'These little things blossom and then they die because they don't fit the world':

Inequalities, the subtle cruelties of unbelonging, and the "true academic" in "neoliberal" English academia

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Abstract

'These little things blossom and then they die because they don't fit the world': Inequalities, the subtle cruelties of unbelonging, and the "true academic" in "neoliberal" English academia
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Record numbers of academic staff, particularly from under-represented groups, are considering alternative careers, frequently citing "neoliberal" shifts contributing to overwork, burnout, and precarious positioning as emblematic of higher education (HE) in "crisis" (McKenzie, 2021). This qualitative, interdisciplinary cultural sociology project foregrounds the experiences of academic staff in early 21st-century English HE with the aim of bringing new understanding to the continued prevalence of inequalities in this environment. Data was generated in 2017-18 through semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 29 academics, highlighting the role of identity in who 'fits the world', 'blossoms', or 'dies'.

The research explores systemic inequalities and power, which are considered through the lens of belonging in relation to ideals and values circulating in English HE culture stemming from both traditional "ivory tower" and contemporary "neoliberal" cultures. Data analysis informed three core concepts—"unbelonging", the "proper academic", and "legibility zones"—and proposes that to avoid a sense of unbelonging an individual must be legible as a proper academic by achieving particular forms of success across various sites of belonging, which are divided into three zones: institutional/administrative, ideological/philosophical, and individual/biographical.

The thesis argues that some belonging sites bind into over-arching and inter-related narratives, creating cumulative ideals that are profoundly exclusionary but not always or entirely "neoliberal". One such narrative is that of the "true academic" or "academic's academic", a sub-type of the proper academic constructed through the core beliefs "academia is a vocation", "knowledge is inherently good", and "proper academic practice is single-minded and altruistic". Together these contribute to the widespread but subtle cruelties of unbelonging and illegibility, fostering individual anxiety and (re)producing systemic inequalities. The research concludes that emulating the true academic involves prioritising unattainable and politicised ideals rendering many academic participants conflicted, disillusioned, ambivalent, and ripe for unsustainable (self-)exploitation.

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Acknowledgements

Professional acknowledgements

Funding

Reuse of prior work

Although I do not explicitly import any of it, a palimpsest may remain of my MA dissertation 'Masculinity, authority, and the illusion of objectivity in academic discourse', completed for Goldsmiths, University of London, as part of a degree conferred in 2013.

Thank you to the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths for their support of my intellectual development at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and particularly to Josh Cohen for his mentorship, reference-writing, and feedback, which was instrumental in more ways than one in the development of this project.

Reuse of current work: presentations

Parts of this thesis, in earlier stages of development, have been presented at:

- Feminist and Women's Studies Association biennial conference—2017 (University of Strathclyde, Scotland)
- Gender and Education Association conference—2018 (University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia)
- Launch of City, University of London's Gender and Sexualities Research Centre—2019
- King's College London's Centre for Public Policy Research seminar series (Wren Butler, 2020)—https://vimeo.com/464800380
- Lancaster University's Educational Research seminar series (Wren Butler, 2022b)—https://youtu.be/ftyc4xL7noc

Thank you to the organisers of these events for their acceptance/invitation of participation.

Reuse of current work: publications

A condensed summary of the central concepts and arguments employed in this thesis has been published as an article (Wren Butler, 2021) in *Social Inclusion*'s themed issue 'Inclusive universities in a globalized world', edited by Liudvika Leišytė, Rosemary Deem, and Charikleia Tzanakou.

An early discussion of some key themes appears as a chapter (Wren Butler, 2022a) in *The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education*, edited by Michelle Addison, Maddie Breeze, and Yvette Taylor (this publication was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic; the material was written in 2019).

Thank you to the editors of these publications for featuring my work, and to them and the anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback.

Personal acknowledgements

I saved writing this section until last. I've been looking forward to it—but I'm also conflicted about appearing self-indulgent or over-inflated: a lot of people helped me be the person who wrote this, but at the same time all I did was a PhD, after all. This project has, however, been the longest and hardest of my life, bar the broader project of staying alive, so I shall permit a little indulgence on two counts. First, small though the achievement is in the grand scheme, I owe a debt of thanks to those who aided, abetted, and tolerated me through the process. Second, I'm hopelessly nosy and really love reading other people's acknowledgements myself, the more fulsome the better, so maybe I'll be forgiven for going to town. If however you are the type who finds sincerity cringeworthy, please skip ahead :)

I moved to Lancaster from London to start this project in September 2016. A lot has happened both personally and collectively in the intervening six years, but I've tried to reach back and remember the people who really made a difference, even without knowing.

     Although there can be a tendency in academia to idealise the archetype of the lone, unattached, ultra-mobile scholar, I found moving to a new city in my early 30s, shedding my professional identity, and forming a structure for myself as a research student immensely taxing on my mental health. When my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer in December that year it precipitated a tailspin it took a long time to recover from and I leant heavily on people, some of whom I had only recently met, during that period. After his death in May 2017 I moved back to London and it "took a village" to hold space while I put myself back together.

     My relationship with my dad was complicated, and as is often the way with these things his illness and death were the catalyst for something bigger as much as a source of trauma in themselves. Still, I miss him more as time goes on and though he didn't

really know what a PhD was I hope he would be proud of this thesis (even though he'd never read it). It also transpired that, without even knowing, he left me a gift in the form of a sister whom I discovered in May 2019 and who has become a core element in my support network even from half a planet away. So, thank you to Stan Wren—for the DNA and for making me a Melora Golden, and thank you Melora for taking on the big sister role with such enthusiasm and grace. As for everyone else, I wanted to contextualise the precise nature of your contribution, but it really did get out of hand. If you don't know why I'm thanking you, send me a text!

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Thank you to Lou Elstow (and Poppy the emotional support dog) for everything; you have come to represent safety to me and I really value that.

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And finally, a blanket thank you to anyone who ever patiently listened while I talked about my research, read any of my work, asked about what I was doing, or buoyed me up when I started wailing.

Oh, and following Bothello & Roulet's (2019) example of acknowledging their detractors as motivators, thanks to the guy on OKCupid for your insightful commentary on my work and the field of gender studies: 'You have a PHD in polly pan

demi sexuality shit. For binary confused sapio people who are easily offended. FFS its not a PHD. Your not a doctor. Its not real. None of it is absolute fact.'

    I have proudly worn my personal strapline *for binary confused sapio people who are easily offended* for several years now and you are correct—none of this thesis is absolute fact and I am not a doctor. But thanks to your words ringing in my head keeping me going, I will be soon.

General Principles

1. Throughout this thesis I use the pronouns they/them/their when referring to other scholars when using names becomes overly repetitive. They/them/their in this context denotes gender-neutrality not non-binary gender: I do not know the preferred pronouns of all the scholars I cite and do not wish to make gendered assumptions based on forenames or have out-of-date references in future should preferences change as gender fluidity becomes more mainstream. I recognise that with the advent of non-binary designations they/them/their is not gender-neutral in the way it once was, and that this practice therefore also carries a risk of misgendering, but as of 2022 it is the most appropriate term I can think of. This also echoes a wider theme throughout the thesis of questioning the relevance of certain information, such as gender or other identity features (of researchers or research participants), and considering how this affects the receipt of information. How is our reading different when we know versus when we do not? Does it always matter? When does it matter? Who is marked and who is unmarked? If we do not know the same information about everybody, what is the effect of highlighting it in some cases and not in others?

2. Related to the above, as this project makes use of empirical interview data, research participants are also referred to as they/them/their unless their gender identity is orientated to within the excerpts under discussion. This also applies to other aspects of identity, which are not foregrounded unless by the participant themselves. The fact I have biographical and demographical information about the participants in this project does not mean it is always relevant, or rather, I am wary of attributing relevance to certain features where this may reveal nothing more than my own assumptions and biases. For reasons of anonymity, participants are denoted as "PX" according to the interview order (an approach I note Addison & Stephens Griffin, 2022, also take). I have deliberately avoided the use of pseudonyms for several reasons, the biggest being that names carry associations and in some cases reveal (or mislead) aspects of identity in a manner that frames how utterances are interpreted. It is hard to hear a name without imagining a physicality to accompany it, which I

personally find distracting; this is not a narrative-based project and it does not use case studies, thus I am less interested in building a story or personality for each participant individually but in connecting the common and divergent threads between them. The focus is on the utterance rather than the utterer, and if this seems disorientating I would invite you to consider why this context feels important, to what degree it is about validating the legitimacy of what has been said, and how your mind fills in the blanks. What assumptions will you make about this participant if I do not tell you who they are? And equally, what assumptions will you make about them if I do?

3. Since polytechnic and other further education (FE) institutions were granted university status in 1992, "the university" or "universities" has become a common shorthand for the higher education sector. Although, like HE policy does, I have tried to employ the phrase "higher education institution" (HEI) rather than "university", in recognition of the fact there are many types of institution offering HE-level education, not all of which would be defined as, or brand themselves as, traditional universities, much of the literature and popular discourse around HE invokes the language of The University. One of the difficult aspects of comparing academia now to academia in the past is that a significant portion of what now constitutes academia was not previously included: polytechnic colleges were not "academia", but those universities that were formerly polytechnics are. This highlights a difficulty of talking about academia more broadly, in that it is not clear exactly to what it refers or how different sets of people might interpret it; for example, most small specialist institutions (SSIs) do not define themselves as universities, preferring School or College, and as they operate within a narrow and practice-based field may not be considered 'academic' in the common sense of the word. For the purposes of this thesis, the terms university and HEI are used interchangeably and academia or "the academy" can be taken to include any institution that at the time under discussion was designated as a higher education provider. The way "academia" circulates is different in different types of institutions, even within institutions, so I do not mean to suggest that all HEIs are homogenous and interchangeable—far from it—but that all HEIs must operate within this wider institution that we call academia, that hovering above the HE sector is a

"collective consciousness" ideal of what academia is (as well as public policy that dictates in many key respects what academia should be, can be, and cannot be) and whether or not each individual HEI or department or research centre emulates this they are all responding to, negotiating with, acquiescing to, fighting against, a relatively stable norm. A central aim of this project is to get a clearer picture of what that norm is and what common conditions HEIs and all those within them must operate under, in order to reveal where they create or exacerbate inequalities.

4.   Single quotation marks and block quotes denote direct citation of either research participants or other texts, while double quotation marks indicate concepts or "scare quotes". Where words or short phrases appear in single quotation marks without attribution they are repeated or isolated from a longer, preceding quote within the same section.

5.   All italics appearing in quotations are original; removed or added italics are signalled in the relevant location. I use British English spellings but retain original style in quotes, hence inconsistencies.

6.   I am aware that I make frequent recourse to an undefined and unpleasantly proselytising "we" as a rhetorical device to call for collective action or make generalised observations. I acknowledge that this type of universalising is problematic as it is unclear who "we" is; it can have the function of erasing those who may not feel included in the we, alienating those who do not wish to be implicated in the we, and suggesting an assumed level of collective support or agreement for contentions. It also responsibilises everyone in the same way with no regard for nuance in who might be more or less able or willing to join forces and generalises problems that may be more localised than represented, whilst failing to attribute responsibility to anything specific: it can betray both ignorance and arrogance. In Grummell et al's (2009: 203) research one participant declares that 'society needs to remodel how it looks at work'— while this appeal to an external 'society' is a further step that distances the speaker from those who need to do this remodelling, it reminded me of the

pitfalls of appealing to a diffuse "we": it stops short of being useful. There are many things we may think should be different but simply stating this fact does little but reveal our beliefs, doing nothing to solve the thorny issue of how to practically engender change and who might take responsibility for spearheading it. As Ahmed (2007: 250) observes, "'everyone" quickly translates into "no one'" when responsibility is dispersed. Academia is much better at diagnosing problems than treating them, and I too am guilty of sidestepping concrete recommendations in favour of vague exhortations—I have justified this by claiming it is also dangerous to make bold proclamations without detailed study of their implications, but it bears explicit acknowledgement that I have elided my duty in some respects. It is easy to talk generally about what "should" happen, especially when that involves passing the buck on to "policymakers" or other nebulous entities, but how often is this followed up such that those identified as agents of change receive these recommendations and how much effort is made to learn whether the utopian proposals stemming from research are even practicable? There is nothing wrong with being "ideological" but there are tendencies to remain so stubbornly attached to "shoulds" that recommendations become entirely useless by virtue of being incompatible with what is realistically possible within the political and ideological architecture of the context. It is harder to see in disciplines that deal primarily in ideas, perhaps, but particularly in the realm of HE research I have seen statements that would be equivalent to an aeronautical engineering project seeking the fastest route from London to Auckland concluding that we should bore a hole through the centre of the earth: accurate, but useless. There can be an emptiness to some academic discourse in this sense, a vacuum between what is recommended, who can act upon it, and what can be feasibly done, and although soliciting a relevant audience beyond academia might be seen as a grubby attempt to generate an impact case study for the REF, this is not about grandstanding or self-promotion but about ensuring research *does* something. It is not "neoliberal" to suggest research should have utility and application, do more than simply become a vanity project for those of us fortunate enough to explore our areas of interest. So, my use of "we" is not ideal—though perhaps more palatable if seen as a "royal we" rather than a universal one—but I have not found a better alternative as yet.

7.   For the avoidance of doubt, where I propose that something "can be seen" in a particular way I am not suggesting that this is my personal perspective, or that it is a position that should be assumed, simply recognising that it is a way the thing could be, or is sometimes by some people, interpreted.

Introduction

Jess: And is he an academic?

P27: [C]ertainly not an academic in any true sense.

*

*P5: I had this little random programme for a while where I got people to have
their own little ideas and [...] do their own thing. But these little things blossom
and then they die because they don't fit the world.*

What is a "true" academic? What are the implications of being, feeling, or seeming like a "false" academic? What can the identity formulation of the "true academic" tell us about who finds higher education (HE) most welcoming, hospitable, and accepting and who struggles for legitimacy—about who 'fits the world', who 'blossoms', who 'dies', and who never attempts life in the first place?

This thesis explores these questions and more, based on data from interviews with 29 academics in English higher education institutions (HEIs) and my own experience of working in the university sector since 2007 (see Appendix 8). The underpinning interdisciplinary research project began in October 2016, with fieldwork conducted primarily in 2018.

It should be briefly noted that, as a researcher of academia as well as an HE employee, I undertake this project from an "insider" position (see Chapter 2). There are thus elements of auto-ethnographic reflective commentary that appear throughout, highlighting the "double vision" of those who both *do* and analyse what is done. This may seem informal, "anecdotal", but I hope also illustrative of positioning, a reminder that I am not a neutral or omniscient researcher but someone with intimate knowledge and personal experience of the arena under study. Furthermore, critiquing concepts of academic legitimacy in the form of a doctoral thesis—the prime function of which is to legitimise academic status—places me in a difficult position of simultaneously doing and undoing (see also Pereira, 2017: 17). My position also lends a desire to be clear in language and terminology: although this is work by an insider for

insiders, it is perhaps more likely to be read by those outside the subject discipline than usual. My primary audience is academics and students, but not necessarily qualitative social scientists; as I want this project to be accessible across specialisms, and particularly to the research participants who enabled its existence, there are processes and lexicons I make explicit for readers beyond the examiners of this thesis, who might deem certain clarifications unnecessary. I also acknowledge that my tone and register are less formal than might be expected and prone to prioritise rhetorical flourish over economy; this is both my natural style and a conscious choice that I hope makes this work both understandable and enjoyable to read (see Pereira, 2017: 18 on making discourse 'legible' as 'good scholarly writing').

Context and overview

UK society is far from equal, with long-standing disparities of life quality between both individuals and groups (Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF], 2022; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021a; Social Metrics Commission [SMC], 2018). Given the importance of economic resources for accessing life's necessities, wealth and income inequalities are an obvious area to consider and address, especially as these differences contribute to, as well as being products of, other irregularities such as condition of health, parent or carer status, or level of education.

Workless households are more likely to experience poverty and material deprivation; this in turn is associated with poorer health and wellbeing and reduced educational attainment (Adjei et al, 2022; SMC, 2018; ONS, 2016a). Consistent employment is therefore correlated with improved socioeconomic conditions, and higher levels of education are linked to greater earnings (ONS, 2017). Education—especially post-compulsory and "higher" education—is thus considered a key means of social mobility (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2016).

Despite efforts to increase HE participation the student population still does not reflect the broader composition of the UK (HESA, 2022a; ONS, 2019; Social Mobility Commission, 2019), and there are also disparities in attainment (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Young people who are white, abled, and from socioeconomically stable backgrounds, for example, are more likely to attend university, gain top grades once there, and excel in the labour market, than peers in other circumstances (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Maclean, 2022). In part this is because HE was the exclusive arena of elite

white men until relatively recently, giving this demographic an advantage (Bailyn, 2003; Hook, 2022; Thwaites & Pressland, 2017). This distorted representation then feeds into postgraduate student and academic staff populations, resulting in an environment where some identities are more visible than others (HESA, 2021b).

One explanation for why some are under-represented or under-perform in HE is that they do not experience the same level of belonging and inclusion in what is ultimately a social environment (Rogers, 2016; Wonkhe, 2022). Sense of belonging relies in part on bonds of similarity: "homophily" in a space confirms that "our kind of people" are welcome (Addison & Stephens Griffin, 2022). Where there are hierarchies this is especially important—the visibility of alike folks at senior levels enables those earlier in their journey to imagine themselves in positions of authority and see this as a legitimate aspiration. Being unable to locate oneself, meanwhile, suggests an inhospitable environment for people of our kind—or at least one we may find lonely. As P10 observes, with disappointment, 'I don't see anybody that I can relate to in more senior academic levels'.

Lack of diverse representation in academia, then, is both a symptom of and contributor to inequalities of participation, and can be partially explained by understanding the academic environment as one in which it is challenging to experience a sense of belonging or inclusion. Given the pivotal role HE is seen to play in improving socioeconomic circumstances, and given that the most socioeconomically disadvantaged are already least likely to pursue HE, as outlined above, it is therefore important to contribute to better awareness of what perpetuates these inequalities. If the institution we look to to help solve societal imbalances has imbalances of its own, its impact beyond itself will necessarily be limited.

In this project I take these concerns of inequalities and belonging and consider how they manifest in the experiences of academic staff. As those who embody the pinnacle of academic achievement, who gain the authority to create and maintain the norms and culture of HE, and who perform gatekeeping functions for prospective students and academics, academic staff hold a pivotal position in determining who and what HE represents. At the same time, within academia if not beyond it, academics are understood to be having a difficult time—over-worked, under-paid, over-managed, under-valued, reduced to little more than providers servicing customers (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Foster, 2017; Radice, 2013; Tight, 2010). There is widespread dissatisfaction encapsulated by ongoing industrial action by the Universities and

Colleges Union (Bergfeld, 2018), and record numbers of staff report a desire to leave the sector (Gewin, 2022; McKenzie, 2021). Twitter is aflame with complaint, anxiety, burnout, stress, and critique (Taylor & Breeze, 2020), and research is quick to attribute negative developments to a "neoliberal agenda" (see Section 1.4). It is clear that academics are in a collective state of unhappiness, and, curiously for a profession characterised by ideals of independence and freedom, consistently position themselves (in research and their own discourse) as disempowered, marginalised, 'besieged' (Piepmeier, 2011), and 'under attack' (Loveday, 2021). Furthermore, while these feelings might be understandable for those who struggle to gain purchase in HE due to being historically shut out, disenfranchisement appears to be equal opportunities in its dispersal. Most laypeople, however, would likely consider academia a privileged environment and a job better than most are afforded, offering wages above the national median average (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2021b; ONS, 2021b), relatively high autonomy (see Section 7.5.1), and the opportunity to devote employment hours to areas of deep personal significance (Foster, 2017).

The initial project aim was to identify what features of academic life compromise academics' sense of belonging and use the results to consider how different identities might be affected. Like Pereira (2017: 2), I 'conceptualise academic practice as shaped by ongoing struggles of, and the power to define, what can count as "proper" knowledge' and, by extension, a "proper" knower. Rather than beginning with a particular population I took a cross-section of academics, and rather than focus on how they were affected I looked at what caused the effect; this generated a comprehensive taxonomy of "sites of belonging" (SBs)—i.e. factors that enable or undermine feelings of belonging (see Chapter 3). Identifying the causal factors, and extrapolating these from a range of participant experiences, enabled it to be seen that everyone operating in the HE space is acted upon by the same forces even if the consequences play out differently. Taxonomising SBs pushed this further, demonstrating that these consequences are variable because of the different ways SBs interact for different identities.

I conceive of belonging as a spectrum (see Section 1.6). As such, each SB contains a range of potential positions, from most ideal to least (and what is most or least ideal may also shift according to context). Individuals therefore represent different blends of belonging and are legible and illegible in various ways; depending on their particular configuration, academics might be seen as conforming to certain "types", which may

hold different levels of esteem or utility in different contexts. Most important for belonging, though, I suggest, is to be legible as a legitimate academic in the eyes of *other academics* (who else, after all, is qualified to make this assessment?). As Hänel (2020: 345) points out, 'those close to us have a major impact on our identity and our self-recognition' and this can include 'those close to us intellectually' particularly in academic spheres where 'we build our identity at least partly from conversation and struggle' with people following similar intellectual pursuits.

Owing to the importance of peer recognition for academic validation, I sought to trace the SBs that cohere most readily to create a formulation of the "academic's academic" or "true academic", a specific iteration of the "ideal" or "proper" academic. This makes apparent that while some forms of legibility are seemingly more institutional—and thus frequently cast by both participants and other researchers as "neoliberal" in nature—they also form an essential part of "true academic" identity by making visible certain core beliefs, motivations, and self-conceptions that otherwise can only be known internally. Although this could be read as necessitating "performative" behaviour in order to demonstrate "academicness" externally it is important to note that it is only in certain types of doing that an inner sense of being can be realised—cultivating a sense of belonging through demonstrating "true academic" identity is not only, perhaps not even primarily, for the benefit of an external audience but in order to self-actualise. Unwinding the mechanics of this offers fruitful intelligence for understanding why academic dissatisfaction is as prevalent as it is, how inequalities in academia are perpetuated, and to what degree "neoliberalism" can really be held responsible (or, to what extent it is useful to do so).

Writing of women's and gender studies, Piepmeier (2011: 124) posited that as a subject area it operates under a 'besiegement narrative' that, while it may once have been appropriate to its fringe status, continues to permeate the discipline despite its acceptance into the main swim of academia. 'The narrative', they claim, 'has leverage because, as scholars, we're inclined to see it as plausible' (ibid.). I propose that there is scope to understand academic life more widely—from academics' perspectives at least—as labouring under a besiegement narrative that likewise 'has become "naturalized", a story that's taken for granted in the field and that's deployed in particular, often seemingly unconscious, ways' and serving as 'a tool for heightening marginality, intellectual and generational claim staking, and absolution' (ibid.). Like Piepmeier (ibid.) my point 'isn't that the besiegement narrative is uniformly used in

problematic ways' or that we 'should always be skeptical of it'; rather 'I'm examining—and calling into question—a particular set of ways in which scholars frame the field […] as besieged'.

Organisation of the thesis

I begin with an expanded look at issues touched upon above, to provide context and grounding in the main areas of research enquiry: power and inequalities, "neoliberalism", academia, and belonging.

In Chapter 2 I account for the considerations and practical processes undertaken in the recruitment and interview of the 29 individuals who comprise the participant sample, as well as in the analysis of the resulting data. I give particular attention to the problems of articulating the messy, often non-linear activities of research in an organised narrative, and discuss issues relating to ethics as well as reflection on my own perspective and position vis-a-vis knowledge production.

Chapter 3 expands my central underpinning concepts: the "proper academic", "legibility zones" (LZs), and "unbelonging". The proper academic encapsulates the collective, abstract ideal of an academic against which individual academics compare themselves and are compared. The activities, achievements, beliefs, features, and behaviours against which they are measured are termed "sites of belonging" (SBs), and these are divided into three categories, or legibility zones: the institutional, the ideological, and the individual. The more SBs a person emulates the ideal through, the more legible their identity as a proper academic is; conversely, where ideal features are absent or perceived to be lacking, the more illegible this identity becomes. The experience of being unintelligible, illegible, unreadable, or invisible as a proper academic produces unbelonging – a sense of not fitting in, being out of place, lacking harmony or resonance with the immediate environment. The multiplicity of SBs, the different significance attributed to them, their coexistence, intersection, and overlap, plus their shifting value in different contexts, means the experience of unbelonging is transient, mutable, contingent, and also compounded by intractable factors that intersect with broader societal inequalities. SBs can therefore be configured in various ways that reflect localised ideals and specific versions of the proper academic. The remainder of the thesis is given to exploring the formulation of one such figure—the "true academic".

The true academic is identified through three core beliefs: "academia is a vocation", "knowledge is inherently good", and "proper academic practice is single-minded and altruistic". These beliefs are narrativised through a variety of perspectives about academic identity, academic practice, academic institutions, and academic temperament, which are explored in Chapters 4-7.

In Chapter 4 I suggest that the idea of an academic as something one *is* rather than something one *does* requires validation through several SBs from LZ1; true academic identity is legitimised through administrative and bureaucratic processes that formalise the institutional relationship. However, the notion that being an academic is not a job so much as a 'lifestyle choice' (P3) contributes to a need to demonstrate a consuming passion for the work in order to make it visible that this is "who you are". At the same time, excessive working increases the chances of obtaining markers of success that confer institutional validations and ticks boxes in other SBs, while a taboo is created around instituting work/non-work boundaries due to emphasis on academia as an opportunity to fulfil a vocational destiny or "calling". This is also related to the belief that higher learning is an inherent good that is rightly pursued only for its own sake and is corrupted by outside concerns, especially economic ones. This is explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 illuminates "true academic" ideals around the role of the university, its construction as 'a great place of education' (P18), 'old-fashioned' (P9; P25) perceptions of its function, and beliefs about what its core missions should be. It also discusses the purpose of HE and the true academic's investment in its inherent value, which is perceived to be undermined by the expansion of the sector, resulting in calls to limit the number of universities and admissions. Finally I consider idealised visions of the true academic's life in academia, linking these to fantasies of the 'golden age' (Tight, 2010). The true academic is concluded to be an exclusionary ideal in part because its template dates back to a prior and not fully accurate conception of HE at a time when academia operated very differently, in part due to being occupied by very different identities.

If gaining and imparting knowledge are constructed as intrinsically valuable, Chapter 6 argues, then financialising them is perceived to sully their value: HE is viewed as something that should be pursued for its own sake only. I demonstrate how this ideology leads to a variety of related positions, such as antipathy towards tuition fees, investment in the idea that financial considerations change relationship dynamics

between students, academics, and HEIs in negative ways, and extreme suspicion of managers and "the university" as a bureaucratic apparatus on account of their perceived sympathy to neoliberalism. These ways of thinking, I contend, produce unresolvable inner conflicts for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, entrench false divisions within institutions, and continually reconstruct the HE environment as one that is hostile to anyone who wants or needs academia to have utility beyond itself. This not only manifests an exclusionary definition of the true academic but may also help explain why feelings of unbelonging are such nebulous, subtle cruelties and attempts to increase inclusivity so difficult: although the stated values of many working in HE are progressive, lurking beneath are more conservative philosophies.

Discussion culminates in Chapter 7, which explores the academic mindset and perception of a true academic as an intellectual, then considers some ways these traits are conveyed before moving to discuss how the true academic explains their professional success, foregrounding luck and hard work. In the process I highlight the inextricability of privilege from these factors; what exactly luck and hard work are, how they manifest, and the degrees of agency and resource available to mobilise them are unpicked, demonstrating the inequalities hiding even in these apparently random occurrences or personal qualities. Finally I tease out the motivations and pleasures of the true academic, using these ideals to add texture to the true academic's constitution—they are an idealist, motivated by social justice, independent and with a strong understanding of themselves as someone with a need for autonomy.

I therefore conclude that unbelonging is such a prevalent and collective experience because in the current global climate the ideals surrounding the true academic are widely unattainable, especially with an increasing perception of bifurcation between institutional and academic visions of the proper academic. Furthermore, chronic unbelonging clusters along similar lines to wider societal inequalities because the least privileged demographics struggle the most to become legible as true academics. Some people 'don't fit' in multiple ways, across several SBs and in more than one LZ, leading to a lack of cohesive "true academic" identity. Given the significance of the belief that academia is a vocation, any effect on professional identity in this context also has implications for personal identity and sense of self, raising the stakes—academia is (ideally) not "just a job" but the all-consuming realisation of a calling, incentivising self-exploitation in order to achieve legitimacy. I

therefore argue for both personal and collective interrogation of inherited ideals, myths, and fantasies about the world of HE both past and present, which contain within them contradictory, fallacious, and harmful beliefs that prop up inequalities. One contribution of the project is its attempt to trace the interplay between the external "demands" of the university and the actions needed to satisfy the internal craving for validated academic identity and belonging, which are often perceived as in conflict.

However, I retain some ambivalence about my arguments, many of which I did not expect to make at the outset of this project six years ago, or even six months ago (indeed, I have made opposite suggestions in previous outputs). Although my views may in places appear stridently held, my aim is to create clear vantage points without necessarily claiming ownership of them, so that we might see how things look from another perspective: if I remove the lens of neoliberal critique how does this change the picture? Accordingly, I pose rhetorical—or perhaps more accurately, hypothetical—questions throughout; questions to which I do not have or seek answers, that perhaps are not answerable—as provocations that I hope have more consequence and substance than mere thought experiments but nonetheless are intended to trouble more than to settle. It must also be noted that small-scale research has limitations, although as the data used here focuses on participants' understandings of collective sentiments I am not simply generalising from singular perspectives but unpicking respondents' own appeals to dominant beliefs.

Although some of this project's questions and suggestions are specific to English HE, there are degrees of portability and disaggregation possible that render it relevant to other spheres. Academia is a global institution, and many of the themes elicited here will resonate internationally; likewise, there are useful illuminations of the relationship between personal and professional identity in the arena of work more broadly, especially in relation to "vocational" jobs, that extend beyond HE. At the top level, observations about pervasive societal inequalities are not confined to HE even if they find particular forms of expression in this world, and the analytical framework of LZs as a tool for identifying cultural values has potential for expansion and adaptation in other areas. Therefore although this is ostensibly a project "about" academia, at its core—and at my core as a researcher—the primary concerns are wider: cultural norms, shared ideals, the intricate mechanisms of belonging and unbelonging, and the interplay between the subtle cruelties we experience as individuals and the brute force of systemic injustices beyond, as well as within, the realm of HE.

Chapter 1: Context and Justification

1.1 Introduction

This chapter assembles the main contexts and existing concepts with which the thesis engages, to fulfil three purposes. Firstly, to ensure the working definitions of the terms I employ are clear; second, to ground them in relevant literature; third, to demonstrate the issues at stake and rationale for centring these areas of enquiry. The debates presented in this section are intended to indicatively situate the project within its milieu pending more extensive engagement with previous scholarship in subsequent chapters. Due to both the significant body of work in areas intersecting with this thesis and my concern with the contemporary moment of English HE, I have concentrated primarily on recent and UK-focused literature (post-2010)[1] as 'recent dramatic shifts in the social, economic and political landscape of UK HE mean that we cannot assume any difficulties currently faced are analogous to those experienced, reported and theorised in […] earlier scholarship' (Rickett & Morris, 2021: 88). Indeed, even the 'contemporary moment' is difficult to pin down for a project taking place over six years and when what characterises the context is not universally agreed but a matter of interpretation, position, and political perspective. For this reason I have attempted to give a flavour of the central influences and issues at stake in the recent history of UK HE without giving too much attention to their evils or virtues, which are well explored in other literature, some of which I gesture to throughout the following sections.

The central areas under consideration in this chapter are: power and inequalities and the relationship between them; neoliberalism as a concept; contemporary UK academia including its construction as a neoliberal institution and force for social mobility; belonging and its significance. My own concepts of unbelonging, the proper academic, and legibility zones, which I defined briefly in the introduction, are treated in Chapter 3 along with their orientation amongst research that uses or creates allied ideas. Although I do not discuss the concept of the ideal in general here—this too is

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[1] I also avoid "post-Covid" sources in order to characterise the UK context at around the time fieldwork was conducted.

explored in Chapter 3—it is worth signalling that where I refer to an ideal, or a discourse of the ideal, I refer to a dominant abstract imaginary not a "real" or concrete object or my personal opinions or values. The mythos of the ideal, even for those who question, critique, or turn away from it, holds sway as a spectre or yardstick and has impact in the "real world" nonetheless. Investigating collective ideals using small-scale research has limitations of generalisability; at the same time, I am primarily interested in how participants perceive generalisations and how they interact with those contained in the literature and my own observations from 15 years of immersion in academia. In other words, I am not interested just in what participants believe, but what they believe others believe, and how their beliefs are presented as emblematic of the wider sentiments of the sector. Academics as objects of study are likely to be especially aware that when engaging in research they are not just speaking for or about themselves; whether their wider observations are "true" is not so much the point as their contribution to and reflection of dominant discourses.

1.2 Power and inequalities

This section explains how I conceive of power and its role in creating and maintaining societal inequalities, suggesting that inequality in the UK is primarily understood in economic terms that use social class as a shorthand for these disparities. I outline why I avoid this language myself and introduce Delpit's (1988) theory of the 'culture of power' before providing some context regarding inequalities in the UK and the importance given to education as an apparatus of social mobility.

I take as my starting point the understanding that all inequalities are fundamentally a product and reflection of power disparities. In any given context there are resources (physical or otherwise) that hold more value; those with greater ability to amass these resources accrue more power, and those with more power are able to both define which resources are considered valuable and control access to them. As Skeggs (2003: 10) summarises:

> attribution of value always depends on the perspective that is taken: for whom is something valuable or not? If we want to understand exchange we need to know from whose perspective and interest is value attributed. Who decides what is valuable, what exists as a resource or asset and what can be exchanged? And what relationships make this exchange and valuation a possibility?

Inequalities between social groups persist because of the cyclical nature of power and the ability of the powerful—whether they consciously use it or not—to structure the context in their favour. These are often called "structural" or "systemic" inequalities and are distinct from, but not mutually exclusive with, individual interpersonal inequalities that may arise in localised situations; as Burke (2018: 366) points out, 'structures of inequality are always intersecting, embodied formations that operate at systemic, cultural, symbolic and affective levels'. Examples of structural inequalities might be the gender wage gap, where women are on average paid less than men for equivalent work (Costa Dias et al, 2020), or the race attainment gap, where people of colour achieve lower grades in educational endeavours than their white peers when all other things are equal (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Structural inequalities can be hard to see—subtle cruelties—because they operate at a collective level, meaning they can be attributed to other factors or dismissed as isolated examples. They are also challenging to address as their cause is rarely singular, novel, or overt; although the UK has equalities laws that protect people with certain characteristics from discrimination, not all processes that disadvantage some groups more than others are outright discriminatory (Mason & Minerva, 2022). Likewise, laws do not prevent unlawful behaviour, only offer a means to challenge it, which requires both knowledge of the law and the resources necessary to mount a case. Inequalities therefore often persist through diffuse mechanisms, some of which I detail in this thesis.

