise the study over the course of six months. These gatekeepers included colleagues in the careers service, members of a social mobility network and lecturers across a range of subjects (including chemistry, business, education, law and medicine). Further direct advertisements were placed in a university-wide email newsletter available to all students to subscribe to. Posters were placed at key sites to reach out to under-represented students (for example in men's toilets). Snowballing was also used as each participant was asked if they would consider sharing the study within their networks. Incentives were used to encourage participation (£10 per interview) and as a recompense for attendance, this was deemed to be in line with principles of fairness and deemed proportionate to the time given by participants by the study's funding body. High quality communications were maintained throughout the advertising and recruitment to ensure not only that enquiries converted to participation, but also to indicate to potential participants that their contribution was valued and would be used respectfully. (Examples of communications with participants are included in Appendix B.) Participants were accepted to the study when they self-identified as first-generation, undergraduate and having UK nationality (international students were outside the scope of this study). Once potential participants responded to an introductory email about the study, they were sent further detailed information about the research including a Participant Information Sheet, which referred them to the full ethics in support of the project (Appendices C and D). Before interviews commenced, each participant was required to complete a consent form (Appendix E).

5.4.6 Participant group

What counts as adequate numbers for qualitative studies can be contested (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Mason, 2010). For this study, the 'Information Power Model' by Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016) was used to reflect on whether sufficient

interviews had been undertaken. This model was chosen partly because of its fit with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022b, endorse the Information Power Model as having a good fit with their understanding of data collection and analysis), but also because it encouraged a systematic and transparent approach to what counted as sufficient data for coding and analysis. Its emphasis is on the quality and richness of data achieved and how outputs can be analysed thoroughly, rather than sampling size or saturation. Personal reflections using the Information Power Model were recorded and showed the study to be high on the continuum of information power. This ultimately led to the decision that data collection could be ended in favour of an intense period of analysis.

Table 2: Sample size via 'Information Power Model'

Model Item	Response
Study aim	This study was focussed on the experiences of FGS at one university – results were not claimed to be widely transferable. Furthermore, this stage of the study was part of a broader mixed method study.
Sample specificity	Purposive sampling meant all the participants were highly aligned to the study's aims (i.e., all undergraduates and all first-generation students).
Use of established theory	A clear theoretical framework had been established and a systematic review of literature relating to the topic had been undertaken by the study's author before data collection began.
Quality of dialogue	The interviewer was herself currently a FGS. Furthermore, she had over 30 years of experience in the field of employability. High levels of communication were maintained before, during and after interviews. As an experienced interviewer, the study lead could use several techniques to elicit detail from each participant including active listening, paraphrasing and mirroring (Ali and Graham, 1996). Rapport was rapidly established in the interviews and participants often commented on how enjoyable they found the experience. The depth and extent of the interview transcripts reflected this.

Analysis Strategy	Interviews were transcribed and coded concurrently with data collection. This approach revealed that a range of insights were gained which both fitted with, but also had the potential to expand upon established theory and research within the topic area of graduate employability.
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In all 25 interviews were conducted over the course of six months (January 2022 to July 2022). The interviews were scheduled to conclude within an hour (including an introduction and conclusion, which were not recorded). The recorded content ranged in length from 26 to 57 minutes (average 47 minutes).

5.4.7 Data analysis

The overarching approach to analysis was that of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a ‘method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022a, p. 4). Reflexive Thematic Analysis recognises the critical and active role of the researcher, who is acknowledged as central to the process of developing codes and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen not only because it can enable patterns of meaning to be developed, but also because crucially for this study it can enable interviews to be analysed inductively (fitting with the plan to draw upon the story-telling elements of the interview) and deductively (enabling the theoretical elements of the Graduate Capital Model to be introduced to the analysis). Reflexive Thematic Analysis has additional benefits: it is theoretically flexible (in this case it can align with a mixed methods pragmatic approach); it values research which can have social impact; it embraces the role of storytelling by both participants and researchers; and it acknowledges that data is contextual as it is both socially situated and subjective (Braun and Clarke, 2022a; Lainsou, Braun and Clarke 2019) .

The process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis and how it was applied in this study will now be examined in full. Braun and Clarke (2022a) advocate the use of six stages to undertake thematic analysis (although they acknowledge, and this was the case in this study, that this is far from a linear process). Stage 1 is a familiarisation with the dataset. In the case of this study, this included the transcription of all interviews orthographically (i.e., both words and sounds were transcribed). These transcripts were then read repeatedly in conjunction with watching the recordings of the interviews. During this stage of the analysis, analytic memos were used to note points of interest and tension within the interviews (Saldana, 2013). An extract to illustrate these memos can be found in Appendix F. A further personal diary was kept recording the subjective

processes at play during the data collection. During this stage of the analysis, key attributes for each participant (degree subject, year of study, receipt of free school meals, gender identity and ethnicity) were also recorded separately to the transcripts to guard against the sharing of personal information. At this stage, pseudonyms were created. The participants were advised at the end of their interviews that pseudonyms would be assigned to protect their identities. Each participant was invited to suggest names, but few chose to do so. In most cases, pseudonyms were created after the interviews to reflect factors such as ethnolinguistic backgrounds and age (Wang et al, 2024.)

Stage 2 of Reflexive Thematic Analysis is coding. In the first instance, all the transcripts were loaded onto NVIVO (release version 1.6.1) and coded systematically on a line by line basis seeking both semantic and latent meanings. Where possible codes were developed 'in vivo' using the participants own phrases and language. In this first cycle of coding each interview was coded inductively. The aim was to stay close to the story as described by the participants, but also to develop descriptive codes which captured key episodes such as beginnings, influential moments, turning points and milestones in the participants' lives (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Saldana, 2013). An excerpt from a transcript is included in Appendix G. Brief descriptions of each code were developed to enable the codes to be further refined, analysed and questioned. This stage of the process relied heavily on reviewing and refining each code to ensure their consistency and focus. Content was continually merged, spliced and at times deleted resulting in 103 codes being developed. As said, NVIVO was used as an organisational tool during this stage of the analysis. This benefitted the study, as multiple versions of the coding could be stored, and selected quotations could be easily compared with code headings. A further advantage of NVIVO was the opportunity for each interview to be coded separately to maintain its integrity, but final stories could also be combined to see if a picture could be built.

In stage 3, candidate themes began to be developed. To enable this codes and field notes were read on hard copy to gain the fullest possible perspective on the data. A deliberate strategy of moving between hard copy and online materials was used to immerse as fully as possible with the data, but also maintain some systematisation as required by Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Using the codes developed in stage 2, themes began to be developed inductively. Codes were clustered around topics such as 'learning to fit into university', 'extra -curricular activities', 'being different'. Then, an additional deductive approach was taken with hard copies of the codes guillotined and then physically laid upon the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) to see if and how they might align with the model. (Appendix H includes pictures to illustrate this process.) This stage of theme development served to further test the coding process and act to interrogate the value of code descriptions and content. It became clear that codes such as 'worries about the future' contained too much content to be of value to theme development.

These codes were revisited, and their content rechecked. This stage resulted in 87 codes being developed (these are given in full with their associated descriptions in Appendix I).

In stage 4, ten candidate themes were constructed. These were formally presented to supervisors for feedback and discussion. Some candidate themes such as 'caring' were reconsidered and became subsumed under a broader theme about family background. Reflection on the research questions proved invaluable at this stage.

During stages 5 and 6 writing began, as themes came to be written they were refined, named and described and quotations began to be allocated which were illustrative of their content. During writing, original manuscripts and field notes were consciously and repeatedly checked to ensure that meaning and context were honoured. Excerpts were chosen from the manuscripts to be illustrative and only adjusted to exclude extra content (marked [...]). Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect the identity of the participants. Ultimately, six inductive themes were developed (these acted to illustrate the FGS's biographies both before and during university) and seven deductive themes (which aligned closely, but not completely with the Graduate Capital Model).

It is acknowledged that the bi-directional coding (inductive moving into deductive) demanded by this phase of the research was not without its issues. Braun and Clarke (2012) recognise that there is a potential for inductive content (in this case, the participants' voices) to be over-ridden with the application of deductive templates (in this case the Graduate Capital Model). Some have questioned whether researchers can truly ever work inductively with a theoretical concept in mind (Morse and Mitcham, 2002). In response to this, specific actions were taken within this research to ensure the voices of the participants were heard in full, before the theoretical model was applied. This was important because it enabled employability resources beyond the model to be captured and explored. Before data collection and analysis the questions used during the interviews had been developed purposefully with no reference made to the Graduate Capital Model and its associated capitals. During data analysis nothing was presupposed and as described above, stage 2 coding was entirely inductive with no reference made to the Graduate Capital Model. To maintain an open and curious stance during the inductive phase, coding was undertaken using the voices of the participants, prior to themes being honed; and when the data was presented it was done so with thick descriptions making use of detailed quotations from the participants. Specifically, the application of the full and systematic process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (outlined above) enabled the voices of the participants to be heard in full before the theoretical concept of capital development was applied to the findings. As a researcher, I made myself accountable to both my supervisors and my participants by actively sharing findings as I coded and through presentations and peer-reviewed publication. In this

thesis, the findings of the inductive phase were reported separately within Chapter 6. Here a more biographical stance was taken to the findings and the students' own accounts of their contexts and histories were explored. The inductive findings were also used in the process of triangulation to both contextualise and challenge the deductive and quantitative results from this research (see section 5.6 and Appendix P).

The second phase of coding the qualitative data was deductive. Morse and Mitcham (2002) suggested researchers can become prone to 'tunnel vision' and tending to 'see what one desires' (p.28) when coding deductively, rather than maintaining the type of openness which is essential to qualitative studies. However, Willis (2000) suggests that there is a clear benefit to using theory to illuminate and analyse data as this can 'drive a curiosity' (p.114) and perhaps overturn or strengthen thinking. It should be noted that whilst the Graduate Capital Model was applied conceptually during the deductive phase, it was one which the researcher was prepared to deconstruct, question and work beyond. To maintain an open stance, inductive coding was undertaken entirely before the Graduate Capital Model was applied. Once inductive coding was completed, the inductive codes were printed, and then quite deliberately and physically cut up and separated from each other, so that previous associations could be deconstructed and potentially reformulated. It was only once this was done, that the model was reintroduced and the codes laid against the capitals. This process illustrated the strengths of the model as it highlighted both facilitators of and barriers towards capital development. However, this deductive coding also revealed a potential weakness of the model, as the theme of economic capital was shown to be significant (more will be said about this within the thesis discussion). The contents of the deductive analysis are presented in Chapter 7, and as in the case of the inductive analysis fully triangulated with all the results within the thesis in Chapter 9.

5.4.8 Qualitative phase: rigour and ethics

Rigour in qualitative data collection was maintained with several strategies including: the establishment of trustworthiness, credibility, consistency and transparency in terms of how the data was collected and interpreted (Greenhalgh and Taylor, 1997; Lainson, Braun and Clarke 2019; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The full and transparent description of the methods used and the inclusion of detailed appendices to illustrate this also show a desire to work in a rigorous and ethical way.

Prior to data collection full ethical approval was sought via ERGO II ('Ethics and Research Governance Online'; University of Southampton; Appendix C). Before the interviews were conducted, participants were sent detailed information about how the study would proceed and the potential impact upon them. Each participant was asked to complete a consent form for the

study, outlining the various ways in which their data might be used (Appendix E). In all cases, participants were made aware that their personal stories would be used for research purposes (Lichtman; 2013). During the interviews themselves, attention was paid in both asking questions and listening fully and without interruption to the respondents' answers. Care was taken to move carefully between listening and interpretation (Greenhalgh and Taylor, 1997; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Towards the end of the interviews, the interviewer summarised and asked participants to reflect on whether their stories had been fully understood and whether there were any points they wished to add. Participants were further invited to follow the progress of the research via the researcher's LinkedIn account, thus ensuring further accountability. Following the interviews, personal data was stored carefully in line with a data management plan submitted for ethical approval. Anonymised transcripts were created with pseudonyms and personal information stored separately in a password protected spreadsheet.

5.4.9 Positionality

As described within the introduction, as a first-generation student who had previously worked within employability, I was heavily invested in this research. I am conscious that my background gave me some advantages in terms of reaching gatekeepers and using careers guidance skills to encourage participants to speak, but it also had the potential to give me some biases and assumptions (Brown, 2023). My aim in this research was to have a curious and open stance, which would enable my knowledge to be 'strengthened', but also 'overturned' (Willis, 2020, p.115). I also chose to be transparent in my methods; part of this was choosing to describe my methods in detail including examples of background data and my 'workings out' within my appendices.

At times it has been difficult to cope with the immersive experience which forms qualitative data collection. Hearing highly personalised stories from students about how they have struggled to settle into university, finance their studies and find both temporary and permanent employment opportunities was at times difficult (although also a privilege). Throughout my PhD I chose to keep a research journal which enabled me to reflect on my interactions in depth, as well as recording my progress and the barriers I faced. This journal was one of the ways I managed my emotional response to these interviews. I also found it helpful to commit to telling my participants' stories as truthfully and as openly as possible. I was motivated to publish my results in order that the participants' experiences could be shared, this enabled me to become accountable to my interviewees. I did this via posters, presentations, social media posts, meetings with key departments at the university and research articles.

When I began to analyse the interviews, the counsel of Paul Willis (2020) was helpful. Like him, I recognised that my research felt like ‘shards’ or ‘academic fragments’ (p. xi). These fragments needed to be made sense of and I could see that my role in analysing the data inevitably shaped its content. Here bi-directional coding helped. Initially the interviews were coded inductively, keeping close to the participants words. Later when the ‘crazy piles’ had been created (Willis, 2020, p. xi), deductive analysis was used and the GCM introduced to the codes to enable themes to be developed (see Appendix H for a pictorial representation of this process). (The full list of deductive codes are included in Table 6, Chapter 7, but included items such as invested in education for human capital and networks ‘I never knew anyone’ for social capital.)

5.5 Phase 2: Quantitative Study

Phase 2 of the study was conducted with the use of a survey. The aim of this phase was to measure the capital development of FGS in comparison to non-FGS at the same Russell Group university. Participants were recruited from the same university as during the qualitative phase, but included both FGS and non-FGS for comparison.

5.5.1 Measures

A self-completing survey to be delivered at a single time point was constructed to meet the needs of phase 2 of the research. The survey was designed to be delivered online, in this case via Qualtrics. The survey consisted of three parts: section 1 (10 items) collected demographic and background characteristics to allow for stratification of the sample; section 2 (45 items) included questions to test capital development with the utilisation of the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS; Tomlinson et al, 2022); and section 3 (six items) included questions developed directly from the qualitative phase of the study such as the role of activities in supporting capital development. The survey contained 61 items and is summarised in Table 3 below. (The survey in full including options for answers and the accompanying participation and consent form are available in Appendix J. Postcode data was collected in order to calculate indices of deprivation; Ministry of Housing, 2019).

Table 3: Survey items

Demographic and background characteristics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What degree subject are you currently studying at the University of XXXX? 2. Which year of study are you currently in? 3. What is your gender identity? 4. What is your age?

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5. How do you describe your ethnicity?
6. Did any of your parents attend university and complete degree studies?
7. What was your postcode of residence whilst undertaking A-Levels/IB/BTEC?
8. Did you receive free school meals whilst at school?
9. Would you describe yourself as a carer?
10. Would you describe yourself as having any disabilities?

Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022)

All of these questions were answered on a Likert scale, with participants asked to rate themselves from 1 not at all confident through to 6 as feeling highly confident in this area.

11. I believe my degree will improve my career prospects.
12. I know that my subject knowledge will be valued by employers.
13. I will use my skills in future employment.
14. I know how to locate a range of information about the graduate job market.
15. I can list a range of sources to find job opportunities.
16. I can produce an effective CV and job application.
17. I have an effective online career profile (e.g., LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster).
18. I feel confident I can perform well at interviews.
19. I feel able to perform well at assessment centres.
20. I can demonstrate my transferable skills.
21. I keep up to date with the graduate job market.
22. I can name key employers of interest to me.
23. I evaluate the changing job market in my career thinking.
24. I can list some graduate roles which I would be suited to.
25. I am confident I can make the most of any opportunities for personal development.
26. I am confident in talking to people I do not know.
27. I can recognise opportunities for personal development.
28. I use my network of career contacts to inform my career planning.
29. I have developed contacts with employers.
30. I know how to find out about skills, attributes and behaviours required for different types of employment.
31. I am able to judge whether organisations will suit me.
32. I know what type of role I am interested in.
33. I feel confident I can present myself well in the sector which interests me.
34. I can identify what employers value most in graduates.
35. I can give examples of achievements which would interest employers.
36. I have distinctive achievements and interests which make me stand out from others.

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37. I take part in extra-curricular activities, these might include volunteering, sports, part-time work, clubs and societies.
38. I can recognise and explain the value of extra-curricular activities.
39. I can recognise roles which would suit me best.
40. I can articulate my skills.
41. I can identify what motivates me.
42. I know what is important to me in my career.
43. I have a clear career plan.
44. I can list my strengths.
45. I have tested my career ideas with relevant work experience.
46. I keep a record of my personal development.
47. It is important to me that my career reflects my personal values.
48. I am confident in my ability to manage change.
49. I see change as an opportunity for development.
50. I consider myself adaptable.
51. I am able to manage setbacks.
52. I enjoy taking measured risks.
53. I can be persistent, despite setbacks.
54. I can make plans to respond to change.
55. I am optimistic about gaining suitable employment.

Additional items added as a direct result of coding the qualitative responses in Phase 1

56. Do you have anyone you turn to for careers advice?
57. In the past, who have you turned to, if anyone, for help with your career planning? (Choose as many as apply from employers, friends, parents/family, online resources, other students, school's careers service, school teachers, university careers service, university tutors and lecturers, other.)
58. Since joining the University of XXXX have you taken part in any of the following? (Choose as many as apply from academic representatives, careers coaching, clubs and societies, mentoring, paid internships, volunteering.)
59. On average, how many hours paid work do you undertake during term time each week? (Sliding scale from 0 to 40 per week).
60. To what extent do your commitments to part-time work impact upon your studies?
61. Please describe any future career plans.

Central to the survey and the measurement of capital development was the application of a self-reporting scale called the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS; Tomlinson et al, 2022), which served to operationalise the GCM. The GCS was selected for three reasons: it was designed specifically to measure the capitals defined within the GCM and so had conceptual alignment

with this study; its content and language were developed to meet the needs of the target undergraduate population; furthermore, it was piloted and refined at the same university as the study. The developers of the GCS ensured face validity by inviting employability experts (including academics and careers practitioners) to comment on its content. Content and cultural validity were further ensured by extensive piloting with students and advisory panels including employability experts and E-learning content developers. The Cronbach's Alpha score for the subscales within the GCS range from .73 to .86 showing a good level of internal reliability (Tomlinson, et al 2022). Moreover, the test has been shown to have concurrent reliability as it is significantly correlated to the 16 item 'Perceived Employability Scale' produced by Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell, 2008 (Tomlinson, et al 2022). The Rothwell scale is one of the few UK-based scales designed to measure employability (Nerookar, 2022).

5.5.2 Sample and procedure

Prior to the dissemination of the survey, approval was obtained via the Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton (ID: 78421) (See Appendix K for the ethics application). Before completion of the survey, participants were invited to read a participant information sheet and were asked to give informed consent. Once collated, data was downloaded, anonymised and stored on university password protected servers.

Recruitment to the survey took place for 6 months (November 2022 to April 2023). Sample marketing materials are included in Appendix L. Students were incentivised via draw entries. The survey was advertised via key gatekeepers (including colleagues in academia, the careers service, the library and the social mobility network in their newsletters and presentations). Around 200 posters and flyers were also distributed in key locations such as faculty noticeboards and student common rooms across the campus. An additional opportunity arose to offer the study directly to psychology students via a recruitment pool in return for them receiving additional module credits. For the survey to have sufficient statistical power, it was estimated that around 160 fully useable responses would be required from the FGS and the remaining population (see Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018 for statistical power analysis in advance of data collection). Ultimately, 379 complete responses were received (further information is available in the next section about how the responses were cleaned in preparation for analysis).

5.5.3 Data analysis

Data was downloaded from Qualtrics (coded values as SPSS. Sav file) directly into SPSS v.26. A separate text version was also loaded into Excel to ensure codes were aligned. The data sets

from two surveys were combined into one SPSS file using the Data > Merge File function within SPSS ($n = 409$). Columns of additional data assigned by Qualtrics were deleted for ease of use (these included: status, recorded date, user language, finished and response, five consent columns, emails and debrief, Pscyh ID for SONA when present). Cases were removed when their completion of the survey was less than 90% (as these participants had not fully completed the GCS, which was central to the study). 30 cases were removed from the study and 379 remained. Responses dated from 22 November 2022 to 25 March 2023. (Appendix M includes full syntax for data download and cleaning.)

Data was checked for anomalies including missing, out of range (none identified) and duplicated data (none identified). Missing postcodes were identified as '999'. In the variable view within SPSS, names and labels were recoded and aligned with the codebook (Appendix N).

Parametric assumptions were tested by checking for normality, outliers, independence and equal variance. Histograms were plotted to explore the normalcy of the data for the whole sample. Observation of the subscales within the GCS revealed them to be bell-shaped and symmetrical suggesting a normal distribution. Indices of deprivation was normally distributed (negatively skewed) and impact of hours was normally distributed (positively skewed). Impact of hours worked was not normally distributed and showed a floor effect. This item was compressed into three categories (worked no hours, worked less than 15 hours, worked more than 15 hours; a maximum of 15 hours being the time recommended by UCAS for working during term-time, 2023a). No extreme outliers were noted when histograms and boxplots were checked. Likert scales were treated as interval data for the purposes of this study. Groups used for coding were FGS and non-FGS, these were assumed to be independent. The internal reliability of the GCS was checked and found to be good, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient ranged from .74 to .89.

The free text box 'please describe any career plans' was analysed thematically and categories were applied to determine whether the participants had no career plans through to clearly defined plans with a future job or postgraduate qualification secured. (The codes applied were as follows: 1 = no career plans; 2 = idea of career plan/ or job sector, but not established; 3 = clearly defined career plan/ or job sector; 4 = clearly defined career plan/ or job sector with a detailed plan as to how this will be achieved; 5 = future job or postgraduate qualification secured.)

Prior to testing, hypotheses were established and a data analysis plan written. This plan included the following statistical tests. To assess differences in the levels of capitals between the FGS and non-FGS, 11 independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare each of the mean scores for the subscales and standalone items in the GCS. Two further independent

samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores for indices of deprivation and work impact which were classed as economic capital items. A chi-square test for independence (with Yate's Continuity Correction) was used to assess the differences in the hours worked by FGS and non-FGS. Sensitivity analyses were conducted using an ANCOVA to control for those variables which had shown a significant difference in previous analysis. The relationships between capitals (as measured by the GCS and financial items including indices of deprivation, free school meals and hours worked) was investigated using separate Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients for FGS and non-FGS. Separate multiple linear regressions were conducted for FGS and non-FGS to explore the similarities and differences in predictors of capital development. GCS subscales and standalone items were applied as dependent variables and independent variables included the 11 items classified as careers help from the qualitative phase of the study. Further multiple linear regressions were conducted for FGS and non-FGS to explore similarities and differences in activities related to capital development (with GCS subscales and standalone items as dependent variables and independent variables including six items classified as careers activities).

5.5.4 Quantitative phase: rigour and ethics

Rigour was maintained in the quantitative phase of the study with several strategies. The data collection instrument was selected carefully to include content from the qualitative phase of the study as well as a pre-existing scale which had fully assessed and reported validity and reliability measurements. Prior to the advertisement of the study, full ethical approval was sought via ERGO II ('Ethics and Research Governance Online' University of Southampton; Appendix K). To be included in the study, each participant had to agree to their data being stored and analysed for the purposes of the study. Data was fully anonymised before analysis. Hypotheses were decided upon before data was analysed and a data analysis plan was created to reflect these. All results were reported in full (see Chapter 8 and Appendix O). To ensure that the study could be reproduced, full information was provided including the survey instrument and its accompanying materials, as well as key information such as data downloading and cleaning and coding protocols (see appendices M and N).

The limitations of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study are reflected upon in the conclusion to this thesis (see Chapter 10).

5.6 Triangulation protocol

A process of triangulation was applied after the full and separate analysis of the data from both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research. This approach was taken in the interest

of ‘completeness’ or put simply to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the capital development of FGS (Bryman, 2006). Triangulation was necessary, because although both the quantitative and qualitative studies had separate and unique questions, an overall question was posed at the start of the research which needed to be answered (to explore whether the concept of capital development could help to explain why first-generation students perform less well in the labour market). This section will act to define what triangulation meant in this study and the ways in which the data was combined in practice.

Triangulation was defined in this research as the process of studying the research question using both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more complete understanding and to discover the interface between the results (O’Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010). However, it was acknowledged that both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research had individual structural integrity. Furthermore, there had already been some integration of the results due to the sequential nature of the study which required the phase 1 results to be analysed in the interests of survey development prior to phase 2 of the study.

Various methods for triangulating findings exist, but they often require the researcher to see the findings on the same page (O’Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010). In this study, a matrix method was utilised and the concept of capitals applied to aid the triangulation process. A matrix was chosen because of the possibility it afforded for points of alignment (convergence), disagreement (dissonance), complementary information (complementarity) and silence to be discovered (Farmer et al, 2006). It is noted that the act of creating the matrix enabled the results to be considered openly and mindfully and a more nuanced and complete understanding of the results to be gained. The matrix also provided a working document to act as a basis for discussions in discovering points of learning and tension within the data. In practical terms the matrix table consisted of headings which reflected each of the capitals within the GCM (human, social, cultural, identity and psychological) as well as additional results identified in both phases of the study (such as economic capital and mobilising capital via parents, lecturers, careers services and employers). These items were then cross referenced against the literature, the inductive and deductive analysis of the qualitative data and the quantitative results. Finally, an additional column was added with notes to identify both points of agreement, but also tension. A summary of the matrix is included in Appendix P and its contents are expanded in full within the discussion (Chapter 9).

5.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has summarised the philosophy and underpinning research design of this thesis. Particular attention has been paid to the methods used in the qualitative and quantitative

Chapter 5

phases of the study and how their respective findings were triangulated. There has been an emphasis on transparency, reproducibility, rigour and ethics. The next three chapters will present the results from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses. Chapter 6 introduces the participants from the qualitative phase of the study. It aims to give meaning to the experiences of FGS as they consider and then choose to study at a Russell Group university. Chapter 7 also presents findings from the qualitative phase of this research, but does so deductively using the GCM to conceptualise FGS' experiences of building their employability. Building upon the qualitative findings, Chapter 8 uses the quantitative results to measure whether FGS have differences in their capital development to non-FGS. The results for each phase of this mixed method study are presented separately. Then the discussion (Chapter 9), combines the qualitative and quantitative results to answer the overarching aim of this study: whether the concept of capital development can help to explain why FGS perform less well in the graduate labour market.

Chapter 6 Qualitative Findings Part 1

6.1 Introduction

The aim of phase 1 of the research, was to understand how FGS negotiated their career development and employability from applications to university to onwards decisions about careers after graduation. 25 interviews were conducted to explore the barriers and facilitators of FGS career development. The next two chapters present the results from these interviews. The first chapter relies solely on themes arrived at via inductive analysis, it gives a sense of what it means to be a FGS, including journeys towards higher education and experiences of university. The next chapter applies the concept of capitals, as defined by Tomlinson (2017a), deductively to understand the experiences of FGS developing their employability within a Russell Group university.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the participants as well as a summary of some of the diversity in their experiences. Next, an overview of the inductive themes are presented before the results are reported in detail. The chapter demonstrates how parents and schools act to influence higher education choices. The chapter also provides evidence about how difficult FGS find university applications and the process of settling into university.

6.2 Participants

Summarised in Table 4, the participants ranged in age from 19 to 42 (modal age 21, mean age 22). There were 20 female and five male participants. A total of 18 different degree subjects were represented (to protect participant anonymity, these have been categorised within the subject areas defined by the university within this study). Students ranged from first through to fourth year, with final year students the most represented. Six ethnic groups were represented, with the majority self-reporting their ethnicity as White British. Eight students had previously received free school meals.

Table 4: Participants Phase 2

Pseudonym	Degree Area	Year	FSM?	Mature student?	Gender Identity	Ethnic Group
Amy	Social Sciences	2	N	N	F	White British
Ashok	Engineering	3	N	N	M	Asian British
Beccy	Humanities	1	Y	N	F	White Other
Ben	Humanities	1	Y	N	M	White British
Freya	Engineering	4	N	N	F	White British
Gabriella	Biological and Life Sciences	3	N	N	F	White British
Hannah	Social Sciences	3	N	N	F	White British
Heather	Medically Related	1	N	Y	F	White British
Indigo	Biological and Life Sciences	3	Y	N	F	White British
Isabel	Biological and Life Sciences	1	N	N	F	White British
Katherine	Biological and Life Sciences	1	N	N	F	White British
Luke	Engineering	3	N	N	M	White British
Meena	Biological and Life Sciences	3	N	N	F	Asian British
Niamh	Humanities	2	N	N	F	White Irish
Orla	Medically Related	1	Y	Y	F	White British
Phoebe	Biological and Life Sciences	3	N	N	F	White British
Rachel	Biological and Life Sciences	2	Y	N	F	Black British African
Rima	Medically Related	1	Y	N	F	Asian
Sadie	Medically Related	4	N	N	F	White British
Samantha	Physical Sciences	4	Y	N	F	White British
Sophie	Social Sciences	3	Y	Y	F	White British
Stephen	Physical Sciences	4	N	N	M	White British
Susanne	Biological and Life Sciences	1	N	N	F	Asian British
Tom	Biological and Life Sciences	1	N	N	M	White British

The following chapter gives an account of the lived realities of 25 FGS as they reflected upon their experiences both before and during the early stages of university. The only factors in common for all the students was their first-generation status and their entry to a high-tariff Russell Group university. The students' experiences were complex and multifaceted and it was acknowledged that reactions to even similar experiences could differ widely. However, where

there were similarities these were studied via the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). For example, most of the students (23) had attended state-funded schools, but others, such as Ashok, had been awarded a scholarship to attend a private school based on family circumstances, whilst Luke passed the eleven-plus to gain access to a grammar school in his area. In both these cases, transitions to higher education seemed more natural, as these students were surrounded by others who expected to go to university and knew how to apply. For these students, expectations from others at home and in school matched their lived reality as the students were primed about future pathways within higher education. Most of the participants had been born in the UK, but three had been born overseas and subsequently moved to the UK with their parents. They faced additional barriers including studying at school with English as a second language and often acting as translators for their parents. Students described a range of other intersectional disadvantages such as caring responsibilities, disabilities and ethnicity. Financial circumstances varied, but many of the students explained how money had acted to limit their choices and make them more focussed on achieving a sustainable future for themselves. Several students had experienced periods of homelessness, and many spoke about the challenges of poor housing generally. Although for many, joining university proved to be an unsettling experience, several commented on the extensive grounds and green campus as well as the opportunities to access their own rooms, something they had not experienced before university.

There are similarities in the students' career planning experiences as exposed by thematic analysis, but there are also profound differences. Crucially for this study, experiences of support with career planning varied widely. Even when participants had positive expectations of future opportunities, this was not always replicated by their family, community or education providers. Most of the students were unable to rely on their families for careers advice and connections, but this was not the case for all. Samantha explained how her mum had used connections where she worked as a school secretary to secure high quality work experience with a university professor. The support offered by schools and colleges with career planning and university applications also varied. It was the direct encouragement of a teacher in her inner city school which led Niamh to university. Tom described the value of the widening participation interventions by college, which had resulted in him securing his university place, against the advice of his parents. In contrast, Hannah explained that her attendance at a rural school in special measures came with no expectation for her to attend university. Phoebe explained how based on poor careers advice at school, she had chosen the wrong degree which she now felt locked into. These differences in the available provision are important as they potentially show where FGS might be most beneficially supported with their career preparation (more will be said

on this important topic in the following findings, but also when the results are triangulated within the discussion chapter, see for example, sections 9.4 and 9.5).

6.3 Summary of themes

Through a process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a), six inductive themes relating to students' biographies were identified as in Table 5. Despite the important differences described above, the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis enabled patterns to be discovered. These patterns give an opportunity to gain a greater insight into shared opportunities and barriers faced by the participants.

Table 5: Summary of inductive themes

Inductive Themes: Biographies, Background and Entering HE
Family background: 'built my character'
Before higher education: 'it wasn't a great college'
Choosing higher education: 'overwhelmed by it all'
Applications: 'the hardest bit'
University: 'untethered'
Grasping opportunities: 'promised land of milk and honey'

The next section illustrates: the impact of learner background on identity formation; the role which education played in decision-making; how, despite grappling with some significant disadvantages, these participants chose and applied to a Russell Group university; and experiences of joining a high status university from a non-traditional background.

6.4 Family background: 'built my character'

FGS often mentioned the pivotal role which parents had played in their journeys to higher education. Families played a range of roles from active or benign support through to acting as barriers for students' plans. At times, a tension existed between parents who lacked knowledge about university and their children who were aspiring to enter this field. Students recognised that whilst experiences might be challenging, characters could be 'built' (Susanne) as adversity was overcome. Family background was also a way in which the participants chose to reflect on their sense of otherness and disadvantage in the context of their university experience. More will be said about these experiences in the following paragraphs.

Students frequently gave examples of their parents being proud that they were embarking upon a degree. For some parents this enabled them to stand out from their own community and enabled them to boast about their children's achievements.

Phoebe: So I think it was quite exciting like, 'oh my god, my daughter is getting a degree'.

Ben: My mum was always quite pleased [...] she likes to like show-off and that about it to other people whose like children didn't necessarily go to university.

Other parents were more quietly supportive. This was reflected in both words and deeds. In Samantha's case she was keenly aware that her love of education had been a direct result of her mum's interest in books and learning. Luke, who wanted to pass the 11-plus to go to a grammar school, was also grateful to his parents for their ongoing reassurance and the practical support they gave him by buying books when tutoring was unaffordable.

Samantha: My family are very like uh book people they always read and my mum has really been keen on me to like, learn [...] so she would not just give me science but also history books.

Luke: They've been very supportive for me, my parents over the years and they said, you know, 'have a go, we'll, you know, we'll buy you some, like, practice books for it'. I didn't have tutoring or anything.

For some students, parental pride tipped into pressure. This seemed to be especially the case, when students had to unexpectedly change their plans (for example, Ashok reconsidering his interest in civil engineering or Sadie failing the entry examinations for medicine) or when parents lacked insight into the difficulties of gaining entry to universities and onward trajectories in a crowded graduate market.

Freya: He's like, 'I know like, I know you are, I just know, I know you're going to like meet the right people and you're gonna do the right things'. And I'm just there like but what if I don't like?

Sadie: I'm her only daughter too, and she's just like she used to run around and be like, 'yeah, that's that's my child she's gonna be a doctor one day' and I'm just like, oh, God. I mean it is a lot of pressure.

Lacking experience of university, parents were unable to give advice to their children. FGS felt that they were often isolated in their decision making. They had to demonstrate high levels of

independence and resilience. In comparison to other students, they felt it was less natural for them to reach out to people within their families for reassurance and advice about their higher education experiences. Susanne spoke about how this lack of insight acted to make her more anxious than others.

Sadie: It's kind of just me going off on my own brain and like, should I just do this?

Meena: It's often very difficult to speak to our family if you get advice on university because you don't have anyone in your family that could explain to you about, OK, how does this work? How would this work? Or if you did something? What would it be like?

Susanne: What do they actually know about university other than seeing like it on TV and dramas etc which is not a realistic representation of it at all. So I guess that kind of channels into the worriedness as well because they have no idea what it's like.

The above examples might be categorised as a benign not knowing, but some parents actively opposed their children's choices. As they had not attended university themselves, parents lacked fundamental understanding at many levels including crucially faith in the benefits of higher education in terms of securing improved job outcomes. Their stance became more oppositional and spilt into 'friction' as in the case of Tom's whose parents wanted him to do an apprenticeship. Tom had explored apprenticeships, to appease his parents, but he felt that his keen interest in high-level research made this an unrealistic choice. Censorship occasionally extended to the wider family as for Ben.

Tom: There was more friction to begin with than there is now. I think they we've both me and them them and I um, have sort of learned that like they're not gonna quite get it, and that's OK.

Ben: Members of my family, they kind of don't really see the point in university. Umm, like they they crack their like jokes about it just being like a way to stay, like younger for longer and all of that. And but like I kind of I want to kind of show to them in a way that like university is worth it and it it can, you know give you a better future really. So I I'd say there is definitely some pressure attached to it.

Heather: My parents didn't understand why I want to go to university. It's just it was just like a 'why would you want to do that?' Uh, so it was a little bit

kind of stuck, so I didn't know how to progress that application any further.

For some participants, caring responsibilities acted as an additional distraction and burden throughout and during university. Numerous examples were given as to how insecure backgrounds acted to interrupt the students' ability to concentrate on their studies. In some cases, university became an opportunity to escape. Two students had experienced periods of homelessness during their childhood, whilst others had lived in crowded housing with no personal space to study in while growing up. Several participants commented on the impact of periods of extended unemployment and underemployment on family finances. Rima had attended police interviews on the behalf of her brother on several occasions throughout her schooling and first year at university. She described the experience of staying up to four in the morning and then going to school the next day and having to 'act like everything's fine'. Beccy spoke about how distracted she had felt from her studies whilst she sofa surfed to avoid domestic abuse. Susanne explained that because her parents could not speak English, she had been responsible for organising bills such as tax, insurance and mortgages from an early age and this had continued into university where she felt guilty that she was not on hand to help them. However, Susanne was also cognisant of the benefits these additional responsibilities had brought to her in terms of enhanced resilience and independence.

Susanne: I've also had to deal with family um matters. Um in a way I don't think that is a barrier though. If anything, I think it's really built my character in the sense that I am not people shy, I am quite confident when I speak. Uhm. I don't I I don't mind complaining and getting back what I should get back these areas of yeah, that doesn't answer your question. It it's the opposite of barrier its built my character.

This theme has revealed some of the family context in which our students' educational and career paths were forged. The FGS parents' responses to their children's educational plans ranged from pride, through to benign not-knowing through to outright opposition. Often a lack of experience within the field, resulted in parents (through no fault of their own), being unable to support their children in applications to and attendance at university. Next we will turn to the FGS experiences of school and college.

6.5 Before higher education: 'it wasn't a great college'

Most of the participants volunteered the information that they had performed well at school, they were often selected for top sets and defined as high achievers. They found that this could

contrast with others in their social circles (including other family members and peers at school and college). This at times led to a sense of difference or otherness and at times isolation.

Indigo: I was a strange child, like my my parents have said that like I was definitely quite strange and I just always kind of had that interest in academia.

Sadie: I don't wanna sound egotistical or anything like that it was just like, I feel like especially out of my whole family like, I was always like the smart child.

Some participants described themselves as naturally academic, but others spoke about periods of intensive and stressful study from primary age upwards. Rachel described her relationship with study as 'toxic' and one which had impacted upon her 'well-being' and 'self-esteem' negatively. Tom described his high-level achievements as coming at 'a cost' and causing some 'burn out'. Both reflected that they had learnt to apply less pressure to themselves at university because of this.

Although in some cases students praised their schools for providing extra classes or tutoring, many students described working against systemic disadvantage. There was a sense of working against the odds as participants were educated in areas where deprivation was high and expectations sometimes low.

Isabel: I think the teachers that they really tried the best we had so many opportunities. But I think it just you know people's upbringings as well like their family situation like some of their like siblings were like in prison and then they were kind of like going down like the same kind of routes.

Meena: The school I went to didn't offer A'levels there wasn't a lot of uptake, a lot of people didn't do A'levels [...] there's quite a lot of deprivation from the area I come from, so it's I think a lot of people didn't want to they couldn't, probably economically.

Heather: It wasn't a great college then, and I think, you know, I, I plummeted I managed to scrape my A levels. I did well but I didn't enjoy that that particular form of education.

Some took extraordinary steps to move away from poor educational opportunities. Luke illustrated this, as rather than attending the secondary school opposite his home, he elected to take a three-hour round bus trip to attend a school he had won a scholarship to. Some students

reflected that the extra barriers they faced had in fact helped them in some ways, Rima exemplified this when she described her schooling.

Rima: I went to a bit of a rough secondary school as well, so you sort of had to um so forced you to be confident as of like, stand your own, you could say.