The key features of power as I conceive it are agency and control, and power is not absolute but relational (Foucault, 1982): it is an omnipresent dynamic between two or more parties like currents in the ocean whose direction and strength are determined by the interplay of forces—the moon's gravity, the global wind pattern, the weight of the water. In social terms, because resources have value in different ways and contexts, power relationships can be complex (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017); there are gradations of power, shifting levels and forms of inequality, as well as underlying patterns in who is collectively empowered or disempowered by the position of their social group(s) in relation to others (Foucault, 1982). As Anderson-Gough et al (2000: 1171) note, 'power does not simply take and repress, it also gives and enables' and like Skeggs (2003: 3) highlights, 'some people can use the classifications and characteristics of race, class or femininity'—or other categorisations—'as a resource whilst others cannot because they are positioned *as* them'.

1.2.1 Social class

Societal inequalities and power differentials are often conceived of in terms of social class and a great deal of sociological literature has been devoted to the definition, delineation, and discussion of class stratification.[2] What exactly indicates social class is debated, with some measures using occupation or income as a proxy and others taking a more holistic view. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital is one of the more prevalent understandings, especially in the field of educational research, positing that social class is comprised of three dimensions: economic capital (wealth), cultural capital (knowledge), and social capital (connections). The more capital a person has, the higher their social class. Although I do not map my argument onto class categories or import Bourdieu's framework wholesale, my approach is similar—what Bourdieu refers to as 'capital' I describe as 'resources'—and what these competing delineations make clear is that social class is a *concept,* just one way of talking about patterns of power and value not a universal truth. Although I recognise the utility of class as a concept to some conversations, I do not use a class lens or categorisations here as I find them unnecessarily restrictive and especially difficult to delineate in the context of academic workers whose class position may have shifted as a consequence of engaging in HE, as Stone (2022: 130) reflects:

> it would be crass and insensitive of me not to recognise that my professional status, and all the trappings that entails, means I can no longer "technically" be classified as working-class; however, I still consider myself to be working-class, because despite upward class mobility, my habitus [see Bourdieu, 1986] continues to shape everything I do, everything I think, everything I feel and how I interact with those around me.

Class, then, is not a fixed identity, despite circumstances of upbringing indelibly infusing everything we do, think, and feel, and how we relate with others, even when the situation subsequently changes (Hoskins, 2010).

Rather than social position being defined by a set of distinct categories I instead see scales of resource accumulation operating as a multi-dimensional spectrum that does not have neat cutoff points bracketing groups off from one another. At the same time, I acknowledge that in the UK in particular social class is a central preoccupation and forms a large part of many people's identities (Friedman et al, 2021; Savage, 2015)

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[2] As class is not a dimension in my analysis it is not relevant to review here.

as a consequence of proud tribal affiliation or externally-imposed circumscription or stigma (Friedman et al, 2021). Class is a "concept" (and in HE a difficult one to pin down in statistics; Harrison, 2017) but one that I am aware has real-life effects on how people conceive of themselves and are constructed by others including the state (Friedman et al, 2021). I do not mean to dismiss the significance of social class, therefore, only to explain its lack of prominence in my work. The decision to elide terminology such as "working-class" or "middle-class" in favour of more general terms like "socioeconomic (dis)advantage", I must also admit, is partly informed by my own complicated, confused, and uncertain relationship with class as it pertains to my life and identity. I am wary of manifesting Friedman et al's (2021) assertion that a significant proportion of people 'misrepresent' themselves as working-class (opening interesting questions too about self-identification and its limits). My upbringing was characterised by instability of every sort and this, as it does for Stone, leaves its marks upon my psyche and movement in the world, but I am deeply uncomfortable with describing myself as working-class and the appeal to group membership that suggests: my experience is that of being an outsider, everywhere. Perhaps this more than anything informs my approach to this project; my hope to capture something that everyone can find themselves in even if they have never felt a strong sense of acceptance, belonging, or affiliation with the social groups that so much research constellates around, who cannot find themselves in the literature.

It is necessary, however, to use the language of social class on occasion, both as research participants themselves invoke the terminology and as so much literature relating to inequalities in HE uses this lens. But, I cannot provide any stable definition for designations such as "working-class" or "middle-class" as my use of these terms will be drawn from their operationalisation by other people who have their own meanings (it is interesting to consider how participants' own definitions of their class position may be affected by comparisons to the 'reference group' of other academics who represent a disproportionately privileged sub-set of society, as outlined by Friedman et al, 2021: 724). My interests remain in distributions of resource and power—which resources confer power, inequalities of access to resources, and how and why such disparities perpetuate—and in my own analysis I prefer to think about the circulation of power in a dynamic way—or rather, to focus on power itself and look at it not as something that "belongs" to some groups and not others but as a force that amasses in particular areas (Foucault, 1982). Instead of examining the effects

of power on certain populations and from that considering "gendered power" or "classed power" and so on, I examine what constitutes a valuable resource and use this to open a consideration of who may be advantaged or impeded as a result. I hope that this approach may foreground the common experiences and shared battles at play in HE today, even if the consequences are felt in different shades, rather than atomising impacts by assigning them to particular groups. I wish also to highlight the forces themselves to demonstrate that all forces act upon, and are enacted by, everybody, for better or worse and to greater or lesser degrees.

I therefore find Delpit's (1988) 'culture of power' a useful framing for understanding how people can be shut out of 'participating' in power. Delpit's work is concentrated on race and class; the way I employ this concept is more broad, in part because of the limitations Delpit (1988: 282) acknowledges in providing more than a 'simplistic' account of social categorisations. Like Delpit (ibid.) I am more interested in the 'cultural identifications' suggested by what is valued in academia than in characterising those values as the purview of a particular social group and like Skeggs (2003: 14) I believe that '[h]ow people are valued […] is always a moral categorization, an assertion of worth, that is not just economic'—hence my focus on ideals and legitimacy or "properness". As Skeggs (ibid.) continues:

> Making legitimate (making things valid) places the thing (be it person or object) that is being valued in the realm of dominant categorizations. As it is inscribed with value it becomes part of the symbolic economy. The moral evaluation of cultural characteristics is central to the workings and transmission of power.

Who in academia is permitted to become 'part of the symbolic economy' and made 'legitimate', and in what contexts?

1.2.2 The culture of power

Delpit (1988: 282) hypothesises that there exists a 'culture of power' and that its rules 'are a reflection of the culture of those who have power', similar to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of economic, cultural, and social capital.[3] Those who are not 'already a

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[3] Delpit shifts between talking of power as something people 'have' and something they 'participate in'. I prefer to think, like Foucault (1982), of power as a current rather than a currency—something that cannot be owned or held but that flows towards, from, and between parties.

participant' in this culture, Delpit claims, are disadvantaged by the fact the rules are not made explicit, which acts as a barrier to acquiring power (ibid.). Furthermore, those who wield power are less aware of and 'least willing to acknowledge its existence' (ibid.)—a condition that Mills (2007) refers to as 'white ignorance' and Jenkins (2017) extends to power formations beyond race and terms 'privileged ignorance'. The example Jenkins (2017: 211) gives is of a white US-born citizen who, due to growing up in a white community, lacks knowledge of the history of racial oppression and thus of the role racism plays both in the lives of people of colour and in maintaining their own white privilege (of which they are equally unaware). Their ignorance is a product of their privilege, and a privilege in itself—the easier life of one who does not have to know, maintained by the circumstances that divorced them from this knowledge. This is relevant to the thesis because my own position is one that generally assumes ignorance and unconsciousness to be greater forces in maintaining the culture of power than malign intent (Bailyn, 2003)—although it is worth noting that 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey, 2019) can contribute in various ways. I say this not to strip the privileged of accountability, but to better describe what I perceive to be happening: clumsy misuses of power stemming from individuals' lack of awareness of how much relative power they are able to direct (or how much relative privilege they hold; Friedman et al, 2021), especially in a context where, as I discuss in Section 3.3.2, impostor syndrome is rampant. Ignorance is a particular problem because 'to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same' (Delpit, 1988: 292). Burke (2018: 374) similarly points out that '[d]iscriminatory processes are not necessarily explicit and intentional; they are often subtle, subjective and almost invisible' because '[t]hose with the authority to judge and assess are often deeply entrenched' in the normative culture of their communities of practice. This complicity and the idea that 'good intentions are only conscious delusions about […] unconscious motives' (Delpit, 1988: 285) are concerns that pervade this thesis.

As an educator, Delpit (1988: 283) is concerned with the circulation of the culture of power in school contexts and the fact that '[c]hildren from middle-class homes tend to do better […] because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power'. My preoccupations are similar: the ideals that I speak of are in a sense the codes governing the culture of power of contemporary academia, and I am interested in how identifying academia's 'rules', which in turn maintain its values, can provide insight into who, by extension, is shut

out. As Hewertson and Tissa (2022: 23) assert, the culture of power

> pervades the environment and represents a dominant value and belief system that […] unfairly privileges the already dominant groups. This dominant culture treats this group as the "ideal" and they have access to more power and resources than other more marginalised groups. This creates a tiered society that reinforces the dominant ideal group as the norm, through specific rules and opportunities that they automatically have access to.

1.2.3 Inequalities in the UK

There are many ways of measuring inequalities, and which inequalities are considered most important reflect the values of a society. It is no surprise, then, that focus often falls on economic disparities between different populations in the UK, whether they be compared in terms of gender, region, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or etcetera. However, while this attention to fiscal concerns betrays a preoccupation with wealth as an indicator of status and wellbeing, poverty is problematic for more than ideological reasons, comorbid with decreased life expectancy, poor health outcomes, and reduced quality of life (Adjei et al, 2022). Those with lower economic means—who may sometimes be referred to by the catchall phrase "the working-class"—are disproportionately people of colour and people with long-term health conditions compared to the overall population (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; JRF, 2022; SMC, 2018). Factors such as lone parenting also increase the chances of financial struggle (ONS, 2017; SMC, 2018). Although the UK does have a benefits system to support those who cannot work, are seeking employment, or require additional assistance with child-related expenses, the payments involved are minimal and declining (O'Grady, 2022), allowing people to tread water at best. The primary means by which socioeconomic status can be elevated, then, is through earning an independent wage (SMC, 2018); however, there are practical limitations on this, even for those who are willing and able to work. There are curtailments on what kind of labour people can do depending on their skills and qualifications, and UK society requires a substantial number of "unskilled" workers to perform low-paid but essential jobs. Being poor is also more expensive—for example due to the interest on credit purchases or the need to buy cheaper and shorter-lasting items (laid out incisively and creatively by *DiscWorld* author Terry Pratchett (1993: 32) in the 'Vimes boots index')—thus material deprivation is cyclical and intergenerational, a phenomenon known as the "poverty trap".

The ONS (2021a) determined that income inequality between the richest and poorest UK households in the 2021 financial year was 48.6% for original income, and 34.4% for disposable income based on the Gini coefficient (0% represents total equality, 100% the highest degree of inequality), demonstrating a significant gulf of living standards and possibility to save for the future between groups. A report by the SMC (2018) highlights the issues at stake:

> 7.7 million people are living in persistent poverty. […] Persistence rates are particularly high for children and working-age adults who live in workless families and families with a disabled person. Given that we know that long periods in poverty can be particularly damaging to people's lives and prospects, this is a significant concern. […] [N]early half of the 14.2 million people in poverty live in families with a disabled person. […] [C]lose to nine in ten (88%) of those living in workless couple families with children are in poverty. This compares to just three in one-hundred (3.3%) of those in equivalent families where both adults work full time. The situation is echoed in statistics on persistent poverty; while 13.1% of children in working families are in persistent poverty, 48.7% of all children in workless families are in persistent poverty.[4]

The correlation between unemployment and poverty is stark, as is that between poverty and disability and child-rearing. Figures relating to children are especially concerning given the limiting effect poverty has on future prospects. The importance of work—and work that pays adequately—to reducing both absolute and relative poverty levels, and closing equalities gaps, is therefore significant.

Education is seen to be a central route by which the poverty trap can be escaped, with raised education levels equated with higher earnings (ONS, 2017). According to the ONS, 'people in the UK who have a low personal education level are nearly five times more likely to be poor in adulthood than those with high personal education levels, once other factors are accounted for', and '11 times more likely to be severely deprived' (ONS, 2016a). Education levels, too, can be generational: 'children of a father with a low level of education are 7.5 times more likely to have a low educational outcome themselves, compared with those who had a highly educated father', and three times more likely in the case of the mother (ibid.). Although those who leave education with at least one GCSE grade A*-C and those who pursue apprenticeships both have similar or higher gross earnings at age 21 to those who

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[4] Persistent poverty is defined as spending 'all or most of the last four years [or more] in poverty'.

graduate from an HE programme, HE graduates generally accrue higher lifetime earnings and work in more skilled jobs (ONS, 2017). University or equivalent attendance is therefore presented as the gold standard for improving socioeconomic status. Given the importance of HE as a potential leveller of inequalities, then, it is a worthwhile site of study, especially because, as I show throughout this thesis, it is an environment that is both structured by its own inequalities and that perpetuates systemic injustices (Naidoo, 2018; Read & Leathwood, 2018). I suggest that this may be partly a consequence of academia's suffusion with beliefs that "instrumental" reasons for pursuing advanced education—such as increasing earning potential or employability—are not "proper" motivations and reveal a person to be ill-fitting to academic culture, marking them for unbelonging. This reasoning can be conflated with, and denigrated as, a "neoliberal" imperative to become a good "entrepreneur", a criticism I question the utility of given the lack of alternative approaches available and clear benefits of gaining the skills and resources necessary to participate in the contemporary culture of power.

1.3 Neoliberalism

The language of "neoliberalism"—I hesitate to say *concept* because, as I show below, the terminology is often deployed empty of definition—is ubiquitous in contemporary cultural-political-economic critiques by the political left (Dunn, 2017), particularly as related to HE (Tight, 2018). Before I discuss the construct of "the neoliberal university", however, I want to consider the utility of neoliberalism as a concept on its own—although this presents several problems.

I will not be using neoliberalism as a paradigm for analysing contemporary academia myself (see below), so providing my own definition would only confuse things. However, the discourse of neoliberalism abounds in both academic literature and participants' testimony, and a major strand of the thesis is invested in interrogating this framing. Problematically, though, neoliberalism is an exceptionally woolly concept (Dunn, 2017; Tight, 2018; Venugopal, 2015), made fluffier still for frequently being used in an undefined manner (Dunn, 2017; Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013) that suggests it is taken to be universally understood as having a stable meaning (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013); instead it operates as an empty signifier leaving the reader to fill in the gap with their own interpretation. So, I cannot leave neoliberalism floating around, unanchored

to meaning, and replicate this problem. Equally, I cannot provide a clear definition because my engagement with neoliberalism is primarily an interrogation of its uses by others, all of whom are liable to understand the term differently. I even considered committing the academic sin of consulting the dictionary, thinking this might represent a stable definition from which to indicate a general flavour of what these diverse meanings constellate around. But even the dictionaries cannot agree, with at least one providing alternative definitions for British and American English (this, perhaps, is telling of the slippage given the international nature of academia alongside, as Dunn, 2017, points out, the quite specific effects of so-called neoliberal developments in different countries). Thus this relatively neutral outline from Oxford Reference (n.d.) will have to suffice:

> It seems generally to be agreed that [neoliberalism] refers to the liberalizing of global markets associated with the reduction of state power: state interventions in the economy are minimized; privatization, finance, and market processes are emphasized; capital controls and trade restrictions are eased; free markets, free trade, and free enterprise are the buzzwords. Beyond that, definitions become more partial.

Having established a basic sense of what underpins the 'moving target' (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013: 262) of neoliberalism, I now move to briefly explore some academic understandings of, and problems with, the concept. This illustrates what those who refer to neoliberalism *might* mean and justifies my own rejection of the term. Like others who have engaged more fulsomely in such analysis I am at pains to elaborate that 'objections to the use of the term should not somehow be taken to imply an approval of the numerous practices identified as neoliberal. To query the term is not to accept, as some have implied, a right-wing position' (Dunn, 2017: 436; see also Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013: 261).[5]

One of the biggest challenges in pinning down what neoliberalism refers to is that it does not "exist" in the sense that there is no clear progenitor and those who are seen to ascribe to and perpetuate the "neoliberal agenda" do not use the term themselves (Dunn, 2017; International Monetary Fund, 2016; Rodgers, 2018; Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013; Venugopal, 2015). As none will lay claim to being neoliberals, then, it

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[5] For insightful critiques of neoliberalism as a concept please see Dunn (2017) and Venugopal (2015); for similar analysis specifically in the context of educational research see Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) and Tight (2018).

is a descriptor applied only to (right-wing) others by their (left-wing) critics (Dunn, 2017; Rodgers, 2018; Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013; Venugopal, 2015), suggesting that the very people who enact "neoliberalism" do not agree that it is "real". This is further complicated by the fact neoliberalism can be used to characterise multiple spheres and 'has been understood in diverse ways to characterise a huge range of social practices' (Dunn, 2017: 436). Rodgers (2018: 81) for example, astutely observes:

> the problem with neoliberalism is neither that it has no meaning nor that it has an infinite number of them. It is that the term has been applied to four distinctly different phenomena. 'Neoliberalism' stands, first, for the late capitalist economy of our times; second, for a strand of ideas; third, for a globally circulating bundle of policy measures; and fourth, for the hegemonic force of the culture that surrounds and entraps us.

The differences between these phenomena are 'large and important' because '[t]hey differ in the objects they name, the causal relations they outline, and the vulnerabilities they reveal' and '[m]ost importantly they differ in the political strategies they encourage for contesting the forces advancing on us' (ibid.: 85). However, the breadth and diffusion of how neoliberalism is conceived contributes to a convincing argument of its nature as 'impossibly vague' (Dunn, 2017: 441): a 'conceptual trash-heap' (Rodgers, 2018: 80) or 'lucky-dip' (Dunn, 2017: 451) that 'becomes an obstacle to critical social scientists' efforts to identify the relations between different social practices and the main drivers of change' (Dunn, 2017: 436). Venugopal (2015: 169) notes that 'an extraordinary number of different and often contradictory phenomena have come to be identified as neoliberal', thus if it 'is indeed everywhere and in everything, then it can be productively deployed only as a contextual wallpaper, for example in reference to "the neoliberal age" or "paradigm", rather than as an analytical work-horse'. Likewise Rowlands and Rawolle (2013: 260) assert that '"neoliberalism" is used in academia to explain almost anything and everything' and can be reduced to 'everything I don't like about the world' (Laidlaw, 2015, quoted in Dunn, 2017: 442), 'a catch-all explanation for anything negative' (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013: 261) and 'universal scapegoat' meaning anything 'out there, impacting on me, that I don't really understand and don't much like' (Tight, 2018: 279).

As detractors of neoliberalism-as-a-concept are keen to point out, identifying the failures of the term is not to deny or applaud the phenomena it is often used to describe. Indeed, the problem is precisely that

> by using 'neoliberalism' in a non-specific way (and by not challenging the myths associated with its use) we are at risk of perpetuating the dominant discourse of neoliberalism rather than disrupting or challenging it. Simply by giving space to that discourse in our work we demonstrate its value; it is only by critically examining that discourse and its impact (and by deconstructing it) that we have any hope of starting a revolution, let alone participating in one (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013: 269).

Likewise, Rodgers (2018: 78) asks a series of pertinent questions that it bears holding in mind throughout reading this thesis:

> Is the overnight ubiquity of the term 'neoliberalism' the sign of a new acuteness about the way the world operates? Or is it a caution that a word, accelerating through too many meanings, employed in too many debates, gluing too many phenomena together, and cannibalizing too many other words around it, may make it harder to see both the forces at loose in our times and where viable resistance can be found?

Part of the problem is that a 'single verbal omnibus' (ibid.: 86) can only flatten the nuances between the crowded phenomena on board, which increases the 'risk of an overly simplistic binary' (Dunn, 2017: 449) and 'provides little help identifying what exactly the user is against', thus 'provides at best a blunt instrument for practical politics […] tending to augur a backward-looking even nostalgic politics and one which can exaggerate the benign nature of state intervention' (ibid.: 451). As Rowlands and Rawolle (2013: 261) point out, framing neoliberalism as 'a unitary concept' means that 'it is very difficult to draw a distinction (or a clear dividing line) between those things that are attributable to neoliberalism and those that are not' (ibid.: 264). Furthermore, Venugopal (2015: 183) observes that there can be slippage between Rodgers' (2018) neoliberal phenomena such that neoliberalism as 'a rhetorical tool and moral device' can drift, enabling 'critical social scientists outside of economics to conceive of academic economics and a range of economic phenomena that are otherwise beyond their cognitive horizons and which they cannot otherwise grasp or evaluate'. This is central to my turn away from neoliberalism as an analytical lens—not only is it imprecise and 'one-sided' (Venugopal, 2015), but to fully understand the many items in the neoliberal slop bucket I would need a far greater comprehension of economics and politics. Therefore I interpret the regular framing of academia as a newly neoliberal space less as a tool for 'analysis and deliberation' (ibid.: 179) and more as a positioning device: 'neoliberalism is defined, conceptualized and deployed exclusively by those who

stand in evident opposition to it, such that the act of using the word has the twofold effect of identifying oneself as non-neoliberal, and of passing negative moral judgment over it' (ibid.).

As I show later, opposing perceived neoliberalism is constitutive of ideal academic identity, and this presents some thorny dilemmas when the imperative to disavow the neoliberal logically results in having to align with equally, if differently, problematic and conservative ideologies, fulfilling Dunn's (2017: 448) warning that '[t]he haste to condemn contemporary capitalism can mean seeing the past in too favourable a light'.

1.4 Academia

This section establishes the current landscape of the UK HE sector and provides a brief history of recent developments in academic policy. I summarise my understanding of what is meant by the phrase "neoliberal academia", the uses and problems of academia's positioning as a meritocratic avenue for social mobility, and inequalities issues within the sector for both students and academics. This indicates why HE is a worthwhile site of study not just in its own right but as a microcosm of society more generally, especially given its elevated position: we look to academia to "better" us and, by implication, it should be leading the way. As Gillberg (2020: 18) points out, '[i]nsofar as a university is a centre for knowledge culture and making contributions upholding the social order, it is not just a knowledge producer but a transmitter of culture, and as such a central actor in society'. Insight into the mechanisms of inequality in HE can therefore shed light on disparities in other areas as well as helping remove barriers to participation in university study and employment.

The world of UK HE, while still primarily comprised of public institutions, is increasingly perceived as "marketised" in step with changes in government policy relating to the human composition and funding structures of universities (e.g. Ball, 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz 2013; Loveday, 2018b; Mountz et al, 2015; Tight, 2010). The UK HE sector has been steadily expanding since the 1990s, partly to accommodate a greater number of students, especially from populations with traditionally low participation in academia (Office for Students, 2022). Although there have been criticisms of this growth—which can be seen as part of a "neoliberal" project to turn universities into training grounds for productive workers to serve the economy

(Ashwin, 2020; Foster, 2017; Giroux, 2002; Loveday, 2018b)—education and increased labour market participation, as discussed above, do have individual benefits (and "the economy" is not a separate entity only of interest to the rich—our fates, too, are tied to the economic performance of our countries and locales—see also McArthur. 2011).

Although engaging in HE has the potential to enable greater participation in the culture of power (Delpit, 1988) for those of lower socioeconomic means, academia has its own culture of power: it is neither a "level playing field" nor a leveller of inequalities even though educational attainment can endow people with more culturally valuable resources. UK society, as discussed above, is unequal; as in most other areas of the world, some groups are structurally advantaged—men relative to women and non-binaries, white people relative to people of colour, abled people relative to disabled people, heterosexuals relative to LGBTQIA+ folks, etcetera. While education in general is understood to be an individual and social good, hence compulsory schooling to the age of 16, specialised HE has always been selective. Initially, HE was the province exclusively of elite white men (Bailyn, 2003), and this has broadened by degrees to the point where now, in theory, anyone can attend university provided they achieve the grades necessary to secure a place and can finance the endeavour. As many have observed, though, the legacy of academia's exclusive beginnings continues to permeate HE both culturally and in relation to student demography and attainment (e.g. Bailyn, 2003; Hook, 2022; Lumsden, 2022; Pereira, 2017; Thwaites & Pressland, 2017).

Background inequalities have a knock-on effect to the academic staff population: according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2022c) for the academic year 2019-20, 53% of academic staff in England were male, 72% of professors in England were male and 82% were white, 75% of all academic staff in England were white, and only 5% of academic staff in England had a declared disability. If prevalence is considered not just in terms of raw numbers but of visibility, seniority, and authority, white male abled academics are certainly over-represented. This is significant not just because it reveals inequalities in who can attain and/or who aspires to attain academic jobs, which require further probing, but because the balance of participants in any context affects the culture of power in that environment. In other words, the ascendancy of particular groups may be self-perpetuating and produce a habitat that is hostile or exclusionary to either certain kinds of difference or difference in general. If HE plays such a pivotal role in enabling people, in particular young people, to improve

their prospects, it is worth addressing its internal inequalities, especially as those who are most at risk of poverty are least represented. Although this project focuses on beliefs about, and held by, the "true" academic, its observations should not be seen as relevant only to knowledge workers. Students are trained into the academic mindset, and those at more advanced stages become apprentice academics themselves. Furthermore, it is academics who set the tone of the culture, gatekeep access to it, determine what counts as success for students, and act as role models for those who encounter them or their work; who is visible in the HE space in positions of intellectual authority, and their beliefs about what constitutes a proper academic, thus has a great bearing on whether aspiring students can "see" themselves in academia and whether they are seen as legitimate learners (Read et al, 2003). The same is true for aspirant academics.

The remainder of this section will be dedicated to tracing the recent history of UK HE, discussing what is meant by the oft-repeated qualifier "neoliberal academia", and greater engagement with academic inequalities.

1.4.1 The changing landscape of UK HE and academic work

The academic position, the story goes, used to be noble, comfortable, and autonomous: a 'gentlemanly' way of life (Halsey et al, 1971: 169, quoted in Tight, 2010: 107; see also Eagleton, 2015). There was a 'shared understanding of an academic as someone who did some teaching (mainly of undergraduates) and some research or scholarship (as and when they felt moved to), at all times adequately supported by administrators and secretarial staff' (Tight, 2010: 110)—until, in the UK at least, a 'fall from grace' beginning in the mid-1970s. (ibid.). Since then, 'there is often a prevailing sense in academic discussions that things used to be a good deal better, and that they can only now get even worse' (ibid.: 106) as HE is 'locked into a competition fetish' (Naidoo, 2018: 605) characterised by the 'corporatized university in which efficiency, productivity, and excellence are the guiding principles' (Mountz et al, 2015: 1241).

Tight (2010: 106) refers to this rose-tinted view of the past as the 'golden age myth', but is quick to point out that its mythological status 'does not mean that it did not occur, nor, alternatively, that it has no elements of truth about it', seemingly in agreement that academics of yore 'enjoyed a relatively leisured and un-pressurised existence as a kind of elite priesthood'. However, while some may conceive of this

period—assuming, for a moment, an uncritical acceptance of its existence—as a utopia of times gone by, a gilded age never to be seen again, others, especially feminist researchers, are more sceptical, branding this conception of the academy an "ivory tower": a lofty, exclusive gaggle of elites, distant from the "real world" and its pedestrian concerns (Read, 2018) and just as invested in intellectual competitiveness (Naidoo, 2018). As Ball (2012: 17) observes,'[r]eflection is a dangerous thing; it is all too easy to slip from careful re-assessment and analysis into nostalgia and "golden ageism"'. Tight likewise (2010: 109) admits that 'the attractiveness of the academic life relied in part on other forms of support' even in the 'golden age'. One thing there does seem to be relatively universal agreement on is the force behind the collapse of the priesthood, however: "neoliberalism".[6]

A common understanding of the current state of HE in the UK (and to some extent "the world", insofar as Anglophone academia tends to dominate academic norms; Pereira, 2017) can be broadly characterised as aligning with Radice's (2013: 408) assertion that 'the purpose of the university has changed from the education of the elites in business, politics, culture and the professions to the provision of marketable skills and research outputs to the "knowledge economy"'. Previously a system based on subsidy of HE students, the government ceased grant provision for domestic undergraduates in stages throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 1998 tuition fees were introduced, to be funded, if necessary, through government-backed loans available to UK and EU students; in 2004 they tripled from c£1000 to c£3000 per year; finally, in 2012, they tripled again to a capped maximum of £9000 that has since risen below the level of inflation (History and Policy, 2016). In conjunction, student number controls were abolished in 2015 (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2014), allowing universities to recruit and enrol as many undergraduates as they could accommodate, resulting in higher-status institutions 'hoovering up' (P15) prospective undergraduates that would previously have "trickled down" to less prestigious and post-92 universities (Harrison, 2017).

The group of HEIs often referred to as "post-92s" are those institutions that were formerly polytechnic colleges. Granted university status in 1992, these HEIs tend to be largely focused on teaching (Deem, 2003) thanks to their roots as practical and technical education establishments. Also known as "new universities"—although since

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[6] For more comprehensive histories please see: Cribb and Gewirtz (2013), Harrison (2017), and Tight (2010, 2018).

the Higher Education and Research Bill 2018 a further slew of new and "alternative" providers have been established, most of which are private—ex-polytechnics are not *new* (and not just because 1992 was 30 years ago), they are merely newly *universities*. This raises the question of quite how drastic the change to the HE landscape has been beyond semantics: the polytechnics were already there, as were their students. The provision by these institutions has adapted to their new status as HE rather than FE establishments, and the fact they operate in the same marketplace as universities has had effects too, but the putative "expansion" of the HE sector happened, arguably, not as a consequence of bringing fresh students into the system so much as redefining the ones who were already present.[7]

That said, student numbers have been increasing since 1992 (Bathmaker et al, 2013; HESA, 2022d; ONS, 2016b), so the growth of the sector is not purely down to rebranding. I mention it, though, to highlight the significance of the incorporation of polytechnics into "academia" in creating the conditions for pearl-clutching about the change in what academia "is"—especially as Henkel (1997) observes that the bureaucratic governance structures of these former local authority-run institutions laid precedent for the more managerial systems seen in HE today. Radice is certainly correct that the function of HE is no longer just to educate the elite, but the second part of their assertion—that training in business, politics, and 'the professions' is radically different from providing marketable skills to the economy—is more questionable. What is the essential difference? Is it that HE now offers a wider variety of subjects, including those that are more directly applied and therefore less perceptibly "academic"? Is it that these areas of study lead more obviously to employable skills and therefore have a purpose beyond learning simply for learning's sake? Is it that accepting a diversity of students means that HE provision *has* to offer "marketable" skills because, unlike the elites, most people need to make a living and not everyone can be, or wants to be, a politician, economist, lawyer, or businessperson (and, in light of the increased financial investment by students, there is a greater necessity for that investment to "pay off")? Has the *purpose* of the university really changed so much, or has it had to adapt the way it *operates* to continue *delivering*

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[7] The increased population and diversity within HE also means a greater array of specialisms and interests, which require staff with appropriate expertise to carry them, although perhaps not full-time; there are pedagogical reasons for workforce casualisation as well as fiscal ones. Indeed in one sense casualisation enables diversity, allowing for more staff by headcount even as it forecloses diversity by reducing security and FTE.

its purpose in the wake of a greatly broadened student body with a wider array of needs and a shifting econo-political landscape that is far from unique to HE? These questions pertain to this thesis (see also Ashwin, 2020), as does the nebulous nature of much critique of the "neoliberal academy" and what, exactly, is being criticised, and on what grounds. There is scope for complaints that are rooted in who is participating in academia to be dressed as kvetching about shifts in academic values attributed to the infusion of neoliberalism, and for oppositional viewpoints to collapse into making the same arguments for different political ends (see Read, 2018). As De Groot (1997: 139) astutely points out, there are nuances here:

> one should note that the resistance of much of the academic community to the new culture of scrutiny and accountability combines valid criticisms of that culture with opposition to precisely the scrutiny to which feminists and others troubled by the monocultural inequities of the academy have long wished to subject it.

1.4.2 "Neoliberal" academia

The concept of "neoliberalism" in academic settings is liberally applied (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2017; Tight, 2018), eventually becoming interchangeable with any and all developments perceived to be negative: everything "bad" is "neoliberal", and everything "neoliberal" is "bad" (Dunn, 2017; Tight, 2018). I am interested in what participants make neoliberalism *mean* but as discussed above am not concerned with taxonomising, appraising, or even validating neoliberalism as an apparatus given its "wallpaper" status. There is, though, a profusion of academic literature bemoaning the evils of "the neoliberal university" or using the "neoliberal" orientation of UK HE as a prism through which to explain the hardships and inequalities of university life (e.g. Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Foster, 2017; Jovanovic, 2017; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b; Lumsden, 2022; Radice, 2013—see Gill, 2018, for a further list). Indeed, as Tight (2018) observes, it seems impossible to find recent scholarship relating to academic life that does not qualify the university and the requirements of academic work, the '[p]rocesses of expansion, marketisation, and measurement' (Loveday, 2018a: 2) as distinctly neoliberal (or equivalent terminology as outlined by Pereira, 2017: 70, who opts for 'performative university'). Compared to the "golden age" of academia discussed above, this "new" iteration of HE is deemed injurious, individualistic, and

over-managed, dominated by forces that must be resisted (Loveday 2018b) and giving birth to 'academic capitalists' (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). The belief that '[d]emocratic education has been usurped by a different form of schooling that now answers to demands of the marketplace and profit' (Jovanovic, 2017: 327) is commonplace in both sentiment and binarised construction (it should also be noted that in the UK public universities generally hold charitable status and despite importation of the language of 'profit' from US contexts such as Jovanovic's are not profit-making institutions—see Synge, 2021).

However, as Cribb and Gewirtz (2013: 346) point out, 'the effects of marketisation on academic freedom may be much less marked in reality than is suggested by the felt sense of loss reported by academics'. Although the execution of "neoliberal" activities can be heavy-handed and poorly considered, such as, for example, the kinds of monitoring sometimes attributed to "audit culture", the basic principle can be sound, necessary, and beneficial in at least some respects. This can be difficult to translate, however, and leave those tasked with enacting such processes feeling conflicted and 'unhomely' (Manathunga, 2007). Discourses of neoliberalism in literature on HE (and common parlance) are so ubiquitous and ill-defined (Ball, 2012; Dunn, 2017; Rodgers, 2018; Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013; Venugopal, 2015), and so often rooted in auto-ethnographic narratives, that they are endlessly replicated and self-reinforcing such that the 'felt sense' carries vastly more weight than whatever the 'reality' might be. Indeed, I might even suggest that the promiscuity of such exercised, panicked repetitions of crisis-laden rhetorics have done more work to embed "neoliberal" logics than so-called neoliberalism itself (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013).

I will come to the hallmarks of the "neoliberal university" in a moment, but first I want to draw attention to two assumptions that are embedded in the repeated branding of contemporary academia as neoliberal and some of the questions they raise. First, "neoliberal academia" as opposed to plain old academia suggests that this iteration is something specific, unto itself, set meaningfully apart from some other (unmarked) version of HE. However, because there is no equivalent characterisation of what came prior to the neoliberal 'turn' (Tight, 2018) it is unclear exactly how novel so-called neoliberal developments are or what the essence of their predecessors was. I have termed the golden-age construction of HE the "ivory tower", but this does not appear to be standard across the literature, and older versions of the academy were far from utopian: as Tight (2018: 275) notes, 'education has proved to be well-suited to

the neoliberal project, with its emphases on achievement and its measurement' (I would not describe neoliberalism as a 'project' for the same reasons laid out in Section 1.3 but the observation that many academic values were already aligned with actions associated with neoliberalism pertains). Second, to qualify academia *in particular* as neoliberal in an era of perceived neoliberalism indicates a sense of exceptionalism—HE should be different, unaffected by the prevailing logic of its time (Tight, 2018).

In 2022 there are few institutions, public or private, that are uncontaminated by neoliberal impetus (Tight, 2018). If we live in neoliberal times (whether or not we call them that) there cannot be any sector that is not operated according to the same principles given that 'neoliberalism remains the dominant political philosophy across the world' (Radice, 2013: 408). Public sector organisations especially, subject as they are to government policy and scrutiny, accountable to the exchequer, cannot operate outside the framework society as a whole is orientated towards. We do not speak of the neoliberal hospital, the neoliberal broadcaster, the neoliberal primary school, and yet those institutions have undergone many of the same transitions as HE, or at least transformations ushered in with the same spirit. What makes the neoliberal university so special that we cannot speak of the contemporary academy without stipulating its neoliberalness? If modern HE bows to the forces of the market and 'revenue-generating aims' (Naidoo, 2018: 607), what forces did it bow to before and were they any better? If, as the exhortation appears to be, HE should *stop* bowing to the market, what should it bow to instead? Are the ills afflicting contemporary HE really "neoliberal" (as Harris, 2016: 5 points out, in the case at least of the 'care-free' ideal of academia this vision dates back to Cartesian models of scholarship and rational/emotional binaries that far pre-date neoliberalism despite regularly being associated with contemporary pressures)? These questions are in many ways at the heart of this thesis and its concern with ideals of what an academic "is", and by extension what a university should be and for whom (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013). I hope to do better than issue 'a generalised call to return to the semi-mythical, traditional ways of doing things' that so often seem to be the only conclusions arising from contemporary critique (Tight, 2018: 279); Gill (2014: 24) asserts that we must 'reclaim Universities as spaces of openness, intellectual freedom and collegiality', but were they ever thus?

1.4.2.1 Hallmarks of neoliberal academia

Foster (2017: 320) states that 'neoliberalism promotes a vision of universities as marketplaces where educational products are consumed by students, and where the value of said educational products is determined by the extent to which graduates become productive workers within a capitalist economy'. Radice (2013: 412) argues that this means 'knowledge is treated as a marketable commodity rather than the result of a collective social endeavour' and that this reflects and perpetuates 'a focus on "performance" as measured by quantitative targets, and the widespread use of financial incentives' previously associated with the private sector (ibid.: 408). This insertion of 'the values, structures and processes of private sector management' (ibid.) into public sector institutions has been branded "new public management" and, in HE, has been argued to represent a reduction in departmental and institutional autonomy, a shift towards centralised administration and policy, an increase in the power of managers, and a tendency to appoint high-level executives from outside academia (i.e. Vice-Chancellors or equivalents, and senior management positions, filled by those from business rather than academic backgrounds).

The main features of contemporary HE considered to be hallmarks of neoliberalism, as identified from the literature (e.g. Ball, 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Foster, 2017; Radice, 2013; Tight, 2010), include:

- "Massification"—increased student numbers, decreased staff:student ratio;
- "Corporatisation"—intrusion of business language and principles;
- Growth—focus on expansion and capital projects over human resource;
- Centralised administration—impersonal bulk processes, institution-wide regulation, decrease of departmental autonomy;
- Casualisation of academic staff—reduced number of permanent contracts, increased precarity (short-term, fractional and hourly-paid work, and redundancies);
- "Marketisation" and recasting student as "customer"—service model in the wake of tuition fees, anxiety about "student satisfaction";
- Bifurcation of teaching from research;
- Emphasis on engagement with business—knowledge exchange, spin-out companies;
- "Audit culture"—increased monitoring, measuring, and assessment of productivity and output;

♦ Heightened competition for research funding—via application processes and the REF;

♦ Introduction of an "impact agenda"—focus on research having demonstrable real-world positive effects;

♦ "Managerialism"—more senior staff from non-academic backgrounds, more top-down approach;

♦ Focus on efficiency and productivity—cost-cutting, streamlining, squeezed resources;

♦ Preoccupation with rankings and proxy measures for esteem—quantification of value;

♦ Meritocratic individualism—personal success encouraged over collaboration, achievement or lack thereof attributed to individual attributes or failings;

♦ Instrumentalism and commodification—treating processes, including learning, as a means to an end.

While I do not object to the analysis of recent changes and their effect on HE in principle (although, as stated, the use of neoliberalism as a concept for doing so is not especially helpful)—it is of course both useful and interesting to trace the specific impacts of wider culture on particular settings (and that is what this project also aims to do)—it is worth remembering that academia is neither uniquely subject to these influences nor is there any reason it should be exempt. Indeed, if such transitions are seen, as I have come to, as at least in part a response to rapid population growth, the attendant need for systems to process people and their information, and technological advancements that enable these to be installed, it can be argued that the relatively small scale and exclusivity of HE protected it for longer than other limbs of the public sector. In this light, hostility to "neoliberalism" in academia can be interpreted as in some respects aversion to widening access—a point I return to in Chapters 4-6.

Those with first-hand experience of fully "pre-neoliberal" HE or when 'academics used to enjoy much greater freedom in UK HE in the early 1960s' (Addison, 2016: 73) would have been born in the 1940s and 50s, and only 5% of the school-leaving population attended HE in the 1960s (Ingleby, 2015: 522). This was a very different world: the global population has more than tripled since 1950, and the UK population alone has increased by almost 20 million people, or 34%, from around 50 million in 1950 to 67 million in 2020 (OECD, 2022). Even if proportions of the populace attending university remained the same, expansion would be necessary, and with expansion comes the need for new systems and processes to oversee things that can

no longer be handled on a case-by-case basis. The standardisation of procedures and regulations is also in part a consequence of attempts to equalise experience and provide parity; this brings its own harms because as is well recognised, equality is not achieved by treating everyone the same. It should be noted nonetheless that the more "personal" treatment of the past was both only available to some populations and prone to individual bias and discrimination: the unique value of the individual was only available to those groups who were also valued collectively, indeed oppression relies upon the dehumanisation of and stripping away of individuality from the colonised.

I do not mean to suggest I am unaware of the 'injuries' (Gill, 2009) that can come as consequence of contemporary trends, many of which are explored in this thesis, or that these should not be accounted for: both literature and project participants demonstrate that 'academics are experiencing substantial stress, anxiety and pressure to perform' (Loveday, 2018a: 2) and participants suggested students, too, are presenting with heightened affect (see Section 5.4.6). However, the baby and the bathwater frequently seem to be cast aside together: not everything "neoliberal" is "bad", and precisely whether, how, and why badness manifests should be considered not assumed. Without promoting a "race to the bottom" mindset it is perhaps also worth questioning whether the perceived reduction in quality of academic life is a consequence of some levelling out—if we accept that those with more privilege must concede some of their advantage to enable its transfer to those with less, the sense that contemporary academia is less 'gentlemanly' (Tight, 2010) could be seen as the price of wider access. Ball (2015: 260) is being critical when they say '[m]y home in the ivory tower is being flattened by neo-liberal bulldozers' but the image of an exclusive hierarchy being razed to the ground—'flattened'—might not be such a terrible one. These are considerations to hold in mind throughout the latter chapters: what beliefs get smuggled in with antipathy towards all things neoliberal?

1.4.3 Higher education, social mobility, and meritocracy

A central governmental justification for increasing HE student numbers is the belief in education as enabling "social mobility" (BIS, 2016). Social mobility in this context means *upward* mobility—raising young people from the working classes into the middle classes, or at least middle-class professions. While working-class participation in post-compulsory education has radically increased in recent years (Maclean, 2022: 160) and

just over a quarter of HE students were from working-class backgrounds in 2017 (ibid.), they are largely concentrated in lower-status post-92 institutions (ibid.). Furthermore, as Maclean (2022: 161) notes, 'the discourse of HE as an institution to achieve social mobility through merit does not reflect the reality' as even upon graduation working-class students' earning power is less than their middle-class counterparts (Bathmaker et al, 2013) and graduates of colour suffer an 'ethnic penalty' in the employment sphere as well as attainment gaps in HE (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Allen et al (2013: 448) make a similar observation, that '[t]here is a great paradox in the United Kingdom at present: despite rising numbers of young people from non-traditional backgrounds coming through the HE system, evidence suggests that we are living in an age of declining social mobility'. Therefore the university can be seen as an entity that 'does not become a social leveller, but rather it becomes another site for the middle classes to compound and exploit their advantages' (Bathmaker et al, 2013: 739). However, as mentioned above, Bourdieu (1986) posits that social class is comprised of three dimensions: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital, meaning that class mobility is not purely a matter of income and wealth but of knowledge, values, taste, and connections. Although I do not engage in-depth with Bourdieu I do wish to plant this seed early in the thesis as the interplay between the financial and cultural paradigms of social position is fundamental to my argument. Has social mobility "failed" if working-class students cannot fulfil the meritocratic dream and rise to meet their middle-class peers' levels of economic and social capital, or is the social mobility project—even if couched as economic in nature—as much about creating a production line of proto-middle-class aspirants who are "civilised" through their accrual of cultural capital, shunted into the fringes of the middle classes by proximity to intellectual values (Reay, 2020)?

The meritocratic ideal is such a transparent fiction that it seems impossible anyone can truly believe that everyone has an equal chance of the same heights of success regardless of their situation and background, but it is perhaps the fact many people have *some* success improving their caches of capital that disguises how much further they have had to travel. Nonetheless, there is a significant degree of cultural investment in the notion of meritocracy (de St Croix & Owens, 2020; Littler, 2017) particularly in HE where it 'has been positioned as a cornerstone of the university' (Naidoo, 2018: 611), and despite the many problems that Littler (2017) points out with its logic, it trains our collective sights on a certain aspiration: to be "higher", to be

"better", to go "up". Regardless of whether anyone can, or does, succeed, regardless of the impossibility of everyone reaching "the top" and there still being such a thing as the top (Littler, 2017; Naidoo, 2018), we *want* to: meritocracy is an idea that sculpts us to be dissatisfied, to see ourselves as in need of improvement, to denigrate our beginnings (Reay, 2020). There is also the related problem of *downward* mobility— there is only so much 'room at the top' (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022) but little attention is paid to those who are displaced.

As Littler (2017: 5) observes, meritocracy validates 'upper-middle-class values as norms to aspire to' and renders 'working-class cultures as abject', but, we must remember, denigration of the lower classes is not a new invention. If there is novelty to neoliberal meritocratic ideology it is in the offer of hope that one can transcend or escape their class origins, whereas in older configurations of inequality rooted in aristocratic societal arrangements the proletariat "knew their place"—abject, unsophisticated, with no hope of redemption. Upper classes have always been positioned as a station to revere—as in some sense aspirational; it is only relatively recently that we have been collectively seduced into the idea that we might break into them if only we work hard enough (Reay, 2020). Indeed, upward mobility is so appealing that there is evidence many people who are from 'objectively' middle-class backgrounds identify—and believe— themselves as having working-class origins in order to draw on meritocratic and exceptionalist discourses of their success that foreground struggles and barriers while downplaying privilege (Friedman et al, 2021). That this is most prevalent in creative industries—characterised by precarity and class inequality that makes working-class success in this arena all the more exceptional (Friedman et al, 2021)—is especially pertinent given the similarities between these jobs and academia (Gill, 2014). While I have some reservations about how social class is 'objectively' determined this point will return later with reference to unbelonging and the reality that 'many simply do not *see themselves* as privileged' (ibid.: 718), or in other words, many relate to what they are lacking more than to what they have and notice the gates that are closed not the ones already open.

Despite issues with the discourse of meritocracy and persistent inequalities of resource, however, there is evidence that HE participation provides benefits even if it does not act as a complete leveller. As of September 2017, graduates were more likely to be employed and work in high-skilled roles as well as yield higher lifetime earnings (ONS, 2017). Although graduates are slower to match the earnings of those who

exited education earlier (owing to entering the labour market later), they soon overtake and remain on an upward salary trajectory for longer (ibid.). There are, however, inequalities in who is most likely to reap these benefits, with, for example, male graduates having higher employment rates and pay than female graduates due to a combination of men being less likely to exit the workforce to take care of the home and the fact men are over-represented in the most lucrative subjects: medicine, engineering, technology, and physical or environmental fields (ibid.). There are analogous disparities between other demographies also (e.g. Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Brown, 2020). Although focusing on the material benefits of HE may be criticised as emblematic of an instrumental, "neoliberal" value system it is worth noting that it is especially important for those of lower socioeconomic means that education provide a return on the investment not just of money but time; although graduates on average accrue higher earnings long-term, the decision to defer earning potential by pursuing HE may be a significant strain.[8] Furthermore "instrumental" gains are not mutually exclusive with genuine appreciation of the educational experience. However, while there are, on average, yields associated with academic pursuit there is a possibility that these relative gains will decrease as more people attend university (Bathmaker et al, 2013; Ingram & Gamsu, 2022)—something that some already point to as an issue, claiming there is an "oversupply" of graduates and not enough graduate-level jobs (despite lack of evidence to support this—see Ball, 2022).

1.4.4 HE inequalities

There continue to exist inequalities of both access and attainment in UK HE (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Graham & Muir, 2022), based perhaps on the 'unspoken rule that students "can be any age, culture or gender as long as they resemble a young British man"' (Leonard, 2001: 43). The origins of academia as a training ground for elite white men (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017) has inevitably impacted the constitution of universities due to a combination of practical impediments to some groups participating and lingering prejudice about who is seen to be (and sees themselves as) a good fit for higher education. Furthermore, as Read and Leathwood (2018: 335) note, '[a]cademic culture has never engendered a sense of security for all: indeed throughout

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[8] I acknowledge that many students work alongside their studies or return to study later in life.

its history, it has been shown to be extremely hierarchical and inegalitarian'. Both gatekeepers and potential attendees may harbour ideas about who academia is "for", and tracing the contours of these ideas is a major aim of this project.

When considering "fit", however, we might be concerned with how historically excluded participants will experience the environment based on whether there are others who look like, or do things similarly to, them, as Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022: 112) observed in their research with students who 'talked about a lack of visibility of people "like them" […] and this emphasised their own sense of not fitting in or belonging in HE'. However, it is also worth noting that in being absent from academia, marginalised groups become the *subject* of knowledge, the oddity to be researched—a population that academia is "done to"—and this may produce conflicted feelings about presenting oneself for judgement in the academy or participating in actions that have the power to stigmatise (Taylor & Breeze, 2020). Delpit (1988: 286) clarifies that there can be resistance to taking on "research-backed" solutions amongst people of colour who are 'skeptical of research as a determiner of our fates' because '[a]cademic research has, after all, found us genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient'. This can equally apply to other stigmatised groups, particularly disabled academics whose historical treatment as subjects of science and current experiences of medicine may be be likewise predicated on deficit discourses and mistreatment, compounded by the fact 'ableism in academia is endemic' (Brown, 2020: 3). Similarly, not all populations have been well served by science and may hold perspectives outside the normative ideal of "rationality" based on the particular historical harms experienced by their communities at the hands of "expertise"—this distrust might impact how certain identities do academia as well as whether they want to (Furman, 2020). Thus barriers to inclusion in HE are not just about diversity of representation or teaching the culture of power, but wariness of the project of academia and its history of stigmatising "research findings"—a perspective supported by Pereira's (2017: 8) observation that academics can be uncomfortable moving from subject to object. Furthermore, as Ahmed (2007: 243) points out, there is not a simple relationship between 'being diverse' as an institution and 'doing diversity': the presence of multiplicitous identities does not entail inclusion or belonging if minorities continue to be alienated, even if jointly (Read et al, 2003). Bacevic (2021: 3) notes that 'academic selection processes […] apply a mix of epistemic, social and cultural criteria, often reproducing the cultural standards of those

who make the assessment'—there are many ways to be similar, and many ways to be different, thus surface level "diversity" does not necessarily have any meaningful impact on more veiled criteria.

One of the greatest tensions in HE is the conflict of interest between widening participation, diversification, and the inbuilt restrictions on access. As Koutsouris et al (2021: 144) note, 'the basic principle of inclusive education' is 'that all learners without exception have a place in the learning encounter, and that it is an institutional requirement to change in order to accommodate diverse learners – as opposed to assimilate them in a pre-existing culture', however this 'poses a unique challenge for higher education, since it is by its very nature selective, and therefore not automatically open to all'. Therefore the responsibility to assimilate is incumbent upon those who wish to participate rather than on HEIs, and the majority of "inclusion" work thus focuses on adapting the student (or academic) to the environment (Brown, 2020; Burke, 2018; McArthur, 2021; Parker, 2007). As Wong and Chiu (2021: 498) point out, the adaptations needed are not always obvious and 'implicit and occluded expectations of students have long disadvantaged those who struggled to understand or "play" the higher education game, especially students from non-traditional backgrounds'. At the same time, the experiences of "traditional" students are not always explored, with much research focus falling on working-class participants in comparison to assumptions about a monolithic middle-class (Nyström et al, 2019). Different groups (and individuals) face different pressures; as Nyström et al (2019: 2) point out, 'exceptionally high academic performance can be understood as "ordinary" and "expected" by many middle-class parents and children, and anything less than excellence is regarded as failure'. There can be a tendency, perhaps, for 'unresearched assumptions' that 'homogenise the middle-class' to assume high attainment comes naturally or easily to these 'fish in water' (Read et al, 2003) groups, therefore 'if we wish to explore the ways in which systems of stratification are produced, reproduced and transformed we need to […] analyse the production of privilege as well as the production of disadvantage' (ibid.: 2-3). This is one reason my project aims to take a holistic view, drawing participants from a range of circumstances.

De Groot (1997: 133) observes that 'growth in student numbers and consequently in institutions and academic jobs created a more diverse student body without ending the old patterns of class, cultural and gender bias'. Although some progress has been made in the intervening years, this continues to be an issue. For

example, given the significant risk of poverty associated with disability, it is especially problematic that only 21.8% of disabled people had a degree in 2019 compared to 38% of their abled peers, especially as this gap remained consistent in the prior six years (ONS, 2019; see also Brown, 2020). In the 2020-21 academic year, 57% of students were female, 85% reported no disability, and 74% were white (HESA, 2022a). 7% of all pupils attended private schools in 2019 (Social Mobility Commission, 2019), but 9% of university students were privately educated in 2020-21 (HESA, 2022a), and those from the most advantaged backgrounds (socioeconomic status, parental education, privately educated) were more likely to pursue further study after graduation than their peers (HESA, 2022b). Despite being over-represented at undergraduate level, in 2018 women remained under-represented at doctoral level—and ethnic minorities accounted for just 16.8% of research students (Handforth, 2022). While there is a degree of levelling out in access to HE, then, there are at least some areas where there continue to be notable disparities, particularly of attainment and post-study reward. The proportion of those going into postgraduate education also has an effect on academic staff representation and culture (Handforth, 2022).

1.4.5 Academic staff and work

In the 2019-20 academic year there were 223,525 staff employed at universities in the UK on an academic contract (HESA, 2021a). 33% of these were employed on fixed-term contracts (25% of full-time staff, 49% of part-time), with 3,545 on zero-hours agreements; 38% of part-time and 1% of full-time staff were hourly-paid (ibid.). Although the proportion of fixed-term staff is relatively high, observations that the academic workforce is increasingly casualised are not borne out in the statistics, which show that the percentage of fixed-term academics 10 years prior was similar, at 33.8% (HESA, 2011). This is partly a legacy of the research funding system, which drives project-based and therefore fixed-term hiring practices, and the specialised nature of academia: academics are not interchangeable, with particular skills and knowledge required for particular roles.

The perception that casualisation is rising may be a consequence of the increased academic workforce more generally—in 2009-10 there were only 181,595 academic staff throughout the sector (ibid.), thus there are a greater gross number of temporary employees compared to a decade ago. Furthermore, in comparison to the working

population of the UK as a whole, conditions in academia appear favourable: in 2020 3.1% of the workforce was on a zero-hours contract (Statista, 2022) compared to 1.5% of academic staff. Academic wages are also higher on average—57% of full-time academic staff earned an annual salary of more than £46,717 in 2021-21 (HESA, 2021b) compared to the median weekly pay of £611 (equivalent to £31,772 per year) for full-time employees across the UK in April 2021 (ONS, 2021b). While the relatively privileged situation of academics does not preclude criticisms being made about poor working conditions and should not muffle legitimate complaint, it is nonetheless becoming to acknowledge that academic jobs come with a variety of advantages compared to other professions (Gill, 2014). It is important, when evaluating the realities of HE, to assess it in relation to parallel realities.

I therefore aim to zoom out slightly so that we might compare apples to oranges rather than apples to slightly older apples and consider academia in the context of other industries instead of simply in relation to itself, as I believe this will help restore agency to academics (and students). Much of the literature on contemporary HE has a waft of self-pity about it, lamenting the hostile conditions of poor exploited knowledge workers as if they were assigned their role against their will and then wrung dry, or bemoaning the plight of young people who are convinced they have "no choice" but to go to university by political discourse and government failures to provide alternative options. This risks making academics and potential students seem naive and uncritical, as if they are duped into academic pursuit and then kicked around the university like a sack of grain until they come apart at the seams. However, the ills of academia may seem less odious if it is not taken for granted that academics *must* be academics and we place academia alongside other industries in the contemporary age instead of comparing it to myths of the past and fantasies of what we imagined it might be (see Section 6.5). Academia has certain peculiarities that make it a worthwhile site of study in isolation but it must be noted that participation is a choice and academic culture is not a secret—as academics we therefore knowingly contribute to, comply with, perpetuate, and strive for academic ideals. We are part of this system, these values, even if we see ourselves as on the margins, even if we critique it, even if "neoliberalism made us do it" (see Section 4.3.2). Neoliberalism is not something being done to us, it is something we produce and reproduce: it is dishonest to pretend we are not implicated, and not to acknowledge that it benefits us in a variety of ways to do so, and to overlook the general intensification of work in all sectors (Sang et al, 2015).

Having said that, there are issues with academic representation and work that should be noted and addressed, even if, or perhaps precisely because, they reflect wider problems (Bacevic, 2021; Bagilhole, 2016; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). In 2019-20 only 28% of professorial staff were female and 11% known to be black or ethnic minority (HESA, 2021b). In academic roles more generally, 47% were occupied by women and 75% by white people (ibid.). The demands of the job are also a source of concern, with 'maladaptive behaviour, such as working longer hours and on weekends' becoming 'normalised for academic professionals' (Cristea & Babajide, 2022: 57) and over a third of UK academics reporting working over 50 hours per week (Sang et al, 2015). Sang et al (2015: 245) call for further research to consider 'the extent to which working long hours is the result of choice rather than structural constraints' as this will 'help to understand why there is apparently so little overt resistance'; this is a call my project responds to (see especially Chapter 4).

Many suggest also that 'academic work has transformed from secure and autonomous to insecure and invisible' in a period defined by 'focus on performance management and measurement', 'diminishing opportunities to exercise autonomy', 'declining collegiality', and 'increasing quantification of academic output' (Sang et al, 2015: 237). These claims will be addressed throughout the thesis along with Mountz et al's (2015: 1250) observation that 'part of the stress of the neoliberal university is the notion that everyone else is working harder and longer than you'. This also bears relevance to the ideal of the proper academic and the self-surveillance and comparison many academics engage in. Belonging as an academic is seen to be at least in part a matter of "keeping up", and this may disguise the different abilities people have to do so, echoing issues with meritocratic rhetoric that emphasise "hard work" as a personal attribute rather than something that is structurally enabled (Allen et al, 2013; see Section 6.3.2). The importance of casting an appropriate academic image may also account for why academic staff are peculiarly distressed, more so than other professionals and the UK population in general (Sang et al, 2015). The cost of belonging is unequally dispersed, yet the need to belong can be more acute for those who already feel less included due to being in a minority (Handforth, 2022) at the same time as academics report high levels of ambivalence about their role—a strong thread throughout this research as well as for Coin (2018: 306) whose participants found academia both 'stimulating, fulfilling, satisfying' and 'frustrating, undervalued, or burdensome'. As Bailyn (2003: 139-40) observes, '[e]quity will not be possible if there

exists one group of people […] who are systematically unable to meet the requirements of the ideal academic who gives full priority and all his time and energy to his academic work'. Investigation of academic ideals and their equalities impacts, then, is imperative.

1.5 Belonging and social inclusion

In this final section I outline the importance of belonging for human wellbeing and touch upon how belonging is viewed in HE more specifically.

Psychologists suggest that social connection is a core need for humans, associated with mental, emotional, and physical health (Bryer, 2020; Lambert et al, 2013; Seppala et al, 2013). Lambert et al (2013) likewise assert that sense of belonging gives life meaning. Isolation and loneliness, on the other hand, is understood to have negative impacts—to the degree where the UK has appointed a Loneliness Minister to combat these effects. It has also been suggested that social rejection activates the same neural networks as physical pain (Eisenberger et al, 2006). Belonging, however, is a largely subjective feeling; simply being in proximity to others does not necessarily translate to a sense of acceptance, "fitting in", or being part of a larger group (Lambert et al, 2013). Furthermore, as human social arrangements have become more dispersed and complicated, no longer restricted only to our immediate tribe or clan, we have multiple contexts in which belonging can be experienced or absent—we may fit in some places but not in others. This does not change the notion that 'as social agents we can flourish only if we have meaningful relationships of (mutual) recognition' (Hänel, 2020: 341), however, or that 'being without care, human safety suffers' (Rogers, 2016: 3): social inclusion is important.

Anthias (2018: 145) points out that belonging is always relational, that 'belonging "to" something is always linked to belonging "with" particular others who also occupy the realm of belonging to that something' but also that it is 'not always premised on similarity', at least in terms of alike identities, and can instead 'be forged in relation to solidarity and values of dialogue and engagement' (see also Hänel, 2020). The fact that belonging does not necessarily follow likeness in the most readily observable ways is key to the LZ framework.

Belonging, then, is necessary but complex and therefore worth exploring from a variety of angles in order to gain a fuller understanding of how this fragile sensation

manifests, what inhibits its blossoming, and its different meanings and consequences in different settings. This project considers belonging not to be a stable, binary condition in which one either belongs or does not, but a spectrum of affect, a combination of emotional, embodied, and cognitive awarenesses providing a sensation somewhere between feeling "in place" or "out of place". Belonging is thus related to other senses such as security, safety, protection, stillness, stability, ease, calm, cohesion, and sureness.

In HE, attention has been turned to belonging as a lens through which to understand the experiences of different student groups, and there is evidence that lower sense of belonging is correlated with poor mental health and relatively impoverished student experience (Wonkhe, 2022). Belonging is less common as a prism through which to understand staff marginalities, although I explore some of the literature in this area in Chapter 3—it is curious, however, that even with a recent handbook devoted entirely to the subject of impostor syndrome in HE (Addison et al, 2022) many considerations of these themes are not empirical in nature or remain individualised through auto-ethnographic approaches (Breeze & Taylor, 2020).There is more work to be done.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I provided information about the background context against which this project is undertaken—namely the modern-day UK, and in particular UK academia. I also gave some indication of the inequalities troubling British society and its HE system as a means of justifying my focus on this site of study and demonstrating the issues at stake, and offered definitions for how I understand key terms that recur throughout the thesis—inequalities, neoliberalism, and belonging.

I have argued that the role of HE in improving young people's socioeconomic conditions makes its internal inequalities especially important to address and claimed that disparities in experiences of belonging undermine attempts to widen academic participation for both prospective students and academic staff. Therefore gaining greater insight into the 'culture of power' (Delpit, 1988) of contemporary HE, as revealed through dominant ideals of academia, is a worthwhile project for understanding how and why inequalities persist in and beyond academia despite increasing diversity and considerable criticism of structural injustices from within the

HE sphere.

Having contextualised the site and circumstances of enquiry and justified the necessity, aims, and purpose of this research, I now move to describe the research process.

Chapter 2: The Research Process

2.1 Introduction

Designing this research involved many decisions and several constraints—some practical, some philosophical. In this chapter I account for the choices made, considerations underpinning them, and processes enacted. Alongside this descriptive element is commentary on the presentation of research methods, particularly in the social sciences, as a means of highlighting the relationships between discourse, practice, and perceived legitimacy (or "properness"). I argue that there is often a disconnect between the way we talk about things and the way we do them, even when employing a reflective approach, potentially shoring up unattainable ideals of research credibility. As Cook (2009: 278) reflects on their own experience, '[w]e saw a gap between our more convoluted practice and published models of neat research. This led to doubts as to whether we were doing "*proper research*" or whether we were doing "*research properly*"'.

Where I refer to "method" I mean the activity of acquiring data, while the philosophies underpinning data-acquisition and analysis are the "theoretical approach". The two together are the "research process". Although I argue that this process is an iterative set of practices that textual accounts necessarily fail to accurately render, the project involved a number of stages even if they did not occur in precisely the discrete linear manner in which they are represented here:

1. Selection of research area and initial project proposal;
2. Cursory familiarisation with existing literature in the area;
3. Composition of research questions and refined project proposal;
4. Selection of research method and theoretical approach;
5. Application for ethical approval;
6. Recruitment and sampling of research participants;
7. Fieldwork (semi-structured interviews);
8. Data analysis;
9. Identification of central themes/areas of interest;
10. Refinement of research questions to guide write-up.

I treat each stage in this order even though, as indicated, in reality there were overlaps, false starts, and, particularly during steps 7-9, iteration between tasks. Moving from theoretical design to implemented practice involved some trial, error, and recalibration, and I have aimed to be transparent without labouring tedious points, demonstrative of my awareness of method-related considerations without simply rehearsing the literature, and responsibly reflexive about my role as a researcher without becoming faux-omniscient. Furthermore, although here I deploy the standard vocabulary uncritically for the sake of clarity, within respective sections I question what exactly we mean when we use such shorthands as "research", "data", "method", "analysis", and so on, considering how many of the established ways of talking about methods can suggest an attempt to appear more "scientific", even for work that expressly disavows a positivist or "objective" approach.

2.2 Selection of research area and initial project proposal

Like many doctoral students, the original plan for my thesis project was an extension of my Master's dissertation (in contemporary literary theory), which explored the conventions of academic discourse and their gendered implications, hence I became interested in the relationship between discourse and practice: does the way we articulate things relate to how we do things? If there is an echo of the starting intentions for this project still resonating it is perhaps most evident in this chapter, where I consider the relationship between what we do as researchers and how we talk about what we do—how we make it sound like research, how we evidence rigour, what elisions and post-hoc rationalisations this requires. While it is worth acknowledging that the work of feminist philosophers and sociolinguists such as Alison Jaggar (e.g. 1996), Lorraine Code (e.g. 1996), Evelyn Fox Keller (e.g. 1983), Deborah Tannen (e.g. 2002), Sandra Harding (e.g. 2004), Hélène Cixous (e.g. 1986/1975), Marilyn Frye (e.g. 1996), and Genevieve Lloyd (e.g. 1993) was instrumental in developing my ideas in this earlier work, and therefore form an epistemological underpinning to the current project, it is not a literature I have space to elaborate here. However, their preoccupations with the boundaries of legitimate academic knowledge and the inequalities smuggled in through normative ideals of scientific practice and discourse are an obvious point of contact with the concerns of the present work.

Although the project has evolved considerably since the completion of my MA in 2013, I mention this early stage of development as, in addition to the philosophical and theoretical literary influences, some of my assumptions underpinning the initial design carried through. For example, my initial uncritical acceptance of and antipathy towards neoliberalism meant I designed the research from this standpoint, but never as an acknowledged theoretical approach. Inevitably this perspective became further ingrained in the research, especially once interviews were conducted and my position was enshrined in the data. However, this only became visible to me much later when my thinking changed. Consequently I lost opportunities to interrogate participants' anti-neoliberal sentiments because, in agreeing with them, I failed to recognise them for what they were. This serves as a reminder that reflexivity has limits and the most pernicious assumptions are often the hardest to see.

2.3 Cursory familiarisation with existing literature

Ideally, this step would have been more than cursory. However, I was aware that the empirical element would add time to the project: I would need to gain ethical approval before I could begin fieldwork, and the fieldwork process itself would be labour-intensive. Rather than heading directly into analysis of existing data, I needed to generate it first. I therefore elected to engage with only as much literature as necessary to define the research questions, confirm my methods, and produce an interview schedule (see Appendix 3).

The major themes of the project at this stage were competition, inequalities, gender, and contemporary HE, so I performed literature searches combining these keywords to locate key recent, relevant studies. Much of the work I encountered was rooted in social sciences approaches; as well as being a contributing factor to my drift away from the humanities-based scholarship of my prior study, this is, in hindsight, a fact that has prolonged the project: without a solid grounding in these disciplines there was more to familiarise myself with and I continue to be nervous about my sociological ignorance. I frame this as a cultural sociology project but am also reticent to do so—I am unsure I have the authority to claim to be a sociologist, or to know what kind of sociologist I might be. Yet it is a research convention to indicate where I and my work belong, whom I might count as my peers and colleagues, despite a nagging feeling that I do not belong anywhere. I feel that I am meant to know where I fit but I am unsure

whether I do fit, or whether I want to.

2.4 Composition of research questions and refined project proposal

My first substantive task was to compose research questions that would winnow down options for how to tackle my problem and shape decisions about the best tools for finding answers. This took several months—my first exposure to the now-familiar experience that just when the research seems settled, one nagging inconsistency can break it apart. The neat linearity I impose on this articulation of my research process belies the repeated building, tumbling down, grouping, disassembling that took place in different ways at various stages.