Overall, these students seemed to express a tension between their academic potential and the availability of the educational infrastructure to support it.

6.6 Choosing higher education: 'overwhelmed by it all'

Participants often couched their desire to get a degree to be 'better' and avoid getting 'stuck' in lower level jobs like their peers.

Phoebe: A lot of my friends who haven't [done a degree] are just kind of stuck in their sixth form jobs that they had like during their A 'levels.

Ben: I think it was kind of like it was a lot to do with thinking about the future and like what jobs I'll be able to get because some of the people in like my family, they either don't work anymore or they're in like quite low paid jobs and kind of like seeing that I always thought like not like I want to be better.

FGS' disadvantages played out further, because they often lacked contacts who they could turn to for advice about making university choices. Students recognised the fundamental importance of role models and sensed that their understanding of higher education was poorer than others, because their family life existed outside of the sphere of university. Some students lamented their lack of informed choices describing their decisions in terms of accidents. Others made career choices (impacting educational pathways and future plans) based on accessible resources such as television programmes. Some students acknowledged that targeted interventions from outreach schemes, which included visits to and from universities, had proved invaluable to them.

Hannah: So I think being a first generation student, you lack obviously representation is very important um in any context and so not being able to see it can be I think it's quite difficult as a human if you can't see yourself, if you can't see somebody else doing it, you can't necessarily picture yourself doing it.

Orla: So it's quite interesting we don't have that basis family support and people who have been through that process before. It makes you a lot more anxious and like researching every possible option and getting really stressed about it because you know this is your only chance and if you don't make the right decision, whereas other people seemed a lot more relaxed about it.

Schools did not always act to fill the deficit created by a lack of family insight. Some participants described how, despite their high ability at school, higher education was not even mentioned to them as an option. Rather pupils from their schools were actively encouraged to leave education and get a job or an apprenticeship.

Niamh: In my area no one really went it was very much like you've got you left school and got a job or you got an apprenticeship like some apprenticeship somewhere and that's it I wasn't really opened up to that being an option for me until I was about 16, 17 and then I decided to go for it and see basically.

Hannah: No, it wasn't really something I had seen or um thought was open to me. Um. I was, I'm not trying to like blow my own trumpet here, but I am good at school, I'm good at academics. Um, but kind of the background that I came from and then also like my school and college, didn't really promote it as an opportunity, in the way that now coming to university and I hear other people talk about their sixth form experiences, I was not set up in that way, none of us were.

Students often compensated for this lack of insight by turning to interests formed in school to make their subject choices.

Samantha: I've always had an interest in science, even like primary school and stuff.

Sadie: I like biology. I like the human body. I like studying disease and how it affects like drugs and how that affects and just like looking at the impacts on the human body. So that just sort of sparked my interest and that's why I chose it.

However, a noteworthy sub-theme within the analysis was how many students used films and television to choose future careers. For some students, such as Rima, a children's show 'Operation Ouch' (watched from around aged five) had led to her initial interest in medicine

which had held strong to the point that any other career would seem 'out of character' for her, despite her facing numerous challenges entering the field.

Amy: I think of like a lot of the TV shows and stuff that kind of initially like got my interest in law.

Indigo: It kind of began when I was around 12 years old and I really loved watching movies and I really love psychological thrillers.

While some students lacked insight, others commented positively on targeted interventions by school and colleges such as open days and mentoring which had acted as a counterbalance to their lack of insight. Opportunities to see universities for the first time proved to be life-changing for some students, as these visits allowed the students to immerse themselves in the university environment and begin to believe that this could be a suitable opportunity for them.

Rachel: I believe they were giving certain students the opportunity to just see what university will be like and I believe I even volunteered myself [...] I had my first experience in forensic psychology and for me it was just fascinating.

Freya: I got taken on like aspiration days, so I got to go to Oxford and Cambridge for days, then be like, 'oh, look how lovely it is' [...] I'd love to go to uni and that's what I definitely wanted to do.

Rachel particularly appreciated the mentorship which she was allocated by her college, recognising the value of 'somebody on my side' especially in areas which she knew nothing about. Although some of these high value interventions were based on prior academic achievements for gifted and talented students, some were because students were specifically identified as from a first-generation background. Occasionally, the interventions were based on more specific criteria such as planned entrance to Oxbridge or Russell Group universities. Recognising the value of such high-level interventions, some students began to strategically use these programmes in their own interests. For example, Katherine had no plan to go to Oxford, but she understood that if she listed them as an option on her university application (UCAS) this would entitle her to receive additional support in the form of mentoring from college.

Katherine: If you applied for Oxford, that was how you got your mentor. That's how you got special help.

In summary, levels of support for future planning differed widely. Some students lacked any form of role models or support and were obliged to turn to readily available resources such as television. However, there were instances when programmes of intervention such as open days

and mentorship proved highly effective. The value of these will be further tested within the next quantitative phase of this research and discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

6.7 Applications: 'the hardest bit'

Even when FGS had decided they would apply to university, they often lacked insight into how to navigate university applications and funding. For some students, such as Heather 'the hardest bit' was navigating the complex path of the university admissions system (including UCAS and associated with this clearing) and finance applications which form the entry route to university in the UK. Critically, FGS can lack someone to go to for key guidance and support in navigating the system and this increases personal workload. Students struggled to know who to turn to for help with: practical activities such as travelling to open days (Hannah); intellectual insight (Susanne not understanding the format of entrance examinations for medicine); and with deciphering the language of higher education (Phoebe).

Hannah: It wasn't so much an informed decision uhm retrospectively. Had I known more about kind of the university process and uhm things like that, the college I went to didn't really give much guidance with that. Uh, but had I known more, I probably would have chosen a different degree programme. But uh yeah, that's how I arrived in sociology.

Heather: My dad did various roles he did things like milkman he did retail, he did factory work, you know? So that's, you know, just stuff that didn't require education so much. He didn't have an education himself and mum's similar she's kind of developed roles since, but she's not academic. So I when I got to the end of college, having got my A'level so I did the process that you go through UCAS applied um they were random. They were so my selection was random because I didn't have anybody to kind of point me in any direction with anything.

Phoebe: I just had I had no idea like even what a bachelors or masters like the years for courses like some medicine ones would be 5 some would be 6 and you're just like 'Oh my God, what?' So it was just like a lot of just Googling stuff and then see what would come up.

Some schools tried to intervene and support with applications, but others were less proactive in their support. Students gave examples where a lack of resources and insight from school and college staff meant the help that they received was limited.

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Isabel: I think there's less support anyway, when you go to sixth form, but particularly 'cause, it's such a big big sixth form like there's 2000 people, they couldn't really I don't think they had necessarily the facility so it was quite independently kind of organised that your study time was 'you do this, you're not forced to do it'.

Beccy: They made us all sit in one room and do the UCAS courses and they were like 'oh we'll review your like applications' and then we would actually ask them questions and they'll be like 'we don't know you've gotta do it yourself'.

A further barrier to applying to university was finance. Many of the participants described instances of worrying about whether they could afford university generally. Tom (home-based student) explained that he had elected to study at home to avoid 'the huge financial burden' of moving into halls. Prior to coming to university several students had worked to save money, they felt this contrasted with other students who could spend gap years and holidays engaged in more enjoyable activities.

Hannah: I worked full time at a supermarket for the whole year, which is quite funny coming into like my halls and uni and everyone too 'cause I was put with other people who had done gap years as well and hearing them talk about their lovely travels and I was always a bit embarrassed to say I worked at a supermarket.

Both Tom and Ben explained how the direct interventions provided by their colleges had acted as a 'counterbalance' to their parents' fears about 'the mortgage amount of money' (Tom) they were about to spend.

Tom: One of the sort of the the big issues that I faced was my parents not really understanding anything about university [...] both the xxx programme and my mentor really helped just get through to me what what this was about and like how precisely to do it, because I think it's it can be certainly underestimated how challenging doing something like UCAS is even for someone who hasn't had people like go through that before.

Ben: Even when cause there there was a point when I didn't even know about like maintenance loans and like Student Finance England and all of that and it was like them that kind of um taught me about that and taught me that I could actually go to university.

Several students commented on their preference for local study. While for some this was for practical reasons, including the need to cut down costs of travel and accommodation and to meet caring responsibilities (Tom describing money as a 'pull factor for staying at home'), for others it was about feeling comfortable in their local area. The need for familiarity seemed highly pertinent for FGS who had limited experience of travelling or staying away from home. Sophie explained that she felt 'safer' staying on the south coast, because it was an area she had known her whole life. Hannah added to this, explaining that XXXX was the 'only city I have ever known'. For Isabel, local study was a pro-active choice which enabled her to access those people she felt most comfortable with.

Isabel: I think people think it's an embarrassing thing or a bad thing, but I just think if you need to come home because that's your support network and you need to see your friends from home, there's no issue with that at all.

This section illustrated how difficult it can be for FGS making applications to and finding funding for university. However, it has also shown that direct interventions in support of FGS can make a profound impact on their experiences of navigating the system.

6.8 University: 'untethered'

Once applications had been made, some students faced the prospect of going to university with fear and anxiety, especially because they lacked the prerequisite experiences to understand what the first weeks of university might entail.

Gabriella: First of all, I was dreading it a lot. I was. So I think that's actually that's a good point. I was really scared to go to uni.

Meena: It's very difficult to actually come into uni it's very overwhelming because you've never even seen a university campus.

Once at university, the FGS told multiple stories of how unsettled and overwhelmed they had become by the experience of joining university. Phoebe described the first weeks as 'isolating' explaining that lacking friends and relatives who had gone to university, she struggled to know what to expect and was 'blindsided' by the whole experience. Samantha also rejected the experience as 'the best time of your life', whilst Isabel was shocked at how 'horrible' her first weeks had been. Beccy described the sense of loss of place at university and lack of support from home as feeling 'untethered'.

Beccy: I know a lot of the time in university students can feel very lonely and also untethered if they don't know anyone or if again, like being a first gen students, I think if you don't know anyone [...] so you can't call them and actually talk about uni things.

These descriptions suggest that students felt unprepared for university by their previous experiences. There was not a confident entry to university where they felt able to settle quickly and mix confidently with peers. For some students the feeling of not fitting in persisted far beyond their inductions. For some the experience was so unsettling, they had either changed universities in the past or like Ben questioned whether he should stay and seriously thought about moving on. Others adjusted their behaviours and moved out of student accommodation or avoided clubs, where they felt the alienation most keenly. The contrast between students such as Ashok and Lauren for example was profound and cannot be underestimated. Ashok joined multiple clubs and societies rapidly growing both his cultural and social capital, whilst Lauren described being openly condescended to for her working class attributes and consequently feeling unable to fit in and engage. In Niamh's case, she was glad to move out of student accommodation which she had found to be an 'alienating experience' where she had experienced 'blatant classicism'.

Niamh: I've had um a couple of words like words associated with the working class like a lot of people called me a CHAV quite like a lot of people [...] which I never like I've never been called in my life.

Sophie coped by making continuous adjustments between the two very different environments of home and university. Rachel quickly recognised that she would need to seek help from people outside of her family circle, as whilst her parents were supportive, they did not have the knowledge of university to be able to support her experiences.

Sophie: Sometimes I feel like my university personality is very different from my personality when I go home, if that makes sense? So two different Sophies and then I need to find a way to kind of make them become one, if that makes sense?

Rachel: I think it comes with being part of that culture in that version of a first gen student where your parents don't know this you know part of life and if you wanna get something if you want to have some understanding unfortunately, you can't rely on them and you have to look for sources and help other elsewhere.

Notably, the sense of not fitting in and understanding the rules of the field often extended to study. In several cases, FGS felt that their backgrounds had not really prepared them for university in terms of either study skills or content. Examples included Amy who for the first time in her life was expected to have an active opinion about politics within seminars, whilst Niamh was missing 'baseline knowledge' in classics to help her navigate the requirements of an English literature degree. They contrasted their experiences with other students who appeared more knowing and had received tacit knowledge from parents who had class-derived cultural capital from activities such as the theatre, but also their own attendance at university. The FGS felt their experiences were often exacerbated as they were left to navigate their studies independently.

Sophie: There's definitely some students where you can you can tell your parents came, went to uni and you know 'what's up' like you know all the unwritten rules ((laughs)).

Amy: After the kind of at the end of the first semester, I kind of started grasping it a bit more, but it just required a lot of work and I didn't know how much work to put in and I didn't I didn't understand anything.

Despite students consciously picking a Russell Group university for their higher education studies (because of the associated prestige and opportunities for networking), numerous students spoke about 'impostor syndrome', of the self-doubt and the fear that they were not good enough to be at a Russell Group university or had somehow fluked their entry. Orla described this as 'cheated my way in'. Susanne spoke about herself as 'not naturally intelligent'. Several students explained how their lack of confidence resulted in them working academically harder, despite often achieving highly.

Hannah : It's a sense of thinking that I've gotten to the place that I am out of like luck or like a fluke, and it hasn't required any skill or like hard work, and I'm not warranted to be there. I think maybe it comes down to not seeing kind of examples of moving into like certain spaces like moving into like a legal field or something like that.

Meena: I think, like when I think about being first generation, I've always viewed it being like do I have to work like 100 times harder because I don't feel like I'm academically as good as let's say, someone who might be a continuing generation student.

Sophie: I think I just try and think logically so it's like a case part of my brain is saying that, but I've also like look at the marks you've got in your

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assignments you know, look at things you have achieved, like you can't fake those things. They're real. They're tangible, like you're not stupid. ((laughs)).

Some students felt they were not entitled to reach out and get the support which other students were receiving. Not having the confidence to reach out to lecturers via emails or office hours, because they felt uncomfortable to do so, meant they didn't get as much support.

Phoebe: I had a few things that I need to submit like assignments or my dissertation was obviously a big one. My friend, when she had education, she did English lit. She had a sister who went to uni and also her dad did. So anytime she'd have something that she needs to hand in, like she'd always send it to them to like, check over, they would like edit it not edit it, but like give her points.

Beccy: Again, it's that barrier of language sometimes. We have some first gen students where we're not you have that formality, but sometimes it's reading something like 'mellifluous language' and going right, but how does that apply to how do I get better? Because you haven't got a tutor to break that down, whereas the second gen might be able to go 'OK, I've got that coursework feedback I'm gonna take it to my tutor'.

FGS were highly reliant on university staff for academic insight. For some students, lecturers played a vital role in aiding their transition to university. Hannah praised the content of a year one lecture where time had been allocated to describe 'university discourse' including explaining language such as 'seminars' and 'semesters'. She felt this had enabled everyone to start on an 'equal playing field'. Tom valued his tutor who use his own experiences to 'pre-empt' problems and re-direct efforts.

Ben: There was one lecturer on one of my modules that just kind of very clearly like spoke about academic writing and kind of what separates it from the writing you've done before.

Indigo: I think I really liked the tutor so my personal tutor was was quite funny and I kind of in those meetings with the tutor and the rest of the tutor group, I found that quite comforting as well, because it was nice to actually kind of talk to people and feel comfortable.

Students such as Beccy, Hannah and Rima were particularly grateful to those academics who acknowledged contexts such as having to work, caring responsibilities and perhaps needing more resources to fit in.

Rima: So, you know, just like the lecturer, being considerate when I walk in late, it's not because I'm trying to be rude or because I wasn't organised.

Beccy: He was one of the people that was consistently checking up on me, you know, trying to do an engagement chat. And I think having that support and kind of being able to be like, there are people looking out for you means that you don't feel like you're kind of lost.

Overall this theme illustrated how FGS could feel culturally misaligned with their university experience. However, there were also examples of university lecturers acting in positive ways to bridge the gap between prior and current experiences of university.

6.9 Grasping opportunities: 'promised land of milk and honey'

Reflections on settling in were often painful, however students also spoke positively of their university experience and how as they settled, they began to see opportunities to build friendship groups and engage with opportunities which had not been available to them previously. For some, university was a place to experience diversity or as Heather described it as an opportunity to go 'travelling without travelling'. Students spoke about university as somewhere they found an academic home. They saw university as a place where it was normal to be clever and display intellect and for some this made them feel more comfortable. Students found it both inspirational and comforting to be surrounded by like-minded people who enjoyed studying, especially as this often contrasted with their previous experiences in school and college when they had experienced their differences profoundly.

Katherine: There's so many of us and we're all smart.

Phoebe: I was lucky my friends aren't really like party people. They were very like academic so we would all like study together and that kind of thing.

Some students were positive about the wealth of opportunities they could access, but at times they were also highly conscious that these opportunities might not last for long. There was a sense of transience and other worldliness as students described university as 'Disneyland' (Orla) or 'promised land of milk and honey' (Heather). Participants were often aware of the opportunity to grasp opportunities for personal transformation, opportunities which they might not be able to afford again.

Rima: Honestly, I've I've absolutely loved coming to university as mostly and just moving away from home and just, you know, just seeing meeting new people because obviously where I'm from is quite closed off um are born in xxx they want to pretty much stay in xxx and not many people leave, you could say so yeah, it's just been honestly brilliant.

Orla: Ever since I came here I've basically just enjoyed everything and taken every single opportunity [...] I just want to do everything 'cause it's the first time in my life that I've had that kind of opportunity and I definitely recognise that other students aren't so bothered 'cause I think they're like, 'Oh well, that'll come round again' or 'I'll have that again'.

This section has illustrated, that for some FGS, higher education was found to be a transformative experience that could assist in the process of building capitals.

6.10 Chapter conclusion

By exploring FGS' paths to university, we have seen that even before they entered university these students had overcome significant barriers. These students demonstrated a range of behaviours which were illustrative of their need to compensate for their lack of family derived knowledge about higher education (including entry processes, outcomes and finance). Once at university, the FGS often felt their sense of difference from others keenly and in some cases this had added to the sense of pressure on them. Some students had benefitted from direct interventions such as opportunities to attend open days or mentoring, but the extent of this support was mixed. In the next chapter, students' perceptions of their future employability will be explored through the lens of capital development.

Chapter 7 Qualitative Findings Part 2

7.1 Introduction

This next chapter moves on from the participants' experiences of applying to and joining university to explore their perceptions of and aspirations for future employability. Here the emphasis is on a more deductive approach to the analysis with the application of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a). Reflexive Thematic Analysis showed capitals to be a helpful way to explore the experiences of FGS both in giving students currency within the field of higher education, but also acting as a barrier towards future employability. In addition to the five capitals identified by Tomlinson (2017a) analysis revealed two themes which merited inclusion: the key role which economic capital (EC) plays; and the ways in which students act to build and mobilise their capitals and can be supported to do so via targeted interventions.

Table 6: Summary of deductive themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Human capital	Invested in education: 'academic career was right on track' Degree and beyond: 'every penny counts' Lacking career management skills: 'just completely flopped'
Social capital	Networks: 'I never knew anyone' Contacts: 'finding connections from connections'
Cultural capital	Navigating the future: 'a whole new can of worms'
Identity capital	Identity: 'up in the air' Uncertainty: 'I'm gonna book, I'm gonna book'
Psychological capital	Resilience: 'ups and downs' Optimism: 'good story-time ending'
Economic capital	Money: 'working, study, working, study' Future plans: 'no bank of mum and dad'
Building capitals	Career service: 'boost you up' Experience: 'a priority' Extra-curricular activities: 'more like employable'

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The participants in this chapter are the same ones previously described in Chapter 6. Again, there is diversity in the student experience. Some students had clear future career plans (including final year students such as Samantha who had secured a graduate role in a laboratory and Stephen who had secured a funded PhD), but others such as Freya and Meena were about to graduate with no clear job plans and, in both cases, the vague idea of taking time out. Many of the students commented on their sense of difference from others in their social circle and as in the case of students, like Ben and Rachel, their drive to achieve and prove others wrong. Frequently there was a sense that students were seen to be reaching beyond the norm and this sometimes resulted in friction with, for example, family members. Clear accounts were given that the students understood the demands placed upon them as FGS and why this resulted in them having to work harder than others. Some were able to reflect on the struggles they were facing and to feel a sense of pride at the distance they had travelled.

Niamh: I think I found it really difficult knowing that and knowing that I'd have to work so much harder than some other people to to just get to the same position. I found it quite frustrating at the beginning, but now I sort of see it as like um, I'm proud of myself for getting to this point.

Rachel: We've always been told it from the younger age, from the youngest age that you have to work 10 times harder than those around you, just because things aren't handed to you as easily you know you have to prove yourself.

Despite facing numerous barriers, the students often faced the future with optimism. They recognised the challenges they had encountered, but were proud that they had enacted personal agency to overcome these and felt the skills they had gained in overcoming trials could be utilised for future reward.

Rima: I I don't wanna toot my own horn or anything. But honestly, I feel like this is all me.

Susanne: It seems like there's a lot of barriers, but those barriers build into opportunities.

The participants' stories of accruing employability capital showed that they often prioritised their academic studies and the development of human capital over other forms of employability capital. They recognised the importance of social capital and in particular networks to seek opportunities, but struggled to establish valuable connections. Their initial unsettling experiences of entering university made them apprehensive towards the future and finding the employment they were seeking. They often expressed fragile identities towards their

employment and struggled to understand the range of opportunities available to them. Economic capital frequently acted as a fundamental barrier to other forms of capital development. These experiences of capital development will now be studied in detail.

7.2 Theme one: human capital

The theme of human capital will be explored first. For Tomlinson (2017a), human capital is a combination of knowledge and skills, including the skills necessary for graduates to navigate the labour market. The findings, determined deductively with the application of human capital, consist of three sub-themes: the extent to which the participants felt purposefully invested in their education; whether they understood the graduate labour market and the need to accrue extras beyond their degree studies; and how they accrued career management skills to ready themselves for future applications. Each of these will be explored in turn.

7.2.1 Invested in education: ‘academic career was right on track’

Many of the participants placed high value on their degree studies and the potential opportunities university might afford them. Like Rachel, they had ‘fought’ to make sure their ‘academic career was right on track’. Graduating from a more prestigious institution was seen to add further reputational value. The students chose to do degrees because they were passionate about learning and their subjects, but also because career planning was central to their decision making. In some cases, the FGS needed degrees to pursue vocational goals. Other students, who were more undecided about their futures felt that degrees could be of general value to securing roles in a competitive labour market. In both cases, there was evidence of the strategic acquisition of human capital, in lieu of social and cultural capital which seemed less readily available to FGS.

Amy: And I knew that a lot of jobs now just you needed a degree like just straight away.

Sadie: I always feel like universities like is where you go if you wanna get like a good job.

Ben: There's obviously certain things I can't control, like available jobs in the future, but I I think by coming to university and like kind of using education within with with the hopes of a better career path I'm taking, I'm taking more control than I would have otherwise.

Some students understood that their degree subjects were closely related to the labour market and in high demand by employers. Luke felt confident that his degree in engineering was highly regarded and that he would have a 'lot of opportunity to be able to get a job at the end of the day'. Ashok was also certain that he would be able to transfer readily to careers in civil engineering, although in his final year of his studies was less certain about the vocational choices, he had made at 18. Heather and Orla spoke of choosing National Health Service related degrees for the bursaries they attracted and their associated employability outcomes. In contrast, Freya seemed to lack labour market insight and was unaware of how highly her degree in mechanical engineering was valued by employers. This seemed specifically linked to the quality and relevance of her networks, perhaps hinting that some social capital is necessary to operationalise human capital (more will be said about the interactions between capitals within the discussion chapter). However, Beccy, studying a humanities subject, was more concerned that her degree would lack currency with employers.

Beccy: So many people with like English degrees or even engineering degrees end up working in like retail, not that retail isn't, you know, a retail is a job, a job is a job and also you know, we need retail and retail is important, but I think when you come to university, I don't think people go to university to just [shrugs].

7.2.2 Degree and beyond: 'every penny counts'

Once at university, many of the FGS continued to achieve at an exceptionally high level, they were often awarded commendations for academic achievement and gained consistently high marks. Some of the participants chose to prioritise their academic studies above all else. This was exemplified by Sophie who avoided extra-curricular activities which would 'mess up' her time, Amy who acknowledged that she had 'neglected' her career planning in favour of gaining high grades, and Susanne who had chosen to 'prioritise' high grades. The focus on grades was often framed as a significant employer signal. As Meena commented, some graduate schemes could be 'pretty strict on what grades they want'. However, there was also a sense from the participants that having successfully transferred to university because of high levels of commitment to academic learning they were not always conscious of other capitals which would enable them to transition to the graduate labour market. They believed in higher education as a meritocracy where commitment to study was the priority.

Indigo: I immediately took an interest in the content of the course. I thought that it was really good and I liked being in the big lecture halls. I thought it was quite fun. Um yeah, I think, you know, like a big library, I think I I

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enjoyed mostly like the concept of being at university more than perhaps like the going outside of things and and things like that that for quite a few months I didn't really, I didn't do anything like socially because I was kind of quite slow to get settled in.

There were students who unquestioningly prioritised their academic achievements above all else, but there were some who understood that they would need to supplement their applications with additional experiences in a highly competitive graduate labour market. Rachel described this approach as making every additional experience or 'penny' 'count'. Her's, like others, was a strategic and considered approach to building employability. These students had moved beyond a grade-centred approach to their capital development, to a more complex understanding of the labour market, whereby they understood that a degree alone might be insufficient preparation for their future employability. Why some students understood this was varied. Some, as in the case of Rachel with her church attendance, had communities which supported her to appreciate the competition she faced. Others, such as Luke, had experienced formal careers interventions both at school and while at university on this topic. While for others, such as Amy and Orla, their own negative experiences of seeking work in a crowded market had enhanced their understanding.

Amy: Like there's 180 people in my degree. If everyone gets the same grade, there's gonna be nothing in it, apart from a few competitions like differentiating.

Luke: Perhaps some people think that you know grades are enough to carry you through getting the job at graduation. But in my experience from talking to employers they really like to see experience in order to to make those offers.

Orla: At the end of day we're all going to come out with a degree but it's the other stuff you have in addition to that.

Often this need to demonstrate additionality to employers was articulated in the language of skills. Without solicitation, participants listed a wide range of skills such as 'communication', 'organisation', 'time-management', 'teamworking' and 'critical thinking'.

Rima: It's all well and good your having good grades and such where you need to be able to show that you're more outside of medicine you could say and not only just like your confidence and just like talking to people but sort of how you demonstrated leadership, organisation.

Katherine: I also think what they're looking for is, for example, it's transferable skills, so even if it's not necessarily like, oh, I've done this in science, it's oh I don't know I've done some volunteering, I've done this um maybe some, like leadership and stuff like that, which those skills show that you could, you know, you can just transfer them along to science.

Some students were highly familiar and articulate about the language of skills, others seemed to speak more in generalities. They had heard that skills were important in some way, but were unable to define them. Amy exemplified this need to mimic what she had previously been told, without fully understanding how this might work in practice when she spoke about the need for 'lots of skills'.

Amy: I think a lot of research and a lot of skills and kind of adapting to different skills and kind of gaining a lot of skills will kind of just help me with my career and maybe not someone in particular, but just like a lot of people teaching me different skills in life and helping me along with my career and stuff.

Niamh was more sceptical of the language of skills and critical of their seemingly formalistic nature.

Niamh: So if you're looking for like a job in like a bigger company, they don't want to see like stacking shelves you have to say like developed organisational skills through stacking shelves ((laughs)).

7.2.3 Lacking career management skills: 'just completely flopped'

As well as defining human capital as consisting of the 'knowledge and skills which graduates acquire', Tomlinson also extends his definition to include career-building skills (Tomlinson, 2017a, p. 341). This next section will explore this aspect of human capital. When speaking about their future transitions, the FGS gave numerous examples of their worries about applying for work. There was a sense that students knew that they should start to make applications, but avoided doing so because they did not possess the knowledge or skills to make competent applications. There was evidence of students not understanding the process of making applications from curriculum vitae through to assessment centres. FGS had often held previous jobs to earn cash, however they felt working in an informal market had not prepared them for graduate applications.

Freya: I don't I don't know if I I haven't done a proper interview before 'cause all the jobs I've had, I've sort of walked in and they've been like, 'Yep, you'll do that's fine'.

Phoebe: Like literally I was like, how do you write CV? Because I had one from years ago I don't know where it was now because I haven't used it in years, but so I wrote a new one. I was like what? What do people write on this?

Ashok reflected on how difficult it was to put together a career narrative that would both meet the needs of employers and reflect the complexities of his own experiences which had led to re-sits in his first year.

Ashok: I think I've managed to juggle a lot and just throughout my whole life really um and I've yeah, I suppose I've done pretty well to get here uh but this I do find it hard to shout out about it.

Meena 'just completely flopped' when she got through to the interview stage, because the experience was 'completely new' to her. Niamh received multiple rejections when she applied for placements, as she navigated application forms and psychometric tests which she had not encountered before:

Niamh: I think the rejections obviously were really difficult as well to deal with because I wasn't sure what I was doing was wrong.

Human capital proved to be an important consideration for the FGS in this study. They were invested in their degrees and often prioritised high grades. There were some students whose previous experiences had enabled them to diversify beyond their studies with the acquisition of relevant experiences and skills, however this was not the case for all. Several of the students spoke about their concerns in making applications to a graduate labour market, when they were not confident in their career management skills.

7.3 Theme two: social capital

The next theme to be explored is social capital. As described more fully in Chapter 4, social capital can be seen as the totality of the connections and networks possessed by students in relation to the graduate labour market. This section consists of two sub-themes: the lack of connections experienced by FGS and the efforts made by FGS in the creation of such networks.

7.3.1 Networks: 'I never knew anyone'

Most of the participants recognised the vital role which networks played in building social capital, but also the barriers they faced as FGS, because they lacked ready access to such networks. The lack of connections was often played out negatively when students tried to access high quality, relevant work experience. Some students felt their lack of connections keenly and linked it specifically to the extra effort they needed to secure work experience. Rachel lamented the lack of 'security blankets' which she observed other students as having, as they could call on their parents to help them to find relevant work experience.

Gabriella: And I don't really have any like sort of contacts with other people. For example, my best friend, her parents both went to university and and have good jobs and and everything else, and they have a lot of networking. I know that.

Rachel: I understand that as hard as I'm working right now I I I have I had this pressure of like I have to start now where they have people friends who come from more affluent families who don't seem to have that pressure. They are really very much go with the flow and it seems that and at the end of the day they end up with an internship if they really need to.

Other students commented on the difficulties of applying for internships while achieving high grades on their degrees and working multiple part-time jobs. Already stretched, students such as Freya described avoidant behaviours towards securing internships as they lacked the capacity to engage with the process which they suspected would be difficult as they lacked contacts.

Freya: But I haven't actually applied, which is bad, but I don't really know what's stopping me other than being too busy, especially 'cause, like if people would do a summer like a summer placement I couldn't do that 'cause my dad would be booking work in.

Katherine: I've chosen this summer when I'll work loads, you know, get more money back and then I can apply for placements next summer.

Lack of connections impacted on career decision making as students, like Katherine, struggled to know where opportunities existed. Amy found that she was directly discriminated against during a job interview, due to her lack of pre-existing social contacts which more advantaged students may have or find easier to harness.

Katherine: Definitely with life it's if you know someone who knows someone, it's a little bit easier and I don't know anyone in the science community, not even if it's just to understand, you know how it all works.

Amy: I was applying to a lot of vacation schemes which are basically like work experience in summer and one of the questions was like 'do you know anyone in our law firm?' And I was like, how is that even like a question in a like a work experience scheme like it shouldn't matter who you kind of know in that law firm. It should just be about your ability kind of thing.

7.3.2 Contacts: 'finding connections from connections'

Recognising the importance of social capital and yet lacking readymade contacts, FGS often had to exercise agency and were innovative and hard working in building their own networks. Ashok explained that with a lack of personal contacts, he had quickly learnt to 'reach out' and 'grab every opportunity'. The participants made use of a range of strategies to pro-actively build their networks. For some students making contacts seemed to come naturally (as in the case of Stephen, who was confident he could 'yabber on' to anyone and had made connections on the train). Networking often required high levels of resourcefulness, time and resilience. The range of ways the FGS built their connections was wide and included contacts with lecturers and teachers, guest speakers at university and in school, clubs and societies, the student's union and via family, friends and partners.

Susanne: So my dad's boss's daughter had a friend whose sister was sister's friend offered me a place at work experience at a hospital. So it's being quite independent and then it's just from then on, it's just trying to dig in dig out as much connection as possible.

Rima: The whole town knows I wanted to be a doctor [...] I got work experience in my first year of college with this consultant I met when I broke my wrist.

One student, Hannah, talked about her guilt at building a newly found law network via her boyfriend's connections, suggesting that this felt like 'vague nepotism'. Her guilt seem to derive from her recognition that she was leaving others with a similar background to her own behind and that others might not be able to benefit in the same way.

Hannah: I'm very understanding of how it's not what you know, it's who you know and I've kind of thought that's kind of an unfair element of our society. And so I feel guilty kind of capitalising on it.

However, even with these extensive efforts, participants often found their own networks to be in the wrong areas of opportunity, and not necessarily strategically aligned to their targeted employment. Lower skilled part-time employment was not a significant source of social capital development as these students struggled to reconcile low-paid roles with the demands of graduate applications.

The application of social capital to the thematic evaluation of the interviews showed the FGS to be generally conscious of the need for social capital to secure high-quality experiences, but often lacking in networks. Linked to this, the students illustrated themselves to be both hardworking and creative in their efforts to secure such connections.

7.4 Theme three: cultural capital

As previously explained in section 4.5, cultural capital can enable individuals to navigate field rules; in the case of this study the individuals are FGS and their fields are schools, colleges, universities and employers. Chapter 6 explored some of the difficulties faced by FGS as they felt culturally misaligned with their university experiences. There was evidence that for FGS university was often an alienating experience, where they took longer to establish themselves. This misalignment impacted upon their ability to settle into university and consequently prepare for the future. The next section shows how career choices after university might be further impacted by cultural misalignment.

7.4.1 Navigating the future: 'a whole new can of worms'

Previous experiences projected onto future plans and made the participants sceptical about fitting into future workplaces or study opportunities. Phoebe commented that lacking contacts and insight, she was unable to judge whether a PhD would be a realistic option for her.

Phoebe: I don't know how hard they are to get either cause they've seem cause a PhD is very I feel like prestigious I don't know if that's the right word? But it's it sounds very like 'ohh you're doing PhD' so I just feel like I need to be really like far ahead of other people to do one, but then I don't know what they're like, application processes, like whether it's like a UCAS thing or whether you just e-mail it your lecturer.

Sophie described how going to other universities such as Oxford for *future* study, would represent a ‘whole new can of worms’ whereby she would have to stretch herself to fit in even more, despite having received high firsts and several Dean’s Awards for study throughout her degree studies.

Sophie: Sometimes I struggle with um it sounds really silly but I just don't see myself as that kind of person that can do a PhD like like the place I grew up, and you know that and my background and things people just don't do PhDs from where I come from I would be the first doctor in my family um it's yeah it's sometimes it's weird separating myself from my kind of experiences growing up and like now I might be an actual like academic one day it sometimes it feels like they don't connect.

Whereas for Niamh, ongoing university experiences where her accent had been pilloried, had led her to predict that this would be a problem in the future.

Niamh: The way that I I talk like an accent and they will immediately have assumptions and I find that quite difficult to to think that maybe that'll be a barrier for a future career path.

Students also expressed concerns about finding the right language to speak to employers:

Sophie: And some people are so confident and they're like ‘Oh yeah, I was emailing so and so you know yesterday’ and just so, like I'll be writing an email and I remember there was one where I just kept, you know, deleting it, rewrite it, delete it, rewrite and I was literally I was asking a question [...] it was so so minor but I have to make sure I sound smart and I have to make sure I sound professional and ugh it was horrible.

Overall, the students’ felt that they lacked the type of cultural capital valued by both universities and employers. There was often a cultural misalignment which they saw as exemplified by their accent and language. Previous experiences of cultural misalignment, impacted negatively on plans for the future.

7.5 Theme four: identity capital

Next we turn to FGS’ experiences of identity formation. Undergraduates with high levels of identity capital have a clear understanding of the graduate labour market and their role within it and can often target activities which align with their future career plans (Tomlinson, 2017a). The two sub-themes within this section illustrate how FGS often found it difficult to form an identity

and the barriers experienced by these students in seeking support with the development of their identity capital.

7.5.1 Identity: 'up in the air'

Several of the students' career plans were still in a state of flux, as they sought to understand the field of graduate employability. Ideas were 'half considered' (Sadie), 'up in the air' (Ashok and Sophie), whilst students described themselves as 'feeling lost' (Susanne) or 'conflicted' (Indigo). Some students felt their FGS status keenly when it came to deciding about careers, suggesting that it was their lack of networks and insights which had led to them feeling particularly unclear about their options. Students such as Sadie, were clear on their career interests and what they could potentially offer, but lacked knowledge about the range of graduate opportunities available to her. Katherine illustrated this well describing science as a 'mystery bubble that she wanted to explore'.

Katherine: I think that's actually probably the thing because I don't know actually, how the science community and how jobs actually work. I'm like Oh yeah, I want I want a job in science. I do want to be doing stuff, but I actually have no idea about the actual realities of doing science.

Some students had begun their degrees believing they had clear ideas about their futures, however occasionally choices made about earlier careers were no longer holding, as insight into the graduate labour market was gained. Students such as Phoebe and Susanne, lamented the lack of opportunity to explore more careers prior to coming to university and hated the feeling of being increasingly lost as their degrees progressed. This experience of feeling lost was of more salience for FGS, who lacked contextual insight into the graduate labour market and its associated graduate roles. This impacted upon their emerging identities.

Phoebe: But I think we were all just kind of overwhelmed by it all, like having to choose what I like at 17 and try and figure out what we were gonna do.

Susanne: It's difficult. I like clarity, I don't like being all lost and you know it being all nebulous and not knowing what's happening.

Ashok was also doubting his choices and thinking that civil engineering was no longer something he wanted to commit to for the 'rest of [his] life'. Partly his mind had been 'broadened' during the Covid-19 pandemic when he had taken numerous roles including managing a census and working in his local accident and emergency department as a receptionist. Ashok yearned for some certainty, as his career worries were proving to be distracting and time-consuming.

Ashok: I know people change career and that might happen with myself but I would like to have some certainty at the outset from finishing university.

In contrast, some students had become increasingly clear about their career plans born of experiences they had gained during university. University acted to expand horizons via work experience, extra-curricular activities, connections made with lecturers, alumni and guest speakers.

Luke: So the company I'm working for now, if they were to offer me a graduate job, I'd be very happy to go with them [...] I think going into a graduate job and as soon as I can after graduating would be ideal for me.

Stephen: I like to think that I kind of synthesised it in the last year or so.

For those students whose career ideas were not clear there were multiple impacts including: missing out on funding deadlines; confusion about where to seek help and which resources to use; and not knowing how to direct their jobhunting efforts.

Katherine: For example, there was one thing we got by email about funding, but you already had to know what you were doing in order to apply for the funding but how would I know what I was already doing they only have to say yes if they know you can (..) it's confusing I don't know.

Susanne: Like I'm surprised you said biomedical pathways as if there's more than one, because in my head it's just research.

Phoebe: They have like the you probably know like gradcracker and my careers, those kind of sites. And I do look through them and but I feel like so many of them are just like these odd jobs and not really like applicable to I put like research and development and then when I look at them, I'm like what is this? What is this job like I'm trying to read the responsibilities and I'm like I don't know what this is advertising?

Students such as Meena and Indigo described, how without graduate plans in place, they were going to take gap years. Indigo described choosing to do a gap year because she still was not certain she had made 'the right decision in the masters'. Phoebe was also considering her commitment to additional studies:

Phoebe: I felt like if I was doing a masters, I'd be just delaying getting a job. I know that that that is like the appeal of the masters to me is like, OK, I have another year to think about careers. I have another year, but really I was

like, I should go out and get some experience, you know, get ahead of my peers.

7.5.2 Uncertainty: 'I'm gonna book, I'm gonna book'

There was some evidence of students taking an active role in the development of their own career identity. Examples included Luke who was heavily engaged with organising relevant work experience and taking an active role in a careers' society in his faculty. Heather drew on previous experience to recognise the importance of reaching out to others even from year one, to build insight into her industry via active engagement with lecturers and guest speakers. Gabriella was also one of the few students who conveyed stronger career ownership by organising meetings with a variety of people to understand their career paths better and how she might fit within them, a process she described as 'gathering bits and bobs'. In each case, these students recognised that building a career narrative would take time and need continuous consideration and application throughout their degrees. In Rachel's case, she explained that forming a strong career identity was essential, if she was to make good use of the degree which she was heavily invested in:

Rachel: I'm quite future orientated. Last semester or last year in general I just spent a lot of time doing a lot of career research and things like that in my own time [...] I'm interested in things like that to just give me some form of security that the degree I am doing will take me somewhere.

Some students turned to lecturers, as key resources they were already familiar with, to aid their planning. Sophie, Rachel and Stephen were all considering doctoral study and potentially careers in academia. They were all highly conscious that this would make them stand out further from their families.

Sophie: One of my lecturers said 'have you considered postgraduate study?' I was like no like me? No I wasn't going to uni like no. I've never thought about that and 'cause I just didn't see myself as the kind of person that would do that and you know he shared loads of resources with me I looked into it and I was like actually like this sounds very interesting.

Meena: So I got a lot of advice from my personal academic tutor. I got a lot from the academics that worked in the fields I was in and I got to speak to them about what careers I could go into in the future.

Others were more tentative or at times confused in their approach to identity formation. Niamh exemplified this, she was conscious that she would need to start making applications in the coming months, but without a clear focus was struggling to know where to direct her attention.

Niamh: But I would say um I probably started looking at the civil service like I know there's like their careers part on their website saying this is anything that is aligned to what and then yeah, I think most like looking online really because I'm not, I'm not really 100% sure. I just feel like I just wanna see that what opportunities come up and if any of them are like aligned with what I would like to do.

Interestingly, even when students felt they should be actively engaged with career planning and knew there was an onsite careers service available to engage with, they often avoided reaching out for support. Students gave numerous reasons why they side-stepped the careers service. These included anxieties about using a service which was new to them and their need to focus on their academic studies in preference to all else. Students such as Isabel, explained that she avoided reaching out for formal help as she found the thought of tackling her career planning to be too 'overwhelming'. Other students suggested that it was their own uncertainty which served as barrier to seeking help as they lacked the starter questions which they thought would be essential to book an appointment.

Beccy: I know it sounds bad, but there's nothing shoehorned at you you know, it's very much expected, like you have to seek out that help yourself, which means that for first gen students, if we don't know, we're not gonna ask.

Freya: But I feel like, yeah, there's just 'cause I haven't had time but like I've signed up to the career service and like get their emails all the time. I'm gonna book it. I'm gonna book it but like, I'm gonna book it next week. I'll do it and I just keep I've just kept delaying it and its bad.

Phoebe: I don't know what to ask. They'll be like, 'OK, what do you want help with?' And I'm like, literally everything, every single thing.

In this section the participants described the worrying and debilitating impact of low levels of identity capital. They spoke about how they had struggled to form identity capital without relevant networks (social capital) and prior understanding of higher education and related graduate opportunities (cultural capital). Some took heavy ownership of their identity formation, making use of societies, lecturers and the career service, others were avoidant in behaviour which led to increasing levels of uncertainty and stress.

7.6 Theme five: psychological capital

For Tomlinson (2017a), psychological capital enables undergraduates to respond to any of the challenges they might face in seeking work within a unpredictable labour market. As illustrated in Chapter 6, the study's participants had already shown themselves to have high levels of resilience before joining university. They also spoke about facing considerable pressures throughout their university experiences (including the Covid-19 pandemic). Their ability to cope with adversity seemed to be both tested and developed by their university experience. This next theme explores these experiences via two sub-themes: how resilience was built via a diversity of experiences, but also how the FGS came to be optimistic about their futures.

7.6.1 Resilience: 'ups and downs'

As well as the stresses of study and in some cases working extra jobs, students had coped with multiple extra points of pressure including: bereavement; their own illness; illness of significant family members; caring responsibilities for parents, siblings and children; and grappling with financial pressures and housing issues. Sadie spoke of the pressures caused by engaging with a full-time course and juggling the demands of part-time work and caring responsibilities. Rima explained how the 'low points [during her first year of study] were mostly because of her family', as she juggled care for four siblings, with supporting her parents through ill health, and frequent visits to police custody cells to support her brother. Despite the challenges, the participants presented as generally optimistic about their futures, they were hardworking and solution orientated.

This was also the generation who dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic and having their studies suddenly locked down both before and during their degrees. The first lockdown particularly led to high levels of confusion and bewilderment, as the students tried to navigate what would happen. Luke described his experiences of working in a laboratory and emerging to find others were packing to go home. Students spoke of their increased isolation as study was moved on-line and laboratory practicals were cancelled. Participants (including Indigo, Katherine, Samantha, Sophie and Stephen) understood, but were also frustrated to see their prestigious in-person internships cancelled or heavily modified. When asked about low points, Phoebe chose Covid-19 to talk about and particularly the impact it had on her as she experienced life-changing opportunities suddenly taken away from her.

Phoebe: Covid was obviously quite a big one. Um just because getting sent home from uni I was having such a good time and I was like, I felt like I was almost finding myself and be able to explore something that no one like

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I I hadn't heard about before. And then getting sent home from that and not being able to see my friends for another like six months. And just like it being cut short, it was so abrupt that I just didn't really have time to process it.

However, for some students, the pandemic proved to be a transformational period, where robust friendships were formed with housemates. Some students such as Stephen (who had dyslexia) found online lectures easier to prepare for and navigate, this had resulted in his grades improving. Students such as Ashok found work in the vaccination centres and later in accident and emergency, this had potentially changed the course of his career. For Samantha, the biochemistry job market had improved as additional laboratory jobs had opened.

Students gave a range of examples of how they had learnt to cope with stress, these included avoidance strategies such as napping during times of acute stress (Isabel) or actively choosing to lock it up (Rima) or often 'push[ing] through' (Samantha) or 'work[ing] harder' (Luke). Both Sadie and Stephen took a more sanguine approach to managing stress.

Sadie: Yeah, I I would I'd like to say I'm quite an optimistic person. Like I feel like you can't look at life like I feel like everyone gets crap in life and and it's like it's just the way you handle it.

Stephen: I'm a big believer on the fact that you shouldn't so for use of a better word, waste your time worrying about something if it might not even happen, because then you've just spent a lot of energy worrying about something that didn't even happen, so that energy could have been put into something better.

There were repeated examples of FGS describing the benefits of learning to manage stress. Sophie spoke about how she had directly developed 'resilience' as result of all the 'ups and downs' of university. Hannah was proud of how 'she had taken charge' of her 'circumstances' despite feeling like an impostor at the start of her degree. Ashok experienced 'significant strain' during his first year, however he described himself as having 'bounced back from' this and had consequently formed closer bonds with his housemates.

Despite coping with high levels of stress on their degrees, many students spoke about the additional pressure which resulted from transitioning from a degree to future roles. Feelings were often mixed about the future, as in the case of Samantha who saw graduation and settling into a full-time job as 'exciting, but scary at the same time'. Stress was increased for those students: who perceived their labour market to be particularly saturated (as in the case of Amy

who wanted to enter law); not clear on their options; and for those who had made multiple applications with little success.

Hannah: I like to remain optimistic, but obviously it's a very saturated path, isn't it?

Isabel: I do think it's quite scary like I think I think it's quite intimidating to think what you're doing now defines what you do in the future.

Phoebe: I apply to so many jobs like there is hope and then I get a rejection and like, Oh God like, there's no, there's no hope.

Freya explained that because of the fear of rejection she had delayed making applications, despite studying in the final year of a highly sought after degree. This was partly because she lacked capacity to make applications, as she had previously worked several part-time jobs which were unrelated to her field of interest, but also because she had failed to secure relevant internship experience.

Freya: But I'm also like oh I just I feel like it's going to be a draining experience, which is why I'm like, I'll do it while I'm at home after uni 'cause, I don't know if I could deal with all the put downs and having to wait for all of like the feedback from them to come back like while I also need to be studying.

This burden for FGS was increased as they once again felt their otherness and that family members would not understand if they failed to progress. Ben also reflected on the practical issues of not being able to return home to a labour market with limited graduate roles, but also unable to afford to move out.

Hannah: The only thing that I'm I'm really concerned about is kind of everything that I'm putting my work towards right now uhm, I like telling people that's what I want to do and like saying and then not actually doing it. I think that's what I'm worried about.

Ben: Yeah, I I do like worry like about not being able to find a job. And then obviously because I don't think like my hometown, I don't think there'll be many jobs related to history at all there. And so I want to live away from home, and then there's obviously like after university, that would be a bit more of a struggle trying to like um paying for accommodation cause obviously students get it a lot cheaper.

7.6.2 Optimism: 'good story-time ending'

Despite multiple hardships, many of the participants chose to describe their university experience as a place where they hoped transformation was possible. Stephen was in the final year of his degree and described discussions with friends from school who had all gone to university, and all benefitted from the experience.

Stephen: We've had a good, good ending, good story-time ending.

Ashok felt his university experiences had changed him totally.

Ashok: If people knew me four years ago, I've changed so much and that is almost wholly because of university.

Students spoke about growing in confidence and seeing their futures as positive. In some cases, they described in detail how by enacting personal agency, in the face of multiple structural barriers, they had become more confident about themselves and their future options.

Susanne: All the barriers that I've been presented with actually turned out to have its positive side as well I am quite comfortable with like my character and the kind of person that I am. I'm inquisitive, confident when I speak, I like to make connections with people I am friendly and I like to be challenged and try to discover opportunities that's out there. Uh, I think these things will take me quite a long way. Yes, there's going to be barriers in the future and I don't know what the future holds. I don't know if I'm going to go into medicine, but I know that things will work out.

Rachel: There will still be people pulling me aside 'Like are you sure?' But I was like, I can't see myself doing it and I knew that I would just be proud of myself now when I stood up for what I wanted at the end of the day, and I've always believed in myself that in this one life you have to live. So many people have lived a certain pattern and a certain way of life and you're just following that path and you already know how it's gonna end. Like you have this one life to live. Why don't you do what you wanna do and things like that?

This exploration of psychological capital has revealed FGS to have high levels of resilience born from their ability to cope with the multiple pressures created by their studies, work commitments and home lives. The FGS' feelings about the future were mixed. Some felt highly optimistic. However, some were increasingly concerned for the future, these students seemed

particularly burdened by their perceived feelings of otherness both in higher education, but also in future employment. They felt the strain of having no-one to turn to who might have shared experiences of their concerns and experiences.

7.7 Theme six: economic capital

So far the five capitals and their associated resources within the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) have been explored. However, it was noteworthy how many times money was mentioned as a barrier, especially as the participants were not asked about it directly. Money acted to influence, limit and drive choices for the students. Next FGS' experiences of economic capital will be described before their worries about their futures upon graduation are explored via the subtheme 'no bank of mum and dad'.

7.7.1 Money: 'working, study, working, study'

For many of the students, money was a constant worry during their studies which prevented them from engaging in potentially transformative activities such as placements, extra-curricular activities and travel. This despite recognising the value placed on such activities by employers. Susanne explained that her constant need to direct 'energy' towards managing her finances meant that she was not living her 'best life'. Samantha also described the need to work during the first years of her degree as making her life less 'carefree and enjoyable'.

Students were appreciative of the funding which university afforded them. Rachel commented that she was 'lucky' because she had the highest bursary. Samantha and Gabriella both felt 'lucky' that loans had afforded them the opportunity to do a degree. As Luke was in an area of high demand for employers he had successfully applied for and gained scholarship funding from employers. Orla had secured a National Health Service bursary. Even though the students often spoke about the value of their student loans and their gratitude in receiving it, they were also conscious that they lacked safety nets in the form of parental income.

Rima: I'm quite appreciative for the bursaries that are available in [university] as well. Because apart from, apart from you know, whatever I make and bursaries and student loans, I've honestly got nothing else. I don't have savings like my friends do.

To compensate for a lack of economic capital, FGS worked multiple jobs both during term-time and holidays. With one student working up to 30 hours per week during term-time (Indigo) and others juggling multiple roles (Ashok, Beccy, Freya, Hannah, Katherine, Sadie, Stephen). Some

students regretted the need for part-time work which led to an unremitting cycle of 'working, study, working, study' (Hannah) and acted as a major distraction from their studies.

Hannah: This year I'm working two part-time jobs alongside university and then have been working one or two part-time jobs for like the other years previous and at times it can feel a bit overwhelming, and you know, you feel a bit kind of like hard done by where you're like other students don't have to work.

Beccy: You have to work after university, you know, so you've gotta run immediately from your lectures [...] in that first year, I was working part-time as an editor, part-time as a tutor for, like, secondary school students and also working in a hairdressers as a nail tech and doing hairdressing as well so you know I was busy. It wasn't like I had all the availability to be able to go I can 100% drop everything and go to this lecture hour.

In need of money, some students described how they chose less challenging part-time roles over potentially more transformative experiences such as internships and travel. Some students were obliged to decline offers of low-paid internships, whilst others delayed applying for placements in favour of working several summer jobs.

Phoebe: Pretty much all I've done is I did like a half a year just like another kind of like Asda-esque job at working at like a cinema and stuff [...] it's like you can't really just take an unpaid position and then like have to get there on your own money like stay there on your own money and it's kind of like a privilege to be in that.

Though part-time jobs could act as a drain on resources, the participants also gave examples of using their experiences to good effect. Students spoke about the benefits of part-time work in serving to protect their mental well-being as it gave a 'bit of a break' (Ashok) from their studies and by socialising supported 'mental health' (Indigo). Samantha enjoyed the opportunity to talk to 'other people about different things' to her studies. Others valued the financial independence which work afforded them, especially not having to depend on family. In Rima's case, work as a medical receptionist had proved valuable for placements on her medical degree, where she had had a head start in understanding systems. Beccy felt that having worked since she was 14 her curriculum vitae was 'stacked'.

7.7.2 Future plans: no 'bank of mum and dad'

Importantly, money became a driving factor for the future, as students had to postpone long held plans such as masters level study or travelling because they did not have the 'bank of mum and dad' (Beccy). Hannah, who had worked several jobs to self-fund her degree, realised that direct entry to a master's degree would be impossible for her. Indigo was also investigating possible further study, but increasingly becoming concerned that a lack of funding would prevent this.

Indigo: So perhaps having some kind of money in the background to either be given to you by your family to live off of or they'll pay your tuition fees kind of things like that. Whereas I really financially I am definitely on my own because my, you know, my family could never afford to kind of give any kind of provision.

When asked about the future, several students mentioned that they craved the comfort of financial stability, this contrasting with their experiences so far, which for two students included periods of homelessness and for others not being able to buy basic provisions such as food on occasion. When asked about what future success might look like, students gave examples as follows.

Ben: It's not like a very extreme vision of success it's just like I'd like to own my own home and just kind of be comfortable really and not like have to struggle for like bills, things like that, and do shopping. Just be able to be comfortable and so yeah, just kind of get along easily like by myself and with the work that I do and be able to like kind of support um members of my family if needs be as well.

Heather: I want to be able to pay for my children to go to university I want to be able to um not fight each month just to pay bills.

Students also felt some pressure from their parents to be financially secure.

Beccy: She was like, 'well, you're not becoming an actress because there's no pay becoming an actress'. I was like, 'fair enough'. And she's like 'you can write books on the side if you really want to, or you can do you know, but you've gotta make sure you're in a job that's gonna bring home money'.

Susanne: My dad always just saying, 'you know you want to make sure you get good grades and you get into a job which doesn't require physical like labour because look at my hands look at how rough they are or look at how many hours I work for the amount that I earn, it's not worth it'.

Money has proven to be an important capital. The FGS in this study were appreciative of the additional funding provided by their university, but many of them worked multiple additional jobs to afford their studies. There was evidence of students missing out on transformational opportunities such as internships because they could not afford them. Economic capital also impacted on future options as postgraduate studies, moves for future work and travel opportunities could not be paid for.

7.8 Theme seven: building capitals

Next, we will turn to the ways in which the FGS acted deliberately to acquire and mobilise capitals. Three sub-themes will be explored: the role which careers services and associated activities such as coaching and mentoring played in boosting capitals; how internships were regarded as a priority by the participants; and the function of extra-curricular activities in building employability capital.

7.8.1 Careers service: 'boost you up'

Some students realised that they needed more structured support with their employability, and in response to this, reached out to formal resources provided by the university to aid career planning. Some students valued careers coaching and mentoring programmes at the university. These included regular meetings with either professionally trained careers advisors or industry contacts supplied by the university. Or in the case of Tom a meeting, where the careers adviser had 'signposted' him to resources which he had found 'pretty helpful'.

Isabel: So I think they do quite a good job at showing you what's available or making sure you know or are aware that there's things out there to kind of boost you up in the career kind of world.

Meena: I don't actually know a lot about what I'm gonna do in my future, so I need someone to guide me. And this was like, a really tailored approach. And I was I was thinking to myself, yeah, this would be, this would be a really good opportunity to speak to someone who's in the industry and who can really explain to me what what I'm gonna do so.

Some students including Beccy, Rachel and Orla had made use of the university careers service. Having previously failed to make high-quality applications, Rachel had found the advice and coaching she had accessed from the university careers service in the development of her human capital to be invaluable as she had managed to secure a prestigious internship as a direct result of it.

Rachel: I remember the first time I applied for the Civil Service I didn't even know you had to practice the psychometric for for the psychometric test. I didn't take it seriously, so obviously I was rejected so but then the next time I was warned by [careers adviser] I mean, yeah, 'so you need some practice need to do this and that'. So having that extra support and guidance has been really helpful.

Beccy: They've got their CV builder um which will break down your CV for you if you upload one it will help you create one which I think is very important again for first gen students because coming from a background of like vocational slash trade myself my mum has no clue why you need a CV she thinks it's useless.

In contrast with the above experiences, some students were critical of the help that had been made available by the university. Students commented that although emails might contain valuable insights, the amount of them and their content seemed overwhelming. The formality of emails often created an unattended distancing from the very users who they were hoping to engage. Phoebe described the thought of engaging with the service as 'a bit intimidating' and in her case preferred to make use of the internet and friends for information.

Amy: Because they do make it really easy because they kind of email a lot. But I think because we get so many emails I just know that I just don't read it because whenever I see careers cause it's a specific email, the emails is career stuff, I don't read them.

Stephen: It was just like I it's never advertised really. Like you don't see it or you, you see occasional emails, but they come up so much so that you kind of ignore them or not enough and you kind of forget they're there.

Several FGS wanted targeted and personalised interventions, like the ones they had experienced at college, where they would be guided through the career planning process and the options available to them in support of the development of their identity capital.

Indigo: I've found that even with kind of applying for a masters and things like that, there's much, much less support than what I might have thought that there was going to be um but there may be that's me just comparing kind of going from college to university where, you know, we had whole like, timetabled meetings to try and apply to university.

Stephen: But I think on a whole, there wasn't really just support at least that I could find that kind of made the process clear like oh when when you should start writing stuff when you should start sending stuff off because I ended up in January being like had Christmas kind of relaxed. Did revision then was like. Right, OK, I'll start applying stuff and then I realised like, Oh my God, like the deadlines are like next week for some of these applications.

Other students suggested that a less structured approach to engagement was required, as in the case of Ben who suggested that more 'outreaching' and 'casual conversation' was needed. Sadie agreed a 'more obvious place on campus' that you could just feel able to 'pop' to would suit her better than booked appointments, this was especially the case as Sadie had care and work commitments which she needed to fit around.

Ben: It seems a bit like too much to be emailing careers all the time whenever I've got any questions um or any thoughts on potential jobs in the future. Seems too much to be going to them, but at the same time if where I could, where others may just generally talk about that with parents, things like that. I've I've tried like with my mum and things like that um but there's only really so much help she can give because it's not it's not something she's familiar with.

7.8.2 Experience: 'a priority'

High level internships have been shown to be one way in which students can increase their employability capital. The participants valued relevant experience for several reasons, including the opportunities to: build human capital in the form of transferable skills; expand social capital in the form of relevant networks; gain cultural capital by meeting students and graduates from other disciplines and backgrounds; garner identity capital in terms of exploring specific roles and in some cases rejecting careers having experienced them. Indigo commented particularly on how valuable it would be to speak to someone to avoid the minefield of mixed information on the internet. Heather explained the importance of seeing people whom she could 'aspire to', so that she could 'suss out' the type of work which would most suit her.

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Amira: I think of maybe more internships as kind of like testing you know a real opportunity to like test out the field before you know making any confirmed decisions.

Meena: I think a lot of these internships I've made a lot of contacts.

The students also recognised that prestigious and relevant work experience was crucial to impress employers when making applications. Freya, Gabriella and Luke were amongst some of those who spoke about this directly.

Freya: Other people who have gone on placements and done days and I feel like if they have the same grades as you and they've done a placement that obviously they'll probably be a priority 'cause they have that specific engineering work experience.

Gabriella: It's always gonna be annoying because to get your first job, you need to get your first job, but for you to get your first job they want you to have previous experience.

Luke: When they've seen you've got good enough grades, they're going to go on to things like past experience, which they really particularly like that's why I was so keen to get internships.

Luke felt that with his relevant internships secured he would be able to fast-track his career towards a 'good graduate job'. Samantha gave direct evidence that a previous placement had secured her role in a laboratory after graduation.

Some, such as Freya worried that the roles she had been obliged to take to earn money (and gain economic capital), might not have sufficient currency when she came to apply for graduate roles. Her family business acted like elastic, pulling her back to the experiences and location she was familiar with.

Freya: If I don't have any jobs I won't be earning any money [...] But I don't know how much engineering firms are going to respect being a painter and decorator and like building something I didn't know I'd I'd like to think it feels I have practical skills to build things, but because it's not in as formal of an environment, I don't know if they'll appreciate it or not.

Notably only two students chose not to engage with internships. Tom was concerned that some of the internships he had seen 'were about cashing in on sort of cheap labour'. Sadie felt the

need to take a break from her hectic term-time schedule of working multiple jobs and engaging with her academic studies and 'separated [her] degree from [...] summer'.

Students spoke of the central importance of the role which universities had played in enabling them to access high-quality, relevant internships. There was clear evidence that students relied heavily on their lecturers for making contacts, with 10 students specifically referring to lecturers as the way they would look for networks. In some cases, lecturers had intervened directly to support students with placements. Examples included: Stephen who had been chosen for a prestigious internship in his field, having achieved highly in his first year; Hannah who had been directed to a research project about poverty by her lecturer; and Samantha whose lecturer had intervened directly to get her a job within a laboratory.

Orla: Anytime we have lecturers come to uni, I'm always trying to chat to them, and mostly 'cause I'm interested in them, but also I recognise from my other career that the it's the people you know that help open doors and and get places.

Samantha: Doctor xxx she helped me get this placement because she used to work there and did her PhD, so knowing that she looked at my CV and just interviewed me once, she was like 'Yeah, Samantha needs a placement'. So I still like thank her to this day and yeah, like it is crazy that happened.

Others accessed opportunities organised via the university careers service or widening participation programmes. FGS appreciated the accessibility, flexibility and quality these afforded as well as the fact the opportunities had been vetted. Tom saw this as vital in avoiding opportunities whereby employers were 'cashing in' on 'cheap labour'.

Rachel: I think 'cause most of the internships I'm applying to are in the university under that shelter of like 'cause it's quite diverse university under that shelter and you know that's its safe everyone can apply everyone has the opportunity here.

Orla: So I'm doing the 'cause I've got a disability with my hand it's difficult for me to do kind of standard jobs like a bit more manual so I'm doing a mature student network internship right now which is like 10 hours a week but that's only for this semester.

7.8.3 Extra-curricular activities: 'more like employable'

Ashok, Beccy, Ben and Rima were amongst the students who actively sought to exploit the value of their extra-curricular activities in building capital and demonstrating value to employers. They all demonstrated a strategic approach to their selection of extra-curricular activities and in Beccy's case understood how experiences gained within them might be translated into positional advantage when applying for jobs.

Ashok: I was fully appreciative of the fact that it wasn't just my academic experience that would be the most important thing, and I think I've always been aware that the co-curricular side's really important.

Beccy: My best advice is that for students to take advantage of committees you know societies, if you really enjoy a society, join the committee because you might not actually do anything, but you can lie or exaggerate what you're doing. You know, you might only be secretary and you might just take notes in the meeting but you can say you've minuted meetings, you've headed meetings and all the administration you're detail orientated, yada yada yada and that becomes useful to employers more than you know you played basketball for a year.

Rima: Like I said, like everything I did pretty much as a child was aiming towards medicine. So I knew very early on that I I couldn't just be academic I needed to do extra-curricular activities and you know, be able to talk to people and be confident.

Even those students who were not strategic in their selection of extra-curricular activities, often spoke about them as giving additional insights beyond their degrees which had proven helpful in making career choices. Students such as Hannah recognised that while engaging in human rights she was both exploring options and creating evidence of work experience and relevant industry insight to share with potential future employers. Rachel reflected on the strong networks she had made via her religious involvement. Sadie's engagement with student fundraising had been purely for fun, but had unexpectedly led to a full-time role within the students' union.

Sadie: So it's nice having those options now and I feel like one thing that having that extra like society bit has sort of taught me it's like yeah, you have a degree and that's cool, but you could also be doing loads of other stuff with your life. Like you don't have to do something just because you pick something when you were 18 and 19.

In contrast, for many students, extra-curricular activities were not about building employability capital. Students such as Katherine, appreciated clubs and societies as a place to make friends, for her engagement with societies was 'purely for fun'. Stephen described joining an orchestra to 'instantly' know people. Freya had been a student representative and society president during her degree, but she was unaware that these would be experiences valued by employers. Several students spoke about clubs and societies providing a welcome distraction from academic study.

Luke: In terms of um getting involved with societies and just trying to make the most of it because if you only focus on the academics, you will eventually just, you know be sick of it essentially and you want to be able to let your hair down so to speak and you know have a, a something enjoyable to do.

Sadie: I can actually feel like I can do other things that's not just study, study, study [...] I feel like say you come to uni to like make the memories too, not just not just the education, I guess. Obviously it's gotta be a bit of a balance of both. You can't just come to uni and throw that away because it's just money. But I feel like the same time it was like I needed that outlet. It was like a stress release.

Although some students were heavily involved in extra-curricular activities, others suggested their interests outside of studies were more akin to 'just kind of like the basics' (Hannah). Students described a range of interests which were often cheap and flexible to engage with including: walking, reading, baking, and visits to the pub. Reasons for not engaging with formal extra-curricular activities, which might have more currency with employers, were wide-ranging, but often included a lack of money. Students such as Niamh, Phoebe and Tom rejected extra-curricular activities as an option for them as they juggled work to earn cash with the demands of their degrees. Phoebe described how disconcerting she found her initial contact with clubs via the university 'bunfight' and the potential costs involved (the bunfight is the colloquial term used for the students union clubs and society membership event held at the start of each year). Susanne described having to make harsh decisions because of a lack of money and despite 'being sporty' deciding not to engage with clubs.

Phoebe: But the other ones just like, oh, this is the membership, like this is what it pays for, and you're just like, oh my God, I don't even know if I wanna do this yet oh my God now I have to pay.

A lack of EC played an important role in deciding about whether to engage with extra-curricular activities, FGS also rejected clubs and societies because they did not feel as if they fitted in.

Niamh: Uh I joined the English society and I went to like one I think and then just like ergh.

Beccy: Like I've met so many students who are coming from, you know, public secondary schools and they've no clue what Lacrosse is. We've all seen like Teen Wolf. But that's like the closest, you know, you've seen a man run around on the stick.

The first-generation students in this study, mobilised their capitals in a variety of ways. Some successfully made use of formal services such as the mentoring and coaching provided by the university careers service. Although others suggested that the lack of personalised approach acted as a barrier to them using the service. Most of the participants valued internships highly. It was notable how many students had accessed such opportunities via the university, particularly making use of lecturers as contacts for work experience. Although some were highly conscious of and strategic to their approach in securing extra-curricular activities for labour market advantage, others used such activities as a deliberate means to relax and avoid thinking about commitments including study and work.

7.9 Chapter conclusion

The interview participants gave numerous examples of understanding the importance of human capital and in particular reputational capital and skill development as part of this. FGS seem to be highly invested in their degrees, at times to the exclusion of all else. The participants also illustrated high levels of psychological capital born of dealing with challenging circumstances both before and during their degrees.

Even when acknowledging the importance of social capital in the form of networks and relevant connections, many of the participants also recognised the challenges they faced in acquiring such networks. Cultural capital was key to understanding the students' experiences as they struggled to settle into the unfamiliar fields of university, but also graduate work opportunities. Some of the students had clearly established career identities which they were happy to narrate to employers, but several described their identities in more nebulous terms. The interviews revealed that a lack of money impacted upon all areas of capital formation, negatively in the case of social capital, but potentially positively for psychological capital.

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FGS gave numerous examples of how direct interventions from lecturers and services such as careers had directly benefitted them. Many of the students understood the benefits of mobilising their capitals via work experience and extra-curricular activities. However, the students also gave examples of the times when these interventions were not accessible to them due to constraints such as finance or a feeling of not fitting in. Overall, the students presented as resilient, hard-working and high-achieving students who were conscious of, but working to defeat, the systemic barriers they faced.

Chapter 8 Quantitative Results

8.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the results from phase 2 of this thesis. In this study, 379 undergraduates at a Russell Group university were surveyed to understand more about their capital development. The full methodology including the chosen measures, sample and data analysis are outlined in the latter half of Chapter 5 (section 5.5). The survey was designed to measure the potential differences in capital development between FGS and non-FGS and whether there was any relationship between capital development and specific experiences and activities. Previous research had shown that FGS were more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and achieve poorer graduate outcomes (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020). Crucially for this study, some research had suggested that a lack of capital development might explain the worse outcomes encountered by FGS both in and beyond university (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020; Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Lehmann, 2022; O'Shea et al, 2018; Pires and Chapin, 2022).

This chapter begins with an introduction to the survey participants and their background characteristics. The next section explores the hypothesis, that in line with previous research and the qualitative findings outlined in Chapters 6 and 7, there would be differences in the levels of capitals between FGS and non-FGS. After this, the correlation between existing capitals within the GCM are explored and whether the possession of economic capital correlates with these items. Finally, the hypothesis that FGS and non-FGS mobilise capital development differently through targeted interventions at school and university and via additional careers related activities is examined via regression modelling.

8.2 Study and background characteristics

The sample comprised of 379 UK undergraduates from a single Russell Group university (FGS $n = 181$; non-FGS $n = 187$; non-declared $n = 11$). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 44 ($M = 20.16$, $SD = 2.82$; FGS $M = 20.45$, $SD = 3.47$; and non-FGS $M = 19.94$, $SD = 2.03$). A summary of participant characteristics is presented in Table 7. Most participants were from the Faculty of Environment and Life Sciences and most of these studied psychology (FGS psychology $n = 110$, 60.8%; non-FGS psychology $n = 127$, 67.9%). Participants were evenly distributed throughout years of study (FGS final year $n = 55$, 30.1%; non-FGS final year $n = 61$, 32.6%). There were more

females than males in both the FGS and non-FGS group (FGS female $n = 146$, 80.7%; non-FGS female $n = 149$, 79.7%). Most of the participants self-identified as having a white background (FGS ethnicity white $n = 148$, 81.8%; non-FGS ethnicity white $n = 130$, 69.5%). A minority of participants were carers (FGS carers $n = 10$, 5.5%; non-FGS carers $n = 10$, 5.3%) or declared a disability (FGS disability $n = 20$, 11.0%; non-FGS disability $n = 29$, 15.5%).

Table 7: Study and Demographic Information of Participants

	FGS n	FGS %	Non- FGS n	Non- FGS %	Full sample n	Full sample %
Faculty						
Arts & Humanities	12	6.6	6	3.2	19	5.0
Eng & Physical Sci	6	3.3	10	5.3	16	4.2
Env & Life Sci	122	67.4	133	71.1	263	69.4
Medicine	0	0	3	1.6	3	0.8
Social Sciences	40	22.1	34	18.2	75	19.8
Unknown	1	0.6	1	0.5	3	0.8
Year of Study						
First	69	38.1	69	36.9	144	38.0
Second	57	31.5	57	30.5	115	30.3
Third	51	28.2	57	30.5	112	29.6
Fourth	4	2.2	4	2.1	8	2.1
Gender Identity						
Woman	146	80.7	149	79.7	303	79.9
Man	29	16.0	34	18.2	65	17.2
Non-binary	1	0.6	4	2.1	5	1.3
Prefer not to say	2	1.1	0	0	2	0.5
Another term	3	1.7	0	0	4	1.1
Ethnic Background						
White	148	81.8	130	69.5	283	74.7
Mixed/multiple	10	5.5	18	9.6	29	7.7
Asian	17	9.4	23	12.3	44	11.6
Black	3	1.7	14	7.5	18	4.7
Other ethnic	3	1.7	2	1.1	5	1.3
Carer						
Yes	10	5.5	10	5.3	20	5.3
No	171	94.5	177	94.7	359	94.7
Disabilities						
Yes	20	11.0	29	15.5	51	13.5
No	161	89.0	158	84.5	328	86.5

To assess whether a meaningful analysis of capital development could be undertaken between the FGS and non-FGS, preliminary analyses were undertaken to establish whether there were any significant differences in the study and background characteristics between the two groups. This is addressed in H_1 below.

H_1 : There are no significant differences in the study and background characteristics of FGS and non-FGS participants.

A t-test was run to determine if there were differences in age between the FGS and non-FGS. No significant difference in age was found between the FGS ($M = 20.45$, $SD = 3.48$) and non-FGS ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 2.03$; $t(288) = 1.714$, $p = .088$, $d = .179$). Chi-square tests for independence (with Yates' Continuity Correction) were used to check for possible other differences between the FGS and non-FGS study and demographic characteristics. They indicated no significant difference between first-generation status and studying STEM subjects, $X_2(1) = 2.272$, $p = .132$; gender identity, $X_2(1) = 0.169$, $p = .681$; ethnicity, $X_2(1) = 3.735$, $p = .053$; carer status, $X_2(1) = 0.001$, $p = 1.000$; or disability, $X_2(1) = 1.221$, $p = .269$. As the sample contained a high proportion of psychology students, a sensitivity analysis was run to see if there were any significant differences between FGS and non-FGS studying psychology, there was found to be no significant difference $X_2(1) = 1.746$, $p = .186$.

The hypothesis was accepted as there were no significant differences in the background characteristics of the FGS and non-FGS. Further analysis could therefore proceed to understand differences in capital development for the two groups.

8.3 Differences in capitals

The overarching aim of this study was to explore whether the concept of capital development could help to explain why first-generation students (FGS) perform less well in the labour market and whether FGS have differences in their capitals, when compared to the wider student population. Previous research (see Chapter 3) had suggested that FGS attend university with the plan to acquire equal levels of HC to their non-FGS counterparts (Lehmann, 2022; O'Shea et al, 2018). Research in numerous studies had illustrated that social and cultural capital enabled more advantaged students to gain positional advantage in a crowded labour market (McCafferty, 2022). Identity capital had been identified as key in navigating graduate outcomes, however prior research had found there to be no association between background and identity formation (Cotes, 2016). Some had suggested that students from a disadvantaged background might have increased psychological capital as a direct result of the challenges they face, but this was a contested topic within the literature (Abrahams, 2017; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013;

Parutis and Howson, 2020). The difference in capital development for FGS and non-FGS is addressed in H₂ below.

H₂: FGS and non-FGS have equal levels of HC and IC, FGS have weaker levels of SC and CC and higher levels of PC as measured by the Graduate Capital Scale.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores for the subscales and standalone item within the Graduate Capital Scale between FGS ($n = 181$), and non-FGS ($n = 187$). Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test results are shown in Table 8. The results support the hypothesis, that there was no significant difference for HC and IC between FGS and non-FGS. Contrary to the hypothesis, the SC and PC levels were not significantly different for the two groups. The only item with a significant difference within the GCS was 'cultural capital factor 2: engagement with extra-curricular activities'. FGS had lower levels of this factor, although with a relatively small effect size, $t(366) = -2.135$, $p = .033$, $d = 0.22$.

Table 8: T-test results for GCS

	<i>FGS</i> <i>M</i>	<i>FGS</i> <i>SD</i>	<i>Non- FGS</i> <i>M</i>	<i>Non- FGS</i> <i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Human Capital							
HCFACT1: degree skills and abilities	14.09	2.75	14.12	2.58	-0.12	.90	.01
HCFACT2: career skills	19.59	5.79	20.17	5.46	-0.98	.33	.10
HCQ10: transferable skills	4.07	1.12	4.03	1.14	-0.34	.74	.04
Social Capital							
SCFACT1: understanding job market	11.05	4.19	11.25	4.63	-0.43	.67	.05
SCFACT2: networking skills	16.50	4.80	17.20	4.80	-1.39	.17	.15
Cultural Capital							
CCFACT1: fit with job market	25.64	6.82	26.06	6.94	-0.60	.55	.06
CCFACT2: extra-curricular	7.83	2.60	8.41	2.64	-2.14	.03*	.22
Identity Capital							
ICFACT1: career identity	29.67	7.13	29.72	7.55	-0.06	.95	.01
ICQ9: personal values	4.38	1.19	4.54	1.20	-1.32	.19	.13
Psych Capital							
PCFACT1: confidence and resilience	29.40	6.05	29.25	5.95	-0.23	.82	.02
PCQ8: optimism	4.27	1.26	4.14	1.22	-0.98	.33	.10

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $d = 0.2$ (small), 0.5 (medium), 0.8 (large); $df = 366$

8.3.1 Identity capital

Further insight into identity capital was gained by asking the participants about their future plans in a free text box. (Free text was analysed and categories were applied to determine whether the participants had no career plans through to clearly defined plans with a future job or postgraduate qualification secured. Detailed information about this coding process is

provided in section 5.5.3.) 297 students provided additional comments at the end of their survey responses. A high proportion of all final year students (41.3%) had either no or undefined career plans. This showed no significant change from first year (42% no or undefined career plans) to final year. It was noted that only 1.1% (four students) were categorised as having a job or qualification secured upon graduation, this despite the survey being conducted during the spring term (the last term before graduation for final year students). Based on the coding of the responses, an independent samples t-test was conducted between FGS and non-FGS to see if there were differences in the extent to which their future plans had been decided upon. 141 FGS and 148 non-FGS provided a description for coding. There was no significant difference between FGS ($M = 2.62, SD = .97$) and non-FGS ($M = 2.55, SD = .99; t(287) = .604, p = .546, d = .071$.)

The open responses within the survey illustrated how undecided the students were. 13.5 % (51 students) were coded as having no career plans. There were numerous incidences of final year students stating how undecided they were about the future.

‘Undecided potentially go into law or business’ (Law, third and final year, FGS)

‘Don't know anymore’ (Criminology, third and final year, non-FGS)

19% (72 students) had a tentative idea of a sector or career, but these were often broad in nature. A further 34% (129 students) had a more clearly defined plan, but with no accompanying strategy to achieve this.

‘Teaching (?)’ (Mathematics, third and final year, non-FGS)

‘I am interested in wildlife conservation and research’ (Zoology, third and final year, FGS)

‘A career in HR, Recruitment or Marketing’ (Psychology, third and final year, non-FGS)

‘I'd like to work in the film industry in pre-production but I don't know precisely what role within this aspect of filmmaking I would like to do. I plan to get my MA before I look for a graduate job.’ (Film, third and final year, FGS)

Some undecided students spoke of the costs attached to having low levels of identity capital, these costs included personal stress and the time taken to worry about their future.

‘Not really sure yet, which is stressful’ (Psychology, third and final year, non-FGS)

‘I'm unsure of what I want to do as a career at the moment, although, it is something I think about often.’ (Psychology, third and final year, non-FGS)

In some cases, the students' responses seemed to indicate that they were unaware of the potential complexities of the labour market and the competition they would face in securing graduate roles. Occasionally students mentioned graduate training schemes, seemingly regarding these as a means to garner experience, rather than understanding their highly competitive nature. Masters-level degrees and travel were also mentioned as a way of postponing career decision making.

'Considering using the year after I graduate to gain some income and then use that to travel. I have ideas floating such as administration work and the civil service, but have also considered the navy' (Modern History, third and final year, FGS)

'I hope to do a graduate scheme within a big company so I can have flexibility in discovering my specific interests' (Psychology, third and final year, non-FGS)

'I'd like to complete a master's degree then see from there, but in short I don't know long-term' (Psychology, third and final year, FGS)

'Marketing, advertising, events. Travel for a year and see the job market.' (Psychology, third and final year, non-FGS)

There were some examples of students understanding the need to build their career identities before their final year (both FGS and non-FGS). Students engaged in a range of career-building activities including internships and volunteering. However, not all students were clear on the process of establishing a career identity.