This thesis is slightly unusual in that it responds to two sets of research questions: one that framed the overall project, as laid out below, and one that directs this particular write-up of my findings. This is because the original research design, once completed and articulated, resulted in answers considerably too large to meet the requirements of a doctoral thesis. Rather than attempting to condense that argument and risk squashing its nuance I instead elected to reduce the focus and retain the complexity. This involved constructing follow-up questions, which I will return to at the end of the chapter; for now I provide only the originals as these guided most research processes:

1. In what academic activities, policies, and related literature does a culture of competition, and its surrounding discourses of success and failure manifest, and how?
2. Do constructions of "ideal" academics emerge from these analyses and in what ways are they gendered?
3. To what extent are these ideals experienced, internalised, or resisted by individual academics and what is the personal and professional impact of negotiating any disparity between the perceived ideal and subjective identities, values, and aptitudes?
4. What can an understanding of these questions offer to wider discussions of inequality, in higher education and beyond, and its potential remedies?

My original aim was to map the prevailing norms governing academic practice at its time of transition from the "ivory tower" to its "neoliberal" mode of operation, with particular attention to any gendered implications related to the dominant culture. This objective framed the methods decisions made throughout the data-generation phase of

the research and into the early stages of analysis. Although the focus on gender has fallen away and the thesis has become more specific, I would not have made substantially different choices had I known in advance how the project would drift. Indeed, it is because I maintained flexibility around what topics arose in the interviewing process—as I detail below—that it is possible to answer a range of questions with the same dataset. This could be seen as a weakness of the research, which it may be argued should have been more tightly orientated towards its aims, but it can also be viewed as a strength: rather than forcing the data to answer questions it cannot do justice to it has presented responses to questions I had not known to ask.

2.5 Selection of research method and theoretical approach

2.5.1 Empirical method: semi-structured interviews

The suggestion to use interviews as the primary data-creation method was primarily to improve the "fundability" of my research proposal (it is unclear what this perception was based on, or whether it was accurate, but it is worth noting that perceptions, even if inaccurate, inform actions). This was a good decision, even if it was not the result of an exhaustive consideration of all other options. Although I had no prior experience of empirical research I audited a Master's module specialising in qualitative research methods, so I received a basic training in interviewing and a broader awareness of alternative methods. Compared to other common methods for social sciences PhDs, such as focus groups or ethnography, interviews provided for the rapport, anonymity, and 'rich, detailed and reflective accounts' (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019: 3) necessary for this project. However, every method has its drawbacks.

2.5.1.1 Limitations of interviewing as a research method

There is an extensive literature relating to research methods and hence a diversity of opinions about their respective advantages and drawbacks I have no space to expand; I use Silverman's (2007) arguments to tease out the main potential issues.

Silverman (2007: 40) is critical of interviews and focus groups as empirical methods, describing them as 'lazy research in which careful data analysis is simply replaced by reporting back what people have told you', noting too that 'if respondents are made aware of your interests, this can affect their responses'. In this sense, then,

they point to a potential issue with badly-executed empirical work in which the researcher, consciously or not, directs the participant towards a particular type of response and then presents this response in raw, unanalysed, uncritical form as "findings". They further highlight that 'telling someone about our experiences is not just emptying out the contents of our head but organising a tale' (Silverman, 2007: 45), suggesting that the 'tale' makes for poor, "subjective" data. Prior (2018: 491) makes a similar point: 'if interviews are used, they must be analyzed as social action rather than neutral or unmediated conduits into participants' inner psychological worlds'. These are worthwhile cautions, and I was conscious that an interview is not a clear window onto a pure truth, and this affects what claims can be made. However, as I question the possibility of a clear window, or an unmediated truth, in any context I am less concerned than Silverman that this invalidates the data.

The implication of Silverman's (2007) critique is that potential disadvantages are the fault of the method not the researcher; by contrast, I would question whether an unreflexive or inadequately rigorous researcher using alternative methods would arrive at better conclusions even if they 'find' rather than 'manufacture' their data. All methods have limitations, and suitability should be appraised in concert with considerations of the research population, research questions, project resources, and the preferences and skills of the researcher. For these reasons I consider semi-structured interviews the most appropriate method for procuring valid and interesting data relevant to the research questions at hand and the objectives of this project, whilst also acknowledging that this data, and the method employed to produce it, has limitations—as do I, as the researcher.

2.5.2 Reflexivity in the social sciences

A central tenet of contemporary qualitative social research is researcher reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Collins & McNulty, 2020), something I took seriously. Reflexivity 'involves the researcher consciously interrogating the theories, assumptions, values and emotions they bring to the research' (Collins & McNulty, 2020: 204) through discussion of the processes undertaken to enact the project, the approach to data analysis, and how these decisions and actions were influenced by the researchers' perspectives and values vis-a-vis how knowledge is made (epistemology) and how the world is (ontology).

The way social sciences research is conventionally structured, although accounting for reflexivity, often separates philosophical, theoretical, and methods considerations from each other as if they are independent—of the researcher, of the design of the project, of the construction of the data, and of one another. Much of my previous training as a literature student was in a similar kind of modularisation: take *this* theoretical lens and apply it to *that* literary text, creating the implication that if no particular perspective is adopted in relation to analysis (or, prior to adopting it) this constitutes a neutral or objective position (or at the very least, that in activating one filter to draw out particular kinds of evidence for particular kinds of readings any other ways of seeing are switched off). Inherent in this suggestion is the assumption that it is possible to see without seeing in a *way*; following many feminist scholars before me, I depart from positivist ideals of research. As Collins and McNulty (2020: 204-05) observe,

> consistent with the ontological assumption that social realities are multiple and situated (Haraway, 1988), feminist researchers (in particular) have rejected traditional notions of the researcher needing to be detached from the objective reality under investigation, instead seeing it neither as possible nor desirable.

As I am not claiming that this thesis presents a neutral account of objective facts, it is my duty as a responsible researcher to consider in what ways it is not neutral. However, it is an irony of reflexivity that our biases and blind spots are present also when we view ourselves. Therefore while I agree that acknowledging the limits of objectivity is important, making academic work better and more honest, I am careful about how credulously these claims can be made. Acknowledging that who I am, how I see things, and what I have experienced impacts the kind of research I do and how I do it should not collapse into an assumption that I am an absolute authority on myself or that I can fully know the extent or nature of the effects my situatedness has (Rose, 1997). If I acknowledge that my view of the world is partial and situated, I must also acknowledge that my view of myself is limited in the same ways, and, inevitably, that any data produced by human subjects is similarly constrained (Rose, 1997). Furthermore, people change over time and research is not bound to a singular moment—which version of myself should I account for? It is unclear how much biographical information to provide, especially if I cannot isolate its effects: would I be 'signalling responsibility and accountability' or 'tending towards "self-promotion"'

(Taylor, 2018: 71)? As Skeggs (2003: 128) points out, reflexivity can centre the researcher whilst 'self-narration often presupposes that the problems of power, privilege and perspective can be dissolved by inserting oneself into the account'. Indeed, '[t]elling and doing are two very different forms of activity' (ibid.) and I hope to tread this line delicately, registering that I am present in both the doing and the telling but not 'eclipsing' either with my presence or granting myself 'the spurious authority of authenticity' (ibid.: 132).

2.5.2.1 Research and temporality

One way that all research outputs produce distortion is through the very process of documentation. A linear write-up of a three-dimensional research process always contains an element of fiction – even the conversion of an embodied encounter into a recording and then a transcription means the data represented is an abstraction (Pereira, 2017). In a sense, all "research" is simply a story of the research: project design is not fixed to a particular point in time but is a product of continual growth, and the need to translate enacted processes into textual description inevitably requires post-hoc rationales, omissions, and smoothings-over. There are decisions even once the work is "done" about how to account for the work. As Collins and McNulty (2020: 203-04) state, 'the "sanitised" methodologies appearing in much of our published work often does not reflect the complexity of the authors' experience' – or, for that matter, the experiences of their participants. Equally, the neat, coherent arguments that comprise these publications do not represent the complexity of the data or all possible interpretations of it. As Cook (2009: 279) notes, '[t]hat mess occurs in research appears to be generally accepted but is usually absent from published accounts' because it 'tends to have connotations of being sloppy, of not being a good researcher'.

My aim is therefore to present an account that orders the inevitable chaos of research without drowning it in Dettol, and while acknowledging that it is, in essence, a story. Like Rosewell and Ashwin (2019: 4) I prioritise 'validity' over 'reliability', for, as they observe, qualitative research is a 'context of multiple legitimate interpretations of the same data'. Therefore my approach has been to produce a 'defensible' interpretation rather than attempt a fruitless hunt for the "right" one (ibid.). In this endeavour I follow Malterud et al's (2016: 1759) observation that '[r]esearch with

social constructivist roots, where knowledge is considered partial, intermediate, and dependent of the situated view of the researcher, does not support an idea that qualitative studies ideally should comprise a "total" amount of facts'. I will sacrifice some of the rigour and scientific legitimacy associated with a "systematic" mode of enquiry so long as validity is still produced.

Rosewell and Ashwin (2018: 4) point to 'communicative validity', which involves 'ensuring that the research methods and final interpretation are regarded as appropriate by the relevant research community', and 'pragmatic validity', which is 'the extent to which the research outcomes are seen as useful and meaningful to their intended audience'. Based on work delivered so far (see Acknowledgements) I am confident that my methods, approach, and analysis have been generally received as sound, relevant, and necessary to the academic community. It is my hope that the concepts and arguments contained here may also travel into other research areas and be adapted for different contexts, but there has been less opportunity to assess impact beyond HE as yet.

2.5.3 My position: the insider?

Like other qualitative researchers I acknowledge that my social position in relation to my topic and participants affected the resulting data in various ways (e.g. Berger, 2015; Brannick & Coughlan, 2007; Collins & McNulty, 2020; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Mercer, 2007; Wegener, 2014). This applies to my status as an "insider" or "outsider" of the researched community and also to more localised dynamics with individual participants, where holding similar (or different) identities or positions can impact interactions.

'Insiderness', say Collins and McNulty (2020: 203), 'is typically defined as a study of one's own communities or organisational systems'. As an employee in the HE sector since 2007 (see Appendix 8 for history) I consider myself an insider, though having never been employed as an academic is one notable difference between me and the research participants. However, while this is how I understand my position, it may not be how I was seen because 'group membership is dependent not just on the researcher's assumptions but also on those of the participants' (Collins & McNulty, 2020: 205) and 'a researcher can move fluidly between, or even simultaneously hold, insider and outsider identities in various contexts' (ibid.: 206).

Most participants were aware that as well as my base at Lancaster University I was employed by another research-intensive university. Sometimes my role arose in the interview, and some participants made an insider of me, signalling that they viewed me as "one of them" because I was undertaking research, whilst others seemed to distinguish me by my student role, as an apprentice. This also varied depending on aspects of participants such as their career stage and field, with social scientists more likely to treat me as a colleague, those earlier in their careers responding to me more as a peer, and more senior participants sometimes taking on a mentorship position. These nuances in themselves are interesting in terms of the research questions as they speak to what an academic "is", but for the purpose of the current discussion the pertinent point is that our position in a social dynamic is always relative, thus it shifts with context.

Insider positioning has implications not just for the research but me as the researcher. Brannick and Coughlan (2007: 70) refer to the 'dual burden of working and/or researching' for insider researchers, and this resonates; although working in HE while researching it represents an immersion that allows for a deep operational understanding of the field, it is also exhausting and at times conflicted (Pereira, 2017). When at work I felt like I was doing everything twice, or seeing double, simultaneously performing my employment function and considering what it "meant". As Braun and Clarke (2006: 94) note, there is a 'dual position that analysts need to take: as both cultural members and cultural commentators'—the further into the research I got, the more this dual position became unavoidable and at times a source of stress where I manifested Brannick and Coughlan's (2007: 70) observation that 'insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioral claims, and identification dilemmas'.

Berger flags some pitfalls of insider research for the data, noting that shared knowledge and experiences can lead to participants leaving unsaid information they take to be known. Collins and McNulty (2020: 211) define researchers in this position as 'Fellows', noting that this role is 'likely to grant access to very rich data, although participants may assume prior knowledge and fail to elaborate on key points'. Similarities between researcher and participant may also affect power dynamics, whether in creating competitive feelings or closeness that collapses professional distance (Berger, 2015). These aspects of insiderness can yield both positive and negative results: the data may be deep and rich because it skips the basic descriptions,

but difficult to contextualise without the researcher filling in gaps. I am not conscious of this being an issue, but it is possible I have filled in the gaps so seamlessly I no longer recognise them.

There are further potential issues with being an insider researcher of academia in particular; Pereira (2017: 8) points out that researchers are not used to being the object of study and may be uncomfortable with the academic gaze turning on them. As an ethnographer, this is particularly pertinent to Pereira's work, whereas my participants volunteered themselves for scrutiny and were pleased of the opportunity to talk through their experiences. However, in my workplace there were comments along the lines of 'oh, you're here to study us!' from academic colleagues when they discovered my research area, which, although jovial, land differently in light of Pereira's (2017) observations—was there an edge of discomfort? My academic workmates know better than anyone that even if I am not "an ethnographer", any insider researcher cannot help but relate what they see, hear, and experience "in the field" to their work.

Like all acts of reflexivity, researcher positioning is therefore worth interrogating and accounting for as it can affect project design, data generation, analysis, and also write-up (in that there may be pressures from stakeholders to present findings in a particular way—not an issue in this case). However, simple binary keywords such as "insider" and "outsider", or even "partial insider", fail to encompass the complexity, overlap, and temporality of social positions. These matters, too – of belonging, of insiderness, of occupying seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously, of who draws the boundaries – are as much a topic of the research as underlying methods considerations.

2.6 Ethics

2.6.1 Application for ethical approval

In order to proceed with data-generation it was necessary to gain ethical approval from the university. This was straightforward: the project was deemed low-risk as the research population consisted of adults and did not include vulnerable groups, thus interview participants were able to give informed consent on their own behalf. Participation was voluntary, without compensation, and potential participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form by email, prior to their

agreement (see Appendix 1). Once interviews were conducted, participants had two weeks to request removal of their data if they changed their mind, and were asked at several stages if they had any questions. Based on these facts and a secure data storage plan, ethical approval was granted in June 2017.

However, meeting the university's acceptable threshold of ethical conduct in the recruitment of participants, obtaining of consent, and handling of documents and data, merely scratches the surface of research ethics. Like other research processes, ethical considerations are entwined with many dimensions of the work and continue to be relevant long after fieldwork has been completed, but ethical approval was framed mostly as a hurdle to be surmounted so that empirical work could begin – a box-ticking exercise – and the focus was on processes for obtaining informed consent and secure data storage rather than wider considerations of ethical behaviour. While consent is of course imperative, its emphasis risks obscuring that what matters most is how participants are treated. Even the question of when participation finishes was not raised – when does my responsibility to participants end? To me, the interview was just the beginning of the participation process, and I remain mindful of the weight of responsibility represented by the transcripts under my care.

2.6.2 Ethics during and after the interview

In addition to balancing my insider-researcher investment with outsider equanimity, interviewing required me to tread the boundary between divulging enough of my own personal content to create rapport (see Section 2.8.3) and encourage participants to disclose what Berger (2015) calls 'deep stories' whilst not a) burdening participants with uncontained emotion, b) losing the ability to "hold space" for participants' emotions, c) shifting the focus from participant to myself, or d) creating an emotionally-charged environment that lulled participants into disclosing more than they felt comfortable with. In this sense, my function was analogous to a therapist, who cultivates the conditions for deep disclosure and provides prompts for thought and discussion in a manner that may also involve judicious personal revelations in order to gain trust and signal non-judgement, but with a focus that remains on the client and their wellbeing. This was my first experience of interviewing and I consider the psychotherapy foundation course I completed in 2007 instrumental in providing the skills of a good qualitative researcher. In particular, the 50-50 tenet – meaning to hold

attention half on one's own experience and half on the other person's – is an excellent guide for reflexive research practice. In this framework the attention given to my own feelings is not narcissistic but in service both of ensuring that I am clear what is "mine" (so as not to "project") and that I acknowledge the way my experience may be indicative of the participant's state of mind (in recognition of the idea that whatever shows up "in the room" is both felt and created by each person—or perhaps more accurately in the connection between those people).

Conducting participant interviews confirmed my sense that institutional ethical approval processes, with their focus so particularly on "vulnerable" groups and "sensitive" topics, obscured the fact that vulnerability can be transient as much as anchored to particular people or types of people, and individual sensitivities cannot be predicted. The seemingly benign topic of work was, in practice, a highly emotive subject for most participants, several of whom became tearful. Other emotions, sometimes unanticipated and surprising, also presented themselves, highlighting that there is always responsibility involved in communicating with others, and this is amplified in a context where one party, by virtue of having the role of the questioner, holds more power. While participants volunteered to be interviewed and were thus responsible for placing themselves in a situation where emotional discomfort might arise, this does not reduce my responsibility.

To be ethical in this context did not mean avoiding difficult feelings or sensitive areas: emotions are not "bad". However, navigating emotionally-charged interactions, especially in a professional context and between people who do not know each other well, required a delicate touch. Again analogous to therapeutic situations, the "data" provided by emotions often points to the heart of what is most significant, but to follow these threads without pulling back too soon or pushing too hard can be challenging. I was also wary of exploiting the sense of having hit upon something important that strong feelings can indicate; just as it can be tempting for a therapist to push a client to a breakthrough and break them before they are ready, it can be difficult to stop probing for more detail or to allow things to go unexplained in the hunt for the "story". My approach to interviewing was therefore characterised by three principles that I hoped would enable a safe and ethical interview process and yield high-quality data:

1. To replicate natural conversation in asking questions. This meant being flexible with

the interview schedule, omitting questions that had already been answered incidentally and changing the order of questions where flow was improved. The intention was to produce more spontaneity and facilitate a human-feeling interaction, with the aim that it would make both me and the participant feel more at ease and demonstrate active listening (i.e. being attentive to their response and adapting my enquiries accordingly rather than rigidly adhering to a proforma). I also did not take notes because I wanted to remain present, but this does mean I am reliant upon the audio recording, transcript, and my memory for analysis.

2. To let the participant lead in answering questions. This meant seeing my job as facilitating the participant's discourse not being an equal actor in the exchange. I aimed to issue the initial question, ask follow-up prompts only when the participant had stopped speaking, and provide comments or description only where it felt necessary to "receive" the participant's words (especially if they had an emotional tone that suggested they needed "holding") or to contextualise my question. I actively avoided non-lexical sounds such as "mhmm" and opted instead for nodding to signal active listening, partly to avoid contaminating the recording and partly so as not to curtail the participant's response. In this sense, the interviews did quite the opposite of natural conversation, which is riddled with overlaps and interruptions between interlocutors and generally involves each speaker taking a relatively equal amount of floor time.

3. To build space around each interview to ensure I was fully present and was grounded and emotionally centred myself. Particularly because this was a new skill, implementing principles one and two was quite exhausting; close listening and the self-discipline not to interject take energy and practice, like training a muscle. I did not think I would be able to sustain that for more than one interview per day, and I also wanted to leave enough room around each meeting for reflection.

The goal of these principles was not just about ethical treatment of participants but creating the best conditions for the generation of data. Although it therefore took nine months to finish the interviewing stage (I was part-time for most of the project), meaning there are differences in the background context between earlier participants and later ones, I do think there was value in taking time over this crucial research

process.

2.6.3 Anonymity

Collins and McNulty (2020: 218) note that:

> To protect participants […] from being recognised […] it is often necessary for the researcher to obscure, heavily disguise, remove or provide fictitious detail data (such as occupation, country of origin, number and gender of children). While such decisions reduce some of the richness and context of the stories, we believe it is justified in order to respect, and protect, the research participants who have trusted the insider with intimate details of their lives. After all, without their involvement and participation, there would be no study and no paper to publish.

This is perhaps one way in which qualitative research, resource-heavy and inevitably small-scale as a result, is open to criticism: not only can it not tell replicable truths, on occasion it must tell outright lies. However, as I have shown above, there is an element of fiction to all representations of research, and like Collins and McNulty I believe my ethical duty is first to those who made the research possible. No truth should be sought that can only exist at the expense of those who make it knowable, and no truth discovered this way can be "pure".

Like in Loveday's (2018b: 158) study of fixed-term academics, anonymity was a worry not just for me but for participants as 'the content of interviews could potentially be compromising, making insecure employees more vulnerable should participants' accounts be recognisable to employers'. In this project many more participants were precariously situated in relation to HEIs than those on fixed-term contracts, meaning 'it is not always possible to provide detailed biographical information about participants or their institutions' (ibid.). I have erred on the side of extreme caution here, for both ethical and analytical reasons, and my approach to attributing direct quotes from participants is outlined in the General Principles section at the start of the thesis (see Addison & Stephens Griffin, 2022, and Pereira, 2017, for similar approaches).

Because of the potential for identifiability in the small world English academia can be, I want to ensure all participants feel comfortable with how they are represented in project outputs. Transcripts were offered for vetting, and once a paper is accepted for publication I send manuscripts to all participants to check. In the case of conference

presentations, which there is not time to circulate in advance, slides and transcripts are sent after presentation but before being made publicly available (where possible). As well as ensuring that no participant feels exposed or identifiable, this serves to provide some validation of my overall analysis and interpretation.

As might be expected, some participants engage more actively than others, but I will continue to send any outputs in which primary data is used, including this thesis, for as long as I produce them, and with each communication I offer participants the option to opt out of receiving such emails in future.

2.7 Recruitment and sampling of research participants

2.7.1 Sample size

I initially decided to interview 26 people to enable a diverse yet manageable sample, but the final number was 29 as I included the data from the pilot interviews (conducted in November and December 2017, recruited through a Facebook group for academics) and acquired a bonus participant when someone I had previously pursued became available later. My aim was to represent as many perspectives as feasible within a limited number of participants.

Although consideration of "sample size" – the number of participants in a project – usually goes hand-in-hand with "saturation" – the point at which sufficient data has been generated and no new insights are offered – with sample size being determined with the aim of reaching saturation, this was not a practical approach to take in this case (I discuss saturation in more depth below). As Sim et al (2018: 619) point out, 'there is often a perceived need to indicate sample size in advance of, or at the outset of, a qualitative research project. This may be in order to meet the demands of research funders or ethics committees, or simply to plan the resources for the study'. Accordingly, many attempts have been made to quantify the ideal sample size to reach saturation point, but Sim et al (2018: 623-24) further observe that attempts to do so 'make a naïve realist assumption […] that themes 'pre-exist' in participants' accounts, independently of the analyst, and are there to be discovered'. Braun and Clarke (2021: 39) are similarly critical of this way of thinking about data themes, arguing that '[t]hemes cannot exist separately from the researcher—they are *generated* by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process'.

However, for the reasons outlined above it was necessary to make some decisions in advance regarding at least target number of participants and length of interview as these had a significant bearing on the resources (financial and otherwise) required and the practicability of the project within the permitted timeframe. Participants also needed to know what to expect and how much of their time was required in order to provide informed consent, and for the project to obtain ethical approval.

2.7.2 Participant recruitment

Recruitment began with a call for participants on Twitter in January 2018 (see Figure 1). The inclusion criteria for eligibility were that respondents needed to have been employed at a public HEI in England within the last two years, on a fixed-term or permanent contract that could be teaching-only, research-only, or what was commonly referred to as a "standard" academic contract (teaching, research, and "service" or administration), but not hourly-paid or purely doctoral (two participants were completing doctorates following careers in academic roles). Those who were no longer employed had to have left for reasons other than retirement as I was mostly interested in their reasons for leaving, although in hindsight the perspective of retired academics would have been interesting too when considering questions of identity—is there any such thing as a "retired academic"? (Davies & Jenkins, 2013; George & Maguire, 2021). Hourly-paid staff such as graduate teaching assistants were excluded as I knew this experience would be present in the sample. I restricted eligibility to HEIs in England to maintain consistency; this is also the context in which I have worked and am most familiar with.

The use of social media as a recruitment tool had disadvantages in that it weighted the sample towards participants with an online presence. However, this also represents a rare underpinning similarity amongst the sample, and Twitter is a broad enough church that I do not consider its users to represent a "subculture" that unduly skews the data in any particular direction. Furthermore, with a sample this small it is inevitable that there are perspectives that cannot be represented and given the efforts made to platform a broad range of biographies in other ways I perceive this limitation to be minimal when considered alongside other inbuilt restrictions of qualitative studies. The aim of this type of research is not to be "representative" and as the project neither focuses on nor so much as briefly alights on the topic of social media,

participants' Twitter status is of little consequence to its goals. It should also be noted that the description of the project as investigating gendered inequalities—a much vaguer representation than my intentions as I did not wish to direct participants' responses—clearly impacted some interviews by invoking gender as a relevant topic. However, as gender is of decreasing relevance to the thesis I am not concerned that it negatively affects the utility of the data.

The first call generated around 90 volunteers. Some respondents did not fulfil the selection criteria and were excluded, whereas other types of respondent (most notably white, female social scientists) were over-represented. This meant follow-up calls were required to target populations under-represented in the pool (see Figure 2).

Call for Participants – Academic Cultures

Hello! My name is Jessica Butler and I am an AHRC-funded PhD student at Lancaster University **recruiting participants for face-to-face interviews** as part of my doctoral thesis. This research has ethical approval from the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee and investigates **gendered inequalities in academia**.

I am looking for participants of **all career stages** who are currently **working in, seeking work in, or have recently left work in an academic post at a public university in England**. Interviews will last **60-90 minutes** and will be arranged for a time and location convenient to you. I will be asking about your **experiences and observations of higher education**, both positive and negative: celebrations and frustrations.

If you may be able to spare the time, **please DM @reltubacissej or email j.butler4@lancaster.ac.uk** for a chat and a full information sheet with further details about the project and interview process.

Figure 1: First call for participants

Hello! I'm still recruiting for the following gaps in my sample:

- **Post-PhD ECRs who are male or non-binary and:** BAME and/or panel A and/or panel B
- **SL/Readers: who are male or non-binary and:** BAME and/or panel A and/or panel B
- **Professors who are male or non-binary and:** BAME and/or panel B and/or panel D
- **Professors who are female or non-binary and:** BAME and/or panel A
- **Ex-academics who are male or non-binary** (especially in panels A and B)

I'm also keen to recruit participants from some of the following institutions: **Winchester; UEA; Canterbury Christ Church; Oxford; Nottingham; London-based institutions**.

Panel: REF main panel your discipline UoA falls into (http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/uoa/).
Ex-academic: someone who worked in HE in an academic capacity for a substantial period of time before leaving the sector (for reasons other than retirement).

Please email j.butler4@lancaster.ac.uk for more information.

Figure 2: Follow-up call

2.7.3 Sampling

Although I considered potential participants in the round, I set broad targets based primarily on achieving varied representation across certain categories:

Race/ethnicity/nationality

Using 2015-16[9] academic staff figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) I calculated that to represent the proportion of academics of colour in the workforce I would need 3 participants of colour, but targeted 6. Academics of colour are, as the HESA data suggests, particularly under-represented in HE and I wanted to ensure that the project did not only represent white perspectives and that there were enough participants of colour to also contain variation in career stage, subject discipline, etcetera. I also made effort to include participants with different countries of origin, first languages, and ethnic identities, though I did not set a quota.

Subject area

I used Research Excellence Framework assessment panels as a crude measurement of discipline, attempting to get an even distribution across the four areas (broadly: A – medical sciences; B – natural and mathematical sciences; C – social sciences; D – arts and humanities). Within the panels, I aimed to include a variety of specialisms, using departmental affiliation as a guide, although this was not always an accurate encapsulation of participants' academic identities. Disciplines have varying concerns, working practices, working environments, and cultures, so it seemed important to ensure as much of this nuance was captured as possible to illuminate how common themes show up in novel ways depending on context (and to trace how even ostensibly very different practices exemplify similar problems when core issues are scrutinised).

Institution type and prestige

I used *The Guardian* newspaper's 2018[10] university rankings as a proxy for prestige, intending to represent an array of positions, and within this considered other features:

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[9] The most recent full year available at the time.
[10] Published in 2017.

size (student population); campus-based, multi-campus, or non-campus; saturation of HEIs in the local area; academic focus; research intensity. Different types of universities have different cultures and conceptions of themselves and their history, in addition to being seen as having variable allocations of cultural cachet. The number of students and focus of courses affects more localised cultures and how departments position themselves in relation to the overall institution. Mapping cultures in HE requires taking into account a broad spectrum of institutions as these will manifest differently in different places.

Geographical location

I divided England into nine areas (London, South West, South, South East, Midlands, East, West, North East, North West) and sought to represent each.

Career stage

Job titles and years since doctoral completion (where applicable) were used as proxies for considering participants early-, mid-, or late-career, although this was not always accurate and some categorisations were revised post-interview to account for those in practice-based roles who had pursued a doctorate later, and those who had not sought or received promotion. Progression through academia requires different achievements at each level, presenting new and escalating challenges, therefore the experiences of those at different stages will provide a range of insights.

As the intention was to identify common themes across HE culture at a macro level, recruiting a diverse array of perspectives and experiences was important in order to draw out similarities—as well as meaningful divergences. This presented several challenges when it came to purposively sampling the initial respondent pool as I sought to select participants in a balanced way—i.e. for participants in one category to be distributed across other categories so that, for example, those in Panel A disciplines were not all early-career, etcetera. In considering institutional affiliation I also accounted for previous institutions at which participants had studied and/or worked. It should be noted, however, that this is not research into "diversity" as equated with marginalised identities. Participants were selected to have different biographies from each other so as to ensure a kaleidoscope of perspectives, but the final sample intentionally resembles the landscape of English HE (and England more widely) in being

comprised of around 70% white academics, most of whom are also native Anglophones. I took seriously the selection of participants for, as Reybold et al (2012: 703) point out, 'selection is a form of data collection, not just entrée to the field' and 'purposeful selection is a mechanism for making meaning, not just uncovering it […] [It] is epistemological; researchers construct versions of reality grounded in their selection choice' (ibid.: 700).

While the breadth of participants and small sample precludes making generalisations about the experiences of any particular group or position, it does enable commonalities across difference to become more visible as well as disparities in the impact of universal experiences. This approach is relatively unique compared to similar HE research, which usually centres on students or particular populations/sites of inequality—e.g. women (Hoskins, 2010; Rogers, 2016); fixed-term staff (Allen Collinson, 2004; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b); gender and women's studies (Pereira, 2017); early-career academics (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017); manager-academics (Deem, 2003; Loveday, 2021); disability (Brown & Leigh, 2020); race (Arday, 2018; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020)—or considers academic culture theoretically rather than empirically (e.g. Ball, 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Radice, 2013; Tight, 2010, 2018). Although there could be concern that the sampling technique spread participants too thin, the resulting data displays a wealth of common ground, particularly with respect to precarity, which is often seen as a problem primarily for newer academics—and, as Bailyn (2003: 145) has observed, using an 'integrated lens' furthers equalities more effectively than focusing on particular groups (McArthur, 2021). The fact this research encompasses the full career span is thus a particular strength as it makes visible both the prevailing 'pattern' acting upon the landscape and the variety of effects on different areas of the map (Frye, 1984).

The constitution of the final sample is:

Gender			Race/ethnicity	
Male	14		White	21
Female	14		Black	3
Non-binary	1		Unspecified	0
Class			Jewish	3
Working class	9		It's complicated	1
Middle class	8		South Asian	1
It's complicated	4		**Nationality**	
W/c by birth, m/c by career	1		British	15
Unspecified	6		Scottish	1
Subject area			Irish	3
Medical and animal sciences	6		Unspecified	5
Natural and mathematical sciences	6		Not British (Anglophone)	1
Social sciences	7		Not British	6
Humanities	7		**Relationship status**	
Arts	3		Single	0
Career stage			Partnered	20
Early-career	10		Unspecified	9
Mid-career	7		**Family status**	
Late-career/senior	4		Children	13
Management	2		No children	5
It's complicated	3		Unspecified	11
Ex	3			

Notes: Some categories add up to more than 29 as participants claimed multiple identities; 'unspecified' means this information was not mentioned rather than actively withheld.

Figure 3: Table of participants

The data in the above table is compiled from a combination of initial participant screening emails (see Appendix 2), the interviews themselves, and a follow-up email in August 2020 (see Appendix 5) in which participants had the opportunity to describe their identity in their own terms. The only categories I expressly asked for input on were: gender identity, class identity, racial/ethnic identity, and career stage. Where other identity aspects were explicitly orientated to, I have mentioned them, thus 'unspecified' does not denote declined response but absence of particular mention. I have distinguished between those from outside the UK who are from Anglophone countries and those who are not mostly for the sake of completeness – interestingly, the matter of speaking English as an additional language did not come up in interviews and ethnic background was a bigger issue than nationality, although the consideration of leaving English academia was more prevalent in those participants who migrated from elsewhere, both due to the current state of English HE and wider concerns around Brexit. I have not tabulated the institutional and geographical categories provided as, while they were important to ensure a diverse sample, most participants

had worked, or at least studied, at different institutions and in different areas, and many did not grow up in, or even live in, the part of the country where they worked. A high degree of mobility is a hallmark of the academic career.

Additional to the features outlined above, which I actively sought to represent, I have tabulated some other key aspects of identity that showed up strongly in the data despite not being asked about.

2.8 Fieldwork (semi-structured interviews)

2.8.1 Fieldwork context

The primary research activity from February to October 2018 was conducting participant interviews. The early part of this period was characterised by wide instability in the UK HE landscape, with a schedule of industrial action by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) at 64 universities, running in the first instance from 22 February to 20 March 2018 (further action has been taken every year since). The catalyst for these strikes was proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme pensions offered by some UK HEIs (Bergfeld, 2018), but the opportunity allowed for discontent across a range of issues, most notably the scarcity and precarity of academic work, to be voiced (later formalised in UCU's 'Four Fights' campaign).[11] The first run of strikes was the longest in UK HE history (Bergfeld, 2018), generating a considerable amount of media attention, so unsurprisingly many of the issues raised during this period arose during interviews. On a practical note, strikes had to be factored into interview arrangements, raising questions around whether participation constituted "academic work".

2.8.2 The interview process

Interviews lasted between 60 and 200 minutes, mostly depending on participants' availability, with the majority falling around the 90 minutes advertised, and these took place in two waves between February and October 2018. Two pilot interviews were conducted in late November and early December 2017, to test the interview schedule and practice interviewing skills; these participants were given the option to allow their

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[11] See https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11818/Four-fights-dispute-FAQs.

data to be included in the final study and in both cases did. Some minor changes were made to the questions and order following these trials but as this was also true of other interviews and the fact the pilots yielded interesting, textured data, I chose to retain use of these transcripts.