'Want to find an internship, secure placement, after graduation find a graduate job in the marketing / hr industry' (Marketing, first year, non-FGS)

'I would like to volunteer more in my field in order to gain experience, I hope to attend career fairs to create a better image of what I want to do in the future' (Psychology, second year, non-FGS)

'Trying to gain some spring/summer internship opportunities in different work types of engineering (consultancy, client, etc.) before graduation' (Mechanical Engineering, third and penultimate year, FGS).

'Teaching or tutoring but would like to expand in career plans but unsure how to' (English, second year, non-FGS)

8.3.2 Economic capital

Although not measured by the Graduate Capital Scale, economic capital (EC), or financial resources, was shown to be fundamental within the literature review as it enabled other capitals to be accessed more readily (Bourdieu 1986; Lehmann, 2019; Morrison, 2019). EC was also mentioned repeatedly by participants during the qualitative phase of this research. With this in mind, additional items suggestive of EC (including indices of deprivation, access to free school meals and hours worked in term-time) were added to the survey and then tested to see if there were differences between FGS and non-FGS as hypothesised in H₃.

H₃: FGS have lower levels of EC than non-FGS.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores for FGS and non-FGS' indices of deprivation and hours worked. There was a significant difference in the indices of deprivation between FGS ($M = 6.32, SD = 2.80$) and non-FGS ($M = 7.51, SD = 2.57; t(270) = -3.645, p < .001, d = .443$). This indicated that FGS were from more deprived areas than non-FGS. FGS worked significantly more hours during term-time ($M = 6.57, SD = 8.12$) than non-FGS ($M = 4.95, SD = 6.65; t(57) = 2.087, p = .038, d = .218$). A chi-square tests for independence (with Yates' Continuity Correction) indicated a significant association between receiving free school meals and first-generation status $\chi^2(1) = 9.265, p = .002$. These results indicate that FGS have significantly lower EC than non-FGS.

8.3.3 Sensitivity analysis

As cultural and economic capital were the only measures to have significant differences between FGS and non-FGS, a sensitivity analysis was carried out using a one-way between groups analysis of covariance to compare whether the differences between FGS and non-FGS CCFact2 could be attributed to EC. The dependent variable was CCFact2 which had been found to be significantly different in the t-test between FGS and non-FGS. Free school meals (FSM) and indices of deprivation were used as co-variates. The difference between FGS and non-FGS CCFact2 was found to be no longer significant when FSM and indices of deprivation were controlled for $F(1, 262) = 17.16, p = .117, \eta^2 = .009$ and $F(1, 262) = 2.49, p = .549, \eta^2 = .001$ respectively. This suggested that when EC was controlled for then first-generation status becomes less significant. These results suggest that there is an association between the possession of EC and taking part in extra-curricular activities. (In effect, students with lower EC are less likely to take part in extra-curricular activities.)

8.4 Correlation between capitals

Central to this research was the examination of capital development as conceptualised by the GCM. Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that whilst each capital within his model can have separate value in terms of employability development, capitals interact and consequently reinforce each other (more is said about this in Chapter 4). How capitals correlate with each other for FGS and non-FGS will be examined next.

8.4.1 Relationships within the Graduate Capital Scale

Previous research had indicated a strong correlation between the components of the Graduate Capital Model (HC, SC, CC, IC, PC; Tomlinson et al, 2022). It was expected that this study would repeat these results. However, any differences between how FGS and non-FGS experience the correlations of capitals was of interest.

H₄: The capitals within the GCS correlate with each other.

The relationships between capitals (as measured by the GCS) was investigated using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The correlations between each of the factors and the three retained single items for FGS and non-FGS are reported in Tables 9 and 10. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between most variables for both FGS and non-FGS, with several showing very large correlations. SCFact1 and ICQ9 for non-FGS were the only items with no correlation. Differences in correlation between FGS and non-FGS was shown to be small.

8.4.2 Relationships between the GCS and economic capital

The qualitative phase of this thesis had indicated the important role which economic capital plays in capital formation. Correlation of EC with the subscales and standalone items in the GCS was of interest and explored in H₅.

H₅: EC correlates with the capitals in the GCS.

The relationships between capitals (GCS and EC as indicated by indices of deprivation, free school meals and hours worked during term time) was investigated using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (reported in Tables 9 and 10). EC correlated with a minority of factors within the GCS. However, for FGS, working more part-time hours during term-time had a small, positive correlation with ‘human capital factor 2: career skills’ (this factor relates to skills such as building CVs and attending assessment centres). For FGS, working more part-time hours during term-time had a small, negative correlation with ‘cultural capital factor 2: engagement with extra-curricular activities’. For non-FGS, receiving free school meals had a

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small negative correlation with ‘human capital factor 1: degree skills and abilities’ and ‘cultural capital factor 1: fit with the job market’. For non-FGS working more hours during term-time had a small negative correlation with ‘human capital factor 1: degree skills and abilities’ and ‘social capital factor 1: understanding of the job market’. These results suggest that a lack of EC can impact adversely on some aspects of capital development.

Table 9: Means, SD, and Pearson’s r correlations between capitals for FGS

Model	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. HCFact1	14.09	2.75	—												
2. HCFact2	19.59	5.79	.23**	—											
3. HCQ10	4.07	1.12	.25**	.68***	—										
4. SCFact1	11.05	4.19	.22**	.59***	.40***	—									
5. SCFact2	16.50	4.80	.29***	.73***	.56***	.64***	—								
6. CCFact1	25.64	6.82	.31***	.61***	.58***	.69***	.75***	—							
7. CCFact2	7.83	2.59	.17*	.22**	.18*	.27***	.38***	.40***	—						
8. ICFact	29.67	7.13	.38***	.55***	.52***	.66***	.68***	.78***	.41***	—					
9. ICQ9	4.38	1.19	.39***	.21**	.31***	.16*	.30***	.39***	.23**	.44***	—				
10. PCFact	29.40	6.05	.32***	.46***	.47***	.38***	.54***	.54***	.27***	.58***	.33***	—			
11. PCQ8	4.27	1.26	.39***	.49***	.44***	.45***	.57***	.59***	.37***	.61***	.39***	.55***	—		
12. Depr	6.32	2.81	.03	-.12	-.14	-.11	-.08	-.06	-.02	-.10	.07	-.10	.06	—	
13. FSM	—	—	.03	-.11	-.08	.07	-.02	-.08	-.07	.01	.03	-.06	-.09	-.18*	—
14. Work	6.57	8.19	-.04	.17*	.13	.08	.14	.10	-.15*	.12	.02	.03	.03	-.08	.10

Note. $n = 181$; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Table 10: Means, SDs, and Pearson's r correlations between capitals for non-FGS

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. HCFact1	14.12	2.58	—												
2. HCFact2	20.17	5.46	.40***	—											
3. HCQ10	4.03	1.14	.37***	.67***	—										
4. SCFact1	11.25	4.63	.19**	.69***	.39***	—									
5. SCFact2	17.20	4.80	.29***	.68***	.54***	.67***	—								
6. CCFact1	26.06	6.94	.37***	.72***	.60***	.62***	.76***	—							
7. CCFact2	8.41	2.64	.24***	.38***	.36***	.30***	.53***	.51***	—						
8. ICFact	29.72	7.55	.39***	.68***	.58***	.58***	.71***	.82***	.48***	—					
9. ICQ9	4.54	1.20	.28***	.22**	.20**	.11	.24***	.29***	.30***	.39***	—				
10.PCFact	29.25	5.95	.19*	.46***	.43***	.33***	.57***	.56***	.44***	.58***	.33***	—			
11.PCQ8	4.14	1.22	.47***	.51***	.46***	.36***	.62***	.65***	.47***	.59***	.34***	.53***	—		
12.Depr	7.51	2.57	-.11	-.05	-.13	-.04	-.07	-.09	-.01	-.07	-.10	-.07	-.09	—	
13.FSM	—	—	-.15**	-.02	-.01	.00	-.04	-.03	-.21**	-.11	-.05	-.09	.01	-.19*	—
14.Work	4.95	6.65	-.20**	.06	.01	.17*	.10	.10	-.03	.03	-.12	-.01	-.03	.07	.26***

Note. $n = 187$; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

8.5 Capital development: careers support

A final aim of the study was to understand the differences between how FGS and non-FGS develop their capitals. The objective was to understand which sources of careers help were most important for FGS and non-FGS in terms of capital development. Previous research had shown how FGS were less able to rely on parents for labour market insight and networks (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Pires and Chapin, 2022) and so consequently were more dependent on formal university support, for example from lecturers (Parutis and Howson, 2020). The qualitative findings from this research (Chapter 7) had also suggested that FGS use different mechanisms for capital development. How careers support contributes to capital development for FGS and non-FGS is addressed in H₆.

H₆: FGS and non-FGS depend on different careers support to mobilise their capitals.

Separate multiple linear regressions were conducted for FGS and non-FGS using the 11 items in the GCS whilst controlling for variables classified as 'career help'. These careers help variables were developed from the findings of the qualitative phase of the study and included items such as support from careers services, employers, lecturers and parents. All the included items had been mentioned by students during their interviews as impacting upon their career development.

Regression results for the full models are summarised in Table 11. For FGS, nine models were found to have statistical significance, with small to medium effect sizes recorded. For non-FGS five models were significant, with small effect sizes recorded.

The contribution towards the models for each of the significant predictor variables is summarised in Table 12 for FGS and Table 13 for non-FGS. In the interests of transparency, full results (including non-significant) are available in full in Appendix O. For FGS (Table 12), employers, friends and university tutors and lecturers were predicted to impact positively on capital development. However, parents and family had a negative impact on capital development for FGS. For non-FGS (Table 13), employers, the university careers service and school careers service were predicted to impact positively on capital development, with no factors negatively impacting capital development. This suggests that FGS and non-FGS depend on different interventions for their capital development. Although, it should be noted that in all cases the effect sizes were relatively small.

Table 11: Main model regression results careers help and capital development

	FGS	Non-FGS
HCFACT1: degree skills and abilities	$F(10, 170) = 1.37, p = .197$ Adjusted R^2 of .020	$F(10, 176) = 0.83, p = .6$ Adjusted R^2 of .009
HCFACT2: career skills	$F(10, 170) = 3.61, p = .021$ Adjusted R^2 of .127	$F(10, 176) = 2.18, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .060
HCQ10: transferable skills	$F(10, 170) = 2.51, p = .008$ Adjusted R^2 of .077	$F(10, 176) = 0.95, p = .487$ Adjusted R^2 of .003
SCFACT1: understanding job market	$F(10, 170) = 3.72, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .133	$F(10, 176) = 2.34, p = .013$ Adjusted R^2 of .067
SCFACT2: networking skills	$F(10, 170) = 4.25, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .157	$F(10, 176) = 2.46, p = .009$ Adjusted R^2 of .073
CCFACT1: fit with job market	$F(10, 170) = 3.71, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .131	$F(10, 176) = 2.62, p = .005$ Adjusted R^2 of .080
CCFACT2: extra-curricular	$F(10, 170) = 3.69, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .130	$F(10, 176) = 1.21, p = .291$ Adjusted R^2 of .011
ICFACT1: career identity	$F(10, 170) = 4.79, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .174	$F(10, 176) = 1.63, p = .101$ Adjusted R^2 of .033
ICQ9: personal values	$F(10, 170) = 2.388, p = .013$ Adjusted R^2 of .069	$F(10, 176) = 0.678, p = .744$ Adjusted R^2 of .018
PCFACT1: confidence and resilience	$F(10, 170) = 1.63, p = .101$ Adjusted R^2 of .034	$F(10, 176) = 1.40, p = .181$ Adjusted R^2 of .021
PCQ8: optimism	$F(10, 170) = 3.01, p = .002$ Adjusted R^2 of .10	$F(10, 170) = 2.39, p = .011$ Adjusted R^2 of .07

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

Table 12: FGS careers help and capital development - significant variables

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
HCFact2							
Employers	2.628	1.026	0.192	2.562	.011	[0.603, 4.653]	.031
Friends	2.309	0.905	0.196	2.550	.012	[0.521, 4.096]	.031
HCQ10							
Employers	0.615	0.204	0.232	3.017	.003	0.213, 1.018	.046
SCFact1							
Employers	1.654	0.739	0.167	2.237	.027	[0.195, 3.113]	.024
Parents/family	-1.520	0.697	-0.163	-2.180	.031	[-2.897, -0.143]	.023
Uni tutors/lect	2.308	0.790	0.227	2.922	.004	[0.749, 3.867]	.041
SCFact2							
Employers	2.812	0.835	0.248	3.367	.001	[1.163, 4.461]	.053
Uni tutors/lect	2.476	0.893	0.213	2.773	.006	[0.714, 4.238]	.036
CCFact1							
Employers	2.814	1.205	0.175	2.336	.021	[0.436, 5.193]	.026
Uni tutors/lect	4.002	1.288	0.242	3.108	.002	[1.460, 6.544]	.047
CCFact2							
Uni tutors/lect	2.364	0.491	0.375	4.815	.000	[1.395, 3.333]	.112
ICFact1							
Employers	3.071	1.228	0.182	2.501	.013	[0.647, 5.494]	.029
Uni tutors/lect	5.968	1.312	0.345	4.549	.000	[3.379, 8.558]	.095
ICQ9							
Uni tutors/lect	0.494	0.233	0.171	2.120	.035	[0.034, 0.955]	.023
PCQ8							
Employers	0.665	0.226	0.223	2.937	.004	[0.218, 1.111]	.044
Friends	0.403	0.200	0.158	2.020	.045	[0.009, 0.798]	.020

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $sr^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

Table 13: Non-FGS careers help and capital development - significant variables

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
HCFact2							
Uni careers serv	3.130	0.996	0.242	3.143	.002	[1.165, 5.096]	.049
SCFact1							
Uni careers serv	2.972	0.841	0.271	3.532	.001	[1.311, 4.632]	.063
SCFact2							
Employers	2.829	0.998	0.208	2.834	.005	[0.859, 4.799]	.040
Uni careers serv	2.182	0.869	0.192	2.510	.013	[0.467, 3.898]	.031
CCFact1							
Employers	2.889	1.438	0.147	2.009	.046	[0.052, 5.727]	.020
Uni careers serv	3.469	1.252	0.211	2.771	.006	[0.998, 5.940]	.038
PCQ8							
Employers	0.673	0.253	0.195	2.658	.009	[0.173, 1.173]	.035
Sch careers serv	0.433	0.188	0.169	2.305	.022	[0.062, 0.804]	.027

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $sr^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

8.6 Capital development: careers activities

Data from both the literature and the qualitative phase of the study had suggested that FGS are less likely to engage in capital mobilising opportunities such as internships and extra-curricular activities, partly because of a lack of awareness, but also because of the associated costs including finance (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). The aim here was to understand whether there were any differences in the activities which FGS and non-FGS engage in.

H₇: FGS and non-FGS access different activities to mobilise their capital development.

Separate multiple linear regressions were conducted for FGS and non-FGS using the 11 items in the GCS whilst controlling for variables classified as activities to aid career development. These 'careers activities' variables were developed from the literature review and the qualitative phase of the study and included items such as careers coaching, internships and participation in clubs and societies.

Regression results for the full models are summarised in Table 14. For FGS, three models were found to have statistical significance, all with medium to large effect sizes recorded. For non-FGS four models were significant, with relatively small effect sizes recorded.

The contribution towards the models for each of the significant predictor variables is summarised in Table 15 for FGS and Table 16 for non-FGS. As above, full results (including non-significant) are available in full in Appendix O. In the final model, only two activities were found to be statistically significant for FGS and one for non-FGS. Attendance at clubs and societies impacted significantly for both FGS and non-FGS on CCFact2. However, this association should be interpreted with caution given the high degree of overlap (as both questions ask about clubs and societies). Careers coaching was found to have a small positive influence on SCFact2 for FGS ($\beta = 0.163$, $p = .039$), although the effect size was small. For non-FGS careers coaching, volunteering and paid internships were found to have borderline significance for capital development, again with a small effect size.

Table 14: Main model regression results activities and capital development

	FGS	Non-FGS
HCFACT1: degree skills and abilities	$F(6, 174) = 0.47, p = .827$ Adjusted R^2 of .018	$F(6, 180) = 0.83, p = .547$ Adjusted R^2 of .005
HCFACT2: career skills	$F(6, 174) = 1.72, p = .120$ Adjusted R^2 of .023	$F(6, 180) = 2.38, p = .031$ Adjusted R^2 of .043
HCQ10: transferable skills	$F(6, 174) = 1.13, p = .347$ Adjusted R^2 of .004	$F(6, 180) = 1.11, p = .359$ Adjusted R^2 of .003
SCFACT1: understanding job market	$F(6, 174) = 2.16, p = .050$ Adjusted R^2 of .037	$F(6, 180) = 2.36, p = .032$ Adjusted R^2 of .042
SCFACT2: networking skills	$F(6, 174) = 3.05, p = .007$ Adjusted R^2 of .064	$F(6, 180) = 2.36, p = .032$ Adjusted R^2 of .042
CCFACT1: fit with job market	$F(6, 174) = 1.90, p = .083$ Adjusted R^2 of .029	$F(6, 180) = 0.77, p = .606$ Adjusted R^2 of .008
CCFACT2: extra-curricular	$F(6, 174) = 7.28, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .173	$F(6, 180) = 4.29, p < .001$ Adjusted R^2 of .095
ICFACT1: career identity	$F(6, 174) = 1.53, p = .170$ Adjusted R^2 of .017	$F(6, 180) = 1.61, p = .147$ Adjusted R^2 of .019
ICQ9: personal values	$F(6, 174) = 1.21, p = .306$ Adjusted R^2 of .007	$F(6, 180) = 0.96, p = .454$ Adjusted R^2 of .001
PCFACT1: confidence and resilience	$F(6, 174) = 0.85, p = .537$ Adjusted R^2 of .005	$F(6, 180) = 0.51, p = .801$ Adjusted R^2 of .016
PCQ8: optimism	$F(6, 174) = 1.24, p = .287$ Adjusted R^2 of .008	$F(6, 180) = 0.50, p = .806$ Adjusted R^2 of .016

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

Table 15: FGS activities and capital development - significant variables

Activities	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
SCFact2							
Careers coach	3.793	1.820	0.163	2.084	.039	[0.201, 7.385]	.023
CCFact2							
Clubs and socs	1.983	0.358	0.380	5.537	.000	[1.276, 2.690]	.141

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $sr^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

Table 16: Non-FGS activities and capital development - significant variables

Activities	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
HCFact2							
Careers coach	4.161	2.142	0.145	1.943	.054	[-0.065, 8.388]	.019
SCFact1							
Volunteering	1.623	0.842	0.148	1.927	.056	[-0.039, 3.285]	.019
SCFact2							
Paid internships	2.728	1.412	0.145	1.932	.055	[-0.058, 5.514]	.019
CCFact2							
Clubs and socs	1.690	0.396	0.303	4.263	.000	[0.907, 2.472]	.088

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, **** = $p < .001$; $sr^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

8.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter presented the statistical findings from phase 2 of this thesis. FGS self-assessed their engagement with extra-curricular activities (cultural capital) and economic capital to be significantly lower than students whose parents had engaged with degree-level studies. Economic capital did not correlate fully with capitals measured by the Graduate Capital Scale. FGS and non-FGS depended on different careers interventions and activities to mobilise their capital development. FGS were more likely than non-FGS to use university tutors and lecturers and friends to mobilise their capitals. Importantly, parents and family were found to have a negative impact on the capital development of FGS. In contrast to FGS, non-FGS used their careers services both at school and university to mobilise their capital development positively. In many cases, the effect sizes were small and so should be treated with caution. This is perhaps attributable to the number of factors involved in capital development, but might also be linked to the range of things which can compound disadvantage. More will be said about this in the next chapter, where the complexity of the employability environment will be discussed in detail.

Chapter 9 Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This research sought to explore how first-generation students (FGS) understood and endeavoured to build their employability capital before and throughout their degrees. The overarching aim of the research was to discover whether the concept of capital development could help to explain why FGS experience less favourable graduate outcomes than non-FGS. Specifically, phase 1 sought to explore:

1. How do first-generation students within higher education understand the influences (including social and biographical) which act to shape their employability?
2. What are the perceived barriers and facilitators of first-generation students' career capital development?
3. What modes of support do first-generation students feel will equip them better for enhancing their future employment?

Phase 2 of the study used quantitative methods to measure:

4. Do first-generation students have differences in their capitals, when compared to the wider student population at the study's university?
5. Is there any correlation between capital development and specific experiences?

Key findings include the high value attached by FGS to their degree credentials, but also the barriers faced by these students in securing future opportunities as they lacked networks and cultural confidence. The research further demonstrated how undergraduates often struggled to form graduate identities and needed to apply elevated levels of resilience to transition to graduate roles. Although the Graduate Capital Model (GCM; Tomlinson, 2017a) proved to be valuable in understanding the students' experiences, there was a need to look beyond the model in its current form to understand more about the foundational role of economic capital (EC) and the way in which capitals co-evolve. A key question for the research was about the modes of support which might best enhance FGS's future employment. The findings showed there to be an important association between capital development and specific backgrounds and experiences, it was found that FGS and non-FGS drew on different modes of support for the development of their employability capital. The differences in how employability capital is built suggested that there is a need for more inclusive action to be taken by policymakers and key actors within the fields of education and work.

This chapter is divided into four parts. It begins with an examination of employability capitals, including how FGS regard their capital development and barriers they face in forming capitals. The Graduate Capital Model (GCM: Tomlinson, 2017a) and its five elements are used to structure this section. The next part moves beyond the GCM to explore how economic capital plays a foundational role within employability development. The third section of the chapter demonstrates how FGS and non-FGS use different forms of support for their capital development. The final section draws upon the findings from all stages of this research, to make specific recommendations for practice and policy. These include actions for government, schools and colleges, universities and employers. If acted upon, it is hoped these recommendations might help to improve the social mobility prospects of FGS.

9.2 FGS and building employability capitals

This research investigated whether capital development could be used to conceptualise and understand the employability experiences of FGS. Despite not being asked directly about capital formation during their interviews, dimensions of the GCM proved to be highly salient to the thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The GCM acted to illuminate the students' experiences; it revealed the complex demands placed upon all students by the graduate labour market; and exposed the differences in the facilitators and barriers of employability development for FGS and non-FGS. The participants had successfully transferred to university, because of their earlier academic potential and elevated levels of commitment to study, but they were not always conscious of or able to access additional capitals which would enable them to transition to the graduate labour market. At times, they seemed to subscribe to the 'myth of meritocracy' (Abrahams, 2017, p. 636), by prioritising human capital to the detriment of other employability-building experiences. This research also revealed the significant role which social and cultural capital played in reproducing disadvantage and damaging opportunities for intergenerational mobility. The following paragraphs will explore each of the GCM capitals in turn by triangulating the findings from the literature and the qualitative and quantitative studies, this will be done to understand more about the role which different forms of capital play in shaping FGS' employability (see Appendix P for the triangulation matrix).

As in the case of previous research about FGS, the interview participants generally believed that human capital (HC) was fundamental to building a graduate profile and could be transferred readily into employment returns upon graduation (Lehmann, 2022; O'Shea et al, 2018). In some cases, this was at the exclusion of other activities such as engagement with extra-curricular activities and internships. A similarly heavy and pragmatic reliance on HC has been found in other studies about the experiences of FGS (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; De Schepper,

Kyndt and Clycq, 2024). Although such an approach might appear naive, it can also be framed as highly strategic, as the FGS in this study were aware that they lacked ready access to other forms of capital. This dependence on educational credentials is perhaps also not surprising as shown in Chapter 2, human capital is still dominant within thinking about employability in universities where there is a heavy emphasis on meritocratic principles, educational credentialism and skill acquisition to secure positive graduate outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017b; Cole and Tibby, 2013).

HC was often conceptualised in the language of skills by the interview participants. The students seemed highly familiar with lists of skills and could quote these without solicitation (such as communication, time-management and teamworking). Benati and Fischer, 2021, found students to be similarly aware of such skills. However, there were those that seemed to see through this possessional approach to skills acquisition (Holmes, 2013). This was exemplified by those students who understood that the language of skills was simply that - a discourse which they could choose to use if they wanted. So 'stacking shelves' could be converted to the preferable language desired by employers of organisational skills and even low-level engagement in committees could be exaggerated to show administrative ability.

In the Graduate Capital Model, HC is also constituted of career-building skills including familiarity with the graduate labour market and knowing how and when to apply for work (Tomlinson, 2017a; see section 4.3). The students in the qualitative phase of the study, felt there was a gap in their career building skills, which created a disadvantage for them when they came to apply for graduate roles. They found that working within casual jobs, to pay their bills, had not necessarily prepared them for the demanding and extensive applications required in the graduate labour market. This was further compounded as these students often had complex demands placed upon them, such as caring responsibilities and issues with housing which they felt could not easily be shared with employers to justify gaps within their career narratives and applications. Even when they knew they should be engaged with career-building and applications, the students described numerous reasons in the interviews why they avoided doing so. For some, the very complexity of their own background, the extent of their career planning needs and their lack of future career ideas acted as a barrier to accessing careers services. Significantly this finding is supported by the quantitative data which shows that FGS were less likely to depend on the university careers service for their capital development than non-FGS (see section 8.5). More will be said about this important topic in section 9.4, when the role which 'significant others' play as facilitators of and barriers towards capital development are further explored.

Numerous studies have shown the central importance of social capital (SC; connections and networks) for higher education students to gain positional advantage in the graduate labour market (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020). The possession of pre-existing networks has been shown to enable individuals to find opportunities and market themselves more readily in a competitive market with less effort expended than other students (Morrison, 2019; Tholen et al, 2013). Consistent with previous research, the FGS interviewees showed instances of lacking key knowledge about work sectors as they were unable to use family resources to secure unadvertised opportunities (Waller et al, 2012). In line with studies by Hordosy and Clark (2018) and Merrill et al (2020), the participants often described themselves as highly aware of the importance of networks in securing opportunities and conscious of the barriers they faced in doing so. The lack of SC was particularly apparent when these students tried to apply for high-quality work experience and internships. This key finding is consistent with those of others and acts to confirm that internships can be classed and serve to replicate rather than disrupt disadvantage (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Merrill et al, 2020; Wright and Mulvey, 2021).

The lack of strategic alignment between personal networks and targeted employment was further demonstrated by the quantitative data, as whilst FGS self-assessed themselves as having the same level of SC as non-FGS, how they acquired their networks differed significantly. FGS used university tutors and employers as sources of capital development, whilst non-FGS used the university careers service and employers as a source of capital development. Significantly, FGS parents and family were shown to have a negative impact on SC development for FGS (see quantitative findings in section 8.5). These important results are explored further in section 9.4.1.

Despite facing and being conscious of significant barriers, the students showed themselves to be active and innovative in their efforts to build networks. The students described both chance moments and purposeful efforts which acted to build 'weak ties' beyond their own circles (Granovetter (1973). As Granovetter (1973) suggests these weak ties had strengths, as their activation enabled the FGS to move beyond their own networks and secure a greater width of ties, potentially enabling social mobility. Ad hoc moments in network creation, included travelling on a train and hospital visits and showed the students to be creative and opportunistic in their efforts to create social networks. There were also instances of communities which were valued such as church attendance and The Scouts for example, also resulting in the provision of valuable labour market information. However, at times, the active creation of networks was time-consuming and functioned as an additional burden which FGS felt more privileged students might not encounter. Students gave examples of purposefully attending a wide range

of events or strategically reaching out to professional bodies and societies to supplement their knowledge. This activity being time-consuming and at times not productive.

The literature review suggested that cultural capital was highly relevant in revealing the hidden mechanisms behind reproduction in education and employment. Previously, some had suggested that gaining empirical evidence about the role which cultural capital plays could be difficult. This is because of the hidden nature of cultural capital, but also the discomfort associated in collecting data about it (Bourdieu, 1986, Lamont and Lareau, 1988, Kalfa and Taksa, 2015). Importantly this thesis includes both qualitative and quantitative data on this topic. The interviews illustrated how a lack of CC impacted the students when they were choosing and applying for university, with many of them describing how overwhelmed they had felt about application procedures. Once at university, the students variously describing their experiences as 'isolating', 'horrible' and feeling 'untethered'. This exploration of FGS' experiences of settling into university is vital for understanding their subsequent employability capital development. This is because if students take longer to settle into university, they are less likely to engage with the type of employability development opportunities (such as careers classes and extra-curricular activities) which can aid capitals to be built and mobilised (Ivermark and Ambrose, 2021; Parutis and Howson, 2020). The research within this thesis also illustrated how these formative experiences projected onto the future, with the FGS nervous that their future transitions might be equally stressful. Some rejected possible options for study and employment in case they experienced further cultural misalignment.

Studies have shown that engagement with extra-curricular activities is key to students differentiating themselves to employers in a crowded graduate labour market (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Ingram and Allen, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020). Tomlinson et al (2017) suggest these activities can also result in enhanced levels of cultural capital. The results from this study, like others about students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, demonstrates that FGS may find it particularly difficult to participate in the type of extra-curricular activities valued by employers (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). The quantitative results provided empirical evidence that FGS have lower levels of cultural capital factor 2 (engagement with extra-curricular activities) than non-FGS although with a relatively small effect size. Some studies have suggested that this may be because students from a lower socio-economic backgrounds are not fully appreciative of the value attached by employers to extra-curricular activities in terms of building perceived cultural fit with their organisations (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020; Roberts and Li, 2017). However, this was not fully evidenced to be the case in this research, as numerous students spoke about the benefit of engagement in clubs and societies to further their careers. The participants suggested alternative barriers to their engagement as a lack of

funds to not only pay for clubs and societies, but also a sense that they did not fit into the opportunities available to them, which is consistent with findings from Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013).

The literature review established the need to find out more about the role of identity and psychological capital in employability development. It was hypothesised that FGS and non-FGS would have equal levels of identity capital. Concerningly, a high proportion of all survey participants were undecided about their future careers (41.3% of final year students had either no or undefined plans and this showed no significant numerical change from the first year of their studies). As in other studies (for example Benati and Fischer, 2021), this lack of clear identity was often described in emotive terms in both phases of the research. Students described themselves in terms of being lost, distracted and overwhelmed and they were aware that their lack of identity led to missed deadlines and lost opportunities. There was, however, no significant difference between the levels of IC for FGS and non-FGS. Although, there was no difference in IC as measured by the results of the survey used in phase 2, the interviews revealed a more nuanced story. The FGS spoke about the need to build a career narrative over time and how for them this had been curtailed for numerous reasons, including: their lack of experiences in understanding the graduate labour market prior to their degree studies; the pressures upon them when they first arrived at university as they struggled to establish themselves; the time they lost as they needed to work part-time; and their lack of readily available networks to understand the graduate labour market and find opportunities. These results build upon Lehmann's (2022) findings, which suggested that FGS arrive at university with a narrower understanding of available graduate occupations born of their formative experiences prior to higher education study. In a challenging graduate labour market, a limited career identity can impact an individual's ability to navigate which capitals to accrue profoundly; this will be further explored in section 9.2.1.

There is some evidence that enhanced PC can improve labour market outcomes, (Calvo and Garcia, 2021; Newman et al, 2014), however it is a contested debate as to whether students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have heightened PC because of the additional challenges they have previously faced (Abrahams, 2017; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Parutis and Howson, 2020). The survey results showed FGS and non-FGS had equal levels of psychological capital, however the qualitative results again provided a more nuanced and contextual insight. The ways in which FGS had acquired their narratives of resilience were of interest, as they were often revealed to be from challenging circumstances including a lack of finance, caring responsibilities and housing issues. There was also evidence of the students becoming increasingly resilient as they dealt with the demands placed upon them by higher education, with some describing the transformations they had experienced during their university career.

(This was perhaps especially the case as they studied during a pandemic and experienced a national lockdown which impacted them substantially.) Importantly, the experiences described by the FGS might be less attractive to potential employers than the resilience narratives built through activities more typically associated with a university educated applicants such as extra-curricular activities including involvement in clubs and societies as well as high-prestige internships. The participants demonstrated this when they reflected on how much they had achieved throughout their studies, employment and personal lives, but also how difficult it would be to reveal these highly personalised stories to employers in a way which the employer might find acceptable. Ultimately, these findings hint that FGS might have equal levels of psychological capital, but the ways in which they have acquired their resilience might not be perceived as an equally valuable commodity by prospective employers.

9.2.1 Capitals co-evolve

Previous research has suggested that the elements of the Graduate Capital Model should interact (Tomlinson et al, 2017; Tomlinson et al, 2022), however prior to this study this had not been fully tested with empirical data about FGS. For clarity, capitals have been presented separately both in this thesis and to a certain extent within the GCM itself. However, the collected data shows that the interactions between capitals are significant. These connections within the GCM were proven by the correlations between the variables in the Graduate Capital Scale (section 8.4) and exemplified by the experiences of the interview participants. Capitals were shown to co-evolve and students who lacked one (through no fault of their own) potentially struggled to form others. The connections between capitals was exemplified via the crucial link described by participants between social and identity capital. As in prior studies, the development of identity was relational and interview participants who lacked networking ties were often not able to develop strong emergent career identities (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007). Without these identities in place, undergraduates were unable to direct their attention to acquiring relevant experiences or making timely applications. Equally, this study demonstrated how FGS were often highly dependent on the weak ties (social capital) they made while at university for their identity formation, with a high number of the interviewees mentioning the important role which lecturers played in identifying potential career opportunities. Low levels of identity capital impacted on the development of career management skills (part of human capital) and how attention was directed to acquiring labour market experience (with the application of social and cultural capital). Relatedly, a lack of economic capital prevented some students from acquiring field specific cultural capital and insight, especially through enriching experiences that might have enhanced their employability narratives.

9.2.2 The central role of economic capital

This research revealed economic capital (EC) to be central to understanding the experiences of FGS in terms of their choices about university, their experiences during university and their future careers. Consistent with the wider literature about inequality, this research demonstrated how economic capital or financial resources, acted as a foundational form of capital, allowing other capitals to be accessed more readily (Bourdieu 1986; Lehmann, 2019; Morrison, 2019). The fundamental importance of EC was supported by both the qualitative and quantitative data. The interviewees were highly aware of the impact of EC on their current choices and future options. Their responses during the interviews, demonstrated that most of the students worked part-time and some juggled multiple roles. This finding was replicated by the quantitative data which showed that FGS had significantly lower EC than non-FGS, (with a significant difference in the indices of deprivation between FGS and non-FGS; FGS working significantly more hours during term-time than non-FGS; and a significant association between being in receipt of free school meals and first-generation status). As in the case of other studies, due to financial constraints and associated work commitments, these students struggled to afford to take part in CV-building activities and internships, even when they recognised that this could impact negatively upon their future employability (Allen et al, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Merrill et al, 2020). A lack of EC also impacted upon career choices, as plans such as postgraduate study and travel were postponed because of a lack of funding. Aligned with other research, a lack of EC led to more rapid and confined decisions on graduation and created pressures to secure work more quickly (Bathmaker, 2021b; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). FGS described themselves as lacking in the buffering support of parents, something which they saw other students as able to access more readily. Furthermore, and as found by others, career plans were influenced by past experiences, as students craved the security they had not enjoyed previously they avoided job choices which might be associated with economic adversity (Lehmann, 2022).

EC was often mentioned by the FGS as impacting negatively on their career development. However, it is not explicitly mentioned as part of the GCM (Tomlinson, 2017a). This might suggest the model should be modified. However, statistical testing of the survey results showed there to be a correlation between only a minority of the factors in the Graduate Capital Scale and EC (as indicated by indices of deprivation, free school meals and hours worked during term time). This is suggestive that EC should remain outside of the scale. Furthermore, it may also not be conceptually justified to add EC to the model, as the GCM is developmental rather than deterministic in nature and when shared with students about helping them to develop their employability capital via experiences acquired during their undergraduate years (Tomlinson et

al, 2017). As university students cannot necessarily change the levels of money they enter higher education with, responsibility lies with policymakers, universities and employers to be aware of the significant barriers posed by money and to do more to actively support students either through targeted funding or more flexibility in the way capital building activities are offered or assessed (specific recommendations are outlined below, in section 9.5).

9.3 Significant self and others

One of the key questions for this research was which modes of support enable FGS to build their employability capital, and relatedly whether there was any correlation between capital development and specific experiences. This section will seek to answer these questions with an exploration of some of the facilitators and barriers of employability capital. FGS interview participants felt their sources of capital were different to non-FGS, this was exemplified by FGS describing in detail the advantages possessed by other students in forming networks (section 7.3.1: networks 'I never knew anyone'). This was subsequently tested by the survey with the inclusion of questions based on the qualitative responses given by the FGS (see Appendix J). The survey results demonstrated that whilst FGS may self-assess themselves as having almost equal levels of employability capital to their non-FGS counterparts, how they acquire and mobilise their capitals is different (sections 9.3.1 to 9.3.5 will explore this key finding in depth). This research also showed how FGS utilised significant agency to overcome the barriers they encountered; it found the participants to be using high levels of agential capacities, but also working within some structural parameters. This section will begin by exploring the role of agency before the role of significant others is considered.

Consistent with some of the broader literature, the FGS showed themselves to be not completely bounded by their circumstances and able to improvise within structures (Holmes, 2013; Tholen, 2015, Tomlinson, 2017b). In their interviews, the FGS showed awareness of how they had invested in their degrees and chosen subjects which they felt would be of high value. They had shown elevated levels of personal agency by acting against 'class wisdom' to choose and then enter a Russell Group university (Fevre, Rees and Gorard, 1999). (It should be noted however, that more economically advantaged students are five times more likely to enter high tariff universities than their disadvantaged counterparts; Department for Education, 2021). The participants also described themselves as working hard and creatively to access opportunities such as internships, opportunities that they felt other students might take for granted. The students were often aware of and proud of the extent of their efforts. Many of them referred to a desire to improve their intergenerational mobility and become more economically stable. They often couched these desires in terms of differentiating themselves from their parents. They

wanted a degree to be ‘better’ and avoid getting ‘stuck’ in lower level jobs like their peers. The literature review evidenced that on average the graduate outcomes for FGS are poorer than their non-FGS counterparts (Office for Students, 2024b), but this research provided essential proof that this is not because of a lack of effort on the behalf of FGS. These students were enacting agency, but it was at some additional costs to them in terms of energy and time spent and they were often conscious of the additional challenges they faced.

The FGS showed high levels of agency, but there was clear evidence also of structures working against them. A substantial contribution of this research was the evidence that FGS can be bounded by their parents and families and this seems to extend well beyond the period of childhood in determining career insights and connections. The variety in background experiences acted to further illuminate the tension between agency and structure and illustrated that neither an agentic nor structural approach alone is sufficient in understanding the experiences of these students in full. The students with a prior knowledge of the labour market gained by their personal circumstances were at an advantage. Equally students spoke of the advantage that could be gained through purposeful interventions. This suggests that resources can and should be usefully directed in support of employability capitals.

The qualitative phase of the study showed that a range of structures influenced the individual behaviour and experiences of the participants. Examples of these included: home (parents, siblings and the broader family); school and colleges (including teachers, mentors and support staff such as careers advisors); employers and business contacts; recreational opportunities (such as sport) and religious communities. Those who were fortunate to have additional careers insight from their communities (such as church and volunteering), understood the hidden rules about networking and extra-curricular activities earlier and so were able to grasp opportunities more readily. Some found their attendance at selective or independent schools had given them extra foundational knowledge about the importance of employer-based projects and work experience. In contrast, other students lacked key networks and graduate labour market insight from their communities and were subsequently worried that their investments in higher education would prove to be less transformational. The next sections will explore the roles played by these significant others more fully.

9.3.1 Parents and family

Multiple studies have shown that students with advantaged socioeconomic status join university with tacit knowledge of higher education, gained from the experiences of family and friends, and this in turn enables them to build employability capital from the start of their degrees (McCafferty, 2022). In contrast, students with a disadvantaged socioeconomic status

have been shown to join higher education from a position of deficit (Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020; Pires and Chapin, 2022). The next section adds to this body of knowledge by describing the role parents played in capital formation in both phases of this research. It will illustrate that understandably parents and family have high impact upon pre-higher education choices about whether and how to study degrees. It will extend understanding, by illustrating how parents and families had long term consequences for the development of social capital and crucially because of this the acquisition of opportunities throughout and beyond university studies. These findings are important because the role of family has been shown to be ‘overlooked’ in research about employability development (Christie and Burke, 2021) and also because they have the potential to explain some of the quantitative findings from previous studies which show family background to play a key role in reduced graduate outcomes (including earnings) long after graduation (Britton et al, 2019; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; The Sutton Trust, 2021).

Many of the interview participants commented on the significant role which their parents had played in their employability development (for example, section 6.4: family background ‘built my character’). Consistent with previous research on the topic of parenting and socio-economic disadvantage, parents played a variety of roles in the biographical narratives of their children from legitimising their experiences through to hindering their development (Christie and Burke, 2021). The role of parents and family was particularly significant prior to degree entry, with the interviews illustrating a range of behaviour from parents from gentle encouragement to benign not knowing through to outright opposition to university attendance. In some cases, parents had functioned as a facilitating force (for example, by passing on a love of learning via books, or encouragement to take the 11-plus exam to enter a local grammar school), and their children recognised and were grateful for this. However, there was also evidence of parents and family acting as a barrier to entry to degree-level study and subsequent graduate employability development. FGS spoke of feeling isolated as they were unable to seek advice or reassurance from their parents about their future. Some parents had needed extensive persuasion about the benefits of degree studies and were further sceptical about postgraduate study. These experiences reflected findings by Gazeley and Hinton-Smith (2023), who found that whilst FGS parents might be proud of their children undertaking degrees they might also not be aware of the benefits and be fearful of the associated costs. In some cases, the needs of parents (including care, health and finance) acted to disrupt their children’s studies. This resulted in the participants feeling unable to concentrate wholeheartedly on their degrees or find the extra time necessary for their own personal and career development. FGS also at times felt additional pressures from what they perceived to be the unrealistic expectations of their family. At times, a tension existed between first-generation parental and family expectations that a Russell Group

education should result in their children immediately securing high-status, permanent roles upon graduation and the realities of a changeable and demanding labour market. These expectations might reasonably arise from parents wanting the best for their children, but at times the participants in this study viewed them as an additional and unhelpful pressure to be managed.

The background literature and qualitative and quantitative results converged most strongly on the topic of social capital to show that even when FGS' parents were supportive of their children, they were not always able to contribute positively to their capital development. The survey data revealed parents and family to have a negative impact on social capital factor 2 'networking skills' for FGS. The interview participants were often keenly aware of these deficits in their connections and recognised the important role that non-FGS' parents played in assisting them to build social capital (see especially section 7.3.1: Networks 'I never knew anyone'). This research, like that of others, showed that relatives might well have networks, but lacked the key insight into and links with the graduate labour market which were important for their children's graduate career development (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Pires and Chapin, 2022).

This research also illustrated the key role which economic capital plays in career choices (Bathmaker, 2021b; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Roberts and Li, 2017). Notably, it demonstrated how this was directly associated with parents and family before, during and after university studies. Corroborating findings from Pires and Chapin (2022), this study found that pre-entry choices were impacted by economic capital as some parents gave low support for university, because of financial concerns and misconceptions about costs and pay back systems. Several students commented that because their parents could not support them financially they were unable to access potentially transformational opportunities including internships, further study and travel. Students also felt pressured to achieve financial security as a direct result and in contrast to their parents' experiences. On 26 separate occasions in the interviews, the participants referred to their parents' hopes that they would better their circumstances. Again, this evidence was supported by the quantitative data which showed FGS to be from more deprived areas than non-FGS and more likely to receive free-school meals than non-FGS.

9.3.2 Schools

Evidence from both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research indicated that school experiences can also have an impact on capital development both negatively and positively. Interview participants recognised the fundamental importance of role models to positive career preparation, but also recognised that they often lacked role models aligned with their plans. The role which schools played in capital development prior to higher education entry

was mixed. There were some examples of schools who made positive and targeted interventions through various activities including: university visits and taster days, individual and group mentoring, visiting speakers, coaching on applications and exam entry, personalised advice about finance, careers guidance, and extra academic support from teachers. These opportunities were extensive and they were valued by the participants. However, there were also students who lacked access to such opportunities. They commented on the difficulties of applying for university when they were unaware of the application processes, did not understand how to access funding, or did not view degree-level study as a viable option for them. This accords with earlier observations which have illustrated the importance of pre-university education in influencing degree choices (Bukodi, Goldthorpe and Zhao, 2021; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). When exploring the relationship between capital development and careers support for both FGS and non-FGS, the survey study found that school careers services did not influence current levels of capital development for FGS, but did impact positively on non-FGS's psychological capital 'optimism'. Although the effect size was small, this suggests that careers services may be acting to further extend inequalities.

9.3.3 University lecturers

Once at university and with an absence of other networks, the interview participants often described themselves as highly reliant on academic staff, as they felt they had no-one else to turn to. Ten of the participants specifically referred to lecturers as central to building networks to access workplace opportunities such as prestigious internships, additional research projects and experiences with key employers. This reflected findings by Parutis and Howson (2020) who suggested that students from a disadvantaged backgrounds were more reliant on formal support from lecturers. The quantitative results aligned with both the qualitative results and background literature to demonstrate that university tutors and lecturers had a positive impact on capital development for FGS in the areas of social capital, cultural capital and identity capital, whilst the effect sizes were relatively small, significantly non-FGS reported no relationship between their capital development and lecturers.

It has been recommended that lecturers, with their industry specific knowledge and contacts, should be a source of careers development for all students (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018), however there are potential drawbacks associated with this. The results from the qualitative stage of this study, showed how helpful some lecturers had been, however they also acted to illustrate the potentially narrow range of occupational insight which some lecturers possessed. There was evidence of lecturers commonly suggesting postgraduate or doctoral study, hinting that engagement with academics did not afford the students the opportunity to extend their career thinking sufficiently. This is mirrored in a commentary about capital

development by Wohlgezogen and Cotronei-Baird (2023), where they reflect on how unprepared they felt as academics to provide ‘evidence-based advice on how our students should direct their career capital development to maximize employment outcomes’ (p.7). This is particularly true within a crowded curriculum where occupational outcomes have been shown to not necessarily align with degree content (Tymon, 2013; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). Furthermore, tutors might understandably encourage students to focus on their degree studies consequently neglecting the need to build capitals to secure future graduate employment (Bathmaker, 2021b).

9.3.4 University career services

Several interview participants had made use of the university careers service. Overall, when accessed, the services provided had proved to be helpful. Students commented positively about a range of services including flexible, high quality work experience and internship opportunities and individualised advice, coaching and mentoring. When modelled, the relationship between capital development and the careers activities which FGS and non-FGS took part in, such as careers coaching were found to have a small positive influence on the levels of social capital ‘networking skills’ for FGS.

There was evidence from the qualitative data that FGS benefitted from their interactions with the careers service, however there were also examples of students who had not engaged with the service at all. There were numerous reasons why this was the case, including: the prioritisation of academic studies (or human capital); anxieties about accessing a service which was new to them; and the perception that if they attended the service they needed to do so with a specific question in mind. This latter point was particularly concerning, as nearly half of all students had no clear identity in mind when tested in the survey phase of the study (see section 8.3.1). The quantitative results aligned with the qualitative results, as although a greater use of university careers services was associated with capital development (including human capital, social capital and cultural capital) for non-FGS, this was not the case for FGS. Others have found that only half of undergraduates at a Russell Group university have engaged with university careers services during their studies because of a lack of time, but also problems with awareness and accessibility (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018). Furthermore, and paradoxically, those who are the least career ready may be the most reluctant to engage with careers services. This research builds further on those findings and suggests that this might be a particular issue for FGS. This is consistent with findings from Parutis and Howson (2020) who showed how students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to engage with opportunities to enhance their employability from the start of their degrees as they were unaware of the importance of doing so. This lack of understanding about the need to engage in

careers services early in undergraduate experiences may be further exacerbated by the relatively poor experiences of school careers support prior to attending university and is perhaps something which merits further investigation.

9.3.5 Employers

Employers were shown to have a vital role in capital development in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this study. The survey data showed employers to impact positively on capital development for both FGS and non-FGS. However, the FGS interviewees had more mixed experiences when they encountered employers. Some told positive stories about employer events and societies and securing work experiences, whilst others were concerned that employers would repeat the negative experiences they had encountered during their degree studies, for example prejudicing applicants for lacking the right accent. As in previous studies, interviewees were concerned that employers might recruit based on their cultural acceptability, rather than ability (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Reay, 2021). Previous research has shown that one of the mechanisms which serves to replicate discrimination is the tendency of some professions to recruit graduates from family members (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Such replication was evident within this study when students spoke about employment fields such as law and medicine; here the deeply embedded roles which familiarity with culture and possession of networks played was evident via the experiences of students. However, other fields seemed more fluid and easier for FGS to negotiate such as engineering and physical sciences. More will be said about how employers might support FGS with access to their opportunities as well as capital development in the following sections which include recommendations for practice.

9.4 Recommendations for practice and policy

Due to widening participation efforts and the removal of the cap upon student numbers, increasing numbers of disadvantaged students have gained qualifications in higher education in the last decade (Universities UK, 2021b). Despite this apparent ‘success story’, the graduate outcomes for these students remain poorer than for their more advantaged peers (Social Mobility Commission, 2017, p. 49). So, widening access to higher education alone has not proven to be sufficient to reduce inequalities in the graduate labour market. This matters not only for the students themselves, but also for society, as diversity within employment is associated with enhanced productivity and innovation (Wright and Mulvey, 2021; Reay, 2021). Some have suggested to change to a more equitable labour market would be all but impossible, as parents will always act in the interests of their own children’s advancement, employing all

the cultural and financial resources they have to the detriment of others (Morrison, 2019). However, Tholen's (2012) research across labour markets from two international settings illustrates that change is possible if different macro policies are applied to the content of studies and labour market access. Furthermore, some studies have suggested that even small scale, localised interventions such as targeted and paid internships and visits to and from employers may act as a catalyst for change, by providing contacts and starting points for students to gain further work experience (Bathmaker, 2021b; Gleeson et al, 2022; OECD, 2024).

This research has revealed FGS to have different levels of capital in some areas and rely on different modes of support to enable their capital development than non-FGS. Although the FGS participants applied extensive personal agency in overcoming the barriers they faced, they also acknowledged the substantial personal effort required for this. Sometimes this personal effort was applied without the support of external agencies. The findings suggest that it is not merely the possession of capitals which is key to navigating the graduate labour market, but also knowing how and when to mobilise capital resources appropriately and in different contexts and having the support to do this. Tomlinson et al (2017) suggests that the GCM represents a 'new vocabulary around graduate employment' (p.29). This vocabulary is one that students and their parents need to be attuned to. Ideally the hidden knowledge which more advantaged students and their parents may be instinctively aware of needs to be made explicit. Schools, universities and employers have a role in foregrounding the importance of capital development and enabling FGS to acquire and mobilise their capitals equally to their counterparts.

In line with the pragmatist nature of this thesis, the next section will make recommendations as to how FGS might be supported better in the development of their employability capitals in order that universities may become stronger vehicles for social mobility. The recommendations span the student lifecycle from pre-entry through to graduation, reflecting the experiences of the participants in this research and the importance of each stage of building employability capitals. They include recommendations for policies to be adjusted at the macro level through to micro interventions. We know from the experiences of the participants (phase 1 of the study) as well as the survey data (phase 2) which activities acted to facilitate development and, so where possible, examples of good practice have been drawn from these sources. Equally, examples of good practice from wider reading are also included wherever possible, to acknowledge the positive work of others already taking place in this field and to function as direct encouragement to the reader that action in this area can have positive consequences. These recommendations are initially summarised in Table 17 and then contextualised in full in the subsequent paragraphs.

Table 17: Recommendations for policy and practice

Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinstate a universal careers service which can enable pupils and students to access face to face guidance appointments outside of the school and college environment where necessary. • Provide more training opportunities for careers staff to address workforce shortages within schools. • Address the provision of confusing and at times conflicting online sites about university, including applications and funding sources. • Provide targeted and accessible funding for FGS considering postgraduate study. • Consider legislation for paid internships.
Schools and colleges (including their careers services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure information, advice and guidance services account for the needs of FGS. • Provide group sessions which include content about the options available at university, financing university studies and alternative options (including online and apprenticeship study) to both students and their parents. • Deliver services before choices are immediate and ideally from year 9 onwards.
Universities (including lecturers and their careers services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide open days, partnership agreements and mentoring targeted at FGS. • Before and once at university, ensure FGS are aware of and have access to additional funding. • Ensure recruitment policies monitor and favour a more socially diverse workforce. • Make language use inclusive and explanatory (examples to be addressed might include bunfight, seminars, semesters). As part of this ensure induction activities include cultural acclimatisation for all. • Establish accessible and diverse extra-curricular activities and monitor the costs of these for individuals and ways to make savings. • Make sure lecturers understand the important role they play in support of students' career planning and that they know how and when to refer their students readily to support services as appropriate.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver in-house training about capital development via existing learning and teaching conferences and lecturer training. • Create communities of practice in support of and celebration of first-generation staff and students. • Embed employability within the curriculum with the Graduate Capital Model and use its associated learning outcomes as the theoretical model for this. • Design university careers services and their associated messaging to encourage all students to make use of them (not just the decided or confident). • Offer elevated levels of mentoring, coaching and internships for FGS.
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace and publicise a wider range of recruitment experiences and attributes (for example, caring responsibilities). • Deliver enhanced mobility events within universities to include talks and visits, with an emphasis on sharing and diversifying culture. • Recruit from a wider selection of universities. • Fund and fully advertise all internship opportunities. • Monitor and report on staff diversity, including by social mobility criteria.

9.4.1 Access to higher education

Despite extensive efforts to widen participation, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still less likely to gain a degree (Britton et al, 2019; Crawford et al, 2016). Furthermore, selective universities, such as Russell Group ones, tend to admit the lowest numbers of students who fulfil contextualised criteria (Social Mobility Commission, 2023). (Parental education is listed as one of the contextual admission criteria which universities can use to adjust offers to degree level study, UCAS, 2023b). This is important because the pipeline of advantage begins before university, and for FGS to achieve the highest graduate outcomes they need access to the most selective universities. The Office for Students (2024a) has been instructed by government to address discrepancies in intake which act against the most disadvantaged students. Negotiated 'Access and Participation Plans' between the Office for Students and universities are expected to include enhanced partnerships with schools which lead to improved ambassador, mentoring and summer programmes, as well as targeted academic interventions (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). In support of these extended Access and Participation Plans, and the increased expectations associated with them, funding has increased from £550 million in 2020/21 to £565 million in 2024/25 (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). The

plans created by individual universities must be approved by the Office for Students as a condition of the university charging higher fee levels. The students in this research described career and life enhancing examples of participation in mentoring, aspiration and open days, so expanded practice in this area is to be welcomed, as is the sharing of published good practice via the agreements themselves. Research in Australia has shown that open days, partnerships and mentoring can be core to first-generation school and college children becoming more secure in their understanding of higher education (Pires and Chapin, 2022).

In this research, the FGS often commented on the expense of university and how this had acted to deter them from applying. The interview participants described how they and their parents were particularly adverse to debt as they had often experienced economic insecurity in the past and lacked the economic safety nets enjoyed by other students. Lehmann (2022) found that a drive to seek 'stability over risk' influenced postgraduate outcomes (p.11). This thesis reflected Lehmann's (2022) findings, but also illustrated how adversity to economic risk extended to choices made even before university. There is a need for schools and colleges and widening participation programmes to acknowledge that a lack of economic capital acts a foundational barrier to participation in higher education. The results of this study show the importance of targeted funding, but also the need to extend this funding and advertise it to students prior to their attendance at university to encourage more FGS to apply to university. It is recommended that the events which form university Access and Participation plans make explicit reference to economic capital and include events and opportunities which explain to FGS and their parents their additional entitlements to funding.

Engagement with a range of career development activities (including careers guidance and employer activities such as fairs, work-shadowing and internships) by the age of 15 has been proven to have a positive impact on career thinking and associated employment outcomes (OECD, 2024). Despite this, students with lower socio-economic status are less likely to participate in these activities across a range of higher income countries (OECD, 2024). The FGS within this study found one of the barriers to entering university for them was understanding the available options within university and knowing how and when to apply. This was often exacerbated because they lacked key contacts in their family to turn to for advice. Some students praised the careers support in school, but others were critical and described limited support being offered en-masse in assemblies or in some cases being actively discouraged to attend university. Since 2012, the statutory duty to provide careers advice has rested with schools with an online and telephone service provided for adults and young people aged 13 years and over provided by the National Careers Service (Department for Education, 2023). The Social Mobility Commission (2017) has been openly critical of government policy towards career advice and guidance within schools rating it as red on their dashboard indicating a need

for significant improvement. More recently, the Social Mobility Commission (2023) produced a report which was also critical of the 'disparate' and confused nature of online careers resources for young people, which make it difficult for them to access clear, accurate and updated careers information including options about university study. Both reports acknowledged that the declining availability of high-quality careers information, advice and guidance within schools had impacted particularly negatively on those students who lacked family and friends with knowledge of degree-level studies. This poor availability of advice was reflected by the findings of quantitative phase of this research, which showed school careers advice to only impact positively on capital development for non-FGS. However, during their interviews there were some FGS who praised the impact of high-quality careers advice and guidance received at school and college. These students suggested that high quality careers guidance could expand both their and their parents' horizons and make options within higher education more accessible. This suggests that there is good practice in careers guidance, which is available for some, but is not consistent or extensive. The challenge exists in spreading this good practice to all schools and colleges, some of which have struggled to provide impartial advice due to curriculum demands, a lack of targeted funding and gaps in the workforce. A dedicated and fully trained careers service is needed both within and outside of the school system. This would also enable the reintroduction of face to face appointments with qualified careers advisors outside of the school environment. Such a service existed and was well used prior to the advent of Connexions in 2000 and its subsequent collapse in 2010 (Hughes, 2010). (Connexions was the UK advice and guidance service for young people, which was set up in 2000, because of the Learning and Skills Act. It offered a range of services related to transition, which extended beyond careers guidance; National Audit Office 2004). In the absence of such a service, research such as this study could be shared with schools and colleges to remind them that interventions are valued by students, but perhaps need to be targeted at those most in need.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data suggested that parents and family played a key role in capital development for their children. However, the extent to which parents and family were able to support their children varied. The interviews in the first phase of this research demonstrated the value of schools and colleges working in partnership with parents. Participants valued parental information evenings about university study, especially when these events demystified the financial system. This research suggests that outreach initiatives need to be mindful of both the needs of students and their parents in understanding how degree-level study and the subsequent labour market operates. Ideally opportunities to gain experience about higher education (including apprenticeships) need to be offered during, but also before years 12 and 13, as the choices made for sixth form study impact profoundly on potential degree choices.

9.4.2 During studies

The ability to settle into the university environment quickly is important for capital development, as FGS who must expend more energy to feel comfortable within their studies have less resources to garner the type of extras needed to impress future employers (Parutis and Howson, 2020; Waller et al, 2012, Wright and Mulvey, 2021). In contrast, multiple studies about advantaged students have found that they are able to make use of their 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990), drawing on earlier educational, family and life experiences to settle more quickly into university experiences and gain the extras valued by employers (McCafferty, 2022). Universities have a responsibility to ensure equality via their recruitment practices, inductions and ongoing support for those less advantaged, this being a condition of registration with the Office for Students (2021). The findings in Chapter 6 of this study illustrate how unsettling the FGS found the initial months of their university experiences. They spoke of feeling like 'impostors' and 'cheats'. The interview participants were often unaware of who they could turn to for support and at times felt very isolated by their experiences. These findings suggest that universities need to do more to enable FGS to feel a stronger part of their community. Next some recommendations will be made which might act to address some of the FGS' concerns about their university studies.

There were students who explained the specific ways their lecturers had acted to induct and support them in the initial stages of their degrees. These students were appreciative of being introduced to university discourse and behaviours via induction activities and lectures and were appreciative of the opportunities which tutorials and seminars gave them to be part of a group focussed on the same topic. Lecturers need to be made aware of the substantial and important impact they are having, and even with limited time and resources, how they can have a positive effect on their students acclimatising to university via existing activities such as induction talks and group tutorials. Where possible, lecturers need to be recruited from a diversity of backgrounds in order that they can both understand the experiences of disadvantaged students and act as representative role models. Ideally, lecturers need to be aware of the range of employability capitals demanded of their students for a successful transition to the graduate labour market and in turn act to foreground these to their students via tutorials and seminars. Lecturers might be made aware of their potential roles in support of employability development for students, through in-house conferences and training about teaching and learning. Lecturers also need to feel empowered to refer their students freely and quickly to careers services, so that students can learn about the range of options available to them and so that lecturers do not become burdened by additional demands upon their time.

Overall, there is a need to make all university staff more conscious of the needs of FGS throughout their degree studies from induction through to graduation. One way to do this is by building communities of practice for FGS. Such communities including academics, support staff and students already exist in some universities and are variously organised by student unions and widening participation units. They meet to raise awareness, celebrate achievements and build networks (for an example, see a 'Class Ceiling' podcast by Meadham and Pasero, 2022). This moves beyond a deficit model to a more inclusive and celebratory stance.

This study, like others about labour market disadvantage, found the FGS to be most likely to rely on their human capital, as they lacked social and cultural capital (Abrahams, 2017; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq, 2024; Merrill et al, 2020). Students who do not recognise the need to mobilise their employability capitals or recognise the need, but are less able to mobilise them via a range of actions and activities, have been described as experiencing 'bounded agency' (De Schepper, Kyndt and Clycq, 2024, p.11). Unfortunately, students who are obliged to treat the labour market as a meritocracy based on academic studies alone, are also those who are at most 'risk of being left behind' (Abrahams, 2017, p.636). This being particularly the case in a highly competitive labour market, where degree studies are often not closely aligned to occupational choices (Tholen, 2012; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). FGS need heightened support to both understand and acquire additional capitals including social, cultural and identity. One approach to tackle this could be the foregrounding of the acquisition of capitals and their associated learning outcomes (O'Shea, 2023). The GCM and its associated practical resources could enable this via dedicated university curricula time (Tomlinson et al, 2017). Embedded employability and work-based learning as part of an assessed curriculum could relieve FGS from the additional workload of developing their employability, especially as their time is at a premium due to additional commitments to part-time work and other responsibilities such as care. Many of the FGS within the qualitative study felt uncomfortable about translating their experiences within informal and part-time roles to the needs of the graduate labour market. Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that university students should be taught career management skills in order that they can confidently navigate applications to the graduate labour market. For FGS to build their capitals over time, their learning in this area would need to be scaffolded from the start of their studies and assessed to encourage full participation.

As FGS cannot easily rely on their own connections, universities have a role in supporting them through elevated levels of employer engagement activity including work experience, networking opportunities and mentoring. This thesis showed lecturers and tutors to be a key resource for FGS and their capital development as many of the participants mentioned the significant role played by lecturers in extending networks and securing internship opportunities, however it also

revealed the dangers within this approach. Lecturers should be sensitised to the vital role they play and encouraged in continuing to support FGS, they also need to be aware of other university wide resources of careers help, as these resources might help to extend the range of occupations that students may be considering.

Extra-curricular activities have been suggested to be key in the development of cultural capital (Tomlinson, et al 2017), notably the FGS within this study had lower overall levels of extra-curricular activities than their non-FGS counterparts. This potentially disadvantaged the FGS in this research, as they did not always appreciate the value attached by employers to extra-curricular activities or have the finances to engage in them. Universities need to be conscious of these differences and seek to reduce membership costs, consider offers of targeted bursaries and diversify the type of opportunities available.

University careers services are uniquely placed to function as a bridging agent between academic studies and the graduate labour market to extend careers thinking and the development of networks. Careers consultants and counsellors are trained to support students with the development of their identity capital via guidance and coaching. Several participants mentioned the value of careers coaching projects already being delivered with the sole purpose of addressing the career planning needs of FGS (Pasero, 2024). However, the findings from the qualitative and quantitative results converge to suggest that university careers services need to attend more to the needs of FGS and advertise and reach out to them differently. In the participants own words this might be via more 'outreaching' and 'casual conversation' and less reliance on formal communications such as emails. Ideally this needs to be in a flexible way which specifically meets the needs of students juggling multiple demands upon their time. In practice universities have experimented with outreach buses and pods, late night opening hours and online chat rooms; more research is needed to understand if the users of these services are diverse in profile and whether they prefer these services to a more centralised and formal format.

9.4.3 The future

This research evidenced the impact a lack of finance or 'economic capital' had, as it prevented students from participating equally in internships and placements during their studies and onwards towards work opportunities and postgraduate study. This suggests that government policy might be usefully directed at enhanced, targeted or more flexible funding for FGS choosing to undertake placements and postgraduate study.

The massification of higher education has led to employers becoming more selective and expecting individuals to package themselves as employable through the acquisition of skills and

extra-curricular activities (Tomlinson, 2017b). Reay (2021) explains that employers consistently exclude talented students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds because of their recruitment practices which have more to do with notions of merit identified with class, rather than objective measures of talent. Employers recruit based on arbitrary perceptions and internalised codes centred on social and cultural capital rather than ability (Aubrey and Riley, 2017; Burke, 2012). Ideally, selection practices need to embrace a wider range of attributes including work and life experiences gained via part-time roles and caring responsibilities. The FGS participants in this study held such roles, but were understandably concerned that they would struggle to develop a compelling employability narrative around them, which employers might value. Here too, there is a role for universities in partnering with and educating employers about their student populations and a need for employers to be remain open-minded.

Some of the participants spoke of anticipatory cultural mismatch towards potential workplace cultures, as they had negative experiences of settling into university. This is something which employers may wish to be aware of and address. Gleeson et al (2022) have illustrated that culturally embedded knowledge about future workplaces and possibilities of acculturation can be acquired with strategic insights gained via mobility events including talks and visits by employers. Employers may wish to consider this in their outreach plans to university.

This thesis has illustrated the consistent role which internships play in replicating disadvantage in the graduate labour market. This is partly because of the way they are advertised, but also because at times they are unpaid. This research suggests that the provision of paid work experience which is openly advertised to act as a bridging activity between the cultural divide of university and graduate employment is key (Abraham, 2017; Allen et al, 2013; Wright and Mulvey, 2021). When employers take their corporate social responsibilities seriously, change can and does happen. This has been demonstrated by the Channel 4 project supported by Samuel Friedman which has enabled the proportion of socially mobile staff to increase from 33% to 39% within four years (Friedman, 2021). The Channel 4 Project began by Friedman (2021) undertook research which proved that despite the television company's ambitions to be otherwise, they were socially exclusive. In response to this, the channel in partnership with Friedman, implemented a range of strategies based on research and good practice, including: the creation of a social mobility taskforce; monitoring of social mobility staff numbers; the implementation of outreach and apprenticeship programmes aimed at students from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and the removal of access to placements via parents and family (Friedman, 2021). If employers are unwilling to take such action, then governments may need to regulate to ensure opportunities are advertised more openly and paid fairly.

It should be noted that the Labour Government has promised to enact the socio-economic duty elements of the Equality Act 2010, this will mean that public bodies will have to adopt measures to address any inequalities which arise from differences in socio-economic background (Labour Party, 2024). However, how this will work in practice and any wider implications for private bodies, is yet to be made clear.

9.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has explored the employability experiences of FGS before and throughout their university careers. It has tested our understanding of capital development with the application and extension of the Graduate Capital Model. The Graduate Capital Model and the interconnection of its key resources was shown to be highly salient to understanding the experiences of FGS as they navigated the graduate labour market. Although not included in the GCM, economic capital has also been shown to be fundamental in understanding the experiences of FGS. Most significantly the research has revealed FGS as reliant on different modes of support for their capital development than their non-FGS counterparts. Notably, FGS were shown to be highly reliant on university tutors and lecturers for capital development during both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research. Their parents and family were revealed to have a negative impact on the formation of their social capital (social capital having been shown to be important for engaging with work experience and internship opportunities). In comparison, non-FGS relied on university and school careers services to impact positively on their capital development. These differences suggest that policymakers need to take action to give FGS equal access to services in aid of capital formation as well as to counteract any deficits students may face through no fault of their own. Multiple recommendations were made in the latter half of the chapter to support FGS with the development of their employability capital.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This research was motivated by a desire to understand more about the experiences of first-generation students as they built their employability capital before and throughout their higher education studies. It aimed to understand whether there were any significant differences in employability capital between FGS and non-FGS, as well as collecting data about the ways in which FGS might be supported with their capital development. The research was designed to add to knowledge in the field of employability research and extend conceptual thinking about capital development with the application of the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a).

The project used mixed methods via an exploratory sequential design. This enabled the individual voices of 25 first-generation students to be heard in phase 1. Their opinions were then used to inform phase 2 of the research. In phase 2, a survey was designed and administered to 379 undergraduates to understand more about the differences and similarities in capital development for FGS and non-FGS. Throughout the research, the conceptual framework of the Graduate Capital Model was used (Tomlinson, 2017a). In phase 1, the model informed the deductive analysis of the interviews. In phase 2, the model was used in the collection of data with the application of the Graduate Capital Scale as part of the survey (Tomlinson et al, 2022).

This research demonstrated that FGS often work from a position of deficit lacking the insight, networks, and finance to engage fully with employability development from the start of their degrees. These deficits have been theorised through the lens of capitals. The research contributed original insights about FGS capital development, the interactions of capitals, and how FGS rely on different modes of support for their capital formation than non-FGS. These original contributions and insights will be explored within this conclusion. This final chapter has four parts. It begins with a reflection on the specific and original contributions made by the research. Next, study limitations from both the qualitative and quantitative phases are critiqued. Then possible options for future studies are explored. The thesis ends with some final thoughts about progress made and how the results of the study will be shared to potentially benefit FGS.

10.2 Research contribution

This research has made several contributions to the study of employability. These include: a systematic review of existing literature related to equality and employability; the creation of

original empirical data about the experiences of FGS; the application of the Graduate Capital Model within a new context; the critical evaluation of the model including its interactions; the discovery of the facilitators and barriers of capital development for FGS; and additional evidence of the need for a more nuanced approach to debates around agency and structure. These contributions and their significance to research and practice will now be summarised.

10.2.1 Establishing an unjust balance

Prior to the collection of the empirical data, a systematic review was undertaken to understand more about how inequality in employability is experienced by undergraduate students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (see Chapter 3). This work was subsequently accepted for publication (McCafferty, 2022). The paper had value as it acted to define and question what disadvantage might encompass through the terms 'DisSES' and 'AdvSES'. The systematic nature of the enquiry also enabled existing research to be synthesised to arrive at new understandings of systemic disadvantage. As a direct result of this and, as an original contribution, six points of balance were created which acted to combine the key findings from the papers within the review (see section 3.1). These points were shown to repeatedly act against students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The six points illustrated how DisSES students often lacked insight into the graduate labour market, seeing it more as a meritocracy than their AdvSES counterparts. They also illustrated how these students were further disadvantaged by their lack of connections, access to internships and money. DisSES students were shown to find university to be an unsettling space where smooth transitions were difficult. Crucially, the paper included suggestions for interventions from government, employers and universities which might act to counterbalance some of the systemic disadvantages faced by DisSES students.

10.2.2 Original insights into the experiences of first-generation students

Chapter 2 established that interest in employability is high for both policymakers and researchers, it also evidenced that empirical data is relatively limited about how students perceive and establish their employability (Batistic and Tymon, 2017; Caballero, Alvarez-González, and López-Miguens, 2021; Forrier, De Cuyper, and Akkermans, 2018). Some have accused employability researchers as concentrating too heavily on conceptual pieces, with little evidence about how students might secure enhanced employability outcomes in practice (Baruch, 2015). Furthermore, employability research has been criticised for failing to hear the student voice and in particular the perspective of equity groups including FGS (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022; Tymon, 2013).

The first phase of this research addressed gaps in the empirical data by capturing a fuller understanding of the employability experiences of FGS and specifically student perspectives on the modes of support which had either helped or hindered their employability development. The analysis of the interview data illustrated how a variety of mechanisms acted against FGS becoming upwardly mobile throughout the student lifecycle. These included grappling with applications prior to university, but also experiences once at university including struggling to settle in, non-engagement with extra-curricular activities, lack of finances and contending with applications for internships. These original perspectives about FGS's experiences were key to the creation of the survey content in the second phase of the research. They also formed the content within a recently accepted journal article (McCafferty, Tomlinson and Kirby, 2024).

10.2.3 Learning from the Graduate Capital Model

Chapter 3 concluded that capitals were used increasingly to theorise disadvantage within the graduate labour market (McCafferty, 2022; Peeters et al, 2019), however, their application was not always fully supported with empirical evidence (Ingram et al, 2023). This research made a timely response to the growing interest in employability capitals and critically, it lent empirical evidence to the debate, with the application of the Graduate Capital Model and relatedly the Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson, 2017a; Tomlinson et al, 2022). Although the GCM had been applied in other contexts (see for example, Bathmaker, 2021b; De Schepper, Kyndt, and Clycq, 2024; Parutis and Howson, 2020), to the author's knowledge this is the only research to apply the model to analyse the experiences of first-generation undergraduates within the United Kingdom. This study is also unique in gathering quantitative data on this subject with the application of the Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022).

The application of the Graduate Capital Model in this research enabled employability to be studied holistically and the complicated interplay of agentic endeavour with structural forces in navigating employability to be explored. It enabled individual experiences of accessing the graduate labour market to be studied and demonstrated some of the processes behind the acquisition of capitals, as well as the barriers to doing so. This research adds weight to existing studies, by suggesting that dominant debates in employability are oversimplified and do not fully explain the mechanisms of the graduate labour market. This thesis has provided evidence that all students need more than human capital in the form of a degree to ensure a smooth transition to the graduate labour market, and that an over-reliance on the myth of meritocracy potentially exposes FGS to less favourable graduate outcomes. FGS need support with developing their strategic behaviours and approaches in managing their future employability in the areas of social, cultural, identity and psychological capital. Policymakers need to be aware

of these capital development needs and also conscious of the profound impact which a lack of economic capital makes upon capital development.

This research has lent weight to the arguments about the importance of social and cultural capital in replicating disadvantage. In the case of social capital it provided new insights about how participants recognised the value of networks, but were unable to capitalise on their own meaningful social relations which had value in the graduate labour market. In response, the students worked hard to create their own connections. These ‘weak’ ties had strengths in building additional and extended networks for the students, but were also shown to need time and energy to create. The literature demonstrated cultural capital to be highly relevant in revealing the hidden mechanisms in replicating disadvantage. However, despite its acknowledged significance, some have suggested that there is a lack of empirical data in relation to cultural capital. The application of both the Graduate Capital Model and its associated scale enabled these hidden mechanisms to be illuminated, this was both an original and significant theoretical and methodological contribution.

Whilst the Graduate Capital Model proved to be a valuable way to understand how disadvantage in the graduate labour market operates, the model was not able to explain fully all the students’ experiences. Sometimes a charge against the Graduate Capital Model is that it focuses more on agency than structural antecedents. In this research it was not fully able to explain why first-generation and non-first-generation students self-reported equal levels of capital in some areas. Furthermore and as explored in section 9.2.2, economic capital was shown to be profoundly important by this research, but it is not currently part of the Graduate Capital Model with its focus on personal and individual development. Crucially, anyone who adapts the model, needs to be conscious of the impact which a lack of money makes upon capital development and ensure this is reflected within their own research, policy or practice.

10.2.4 Differences in supporters of capital development

The introduction to this thesis established the need for further research about which activities might really serve to enhance graduate employability for individuals (Baruch, 2015; Batistic and Tymon, 2017). Both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research addressed this important gap with empirical evidence which was then converted into recommendations for stakeholders. The FGS’ participants in the qualitative phase of the study were asked about their perceptions of the facilitators and barriers which had impacted their employability development. Some of the students understood the benefits of mobilising their capitals via activities such as work experience and extra-curricular activities. However, readiness to acquire capitals varied between students and seemed to be highly dependent on formative experiences

(such as attending a selective school or being invited to targeted careers interventions at college). Significantly, many of the students were unable to fully develop their employability capital throughout their studies, something which they felt might be more usual for others. These FGS were obliged to work more independently to acquire employability related extras such as internships and this proved to be at some cost to their physical and mental workload.

An original aspect of this research was the use of the Graduate Capital Scale, in connection with questions developed from the qualitative study, to understand more about the modes of support which FGS and non-FGS relied on for their capital development. Uniquely, this study provided evidence of how employability capitals are built differently for FGS and non-FGS (for example, university careers services impacted positively on capital development for non-FGS, although significantly this was not the case for FGS; and parents impacted negatively on the capital development of their first-generation children). These differences have profound implications for practice which were addressed within the recommendations in Chapter 9.

10.2.5 An argument for a more nuanced approach to the agency and structure debate

As previously explored in Chapter 2, dominant conceptualisations of employability tend to position students as having agency and associated with this, the tendency to engage with education in a rational way to improve their personal circumstances (Tomlinson, 2017b; Cole and Tibby, 2013). However, many have argued that aspiration alone is not the sole answer to understanding educational and career outcomes for all and that structural barriers play a role in choices (Ingram et al, 2023). Despite ongoing and keen debates about the role which agentic or structural forces play within employability, there is limited evidence which specifically acts to understand the experience of the individual and the place of FGS within the debate (Forrier, De Cuyper and Akkermans, 2018; Tholen, 2015). This research acted to address this gap with empirical evidence about the experiences of FGS (qualitative phase) and in particular the structures which aid or limit their employability development (qualitative and quantitative phases). The research outcomes served to demonstrate that the agency structure dialectic was not straightforward as whilst there was evidence of agential striving, this was often bounded by the context of wider experiences.

Overall, this thesis evidenced a clear need for policymakers and key actors to consider more clearly the ways in which they support FGS: educational providers need to move beyond dominant conceptualisations of employability to support FGS more broadly with their acquisition of cultural, identity and social capital; employers need to be more flexible and open within their recruitment, abandoning practices which advantage those with cultural, economic and social capital; and careers services need more targeted resources in support of identity

capital and FGS specifically. The recommendations within Chapter 9 reflect this call for action in full.

10.3 Study limitations

Some limitations within this research are acknowledged and will be explored next. Potential weaknesses of this research included the sampling strategy; the location of the research as limited to one university; data collection conducted at a single time point; the use of a self-reporting instrument; and the limited opportunity to explore the impacts of intersectional disadvantage in phase 2 of the study. Each of these will be explored in turn.

An overarching challenge throughout the research was recruiting sufficient participants. In the qualitative phase of the study, purposive sampling made good sense as it enabled the research to be targeted at FGS. However, and in common with other research, despite extensive efforts there were more female than male participants. Preferably in the quantitative phase of the study the sampling frame would have included the entire UK undergraduate population at the study's university. However, understandably and in the context of the university's ethics policies, I was unable to access a full list of the student population. Therefore non-probability sampling was used with students self-selecting to participate in response to targeted and extensive advertising. As a result of this, there were disproportionately high numbers of female and psychology students who chose to participate (the latter were incentivised via study credit). There was also a possibility that students with a partisan interest in the study were more likely to choose to participate. In consideration of these sampling weaknesses, additional sensitivity analyses were run before the main statistical tests were undertaken, to ensure that there were no differences in the sample of FGS and non-FGS (see section 8.3.3). However, it is acknowledged that the lack of access to probability sampling limits any claims to broader generalisations.

Research which compares the experiences of students from Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities has been shown to be highly beneficial in highlighting how advantage operates (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). However in this research, this data was collected from a single university. This had benefits as all the students had attended a university with the same high status, so issues of reputational capital confounding the responses were avoided and FGS and non-FGS responses could be compared directly. Also access to data collection was more straightforward as the same points of advertising and access to gatekeepers could be used for both phases of the project. The findings may be reflective of similar universities, but this cannot be assumed. Future research could replicate the studies with FGS and non-FGS at other universities. Of particular interest might be any differences in

experiences for post-1992 university students, as these universities have lower reputational capital, but higher social mobility scores (The Sutton Trust, 2023).

Due to time limits, students were only interviewed and surveyed at a single point in time. This impacted upon the opportunity to gain insights into the students' experiences upon graduation and whether their capital formation had aided or hindered them in the ways they had predicted. Although difficult to do within the time and resources of a doctoral study, future research could usefully employ a longitudinal study whereby students' Graduate Capital Scale scores (Tomlinson et al, 2022) could be mapped against future career destinations to understand more about whether capital development has predictive power for graduate outcomes. If high levels of capitals were proven to be predictive of positive employability outcomes, then it could be argued more readily that more attention should be directed by universities to their development.