It was my intention to meet in participants' offices where possible, or in other institutional rooms, so that I could get a sense of the institutional context, but most took place in participants' homes (see Appendix 4). In some cases this was because participants no longer had an institutional affiliation, in others because they were on parental leave or had scheduled our interview for a day off or research day. There were variances in whether participants treated the interview as something they could legitimately do "on the clock", and those meetings that took place in institutional offices tended to be shorter to fit into the 60-minute blocks that often characterise a campus day.

The initial aim to meet on campus was to gain an impression of the institution and a feel for the space, environment, and atmosphere of participants' workplaces. Visiting universities around the country gave a sense of the institutions and their population, architecture, location, and size. However, meeting participants in their homes offered more insight into those individuals—one participant greeting me at the door, laptop in hand, on their day off, apologising for having to put out a metaphorical fire before our interview could commence, another breastfeeding a mizzling baby—and even travelling to the towns and cities in which institutions were based increased the texture of the interview encounter and subsequent analysis. From the enormous 'TEF Gold' banner emblazoned across one HEI's glass-fronted library ('when we were number one on various league tables […] that was up in place of the big gold sticker'), to the rabbits bouncing between daffodils at a particularly bucolic campus, to the identikit once-brightly-coloured polyester furniture and snazzy "feature wall" at seemingly every university, the embodied experience anchored the data to a tangible somatic memory (Ahmed, 2007: 242 recounts a similar experience). While there are benefits, especially in the post-Covid age, to conducting interviews via video link I am immensely grateful that I had the opportunity to meet participants in person and have no doubt the data and analysis are better for it. I *loved* doing fieldwork—it was a privilege and a pleasure.

Where I was in the position of "host" rather than "guest" the interview dynamic changed much as it did in response to other contextual factors—an interruption for a

phone call, a slight sense of rush to finish before England played a World Cup match, being momentarily distracted by wondering how many biscuits it is polite to eat. How does the offer, acceptance, or rejection of a cup of tea affect the connection and the power dynamic; how does it change depending on which party is making the offer? What was the effect of walking a participant's dogs with them before settling down to the interview and did it counteract the irritation of the neighbour's power-saw later? Does the presence of a baby or the phone call from a teenage child affect the amount we talk about parenthood? In places, participants alluded to the way space and location shift identity, noting that perhaps they would have said something different were we not in their office, where they had their academic hat firmly on. We may not be able to say precisely what might have been different but what makes its way into the data is a product of many factors, especially in qualitative, field-based research like this. This is not a failing or an invalidation, but something to be held in mind when considering "reliability" or "truth": there are very few open questions that would yield the same answer in the same words even if asked of the same person at the same time every day. Life is not a laboratory.

The interview schedule was designed carefully (see Appendix 3) to ensure questions were open, not leading, and ambiguous enough to be taken in different directions without being dauntingly wide. I was especially mindful to avoid directly invoking the themes I intended to explore, hoping to see if participants raised them spontaneously (if they did not, we usually had an opportunity to discuss them at the end as it was common for participants to ask what I was focusing the project on). I also paid particular attention to creating a flow of questions, but in practice participants responded so differently that the opportunity to raise certain issues presented itself at other times. The only place where this consistently failed was before the question 'do you consider yourself successful?' (plus additional prompts), which I rarely found an opportunity to slip in seamlessly; it therefore mostly appeared when the previous line of conversation had run dry, and prefaced with 'a slightly weighty question now…' or 'changing tack slightly,…' to prepare participants for a different style of question. This was the main point at which I regularly felt myself in "interviewer mode", drawing attention to the asking of questions, but as this usually took place around two thirds of the way through an interview it did not feel disruptive as generally the participant and I had established a sense of ease by that point. If anything, it perhaps drew more focus to this and the following question, 'have you ever

felt like you were failing?' (plus additional prompts), in a way that was useful given the significance of these questions to the research questions, and re-established the boundary of the interview context.

2.8.3 Rapport

Although discussions of the benefits of interviews, especially less structured ones, highlight the significance of "rapport" between the researcher and participant as a necessary ingredient to obtain "rich" data, Prior (2018: 489) observes that 'rarely is rapport defined either conceptually or empirically'. Indeed, it is difficult to define, as, rather like love, it is a feeling that is hard to quantify or describe. It is not very "scientific" to speak of intuition, yet at least in a colloquial sense that is how I would think of rapport—as an intangible "gut feeling" of kinship with someone, as whatever it is that makes some strangers instant friends yet some regular acquaintances perpetual strangers.

Malterud et al (2016: 1755) highlight that the 'analytic value of the empirical data depends on the skills of the interviewer, the articulateness of the participant, and the chemistry between them'. Like many things it is a matter of balance: enough ease to create an interview environment free of awkwardness and fertile for discussion, but either enough formality or an attentive enough researcher to ensure adequate detail is provided and ethical boundaries are maintained. Several participants told me they volunteered for the project because they wanted the space to think through issues around academia and inequality, so it felt important to keep this space open. What this entailed was being relatively unobtrusive and allowing participants to speak at length if they wished, which tended to result in the power balance being determined by the participant, which also affected the rapport between us (or perhaps was a product of it). In practice, though, whether one is conducting insider research or not, and whether rapport is actively cultivated or not, each interview is different because each participant is different (and, to an extent, the researcher too is different in each encounter, not only due to their mood on the day or the background events of their life, but because of the knowledge and experience gained from previous interviews).

2.8.4 Finishing fieldwork—or, saturation

As outlined above, data saturation is, loosely, the point at which nothing new is appearing in the data and data-generation can cease. However, the importance and possibility of saturation is hotly debated. How the "completeness" of the data is thought about also depends on how analysis is conducted; in deductive research, themes are identified in advance and saturation is reached when they are sufficiently represented by the data, while in inductive research, themes arise from the data and saturation is reached when no new themes appear (Saunders et al, 2018). However, as Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) consistently point out, themes do not lie passively 'in' the data waiting to 'emerge', but, like the data itself, 'are *generated* by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process' (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 39). They also highlight that in reality most qualitative data analysis is both inductive and deductive; as themes are identified in earlier analyses they become searched for in later ones, and if we have set research questions we have some sense of what we are looking for. So, if themes in the data are *made* rather than simply *being there*, and if analysis is an iterative process of generating themes and applying them, how could I tell when saturation had been reached—indeed, is it even possible to "exhaust" the data when I am *creating* and not *discovering* its meaning?

Instead of focusing on saturation, then, I took the more practical approach of 'reaching the point where further data collection becomes "counter-productive", and where the "new" does not necessarily add anything to the overall story or theory', working from a logic of 'diminishing returns' (Saunders et al, 2018: 1900). Of course, without knowing what the next participant would offer it was impossible to say whether anything pivotal might be contributed, so saturation, whether full or "good enough", is always likely to be to some degree a guess. I also agree that 'the term "saturation" is itself problematic, as it intuitively lends itself to thinking in terms of a fixed point and a sense of "completeness"' (ibid.), so I framed my decision instead with a question: *is there a compelling story to tell from this data, and can I tell it without bridging gaps with my own assumptions?*. This seems a reasonable approach given O'Reilly and Parker's (2012: 194) observation that '[i]f saturation is not reached this simply means that the phenomenon has not yet been fully explored rather than that the findings are invalid'. Indeed, several participants alluded to the fact that their answers were not "final" in the sense of being their complete and fully-formed response to my prompts

so in some sense the exploration is always partial. Our answers at any given moment reflect our thoughts, experiences, mood, etcetera, at the time, as well as connection with the interviewer and other aspects of the interview context.

I recall being asked, towards the end of the interviewing period, whether I felt I had achieved saturation. My response at that point could only be based on my experiences of the interviews themselves as I had not yet begun systematic analysis of the transcripts—but, of course, I had thought about and reflected upon the conversations I had, both during and after them. So: when is "the analysis", what is "the data"? These questions return as I consider the 'cumulative judgements' (Saunders et al, 2018) made—educated judgements, but judgements often made on a sense, rather than a rigorous assessment. The impulse to make rigid, certain, logical, and linear, processes that in the event are also flexible, emergent, intuitive, and chaotic, makes sense: it makes qualitative social science sound more like scientific-method science, it binds it to convention, it renders the story more tellable by organising it teleologically. But it also does a disservice to this kind of research while mystifying it and making it less accessible. In subtly misrepresenting what is done it is easy to overstate claims—I have reached saturation! I have fully explored this phenomenon!—and in the process undermine trust in the approach as a whole.

2.9 Data analysis

2.9.1 What is data?

I have been using the word "data" thus far to refer to the end product of the interviews—written transcripts. I have already suggested that these are only a *representation* of the data based on audio recordings that are themselves only a reflection of one aspect of the interview—that which can be rendered in sound. The word data itself, though, has some issues.

Firstly, as I was the researcher who both generated and analysed the data, how do I delineate between information arising from whatever documents comprise the "dataset" and that arising from everything in between: my experiences, memories, intuitions, sensations, all the information I hold without consciously knowing it or that is not represented in the sonic or graphic hologram of the data? Social science recognises the importance of reflexivity but tends to frame it in terms of opening

awareness to what the analyst "brings to" the data, as if the information the researcher already contains is not also, in a sense, data.

It should be noted also that how data comes to be is contested. Silverman (2007) speaks of 'found' versus 'manufactured' data, others refer to "collecting", "capturing", or "creating" data. The matter of whether the data is just "there" or whether it is created in part by the researcher is one of perspective, and the question then becomes whether it is possible ever to simply "find" information or whether it is always to some extent "manufactured" by the decision to use it as data. I prefer the term "generated" to reflect the fact that although the information contained within my data may already have existed it was either not available in an analysable form or not construed as data until my involvement.

2.9.2 When is analysis?

I call everything that happened after getting the interview transcripts "analysis", but of course, as above, prior to beginning any formal or systematic processes I was already digesting the information. This pre-analysis became built into future interviews as the technique and schedule were honed by each encounter, and in some cases enshrined into the written data when, for example, I am asked what responses prior interviewees have given, or as I ask a follow-up question inspired by something said by someone else. This is another demonstration of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) observation that themes can be generated by the researcher, that we reinscribe certain occurrences in the data by, consciously or not, bringing them back. In hindsight I wish I had kept a research diary more formal than the several notebooks in which I jot thoughts, but equally there is a different kind of information in which memories stick, in what niggles. Have these memories become warped by time? Probably. But who is to say my contemporaneous notes are any less distorted, or my interpretation of those scribbles months later? The same applies to the data itself, some of which I have read differently over the years, highlighting again how even if there is some sense in which meaning lies dormant "in" the data, it requires the analyst's activation. When does analysis begin, or end? Again, I have no answers for these questions—they are further examples of the ragged edges of research the drive for legitimacy impels us to snip clean.

2.9.3 Analytical process

My approach to analysis was not exhaustive—in other words, I did not aim to reach a saturation point but to arrive at a stage where there was a clear story to tell that offered something new and could be supported. This was largely for practical reasons—with 500 pages of transcripts and limited time to complete the thesis, one cannot be too precious. In hindsight, the number and length of interviews was probably unrealistic for a project of this size and duration, but as someone who once sent a 6000-word reply to an email saying only 'how are you?' a tendency towards the prolix may simply be a personal shortcoming.

The data was processed six times, in both audio and transcript form, digitally (using Atlas.ti to input and collate tags) and by hand:

1. Playback of each recording;
2. First computer-based pass of transcripts, tagging data with obvious themes relating to the research questions or describing subject matter, resulting in a preliminary set of keyword codes;
3. Second pass to incorporate codes derived later in step 2 that had been missed from earlier transcripts;
4. Paper-based reading and manual highlight of data that was particularly striking or that related to impostor syndrome (I was writing a chapter on this topic at the time—see Wren Butler, 2022a);
5. Import of paper annotations and tagging of any mention of feeling out of place, not fitting in, excluded, on the outside, etc. (unbelonging);
6. Final read through to isolate quotes relevant to final argument.

As this suggests, the analysis process was iterative: discoveries from one round of engagement were fed back into subsequent rounds until it was possible to tell a comprehensive narrative. It should also be noted that like Pereira (2017: 12) I approached interviews and their data as 'discourse to analyse, rather than just as sources of […] information'.

2.10 Identification of central themes/areas of interest

After the first three stages of data processing it was possible to discern four over-arching themes in relation to the research questions, and an array of sub-themes for each. These I organised as follows:

1. Aspects of "idealness" or difference/inequality

Gender; accent; class; race/ethnicity; previous or current institutional affiliation; age; caring responsibilities; dress and appearance; religion; health and disability; politics; nationality or country of origin; mobility; research area or discipline; supportedness; financial resources.

2. Sites of success and failure/competition culture

Rankings, metrics, league tables; precarity and casualisation; the Research Excellence Framework; the Teaching Excellence Framework; student feedback; KPIs and targets; grant bids and research funding; promotion and probation; redundancy and "voluntary" severance; social media; publication; workload models; conferences; (bad) management.

3. Long-term consequences of competition culture

For both individuals and the sector as a whole: bullying/lack of collegiality; extreme anxiety; poor health—acute and chronic; overwork/burnout; suicide; individualism and isolation; leaving the sector; decreased productivity; quality/quantity imbalance; fractured identity; personal crisis; narrowing or shallowing of research; lack of diversity; 'tail wagging the dog' (P9); hollowing out of values/disillusionment; instrumentalised learning/research.

4. Ameliorants

Mentorship within the academy; support systems beyond the academy—family and friends; hobbies or interests unrelated to academic life; strong sense of self;

independence; firm, clear boundaries; care—for and by self and others; being heard; celebration of achievements, however minor; good management; collegiality; alignment of values; time to think; positive feedback.

Impostor syndrome, although mentioned in passing by some participants, was not a theme I had identified beyond "difference" until I was given cause to focus on it apropos of contributing to a handbook on the topic (Addison et al, 2022). Stage four of analysis was therefore primarily to locate material on which to base this paper (Wren Butler, 2022a), the writing of which was pivotal for the project in two ways. First, in finding the notion of impostor syndrome inadequate my alternative framing gave rise to the concepts of unbelonging and the hegemonic academic (now the "proper academic") and an early iteration of the legibility zones framework. Second, in the chapter ballooning to over 26,000 words it became clear that these were highly generative concepts to use, hence they became the new focus of analysis for the final two stages. The data was then scoured for any further content that revealed feelings or examples of exclusion, outsiderhood, marginality, difference, discomfort, being out of place, or not fitting in ("unbelonging"). This was mapped onto what encounters, processes, or situations could engender these feelings ("sites of belonging"; SBs), which were then organised into the three "legibility zones" (LZs): institutional/administrative (what a proper academic does), ideological/philosophical (what a proper academic "is"), and individual/biographical (who a proper academic is).

By stage six I had further developed and tested the LZ framework in a journal article (Wren Butler, 2021) and was intending to produce an expanded version of its argument for the final thesis. However, when unstuffed, and despite adhering to my original thesis plan (see Appendix 6), this argument further mushroomed beyond the capacity of a PhD. Feeling that its essence was in its comprehensive mapping of SBs and that a truncated version would offer little above what the article had contributed, I decided instead to retain the concepts but use them in service of a different story. This required composing a new thesis plan in response to a more refined set of research questions.

2.11 Refinement of research questions

Throughout writing the first thesis draft, some SBs were clearly identifiable as more

tightly related, and also as more strongly bound to a particular version of the proper academic. While the more general ideal of the proper academic can be emulated in a variety of ways, the features participants identified as representing the "true essence" of an academic on a metaphysical level are more specific. However, the intangible nature of these qualities requires that they be made visible through concrete indicators that act as proxies for certain beliefs, motivations, and self-conceptions that otherwise can only be known internally. Although these more readily identifiable forms of legibility are seemingly institutional in nature—and thus frequently cast by both participants and other researchers as "neoliberal"—they also support ideals of academic disposition, value, and purpose that originate in an older time. Unpicking the tensions and contradictions of the "true academic" can shed light on why practices that maintain inequalities continue to prevail in UK HE and the uncomfortable degree of complicity academics have even—perhaps especially—in the conventions participants were most critical of. This thesis is thus structured by the following questions:

1. What are the dominant beliefs about the value and purpose of higher education and the constitution of the "true academic" circulating in contemporary English academia?
2. How do these ideals a) contribute to experiences of unbelonging and illegibility in English academia and b) create, maintain, and perpetuate systemic inequalities?
3. What can the answers to these questions offer to efforts to increase inclusivity and equalities both within and beyond higher education?

2.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I have elucidated the processes, approaches, considerations, and decisions undertaken in relation to the design and enactment of this research project. I have also presented commentary on the conventions associated with articulating research methods in the social sciences and argued that efforts to demonstrate reflexivity and practice conscious research that foregrounds the agentic power of the researcher, while laudable, can create their own obfuscations. The way research is presented, I have suggested, can construct a 'sanitised' picture of qualitative

investigation (Collins & McNulty, 2020) that attempts to replicate "scientific" measures of legitimacy. This seemingly transparent but often incomplete account can, in building credibility for one project, make us doubt our own, representing an unattainably neat and teleological vision of activities that are in practice often chaotic and even accidental. As Cook (2009: 278) observes, '[p]erceptions of self as researcher tended to be linked to portrayals in the literature of neat and tidy research models. Not following a path that others had apparently successfully negotiated led to feelings of being deviant'. Like many academic conventions, some people have an advantage in acquiring knowledge of the rules and rendering themselves and their work credible by the established standards; the question then remains whether greater equality should be achieved by institutionalising those who are less legible as legitimate ('deviant') or by changing the lens through which legitimacy is read. These matters speak to the heart of this thesis and the concepts explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Concepts—The Proper Academic, Unbelonging, and Legibility Zones

3.1 Introduction

In the first two chapters I made reference to several concepts that are central to this thesis, which argues that belonging in contemporary English HE is partly determined in relation to three central beliefs about what constitutes a "true academic". This archetype is a particular formulation of the more generalised ideal or "proper" academic. The proper academic is identified through various sites of belonging, organised into three overlapping legibility zones (LZs) based on academic doing (LZ1), academic being (LZ2), and individual identity (LZ3).

I provided an introduction to the existing concepts and areas of study relevant to this project in Chapter 1. Other key terms, however, are "new", in that they are theoretical constructions derived specifically from this research, first arising from the data and then, as outlined in Section 2.9, deployed in service of further data analysis. These concepts require expansion to ground their meaning, differentiate them from similar ideas, and enable them to be understood in enough detail for potential use in other research. Thus I treat each in turn, beginning with a discussion of the proper academic before moving on to defining unbelonging and an overview of the LZ framework. The formulation of the "true academic" will be the focus of the remaining three chapters.

3.2 The "proper academic"

The concept of the proper academic as I use it has been through several iterations. An early form of this idea has been in use from the commencement of the project, beginning life as the "ideal academic". Indeed, as outlined in Section 2.4, identifying the traits of the ideal academic was one of the starting aims of this work and is inscribed in the first set of research questions. My interest in academic ideals was initially sparked by my own falling short of them and the sense, as articulated by Wong and Chiu (2021: 502), that investigating conventionalised constructions of what is desirable in a

particular context could highlight underlying inequalities:

> by specifying what is considered to be ideal, we are simultaneously inferring what is not ideal. This process of inclusion and exclusion has power implications around dominant and marginal discourses, with an underlying concern about the extent to which ideal […] characteristics might privilege or disadvantage particular groups.

I open this section by contextualising my work on ideals in HE amongst some recent studies using similar ideas. I then briefly articulate the evolution of the proper academic concept as I have used it throughout this project.

3.2.1 Academic ideals in research literature

Below I indicatively outline some constructions of the "ideal" in HE contexts (student and staff), focusing on that which best illustrate points of contact and divergence with this project.

An important question when considering ideals is "whose ideal?"—curiously, this is not always addressed, and ideals can be spoken of as if universally agreed-upon, often invoking "neoliberal" values. Bailyn (2003: 143) for example claims—via Howard Georgi (a physicist)—that scientists 'are expected to be assertive and competitive' but points out that these traits may not improve the quality of their science. However, it is unclear who is understood as expecting scientists to be this way or how scientists interact with this expectation; while I do not refute that this is one permutation of the ideal scientist, I want to draw attention to the ease with which such statements are made in HE literature and the function they perform in reinforcing perceptions of ideals and rendering them monolithic and homogenic. In reasserting ideals, especially those based in assumptions of what (unnamed) others believe rather than research data, we make it harder to redraw them and harder to see that this is no longer the prevailing thought, merely the prevailing thought about thought.

3.2.1.1 Student ideals

Some of the latest research related to ideals in academia has been conducted by Wong and Chiu (2021; also Wong et al, 2021), who investigate features of the ideal university student. They too have grappled with pinning down the concept, and noted the fact

that as an abstract imaginary there can never be complete agreement about what constitutes an ideal. Although their attempt to identify the dominant ideals of students in the UK is broadly consonant with my aims, there are notable differences of approach. Firstly, Wong and Chiu (2021) directly asked their respondents (academic staff and students) to reflect on the ideal student, whereas I inferred the proper academic from a wide range of questions in order to avoid "stock" answers. Secondly, they take a relatively uncritical stance; their objective is to construct a list of ideal characteristics to inform students about what is expected of them rather than to interrogate these ideals and the assumptions underlying them, and they take at face value their participants' views without framing them as *perceptions* and the ideal thus as a *construct*. This seems especially important as so many of their respondents are students, whose understandings of the ideal may especially not be "accurate" but instead reflective of ideas received from elsewhere (see Henderson & Reynolds, 2022, on fictional representations of academia). While Wong and Chiu (2021: 506) claim their operationalisation of the term 'ideal' is 'not about perfection' in the sense of being the 'best' student, this also seems debatable—I understand this to mean that the ideal student need not be the highest attaining (a point I return to later as it interfaces with beliefs about the true academic), but I would argue that emulating the ideal student is simply another form of attainment and a different kind of "perfect" or "best". However, the divergence between the "top of the class" student and the ideal student more broadly lends support to my LZ framework, highlighting the variety of factors that comprise an ideal.

Wong and Chiu's (2021: 499) assertion that '[b]y uncovering some of these ideal characteristics, students would be better informed and will have the opportunity to develop these attributes' may be well-intentioned but it is in danger of replicating the (perception of the) status quo (Koutsouris et al, 2021: 132). I therefore wish to be clear that my attempt to trace the features of the proper and true academics is in no sense a guidebook for how to academic properly—it is a tool for untangling how ideals reinforce each other and a foundation for examining those ideals, their underlying assumptions, and the problems they catalyse.

Koutsouris et al (2021) also focus on the ideal student, drawing participants from a single Russell Group institution and using the notion of the 'hidden curriculum' to inform their analysis. Similar to what Bourdieu (1977: 167) terms 'doxa' or that which 'goes without saying because it comes without saying' (italics removed)—what we

might call dominant or normative culture—the hidden curriculum 'is about unintended messages, underpinning norms, values and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible' (Koutsouris et al, 2021: 132). In other words, in an HE context it is the things a successful student needs to learn but that they are never explicitly taught because they are not acknowledged as necessary or are assumed to already be known because '[p]rocesses within higher education institutions are often implicitly modelled around a certain type of student, such as a young, white, able-bodied student, living away from home, without caring responsibilities or financial worries' (ibid.: 134-35). A similar issue faces academics, as my research demonstrates, and likewise the secret rules governing the proper academic 'draw attention' to what participants 'are expected not just to "do" but most importantly to "be"' (ibid. 135). In another parallel, Koutsouris et al (2021: 143-44) also found that students who reported that 'they did not fit with the projection of the implied student' experienced this as 'a source of anxiety leading to a feeling that "they have less of a right to be here", a feeling of non-belonging'. These findings complement Nyström et al's (2019: 6) discovery that students' perceptions of success 'involved much more than simply undertaking an elite programme, getting good grades and demonstrating cleverness', noting that 'having it all', particularly in a manner that appeared effortless or stress-free, is esteemed in students. This both supports and contrasts with my data regarding ideal academic identity.

In their research on students becoming ideal creative workers, Allen et al (2013) find that constructions of 'employable' students in the creative industries are gendered, raced, and classed. The ideal worker/student in this context bears similarities to the proper academic in terms of expectations around demonstrating passion, commitment, and alignment to an inner sense of "being" a creative (as opposed to simply doing creative work; see also Gill, 2014). As Allen et al (2013: 439) point out, structural impediments to performing this identity are backgrounded in favour of attributing certain qualities such as 'get up and go' to individuals who are cast as 'motivated' (rather than, say, privileged). Similar to my analysis, they find that 'the capacity to produce oneself and be recognised as an "employable" student and ideal future creative worker is dependent on having access to a range of unequally distributed resources – or economic, social and cultural capitals' (Allen et al, 2013: 434) and that '[t]hese unwritten expectations assume a particular kind of student who has the time to undertake placements, negating the presence of other responsibilities (such as part-

time work or childcare) that constrain this capacity' (ibid.: 438). Indeed, being "care-free" is a repeated motif in understandings of both the ideal student and ideal academic (e.g. Bleijenbergh et al, 2013; Handforth, 2022; Hook, 2022). However, as with much HE research of this time period, these problems are attributed to the imperative for individuals to cast themselves as idealised 'neoliberal subjects' (Allen et al, 2013: 434) while, as I have stated, I wish to trouble the notion that the features characterising ideal identities—*especially* in creative, knowledge, and other "vocational" industries—are specifically emblematic of neoliberalisation, or that conceiving of them in these terms is helpful.

3.2.1.2 Academic ideals

Bleijenbergh et al's (2013) is one of relatively few studies to interrogate ideal academics, although they are careful to point out that their observations are limited to the Netherlands. However, 'the growing globalization of the academic community suggests the existence of generally shared norms about the "ideal academic" among those working in academia' (ibid.: 22-23), at once validating my own approach to discerning some of these 'generally shared norms' and enabling the transportation of findings to other HE contexts. Their study is somewhat limited by its focus on gendered ideals, especially as their source data is derived from interviews exclusively with senior male academics; in this sense, it reflects the ideals of a very specific perspective: not just men, but men with significant institutional responsibility. This raises again the important question: when I talk of ideals, *whose* ideals am I referring to? Bleijenbergh et al (2013) tease out certain institutional values (that in my project come under the rubric of LZ1) such as a strong publication record, grant income, and focus on research productivity over teaching (Bagilhole, 2016)—and my data suggests that many academics share, or have internalised, these norms—but in linking these to the concept of the 'ideal worker' they do not consider any distinction between employer and colleague ideals. A contribution of my project, then, is its attempt to trace the interplay between the "demands" of the university and what academics believe is required of themselves; this is significant as while institutional success is necessary to maintain a career, being accepted as a proper academic by peers is powerfully validating.

While Bleijenbergh et al (2013: 24) note that '[t]he ideal academic [...] is often

construed as a lone, independent individual, who is self-protective, competitive, ruthless and not that collegiate or supportive of colleagues and students', participants in my project identified this character as undesirable and not what a true academic should be. Continued emphasis on the "neoliberal" version of the ideal academic overlooks the more delicate and problematic fact that those who achieve this type of success are not granted peer respect or acceptance; to truly belong, academics must finely balance sustaining a career with maintaining esteem amongst colleagues and tolerate the ambivalence this creates. The idealisation of the 'lone, independent' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013) scholar is also undermined by both Bleijenbergh et al's (2013: 30) own findings that '[a] common element in the construction of the ideal academic is the assumption that for an academic career you need a supportive spouse who allows you to make long hours' and my data, which each suggest that the ideal academic can more accurately be described as someone who can act *as if* they are independent, but whose freedom is enabled by behind-the-scenes labour that both takes up the slack and provides a fulfilling home life that sustains excessive working and emotional wellbeing (Grummell et al, 2013; Utoft, 2020).

Handforth (2022: 296) similarly notes that the

> ideal academic is based on the traditional male academic model of success and operates as a care-free, geographically mobile individual who is able to devote themselves singularly to the production of academic work, as well as withstand periods of precarious employment.

While many discussions of academic inequalities, including mine on occasion, describe particular constituents as 'able to' or unable to emulate such ideals, this has certain effects. There is a risk that in foregrounding what limits people we focus on achieving equality by enabling everyone to achieve the same more than questioning the goal, which reinforces the existing ideal. Privilege then gets framed in peculiar ways—as the ability to devote oneself singularly to work, for example, disguising the much greater and more desirable privilege to be able to place boundaries around work and still succeed—which consequently constructs impediments to doing this as barriers and burdens where they may perform more positive functions too. That caring responsibilities are frequently listed alongside potentially restrictive biographical features and sources of inequality over which one has no control, such as a gender, race, or socioeconomic background, disguises the element of choice in, and further idealises, a way of life that, while potentially paying dividends in respect of an academic

career, can be lonely, isolating, and detrimental to broader wellbeing (Bryer, 2020; Lambert et al, 2013; Seppala et al, 2013).

3.2.1.3 Summary

There are, then, a set of relatively stable discourses around academic ideals at both student and staff levels, and these are frequently attributed to "neoliberal" influences that require the "production" of a certain kind of "self". It is also clear that 'some people automatically come closer to the ideal than others' (Lund, 2012: 226), 'some seem to be versed and conversant, while others occupy marginal positions—and others aren't even in the room' (Taylor & Lahad, 2018: 5). However, most existing studies frame the imperatives of the "ideal" as an external force demanding certain kinds of measurable output and point to the many structural impediments preventing some individuals and groups from achieving these standards. While these are valid analyses—which my own findings generally support—I find some nuance lacking. There is a tendency to present the ideal as a tyrannical ogre in the face of which an academic (or student) is powerless and being "done to", negating the agency of people who have both chosen their career and do their work in constant dialogue with its "demands". This overlooks the fact that academics in particular make the demand of themselves to live up to certain ideals, many of which, I show in Chapter 7, form part of their motivation for pursuing an academic career in the first place. Also absent from most work in this area is consideration of the ideological realm, by which I mean what the ideal academic believes, and how these more metaphysical aspects of academic constitution connect to ideals around both academic work and personal identity. Although it is often noted that academic ideals reflect values that are emblematic of a particular social group, there is less attention paid to the possibility that belief in those same values may be what attracts those from other groups to participate in academia; academics from non-traditional backgrounds may lack the broader cultural capital to feel a sense of belonging amongst academic peers but their social values, particularly in relation to the project of academia itself, may be very similar (even if they are assumed not to be). It is these nuances that I aim to tease out, to texturise what can sometimes feel like a binary understanding of class identity in education.

3.2.2 The "ideal academic"

As briefly elucidated in Chapter 2, the original impetus for this project was an extension of prior work conducted in the service of my Master's degree. My final dissertation explored the ideal conventions of academic discourse and concluded that certain types of people were more readily positioned to fulfil them. Convention in how certain things are (meant to be) done, then, moulds and reveals who can do those things, or do them best. It was therefore a natural progression to consider activities beyond discourse and how these too might construct ideals that could explain why despite widening participation in academia so many inequalities persist in who achieves conventional "success" (see Section 1.4.4).

The notion of the ideal academic is straightforward: it is the dominant collective imaginary of what an academic "is" or "should be"- the ideal version of an academic. As Wong and Chiu (2021: 498) point out, 'ideals can be in the eye of the beholder, especially at the individual level. However, our collective ideals, or ideal types, are shared at the societal level and likely to be part of dominant discourses'. The ideal academic, then, is the version appearing in dominant discourse. This type of ideal is sometimes referred to as a "Platonic ideal" after the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato who posited that every concrete manifestation of a thing is simply one example of an abstract idea of the category to which the thing belongs. A particular bucket, for example, is a representative of the idea "bucket". The idea "bucket" is comprised of everything that makes a bucket a bucket and nothing that makes it not a bucket, in contrast to the real, physical bucket that may, despite not having all features of the ideal bucket and perhaps even some features of a not-bucket, still be best described as "a bucket"—it is more of a bucket than it is anything else, but it does not fully embody the Platonic ideal of a bucket. We might *call* it a bucket, but not be entirely convinced it *"is"* a bucket, in its soul. Similarly, there is a difference between "being" an academic in a technical sense—i.e. having an academic job—and *being* an academic in a more esoteric way. Like the abstract bucket, the ideal academic is not "real" but 'the aspirations and imaginations of desirable […] characteristics, which may not exist in reality, particularly as one individual' (Wong et al, 2021: 2). In early presentations of this project I termed this collection of desirable characteristics the "hegemonic academic".

3.2.3 The "hegemonic academic"

The proper academic began life as the "hegemonic academic", after Connell's theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) before being renamed to align with participant testimony.

Hegemonic—or, politically and socially dominant—masculinity is 'understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allow[s] men's dominance over women to continue' (ibid.: 832). Representing the version of malehood that is ascendant in any given time and place, it does not necessarily entail a 'normal' way of being a man in that it may only be exhibited by a minority, but is the archetype—or ideal—against which masculinity is defined and through which it maintains its power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (ibid.: 832) clarify that although hegemonic masculinity is not *normal* it it norma*tive* in that it 'embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men'. That this form of masculinity is mythological in the sense of holding a position of dominance despite not being dominant in prevalence shores up rather than weakens its power. As Spence (2007: 874) notes, '[t]he very function of myth is to hegemonise'—it is the fact that men (and in a different way, women and non-binary people) are positioned in *relation* to hegemonic masculinity rather than positioned *as* it that makes it so oppressive. Hegemony need not reflect or legitimise the way things actually are; it constructs an idea of the way things are, represented in such a way as to embed the notion that it is how things should be. Therefore when a particular way of being becomes hegemonic—for instance, with hegemonic masculinity, a particular way of being a man—we are collectively seduced into believing both that "real men" *are* a certain way and that they *should* be. This is a potential problem for those men who are not "real" or "proper" (how to become more akin to, or be perceived as more like, the ideal man), and a different kind of problem for those who do not wish to be (how to be valued in a culture that has a different idea of what one should be).

The hegemonic academic, then, like hegemonic masculinity, is a theoretical construct describing the most valorised way of being an academic. There is some overlap between this academic ideal and the toxic excesses of hegemonic masculinity (Nunn, 2016), and ideal academic identity can also be seen as correlated with maleness

(Danvers, 2018). However, whereas gender identity is constituted by modes of being that have no original "template" and thus shift significantly over time and context, academic ideals are rendered more concretely and universally by international discourses of "excellence", to which academics are encouraged to aspire (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017). Participants in this project drew subtle lines of separation between the types of academic who seek success by the 'standard measures' (P19) as a result of 'playing the game' (Addison, 2016) and those who balanced this type of success with an "authentic" academic identity. The hegemonic academic represents a blend of the two in the sense that it refers to the amalgamated ideal containing a variety of vantage points and success in the broadest range of areas. As I engaged further with the data, however, the terminology evolved and the hegemonic academic was rebranded the "proper academic". While pinning my ideas to Connell's theory was a productive step in building the architecture of the concept, once established it seemed unnecessarily convoluted (please note, though, that the majority of publications and presentations to date employ this older iteration, hence I explain here the connection between these terms).