The second phase of the research made use of the Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022) to invite students to offer subjective self-appraisals of their capital development. The results of this phase, showed there to be little difference between the mean scores of capital development for FGS and non-FGS. However, there were differences in economic capital and how capitals were formed, items which were reported more objectively. The use of a self-reporting scale had its advantages. It was readily accessible to the participants; it closely aligned with the Graduate Capital Model; and was designed to assess capital development for undergraduates. However, the use of such a scale may be open to self-reporting bias, whereby participants rate themselves according to what they deem to be acceptable, rather than truthful. Also, and key for this study, scale users may not be able to assess themselves accurately in comparison with others. So for example, FGS may not be aware of the extent of others' networks in comparison to their own until this is assessed directly.

As explained within the introduction (see section 1.5.1) some researchers are critical of those studies which present FGS as homogenous and without intersectional and personalised disadvantages (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2023). Others have claimed that the intersectional impact of being from multiple minority groups is a 'missing dimension' in research about social mobility (Eyles, Elliott Major and Machin, 2022, p,17). During this research and in direct response to this, attention was paid to the differences between students via the collection of intersectional data including gender, ethnicity, care-status and disability in both phases of the research. The qualitative data suggested that FGS experience multiple levels of disadvantage including acting as carers throughout their education, being care-experienced and having disabilities. It is acknowledged that the quantitative study did not address the issues with intersectional disadvantage in depth. This was because in the quantitative phase insufficient responses were received in each category of the survey to enable meaningful statistical analysis

by each discrete area of disadvantage. (For sufficient statistical power to be achieved overall recruitment would have need to increase by a power of somewhere between 1.5 and 2.0, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Future studies might usefully focus on the specific experiences of students within these areas. Furthermore, studies could be conducted to understand more about how employers respond to the experiences of students (including caring and disability), which whilst challenging for students, do not fall within the narratives which employers might typically expect to hear from applicants about how their resilience has been built (Belmi et al, 2023).

10.4 Possible directions for future research

This research has proven to be valuable and has resulted in original research contributions and recommendations for practice, however there are several ways in which it could be usefully extended in future to learn more about the experiences of first-generation students. The next section will explore potential areas for future research which fall outside the scope of this thesis.

The research in this thesis utilised mixed methods in an exploratory sequential design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This was highly beneficial, as it enabled the qualitative participants to directly inform the survey design for phase 2 of the research, by suggesting key topics which were to be assessed (for example the role of lecturers and parents in capital development). Now the survey has been created and verified, it could provide a quantitative framework for future studies. A future study could become explanatory in nature, for example, phase 1 of such a study would apply the survey, whilst phase 2 could focus on students with outlier results (both low and high) to hear how they had both succeeded in or struggled with accruing capital. Such an approach could reap further benefits in understanding where policy makers should direct their employability development activities in support of all students facing disadvantage.

Key insights from this research included how FGS and non-FGS mobilise their employability capitals. An example of this was the at times negative role played by FGS' parents in the development of their children's employability capital both before and during university. There seems to be limited research available about how parents view their role in supporting higher education and graduate outcomes for their children (Pires and Chapin, 2022, studied the experiences of students and their parents prior to attending university in Australia). Research with students and their parents on fears and expectations about university and future graduate outcomes would seem to warrant more attention generally.

The participants in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research indicated that their experiences prior to attending university were both different and important in the development of their employability capital. There are perhaps wider issues at play here including the status of schools and their available resources all of which can impact on capital formation before higher education. Further research is needed to understand more about the nature of career interventions in support of students before they attend university.

Social capital proved central to understanding the experiences of the students within this study. Further research could usefully seek to understand how and whether such capital might be proactively developed with interventions by universities and their careers services. A whole study could be focussed on this subject and whether networks can be strategically acquired or 'manipulated' (Granovetter, 1973). An action research project could be conducted with the application of the Graduate Capital Scale (Tomlinson et al, 2022) to assess capital levels prior to and post an intervention such as mentoring.

A high proportion of both FGS and non-FGS reported low levels of identity capital within both phases of this research and many of them commented on the negative impacts this had in terms of accruing human, social and cultural capital and depleting their psychological capital. Future studies could usefully focus on this topic and the value of targeted interventions for those in need of support with their identity capital development.

The Graduate Capital Model has been praised for its holistic nature and practical application (see section 4.9). However, perhaps because it is so conceptually tight, it does not recognise further forms of capital resources which may serve to develop employability. These might include specific personal resources such as health and geographical mobility. (However, there is also a danger here in proliferating the language of capitals in the same way we have seen lists of skills proliferating in the past.) The importance of 'spatial' capital and its impact on both geographical and social mobility was hinted at in this study. Students gave instances of choosing to study near home to avoid both the discomfort and costs of moving into student residences. There was evidence that these decisions were impacted by relatives who had limited experience outside their immediate surroundings. The interview participants also suggested that seeking internships and graduate roles in geographical areas, which they were unfamiliar with and could ill-afford, was difficult. The dominant narrative in England is one of expecting students to leave home to attend university and then upon graduation be open to migrating again to find opportunities (Ingram et al, 2023). Such mobility tends to favour students with elevated levels of social and economic capital. Future research might usefully examine the role which spatial mobility plays in career decision making.

10.5 Final thoughts

This research has enabled the experiences of first-generation students to be expressed and heard. It revealed first-generation students as possessing considerable resilience. This resilience was necessary to gain entry to a Russell Group university, but also to settle into unfamiliar surroundings and then make applications for graduate internships and opportunities. The FGS studied hard and accrued high levels of human capital in the form of educational qualifications and skills, although not necessarily career management skills. They used innovation to develop the appropriate cultural, economic and social capital to meet the demands of university and the graduate labour market. At times, and perhaps like many undergraduates, they struggled to build their career identities. Through this research recommendations for practice have been made and my research skills extended. I plan to share the results of this research via publications, conferences and training to enable the students' experiences to be heard, in the hope that employability support can be further improved for FGS.

Appendix A Phase 1 interview schedule

(Adjustments made during pilot in italics)

Thank you for giving me your time today. In this interview I am hoping to hear the story of your career choices to date and any plans you might have for the future. All career stories are personal and individual, so there are no right or wrong answers. Feel free to speak as much or as little as you want on any topic. You can also ask to skip questions at any point. The interview will take around 60 minutes.

From this point the interview will be recorded.

Before the main interview begins, would you be happy to share some background details about yourself?

- What degree are you studying?
- And what year?
- I know your parents didn't go to university – but what about any siblings?
- Before coming to university were you in receipt of free school meals at any point?
- Would you mind tell me your age?
- What gender do you identify with?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- *How did you find out about the study?*

Past

1. You're studying xxx, how did you choose that?
[Prompts: Why XXXX Uni? Did anyone help you with your choices?]

Present

2. What's it like studying xxx?
[Prompts: highpoints? low points?]
3. How do you spend your time outside of your studies?
[Prompts: During term time? During the holidays? Work? Interests? Why chosen?]

Future SO LOOKING FORWARD NOW

4. Where do you see yourself going after your degree?
[Prompts: Any particular jobs? Employers? Further study? How did you choose this?]
5. You mentioned that you plan to enter xxx can you tell me how you've come to that decision?
[Prompts: Any contacts? How did you find the contacts? Work experience? How well do you think you will fit in to the workplace you mentioned? *How are you building your profile for that future?*]

OR

You mentioned that you are not sure about the future – can you tell me more about that?

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[Prompts: What's made the decision difficult? *What if anything would you value in a future career?*]

6. Have you had any experiences dealing with employers?
[Prompts: applying for work experience? Internships? Experiences of applications and interviews? What were the employers looking for? How did you feel about their requirements? *To what extent did you feel you fitted into their requirements?*]
7. Do you have any worries about the future?
[Prompts: how will you cope with these?]
8. Overall, has anything helped with your career planning?
[Prompts: Clarity of ideas? Resilience? Knowing how employers operate? Contacts? Having the right skills and knowledge?]
9. Overall, has anything held you back with your career planning? *When you think about these barriers how do you manage them?*
[Prompts: Clarity of ideas? Resilience? Knowing how employers operate? Contacts? Having the right skills and knowledge?]
10. Is there anything which you would like to add about your career story?

DO YOU KNOW ANYONE ELSE WHO MIGHT BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

Thank them for participating and refer them back to Participant Information Sheet.

Make sure they know how and when the incentive voucher will be transferred to them.

Appendix B Phase 1 example of advert

Are you a first-generation student?

Research Recruitment

I really want to hear about **your experiences of career planning** – whether you have clear career ideas or none at all.

You need to be:

- ✓ A first-generation student (that means you attend university, but your parents did not)
- ✓ A UK national
- ✓ Studying a degree at the University of Southampton (any year)



Participants will be interviewed online.



Takes one hour to complete.



£10 Voucher for participating in this study

This research is being conducted as part of a PhD project: Career Readiness, Employability and Capitals: The Role of Socio-Economic Background

ERGO number: 69347

Funding: externally funded by the ESRC South Coast Training Partnership, Grant Number: ES/P000673/1.

For more information about my project or to participate please contact:
Hazel McCafferty, PhD student in the School of Education at hem1n19@soton.ac.uk.
Thank you for considering participating in my project. 😊

Appendix C Phase 1 ethics application

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

Faculty of Social Sciences

Please note:

- You must not begin data collection for your study until ethical approval has been obtained.
- *It is your responsibility to follow the University of Southampton's Ethics Policy (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/ethics.page>) and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data.*
- *You are advised to read the Advice on Applying guidance document, downloadable from the ERGO II website, before you submit your application.*

Important notice on Risk Assessment:

Health and Safety-type risk assessment is no longer part of the ethics review process.

Questions pertaining to ethical and reputational risks have been moved from the old 'Risk Assessment Form for Assessing Ethical and Research Risks' to this form. Please do NOT upload a separate Risk Assessment Form to your ethics application.

However, it is your responsibility to undertake a Risk Assessment for your research study.

Depending on whether your study is office based, involves off-site data collection and/or international travel, there are different risk assessment forms you can use. Please use this link to access the forms:

<https://groupsite.soton.ac.uk/Administration/FSHS-Health-and-Safety/Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?RootFolder=%2FAdministration%2FFSHS%2DHealth%2Dand%2DSafety%2FDocuments%2FRisk%20assessments%20and%20risk%20register%2FERGO%20interim%20documents&FolderCTID=0x012000BE79A4A3B3DC1143ABB38DFA6B580A8C&View={A5E79215-986A-4471-8CF9-B11F85214687}>

If you need guidance or are unsure about which form to use, please contact your Discipline Health and Safety Rep in the first instance, and the Faculty Health and Safety Officer, Aloma Hack (A.J.Hack@soton.ac.uk), if you have further questions. Supervisors and Line Managers are responsible for ensuring risk assessments are completed for all research studies.

1. Name(s): Hazel McCafferty

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2. Current Position PhD student

3. Contact Details:

Division/School School of Education

Email XXXX

Phone XXXX

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes No

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor

Dr Michael Tomlinson

6. Title of your project:

Career Readiness, Employability and Capitals: The Role of Socio-Economic Background

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Since 1997, successive UK governments have acted to increase student numbers within higher education, their aim to widen participation and enhance social mobility (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016). Disadvantaged students are 78% more likely to enter higher education than 10 years previously (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018). Despite equal degree performance, evidence continues to grow that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged in their career development in several ways. These include; being less likely to gain employment in professional roles; less likely to study postgraduate qualifications; and, on average, earning less throughout their careers (Bridge Group, 2017; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014).

By making use of a theoretical concept, the 'Graduate Capital Model' (Tomlinson, 2017a), this project aims to explore the opportunities and challenges experienced by first-generation students and how they may develop their career capitals in support of their employability. The model suggests that students might benefit from developing their capitals across five domains: human, cultural, social, psychological and identity.

Phase 1 Research questions:

1. How do first-generation HE students perceive their future career readiness and employment horizons?

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2. What are the barriers and facilitators of first-generation students' career capital development?
3. What modes* of support do first-generation students feel will equip them better for enhancing their future employment?

Phase 2 Research questions

4. Do first generation students have differences in their capitals, when compared to the wider student population at the University of XXXX?
5. Is there any correlation between capital development and specific experiences?
(It is hypothesised that first-generation students will report equal levels of human and identity capital, stronger levels of psychological capital and weaker levels of social and cultural capital.)

Phase 3 of the study will triangulate the data gained in the previous stages of the study to seek to answer:

6. Can the concept of capital development help to explain why first-generation students perform less well in the labour market?
 7. What policies and/or interventions might work best in enhancing the career outcomes of first-generation students?
8. Describe the design of your study

The study utilises mixed methods in an exploratory sequential design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In phase 1 of the study a maximum of 30 online narrative interviews will be conducted via Microsoft Teams to explore first-generation students' understanding of the labour market and their experiences of capital development. Themes from the qualitative phase of the study will inform the development of variables for the quantitative phase of the study.

Phase 2 of the study will use quantitative methods (in this case a psychometric survey) to gain insight into the extent which students have developed their career-related capital and whether first-generation students have variances in their capital development when compared to other students at the University of XXXX.

As the design of the survey to be used in Phase 2 of the study, is dependent on the results from Phase 1, full ethical approval is being sort for phase 1 of the study only at this stage. Ethics for phase 2 will be sought when the phase 2 survey has been designed and prior to data collection for that phase.

9. Who are the research participants?

Phase 1 interviews – First-generation students only at the University of XXXX (all participants being UK-domiciled undergraduate students).

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Phase 2 survey (in round 2 of ethics application) – The survey population will be twofold: first-generation and for comparison the remaining wider student population at the University of XXXX (all participants being UK-domiciled undergraduate students).

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Please note that if you are analysing individual-level secondary data (e.g. survey data), you must also fill in and upload the Ethics Application Form for SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS.

N/A

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of your information sheet. This must be based on the GDPR-compliant template that can be downloaded from the ERGO II website. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using an information sheet, please explain why. If you are using posters, fliers or emails for recruitment, these must be uploaded, too. Please note that recruitment by mass emailing to @soton.ac.uk email addresses is not allowed.

Gatekeepers such as the Careers and Employability Service, key lecturers and the Social Mobility Network will be approached to display posters and PowerPoints and share key information about the study via their social media platforms (Including Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook). I will also include details of the study on my own networks, including LinkedIn and student groups such as WhatsApp. The Internal Communications Team at the University of XXXX will be approached with details of the study to see if they would be prepared to include an article in the University of XXXX communication channels e.g. SUSSED. An advert will also be displayed in the Psychology pool at the University of XXXX.

Examples of social media postings (including wording and graphics), posters, PowerPoint slides are attached to this application.

Participants will be encouraged to take part in the study with the incentive of a £10 gift voucher. Once students have participated in the interview, this voucher is non-returnable, even if participants choose to subsequently withdraw. Incentives are being used in the hope that they will improve the response rate for the study. Whilst it is recognised that incentives are not without their issues (for example participants may feel unduly pressured to take part in a study where financial incentives are available),

these incentives are fairly small and in keeping with the amounts allowed by the SCDTP. They are being offered in recognition of the time which participants will be giving to this study and are appropriate in a study where participants may be particularly economically vulnerable.

Once potential participants have reached out to me, they will be sent full details of the study via an email with the Participant Information Sheet attached. Participants will be encouraged to ask any questions they may have via email or telephone before they give informed consent. I will request that they send their consent form via Safesend prior to any data collection. There will be another opportunity for participants to ask questions at the start of the interviews.

12. Will you be collecting Special Category data as defined by UK data protection legislation?

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual's religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Yes, brief, contextual data about key participant characteristics will be collected at the start of each interview. This will include ethnicity and gender identity, as well as participants' previous access to free school meals. Participants will be reminded that they can elect not to answer specific questions at any stage of the interview, just before these responses are collected.

Will you be collecting Criminal Offence data? If so, please give details. No

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual's religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

None

13. Where will your data collection take place?

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Phase 1 will be conducted via online interviews using Microsoft Teams software provided by the University of XXXX. Participants will be asked to have their cameras on during the interviews.

14. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

15. If you answered 'no' to question 14, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of your consent form. A template consent form can be downloaded from the ERGO II site. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using a consent form, please explain why.

Informed consent will be sought from participants about engaging with this study and participants will be assured that participation is entirely voluntary. Participants will be given Participant Information Sheets (PIS) prior to them taking part in the research and will be asked to indicate that they understand how their data will be used and stored for this project. Furthermore, they will be asked to indicate that they understand that pooled data with identifiable information deleted will be deposited with the ESRC as per the terms of the research funding. Consent forms with identifying data will be sent and returned by Safesend email. A PIS and Consent Form have been uploaded as part of this application.

16. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

None

17. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff), what permission do you have to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Please upload evidence of approval from gatekeepers (e.g. Head Teacher, if conducting research in a school).

N/A

18. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants.

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Specify in meaningful detail the experience of participation from the point of view of the participant. You MUST attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic lists to be used.

Prior to taking part Phase 1 of this study, participants will be asked to read a Participation Information Sheet and complete a Consent Form (submitted with this application). Some background contextual data will be collected from each participant at the start of the interview including: their degree and year of study, whether their siblings attended university, whether they were in receipt of free school meals, their age, their gender identity and their ethnicity.

Participants will be invited to take part in online semi-structured interviews. The interviews will take around 60 minutes each to complete and will invite the participants to reflect on their employability experiences including choosing their degrees, their degree studies and planning for their future careers. The questions to be asked are attached to this application as an Interview schedule.

19. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

If there is a point after which it is not practicable to eliminate someone's data (e.g. after submission of dissertation), then please state this clearly here and on the Information Sheet. Please note that in fully anonymous online or paper questionnaires, it is not possible to withdraw data after submitting / handing in the questionnaire.

Participants will be informed that they can withdraw from the study in the Participant Information Sheet as follows:

‘You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time during the interview without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected. After the interview, you can withdraw from the research by emailing me XXXX for up to 1 month after the interview. After this time your data will have been anonymised and pooled with other’s.’

20. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience, harm or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how you will deal with this.

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Give consideration to aspects such as emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of participants' identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks. Specify what precautions you will take or suggest to your participants to minimise any risks of harm (e.g. providing information about support services).

No direct risks are identified, although any issues pertaining to participants' wider profile characteristics will be treated sensitively and with respect.

It is acknowledged that participants will reflect on past experiences during the interviews and this may result in a few cases where participants they recollect hidden or painful experiences. Care will need to be taken when sharing the purpose of the study with participants, as first-generation students may gain an enhanced awareness of the potential barriers facing them. If participants display signs of discomfort during the interview, the researcher will discuss other relevant areas of the research or ask the respondent if they wish to discontinue the interview. The researcher will ensure timely referral to support services including the Careers and Employability Service at the University of XXXX. Details of this will be provided in the PIS.

21. Specify any possible distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research, and the precautions you will take to minimise these.

Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.

It is not participated that the interviews will result in any specific distress or harm to me, especially as I have practiced in the field of careers guidance for more than 30 years. However, I will ensure that when students need additional support with their career planning, I will make referrals as above.

22. Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied?

Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.

Potentially sensitive background data will be collected as well as information about structural inequalities. The researcher will aim to deal with this information gathering

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sensitively and carefully. Participants will be given the opportunity to move on from questions or withdraw from the study entirely if it proves necessary.

23. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Only that data which is essential to the research outcomes will be collected. Only software recommended by the University of XXXX as meeting GDPR requirements will be used for data collection.

When data is collected, it will be downloaded at the earliest possible point and stored securely on university password encrypted servers. Data will be pseudonymised by the removal of Identifying information. Identification keys will be created and stored separately from the data sets collected during the research.

When data needs to be moved it will only be done through services provided by the university such as Safesend (up to 100 GB) or Sharepoint.

24. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at

<http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>

Please note that for UGs and PGTs, it is NOT correct that the University will store data for 10 years or longer. Instead, UG and PGT dissertation study data should be destroyed securely after conferment of the degree, unless strong justifications are made to retain the data for longer.

Qualitative data will be collected via the use of online semi-structured interviews with 30 undergraduate students at the University of XXXX. Interviews will be conducted on Microsoft Teams using my University of XXXX account. Interviews will be recorded on my University of XXXX Stream account and made accessible only to me and my supervisors when necessary. Video recordings and transcriptions will also be downloaded and stored on Filestore. Video files will then be transcribed and thematically coded, with all content being stored electronically on Filestore. NVIVO (version supported by UoS) will be used as an organisational tool for the transcriptions. Where notes are taken on paper to act as an aid memoire for the interviews, they will not contain identifying information

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about participants. These notes will be destroyed once the interviews have been transcribed and coded.

Files will be stored with a three-step file name indicating the overall content (e.g. 'interview'), unique identifier (e.g. 'student1') and date. For example, interview_student1_20211101. Only one version of each data file will be stored on Filestore and an overarching register of filenames and the phase of the research they apply to will be kept. A folder hierarchy will be created indicating the part of the research each file belongs to for example method – quantitative data – consent forms.

Metadata files will be produced for both the quantitative and qualitative data sets including: author, date created and date modified; participant ID; location of data collection; file names of original data set and subsequent transcription and analysis; size of the data set and where stored; and data accessibility. These will be stored as separate documents and included in the appendices of the final thesis.

As this project is ESRC funded, I am mindful that their rules must be adhered to including the data (with identifiers removed) being made available for re-use or archiving within three months of the end of the grant. There is no stipulation on how long data must be retained by the ESRC, but in line with University of XXXX policy the data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years from the point at which the data was collected.

25. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

Participants will be furnished with my Linked in contact details via the PIS.

26. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

This research project poses a number of ethical issues including: the collection of sensitive and personal data including special category data; dealing with sensitive and personal information in interviews; the anonymisation of participants and the protection of data collected during the study. Participants will be informed that their participation in the study is entirely voluntary and they can choose not to answer questions they feel uncomfortable with. Only that data necessary to the study will be collected and then stored securely and safely using university systems.

27. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

For example, if you have professional qualifications or experience relevant to your study, you may wish to state this here.

Appendix C

My study is in the field of employability. I have worked in this area for more than 30 years and have a master's level qualification in Careers Guidance (University of Reading, 2002). Most recently I have completed master's level research units as part of an Integrated PhD in the School of Education.

Appendix D Phase 1 participant information sheet

Study Title: Career Readiness, Employability and Capitals: The Role of Socio-Economic Background

Researcher: Hazel McCafferty

ERGO number: 69347

You are being invited to take part in the above research study. To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information before you decide to take part in this research. You may like to discuss it with others but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am Hazel McCafferty and this research is being conducted as part of my PhD project. I am collecting data about the experiences of first-generation students in navigating their career choices before, during and after their degree studies.

Importantly for my research, first-generation students have been increasingly likely to enter university. More research is needed to understand first-generation students' perspectives on their employability. In response to this, my study aims to explore what has helped or hindered first-generation students with their career planning and who or what has helped them most with their employability.

The project is externally funded by the ESRC South Coast Training Partnership, Grant Number: ES/P000673/1.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to participate because you are a UK, first-generation student who is studying an undergraduate degree at the University of XXXX. First-generation students are those who are attending university and studying for degrees but whose (step)mothers (step) fathers have not. I am hoping to interview around 30 first-generation students for this study.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part you will be interviewed by me for around 60 minutes via Microsoft Teams.

Before the interview can begin, I will check that you have read this participant information sheet and completed the consent form attached to the study. You are welcome to ask any questions about the

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study before the interview begins. The interview will be conducted entirely online and last for around 60 minutes. I will ask questions about your experiences of choosing your degree, studying and your plans for the future. You can choose not to answer any of the questions.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

Participating in this interview will give you the opportunity to be part of a research process. It may also help you to structure your career thinking.

As a thank you for participating, you will be given a £10 gift voucher. Once you have participated in the interview, this voucher is non-returnable, even if you choose to subsequently withdraw.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no specific risks attached to this project. However, there may be a potential for you to need to reflect more on your own career planning after the interview. If this is the case, you may wish to make use of the University of XXXX support services and in particular the Careers and Employability Service at the University of XXXX (Student Services Centre, University Of XXXX, Highfield Campus, XXXX SO17 1BJ).

What data will be collected?

At the beginning of the interview, I will collect some background information about you, including: your degree and year of study, your gender identity, your ethnicity, information about your siblings' attendance at university and whether you were in receipt of free school meals.

I will then ask questions about your experiences of career planning.

Video recordings of the interviews will be made as we speak.

Only software recommended by the University of XXXX as meeting GDPR requirements will be used for data collection.

Will my participation be confidential?

Your participation and the information I collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential.

Only members of the research team and responsible members of the University of XXXX may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly) may require access to your data. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential.

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Interview recordings will be downloaded at the earliest possible point and stored securely on university password encrypted servers (Filestore). Data will be pseudonymised by the removal of identifying information. Identification keys will be created and stored separately from the data sets collected during the research. Once transcriptions of the interviews have been made and analysed then the video recordings will be destroyed. Transcriptions will be stored securely on Filestore.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you want to take part, you will need to sign a consent form before the interview begins.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time during the interview without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected.

After the interview, you can withdraw from the research by emailing me XXXX for up to 1 month after the interview. After this time your data will have been anonymised and pooled with other's.

What will happen to the results of the research?

Your personal details will remain strictly confidential. Research findings made available in any reports or publications will not include information that can directly identify you without your specific consent.

The results from this study will be written up as part of my PhD thesis. Once the project has been completed, and in line with the ESRC funding agreement, anonymised and accessible datasets will be deposited in the UK Data Service indefinitely (ESRC). My thesis, metadata and any journal or conference articles published during the research will be stored in the University of XXXX Research Data Depository (PURE).

If you want to find out more about me and my research you can follow me on LinkedIn. [Hazel McCafferty - Doctoral Student - University of Southampton | LinkedIn](#)

Where can I get more information?

If you have any more questions please contact me at XXXX

What happens if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the researchers who will do their best to answer your questions.

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If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Research Integrity and Governance Manager (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of research integrity. As a publicly-funded organisation, the University has to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information about people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use information about you in the ways needed, and for the purposes specified, to conduct and complete the research project. Under data protection law, 'Personal data' means any information that relates to and is capable of identifying a living individual. The University's data protection policy governing the use of personal data by the University can be found on its website

(<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>).

This Participant Information Sheet tells you what data will be collected for this project and whether this includes any personal data. Please ask the research team if you have any questions or are unclear what data is being collected about you.

Our privacy notice for research participants provides more information on how the University of Southampton collects and uses your personal data when you take part in one of our research projects and can be found at

<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/sharepoint/intranet/Is/Public/Research%20and%20Integrity%20Privacy%20Notice/Privacy%20Notice%20for%20Research%20Participants.pdf>

Any personal data we collect in this study will be used only for the purposes of carrying out our research and will be handled according to the University's policies in line with data protection law. If any personal data is used from which you can be identified directly, it will not be disclosed to anyone else without your consent unless the University of Southampton is required by law to disclose it.

Data protection law requires us to have a valid legal reason ('lawful basis') to process and use your Personal data. The lawful basis for processing personal information in this research study is for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Personal data collected for research will not be used for any other purpose.

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 10 years

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after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal data necessary to achieve our research study objectives. Your data protection rights – such as to access, change, or transfer such information - may be limited, however, in order for the research output to be reliable and accurate. The University will not do anything with your personal data that you would not reasonably expect.

If you have any questions about how your personal data is used, or wish to exercise any of your rights, please consult the University's data protection webpage (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>) where you can make a request using our online form. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).

Thank you.

Thank the individual for taking the time to read the information sheet and considering taking part in the research.

Appendix E Phase 1 consent form

Study title: Career Readiness, Employability and Capitals: The Role of Socio-Economic Background

Researcher name: Hazel McCafferty

ERGO number: 69347

Please initial the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the participant information sheet (4/1/22, Version 1.1) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	
I agree to take part in this interview and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded on Microsoft Teams.	
I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason without my participation rights being affected.	
After the interview, I also understand that I can withdraw from the research up until the point my personal information is no longer linked to the data (one month after data collection).	
I understand that I may be quoted directly in reports of the research but that I will not be directly identified (e.g. that my name will not be used).	
I give permission for my age, ethnicity and gender identity to be stored alongside anonymised information about me and accessible datasets to be deposited in the UK Data Service (ESRC) indefinitely.	

Name of participant (print name)

Signature of participant

Date

Name of researcher (print name)

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix F Phase 1 fieldnotes

Extensive fieldnotes including summaries and key memos were created for each participant immediately after the interviews were completed. The following is an example of these notes from Freya's interview. (Freya is a pseudonym.)

Freya is in the final year of a four degree course in Mechanical Engineering. She describes herself as White British and is 23. She has always enjoyed learning (describing one of her favourite birthday treats as a child as being visits to the Natural History Museum). She enjoyed school and was often picked for extras such as readings in church, but also importantly a mentoring programme which encouraged her to think seriously about university and included trips to Oxford University. Freya has enjoyed her university experience making a wide range of friends and becoming actively engaged in university life via clubs, societies and rep roles. Freya has held paid jobs since she was 14. At times she has worked three jobs to bring in cash. Her summers are spent working for her Dad as a general labourer and painter and decorator. Freya is key to her Dad's business as he can schedule extra work when she is available. Freya is a hardworking student, who aspires to do well academically and in work.

Despite being in her final year, Freya has not started to apply for jobs. She struggles to find time to make applications with her multiple commitments and is worried about whether employers will pick her with her lack of engineering experience.

Freya highly values her degree – but she has no concept that she is missing labour market insight. She is engaged/hardworking and busy like other students – but she doesn't understand which of her interests (if any) might be valued by employers. She lacks contacts to get work experience/ internships – so she avoids worrying about these as she knows finding work will be particularly hard and time-consuming for her. Whilst her family are supportive, they also have expectations and needs - like elastic = pulling her back. Freya is optimistic/hardworking/creative/solution finding. But she lacks SC and this impacts on identity formation (IC?). Lack of money creates multiple pressures – needs to plan ahead and save, lacks nest eggs. EC is central to Freya's story – she wants to stop working multiple jobs but can't. Freya liked being picked for things by school and this pushed her forward – should universities work more closely with students? Push them forward for things? How would this work?? Role of academic could be powerful? Mentoring not mentioned by Freya, but the type of starting points and encouragement she needs would seem to fit with this type of relationship. Overall Freya is responsible, hardworking and resilient, she lacks money, contacts and insider information. Evidence of high Sch Capital, HC, PC. Limited EC, SC, CC and IC.

Appendix G Transcript with coding from NVIVO

File Home Import Create Explore Share Modules Document
Log In

Code Panel
0
00:11:50.000 -> 00:11:53.380

Int:
Excellent. Thank you very much. Thank you. That's that's all factual stuff done. So you're studying psychology?

Rachel:
Yes.

Int:
Can you tell me how you chose that?

Rachel:
Yeah um so I was one of the generation students in secondary school, I believe they were giving certain students the opportunity to just see what university will be like and I believe I even volunteered myself. I was selected to go and we went to cos I'm from Birmingham and we went to a uni close we went to Worcesterhire and I had my first experience in forensic psychology and for me it was just fascinating more of like the psych because we did do quite a lot of biology, but I was just extremely intrigued and then I decided to like do it do it at A levels and then from that I was like, yeah, it was like the only subject it was just it just came naturally to me like I mean I did struggle sometimes but I could always be assured that not only will I enjoy this subject, but I will still do well in it so I said why don't I do it for my degree and looking 'cause I do believe I'm quite career driven and I have and I have a lot of desires to like, you know, to do extremely well coming from my you know background and things like that. I don't think there is a pressure but I think there is an expectation from how much your parents have sacrificed that there could be some kind of like you know some consequence or like benefit, you know how much they gave away that you there's some kind of reward, you know, especially coming through their kids. So yeah, there's that expectation like (inaudible) or psychology, but I guess if we're doing more of like the whole first

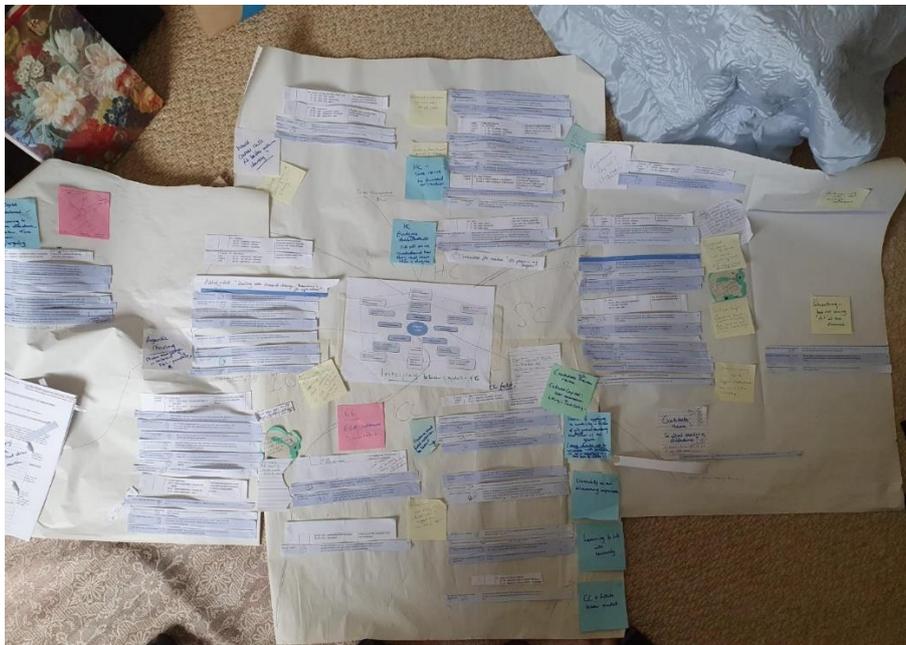
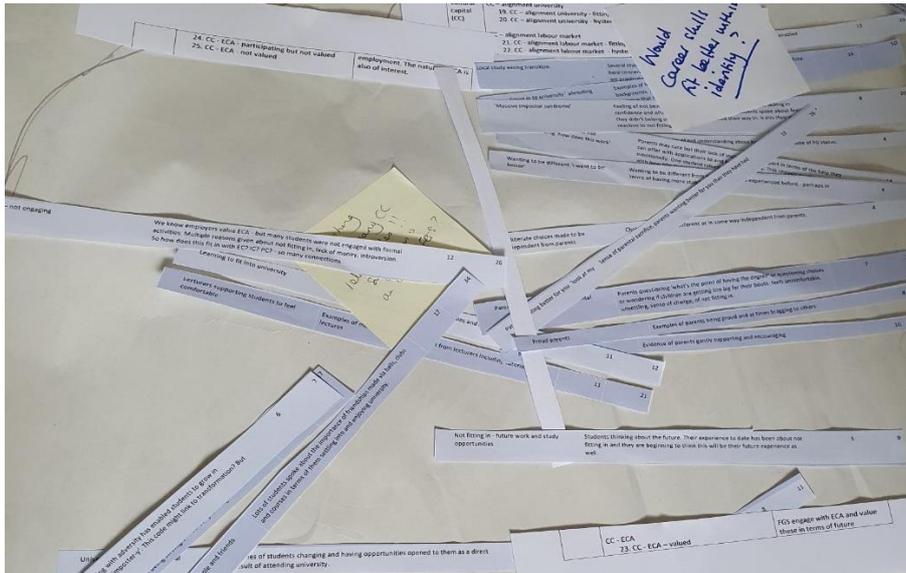
CODE STRIPES

- Travel
- Uncertain about the future limited ideas
- Saturated job market '160 people on my degree'
- Slipstream - modelling for others
- 'pushing myself' - growing in confidence
- Extra-curricular activities (ECA) fully engaged
- On your own lack of career support
- Slipstream - seeing others doing it
- 'Clearish' idea of career choice
- Covid Impact
- Fitting in friendly people and friends
- 'degree was the key to a good job'
- Questioning value of internship
- Deliberate choices made to be independent from parents
- Community help
- 'Always knew that I wanted to get a degree'
- Importance of bursaries
- What employers want - 'a lot of skills' and experience
- University is transformational
- 'Land of milk and honey' university full of opportunities
- High levels of effort to get an internship
- High achiever at university 'Dean's list'
- Value of internships
- High achievement 'came at a cost'
- School 'I always got good grades'
- Working to build own network
- Internships - using careers no network
- Help and interventions at school eg mentoring Aspire
- 'Russell Group equals top'
- 'Grit and determination'
- Expanding horizons 'potential to do so many things'
- Network - not knowing anyone
- Building CV/ being strategic 'it's competitive out there'
- Careers help at university - positive
- Parents wanting better for you 'look at my hands'
- Being in control
- Parents impact of parents not understanding 'how does this work'
- FGS feeling the pressure 'have to work 10 times harder'
- Parents being negative judgemental

Coding Density

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Appendix H Developing themes



Appendix I Codes created round 3 via NVIVO

Name	Description	Files	References
1. High achievement 'came at a cost'	Students often achieved highly at school, but at times this came as a burden in terms of their stress or burnout.	6	9
2. High achiever at university 'Dean's list'	Sense of achieving at an exceptionally high level e.g. Dean's list, but also about working hard to get their/pushing self/prioritising academic side.	10	15
3. 'Focussed on the studies and not much else'	Linked to high achievement at university - sense that students are prioritising academic study above other opportunities such as ECA and using careers. Does this hint at a lack of strategic thinking? Relying heavily on HC?	7	11
4. School 'I always got good grades'	Evidence of being academically able at school 'bright', 'able', achieving, working hard, top sets.	17	43
5. School in special measures	Schools described as 'not being great' or in special measures. Students achieved despite this or in some cases stood out as exceptional and so gained more support.	5	7
6. 'Struggled' at school	Limited examples of struggling academically at school because of ill health and language barriers.	2	2
7. Applying for jobs	Specific examples of the difficulties and worries surrounding applying for jobs.	2	2
8. Building CV - being strategic 'it's competitive out there'	Students are aware of the importance of building their CVs, they acknowledge strategic examples. Opposite of being naive about career planning.	10	24
9. 'A bit of a traditional route' (before university career choice)	For some students their university choice seemed less conscious - they chose university because everyone else did.	2	3
10. Accidental career choice 'I kind of fell into it' route' (before university career choice)	Stories of falling into subjects or ending up there because of previous decisions - lack of planning.	4	4
11. 'Always knew that I wanted to	Many of the students had wanted to do a degree for a while. They	8	13

Appendix I

Name	Description	Files	References
get a degree' route' (before university career choice)	didn't always know which degree, but they had hoped to go to university.		
12. 'degree was the key to a good job' route' (before university career choice)	Students chose to do degree studies as a path to either a specific role or to enter higher level roles generally. Evidence of choices about degrees being connected to employability.	12	16
13. On your own lack of career support route' (before university career choice)	Evidence that some of these students were having to do their own research about university with little support from school or college.	4	7
14. Schools push university not apprenticeships route' (before university career choice)	Some students spoke about limited information being available from school about alternative options such as apprenticeships.	3	4
15. Subject choice was often linked to interest route' (before university career choice)	Interest came from previous subjects studied e.g. liking sciences, but also came from TV	16	23
16. University not pushed as an option route' (before university career choice)	For two students university was not really presented as an option. They saw this as a point of difference from other students.	2	3
17. Being in control	Students talking about being in control of their future and being able to exercise agency to make choices. Varied from feeling 100% in control to recognising the external forces acting upon them. This might be linked to transformation?	16	25
18. Career choice - influence of lecturers	Evidence that students relied on lecturers for support and insight into careers including internships - this links in some way to networks and help.	10	13
19. Career choice - lecturer too busy	Whilst some students were able to rely heavily on their lecturers for others this was impossible as the lecturers were too busy and made this obvious to their students.	2	3

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Name	Description	Files	References
20. 'Clearish' idea of career choice	Even for those students who had narrowed down their ideas to one field or one choice, there was often still a sense of flux as they sought out opportunities or scanned their field.	10	14
21. Expanding horizons 'potential to do so many things'	Sense of optimism - seeing multiple opportunities - how does this fit with Identity Capital?	9	13
22. Loss of direction or path	Sense of drifting or being lost. One student used the word 'nebulous'. Links with worries about the future and identity.	3	8
23. Uncertain about the future limited ideas	Examples of being uncertain about the future, perhaps because they have had limited opportunities to know what the options might be, or perhaps because the options are too broad and confusing.	16	38
24. What success looks like	Interesting code - illustrates that career choice is highly personalised and born from many factors and personal preferences. For some about being settled and content - for others striving to make high level change transformation for themselves and others. Can see links here to EC, as several students mentioned stability and housing.	15	26
25. Covid Impact	Direct examples of Covid-19 impacting study, work and homelife. For example being obliged to study online or needing to move home. Includes both positive and negative experiences.	18	44
26. ECA - not engaging	We know employers value ECA - but many students were not engaged with formal activities. Multiple reasons given about not fitting in, lack of money, introversion. So how does this fit in with EC? IC? PC? - so many connections	12	26
27. Extra-curricular activities (ECA) fully engaged	Examples of what students do in their spare time and the reasons for doing this. Includes examples of engaging at a high level with ECA Makes a useful counterpoint to working for cash.	15	37

Appendix I

Name	Description	Files	References
28. Community help	For one student contacts made via church made a profound difference	1	1
29. Deliberate choices made to be independent from parents	Choices made to be different or in some way independent from parents.	4	5
30. 'I've had a lot of guidance' from parents	Examples of direct support from FGS parents e.g. finding an internship, encouraging interests and discussing career choices.	3	5
31. Parents being a drain on you - having to care for them	Examples of having to care for or worry about family. Sense that family may interrupt plans with their needs. Stops these students feeling secure in their choices. Interrupts their ability to concentrate on their studies.	4	12
32. Parents being negative judgemental	Parents questioning 'what's the point of having the degree' or questioning choices or wondering if children are 'getting too big for their boots', feels uncomfortable, unsettling, sense of change, of not fitting in.	7	20
33. Impact of parents not understanding 'how does this work'	Parents may care but their lack of insight has an impact in terms of the help they can offer with applications to and from university. This impacts practically, but also emotionally. One student talked about sense of feeling 'untethered' - a link here with how FGS fit in.	18	42
34. Parents supportive	Evidence of parents gently supporting and encouraging.	10	24
35. Parents wanting better for you 'look at my hands'	Sense of parental sacrifice, parents wanting better for you than they have had.	13	26
36. Proud parents	Examples of parents being proud and at times boasting to others.	8	8
37. Wanting to be different 'I want to be better'	Wanting to be different from the life they had experienced before - perhaps in terms of having more stability or money.	4	4
38. FGS feeling the pressure' have to work 10 times harder'	Clear examples that they are aware of being FGS and that this brings with it some pressures in terms of trying to be different and lacking resources.	8	20
39. Fitting in friendly people and friends	Lots of students spoke about the importance of friendships made via halls, clubs, and courses in terms	17	34

Appendix I

Name	Description	Files	References
	of them settling into and enjoying university.		
40. Learning to fit into university	Stories of learning to fit in, easing into studies and social life after the big change which is moving to university.	11	12
41. Lecturers supporting students to feel comfortable	Examples of moral and practical support from lecturers including tutorials and lectures.	11	21
42. University as a place where you fit - smarts	Students enjoying and feeling comfortable in their studies - feeling like they fit in.	7	10
43. Help and interventions at school e.g. mentoring Aspire	Examples of formal help and interventions which encouraged and enabled students to go to university e.g. mentoring, Aspire, careers.	11	33
44. Poor careers help at school and college	Examples where students were given no careers support or poor support at school and college and so had to do their own research and make their own decisions - at times with bad consequences.	4	7
45. Careers help at university - avoiding 'it seems quite overwhelming'	Some students knew about careers help and suspected it would be a good thing to engage with, but took an ostrich approach and avoided it.	8	9
46. Careers help at university - negative	A range of reasons for negative responses e.g. not tailored, too low a profile - seemed that students hadn't always used support services, but judged them as poor anyway? Something here about messaging and profile...	12	36
47. Careers help at university - positive	Examples of formal help and interventions which encouraged and enabled students whilst they were at university e.g. mentoring, careers meetings, coaching. When students actively engaged with services, their responses were often positive.	16	44
48. High levels of effort to get an internship	Evidence of efforts involved in getting an internship, often because students lack contacts.	13	24
49. Impact of no internships	Students talking about issue of having no relevant work experience.	3	6
50. Internships - from lecturers	Examples of gaining or looking for internships via academic staff.	3	5

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Name	Description	Files	References
51. Internships - using careers no network	Gaining internships via advertised opportunities at the UoS.	5	7
52. Questioning value of internship	Two students questioned value of internships - one because they worried that employers might use them as cheap labour, another because she felt that she needed a break in the summer.	3	3
53. Recognising value of internships	Students recognised that internships had a range of value including deciding about careers, contacts, getting experience for CV and being paid. Links to being strategic in CV building.	14	34
54. Value of real-life projects as part of curriculum	One student spoke about how real-life projects within the curriculum could have value.	1	1
55. Lack of skills in applying for jobs	Stories about not understanding the application process or not having sufficient experience to pass assessment centres and interviews.	6	9
56. Local study easing transition	Several students commented on their preference for studying locally. Something here connected to fitting in perhaps? Is it less transformative in some cases. There are practical reasons such as cost. But also seemingly something about fear.	9	16
57. Location choice 'just so much green on campus'	A number of students commented on how green and beautiful the campus was. For some this was in direct contrast to their hometowns.	8	12
58. Coping strategies 'just kind of ride it out'	Students gave examples of a wide range of stress including from education, personal life and finding work. They also gave examples of how they dealt with this stress for example avoiding (e.g. sleeping), purposively relaxing.	13	22
59. Dealing with stress of change as students transition from their degree	As students faced transition from their degrees into what they saw as a congested labour market they spoke about the stress of managing the transition.	8	12
60. 'Grit and determination'	Range of examples of students being aware of the need for resilience and determination to overcome barriers (including education, life, and work).	15	28

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Name	Description	Files	References
61. 'Massive impostor syndrome'	Feeling of not being good enough to be studying for a degree, lacking in confidence, and often having to work extra hard. Students spoke about feeling like they didn't belong or had some way cheated their way in. Is this their internal reaction to not fitting in?	8	20
62. 'Not emotionally ready'	2 students gave examples of feeling emotionally not ready for challenges. One experiencing this currently and one in the past. The one in the past explained how this was overcome and so we might align this with coping strategies.	2	3
63. 'pushing myself' - growing in confidence	Examples of how dealing with adversity has enabled students to grow in confidence and feel less 'imposter-y'. This code might link to transformation? But also sits within mindset.	6	7
64. Money	Money acts to influence, limit and drive choices. Remarkable how many times money was mentioned as an influencing factor, because I wasn't asking about it directly. Students used words such as survive and worry in connection with money. Students had to use additional energy to plan how to spend their money - they spoke about money limiting options whilst studying their degrees and choosing options such as masters and PhD.	20	73
65. Importance of bursaries	Various types of bursaries mentioned often with gratitude.	10	13
66. Money not an issue	Of interest that only one student spoke about money as not being an issue for them.	1	1
67. Don't understand purpose of networking	Examples of how FGS do not appreciate either the importance of networking or don't have the skills to make full use of networks.	2	2
68. Network - not knowing anyone	Impact of a lack of contacts on career decision making, finding work experience and employment opportunities.	10	25
69. Networking - importance of lecturers	Evidence that students lack networks and so turn to lecturers for support. Perhaps also indicates that networks are limited.	4	4

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Name	Description	Files	References
70. Networks beyond parents	Lacking immediate networks, FGS work creatively and turn to family and friends in some cases.	3	5
71. Parent providing network	In one case a parent was able to organise relevant work experience through her role within a school.	1	1
72. Recognising importance of networks	Students spoke about the importance of networks and also the barriers they faced as FGS in creating them. This code links strongly with working to build own networks e.g. students recognising the importance of networks and then taking steps to create them.	13	17
73. Working to build own network	FGS used a range of strategies to create networks. For some students this seemed to come naturally, for others they applied massive effort. Strategies included the use of meetings, volunteering, careers, LinkedIn, conferences etc.	14	23
74. Applying to university - not understanding the rules	Several students struggled with applications to university. They lacked understanding about UCAS, pre-entry exams and finance. They also gave examples of not having anyone to turn to for support.	8	14
75. Not fitting in - future work and study opportunities	Students thinking about the future. Their experience to date has been about not fitting in and they are beginning to think this will be their future experience as well.	5	9
76. Not fitting into university 'alienating experience'	Examples of how FGS don't feel that they fit into university because of their backgrounds, lack of money. Includes evidence of the impact of this. Some evidence that students then turn to academic studies in response to this.	16	50
77. Not understanding study requirements	Specific examples of not understanding about how to study because of FG status. Yet we also have codes about achieving highly, how does this fit?	4	6
78. 'Russell Group equals top'	Students being conscious in their choices about picking a RG university because of the associated prestige and opportunities for networking. Occasional voice of dissent associated with teaching/TEF. This code links to being strategic in career planning. Adds evidence	8	14

Appendix I

Name	Description	Files	References
	that these students are not naive in their thinking.		
79. Saturated job market '180 people on my degree'	Students spoke about a saturated labour market where they would need to differentiate themselves to compete for jobs.	4	10
80. Slipstream - modelling for others	FGS mentioning that they now see themselves as setting a positive example for their younger siblings.	8	11
81. Slipstream - seeing others doing it	May be siblings, relatives or community but seeing others achieve can have an impact on attitudes and choices. May fit in with ideas about how FGS might be helped.	9	10
82. 'Land of milk and honey' university full of opportunities	For some students university felt like a very positive space where they wanted to and could grasp opportunities. Opportunities which had not always been available to them previously. This fits within the concept of university as a transformational space. Links with ideas about being strategic in career planning??	9	17
83. University is transformational	Stories of students changing and having opportunities opened to them as a direct result of attending university.	13	25
84. Travel	When travel was mentioned, it was often aspirational i.e. something others do and something I want the opportunity to do. E.g. ski seasons being mentioned as evidence of others' wealth.	6	7
85. What employers want - 'a lot of skills' and experience	When students spoke about employer requirements, they often did so by explicitly mentioning skills or used the language of skills e.g. organisation. Some were also aware of the need to sell these skills. Students often added that experience was a vital component in attracting employers.	18	29
86. Working in paid university roles	Examples include co-design panels and paid internships	2	3
87. Working part-time	Examples of and impact of working part-time. Needing to work to earn cash - can distract from opportunities such as ECA and coursework, but can also serve as an opportunity for personal growth. Many of the students illustrated a	16	44

Appendix I

Name	Description	Files	References
	strong work ethic. Idea here of not wanting to be a burden on others.		

Appendix J Phase 2 survey including PIS/ consent

Participant Information Sheet Combined with Consent Form V1.2

Study Title: Employability and Capitals

Researcher: Hazel McCafferty

ERGO number: 78421

You are being invited to take part in the above research study. To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information before you decide to take part in this research (you can do this by emailing me at XXXX). You may like to discuss it with others but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to indicate this via a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am Hazel McCafferty and this research is being conducted as part of my PhD project. I am collecting data about the experiences of students in navigating their employability during their degree studies.

My study aims to explore what has helped or hindered students with their career planning and who or what has helped them most with their employability. I am interested in the views of all students, whether they have clear ideas about the future or no career plans at all.

The project is externally funded by the ESRC South Coast Training Partnership, Grant Number: ES/P000673/1.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to participate because you are a UK student who is studying an undergraduate degree at the University of XXXX.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to complete an online survey by clicking on the link below. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All the questions are about you and relate to your career planning to date. Prior to completing the survey, I will ask you to consent using an

online form.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

Participating in this study will give you the opportunity to be part of a research process. It may also help you to start thinking about your career plans. Upon completion of the survey you will be entered into a prize draw. There is an opportunity to win:

- one of two £50 Love2Shop vouchers
- one of five £20 Amazon vouchers

Winners of the prize draw will be contacted via the email address provided at the end of the survey.

(Participants recruited from the Psychology participant pool will also be awarded 3 study credits.)

Are there any risks involved?

There are no specific risks attached to this project. However, there may be a potential for you to need to reflect more on your own career planning after the survey. If this is the case, you may wish to make use of the University of XXXX support services and in particular Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise at the University of XXXX (Student Hub, University Of XXXX, Highfield Campus, XXXX SO17 1BJ).

What data will be collected?

The survey begins by collecting demographic information from you including special category data under the General Data Protection Regulation (including gender and ethnicity) You will then be asked to reflect on how confident you feel about your career thinking to date. You have the option of including your email if you wish to be entered into a prize draw. Some of the survey questions contain textboxes where you will be asked to type in your own answers. Please note that for this survey to be anonymous, you should not include in your answers any information from which you, or other people, could be identified.

Will my participation be confidential?

Your participation and the information I we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential.

Only that data which is essential to the research outcomes will be collected. Only software recommended by the University of XXXX as meeting GDPR requirements will be used for data collection (in this case Qualtrics, Excel and SPSS will be used). When data is

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collected, it will be downloaded at the earliest possible point and stored securely in university password encrypted files and backed up on a secure server. Data will be anonymised by the removal of identifying information (in this case emails). E-mails are being collected to undertake a prize draw only so will be stored separately from the downloaded survey responses. E-mails will be deleted once the prize draw has been randomly generated and prizes allocated (June 2023).

Only members of the research team and responsible members of the University of Southampton may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly) may require access to your data. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you want to take part, you will need to complete a consent form prior to starting the survey.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time during the survey without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected. Your data will not be submitted until you click the submit button after answering all questions. If you wish to withdraw from the study, closing the browser window without submitting will mean your responses are not saved. Please note that once you have submitted your responses, your data cannot be withdrawn because it will be stored separately from your email (which is used only for the purposes of entry to a prize draw).

What will happen to the results of the research?

Your personal details will remain strictly confidential. Research findings made available in any reports or publications will not include information that can directly identify you without your specific consent.

The results from this study will be written up as part of my PhD thesis. Once the project has been completed, and in line with the ESRC funding agreement, anonymised and accessible datasets will be deposited in the UK Data Service indefinitely (ESRC). My thesis, metadata and any journal or conference articles published during the research will be stored in the University of Southampton Research Data Depository (PURE).

If you want to find out more about me and my research you can follow me on LinkedIn.
Hazel McCafferty - Doctoral Student - University of Southampton.

Where can I get more information?

If you have any more questions please contact me at XXXX.

What happens if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to me in the first instance and I will do my best to answer your questions.

If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Research Integrity and Governance Manager (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of research integrity. As a publicly-funded organisation, the University has to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information about people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use information about you in the ways needed, and for the purposes specified, to conduct and complete the research project. Under data protection law, 'Personal data' means any information that relates to and is capable of identifying a living individual. The University's data protection policy governing the use of personal data by the University can be found on its website (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>).

This Participant Information Sheet tells you what data will be collected for this project and whether this includes any personal data. Please ask the research team if you have any questions or are unclear what data is being collected about you.

Our privacy notice for research participants provides more information on how the University of Southampton collects and uses your personal data when you take part in one of our research projects and can be found at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/sharepoint/intranet/ls/Public/Research%20and%20Integrity%20Privacy%20Notice/Privacy%20Notice%20for%20Research%20Participants.p>

df

Any personal data we collect in this study will be used only for the purposes of carrying out our research and will be handled according to the University's policies in line with data protection law. If any personal data is used from which you can be identified directly, it will not be disclosed to anyone else without your consent unless the University of Southampton is required by law to disclose it.

Data protection law requires us to have a valid legal reason ('lawful basis') to process and use your Personal data. The lawful basis for processing personal information in this research study is for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Personal data collected for research will not be used for any other purpose.

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 10 years after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal data necessary to achieve our research study objectives. Your data protection rights – such as to access, change, or transfer such information - may be limited, however, in order for the research output to be reliable and accurate. The University will not do anything with your personal data that you would not reasonably expect.

If you have any questions about how your personal data is used, or wish to exercise any of your rights, please consult the University's data protection webpage (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>) where you can make a request using our online form. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).

Consent

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and considering taking part in this research. Now please tick the following statements to indicate that you have read and understood the information on this form, are aged 18 or over and agree to take part in this survey.

- I have read and understood the information sheet (V1.2 3/11/2022) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. (6)
- I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study. (11)
- I understand my participation is voluntary. (12)
- I understand that once I submit my answers it will not be possible to remove my data from the study. (13)
- I give permission for my age, ethnicity and gender identity to be stored alongside anonymised information about me and accessible datasets to be deposited in the UK Data Service (ESRC). (14)

Section A Please be aware that this study is for UK undergraduates only.

Please complete the following questions which include background information about you.

Q1 What degree subject are you currently studying at the University of XXXX?

Q2 Which year of study are you currently in?

- First (1)
- Second (2)
- Third (3)
- Fourth (4)

Q3 What is your gender identity?

- Woman (1)
- Man (3)
- Non-binary (5)
- Prefer not to say (7)
- I use another term to describe my gender (8)

Q4 What is your age?

Q5 How do you describe your ethnicity?

- English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (84)
 - Irish (85)
 - Gypsy or Irish Traveller (102)
 - Any other White background, please describe: (86)
-
- White and Black Caribbean (87)
 - White and Black African (88)
 - White and Asian (89)
 - Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe: (90)
-
- Indian (91)
 - Pakistani (92)
 - Bangladeshi (93)
 - Chinese (94)
 - Any other Asian background, please describe: (95)
-
- African (96)
 - Caribbean (97)
 - Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe: (98)
-
- Arab (100)
 - Any other ethnic group, please describe: (101)
-

Q6 6) Did any of your parents attend university and complete degree studies?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

Q7 7) What was your postcode of residence whilst undertaking A-Levels/IB/BTEC?

Q8 Did you receive free school meals whilst at school?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

Q9 Would you describe yourself as a carer?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q10 Would you describe yourself as having any disabilities?

- Yes (if yes, please describe) (1) _____
- No (5)

End of Block: Background information

Start of Block: GCM

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Q 11 - 55 Next, you will be asked some questions which will ask you to identify how confident you feel about your career thinking to date. Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is low and not at all confident and 6 means you feel highly confident in this area.

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	1 Not at all confident (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 Highly confident (6)
I believe my degree will improve my career prospects. (45)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I know that my subject knowledge will be valued by employers. (46)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I will use my skills in future employment. (47)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I know how to locate a range of information about the graduate job market. (48)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can list a range of sources to find job opportunities. (49)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can produce an effective CV and job application. (50)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I have an effective online career profile (e.g. LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster). (51)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I feel confident I can perform well at interviews. (52)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I feel able to perform well at assessment centres. (53)	•	•	•	•	•	•

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I can demonstrate my transferable skills. (54)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I keep up to date with the graduate job market. (55)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can name key employers of interest to me. (56)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I evaluate the changing job market in my career thinking. (57)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can list some graduate roles which I would be suited to. (58)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am confident I can make the most of any opportunities for personal development. (59)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am confident in talking to people I do not know. (60)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can recognise opportunities for personal development. (61)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I use my network of career contacts to inform my career planning. (62)	•	•	•	•	•	•

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I have developed contacts with employers. (63)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I know how to find out about skills, attributes and behaviours required for different types of employment. (64)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am able to judge whether organisations will suit me. (65)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I know what type of role I am interested in. (66)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I feel confident I can present myself well in the sector which interests me. (67)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can identify what employers value most in graduates. (68)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can give examples of achievements which would interest employers. (69)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I have distinctive achievements and interests which make me stand out from others. (70)	•	•	•	•	•	•

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I take part in extra-curricular activities, these might include volunteering, sports, part-time work, clubs and societies. (71)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can recognise and explain the value of extra-curricular activities. (72)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can recognise roles which would suit me best. (73)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can articulate my skills. (74)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can identify what motivates me. (75)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I know what is important to me in my career. (76)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I have a clear career plan. (77)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can list my strengths. (78)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I have tested my career ideas with relevant work experience. (79)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I keep a record of my personal development. (80)	•	•	•	•	•	•

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It is important to me that my career reflects my personal values. (81)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am confident in my ability to manage change. (82)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I see change as an opportunity for development. (83)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I consider myself adaptable. (84)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am able to manage setbacks. (85)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I enjoy taking measured risks. (86)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can be persistent, despite setbacks. (87)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I can make plans to respond to change. (88)	•	•	•	•	•	•
I am optimistic about gaining suitable employment. (89)	•	•	•	•	•	•

End of Block: GCM

Start of Block: Career plans

Q56 This final section invites you to tell us briefly about your career and work experiences to date.

Do you have anyone you turn to for careers advice?

- Yes (4)
- No (5)

Q57 In the past, who have you turned to, if anyone, for help with your career planning? (Choose as many as apply.)

- Employers (4)
- Friends (5)
- Parents/family (7)
- Online resources (8)
- Other students (9)
- School's careers service (10)
- School teachers (11)
- University careers service (12)
- University tutors and lecturers (13)
- Other (please describe) (14) _____

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Q58 Since joining the University of XXXX have you taken part in any of the following (choose as many as apply):

- Academic Rep (4)
- Careers coaching (5)
- Clubs and societies (7)
- Mentoring (8)
- Paid internships (9)
- Volunteering (10)

Q59 On average, how many hours paid work do you undertake during term time each week?

0 4 8 12 16 20 24 28 32 36 40

Please move the slider to give an indication of your average hours ()	
--	--

Q60 To what extent do your commitments to part-time work impact upon your studies?

1 2 2 3 3 4 4 5 5 6

1 means not all, through to 6 severely impacts. ()	
---	--

Q61 Please describe any future career plans.

End of Block: Career plans

Start of Block: Prize draw

Q62 Finally, if you wish to be entered into the prize draw for this study, please include your email below – this will not be identified with your data and used only to randomly allocate the prize draw.

End of Block: Prize draw

Start of Block: Debrief

Debrief Thank you for your participation in this research. Please remember that if you need any further help with your career planning, then you can contact Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise at the University of XXXX.

Are you happy to submit your answers?

YES (7)

End of Block: Debrief

Appendix K Phase 2 ethics application

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

Faculty of Social Sciences

Please note:

- You must not begin data collection for your study until ethical approval has been obtained.
- *It is your responsibility to follow the University of Southampton's Ethics Policy (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/policies/ethics.page>) and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data.*
- *You are advised to read the Advice on Applying guidance document, downloadable from the ERGO II website, before you submit your application.*

Important notice on Risk Assessment:

Health and Safety-type risk assessment is no longer part of the ethics review process.

Questions pertaining to ethical and reputational risks have been moved from the old 'Risk Assessment Form for Assessing Ethical and Research Risks' to this form. Please do NOT upload a separate Risk Assessment Form to your ethics application.

However, it is your responsibility to undertake a Risk Assessment for your research study.

Depending on whether your study is office based, involves off-site data collection and/or international travel, there are different risk assessment forms you can use. Please use this link to access the forms:

<https://groupsite.soton.ac.uk/Administration/FSHS-Health-and-Safety/Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?RootFolder=%2FAdministration%2FFSHS%2DHealth%2Dand%2DSafety%2FDocuments%2FRisk%20assessments%20and%20risk%20register%2FERGO%20interim%20documents&FolderCTID=0x012000BE79A4A3B3DC1143ABB38DFA6B580A8C&View={A5E79215-986A-4471-8CF9-B11F85214687}>

If you need guidance or are unsure about which form to use, please contact your Discipline Health and Safety Rep in the first instance, and the Faculty Health and Safety Officer, Aloma Hack (A.J.Hack@soton.ac.uk), if you have further questions. Supervisors and Line Managers are responsible for ensuring risk assessments are completed for all research studies.

1. Name(s): Hazel McCafferty

2. Current Position PhD student

3. Contact Details:

Division/School School of Education

Email XXXX

Phone XXXX

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes No

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor (s)

Professor Michael Tomlinson

Dr Sarah Kirby

6. Title of your project:

Employability and Capitals

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Since 1997, successive UK governments have acted to increase student numbers within higher education, their aim to widen participation and enhance social mobility (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016). Disadvantaged students are 78% more likely to enter higher education than 10 years previously (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018). Despite equal degree performance, evidence continues to grow that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged in their career development in several ways. These include; being less likely to gain employment in professional roles; less likely to study postgraduate qualifications; and, on average, earning less throughout their careers (Bridge Group, 2017; Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016; HEFCE and OFFA, 2014).

By making use of a theoretical concept, the 'Graduate Capital Model' (Tomlinson, 2017a), this project aims to explore the opportunities and challenges experienced by first-generation students and how they may develop their career capitals in support of their employability. The model suggests that students might benefit from developing their capitals across five domains: human, cultural, social, psychological and identity.

Phase 1 Research questions:

8. How do first-generation HE students perceive their future career readiness and employment horizons?

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9. What are the barriers and facilitators of first-generation students' career capital development?
10. What modes* of support do first-generation students feel will equip them better for enhancing their future employment?

Phase 2 Research questions

11. Do first generation students have differences in their capitals, when compared to the wider student population at the University of XXXX?
12. Is there any correlation between capital development and specific experiences?
(It is hypothesised that first-generation students will report equal levels of human and identity capital, stronger levels of psychological capital and weaker levels of social and cultural capital.)

8. Describe the design of your study

The study utilises mixed methods in an exploratory sequential design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In phase 1 of the study 25 online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams to explore first-generation students' understanding of the labour market and their experiences of capital development. Themes from the qualitative phase of the study are being used to inform the development of variables for the quantitative phase of the study.

Phase 2 of the study will use quantitative methods (in this case a survey) to gain insight into the extent which students have developed their career-related capital and whether first-generation students have variances in their capital development when compared to other students at the University of XXXX.

Having completed phase 1 of the study full ethical approval is now being sort for phase 2 of the study. (Phase 1 ethics was approved January 2022, number: 69347.)

9. Who are the research participants?

The survey population will be twofold: first-generation and for comparison the remaining wider student population at the University of XXXX (all participants being UK-domiciled undergraduate students). It is hoped that around 160 FGS and 160 non -FGS will be surveyed.

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Please note that if you are analysing individual-level secondary data (e.g. survey data), you must also fill in and upload the Ethics Application Form for SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS.

N/A

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Appendix K

Please upload a copy of your information sheet. This must be based on the GDPR-compliant template that can be downloaded from the ERGO II website. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using an information sheet, please explain why. If you are using posters, fliers or emails for recruitment, these must be uploaded, too. Please note that recruitment by mass emailing to @soton.ac.uk email addresses is not allowed.

The participation information sheet with combined consent will be made available via Qualtrics. This has been uploaded as part of this application. Participants will access the Qualtrics survey via a live link or QR code advertised as follows.

Notices in the form of posters and flyers, with QR codes linked to the survey, will be displayed on noticeboards and venues throughout campuses such as Highfield and Avenue. Gatekeepers such as the Careers and Employability Service, key lecturers and the Social Mobility Network will be approached to display posters and PowerPoints and share key information about the study via their social media platforms (faculty newsletters, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Microsoft Teams). I will also include details of the study on my own networks, including LinkedIn, Twitter and student groups such as WhatsApp. The Internal Communications Team at the University of XXXX will be approached with details of the study to see if they would be prepared to include an article in the University of XXXX communication channels eg SUSSED. An advert will also be displayed in the Psychology pool at the University of XXXX.

Examples of social media postings (including wording and graphics), posters, PowerPoint slides are attached to this application. There are two versions of each of the adverts. The first is a general one inviting all UK undergraduates at the University of XXXX to take part. The second has targeted information aimed at ensuring sufficient first-generation students participate in the study.

Participants will be encouraged to take part in the study with the incentive of entering a prize draw (prizes to be 2 x £ 50 Love2Shop vouchers and 5 x £20 Amazon vouchers). In order to administer the draw university emails will be collected but stored separately from the answers given in the survey. It is planned that the draw will take place in June 2023. Incentives are being used in the hope that they will improve the response rate for the study. Whilst it is recognised that incentives are not without their issues (for example participants may feel unduly pressured to take part in a study where financial incentives

are available), these incentives are fairly small and in keeping with the amounts allowed by the SCDTP.

Participants from the School of Psychology will be recruited via their programme research participation scheme, using the “SONA” system, for which they will be awarded research credits in return for participation. In this case this will equate to 3 credits (15 minutes of time).

12. Will you be collecting Special Category data as defined by UK data protection legislation?

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual’s religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Yes, brief, contextual data about key participant characteristics will be collected at the start of each survey. These include gender identity (includes a self-identifying option and prefer not to say), ethnicity and disability.

Will you be collecting Criminal Offence data? If so, please give details. No

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual’s religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

None

13. Where will your data collection take place?

Via a self-completing online survey to be delivered via Qualtrics (version provided by the University of XXXX).

14. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

15. If you answered 'no' to question 14, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of your consent form. A template consent form can be downloaded from the ERGO II site. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using a consent form, please explain why.

Informed consent will be sought from participants about engaging with this study and participants will be assured that participation is entirely voluntary. Participants will be given Participant Information Sheets (PIS) prior to them taking part in the research and will be asked to indicate that they understand how their data will be used and stored for this project. Furthermore, participants will be asked to indicate that they understand that pooled data with identifiable information deleted will be deposited with the ESRC as per the terms of the research funding. A combined PIS and Consent Form have been uploaded as part of this application. These will be uploaded and available only via Qualtrics.

16. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

None

17. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff), what permission do you have to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Please upload evidence of approval from gatekeepers (e.g. Head Teacher, if conducting research in a school).

N/A

18. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants.

Specify in meaningful detail the experience of participation from the point of view of the participant. You MUST attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic lists to be used.

Participants will be invited to take part in this survey by clicking on a link or QR code which leads them to an online survey. The survey can be completed on a laptop, tablet or telephone.

Appendix K

Once participants follow the link to the survey they will be given more detail about my study via a PIS. Once they have read this, they will be asked to complete an online consent form before proceeding to the survey itself. (Examples of these are included with this application.)

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

19. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

If there is a point after which it is not practicable to eliminate someone's data (e.g. after submission of dissertation), then please state this clearly here and on the Information Sheet. Please note that in fully anonymous online or paper questionnaires, it is not possible to withdraw data after submitting / handing in the questionnaire.

Participants will be informed that they can withdraw from the study in the Participant Information Sheet as follows:

‘You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time during the survey without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected. Your data will not be submitted until you click the submit button after answering all questions. If you wish to withdraw from the study, closing the browser window without submitting will mean your responses are not saved. Please note that once you have submitted your responses, your data cannot be withdrawn because it will be stored separately from your email (which is used only for the purposes of entry to a prize draw.’

20. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience, harm or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how you will deal with this.

Give consideration to aspects such as emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of participants' identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks. Specify what precautions you will take or suggest to your participants to minimise any risks of harm (e.g. providing information about support services).

No direct risks are identified, although any issues pertaining to participants' wider profile characteristics will be treated sensitively and with respect.

Appendix K

It is acknowledged that participants will be asked to reflect on their career plans and progress towards these plans whilst completing the survey. With this in mind, the researcher will ensure timely referral to support services including Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise at the University of XXXX. Details of this will be provided in the PIS and at the end of the survey.

21. Specify any possible distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research, and the precautions you will take to minimise these.

Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.

It is not anticipated that the data collection will result in any specific distress or harm to me, especially as I have practiced in the field of careers guidance for more than 30 years. However, I will seek support from my supervisors if a need arises.

22. Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied?

Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.

Potentially sensitive background data will be collected as well as information about structural inequalities. The researcher will aim to deal with this information gathering sensitively and carefully.

23. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Initial data will be collected and processed via Qualtrics. Only that data which is essential to the research outcomes will be collected. Only software recommended by the University of XXXX as meeting GDPR requirements will be used for data collection (in this case Qualtrics, Excel and SPSS will be used).

When data is collected, it will be downloaded at the earliest possible point and stored securely on university password encrypted files and backed up on a secure server. Data

will be anonymised by the removal of identifying information (in this case emails). E-mails are being collected to undertake a prize draw only so will be stored separately from the downloaded survey responses. E-mails will be deleted once the prize draw has been randomly generated and prizes allocated (June 2023).

Whilst data is being analysed it will be stored securely as per question 24. During data analysis and writing several strategies will be employed to minimise the risk that data subjects might be inadvertently exposed to identification once the results are published and stored. These will include: the initial removal of direct identifiers (in this case emails) as described in the above paragraph, which will not form any part of the data analysis; geo- references (in this case, postcodes) will be removed and replaced with higher-level identifiers which code participants according to indices of deprivation; categories will be collapsed as in the case of courses which will be aggregated and reported at school or faculty level and ethnicity which will be reported at the headings level identified by the ONS; descriptive career plans will be generalised through the application of codes from the Standard Occupational Classification.

Throughout the aim will be to be mindful and either collapse categories or suppress data where revealing information would jeopardise student privacy.

24. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at

<http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>

Please note that for UGs and PGTs, it is NOT correct that the University will store data for 10 years or longer. Instead, UG and PGT dissertation study data should be destroyed securely after conferment of the degree, unless strong justifications are made to retain the data for longer.

Only the researcher and their supervisors will have access to the original data. All data will be stored securely on university servers in password protected files. When data needs to be moved it will only be done through services provided by the university such as Safesend (up to 100 GB). Emails will be stored in a password protected spreadsheet separately from the gathered survey responses.

As this project is ESRC funded, I am mindful that their rules must be adhered to including the data (with identifiers removed) being made available for re-use or archiving within three months of the end of the grant. There is no stipulation on how long data

must be retained by the ESRC, but in line with University of Southampton policy the data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years from the point at which the data was collected.

25. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

Participants will be furnished with my Linked in contact details via the PIS.

26. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

This research project poses a number of ethical issues including: the collection of sensitive and personal data including special category data; dealing with sensitive and personal information; the anonymisation of participants and the protection of data collected during the study. Participants will be informed that their participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Only that data necessary to the study will be collected and then stored securely and safely using university systems.

27. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

For example, if you have professional qualifications or experience relevant to your study, you may wish to state this here.

My study is in the field of employability. I have worked in this area for more than 30 years and have a master's level qualification in Careers Guidance (University of Reading, 2002). Most recently I have completed masters level research units as part of an Integrated PhD in the School of Education.

Appendix L Phase 2 sample marketing materials

Research Recruitment: Employability and Capitals Are you an undergraduate?

I really want to hear about your experiences of career planning – whether you have clear career ideas or none at all. To participate, you need to be:

- ✓ A UK national
- ✓ Studying a degree at the University of Southampton (any year)



Participate in an online survey



Takes 15 minutes



Opportunity to enter a prize draw and win one of:
2 x £50 Love2Shop vouchers
5 x £20 Amazon vouchers

QR Code from
Qualtrics to go here



This research is being conducted as part of a PhD project: by Hazel McCafferty at hem1n19@soton.ac.uk.

ERGO number: 78421

Externally funded by the ESRC South Coast Training Partnership, Grant Number: ES/P000673/1.

Thank you for considering participating in my project. ☺

Appendix L

Proposed Social Media (Oct 2022) for Facebook/Linkedin/ Sussed/ Online newsletters

[Not to be distributed via direct emails to students. Image is a stock one provided by Microsoft Word.]

Version 1 for general recruitment

Are you an undergraduate student at the University of XXXX?

I want to hear your views about career planning – whether you have clear career ideas or none at all.

To take part in this study you need to be:

- ✓ A UK national
- ✓ Studying a degree at the University of XXXX (any year)

Your contribution could make a positive impact for future students planning their careers. The study will be conducted via an online survey which takes about 15 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be offered the opportunity to enter a prize draw for one of 2 x Love 2 Shop Vouchers (£50) and 5 x Amazon Vouchers (£20).

Interested in finding out more? *Link to be inserted*. This study has been approved by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (ERGO No: 78421)

Appendix M Data download and cleaning protocol

Data was downloaded from Qualtrics (coded values as SPSS. Sav file) directly into SPSS v.26. A separate text version was also loaded into Excel to ensure codes were aligned.

Data sets from two surveys were combined into one SPSS file using the Data > Merge File function within SPSS. In total 409 cases were downloaded.

Columns of additional data assigned by Qualtrics were deleted for ease of use (these included: status, recorded date, user language, finished and responseld, five consent columns, emails and debrief, Pscyh ID for SONA when present).

Cases were removed when their completion of the survey was less than 90% (as these participants had not fully completed the GCS, which was central to the study). 30 cases were removed from the study and 379 remained. Responses dated from 22 November 2022 to 25 March 2022.

A unique ID was created for each participant.

In the variable view within SPSS, names and labels were fully aligned with the codebook.

Data was checked for anomalies including missing, out of range (none) and duplicated data (none). Missing postcodes were identified as '999'.

Recoding was needed in the following cases to align with the codebook and clean formatting anomalies. (In the case of binary codes yes = 1 and no = 0.)

1. Gender

RECODE Gender (3=2) (5=3) (7=4) (8=5) (1=1).

EXECUTE.

2. First generation status

RECODE FGS (1=0) (2=1) (3=3).

EXECUTE.

3. Free school meals

RECODE FSM (3=3) (1=1) (2=0).

EXECUTE.

4. Carer status

RECODE carer (1=1) (2=0).

EXECUTE.

5. Disability

RECODE Disable (1=1) (5=0).

EXECUTE.

6. Careers advice

RECODE careersadv (4=1) (5=0).

EXECUTE.

7. Careers support

RECODE careerhelpemp careerhelpfriends careerhelpfam careerhelpnon careerhelpstud
careerhelpschcar

careerhelpschteach careerhelpunicar careerhelpunitut careerhelpoth (1=1) (SYSMIS=0).

EXECUTE.

8. Activities outside of studies

RECODE activitiesrep activitiescoach activitiesclubs activitiesment activitiesintern activitiesvol
(1=1) (SYSMIS=0).

EXECUTE.

Additional variables were created as follows to include dummy variables and subscales:

1. Multiple indices of deprivation created using 'look-up tool' (English indices of deprivation 2019: Postcode Lookup (opendatacommunities.org). Missing items coded as '999':

```
RECODE depr (SYSMIS=999).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

2. 8 subscales were created to reflect the scoring instructions for GCS <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JARHE-04-2021-0151/full/html>, p, 1204, totals not mean.