3.2.4 The proper academic

The ideal academic, hegemonic academic, and proper academic all broadly refer to the same concept; the distinction is primarily linguistic. I have settled on the terminology "proper academic" because this was the language participants themselves used: in the course of unpacking SBs and attributing them to zones, I recognised that belief in the idea of the "proper academic" was itself an SB (belonging to LZ2). Although I had previously hypothesised that there was an ideal against which academics compared themselves, I had not anticipated that there would be such a high degree of conscious awareness around it. This is further supported by other uses of this terminology, such as in Cook's (2009: 278) doubts about whether they were doing 'research properly' or 'proper research' when failing to replicate the neat processes they perceived to represent the standard for "properness". Thus the initial theory of the ideal academic that was applied *to* the interview data has been developed further in light of the already-in-operation concept of the proper academic that was derived *from* the data. P29, for example, reflects:

> I don't think I really do feel like a proper academic yet because I haven't published and I haven't embedded myself and I haven't proved myself yet. I feel like a person that's been given an academic title but I haven't really grown into it.

This nicely encapsulates the dynamics of the proper academic—it is an abstract external reference point, it requires achievements in certain areas to be emulated (publishing in this case—an SB from LZ1), and it is not conferred simply by being 'given an academic title'. It is also, crucially, something *other people* are, that has an aura of in-group and Koutsouris et al's (2021) hidden curriculum about it—something 'they all seem to know' how to be, as if by magic:

> I still don't feel like a proper academic and I feel like other people are. […] I always had this thing that they all seem to know how to academic properly and I don't. (P6)

I elucidate the specific features of the proper academic in relation to SBs through Sections 3.4.4-3.4.6. For now I simply wish to clarify how the general concept of the proper academic is defined, how it relates to terms I have used in the past (both in this thesis and other publications), and why I have alighted on this one. In order to isolate SBs, however, it was necessary to dig further, as although some participants did directly speak of the proper academic, or of academic ideals, these examples only provided limited insight. Identifying less conscious or overt examples of proper academicness required following participants' feelings of inadequacy and tracing them back to a stimulus; these feelings I characterise as "unbelonging".

3.3 Unbelonging

3.3.1 Belonging

Before I discuss definitions of unbelonging, a note on belonging: to a degree, these are opposite concepts, in that unbelonging can generally be characterised as a feeling contrasting with that of belonging, but I am wary of presenting their meanings in an essentialised and dichotomous way. To say that belonging and unbelonging are opposites is to suggest that they are antithetical or mutually exclusive, which is not how I conceive them. This is also why I have coined the term "unbelonging" (as I discuss below, this is not the first use of this word, but I employ it somewhat

differently to its few existing applications) rather than use the description "not belonging", which creates another binary. To talk of belonging or not-belonging may imply a state of "actual" being—of being included or excluded, on the inside or the outside—whereas my interest is mostly in subjective experience: the affective condition of unbelonging (or belonging), not the "location". All participants in this project "belonged" in academia in the sense that they were, or had been, academic employees. They belonged to their institutions in the sense of holding an affiliation conferred by their job status. However, despite clearly *doing* academic work and having a degree of legitimacy from university employment, they did not necessarily feel valued or included as an academic, or experience spiritual or philosophical affiliation to their university, or feel that they were recognisable—to themselves or others—as *being* an academic, as being "proper". They "belonged" but often felt out of place or like they "didn't fit"; I define this sense of "being there" whilst in some sense not being "there" as unbelonging.

3.3.2 Impostor syndrome

There is a considerable literature relating to marginality, outsiderhood, and exclusion in HE, much of which draws on the experience of feeling like an outsider despite being objectively identifiable as an insider and attributing it to "impostor syndrome" or "impostor phenomenon" (Clance & Imes, 1978). Some participants even deployed this language themselves when accounting for feelings of inadequacy. However, as Breeze et al (2022: 5) point out, most references 'reproduce and repackage the most widely used definition of imposter syndrome, which hinges on *feeling as if* one isn't good enough and one doesn't belong *despite evidence to the contrary*'. It is also frequently attributed to early-career academics (Bothello & Roulet, 2019) and marginalised identities, particularly women (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hewertson & Tissa, 2022; Hoskins, 2010), and used to explain the self-doubt experienced by those who have historically been excluded from or minoritised within certain working environments (Breeze et al, 2022; Rickett & Morris, 2021)—a problem not only due to the dearth of evidence that it is more prevalent in these populations but because it might suggest they are 'dispositionally unsuited to the pressures of competition and achievement' (Slank, 2019: 208). This is perhaps one shortcoming of research that focuses on particular populations, in that it attributes phenomena to these groups that may not be

so specific in distribution (even if experienced in particular ways); there is a danger of assessing whether fish are 'in' or 'out of' water (Read et al, 2003; Rickett & Morris, 2021) by looking at the type of fish rather than the water level. Furthermore, impostorhood does not only arise in these populations or as an affect, unevidenced in reality (Slank, 2019); some people 'might not only feel like, but be *treated as,* imposters' (Breeze et al, 2022: 8).

The fact impostor syndrome is already a concept with both traction and the potential for glib interpretations diminishes its utility: it is saturated with meanings, a blunt instrument that describes a weighty and constant state of being. By contrast, although some participants did refer to impostor syndrome or fears that 'they're going to find me out' (P8; P11), many indicators of feeling out of place were less conscious, more fleeting. Before I discuss the problems with attributing these feelings to impostor syndrome, though, I want to look in some detail at the times where this language arose in interviews. Rather than unpicking each quote separately, I break them down together as it is their similarities in which I am most interested:

> I sort of think everyone gets a bit of impostor syndrome and I think I have impostor syndrome. I think it's taken the last few years to realise that I don't need to have it and that I've probably got to a point where actually I can mostly let that go. Even with [doing a PhD] now, you know, if I'd done it a few years-, I could never have done it at your age. I'd have never have done it. (P7)

> [T]he usual things, you know. You always think you're rubbish and you're not as good as everybody else and that kind of stuff. Not quite impostor syndrome but there's a level of self-comparison and how that's kind of played upon by institutions. Well, explicitly used as a way to measure you against other colleagues. (P9)

> I can say 'yeah I'm successful. I've got this really good CV and my career's going well'. Also 'I don't deserve to be here and I'm an impostor and I shouldn't be here and eventually they're going to find me out'. And I think that's probably quite common. I think we all kind of feel that. (P11)

> [D]oing my PhD, it was nerve-wracking in a way, because I am not somebody who, I still to this day suffer from impostor syndrome I guess, which is quite common among academics. So I never really felt 'oh this will go all right'. (P20)

> Even though we're all riddled with doubt, this impostor syndrome, but there's a level of confidence there that has you submitting things, applying for things,

standing in front of hundreds of students. There's got to be something there for you to be doing those kind of things, even if you are insecure. (P23)

[C]oming into academia kind of really made me feel yeah that kind of classic impostor syndrome. (P27)

There's quite a lot of impostor syndrome going on. I felt that particularly when I was younger, when I was doing my PhD. I never really, I struggled, I struggled with, for a long time with feeling that I deserved my PhD. I did get it in the end but it took me quite a long time to write up and then I had to do a significant rewrite and I struggled with the idea that I was actually, what's the word I'm looking for, entitled to it. (P29)

There are several noteworthy themes to these participants' invocations of impostor discourse, perhaps the most obvious being the sense that this is not the highly individuated syndrome it can be characterised as but a universal experience (Breeze, 2018; Breeze et al, 2022). 'Everyone' gets impostor syndrome, it is 'classic', a 'usual thing' that 'you always think you're rubbish'; it is 'quite common among academics' and 'we all kind of feel' it: 'we're all riddled with doubt'. Although several of these participants were at early stages of their current career, having either changed disciplines, come to academia later in life to teach and research their professional specialism, or having begun doctoral study after a substantial period as an academic, only one was a "traditional" early-career academic (ECA) in the sense of being relatively young, at a junior level, and never having been significantly employed outside of academia. The fact that these mid-career transitions would be more likely to take participants out of their comfort zones might account for their increased awareness of impostorhood within themselves, but its consistent presentation as a collective phenomenon supports Breeze et al's (2022: 6) observation that the fact 'everyone experiences feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence occasionally' is '[t]he common-sense understanding of imposter syndrome in universities'.

In explaining the inadequacy of impostor syndrome as an explanation for feelings of fraudulence, it also seems relevant to highlight P9's observation that self-comparison is not simply a "natural" academic tendency but something that is encouraged and 'played upon' by HEIs. If employers measure their employees against each other, why would colleagues not internalise these measurements and replicate the behaviour? Similarly, P29's struggle to feel that they 'deserved' and were 'entitled' to their PhD was directly related to the fact they found it a difficult process (Burford et al, 2022), and this difficulty was reinscribed by the 'significant rewrite' required for it to pass. P20

also articulates a sense of worry about their PhD and a lack of confidence in the idea that it would 'go all right'. In all three of these accounts, there is a rational basis to these feelings of self-doubt: the work that is being done is being externally appraised, it can pass or fail, it can be ranked and compared, it is found wanting. As Handforth (2022: 301) points out, 'imposter syndrome is related to individuals' perceptions of academic legitimacy'. Consequently, the anxiety never fully goes away, even when one achievement is conferred, because there is always another metric to be graded against—feelings of impostorhood might arise despite *some* evidence to the contrary, but there will always be evidence in favour. Furthermore, comparing ourselves is always going to be a flawed metric because we have more information about our own history and 'non-talent causes' of success than others' (Slank, 2019: 213).

P11's ambivalence about their status is also notable, shuttling from 'my career's going well' to 'I don't deserve to be here'. The theme of splitting, bifurcation, ambivalence, and contradiction manifested in various ways across the data; in the context of impostor syndrome, consideration of the mutability and contingency of these two seemingly dichotomous states of mind contributed to the theorising of LZs (see Section 3.4). Do these feelings occur together, or is there travel between the two? If the latter, what provokes the shift? P23's testimony has relevance here too, in the acknowledgement that despite the doubt and insecurity, academics must have 'a level of confidence' to continue doing the job, to keep putting themselves forward for potential rejection. For those who remain in academia, the sense of being an impostor, while palpable, does not win out.

The final point of consideration is P7's allusion to the increased confidence that comes with age. Although participants who were later in their career also acknowledged the tendency towards self-doubt and self-comparison, P9 being the most senior, it should not be overlooked that there is a learning curve to any career or organisation, and indeed to life itself. Burford et al (2022: 386) point to this issue in relation to doctoral students' self-doubt, noting that '[w]hile these questions could be ascribed to imposter syndrome, equally we might describe them as normal feelings of being out of one's depth within the expected learning trajectory of the PhD'; what is "normal" discomfort that plays an integral role in developing academic skills, and what is *normalised* discomfort that serves no intellectual purpose? Although I do not have space to explore this here, there is a substantial seam of data supporting the importance of time, practice, exposure, acclimatisation, and also demonstrating the

shortcomings of conventional paths into academia in adequately preparing people to be good academics and good managers. Good *researchers*, possibly even good teachers, but ill-equipped for the many other responsibilities and realities of the job, leaving them open to impostor feelings and criticism.

On account of the limitations and issues set out above, I find impostor syndrome an unhelpful terminology for explaining experiences of self-doubt and feelings of insecurity in HE despite its ritual invocation. In collecting a set of symptoms that are complex and vacillating under the rubric of a "syndrome", emotional responses and sensations are reduced to a pathological condition rather than understood as rational reactions to specific contexts (Churchill, 2018). Participants observed that academia is a competitive environment where participation is reliant on earning a place and where the necessary achievements could always be more or better, either objectively or in comparison to others, thus impostor syndrome 'is not solely located within individual psyches but produced within and through practices, processes and cultures of academia, shaped in a context where traditional elitism intertwines with contemporary neoliberal values' (Morris et al, 2022: 226). Failures were reported as more frequent than successes, losses more than wins, and rejections more than acceptances; in a situation such as this, it would be more irrational to feel safe (Slank, 2019), especially, as Breeze et al (2022: 6) note, because 'the university functions to exclude and marginalise some, and to centre and privilege others'. Therefore the fact that impostor syndrome is a problem anchored in the individual not only obscures the systemic apparatus that leads to the proliferation of these feelings, but risks further isolating people from each other, both by responsibilising individuals for "fixing" their "condition" and by de-emphasising the collectivity, and thus structural nature, of the experience (Breeze, 2018; Taylor & Breeze, 2020).

As Breeze et al (2022: 2) highlight, the failure of impostor syndrome to interrogate underlying discrimination is not so much an accident as part of its appeal: 'the popular uptake of impostor syndrome as a framework for understanding (not) belonging has been so prolific *because* it can be detached from well-evidenced forms of discrimination that structure educational access and experience'. This makes it especially problematic as an analytical tool. Furthermore, essentialising impostor syndrome into a condition one "has" or does not renders static and binary what this project would suggest is mutable and contingent; participants were not locked in position but perambulated through degrees of impostorhood depending on context

(Anthias, 2018). Similarly, treating an individual with a "syndrome" not only avoids exploration of the root cause but constrains who is considered to be "at risk", reinscribing a sense of who automatically belongs and who needs to adapt.

3.3.3 Unbelonging as collective

Moving away from thinking in terms of impostor syndrome, with its individuated pathology, I characterise the vacillating and contingent sense of being out of place in the environment as "unbelonging". Alternative terms to conceive of feelings of "not fitting", such as being an "outsider" or "marginal", not only suggest a location that is consistently anterior to a perceived centre—linguistically reinscribing the very notion of a stable "inside" (as opposed to a site of continual contestation)—but evoke certain populations and identities (those most readily labelled "other"). It is my hope, however, that unbelonging more readily encompasses all participants in academia, therefore both concurring with and departing from '[t]he common-sense understanding of imposter syndrome in universities', which 'is simply that everyone experiences feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence occasionally, irrespective of positioning in academic hierarchies' (Breeze et al, 2022: 6). My data strongly indicates that everyone *does* experience inadequacy—however, it is certainly not 'irrespective' of identity and position and further still from being 'simply' an inevitable phenomenon. While this research suggests that the most under-represented in HE are most severely disadvantaged by the layering and linking of SBs into exclusionary systems, I also illuminate the tensions and contradictions that can disappear in discussions centred purely on objective marginalisation—the 'subtle, hidden or marginalised forms of experience that limit individual flourishing' (McArthur, 2021: 10). Not all marginalities are visible or attributable to structural axes of oppression, and focusing only on these exclusions can overlook the effects of *feelings* of outsiderhood—not just in terms of the impact on individuals but how this feeling informs those individuals' actions. These actions may have wider ramifications, for specific people or more structurally, especially if they are undertaken by those in positions of authority. A focus on particular populations is also in its own sense divisive, obscuring the commonality of human vulnerability (Rogers, 2016)—as a shared affective experience at least—greater attention to which could arguably offset the very culture of individualism and competitiveness that opens the door to many feelings of unbelonging. A common

criticism of contemporary HE is its individualism, particularly in relation to success and failure, which neoliberalism is seen to explain through a meritocratic lens as consequences of personal excellence or shortcoming (Loveday, 2018a, 2018b). This is countered by highlighting structural impediments or accelerants to success; however, when understood through an impostor lens these structural barriers become once again individual (Breeze, 2018). As Gill (2018: 106) points out, there is a dominant 'individualistic register' that runs throughout academics' testimony that even when describing collective forces focuses on their personal consequences and displays 'a tendency to account for ordinary experiences in the academy through discourses of excoriating self-blame, privatized guilt, intense anxiety, and shame'. Although there is a prevailing sense that some identities move through HE like fish in water (Read et al, 2003), I am unsure this is as true as we imagine; at best it seems an assumption rather than a product of extensive research with "the norm".

Given the increasing collective awareness and rightful fury around historical and institutional hoardings of power, as evidenced by recent headline-grabbing activism such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, Black Lives Matter, etcetera, one could be forgiven for wondering why we should care about the feelings or experiences of "everyone" in a context still dominated by white middle-class men. This is a reasonable concern, but I propose there are several reasons to attend to even the most structurally privileged. First, if an environment is uncomfortable even for those it is built around, it can only be worse for those it is not. Second, feelings motivate behaviour and the sense of being under threat can be used to rationalise instrumental and individualistic practices that further disenfranchise the minoritised. Third, without privileging the comfort of dominant groups above marginal ones, we may nonetheless wish for an environment that is not uncomfortable for anyone. Fourth, as evidenced perhaps by defences such as #NotAllMen, people often do not self-identify as personally powerful even when they are in cultural ascendancy and wield systemic power (Friedman et al, 2021); furthermore, anyone in a position of authority (including minority identities—Rogers, 2016) can act in concert with or as an agent of hegemony. Therefore, fifth, it is important to understand how the structural apparatus of HE affects all of its constituents in order to shift responsibility away from individuals and groups and look instead at the framework that allows them to perpetuate hegemonic inequalities.

If the system continues to be built on the same values and reward the same kinds of work it will not be possible to create a more meaningfully inclusive HE because

there are too many for whom the demands are, or are perceived to be, unreachable. We must go further than simply enabling a more diverse set of people to exploit themselves (and others) in the service of an academic career, and that means looking at the ways the current operation makes an outsider of everyone. To be inclusive, to me, is to take stock of all experiences and to untether the systemic from the individual; it is to try and find the existing common ground and reorientate to that as the "centre", to acknowledge that we all spill over into the margins but few of us solely exist there. It should not be assumed that the status quo "works" or is desirable for individual members of culturally dominant groups simply because it follows patterns of power that have historically benefited their kind; we are all complicit, often against our conscious will, in a system of hegemony that shores up global inequalities of privilege and resource access. Likewise all identities have bearing on lived experience, not just marginal or "other" statuses; as Pereira (2019a: 357) says, and as LZ3 demonstrates, 'embodiment and positionality must be considered in all boundary-work research, because they are constituent elements of all boundary-work'.

3.3.4 Defining unbelonging

Unbelonging, in my definition, is not antithetical to belonging or a position of inherent deficit but the experience of disconnection, dislocation, or disjunction between the self and one or more aspects of the immediate or wider environment: it can be transient and contextual. "Alienation" would perhaps be a suitable synonym, but there are already a variety of uses for this term, most notably in Marxist scholarship; I have tried to avoid employing concepts that are already charged with meaning. Conversely, unbelonging is a term I have not seen substantially theorised in relation to academia; there is existing work on topics related to belonging and its direct opposites, especially for minority communities, but I propose here that unbelonging is a concept worth considering in its own right (i.e. not as the negative of belonging). Beyond HE research (mostly in the study of migrant, marginalised, and diaspora communities) there is limited reference to unbelonging; however, it is not given its own definition and used in relation primarily to place, race, and nation (e.g. Christensen, 2009; Lidola, 2011; Pettersson, 2013). Interestingly, other frameworks for (un)belonging, like legibility zones as I discuss next, are also tripart (Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and share some similarities with my concept despite stemming from a different context.

However, much of the scholarship that orientates to belonging first and unbelonging as an absence relies on "us and them" narratives that I do not find readily applicable for this project. The individualistic nature of HE experienced by participants renders these categories unstable, even mythical, and where in studies of migrant communities—for example—there may be clear delineations between "native" and "alien" citizens, citizens of academia are theoretically a unified population of the same "nationality".

Unbelonging, then, to illustrate through example, consists in achieving markers of inclusion (e.g. making Professor) yet feeling out of place (e.g. the only woman in the room); feeling at home in one context (member of a supportive research group) but insecure in the wider environment (serial article rejections); having all the accolades on paper (shortlisted for every permanent job) yet not being granted admittance (stuck on short-term contracts). That it is a *feeling* is important: the same stimulus will not engender identical sensations in everyone, and it is not necessarily observable externally—indeed, unbelonging can be produced by the disparity between others' judgements and our inner sense. Crucially, despite being uncomfortable, unbelonging does not have to be negative and is not an aberration of a default state; there is no inner circle from which we have been "cast out" or denied entrance, only positions of varying proximity we occupy in relation to each other and the imagined centre. Hence I describe unbelonging as a "subtle cruelty"—rarely overt, often unconscious, painful when it is forced on us but also available for appropriation (Graham & Muir, 2022). Nonetheless, the intersections and overlaps of circumstances and social identities for some mean that unbelonging is a feeling with strong connections to tangible marginalisation: not only a feeling but a manifestation of structural obstacles. One way of understanding this interlacing is through dividing sites of belonging and unbelonging into categories—conceived of here as legibility zones—by which to demonstrate their layered effects.

3.4 Legibility zones (LZs)

3.4.1 Legibility

Although not always explicitly, most participants made comparisons—between themselves and their colleagues, and in relation to their understanding of the proper academic. They were looking inward and outward, judging and assessing others and

judging and assessing themselves as others might appraise them. As described above, I term the yardstick against which this evaluation is conducted the "proper academic", theorise the feeling of falling short as "unbelonging", and, as briefly discussed in Section 2.10, used the interview data to isolate the characteristics of this ideal figure by identifying the most significant SBs, which were then divided into three LZs.

"Legibility", in this context, is not about being readable, visible, or intelligible per se, but specifically a matter of being legible as a proper academic. What characteristics, what measures, are we considering when we assess each other's—and our own—properness, and how easy are they to see? To be intelligible is to be made sense of; in the academic environment, to be made sense of as something in particular. Who is most legible as a proper academic, in what contexts, and why? How is this identity signalled, scrambled, read, and misread? Legibility is not synonymous with "recognition" as Honneth (1992) and their adherents use it, but illegibilities, like 'misrecognitions are difficult to capture because they work at the level of everyday, taken for granted practices within heterogeneous, disciplinary communities of practice' (Burke, 2018: 366). Acts of comparison are processes of interpretation, "readings" that are underpinned by the viewer's assumptions and prejudices, based on the (partial) information available to them and perhaps refracted through a certain "lens". In this case, the lens is that which brings into focus the traits of the proper academic; with spectacles of this prescription only certain characteristics are legible whilst others become blurred, hidden, distorted, or invisible, so the more aligned an identity appears to these ways of being, the more intelligible they are as "legitimate". As Pereira (2017: 56) points out, 'the assessment of particular people as less able to produce proper scientific knowledge is reflective of macro-structures of power where they occupy a subordinate position, and is also in itself a form of subordination'. Boundary work is always a comparison between that which is, and is not, "proper" (Pereira, 2017). It should also be noted that although legibility zones are not arranged hierarchically and therefore overlay each other, they are not always visible simultaneously in that legibilities in different zones can "overwrite" each another while other struggles may cluster in particular areas.

3.4.2 Sites of belonging (SBs)

SBs are specific activities, achievements, beliefs, attitudes, ways of being, or aspects of

identity or biography that present opportunities for belonging and unbelonging—i.e. where there is a "proper" embodiment of that thing against which individuals measure themselves (and are measured). Some of these were very obvious in the data where others required more inference, but all constitute the 'taken-for-granted academic practices' through which 'constructions of difference are formed, often in problematic ways that deepen misrecognition and inequalities' (Burke, 2018: 366). Of course, not all participants spoke of the same things, and my findings are not exhaustive; I do not mean to suggest that everyone holds the precise same version of the proper academic or experiences unbelonging in the same way as a consequence of the same sites, or claim to have discovered all such sites. My intention has been to articulate the SBs that are the most significant, either in frequency or potency, and group them into zones so as to demonstrate a) that individuals' variations of unbelonging within and between zones reveals the complexity of not-fitting and the 'additive effect' of intersecting marginalities (Hewertson & Tissa, 2022), and b) certain SBs more readily coalesce across LZs and come to constitute narratives in which isolated SBs can no longer be disconnected from one another. The "true academic", as discussed in the remainder of the thesis, is one example of this.

It should be reiterated that the LZ framework—like all the concepts introduced here—is abstract, theoretical, and, as this is its first iteration, has room for further development and refinement. It is an architecture designed to be portable and flexible, to be used as an alternative or complementary tool for thinking about inequalities, but always descriptive rather than prescriptive. To my knowledge, an attempt to isolate and itemise the constituent elements of top-level cultural ideals in academia has not been made; in that sense, the LZ terminology, concept, and content are fabricated from whole cloth rather than in relation to others' work, although there are similarities as gestured to above. The distillation of these elements into a cohesive tool for analysis—as a product *of* analysis—was intended to be the original contribution of this project to scholarship. However, as outlined in Chapter 2, the scale and complexity of this task, especially when accounting for the existing literature relating to constituent parts individually, exceeded the possibilities of a doctoral thesis. I provide a theoretical overview of the LZs and list the SBs identified here to contextualise my argument and clarify the framework but I do not—cannot within this space—engage with research in respect of each SB separately or provide the data underpinning them.

3.4.3 Legibility zones (LZs)

Having begun to compile SBs from things participants either obliquely or directly cited as indicating a successful academic identity or engendering a feeling of unbelonging, they started to cleave into categories. These I worked to define, assign, and distil further into what became three main areas, or LZs: the institutional/administrative (LZ1), the ideological/philosophical (LZ2), and the individual/biographical (LZ3). This conceptual tool responds to questions around how to enrich and nuance understandings of exclusion in HE in ways that account for both individual and collective experiences: the powerful effects of the systemic hegemonic imaginary, to which everyone contributes and from which no-one is immune, and the deeply personalised consequences of working under this ideal, which are unequally distributed. It is possible to draw a parallel with Bourdieu's (1986) tripartite framework of capital as outlined in Section 1.2.1—in a sense, greater legibility within a zone represents a greater accrual of 'capital' in that area—but Bourdieu's descriptions do not quite match my categories despite some symbolic overlap. Economic capital, for example, is not valued as a feature of the proper academic per se, though it greatly helps in enabling academics to achieve the types of successes that count as "currency" in this environment (LZ1) as well as being more readily associated with identities that hold higher capital in other areas.

In the following sections I consider each LZ in more detail to lay the groundwork for the substantive data analysis chapters that follow, but for clarity I first provide a short summary and visual metaphor (Figure 4) of the relationship between LZs, conceived of as a garden to match P5's quote in the title of this thesis: to be legible in one zone enables access to its resource—in this metaphor, sunlight, rain, or earth— each of which provide conditions for life; to be legible in multiple zones adds other resources, providing more fertile conditions and accelerating growth; greater growth allows both for individual blossoming and increased chances of death for those seedlings who are crowded out as a result. Skeggs (2003: 14) points out that the process of 'making things valid'—or legible—is 'not a straightforward process' because '[d]ifferent forms of inscription' are laden with different value but this value depends heavily on context; in a sense this speaks to the relationship between unbelonging and legibility, with the LZ framework precisely attempting to map these forms of inscription and model their various configurations whilst keeping clear the fact that

their value (degree of legibility, validity, legitimacy) is not inherent but relational. The same characteristic can engender belonging in one situation and unbelonging in another.

It should be reiterated at this point that within each site of belonging there is a spectrum of legibilities available, with the ideal of the proper academic representing the 'most honored' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) position, culturally speaking. The legibilities that constitute the proper academic, though, are not fixed certitudes—they are *beliefs*, largely beliefs about what *others* believe, and are therefore somewhat context-dependent and are not necessarily universally agreed-upon. As Wong & Chiu (2021: 503) note in relation to the ideal student, 'features of the "ideal" university student are not universal but change according to context. […] [I]deals can be relational, which means being an ideal student may be more possible in some setting over others'—in other words, "idealness" is more legible in some situations and different ideals are in play in different environments. It is also not necessary that an individual academic exhibits the fullest extent of properness to be read as proper—some characteristics are enough—and it should not be assumed that properness is the highest aspiration of any specific scholar. However, maintaining a career without achieving legibility in at least some key sites, especially those in LZ1 (which, as I demonstrate, are aided by legibility in other zones), would be challenging.

LZ1: Institutional and administrative legibility

SBs related to getting, having, and keeping an academic role, being administratively recognised, and navigating institutional life—the markers that prove success or failure in the various things academics must do to achieve legitimacy.

LZ2: Ideological and philosophical legibility

SBs related to values, politics, and beliefs, mostly about academia and academic work but also about the wider world—the markers that prove alignment or dissent from the various things academics must think, see, and be to achieve legitimacy.

LZ3: Individual and biographical legibility

SBs related to embodied and personal characteristics, physical circumstances, and public image—the markers that prove similarity or difference to the types of identities most immediately associated with the signifiers of legitimacy encompassed by LZ1 and LZ2, or that provide covert support in acquiring them.
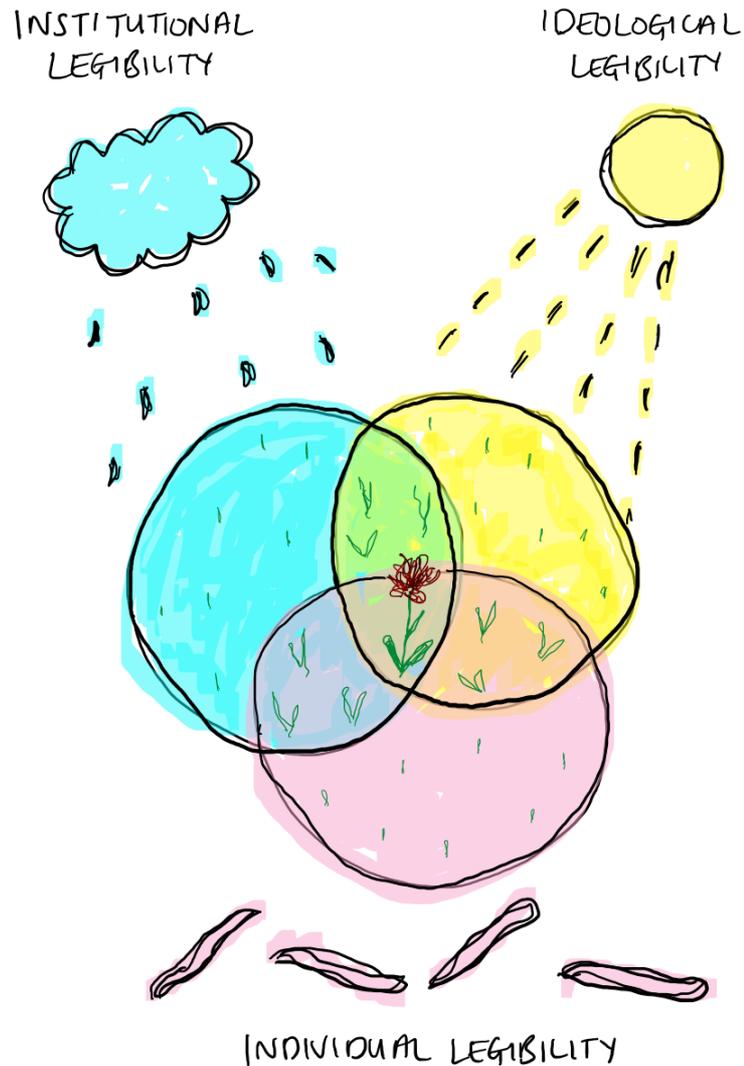
Figure 4: Legibility zones as visual metaphor

3.4.4 LZ1: Institutional and administrative

LZ1 encompasses many tokens of proper academic identity that might be considered so obvious as to be unworthy of discussion, such as being employed at a university or having an academic contract, along with more subtle and subjective (i.e. known only to or felt only by the individual) indicators like having a staff ID card that is correctly configured with access rights to the required areas (see Leathwood & Read, 2020).

What this zone demonstrates is that simply being employed as an academic is not enough to confer a sense of security and properness, although it is a fundamental cornerstone upon which this might begin to be built. There are many other, sometimes seemingly trivial, things that can bolster or unsettle any feeling of "arrival" that obtaining an academic post might engender (Breeze & Taylor, 2020). What the other LZs add is an understanding of how the significance of each of these markers changes depending on how individuals are placed across all three zones: for those marginalised in other areas, institutional credentials are imperative to being seen to belong, whereas for some these apparatuses are less necessary or even restrictive.

While some might argue it is possible to "be" an academic without holding a job in a university, being affiliated to an HEI offers a level of resource and validation that both enables academic work to be conducted and facilitates the visibility of work and worker even if as 'only a cog in a big machine' (P25). In this sense, universities condone and promote the professional identities of their academic employees; however, institutions also have their shadow sides, from the battle to gain entry to the price of staying in. Where there are large-scale operations there are layers of bureaucracy and administration that confound, complicate, erase, depersonalise, and flatten individual experience into paperwork, numbers, protocols, whilst at the same time formalising the institutional relationship. Even if we are, to the institution, only a line on a spreadsheet, to be translated into an audit trail is to be inscribed as that cog within the institutional machinery, to appear within record systems and on lists: as far as the apparatus of the organisation is concerned, to exist. Administrative processes of one sort or another are the method by which human beings become institutionally legible, both internally and within the wider sector; it is through these ritualised procedures and languages that we come to collectively understand what is signified by a Senior Lecturer title, or a 4* output, or many of the other shorthands that both describe and assign value and status. When these pre-ordained categories do not fit, though, or cannot be claimed or confidently inhabited, this can render academic properness illegible.

The SBs identified as comprising to this zone fall into three clusters:

Academic Employment

- ♦ Having a job: 'I was unemployed for a bit and that was awful' (P10)
- ♦ Getting a job: 'me against loads of these other mythical ideal academics' (P6)
- ♦ Institutional prestige: 'could you not get a job at the proper one?' (P11)
- ♦ Job title and role focus: 'those mythical posts' (P14)
- ♦ FTE: the 'zombie existence' of part-time contracts (P8)
- ♦ Length of contract: 'out on my ear again' (P16)
- ♦ Keeping the job: 'you're part of a big corporation and they judge you' (P22)
- ♦ Redundancy: 'a permanent job is not a permanent job' (P15)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic is securely employed on a full-time permanent contract at a prestigious university, having obtained their first job with relative ease shortly after completing their doctorate (or without ever having completed one). Their role includes responsibility for both teaching and research, and they perform well enough to be promoted quickly through the ranks to reach Professor without ever facing the risk of redundancy or the precarity of short-term work.

Academic Labour

- ♦ Student welfare: 'there's literally zero support for academic staff' (P27)
- ♦ Paperwork, procedures, processes: 'the amount of paper filling is fucking nonsensical' (P8)

Research

- ♦ Publishing: 'it's a nice validation' (P13)
- ♦ External grants: 'you haven't brought in any research funding therefore you are worthless' (P29)
- ♦ The REF: 'you get your training and it's basically REF, REF, REF' (P8)
- ♦ Conferences: 'I'm incredibly intimidated by other academics' (P27)

Gatekeeping

♦   Peer review: 'some people thrive on just being really negative' (P2)

♦   Credentialising: 'sorting out the PhD situation' (P23)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic is a research powerhouse with an abundance of publications in highly-regarded outlets and a substantial record of grant funding that enables them to focus primarily on research activity, partly due to working in an area of strategic importance to their institution and being well-supported in their endeavours. Consequently they are liberated of—or are indulged in refusal to engage with—low-stakes departmental responsibilities such as pastoral work with students, menial administrative roles, and even teaching outside their own specialist modules. They hold all the appropriate credentials, or demonstrated such brilliance they were deemed unnecessary, and are respected as an authority who has the right to uphold academic standards.