```
COMPUTE HCFACT1=SUM(HCQ1,HCQ2,HCQ3).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE HCFACT2=SUM(HCQ4,HCQ5,HCQ6,HCQ7,HCQ8,HCQ9).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE SCFACT1=SUM(SCQ1,SCQ2,SCQ3,SCQ4).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE SCFACT2=SUM(SCQ5,SCQ6,SCQ7,SCQ8,SCQ9).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE CCFACT1=SUM(CCQ1,CCQ2,CCQ3,CCQ4,CCQ5,CCQ6,CCQ7).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE CCFACT2=SUM(CCQ8, CCQ9).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE ICFACT=SUM(ICQ1,ICQ2,ICQ3,ICQ4,ICQ5,ICQ6,ICQ7,ICQ8).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

```
COMPUTE PCFACT=SUM(PCQ1,PCQ2,PCQ3,PCQ4,PCQ5,PCQ6,PCQ7).
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

3. Faculty level variable was created.

1 = Arts and Humanities

2 = Engineering and Physical Sciences

3 = Environmental and Life Sciences

4 = Medicine

5 = Social Sciences

6 = Unknown

4. STEM variable created dummy coding

RECODE Faculty (1=0) (2=1) (3=1) (4=1) (5=0) INTO STEM.

VARIABLE LABELS STEM 'STEM subject'.

EXECUTE.

5. Binary variables for psychology and non-psychology.

Listed as Psychology as primary subject Yes = 1, No = 0

6. Ethnicity to reflect ethnic grouping

RECODE Ethnicity (84=1) (85=1) (102=1) (86=1) (87=2) (88=2) (89=2) (90=2) (91=3) (92=3) (93=3)
(94=3)

(95=3) (96=4) (97=4) (98=4) (100=5) (101=5) INTO Ethnicitygroup.

VARIABLE LABELS Ethnicitygroup 'Ethnicitygroup'.

EXECUTE.

7. Ethnicity to reflect ethnic minority dummy coding

Appendix M

```
RECODE Ethnicity (84=0) (85=1) (102=1) (86=1) (87=1) (88=1) (89=1) (90=1) (91=1) (92=1) (93=1)
(94=1) (95=1) (96=1) (97=1) (98=1) (100=1) (101=1) INTO Ethminority.
```

```
VARIABLE LABELS Ethminority 'Ethnicminority'.
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

8. Gender non-male/male dummy coding

```
RECODE Gender (2=0) (1=1) (3=1) (4=1) (5=1) INTO nonmale.
```

```
VARIABLE LABELS nonmale 'nonmale'.
```

```
EXECUTE.
```

Appendix N Codebook for quantitative data

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
ID	Identification number	Identification number added to all records	Scale
degreename	Undergraduate degree	Name as provided by student	String
Faculty	Faculty which the degree is part of	1 = Arts and Humanities 2 = Engineering and Physical Sciences 3 = Environmental and Life Sciences 4 = Medicine 5 = Social Sciences 6 = Unknown Source: Faculties, schools and departments University of Southampton	Nominal
Pscyh	Listed as psychology degree	Yes = 1, No = 0	Nominal
STEM	Identified as STEM subject	Yes STEM = 1, Not STEM = 0 House of Lords - Higher Education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects - Science and Technology Committee (parliament.uk)	Nominal
year	Year of study	1 = first year, 2 = second year, 3 = third year, 4 = fourth year	Ordinal
gender	Gender identity	1 = woman, 2 = man, 3 = non-binary, 4 = prefer not to say, 5 = another term to describe identity	Nominal
Nonmale	Non-male	1 = all self-describing as female or non-male 0 = self-describing as male	Nominal
age	Age	In years	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
ethnicitygroup	Ethnicity in over-arching groups	1 = White, 2 = Mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 3 = Asian or Asian British, 4 = Black, Black British, Caribbean or African, 5 = Other ethnic group Source for original and combined codes List of ethnic groups - GOV.UK (ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk)	Nominal
Ethminority	Ethnic minority	1 = yes member of ethnic minority 0 = no (white British)	
fgs	First generation status	1= fgs parents did not attend university, 0 = non-fgs parents attended university 999 = don't know/missing	Nominal
Postcode	Postcode	Postcode of residence whilst completing further education	String
depr	Indices of deprivation	Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile Scale from 1 – 10 generated from postcode; the lower the score, the more deprived the area (and the lower its rank). English indices of deprivation 2019 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) English indices of deprivation 2019: Postcode Lookup (opendatacommunities.org)	Scale
fsm	Free school meals	1= received fsm at school, 0 = did not receive fsm at school, 999 = don't know/missing	Nominal
carer	Carer status	1= describes self as a carer, 0 = does not describe self as a carer	Nominal
disable	Disabilities	1= describes self as having a disability (ies), 0 = describes self as not having disability(ies)	Nominal

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
HCQ1	HCQ1 GCS: I believe my degree will improve my career prospects	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ2	HCQ2 GCS: I know that my subject knowledge will be valued by employers	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ3	HCQ3 GCS: I will use my skills in future employment	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCFact1	Human capital factor 1: Your degree skills and abilities	<p>Combined scores for this factor questions HCQ1 + HCQ2 + HCQ3</p> <p>Source Developing graduate employability for a challenging labour market: the validation of the graduate capital scale Emerald Insight (page 1204)</p>	Scale
HCQ4	HCQ4 GCS: I know how to locate a range of information about the graduate job market	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ5	HCQ5 GCS: I can list a range of sources to find job opportunities	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ6	HCQ6 GCS: I can produce an effective CV and job application	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ7	HCQ7 GCS: I have an effective online career profile (e.g. LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster)	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCQ8	HCQ8 GCS: I feel confident I can perform well at interviews	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
HCQ9	HCQ9 GCS: I feel able to perform well at assessment centres	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
HCFact2	Human capital factor 2: Your career skills	Combined scores for this factor questions HCQ4+ HCQ5+ HCQ6 + HCQ7 + HCQ8 + HCQ9	Scale
HCQ10	HCQ10 GCS: I can demonstrate my transferable skills (single item)	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ1	SCQ1 GCS: I keep up to date with the graduate job market	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ2	SCQ2 GCS: I can name key employers of interest to me	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ3	SCQ3 GCS: I evaluate the changing job market in my career thinking	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ4	SCQ4 GCS: I can list some graduate roles which I would be suited to	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCFact1	Social Capital factor 1: Your understanding of the job market	Combined scores for this factor questions SCQ1 + SCQ2 + SCQ3 + SCQ4	Scale
SCQ5	SCQ5 GCS: I am confident I can make the most of any opportunities for personal development	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ6	SCQ6 GCS: I am confident in talking to people I do not know	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ7	SCQ7 GCS: I can recognise opportunities for	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
	personal development		
SCQ8	SCQ8 GCS: I use my network of career contacts to inform my career planning	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCQ9	SCQ9 GCS: I have developed contacts with employers	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
SCFact2	Social capital factor 2: Your networking skills	Combined scores for this factor questions SCQ5 + SCQ6 + SCQ7 + SCQ8 +SCQ9	Scale
CCQ1	CCQ1 GCS: I know how to find out about skills, attributes and behaviours required for different types of employment	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ2	CCQ2 GCS: I am able to judge whether organisations will suit me	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ3	CCQ3 GCS: I know what type of role I am interested in	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ4	CCQ4 GCS: I feel confident I can present myself well in the sector which interests me	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ5	CCQ5 GCS: I can identify what employers value most in graduates	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ6	CCQ6 GCS: I can give examples of achievements which would interest employers	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ7	CCQ7 GCS: I have distinctive	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
	achievements and interests which make me stand out from others		
CCFact1	Cultural capital factor 1: Your fit with the job market	Combined scores for this factor questions CCQ1 + CCQ2 + CCQ3 + CCQ4 + CCQ5 + CCQ6 + CCQ7	Scale
CCQ8	CCQ8 GCS: I take part in extra-curricular activities, these might include volunteering, sports, part-time work, clubs and societies	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCQ9	CCQ9 GCS: I can recognise and explain the value of extra-curricular activities	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
CCFact2	Cultural capital factor 2: Your engagement with extra-curricular activities	CCQ8 + CCQ9	Scale
ICQ1	ICQ1 GCS: I can recognise roles which would suit me best	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ2	ICQ2 GCS: I can articulate my skills	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ3	ICQ3 GCS: I can identify what motivates me	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ4	ICQ4 GCS: I know what is important to me in my career	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ5	ICQ5 GCS: I have a clear career plan	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
ICQ6	ICQ6 GCS: I can list my strengths	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ7	ICQ7 GCS: I have tested my career ideas with relevant work experience	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICQ8	ICQ8 GCS: I keep a record of my personal development	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
ICFact	Identity capital	Combined scores for this factor questions ICQ1 + ICQ2 + ICQ3 + ICQ4 + ICQ5 + ICQ6 + ICQ7 + ICQ8	Scale
ICQ9	ICQ9 GCS: It is important to me that my career reflects my personal values (single item)	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ1	PCQ1 GCS: I am confident in my ability to manage change	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ2	PCQ2 GCS: I see change as an opportunity for development	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ3	PCQ3 GCS: I consider myself adaptable	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ4	PCQ4 GCS: I am able to manage setbacks	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ5	PCQ5 GCS: I enjoy taking measured risks	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ6	PCQ6 GCS: I can be persistent, despite setbacks	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
PCQ7	PCQ7 GCS: I can make plans to respond to change	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
PCFact	Psychological capital	Combined scores for this factor questions PCQ1 + PCQ2 + PCQ3 + PCQ4 + PCQ5 + PCQ6 + PCQ7	Scale
PCQ8	PCQ8 GCS: I am optimistic about gaining suitable employment (single item)	Likert scale 1 = not at all confident to 6 = highly confident	Scale
careersadv	Careers Advice	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpemp	Employers listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpfriends	Friends listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpfam	Family listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpon	Online resources listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpstud	Other students listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpschcar	School careers service listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpschteach	School teachers listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpunicar	University careers services listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
careerhelpunitut	University tutors and lecturers listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal

Appendix N

SPSS variable (name)	Full variable (label)	Coding Instructions	Measurement
careerhelppoth	Other help listed as a source of help for career planning	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiesrep	Activities outside of studies – academic rep	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiescoach	Activities outside of studies – careers coaching	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiesclubs	Activities outside of studies – clubs and societies	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiesment	Activities outside of studies – mentoring	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiesintern	Activities outside of studies – paid internships	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
activitiesvol	Activities outside of studies – volunteering	1 = yes, 0 = no	Nominal
hourswork	Hours worked during term-time	Hours 1 - 40	Scale
workimp	How severely work impacts upon studies	1 = not at all, 6 = severely impacts	Scale
cathoursworked	Compressed hours worked	1 = no hours, 2 = 15 hours and less, 3 = more than 15 hours	Ordinal
careerplan	Description of future career plans	Coded thematically	String
opencode	The free text was analysed and categories were applied to determine whether the participants had no career plans through to clearly defined plans with a future job or postgraduate qualification secured	1 = no career plans, 2 = idea of career plan/ or job sector, but not established, 3 = clearly defined career plan/ or job sector, 4 = clearly defined career plan/ or job sector with a detailed plan as to how this will be achieved, 5= future job or postgraduate qualification secured, 999 = blank response/ missing data	Scale

Appendix O Full results from regression analysis

The following tables represent the regression results for all those models which were found to be significant.

Note for all the following tables:

Significance = $p < .05$, = $p < .01$, = $p < .001$

Effect size $sr^2 = 0.02$ (small), 0.13 (medium), 0.26 (large)

Relative weightings of independent variables for HC Factor 2 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	2.628	1.026	0.192	2.562	.011	[0.603, 4.653]	.031
Friends	2.309	0.905	0.196	2.550	.012	[0.521, 4.096]	.031
Parents/family	-1.715	0.968	-0.133	-1.772	.078	[-3.625, 0.196]	.015
Online resources	0.004	0.915	0.000	0.004	.997	[-1.803, 1.811]	.000
Other students	0.389	0.965	0.030	0.403	.687	[-1.515, 2.294]	.000
School careers service	-1.003	0.883	-0.083	-1.136	.257	[-2.747, 0.740]	.001
School teachers	0.770	0.860	0.065	0.895	.372	[-0.927, 2.467]	.000
Uni careers service	1.678	1.035	0.124	1.622	.107	[-0.365, 3.721]	.012
Uni tutors/lecturers	1.737	1.096	0.124	1.585	.115	[-0.427, 3.901]	.012
Other sources	-2.537	3.229	-0.056	-0.786	.433	[-8.911, 3.837]	.003

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for HC Factor 2 in non-FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	1.460	1.144	0.094	1.277	.203	[-0.797, 3.718]	.008
Friends	0.455	0.886	0.041	0.513	.608	[-1.294, 2.203]	.001
Parents/family	-0.179	1.266	-0.011	-0.141	.888	[-2.678, 2.320]	.000
Online resources	-0.384	0.834	-0.034	-0.461	.645	[-2.030, 1.261]	.001
Other students	1.110	0.965	0.090	1.151	.251	[-0.794, 3.014]	.006
School careers service	0.536	0.849	0.047	0.631	.529	[-1.140, 2.211]	.002
School teachers	-1.051	0.899	-0.088	-1.169	.244	[-2.825, 0.724]	.006
Uni careers service	3.130	0.996	0.242	3.143	.002	[1.165, 5.096]	.049
Uni tutors/lecturers	0.185	1.152	0.012	0.161	.872	[-2.088, 2.458]	.000
Other sources	-1.225	2.365	-0.040	-0.518	.605	[-5.892, 3.441]	.001

Relative weightings of independent variables for HC question 10 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	0.615	0.204	0.232	3.017	.003	0.213, 1.018	.046
Friends	0.259	0.180	0.114	1.441	.151	-0.096, 0.615	.010
Parents/family	-0.200	0.192	-0.080	-1.037	.301	-0.580, 0.180	.005
Online resources	-0.237	0.182	-0.098	-1.299	.196	-0.596, 0.123	.008
Other students	0.240	0.192	0.096	1.254	.212	-0.138, 0.619	.008
School careers service	-0.129	0.176	-0.055	-0.735	.463	-0.476, 0.218	.002
School teachers	0.084	0.171	0.037	0.493	.623	-0.253, 0.422	.001
Uni careers service	-0.141	0.206	-0.054	-0.687	.493	-0.548, 0.265	.002
Uni tutors/lecturers	0.321	0.218	0.118	1.475	.142	-0.109, 0.752	.011
Other sources	-0.626	0.642	-0.071	-0.974	.331	-1.893, 0.642	.005

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact1 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	1.654	0.739	0.167	2.237	.027	[0.195, 3.113]	.024
Friends	0.605	0.653	0.071	0.927	.355	[-0.683, 1.893]	.004
Parents/family	-1.520	0.697	-0.163	-2.180	.031	[-2.897, -0.143]	.023
Online resources	0.151	0.660	0.017	0.228	.820	[-1.151, 1.453]	.000
Other students	0.213	0.695	0.023	0.306	.760	[-1.159, 1.585]	.000
School careers service	-0.225	0.636	-0.026	-0.354	.724	[-1.481, 1.031]	.000
School teachers	-0.188	0.620	-0.022	-0.303	.762	[-1.411, 1.035]	.000
Uni careers service	0.537	0.746	0.055	0.720	.473	[-0.935, 2.009]	.003
Uni tutors/lecturers	2.308	0.790	0.227	2.922	.004	[0.749, 3.867]	.041
Other sources	1.822	2.327	0.056	0.783	.435	[-2.771, 6.415]	.003

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact1 in non-FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	1.157	0.966	0.088	1.197	.233	[-0.750, 3.064]	.007
Friends	0.072	0.748	0.008	0.096	.923	[-1.405, 1.549]	.000
Parents/family	0.505	1.070	0.035	0.472	.637	[-1.606, 2.616]	.001
Online resources	-0.354	0.704	-0.037	-0.502	.616	[-1.744, 1.036]	.001
Other students	0.183	0.815	0.017	0.224	.823	[-1.426, 1.791]	.000
School careers service	-0.957	0.717	-0.098	-1.335	.184	[-2.373, 0.458]	.009
School teachers	0.406	0.759	0.040	0.534	.594	[-1.093, 1.905]	.001
Uni careers service	2.972	0.841	0.271	3.532	.001	[1.311, 4.632]	.063
Uni tutors/lecturers	0.767	0.973	0.060	0.788	.432	[-1.153, 2.687]	.003
Other sources	1.817	1.998	0.069	0.910	.364	[-2.125, 5.759]	.004

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact2 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	2.812	0.835	0.248	3.367	.001	[1.163, 4.461]	.053
Friends	0.599	0.737	0.061	0.812	.418	[-0.857, 2.054]	.003
Parents/family	-0.118	0.788	-0.011	-0.149	.882	[-1.673, 1.438]	.000
Online resources	-0.570	0.745	-0.055	-0.764	.446	[-2.041, 0.902]	.002
Other students	1.104	0.786	0.102	1.405	.162	[-0.447, 2.655]	.009
School careers service	-0.105	0.719	-0.010	-0.146	.884	[-1.524, 1.315]	.000
School teachers	0.032	0.700	0.003	0.046	.964	[-1.350, 1.414]	.000
Uni careers service	1.341	0.843	0.119	1.591	.113	[-0.322, 3.005]	.012
Uni tutors/lecturers	2.476	0.893	0.213	2.773	.006	[0.714, 4.238]	.036
Other sources	-0.920	2.629	-0.025	-0.350	.727	[-6.111, 4.271]	.000

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact 2 in non-FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	2.829	0.998	0.208	2.834	.005	[0.859, 4.799]	.040
Friends	1.188	0.773	0.122	1.537	.126	[-0.337, 2.714]	.012
Parents/family	0.268	1.105	0.018	0.243	.809	[-1.913, 2.449]	.000
Online resources	-1.119	0.728	-0.112	-1.538	.126	[-2.555, 0.317]	.012
Other students	-0.437	0.842	-0.040	-0.519	.604	[-2.099, 1.225]	.001
School careers service	0.428	0.741	0.042	0.577	.565	[-1.035, 1.890]	.002
School teachers	-0.318	0.785	-0.030	-0.406	.686	[-1.867, 1.230]	.001
Uni careers service	2.182	0.869	0.192	2.510	.013	[0.467, 3.898]	.031
Uni tutors/lecturers	-0.328	1.005	-0.025	-0.326	.745	[-2.311, 1.656]	.001
Other sources	0.563	2.063	0.021	0.273	.785	[-3.509, 4.635]	.000

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for CC Fact 1 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	2.814	1.205	0.175	2.336	.021	[0.436, 5.193]	.026
Friends	1.827	1.064	0.132	1.717	.088	[-0.273, 3.926]	.014
Parents/family	-0.715	1.137	-0.047	-0.629	.530	[-2.959, 1.530]	.002
Online resources	-0.280	1.075	-0.019	-0.261	.795	[-2.403, 1.842]	.000
Other students	0.851	1.133	0.056	0.751	.454	[-1.387, 3.088]	.003
School careers service	-0.638	1.037	-0.045	-0.615	.539	[-2.686, 1.409]	.002
School teachers	1.703	1.010	0.122	1.687	.093	[-0.290, 3.697]	.013
Uni careers service	0.606	1.216	0.038	0.498	.619	[-1.794, 3.005]	.001
Uni tutors/lecturers	4.002	1.288	0.242	3.108	.002	[1.460, 6.544]	.047
Other sources	2.889	3.793	0.054	0.762	.447	[-4.598, 10.377]	.003

Relative weightings of independent variables for CCFact1 in non-FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	2.889	1.438	0.147	2.009	.046	[0.052, 5.727]	.020
Friends	0.466	1.114	0.033	0.418	.676	[-1.732, 2.663]	.001
Parents/family	0.694	1.592	0.032	0.436	.664	[-2.448, 3.835]	.001
Online resources	-1.100	1.048	-0.076	-1.049	.295	[-3.168, 0.968]	.005
Other students	1.420	1.213	0.090	1.171	.243	[-0.973, 3.814]	.007
School careers service	1.360	1.067	0.093	1.275	.204	[-0.746, 3.467]	.008
School teachers	-1.725	1.130	-0.114	-1.527	.129	[-3.955, 0.505]	.011
Uni careers service	3.469	1.252	0.211	2.771	.006	[0.998, 5.940]	.038
Uni tutors/lecturers	-0.522	1.448	-0.027	-0.361	.719	[-3.379, 2.335]	.001
Other sources	5.015	2.972	0.128	1.687	.093	[-0.851, 10.881]	.014

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for CCFact 2 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	-0.118	0.459	-0.019	-0.258	.797	[-1.025, 0.788]	.000
Friends	0.352	0.405	0.067	0.868	.387	[-0.448, 1.152]	.004
Parents/family	0.277	0.433	0.048	0.639	.524	[-0.579, 1.132]	.002
Online resources	-0.592	0.410	-0.106	-1.445	.150	[-1.402, 0.217]	.100
Other students	0.089	0.432	0.015	0.206	.837	[-0.764, 0.942]	.000
School careers service	0.473	0.395	0.087	1.196	.234	[-0.308, 1.253]	.007
School teachers	0.643	0.385	0.121	1.670	.097	[-0.117, 1.403]	.013
Uni careers service	0.353	0.463	0.058	0.762	.447	[-0.562, 1.268]	.003
Uni tutors/lecturers	2.364	0.491	0.375	4.815	.000	[1.395, 3.333]	.112
Other sources	0.106	1.446	0.005	0.074	.941	[-2.748, 2.961]	.000

Relative weightings of independent variables for ICFact1 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	3.071	1.228	0.182	2.501	.013	[0.647, 5.494]	.029
Friends	1.165	1.084	0.080	1.075	.284	[-0.975, 3.304]	.005
Parents/family	-0.322	1.158	-0.020	-0.278	.782	[-2.608, 1.965]	.000
Online resources	-0.342	1.095	-0.022	-0.312	.755	[-2.505, 1.820]	.000
Other students	1.191	1.155	0.074	1.031	.304	[-1.088, 3.470]	.005
School careers service	-0.527	1.057	-0.035	-0.499	.619	[-2.613, 1.559]	.001
School teachers	0.700	1.029	0.048	0.681	.497	[-1.331, 2.731]	.002
Uni careers service	-0.131	1.239	-0.008	-0.106	.916	[-2.576, 2.314]	.000
Uni tutors/lecturers	5.968	1.312	0.345	4.549	.000	[3.379, 8.558]	.095
Other sources	2.146	3.864	0.039	0.555	.579	[-5.483, 9.774]	.001

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for ICQ9 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	0.301	0.218	0.107	1.380	.169	[-0.130, 0.732]	.010
Friends	-0.073	0.193	-0.030	-0.380	.705	[-0.453, 0.307]	.001
Parents/family	0.178	0.206	0.067	0.866	.388	[-0.228, 0.585]	.004
Online resources	0.382	0.195	0.148	1.960	.052	[-0.003, 0.766]	.020
Other students	-0.031	0.205	-0.012	-0.151	.880	[-0.436, 0.374]	.000
School careers service	-0.170	0.188	-0.068	-0.904	.367	[-0.541, 0.201]	.004
School teachers	0.300	0.183	0.123	1.642	.102	[-0.061, 0.661]	.014
Uni careers service	0.220	0.220	0.078	0.997	.320	[-0.215, 0.654]	.005
Uni tutors/lecturers	0.494	0.233	0.171	2.120	.035	[0.034, 0.955]	.023
Other sources	0.992	0.687	0.106	1.444	.151	[-0.364, 2.348]	.011

Relative weightings of independent variables for PCQ8 in FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	0.665	0.226	0.223	2.937	.004	[0.218, 1.111]	.044
Friends	0.403	0.200	0.158	2.020	.045	[0.009, 0.798]	.020
Parents/family	0.009	0.213	0.003	0.041	.967	[-0.413, 0.430]	.000
Online resources	-0.133	0.202	-0.049	-0.659	.511	[-0.532, 0.266]	.002
Other students	0.043	0.213	0.015	0.204	.838	[-0.377, 0.464]	.000
School careers service	-0.045	0.195	-0.017	-0.232	.817	[-0.430, 0.339]	.000
School teachers	0.116	0.190	0.045	0.611	.542	[-0.258, 0.490]	.002
Uni careers service	0.338	0.228	0.114	1.478	.141	[-0.113, 0.788]	.011
Uni tutors/lecturers	0.462	0.242	0.151	1.913	.057	[-0.015, 0.940]	.018
Other sources	-0.645	0.712	-0.066	-0.906	.366	[-2.051, 0.761]	.004

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for PCQ8 in non-FGS

Source of careers help	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Employers	0.673	0.253	0.195	2.658	.009	[0.173, 1.173]	.035
Friends	0.186	0.196	0.076	0.949	.344	[-0.201, 0.573]	.004
Parents/family	-0.262	0.280	-0.070	-0.934	.352	[-0.815, 0.291]	.004
Online resources	-0.199	0.185	-0.079	-1.079	.282	[-0.563, 0.165]	.006
Other students	0.053	0.214	0.019	0.250	.803	[-0.368, 0.475]	.000
School careers service	0.433	0.188	0.169	2.305	.022	[0.062, 0.804]	.027
School teachers	-0.283	0.199	-0.107	-1.424	.156	[-0.676, 0.109]	.100
Uni careers service	-0.002	0.220	-0.001	-0.011	.991	[-0.437, 0.433]	.000
Uni tutors/lecturers	-0.489	0.255	-0.146	-1.917	.057	[-0.992, 0.014]	.018
Other sources	0.774	0.523	0.113	1.480	.141	[-0.258, 1.807]	.011

Relative weightings of independent variables for HCFact2 in non-FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	2.943	1.667	0.127	1.765	.079	[-0.348, 6.233]	.016
Careers coaching	4.161	2.142	0.145	1.943	.054	[-0.065, 8.388]	.019
Clubs and societies	0.434	0.843	0.038	0.515	.607	[-1.230, 2.098]	.001
Mentoring	0.782	1.430	0.040	0.547	.585	[-2.041, 3.605]	.001
Paid internships	1.094	1.606	0.051	0.681	.497	[-2.075, 4.263]	.002
Volunteering	1.420	0.993	0.110	1.430	.154	[-0.539, 3.379]	.010

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact1 in FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	0.931	1.140	0.061	0.817	.415	[-1.318, 3.181]	.003
Careers coaching	1.267	1.611	0.062	0.786	.433	[-1.913, 4.448]	.003
Clubs and societies	-0.323	0.623	-0.038	-0.518	.605	[-1.553, 0.907]	.001
Mentoring	2.926	1.644	0.152	1.780	.077	[-0.318, 6.171]	.017
Paid internships	0.395	2.115	0.016	0.187	.852	[-3.779, 4.570]	.000
Volunteering	1.153	0.784	0.113	1.469	.144	[-0.396, 2.701]	.011

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact1 in non-FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	0.882	1.415	0.045	0.623	.534	[-1.910, 3.674]	.002
Careers coaching	1.970	1.817	0.081	1.084	.280	[-1.616, 5.556]	.006
Clubs and societies	-0.040	0.715	-0.004	-0.055	.956	[-1.451, 1.372]	.000
Mentoring	0.836	1.214	0.051	0.689	.492	[-1.559, 3.231]	.002
Paid internships	2.367	1.363	0.130	1.737	.084	[-0.322, 5.056]	.016
Volunteering	1.623	0.842	0.148	1.927	.056	[-0.039, 3.285]	.019

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact2 in FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	1.522	1.287	0.088	1.183	.239	[-1.018, 4.063]	.007
Careers coaching	3.793	1.820	0.163	2.084	.039	[0.201, 7.385]	.023
Clubs and societies	0.361	0.704	0.037	0.512	.609	[-1.029, 1.750]	.001
Mentoring	3.265	1.857	0.148	1.758	.080	[-0.400, 6.929]	.016
Paid internships	1.000	2.389	0.034	0.419	.676	[-3.715, 5.715]	.001
Volunteering	0.194	0.886	0.017	0.219	.827	[-1.555, 1.942]	.000

Relative weightings of independent variables for SCFact2 in non-FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	0.561	1.466	0.028	0.383	.702	[-2.332, 3.454]	.001
Careers coaching	2.351	1.883	0.093	1.249	.213	[-1.365, 6.067]	.008
Clubs and societies	0.507	0.741	0.050	0.684	.495	[-0.956, 1.969]	.002
Mentoring	0.801	1.258	0.047	0.637	.525	[-1.681, 3.283]	.002
Paid internships	2.728	1.412	0.145	1.932	.055	[-0.058, 5.514]	.019
Volunteering	1.423	0.873	0.125	1.631	.105	[-0.299, 3.145]	.014

Appendix O

Relative weightings of independent variables for CCFact2 in FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	0.035	0.655	0.004	0.054	.957	[-1.258, 1.328]	.000
Careers coaching	1.271	0.926	0.101	1.373	.172	[-0.556, 3.099]	.009
Clubs and societies	1.983	0.358	0.380	5.537	.000	[1.276, 2.690]	.141
Mentoring	1.210	0.945	0.102	1.281	.202	[-0.654, 3.075]	.008
Paid internships	0.171	1.216	0.011	0.140	.889	[-2.228, 2.570]	.000
Volunteering	0.347	0.451	0.055	0.770	.443	[-0.543, 1.237]	.003

Relative weightings of independent variables for CCFact2 in non-FGS

Activities outside studies	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Effect size (sr²)</i>
Academic rep	0.917	0.784	0.082	1.170	.244	[-0.630, 2.464]	.007
Careers coaching	0.592	1.007	0.043	0.588	.558	[-1.395, 2.578]	.002
Clubs and societies	1.690	0.396	0.303	4.263	.000	[0.907, 2.472]	.088
Mentoring	0.160	0.672	0.017	0.239	.812	[-1.167, 1.487]	.000
Paid internships	0.745	0.755	0.072	0.987	.325	[-0.745, 2.235]	.005
Volunteering	0.641	0.467	0.103	1.374	.171	[-0.280, 1.562]	.009

Appendix P Triangulation Matrix

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
Human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HC is dominant conceptually (Dalrymple et al, 2021). • Employability is often conceptualised in language of skills by employers and students (Benati and Fischer, 2021). • DisSES students rely more heavily on HC, as they lack alternative forms of capital. This may suggest a naivety in thinking (Groves, O’Shea and Delahunty, 2022). Although Ingram et al (2023) suggests that students who have broken the barrier of attending RG university are more aware of importance of RC. • NB: Tomlinson (2017a) adds CMS to GCM as part of HC. 	<p><i>Choosing HE: ‘overwhelmed by it all’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About avoiding being ‘stuck’ 	<p><i>Invested in education: ‘academic career was right on track’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of the strategic acquisition of HC, in lieu of SC and CC. • Sense of investing in a degree and in some cases conscious of the value of a RG university. <p><i>Degree and beyond: ‘every penny counts’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some evidence of prioritising academic studies above all else, in some cases belief that university was a meritocracy. However, not all students. • Language of skills often used to demonstrate additionality – sometimes ironically. <p><i>Lacking CMS: ‘just completely flopped’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CMS lacking for some – opportunities in the informal job market had not prepared them for the demands made by the graduate market. Also issues with ‘telling’ complex stories in an acceptable way to employers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant difference for HC between FGS and non-FGS. 	<p>Aligning with literature QUAL suggests that FGS understand the value of HC and are at times more heavily dependent on HC, although not necessarily naively. Although not asked explicitly FGS chose to describe their employability in the language of skills.</p> <p>Paradox – students believe in HC, achieve highly and invest in their education, but are not getting the best jobs.</p> <p>QUAL adds additional insights by illustrating why FGS might struggle to develop CMS. Links with findings about mobilising capitals.</p>
Social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who you know matters as much as what you know. Pre-existing networks means you can find opportunities and market yourself more readily in a 	<p><i>Family background: built my character</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGS often felt isolated in decision making. 	<p><i>Networks: ‘I never knew anyone’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students recognised the vital role of networks, but also the barriers they faced. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant difference for self-reported SC between FGS and non-FGS. • However, regression modelling 	<p>Literature and QUAL showed clear agreement. FGS were aware of the need for SC to succeed in the graduate labour market, but also their deficits in this capital</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
	<p>competitive market (Morrison, 2019, Tholen et al, 2013).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all students can access work experience equally (Allen et al, 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Roberts and Li, 2017). Internships are classed and act to replicate rather than disrupt disadvantage (Allen et al, 2013; Lehmann, 2019). Despite enacting significant personal agency and creativity to secure internships, DisSES students are always in deficit because they lack vital 'hot knowledge' which gains them access to unadvertised, but highly beneficial opportunities (Waller et al, 2012, p.336). 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of SC was particularly apparent when trying to secure high-quality work experience, especially as extra effort was required to secure necessary connections. Lack of SC also impacted upon the students' ability to build IC – lack of vocational insight. <p><i>Contacts: 'finding connections from connections'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numerous examples of innovation and hard work in building SC. Students proved themselves to be resourceful and innovative, but this was time-consuming. 	<p>illustrated that FGS and non-FGS rely on fundamentally different networks of support to build their capitals.</p>	<p>compared to other students. In alignment with the literature the QUAL data illustrated the impact on securing work experience and in particular the need for students to use more effort to secure high quality internships.</p> <p>QUAL and quant data was in partial agreement. As whilst FGS self-assessed themselves to have the same levels of SC as non-FGS, how they build their networks is of interest here.</p>
Cultural capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGS less likely to apply to elite unis (link here to Reputational capital.) AdvSES students have been found to be more strategically conscious in university choices (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). Struggling to fit in universities (hysteresis) means FGS are less likely to engage with important extras valued by employers such as ECAs and employability development (Ivermark and Ambrose, 2021). 	<p><i>Choosing HE: 'overwhelmed by it all'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These participants had applied for and been accepted by a RG. Despite this achievement, many of them reflected on how difficult they had found this. FGS sensed that their understanding of HE was poorer than others – family life outside HE sphere. Transitions seemed smoother for Ashok and Luke who had attended fee-paying schools and had a more 	<p><i>Navigating the future: 'a whole new can of worms'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some students found university to be an alienating experience. This projected onto future plans and doubts about fitting in. <p><i>ECAs: 'more like employable'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some FGS understood the value of ECAs in future applications for graduate roles. Although some students took part in them purely for fun. However, some FGS avoided ECAs because they 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The only item with a significant difference within the GCS was Cultural capital factor 2: engagement with extra-curricular activities. FGS had lower levels of this factor, although with a relatively small effect size, $t(366) = -2.135, p = .033, d = 0.22$. 	<p>Partial agreement between literature and QUAL, that FGS find applications to universities with high RC challenging.</p> <p>Agreement between literature and QUAL that once at university FGS can find university to be an unsettling experience.</p> <p>Agreement between literature and QUAL that lacking labour market insight from parents, FGS can struggle with making plans about the future (link here with mobilising capitals: role of parents).</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DisSES students are generally unaware of the importance of ECAs or cannot afford them (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). 	<p>ready understanding of HE.</p> <p><i>Applications: 'the hardest bit'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacked insight how to apply – interventions and outreach did help. <p><i>University: 'untethered'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students felt unsettled and overwhelmed once they arrived at university. Previous experience had not prepared them. Must work harder in academic studies because they had a sense of not knowing/ feeling of impostor syndrome. 	<p>could not afford them or felt a lack of cultural fit.</p>		<p>Agreement between literature, QUAL and quants results connection between CC and engagement with ECAs. Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) found that uptake of ECAs can be relatively low for all students. (In their study between 40% and 60% of undergraduates rarely or never took part). They suggest that students need to be made aware of the importance of extras to employers – but is it about not being aware of benefits or for FGS CC/ EC?</p>
Identity capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cote (2016) argues that IC is key to navigating a labour market where roles are no longer strictly ascribed. Research has found that u/g are often 'novices' in their thinking (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). Some have found that disadvantage does not impact on IC formation (Cote, 2016, Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). However, Lehmann (2022) suggests that FGS arrive at university with a narrow understanding of occupations. 		<p><i>Identity: 'up in the air'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many of the students felt undecided about the future, several of them commented that a lack of networks and insights made their decision making even harder. Lack of insight prior to university made choices more immediate. Some students understood the time need to build a career narrative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No significant difference for IC between FGS and non-FGS. A high proportion of all final year students (41.3%) had either no or undefined career plans. This showed no significant change from first year (42%) to final year. It was noted that only three students were categorised as having a job or qualification secured, this despite the survey being conducted during the spring term. 141 FGS and 148 non-FGS provided a description for coding. There was no significant difference between FGS (M = 2.62, SD = .97) 	<p>Whilst QUAL data showed that some students understood the time needed to invest in a career identity and supportive narrative, evidence that this is not the case for the majority of students.</p> <p>Literature, QUAL and quant all converge to show that a high proportion of students from both first-generation and non first-generation backgrounds struggle to form IC.</p> <p>Whilst FGS and non-FGS showed no difference in IC (aligning with some previous studies), how FGS build capitals is of interest here. Quants results illustrating sources of careers support for FGS might be seen to partially agree with Lehmann (2022)</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
				and non-FGS (M = 2.55, SD = .99; t (287) = .604, p = .546, d = .071.)	
Psychological capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some evidence that positive PC can enhance labour market outcomes (Calvo and Garcia, 2021; Newman et al, 2014). Contested as to whether DisSES students have heightened PC because of additional challenges or less confidence born of previous experiences (Abrahams, 2017; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Parutis and Howson, 2020). Belmi et al (2023) suggest that as employers love a resilience narrative; all students including middle-class and wealthy are encouraged to recognise and share their stories of persistence. 		<p><i>Resilience: 'ups and downs'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple points of extra pressure including working extra jobs and care. Impact of covid-19 Evidence of becoming more resilient as they dealt with the extras demanded of them. Transitioning to the graduate labour market was an additional burden as students grappled with fear of rejection and family expectations. <p><i>Optimism: 'good story-time ending'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing in confidence and feeling that transformation was possible. Feeling that personal agency was possible despite multiple barriers. 	No significant difference for PC between FGS and non-FGS.	<p>QUAL data supports the suggestion that FGS may have heightened PC born of the multiple challenges they face. However, quant results potentially conflicts with this result, as no significant differences were detected between FGS and non-FGS. Perhaps this finding is more akin to Belmi et al (2023).</p>
Economic capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundational/ transmitting between generations and allowing other forms of capital to be accessed more readily (Bourdieu 1986; Lehmann, 2019; Morrison, 2019). Lack of EC excludes unpaid opportunities such as ECA and internships studies 	<p><i>Applications: 'the hardest bit'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students worried whether they could afford university generally. Some chose to study close to home, because of this. 	<p><i>Money: 'working, study, working, study'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Money was often mentioned as a barrier – influencing, limiting and driving choices. FGS were appreciative of bursaries. Most of the students worked part-time and some juggled multiple roles. 	<p><i>FGS have significantly lower EC than non-FGS.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was a significant difference in the indices of deprivation between FGS (M = 6.32, SD = 2.80) and non-FGS (M = 7.51, SD = 2.57; t (270) = -.645, p < .001, d = .443). This indicated that FGS were from more deprived 	<p>Agreement across literature, QUAL and quant that EC is key to understanding the experiences of FGS in terms of choosing university, transformational experiences whilst at university and limiting future options.</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
	<p>(Roberts and Li, 2017; Wright and Mulvey 2021).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of EC leads to more rapid and confined decisions on graduation (Bathmaker, 2021b; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Hordosy and Clark, 2018; Merrill et al, 2020; Parutis and Howson, 2020). Lehmann's research (2022), suggests that FGS who have experienced economic adversity are more likely to seek 'stability over risk' (p. 11) when they select careers. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working part-time excluded opportunities to engage in ECAs and internships. <p><i>Future plans: no 'bank of mum and dad'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plans such as p/g study and travel were postponed because of a lack of funding. Future plans were influenced by past experiences, as students craved the security they had not enjoyed in the past. 	<p>areas than non-FGS.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A chi-square tests for independence (with Yates' Continuity Correction) indicated a significant association between being in receipt of free school meals and first-generation status $X^2(1) = 9.265, p = .002$. 	
Mobilising capitals: parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FGS lack insight into the graduate labour market inherited from parents (Groves, O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022; Pires and Chapin, 2022). FGS' parents may act to encourage entry to HE (their children having a chance that was denied to them) or discourage (not understanding the benefits of HE, or being fearful of costs) (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2023). Also linked to EC, parents cannot afford to invest as much into their children's education (Becker et al, 2018; Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2023). 	<p><i>Family background: built my character exemplifies clearly barriers faced</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some parents were proud and supportive. Not knowing about university sometimes led to parents giving poor or oppositional advice. In some cases FGS felt burdened by parents. Sense of isolation <p><i>Choosing HE: 'overwhelmed by it all'</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regression model showed parents and family had a negative impact on capital development. 	<p>Multiple, complex and differing relations influence how FGS build their capital 'relational dimensions of higher education decision-making', (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2023,p.9).</p> <p>Literature, QUAL and quant converged to show that whilst the parents of FGS might mean well, they are not always able to contribute to positive capital development. Link here with SC.</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
Mobilising capitals: lecturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parutis and Howson (2020) suggested that students from a disadvantaged background were more reliant on formal support from lecturers. Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch (2018) found that lecturers could have value for all students, as they possess industry specific knowledge and contacts. 	<p><i>University: 'untethered'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some felt not entitled to reach out and get support/ at same time others described themselves as highly reliant on academics, as they felt they had no-one else to turn to. 	<p><i>Experience: 'a priority'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence that students turn to lecturers for careers help, because they are familiar with them FGS also relied heavily on their lecturers for making contacts, with 10 students specifically referring to lecturers as the way they would look for networks to access internships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regression modelling showed that for FGS, university tutors and lecturers and friends were predicted to impact positively on capital development. 	<p>QUAL and quant in full agreement as to the important role which lecturers can play for FGS in building capitals.</p>
Mobilising capitals: careers service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parutis and Howson (2020) found that the disadvantaged students were less likely to engage with employability classes, as they struggled to understand the need to develop a clear employability strategy from the beginning of their degrees – connection here with CC. Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch (2018) found that only half of the students at a RG university had made use of the university careers service during their studies. Reasons for this included their own lack of time, but also lack of awareness and accessibility. 	<p><i>Choosing HE: 'overwhelmed by it all'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Want to comment here on positive role of role models, mentoring, visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building capitals: 'boost you up' Some students valued careers coaching and mentoring programmes provided by the university. Evidence that when the careers service had been accessed it had proved invaluable in securing internships. Uncertainty: 'I'm gonna book, I'm gonna book' Students avoided reaching out to the careers service. Anxious about using something new, prioritising academic studies, overwhelmed by options, feeling like they needed to have a question in mind. Distance created by number and formality of emails. Some commented that they found the thought of using a careers service intimidating and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regression modelling for non-FGS, the university careers service and school careers service were predicted to impact positively on capital development. This suggests that FGS and non-FGS do depend on different interventions for their capital development. 	<p>When careers services are used they proved to be helpful. However, literature, QUAL and quants results converged to suggest that careers services need to attend more to the needs of this group and advertise/reach out differently.</p> <p>Correlations also illustrate the importance of the interconnectedness of GCM.</p>

Capital	Literature	Qualitative - inductive	Qualitative - deductive	Quantitative results	Notes
			wanted more personalised and tailored support.		
Mobilising capitals: employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reay's (2021) suggests that employers often recruit based on notions of merit identified with class, rather than on objective measures of talent. • Growth in HE has resulted in employers becoming more selective in targeting elite universities, seeing this as a form of educational credentialism (Ingram and Allen, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017b; Tholen and Brown, 2018). • Work experience and especially internships are an essential part of the recruitment cycle for employers as they act to differentiate students and demonstrate enthusiasm (Hunt and Scott, 2018). 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here is the link with fitting in and finding internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers support capital development for both FGS and non-FGS 	

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