Academic Institutions

♦   Leave: 'stretched like elastic bands' (P29)

♦   Working hours: 'I really started cracking up' (P4)

♦   Institutional culture and attitude to staff: 'you know that you're not valued' (P29)

♦   Space and place: 'you have to move' (P20)

♦   Resourcing: 'some things need a lot of time to mature' (P4)

Institutional Relationships—Management and Colleagues

♦   Hierarchies and management: 'gluing in the middle' (P5)

♦   Induction, training, development: 'nobody told me how to do this' (P20)

♦   Changing demands: 'it often feels like you're reinventing the wheel' (P28)

♦   Measurement: 'I always think I should be doing more' (P27)

♦ Pushback: 'I'm not someone who makes waves' (P23)

♦ Bullying and exploitation: 'male academics are sometimes a bit like water buffalo' (P22)

♦ Lateral relationships: 'it's also about who the people are around you' (P17)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic rarely stops working, even to have children, but has made themselves institutionally valuable in such a manner as to be afforded generous research leave and a high degree of autonomy over what they do and when. They are given university space, although they are rarely required to be on campus, and do the kind of work that fits well with institutional priorities and timescales, thus appearing to effortlessly navigate the demands of the university and any politics resulting from them. They are well-liked by colleagues and seniors, having a knack for balancing institutional critique with personability and an impeccable record of delivering what is asked and adapting to change (or, less desirably, they are disliked but feared and left alone to pursue their own agenda because their recalcitrance is impermeable and their institutional value, or the consequence of their ire, is such that they maintain a position of power; unpopularity does not bother them). They seem entirely at home, always knowing exactly what needs to be done and how, helpful to newer academics yet never to the detriment of their own success (or, "helps" newer academics by testing their mettle).

3.4.5 LZ2: Ideological and philosophical

LZ2 covers the ideological and philosophical realms of life—views about the world, the purpose of academia, and of what academic should be. LZ1 demonstrates how academic legitimacy is partly about concrete indicators of validation and administrative legibility, while LZ3 shows how embodied modes of being also affect recognisability such that unbelonging can be engendered simply by being physically anomalous (cf. Ahmed, 2012, on 'becoming a stranger'). However, misrecognition rooted in physicality is about more than the visual, which acts as a proxy for assumptions about how far certain identities are understood to (be able to) emulate what a proper academic "is", in an inner sense. The "isness" of academic identity is therefore not bound to the body, although it does derive from it: lived reality affects both how a

particular version of academicness came to be deemed proper and how possible it is to resemble it. In other words, because white middle-class men established the academy, white middle-class men are more readily associated with its norms and values (Leonard, 2001)—everything that the proper academic "is" is also tethered to a particular kind of body that is more readily taken to house the ephemeral traits encompassed by LZ2, which are hard to "see" on their own.

The fantasy that achieving the validations of LZ1 would engender a sense of arrival was frequently debunked by securely-employed senior participants who continued to carry a sense of not 'measuring up' (P5) despite their achievements (in contrast to the findings of Keefer, 2015, with doctoral students). In some cases this was due to the unrealistic demands of LZ1, but in others it was harder to put a finger on, related to the fact that 'there is this idea of what it means to be an academic' (P2), the ill-defined nature of which introduces many possibilities for feeling distant from this ideal. If a proper academic is more than simply someone who has an academic job, what is the "more"? LZ2 divides ideologies of academic identity and academia in two clusters—beliefs about academics and academic work, and beliefs about academia more broadly. Legibility in this zone is not just about matching up to dominant beliefs through exemplifying the ways they idealise certain ways of being and doing, but holding those beliefs oneself.

Beliefs about academic being and doing

- The 'proper' academic: 'most people wouldn't think of me as an academic' (P24)
- Academia as vocation/calling: 'it is a self-sacrifice, academia' (P9)
- The academic constitution: 'I definitely think like an academic' (P14)
- Academic identity: 'a lot of what you do, it's kind of being' (P28)
- Reasons for being an academic: 'doing something meaningful' (P4)
- Academic ambition: 'you're meant to just be willing to do anything' (P16)
- The dark side: 'power-grabbing, strong egos' (P24)
- Academic stereotypes and fantasies: 'professors are old men with beards and tweed jackets' (P25)

♦ Negotiating disciplinary and departmental norms: 'I'm something of an anomaly' (P11)

♦ What constitutes success: 'for some people it's money and for some people it's like prestige or status' (P11)

♦ What enables success: 'luck and hard work and having supportive people' (P19)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic believes there is such a thing as a "proper academic", and that proper academics know they are proper academics, but does not identify with this character themselves. The proper academic sees academic work as a vocation and their motivation for pursuing an academic career is to improve the world through this calling—academic work is perceived as meaningful, virtuous, and fulfilling a higher purpose. They are sceptical of institutionally-defined success and the successes of others if they seem to have been gained too easily or as a consequence of chasing renown or institutional validation. The proper academic is an intellectual who believes that academics are simply born that way—one either is, or is not, an academic; it cannot be learnt. They are politically left-wing, seeing themselves as progressive and "on the right side of history"; they recognise that academics can be viewed in negative ways—as superior, patronising, intimidating, ruthless, self-serving—but do not consider themselves to use their authority in this manner. The proper academic understands themselves as an 'anomaly' in some respect—an outsider or exception in at least one sense that can become a central part of their identity and individuation, especially from other academics.

Beliefs about the role and purpose of academia

♦ What universities are for: 'universities should be about learning and flourishing lives' (P9)

♦ Attitudes to managers and institutions: 'people look at you like you're mad if you say, you know, good things about academia' (P18)

♦ What is HE and what (and who) is it for?: 'this doesn't feel like higher education' (P21)

♦ Money and the changing culture of HE: 'it [fees] changes the relationship

between students and the institution' (P2)

♦ Teaching, learning, and students: 'people are just generally not respectful of students in the UK' (P14)

♦ The joys of the job: 'making something that's bigger than you' (P5)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic believes that producing and transmitting knowledge is an inherent good with intrinsic value that cannot and should not be measured, especially in financial terms. They are sceptical of institutions and managers, believing their motivations to be improper and guided by a politically incompatible agenda to which they are subjected against their will. Accordingly, the proper academic heavily critiques academia and takes on a degree of martyrdom in which personal choice, agency, and benefits are consistently backgrounded— they believe that HE used to be better and easier and have fantasies of leaving but see themselves as trapped. Igniting intellectual sparks in their students is a highlight of the job but there is a strong culture of negativity towards the student population at large, especially since the introduction of tuition fees and the "consumer" mindset this is seen to have engendered. The proper academic believes that academics should ideally be left alone to set their own research agenda and work autonomously without institutional "interference", oversight, or measurement, but also that institutions should support their staff more effectively: universities are seen as separate entities rather than an organisation of which academics are a constituent part.

3.4.6 LZ3: Individual and biographical

As LZ1 and LZ2 indicate, who is identified as belonging in the academy is predicated in part on certain markers of success and particular formulations of belief and constitution. However, who gets to obtain these markers is in itself determined by who is read as a "proper academic in waiting" and how comfortable academia is for them as a result. These types of judgements are rooted in the corporeal signifiers of identity and sources of inequality of LZ3, such as gender, race, and class, as well as visual or image-related cues like appearance, dress, and public self-presentation, the latter of which frequently act as proxies for the former. Looking "right", or at least looking similar to those in proximity, is in most cases a significant advantage in terms

of career progression and sense of belonging, which are in several ways intrinsically connected (Thornton, 2013). While the sites of belonging in LZ1 are mostly very literal and those in LZ2 largely ephemeral, LZ3 falls somewhere between the two: visible recognisability as an identity who belongs is both a physical question (*do you look like us?*) and a stand-in for other forms of properness (*do you look like the type of person who shares our values and aptitudes?*). LZ3 is broadly concerned with the ways embodied existence has bearing not only on gaining the status markers of LZ1 and sharing the ideological perspectives of LZ2, but on the extent to which people are assumed to (even if they do not), or to which these positions are legible when inhabited. As Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018: 148) point out with respect to ethnicity, a body marked as 'Black mixed-race man […] is, for the white gaze, more intelligible as the Black male trespasser (or criminal) than as an academic': our embodiment affects how we are read, what we are legible as. Like Bacevic (2021: 5) I think this means 'the question is not *whether* someone's identity or social position influences how their work will be judged, but *how*'.

I use the term "embodied" here relatively loosely, to denote characteristics that (are perceived to) connect individuals to a wider group (e.g. race, gender, class), those that relate to physical circumstances (e.g. location, parent or carer status, condition of health), aspects of corporeality that may be malleable and take on significance as indicators of covert identity features (e.g. clothing, voice, attractiveness), or personal qualities other than intellect. It also includes self-presentation, which represents the bringing together of all three LZs into a complete image, packaged in a particular way to project a certain kind of academic identity. Thus some aspects of identity considered here are either invisible or "optional", and these attributes may be inferred (correctly or not) from proxy indicators or known only to the individual. It is important to consider the complexities of this: while being misrecognised can potentially pay dividends in terms of receiving the privilege associated with a higher status identity, the converse can also be true, and either way the internal experience of being illegible creates an intractable sense of unbelonging. Passing as a member of a group with which one does not identify can facilitate feelings of fraudulence and impostorhood, and accusations of misrepresentation can equally be levelled when attempting to align with an identity that may feel more authentic but is not validated externally. There are not only competitions for success, but competitions for hardship; in an environment where totems of achievement are in such short supply there is an incentive to have

impediments legitimised (Friedman et al, 2021). Misidentification cuts both ways: someone with a hidden disability or illness, for example, may not receive the upfront discrimination that a more visibly impeded individual might, but may therefore have to work harder to gain the necessary accommodations. As well as placing an undue burden this also reduces the time and energy available to achieve other markers of success. As P3 points out, 'I could do so much. Except I can't because I'm not well enough. And I have an ill daughter'. In this way, embodied experience gives rise to unbelonging even for those who are not read as "diverse" (Ahmed, 2007) or seen as having/being a 'problem' (Leonard, 2001). That legibility in this zone is "embodied", however, is not to say it is static; bodies move and unbelonging is not fixed to them— indeed, unbelonging is in this sense *disembodied*.

LZ3 falls into two clusters and is in some ways the most "straightforward" zone, in that the first grouping holds little new or surprising: the white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-het masculine norm is uncontestable and well-documented in research. However, the second cluster is more complex, dealing with the "illegible advantages" of the proper academic—the things that the proper academic needs in order to fulfil the requirements of properness, but that do not constitute part of the mythos. These hidden privileges frame what is possible but in some cases undermine the proper academic formulation—for example, the romanticised trope of the single, unfettered scholar belies the difficulty and isolation of this situation (Utoft, 2020): most participants credited their familial relationships and responsibilities as a source of comfort, support, and distraction rather than something that held them back (this could reflect a status as 'care-commander'—Clegg & Rowland, 2010—but nonetheless demonstrates that attachments are not unequivocally limiting of success). Appealing to these characteristics, then, enables academics to distance themselves from the image of the proper academic while still drawing the rewards that simultaneously increase their proximity to it (similar to the middle-class participants who identified as working-class in Friedman et al's, 2021, project): this is one of several tensions and contradictions that play into the negotiation between the ideal of the proper academic as a system of belief and the lived reality of actual academics' experiences.

I wish to emphasise that the categories discussed in this LZ in particular are not exhaustive. The sample size, while selected to incorporate as broad a spectrum of perspectives as possible, is too small to represent all possible permutations of identity or experience. There are, for example, no self-identified trans participants and only

one non-binary individual. Likewise disability was not a dominant topic, although health was mentioned by several participants. Sexual orientation, too, was mentioned only in passing. There are many aspects of experience that are not discussed here because they either did not arise or were not substantial enough to make more than a fleeting observation about; this does not mean these are not important or significant areas of unbelonging or illegibility, and I do not wish to render them further illegible by "erasing" them here, but I can only discuss what the data contains. Indeed, none of the categories represented within the LZ framework are exhaustive—either of the potential number of categories, or of the permutations within categories—and part of the purpose of representing them as a framework is precisely to illustrate the types of ways we might think about illegibility and provide an apparatus in which to add further SBs with future research.

Personal characteristics and qualities

- Gender: 'people assume that you're an administrator if you're female' (P3)
- Race, nationality, and ethnicity: 'I'm always going to stand out' (P17)
- Class, background, and abledness: 'I shouldn't have been an academic' (P13)
- Age and career stage: 'junior people don't get free rides' (P14)
- Family responsibilities: 'my main challenge has been my caring responsibilities' (P9)
- The curated self: 'there isn't an emotional honesty' (P5)

Ideal formulation:

The proper academic is male, masculine, or at least not overtly feminine or frivolous in presentation (or, if an academic wunderkind, must be conventionally attractive); they are fair-skinned, of Anglophone or European descent, with perfect command of academic English and lacking any regional UK accent that may be taken to signal lower socioeconomic background. The proper academic is able-bodied, neurotypical (or high-functioning "genius" type), in good physical and mental health, financially secure and unencumbered by significant caring responsibilities, with "middle-class" tastes, values, and pedigree. If they are young, they must have proven themselves a 'rising star' (P4) and consolidated their academic position swiftly; if

they are older, they must have reached a career stage and academic title commensurate with their assumed experience level. The proper academic knows how to present themselves in professional contexts both in person and on paper; they have a cohesive academic identity—a personal brand—and comportment, dress, and manner that portrays appropriate gravitas.

Illegible advantages

♦ Supportive relationships: 'outside voices help' (P2)

♦ Stickability: 'you need to be a bit resilient' (P25)

♦ Boundaries and balance: 'make sure you've got other things in your life' (P16)

♦ Understanding, experience, and acceptance: 'the feeling of failure is a feeling' (P4)

Ideal formulation:

To become a proper academic requires a network of supportive family, friends, and colleagues—and therefore the skills, emotional stability, and personality to acquire and maintain them. The proper academic is sceptical of the concept of "resilience" but nonetheless requires it: creating distance between self and work, not taking things personally, is necessary for survival. Instituting boundaries between home and work and learning how to achieve balance are similarly imperative for a long-term career. Becoming a proper academic takes time—to learn the rules, to understand the stakes, to accrue confidence, to practice, to adjust, to settle in, to realise that the proper academic is an unattainable ideal and accept that self-doubt is inevitable.

3.5 The proper academic, unbelonging, and legibility zones in combination

It should be emphasised again that the proper academic is not "real"—it is an idea, and therefore its characteristics are open to contestation. All the aspects of the proper academic laid out in this thesis are *beliefs*, and accordingly they will not necessarily be universally shared. It is also not required for an individual academic to exhibit all traits of the proper academic—to be legible in all sites—in order to appear aligned with proper academic identity. This is both because others' perceptions may not be

accurate and because SBs work together to build incremental legitimacy. The LZ framework and its constituent SBs are something I have created and articulated in order to demonstrate the many fine-grained ways properness is read and communicated, are order impressed upon chaos—in life, however, we do not consciously measure each other against a checklist of traits and achievements. We have a sense of who seems proper based on personal ideas of what properness looks like, ideals inherited from the surrounding culture, and our own insecurities (participants were more likely to consider others proper if they held enviable achievements). There are many permutations or "blends" of properness that draw on different configurations of SBs: indeed, what the framework is intended to highlight is precisely how illegibility in some areas can be "got away with" if compensated for in others, while others remain stubbornly invisible if rendered illegible by occluding factors. Conversely, some SBs are so significant that they become "compulsory", and several of these can only be validated through working in conjunction with others; for example, most of the beliefs comprising LZ2 must be made visible, and thus legible, through sites from LZ1 and LZ3. It is not possible to tell whether someone ascribes to or embodies a belief without them either preaching it or practicing it (ideally both; the ideology of the proper academic must be performed), as I explore next.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have detailed the three major concepts at the heart of this research: the proper academic, unbelonging, and legibility zones. I have argued that these work together to create an unattainable ideal in relation to which unbelonging is frequently experienced by academics in England, whether transiently, acutely, or chronically. The layering and linking of LZs, I have proposed, leaves some especially vulnerable to exclusion by marking them as "impostors". Rather than attending in a piecemeal manner to the potential discomfort or alienation produced by individual sites of belonging then, it is useful to consider how concrete features of the proper academic from LZ1 and LZ3 stand in for, shore up, and sometimes disguise, beliefs from LZ2 despite at times appearing contradictory. The final three chapters traverse some of these tensions through analysing a particular "strain" of the proper academic, drawing on beliefs participants represented as marking individuals to be what they considered a "true academic".

Chapter 4: The True Academic and the 9-5

4.1 Introduction

Over the next four chapters I suggest that there is a sub-type of the overarching "proper" or ideal academic discussed in Chapter 3—the "true academic", which is constituted primarily through holding certain beliefs about academic identity, the purpose of academic practice, and academic ways of seeing and thinking. Because beliefs are largely features of interior life, it is necessary to engage in particular practices and behaviours to make oneself legible as a "true academic" externally (I do not consistently scare-quote this term, but wherever the/a true academic is referenced it is in relation to the ideal construct: I hope it is obvious, but I do not believe there is one true way of being an academic, I am simply illuminating the prevalent, if often unconscious, sense that there is). As I show, there are dividends for communicating true academic tendencies and penalties for not—both professionally and personally due to the often intertwined nature of academic identity. However, the degree to which different types of people are able to embody a true academic, the ease with which they do so, and the punishment for failure or resistance, is not equally distributed. The conditions of being legible as a true academic, then, are disproportionately difficult for some to meet, reinforcing existing patterns of success and underlying perceptions of who is most readily suited to, or correlated with, academic life.

In common with other literature on academic identities I found that 'the meaning of being an academic tends to be associated with […] autonomy and freedom, intellectual stimulation, teaching and research, and ideas around making a difference, and a sense of calling' (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019: 1). Similarly, Allen Collinson (2004: 318) points to a 'specific academic value system' that contains 'certain common elements, including: the pursuit of truth, academic honesty, acceptance of reasoned criticism, open transmission of knowledge, and a belief in academic quality'—these will echo throughout the next four chapters. However, my data suggests that the ideals of academia do not necessarily bear out in reality, and that such framings can replicate meanings that can be harmful. Morris et al (2022: 230), for example, point to these

'idealised forms of academia against which we felt ourselves judged and lacking' and the consequent condition of being 'haunted by the spectre of "the real academic"'.

In this chapter I introduce the ideal belief in academia as a vocation or "calling" and the idea that for the true academic "being an academic" is about more than simply holding an academic role: it also forms an integral part of personal identity (Hänel, 2020). I demonstrate the difference between being and *being*, discuss the centrality of the notion that academia is more than "just a job" (particularly in contrast to "the 9-5"), and explore academic becoming, unbecoming, and ambivalence. I then show how commitment to academia is partly signalled through working practices that make true academic identity legible, most notably conscious demonstrations of excessive work. I argue that although academics are generally critical of what are perceived to be neoliberal institutional imperatives to hyperproduce, there are several reasons overwork is normalised in academic culture—from enjoyment, to career enhancement, to identity validation. In this sense, external measures of productivity and quality attributed to neoliberal developments in HE (such as the REF, TEF, etcetera) can be seen as manifestations and fuller extensions, not just provocations, of "self-surveillance" and comparison between academics that already form staple aspects of academic culture.

4.2 Becoming, being, and unbecoming a true academic

4.2.1 Being and "being"

Underlying participants' testimony was a strong sense that a legitimate, authentic, "real", or "true" academic is perceived as something a person either *is* or *is not*. P28, for example, said, 'I do a lot of administration but when I'm being an academic academic, so when I'm writing, that's the happiest I could be', signalling the difference between having an academic title (but using it to 'do a lot of administration') and 'being an academic academic'. Similarly, P27 described a senior manager of their institution as an academic 'in the sense of, yeah, kind of a professor from, given a professorship at a different institution […] but certainly not an academic in any true sense'. Likewise, when P12 was made redundant this was more 'galling' because those who made the decisions 'were nowhere near being professors' despite the fact they 'had the title':

> luckily I could very clearly see this was a pile of bullshit and so I didn't take it

on like 'oh no I'm not good enough'. I thought 'it's these fuckers who aren't good enough', you know, in fact that's one of the things that galled me. They were nowhere near being professors yet they had the title and were trying to take it off me.

Participants therefore made distinctions about both whether they saw themselves as academics and whether they conferred this identity on others (Fasenfest, 2021). Where self-definition was at stake, some participants were aware of the image others had of them, for example P8 who considered themselves 'a strange academic', suggesting a "normal" counterpart. The norms and ideals governing academic legitimacy, then, are tied to more than academic titles or even academic work and achievements (Taylor & Breeze, 2020), fulfilling Gill's (2009: 240) observation that 'we often draw no distinction between our work and ourselves'.

P18 felt that being an academic 'sums me up', that 'the job is the vocation', while P12 points out the inevitability of this, especially if engaged in work that is 'real' or 'means stuff':

I've always been a bit conflicted perhaps would be the way that you describe it about academia in terms of identity and what it is which is probably a very good thing to be, not to buy into the bullshit of it so much. But nevertheless I think if you do it for that long and you try to make a good job of it, you know, like if you strive to be a good teacher or to write books which are real or mean stuff then it sort of, yeah, it does become part of who you are.

This sense of being 'conflicted' is frequently encountered (Taylor & Breeze 2020), with most participants, even those who struggled to achieve it, considering some level of balance to be wise. Gill (2018: 98) calls this refusal to 'take on the university's way of seeing you' a 'double consciousness' that is 'essential, difficult, and agonizingly painful', and some have even characterised the relationship between universities and academics as akin to an abusive romantic partnership (Coin, 2018; Gill, 2018). It says something that this is how the relationship is perceived but such metaphors disguise the fact these are not, in fact, "relationships" in the sense of bilateral, reciprocal arrangements where each party has equivalent responsibilities. These feelings can thus stem from (unrealistic or unstated) expectations as well as failure or betrayal (see Section 6.5).

At the same time, while maintaining double consciousness and work/non-work balance is necessary, its possibility is bound to how far academics can install a 'firewall' (P8) between work and home. Various factors, particularly caring responsibilities, affect how feasible it is to limit (or extend) working hours, to contain them to

"sociable" hours, to do work only *at* work, and how far it is necessary to shore up academic identity by demonstrative commitment to additional labour (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017). The ability to instil boundaries, then, depends in part on how legible a person is as an academic; for those already struggling to be legitimised, certain performances may be necessary to offset perceived deficits in other areas (Loveday, 2018b).

4.2.2 Vocational subjects

Perhaps the strongest indicator of being a true academic is holding an academic identity in all areas of life. Many participants demonstrated commitment to the idea that academia is a vocation (Gill, 2018), perhaps even a 'higher calling' (Fasenfest, 2021; Sturges et al, 2019), and those who did not feel this or have it reflected back at them through commensurate levels of achievement could experience unbelonging as a result. This was especially true of academics in vocational or applied disciplines, perhaps because having a dual specialism raises the question of which identity is the "real" one. P24, for example, felt that

> most people wouldn't think of me as an academic even though I worked at the university because I didn't present myself in that way, even in that crowd. And partly that was because, you know, they were nearly all philosophers or sociology or literature and I suppose I was in a vocational subject.

There is a sense, then, in which the true academic is only legible when uncomplicated by the presence of other skills, priorities, or identities, especially if they are not "intellectual" (see Section 6.2). This could reflect Herman et al's (2021: 73) findings with second-career academics who migrated from other vocational careers and were surprised to find their previous practical experience disregarded; instead they were viewed as 'newcomers to an already-established community to which they seemingly had nothing to contribute'. This tendency was also noted by P8 in respect of doctoral students; the idea that knowledge from outside academia, even when it pertains to academia itself or derives from practice relevant to the department, is invalid can be quite persistent: it is as if every entrant to academia is freshly unplugged from the matrix to be reconstituted through science.

Fasenfest (2021: 1061) notes also that established faculty may have 'implicitly assumed that temporary or contingent appointments are somehow less deserving as

scholars' because they have not achieved the outward representation of someone for whom academia is a 'higher calling' and may be assumed to do academia as a "side hustle". This is an extension of the potential for inter-disciplinary snobberies and 'turf wars' (Bothello & Roulet, 2019: 857) particularly applicable to vocational disciplines, most notably business and management studies where 'business faculties are treated as trade schools that train people to make money rather than conduct research or even contribute to society' (ibid.). Although, as Bothello and Roulet (ibid.) point out, there are many disciplines housed within business schools, there is nonetheless a pervasive perception in some quarters that these faculties are 'a necessary evil', the 'dark side', and those originally trained in other areas 'sell out' by affiliating with business. Indeed, Eagleton (2015, n. p.) brutally eviscerates contemporary academia by using the example of an institute for management studies, which is positioned in opposition to 'critical studies of any kind'.These points about academic and intellectual legitimacy, and especially the connection between legitimacy and money (business schools doubly implicated for both being 'cash cows' (ibid.) and studying topics associated with commerce and economics), will reappear.

4.2.3 'Just a job'?

The idea that a true academic is someone for whom being an academic is "involuntary" was a core thread throughout the data, similar to some of Rosewell and Ashwin's (2019: 5) participants who found their work 'compulsive' and 'fundamental to their sense of self'—although notably different from others who 'stated that being an academic is "just a job"' (ibid.: 6). In my project the most authentic version of the academic role was consistently represented as an integral aspect of self-identity, a matter not just of what a person does but who they fundamentally "are" (George & Maguire, 2021). In fact, P8 volunteered for the project precisely because they buck this trend and experienced a sense of being 'invisible' as a result: 'although I'm a white heterosexual male, I actually I think represent the kind of academic who's always under-represented'. They explain:

> academia to me is a job. So to me I do it as a profession. It's not a vocation, it's not my passion. None of those things ring any bells with me. I work 9 to 5, Monday to Friday and [...] I often think those kind of academics are invisible.

Thus despite the fact there evidently are examples of academics who take a "just a job" attitude, the 'vocation' conception would appear to be the more visible and ideal formulation, supported by furious enactments of 'passion' that, as McKenzie (2021) notes, is highlighted in academic job-seeking advice (and recruitment processes). It is also important to note that boundaried working hours are part of what identifies P8 as an outlier (Davies & Jenkins, 2013), revealing a link between 'passion' and excessive working (Read & Leathwood, 2018), as I explore later. In this sense, having 'passion' becomes a competency (McKenzie, 2021), and one perceived to be distinct to academia where this 'passionate attachment […] is palpably different from many other jobs' (Gill, 2018: 106).[12]

When asked how core to their identity being an academic was, most participants revealed a strong sense of alignment, at least in terms of what represented the kernel of academicness. This kernel often operated independently of work-related responsibilities: not only is academic vocation about more than just the tasks associated with academic roles, sometimes these tasks *get in the way* of proper academic business. P21 reflects, 'I think it is core [to my identity]. I think the elements of it are core. You know like I said, 10-year-old trying to solve a maths problem, I think that's still there. That's never going to go away'. Several participants echoed that the academic spark was ignited in them as children, signalling again the intrinsic nature of the vocation as something that is both already there and 'never going to go away'. P4 felt this particularly strongly, stating 'I've always wanted to do this because I find it meaningful and I don't think I would adjust to a 9-to-5 job that's just a job'.

The consistent framing of academia as distinctly *not* a '9-to-5 job' and therefore more than 'just a job' is significant (Sang et al, 2015), especially given the generally high degree of flexibility academia can offer in this respect. The implication, then, is that those who work nine to five see their work instrumentally: if a person "is" an academic rather than simply taking on the role of an academic for a certain number of hours, how could they ever be "off the clock"? By this logic it becomes almost unseemly to admit that an academic job is a job at all, let alone 'just' a job. This point returns later.

While most participants agreed that being an academic was part of their identity, the degree varied. P22 defined themselves as 'a higher education kind of person and

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[12] Academia is not unique in this respect, but it is notable that it is often perceived to be.

it's too late to be anything else really'. Other participants expressed a similar feeling of having become more academic over time, or "finding themselves" in academia; having transitioned into HE, P3 reflects that in industry 'I never felt like who I really was whereas an academic does feel like who I am'. Identification with being an academic can be reinforced, too, by building a life in academia that encompasses social connections—'a lot of my friends'—as well as professional activity:

> it's pretty core actually. I've thought about this, it really is, because it's, it's not a nine til five job. Yeah, no, I, I have family and stuff and I'm a mum to two kids but that bizarrely isn't how, that's not how I first describe myself at all. I think I've spent however many years getting to the point where this is my, this is my job, and it has, and also a lot of my friends are academics as well so it's, I dunno, it's kind of pretty core to what I do and and how I perceive myself. (P1)

Although, as discussed, participants framed academia as 'pretty core' because 'it's not a nine til five job', suggesting that it is the fact the work bleeds throughout life that gives it such central status (or vice versa), P8 demonstrates that it *can* be 9-5 when the work does not represent such a cornerstone of identity. In this sense, then, it is not that an academic job must exceed standard working hours, but that a true academic communicates this identity by continually performing it. This leads to an "academic first" self-conception where other roles, even those as substantial as parenthood, become subordinated: one approaches parenting as an academic rather than approaching academia as a parent. Part of this may also be responsive to Grummell et al's (2009: 197) finding that if a female prospective senior academic 'took time out from work for childcare, this implied a lack of commitment to the profession', thus there are incentives to background one's identity as a parent, especially for women. This may present conflict when academic identity co-exists with or is overtaken by others, particularly where there is a cultural expectation that a new primary identity will be formed, such as when becoming a mother (Grummell et al, 2009; Rosewell, 2022).

Even participants who did not want to 'buy into the bullshit' (P12) of academia as a vocation saw a distinction between academic-the-identity and academic-the-job. P27, for example, did define themselves as an academic, but alongside other descriptors related to their professional practice and family relations (spouse, parent), saying 'I guess I kind of feel like I should put it up there because it's my job' but also 'it does

mean a lot to me'. They were clearly conflicted about both the relationship between work and identity and identity and academia (Taylor & Breeze, 2020), expressing a sense of obligation to define themselves by their work but a sadness that it 'feels like a job':

> largely the reason […] I think about it more as a job is sadly because so much of it feels like a job rather than, you know, it feels like that's what pays the bills all the time even though I would probably like it to be higher [on the list of identity definitions]. And ideologically it's just the reality is, it's difficult and you know challenging, yeah. Not as fulfilling on a day-to-day basis as it should be. (P27)

Being an academic ranks lower in identity formulation because it 'pays the bills' rather than being 'fulfilling on a day-to-day basis' (which, I note, it is believed it *should* be), and also because it is 'ideologically […] challenging'. This testimony repeats the motif in which fiscal concerns are dichotomised in relation to personal satisfaction, paralleled by P22's distinction between the 'profession' and the 'career', taking the view that 'in terms of a profession, in terms of its core, it's totally amazing and I utterly recommend it to anybody who is inflamed by the ideas. In terms of it being a career if you like, it has all these quite profound provisos'.

Despite acknowledgement of the 'provisos' around the academic career, those who appear to identify less with the vocation can find that this brings repercussions, not just because in working fewer hours they have less opportunity to rack up professional esteem markers but because of how this is perceived by other academics (Gill, 2018). P8's vocal commitment to their hours of work attracted ire: 'I once had an anonymous email off someone who said I was a cockroach and that I should quit so that somebody with passion could take my job'. This potential was also observed by P14, who noted the 'penalty' associated with even appearing 'less psychologically invested':

> I think it would be nice to be less invested but I don't know how to do that. I mean I feel like people would really, like, come down on me really hard if they thought I was being less psychologically invested even if I was doing the same amount of work. I think there's quite a penalty in some ways.

Demonstrative practices of overwork, then, are not so much about the work itself but the visibility of it—there is no such thing as "enough": all exhaustible resources must be drained in the performance of academic identity to render it legitimate and legible

(Gill, 2014).

4.2.4 Gratitude culture and calling

Several participants observed that the importance of academic identity discussed above means it is difficult to argue for better conditions or register legitimate complaint. If an academic is something you *are* rather than something you *do*, to be granted the opportunity to realise the vocation is a gift (Gill, 2014): the work is its own reward (I return to this topic in Chapter 5). This contributes to what is sometimes referred to as 'gratitude culture' (P14), carrying the implication that anyone who is dissatisfied with the conditions of being an academic is 'blocking the job of somebody who truly loves academia and it's their passion' (P8). This particular manifestation of gratitude—as distinct from a balanced acknowledgement that compared to much other work academia has many advantages—has strong ties to the notion of "calling" or 'a sense of purpose or direction that leads an individual toward some kind of personally fulfilling and/or socially significant engagement within the work role' (Dik & Duffy, 2009: 427). While participants did not use this language directly, the ways they spoke about their work, identity, and motivations resembled the narratives of Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) zookeepers.

As Bunderson and Thompson (2009: 32) point out, the concept of work as a calling 'has very deep roots in Western cultural and religious traditions' but is 'a recent phenomenon' since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, before which 'the idea that work was anything but an unfortunate drudgery would have been a foreign concept' unless it was spiritual in nature (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Although contemporarily the valorisation of having a "career" and inspirational platitudes such as "love what you do and you'll never work a day in your life" might be seen as a consequence of neoliberal brainwashing, the underlying beliefs—as with many of the ideologies of the true academic shown here—can be traced back to an older social order, most notably Puritan 'asceticism and dedication to hard work, which led to the rise of capitalism' (Dik & Duffy, 2009: 426). So, part of the same system, but certainly not novel.

While in 'classic' formulations of calling there is a focus on answering a call from God, the religiosity falls away in 'neoclassical' definitions but leaves a sense of higher purpose, destiny, and service to a larger cause (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Zookeepers, like academics, expressed beliefs that their work was 'what one was

meant to do, or part of who one has always been' and were 'not motivated by money' but 'commitment to the animals' (ibid.: 36). However, like academics the twinning of these positions placed zookeepers in a complicated, ambivalent relationship with their calling, which became a 'double-edged sword' representing both 'occupational identification, transcendent meaning, and occupational importance, on the one hand, and unbending duty, personal sacrifice, and heightened vigilance, on the other' (ibid.: 39). The framing of calling as a 'moral duty' to undertake a particular kind of work leaves those who understand their work in this way 'vulnerable to exploitation by management because unfavourable pay, benefits, or working conditions are likely to be construed as simply another sacrifice one must make to pursue a calling' (ibid.: 43), and similar to participants in my project this could sour relationships between employees and the broader organisation, particularly if business interests are perceived to supersede welfare considerations (ibid.). For Bunderson and Thompson (2009: 52) 'greater sense of calling was also associated with heightened expectations about management's morality related to the work, leading to an employment relationship characterized by vigilance and suspicion', thus they note that 'calling cannot inspire profound meaning without simultaneously requiring profound sacrifice'. These observations both hold true in this research, demonstrating that the notion of calling is prevalent in HE (but is not unique to it), that attachment to this belief is a significant component in academic working practices, and highlighting the dangers of identification with calling being idealised as a pre-requisite for legibility as a true academic (or zookeeper, etcetera). Furthermore, there is a moral dimension underpinned by historical religious interpretations of work as a 'divine offering' and 'solemn duty' to use one's 'God-given gifts' (ibid.: 33)—a sense of meaning that is cheapened by 'economic or career advancement reasons' (ibid.: 32).

4.2.5 Cultural capital and gratitude

The discourse of gratitude is predicated on the idea that not everyone has an automatic right to academia, the logic being that the scarcity of places and high competition mean those from traditionally under-included backgrounds in particular should simply be grateful for the opportunity (Gill, 2014). This is consonant with the notion that fiscal concerns have no place in HE, suggestive of ingratitude or failure to recognise the inherent reward academia provides: it is "uncultured". However, it is

easy to be unconcerned with money when one has plenty of it, and in this light the insistence that HE is intrinsically valuable (Gill, 2018) can be seen as stemming from a classed perspective in which financial conversations are seen to be impolite.

Gill (2014: 15) notes that in creative industries as well as academia the job is 'claimed as reward in its own right' and there is 'the enculturated idea that it would somehow be in "bad taste" to ask about money/pay'. Thus the discomfort with all topics economic in HE is difficult to untether from historical aristocratic attitudes that continue to pervade UK (particularly English) culture. It is still generally considered a faux pas to ask someone how much they earn, how much they paid for their house, or discuss personal finances. Those who talk about money openly are liable to be seen as gauche or vulgar, much like the "nouveaux riches" who, rapidly upwardly mobile, ascend to wealthy class positions with none of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) of those who inherited their status, and are therefore seen to degrade the genteel standards of upper-class society.

The nouveaux riches are primarily "self-made", proto-neoliberal individuals who raise their social standing by embodying the meritocratic ideal via business and commerce. The expansion of HE, then, can be seen to mirror the changing British class structure following industrialisation, with its stated intention to increase social mobility and the attendant increase of "non-traditional" students (some of whom then become staff) coinciding with (or necessitating) changes to the funding model. "Old money" funding, where cash comes in automatically and is handled at a senior level, gives way to "new money" approaches, where funds must be collectively "brought in" and discussed. Through this lens, hostility towards the financialisation of HE and the explicit conversations about money and value it creates looks like little more than prejudice against those for whom these conversations are pertinent (though I recognise it is not only—and certainly not consciously—this that informs perspectives on the politics of HE funding and expansion).

That there are many socioeconomically disadvantaged people working and studying in HE does not necessarily undermine this; for one, social class is such a defining aspect of UK culture (Savage, 2015) that internalised classism seems unavoidable, and for another, academia continues to be considered a middle-class pursuit, legacy of an upper-class system (especially in the elite institutions), thus the appeal of HE to those outside this might plausibly indicate aspirations of upward mobility and ideological sympathy with "middle-class values" (Gagnon, 2018). Indeed,

those participants with stated working-class origins were perhaps the most attached to idealistic visions of the university and the opportunities they suggested for "redemption" through class transcendence, such as in P21's fantasy of academia formulated through *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel defined by its potent combination of nostalgia for the elite student life and aristocratic Britain. This could lead to particular disillusionment for those whose dreams of HE were based in fictional or semi-mythological ideals (see Section 5.4.3).

4.2.6 Reclaiming independence

Some participants had been stripped of their illusions and became resentful of their implication in institutional structures, at war with the parts of themselves that clung on to academic identity. Although all academic labour is beneficial for the institution on some level—and arguably should be, given that the institution provides the resource—some parts of the job are perceived as more directly institutional than others. P5 in particular, perhaps due to their management role (see Chapter 6), felt such a significant split between 'the job bit' and 'the bit of it that is a big part of my identity' that one side of themselves came to feel like it 'belongs to someone else':

> really honestly the bit of it that is a big part of my identity is that amazing moment of seeing a thing that I didn't see before, and I kind of click. And that is quite different from my job because my job is about being in an institution, doing certain things at certain times for certain structures. So the bit of it that's my identity is not the job bit, it's the really I like figuring out puzzles and that bit is me. But that other bit, somehow that feels like it belongs to somebody else and I kind of slightly resent that I let myself get sucked into it so much.

For participants who saw a distinction between 'figuring out puzzles' and 'the job bit', the ideal of an academic's life sat uncomfortably alongside institutional responsibilities and 'doing certain things at certain times for certain structures'. Although the job and the vocation can be perceived as ideally rolled into one, not everyone experienced harmony between the two; academia cannot always deliver the idea of what being a true academic is, producing ambivalence and internal conflict (Ball, 2015), a sense of internal unbelonging.

P5's resentment about being institutionally-bound was experienced by other participants, too, especially those later in their careers who articulated a sense of being

held hostage by HE, wishing they could transfer to another sector but feeling too specialised or 'over-evolved' to make the transition:

> I'm somewhat like a panda. It's the analogy that I used the other day. I was trying to explain the situation I'm in. I'm like I'm so over-evolved, I can only eat bamboo. There aren't many other sectors that I could go to but at the moment, if I could. If I could take the voluntary severance and go to another sector, I would. (P15)

Although several participants reported feelings of being trapped in academia, unable to move into another type of work, it is not perhaps that there is no other work available but that there are various unstated conditions an alternative job would need to meet in order to render it more appealing than academia. It is unclear whether 'only being able to eat bamboo' in this testimony is a comment on the lack of transferability of academic skills—i.e. the accomplishments of a long academic career not having much currency in other sectors—or on the participant's own needs—i.e. only being willing to do a particular kind of work. There are of course many alternative jobs available in non-HE sectors, but far fewer that are academic in nature, which is how I interpret the problem at hand for those participants who were desirous of leaving: they wanted to move away from academia but still do a job that enabled them to be, in some respect, an academic. Without undermining the pain and difficulty of relinquishing an identity curated over many years, it is worth noting that to have been able to do a job that commensurates with one's identity in the first place is a substantial privilege. The fact that most people have it worse is not a reason not to fight for HE to be better, but there must be self-awareness that it continues to be not only a pleasanter job with relatively good benefits in comparison to the majority of employment, but an arena that allows for at least some degree of harmony between personal identity, ethics, ideology, and the work being undertaken (Foster, 2017; Gill, 2009). Perhaps this is the issue: academia is still, even with all its problems, more desirable than another job; it is still better to eat bamboo, even if more effort is required to yield less of it, even if we are perpetually hungry, than to change diet.

As P8 points out, the degree to which academia is still considered a good job can be related to background, expectations, and point of comparison:

> from my background, academia is ace. So I come into a full-time post. I'm well-paid. I'm in TPS not USS, so the pension's great. I get what? 40 days' holiday a year. Nobody truthfully asks me where I am, especially now I'm [in

management]. But from an identity point of view it's not core to my identity. […] It's a job.

Interestingly, then, if able to gain an academic position with this level of emotional detachment, it may be a better job for those whose identities are not beholden to the work. P8's lack of attachment to being an academic renders academic life more enjoyable because they are in control of the power dynamic and would be out 'like a shot' (P8) if an equivalent role was offered in industry—the relationship with academia is transactional and therefore more equal: 'it's a job'. This contrasts starkly with the experiences of those for whom becoming an academic was the realisation of a life-long dream but have ended up 'hugely disappointed' and disillusioned with HE:

> when I did get it, it was an enormous relief and enormous validation. And my relationship therefore with that feeling was much more enthusiastic than it is now. […] These days I think of that as sort of an unfortunate aspect of my personality [LAUGHS], as I mean I think I am temperamentally suited to that kind of job and I like it but I think that I would probably be a happier person if it weren't so. The identification [with being an academic] is tempered by this huge disappointment. (P4)

A similar sentiment is shared by P20, who reflects that although the degree to which being an academic represents their identity has remained consistent 'I think it starts to annoy me more how much it matters for my identity. I'm not sure it's changed but I think it annoys me more'. Those who feel that being an academic is an 'unfortunate aspect of personality' become conflicted, beholden not just to an institution that they have become disillusioned with but to their own need to do a job they are 'temperamentally suited to'. This, as many have observed (e.g. Gill, 2018; Morris et al, 2022; Naidoo, 2018), manifests Berlant's (2011: 1) notion of 'cruel optimism', in which 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' because 'the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially'. Academic success is an 'enormous validation' but something that gets in the way of being 'a happier person'—and in many cases of being a "good" academic too.

Interestingly, waning dedication or 'tempering' of 'identification' appears to be a common phenomenon in fields where vocation and calling are strong attributes of the workforce, as demonstrated by Dobrow's (2012) research with 'amateur' musicians, which found that sense of calling declines over time. This distinction between amateur and professional musicians based on employment status is also curious to consider in

respect of academics who, like musicians, despite being proficient in their craft after many years of study might not have "gone pro"—and, like musicians who do become employed in orchestras, may report 'low levels of job satisfaction' (Dobrow, 2012: 436). In both cases this could be due to 'big-fish-little-pond' effects: academics who progress through education are likely to have been amongst the highest-attaining in their milieu, however once amongst other qualified peers self-confidence contracts (Dobrow, 2012).

4.2.7 Unbecoming

Academic identity, once validated, can be difficult to relinquish. As I have shown, achieving academic status can be the realisation of a long-held dream. So what does it mean to let go of it?

For P13 the realisation that they were 'doing the wrong thing' came sooner than divestment from the associated identity; shedding this 'defining' aspect of themselves was a 'huge' process:

> I think initially I was defined by academia because as you know, it's very hard to get into it […]. And so it's like, 'oh, you've made it' and then you're still working like hell. But so it does sort of define you because also it takes a lot of your life. And but I started, when I really started thinking, you know, it actually came quite suddenly to me in a phrase, like 'I'm doing the wrong thing'. […] It was huge for me and so I had to do a lot of developing of myself and thinking, like what is that like to leave that identity?

One of the more traumatic aspects of compulsory redundancy schemes, in light of this, is the consequences it has for academics' identities that academia 'takes a lot of your life' and then spits it back out. Although in other places P12 reports not taking on the idea that being made redundant meant they were not good enough, the process of being stripped of job and title nonetheless provoked reckoning with similarly difficult questions of 'what is that like to leave that identity?':

> I'm putting a lot of myself into it, a lot of emotional labour I guess, so I think it probably is part of me […] so if you then face the question like I've been faced with, 'well what if I never get another academic job, what does that mean?' It's quite, you know, so there's material aspects to it like 'how will I live, how will I survive, […]', then there's practical things like 'what will you actually do, how will you fill your time?', but there's a separate question of 'what does that mean for your status or identity or what you think about

> yourself or other people think about you?' Maybe I'm a bit bothered about
> that.

Although a person may feel inherently academic, validation is gained through achieving academic status and integrating outward legitimacy with the inward sense of who they are. No longer having the institutional legibility to bind the two together can therefore be disorientating and 'a bit bothering' in addition to, but notably distinct from, 'material aspects' and 'practical things'.

4.3 Making the vocation legible: overwork and hyperproduction

In the previous section I demonstrated that the true academic's identity is all-consuming and difficult to separate from. The work is seen as a vocation, calling, and higher purpose, encapsulated by beliefs that academia is incompatible with being a '9-to-5' job. In this section I explore how attachment to the academic profession as 'not just a job' is made outwardly legible through visible practices of excessive work.

4.3.1 A neverending job

As demonstrated by the general agreement that academia 'isn't a nine til five job' (P1) the perception that working in excess of standard hours and 'without boundaries' (Grummell et al, 2009: 196) is an inherent feature of the sector is prevalent, evidenced by P18's airy wave of the hand, '[o]h I think you'd struggle to find anybody who can do the job on the contracted hours' (Loveday, 2018a). The nebulous nature of much academic work, though, casts a question mark over what exactly 'doing the job' is: because academics' value is largely determined by comparisons between peers or against unrealistic targets rather than on objective merits, there is no such thing as "enough" or "job done" (Gill, 2014). This is something of which institutions are aware (or incentivise), as evidenced by P12's boss who saw no need to include research time in the academic workload model because staff would 'do it in their own time anyway' (P12). There are internal as well as external incentives to work harder and longer, accrue institutional validations that boost professional esteem, and communicate true academic identity: working extra hours becomes a "badge of honour" (Allen et al, 2013) and 'self-exploitation is seen as meritorious' (McKenzie, 2021: 539). Furthermore, as Duffy and Dik (2013: 433) note, 'workaholism' is a problem for those

who relate to their job as a calling due to 'over-identification with work'.

Although HEIs are often criticised for setting unrealistic targets, benchmarks are partly determined by those academics who spend more time working—a bar that may be particularly hard for some demographics to meet, but that a minority achieve and others then chase. Bothello and Roulet (2019: 857) observe that 'we tend to view "star-performers" of our field as standard academics' and this is in part because 'well-published academics are simply more visible'; nonetheless these exceptions provide clear fodder for self-comparison, especially if they are active on social media. As Nyström et al (2019: 14) observe in relation to students, 'timescapes' in HE tend to favour 'well-resourced, middle-class students with no or few family commitments'; not everyone can or wants to exceed reasonable working hours, ossifying existing inequalities and creating new ones, whether because those with the resource and inclination to work more gain a career advantage or because those who are perceived to have more liberty are disproportionately leant on to pick up slack of work that is 'demanding and unending' (Rosewell, 2022: 712). Those on insecure contracts or in precarious positions were especially aware of the need to make themselves competitive or 'indispensable' (Coin, 2018; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b), with a fantasy that once a 'holy grail' (P2) post had been acquired their workload would diminish—but, inevitably in the process proving the "value for money" these positions represent when occupied by those with something to prove.

4.3.2 Complicity

Given the personal advantages to overworking, at least for a period, it is worth noting the justifications for doing so; as Sang et al (2015) note, there is little pushback against overwork in the form of changed behaviour despite complaint about its ubiquity. There is self-interest, whether in terms of career advancement, personal reputation, demonstrating vocationality, bolstering confidence, sense of bettering the world, avoiding other areas of life, escaping a sense of guilt, or so on; it is pertinent that Cristea and Babajide (2022) found overwork to be a common practice amongst academics experiencing impostor syndrome.

Although participants reported that negative feelings associated with taking a boundaried approach to work can be stoked by institutions or "neoliberal culture" (Loveday, 2018b), '[b]eing productive is seductive' (Pereira, 2017: 213, 2019b: 181)—

even, especially, for those whose political investment in critiquing injustice tears them in two (perpetuating injustice through overwork, but using that work for academic activism). We must keep an eye on our complicity: if we elect to do the system's bidding, we become a part of that system and cannot but be implicated in the demands it makes (Pereira, 2017, 2018b). Cribb and Gewirtz (2013: 345) speak of 'academic self-identity and self-definition' becoming 'colonised by institutional performance ideologies' but although the language of colonisation arises often in literature about the encroachment of "neoliberalism" this paints a particularly passive portrait of academics that obscures our implication in these ideologies (Ball, 2012). Colonisation is seen as a 'sign of the loss of exceptionalism in the sector, with academic identities and careers seemingly becoming isomorphic with […] those in any sector' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013: 345)—a development positioned negatively, but that I might question: are, and should, academics be 'exceptional' by contrast to other workers or is this a hangover from when academics were a more pronounced elite accustomed to holding exceptional status in all areas of life?

Žižek (1989: 33) wrote that '[c]ynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironic distance, we are still doing them'. I find this a useful reminder that it is what we do that perpetuates culture, not what we believe. This thread of being 'complicit' and thus 'ambivalent' (Pereira, 2017, 2019b; Rogers, 2016: 4) runs throughout the project, with participants expressing a sense of being stuck over a barrel unable to 'settle on a position that makes sense' (P5).

4.3.3 'Yeah but I enjoy it'

One reason academics may be readily complicit in unhealthy working practices is that with such personal investment much of the work is effectively a hobby. Therefore although demonstrative overwork can be critiqued as playing into neoliberal games of "self-promotion"—such as Loveday's (2018a:10) participant Howard remarking on those 'still promoting themselves on Christmas Day'—it is likely academics engaging in "PR" do not conceive of their activities in this way. When academia is a matter of identity and not of labour there is no such thing as a "day off"; are those tweeting about their outputs on Christmas Day "good neoliberal subjects" or "true academics"? Pereira (2017: 73), like others, sees the 'additional urgency, frenzy, insecurity and

investment in that demarcation of who is (not) a proper scientist' as a product of 'the performance university' in which '[i]t becomes necessary to […] continually constitute oneself as a proper scholar by recurrently and incessantly producing the products seen to count as appropriate displays of scholarly competence, authority and achievement'. However, as I have suggested, it may not be that communicating proper scholarliness is so directly and uniquely related to counting and productivity measures; identity is always a factor, and, for some, so is pleasure.

Research was for many participants the most enjoyable and rewarding (in several senses) aspect of the job and this could easily blur whether it is seen as work. P12 observes:

> I probably would still say something like 'yeah but I enjoy it and I wouldn't be doing this sitting here on a Saturday night if I didn't actually enjoy it so it doesn't actually feel so much like work.' It is work yeah.

In recent years the idea that just because work is enjoyable, 'it is work', has been increasingly foregrounded, with attention drawn to the fact HEIs can capitalise on academics' passion for the job, encouraging self-exploitation. While this may orientate focus towards the negative, removing pleasure from the job by consistently highlighting that it is "work", it also brings into view the fact that working in this way is not simply a matter of 'self-imposed working' (P18) and points to inequalities in who can be 'successful and have the rewards' (P12) as a result of 'writing a paper on a Saturday'— and also who can 'enjoy it'. There continue to be blind spots:

> I really like my job and I really like doing it. When I sit down and write a paper on a Saturday, I don't really feel like I'm at work. Because it's more of a vocation for me than anything else, so I don't mind it, I quite like it. And a lot of the time I work on the weekend, or late at night. I don't think I have to. It's not like anybody is telling me I've got to. It's my own self-imposed working to, you know, finish papers, which I quite like doing so I don't think it detracts from anything. (P18)

Although this participant acknowledged that being able to work 'on the weekend, or late at night' was related to certain kinds of privilege, it is nonetheless parsed as both voluntary and unproblematic, simply living out a 'vocation': it 'doesn't actually feel so much like work' (Bailyn, 2003). But what of P18's claim that working in this manner is purely 'self-imposed'?

> Jess: Do you think there would be consequences if you didn't finish as many

papers? Whilst you say no-one's telling you, I wonder whether, how the love of it intersects with the need in some sense to fulfil those roles?

P18: Yeah. So I think there would be consequences. […] [Y]ou wouldn't go up as quick as you would if you didn't write as many. And I wouldn't have got the lectureship after, you know, PhD plus three [years] […] if I hadn't written the amount of papers I did, because I was working sort of six or seven days.

In other words: yes, it is clearly a self-imposed responsibility in that there is no explicit demand being made for out-of-hours working, but there are penalties associated with not working in this way—both in terms of identity and producing the countable outputs needed for career progression and professional esteem (see Section 8.5 for an update on the long-term effects of 'working six or seven days'). Thus without collective recalibration of working patterns, the inability—or the unwillingness—to fit into them can be easily dismissed as a personal failing (Allen et al, 2013; Loveday, 2018a). How, then, do we collectively institute boundaries such that these "shortcomings" can be depersonalised?

4.3.4 'Go home, have a life'?

Any attempt to redress work/non-work balance should note that working practices vary across disciplines and job roles. In some subjects, such as those based in labs (Deem, 2003), or for project-specific staff, there is less flexibility and academics may be more beholden to the Principal Investigator. In certain areas timing is also significant:

[W]hen my partner was very ill the first time, I was also at the stage of writing up PhD and papers. And there was some quite novel data and I had to sort of step back because I knew I couldn't analyse it and write it up in the time required for it to retain its novelty. So I had to pass it on to a colleague. And that simple thing of not being first author on a paper… (P9)

In some disciplines, then, the nature of the work more directly demands unhealthy practices and pushback is harder; in order to get the "scoop", intense periods of work are necessary to write up papers in quick time, bumping those who cannot down the author list. As P9 highlights, while there might be choice involved in arranging one's workload, the same choices are not available to everyone: not all circumstances are conducive to working evenings and weekends even if one wants to. For those who had been living this way, it was often a crisis that forced a reckoning with their habits, requiring a level of self-management. However, while the need for academics to

manage themselves and their boundaries is often pointed to as a neoliberal individualisation of responsibility (Loveday, 2018a, 2018b), the autonomy and independence of academic work—which participants identified as hinging on the ability to set their own schedule, prioritise their own tasks, and choose their area of focus—was reported to be one of the main benefits of the role (see Sections 6.3.3 and 6.3.4). There is a sense, then, in which the freedom of personal autonomy comes with the responsibility of personal boundary-making. Difficulty doing this can in practice be as much about identity as institutional demands, but, as Mountz et al (2015: 1253) highlight, the only real tool at our disposal is to 'be unwilling to be undermined or belittled for not conforming to hegemonic agendas that are devoid of the responsibilities and joys or life beyond the ivory tower'.

The reasons some participants struggled with reducing their workload were complex: maintaining an image of suitable commitment, the need to accrue more achievements, guilt, gaining a sense of control (Loveday, 2018a), and sometimes simply in response to an intangible pressure to always be doing more. P27 admits, 'I want to do less and that makes me feel bad so I'm trying to work that out'. Whether stemming from an internal conflation of worth with productivity or a comparison to external factors such as others' achievements, participants expressed high anxiety in which they 'just constantly have a sense of drowning […] it's just possible to feel like I should have done more. All the time. Yeah' (P14). This chronic sense of under-achievement was echoed by others, especially early-career academics:

> just always feel like I'm not doing enough despite, you know, the facts proving the opposite. […] [H]ear that voice in my head: 'you're not doing enough, […] you're not working hard enough, you don't care enough about your students, […] you're not doing the right kind of research'. (P27)

It is no surprise, then, that with an indistinct sense that whatever is being achieved is somehow not 'right', not good enough, not voluminous enough, participants were strongly motivated to relieve this feeling by spending all available time working—as much as anything, perhaps, to distract from fear of inadequacy. However, there is always more that could be done and always a danger of being perceived as shirking an essential responsibility. As P1 points out, even attempting to decrease work pressure by doing a part-time role is likely to be unsuccessful:

> [I would recommend academia to] [s]omebody who is pretty resilient, willing

> to accept that it's going to be quite a lot of hard work, and is, I don't want to use words like 'make sacrifices' because it's not really but also it kind of is so it's not gonna work for somebody who kind of wants a job that they can put away at the end of the day. I don't think that's how it works, it's not, it is a job you can do part-time for sure because plenty of people do part-time roles except I don't think they really do.

This repeats the motif of academia as a vocation—not something one can 'put away'—and the notion that a personal tithe is required—not quite a 'sacrifice' but not *not* a sacrifice either. It also reveals a degree of ambivalence and an obvious tension: if full-time academics are working anything up to 80 hours per week as participants reported, how can there, in any meaningful sense, be such a thing as a part-time academic? This is an existential question as much as a contractual one—if 'a lot of what you do, it's kind of being' (P28), where are the lines between work and not-work, what is a hobby and what is labour when academic-as-identity and academic-as-university-employee are conflated?

Furthermore, declining to demonstrate vocational zeal through hyperproductivity is also an impediment to collecting career-building achievements. Thus those who continue to perform true academic identity in this way inevitably accrue more denotations of success and consolidate a platform for perpetuating the ideal. While I am not suggesting institutions bear no responsibility for setting unreasonable targets or inaccurate workload projections, or that this is untethered from wider policy changes bringing competitive regimes such as the REF into greater prominence, it bears remembering that collective compliance feeds this, and it is linked to personal benefit as well as pleasing the university. Reflecting on being an academic in another (northern European) country, P4 recalls that 'my head of department used to come banging on my door at 5pm saying, "what are you still doing here? Go home, have a life." I do need that. I tend to be a workaholic'. Perhaps HE could do with more of a culture of 'go home, have a life', but this is also a responsibility we can take on ourselves; with a profession that is a vocation—where the job is 'life'—and where demonstrating this outwardly communicates authenticity to others, it may be less threatening to identity to be given permission to down tools than make that choice oneself, but it is up to us how far that identity runs—becomes—our life.

At the same time, it is frequently noted that

> A practice and politics of refusal of work is not easy to implement and

> maintain. It is, in many ways, a strategy available only, or primarily, to the privileged, those who already have a job, guaranteed income, the range of opportunities and the status to be able to refuse work without concern for their survival, fear of reprisal or worry about the fall-out (Pereira, 2017: 217, also a variation appears in 2018b: 182).

While this is not not-true, I do want to point out two things that often go unaddressed. Firstly, when such observations speak of 'survival' they refer to survival as an academic, not life-or-death matters—without wishing to be simplistic or naive about the ease of obtaining employment, there are other jobs out there; the stakes are ego-death not literal mortality. I say this not to downplay the significance of making such identity adjustments or belittle the severity of psychological suffering (which I recognise can result in life-or-death crises), but to relax the tendency to hyperbole. Secondly, the bifurcation of the 'privileged' employed and the "insecure" precariat risks separating the general academic practice of overwork into two areas, one of which it is suggested can and should implement a 'practice and politics of refusal' while the other is understood as inevitably implicated in 'survival' modes of endless agreement. Given, however, that in practice academics are not so easily delineated, with many holding multiple roles of different types simultaneously and all engaging in substantially the same labour, boundaried work is something everyone must participate in for it to be effective at repealing the current standards. If precarious academics continue to mop up the excess from securely employed colleagues who are either overloaded or practicing refusal, this risks demonstrating that there are plenty of people around who can, will, and do accept this level of toil. Hourly-paid staff then begin to look like "good value" in comparison to salaried peers, further justifying reliance upon them, especially as they can be drafted in short-term to handle particular spikes in activity and then powered down again. As Back (2018: 122) observes, 'hyper self-exploitation impacts on everyone else around you'; the competition to be an academic appears to preclude the possibility of 'calming down' but perhaps we should attempt to emulate instead the 'industrial veteran practiced in the art of giving the bosses just enough for [their] hourly rate'. Indeed, who is the work "really" for?

4.3.5 Who is academic work for?

As discussed, the true academic's commitment to their vocation provides many incentives to work excessively, which can result in resentment towards institutions for

encouraging, failing to limit, and not adequately compensating this additional labour. Equally, ideal academic attitudes to money and constructions of overwork as emblematic of 'passion' or 'love' create discomfort around seeking reward or recompense. This left many participants conflicted and ambivalent about who their work was "for" and when they were 'giving away' for others' benefit (especially if there were personal advantages to doing so) compared to when they were doing something 'for me':

> You give that stuff away all the time because it's for the good of the students or it's for the good of your team or whatever it is. I think if you've done that forever, which most academics have to get to the positions they're in, it's difficult to dial that back or consolidate it or rationalise it, […] as an academic you're, a lot of what you do, it's kind of being isn't it? It's your practice, it's kind of everything that you're about. It's the thinking. So someone will say, my father-in-law said the other day, 'what are you reading?' And I was reading something for an article. He said, 'oh I thought it was like a story book. I thought it was something for you rather than something for the institution'. I went, 'right it is for me' because you carry that stuff around with you all the time.

When 'a lot of what you do, it's kind of being' and is 'everything that you're about', especially when, as I have shown, investment in this conception of academic identity accelerates legibility, the question of who academic work is for has no clear answer. The most accurate conception, perhaps, might be that academic work is both for the institution and the self, as it is in the interests of each party: HEIs need their staff to read and write, academics need to produce articles to further their careers and legitimise identity. Unlike many other jobs, where work and life can be delineated, where work is spatially constrained to a physical location, academics 'carry that stuff around all the time'—the workplace is the mind.

However, inequalities are introduced and maintained by the confusion about who the work is for and academics' ambivalence about who they *want* it to be for—pleasurable work like reading may be self-orientated whilst other tasks may feel more extractive and 'like a job' (P27), obscuring the intimate relationship between academics and their institutions. This thinking also appears in attitudes to audit exercises like the Research Excellence Framework (REF; see Glossary), where HEIs can be seen as "stealing" their researchers' work for institutional gain—especially in 2021 when previous and deceased employees' outputs could be submitted (Breeze & Taylor,

2020). However, whatever issues there may be with the REF, its goal is to appraise the quality of research environment fostered, funded, and enabled by *institutional* units, as a measure of *institutional* "quality", not to rate the work of individuals. That academics by and large are so mistrustful of their institutions and so apt to frame the relationship as exploitative is telling if not entirely useful: if universities fund research, pay salaries, provide facilities, confer the legitimising affiliation, and enable external grants to be applied for, won, and administered, who does (who *should*) the research "belong" to and who is it 'for'? Even if institutions make use of the work their staff produce through self-exploitation practices—or in the worst case promulgate exploitation themselves—it is worth noting that underlying institutional support (either current or historical) is what makes a career and enables this work to take place, both in terms of resources and symbolic capital such as using the university's name for validation. This entanglement was difficult for participants to reconcile but bears being made explicit; much as, as P1 pointed out, we might school our students in the fact their tuition fees do not only pay for their contact hours but for everything the institution provides, salaries are not the only form of payment academic staff receive.[13]

The accusation that academia as an institution "runs on goodwill" is predicated on the idea that academic work that is not demonstrably or directly "for" the employing institution is unpaid. Becoming unemployed after a substantial career in HE, P12 continued to engage in academic work, noticing how much had previously been 'subsidised by a salary':

> my job was a lot of like editing a journal, reviewing for journals, examining undergraduate, I'd be an external examiner, writing pieces for publication, writing pieces with other people, writing research bids and stuff, actually a lot of activity which is still going on which I still do but I'm just not paid for it, which is quite, it sort of casts a light on how, how much academic labour is unpaid or not directly paid or subsidised by a salary.

There are complexities to the different ways of seeing the type of work that falls beyond the scope of the directly institutional and therefore 'directly paid'-for labour. On the one hand, some of this "additional" work is exploitative in the sense that profits are made from activities the beneficiary did not invest in—for example, peer

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[13] This is particularly complex in relation to research, however, given that the material differences between activities undertaken by doctoral students and academic staff may be slight yet there is huge variation in the economics: some research students pay for the privilege, some are paid a nominal amount through studentships, while staff are paid more fully.

review and writing or editing publications, where publishers make money without paying contributors. This also means those without contracts or paid by the hour can continue to undertake reputation-building work on an unremunerated basis in the hope this will lead to employment, propping up the status quo (Coin, 2018). On the other hand, everything P12 lists as ongoing but 'unpaid' are arguably core academic responsibilities and can be attributed to one of the customary workload model areas of teaching, research, or service (Mountz et al, 2015) for those who are salaried. That these things might be more likely to fall into "overtime" than activities like teaching that must happen within core hours does not make them distinctly unpaid in contrast to other responsibilities. In this light, such activities are not simply 'subsidised by a salary' but part of the overall package of work that academics are expected to perform in return for their pay. It is the fact these tasks are untethered from the university that renders them more problematic, in that they can be done by unaffiliated and thus unpaid aspirants or former employees (or overworking employees). The question then is whether this is reasonable and how to balance the fact that much academic labour is beneficial to both individual and institution—and, as discussed in the previous chapter, enjoyable—thus not clearly "for" either party.

I do not wish to stray into promoting gratitude culture or argue that simply because a task is pleasurable, advantageous, or done out of 'love' (Coin, 2018) it should not be compensated as, if nothing else, this stratifies "nice" and "vocational" jobs as only doable by those who can support themselves. However, there is also something uncomfortable—and "neoliberal"—about defining all academic activity in terms of work and monetising it accordingly. Sometimes it is precisely in pursuit of something as a "hobby" that pleasure lies; a freedom, a gift to oneself, a luxury. In doing it "for ourselves" rather than identifying it as something we are "giving away" to the institution, we get to keep psychic ownership, reappropriate labour, and recalibrate our relationship with what we are doing. There is a balance to be struck, but it is worth noting that in many of these tasks lies the making of academic reputations and the building of academic identity. The interests of institution and individual are inextricably bound. While Ball (2012: 25) acknowledges that 'together we do the work of neoliberalising Higher Education' they also claim that 'we are none of the things we now do, think or desire' (ibid: 26), leaning in to the discourse of 'colonisation' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013) or 'takeover' (Gill, 2009: 231) that runs throughout the literature on neoliberal HE. I must disagree, however—we are nothing

but that which we do, think, and desire; if our proclivities have been co-opted by "neoliberalism" then *we* have become an integral part of that system and cannot, should not, must not, disavow our involvement or abdicate responsibility. Whatever neoliberalism denotes, it is not an external force "out there" invading us but a protein that runs throughout our DNA: we are all neoliberal in the same way we are all prejudiced by virtue of being raised in a profoundly unequal world—all our thoughts are ours, even those we do not want to think, even those that seem like they 'belong to someone else' (P5). We cannot be "better than" our most shameful thoughts, actions, and desires.

Therefore the background support of universities should be kept in mind when considering problems with contemporary academia; there are "in-kind" contributions even for precarious employees. Participants, though, displayed a general antipathy towards their institutions, interpreting them as obstructive and extractive, taking a lot and giving little back (see Chapter 6). However, given the latitude academics (salaried at least) have in their work there are considerable freedoms and resources institutional affiliation provides compared to other types of employer. P28 reflected that 'the stuff I've written over the summer almost has nothing to do with the university. […] I could feasibly do that as an independent academic. The university structures don't help me do that'. Yet while this might be true in the sense that some disciplines do not require laboratories, equipment, teams of people, and so on, there are other forms of support and stability the institution provides. The 'university structures' do not in all cases directly enable or disable academic work, but the structure provided by university employment and pay often do, not to mention the legitimacy conferred through such associations. The perceived reduction in long-term, full-time contracts in HE, though, has led to more conversations about practical and financial matters, highlighting the difficulties faced by those without independent wealth or external support in sustaining precarious employment. Conversations about unpaid academic labour become more commonplace as greater numbers of casual and hourly-paid staff enter the workforce, and for those attempting to forge an academic career, the fact many reputation-building activities can be done without a secure contract and are not directly paid creates inequalities in who can sustain this mode of work outside of a job. These are problems, but not entirely neoliberal ones.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that legibility as a true academic relies on performing an inner sense of vocation and communicating commitment to an all-consuming academic identity by engaging in excessive working practices. I have suggested that there are penalties associated with taking a boundaried approach to work, especially for those who do not clearly present as true academics in other ways, and that these have consequences for both career progression and sense of belonging. These perceived imperatives, though seen to be emblematic of neoliberalisation in HE, cannot be entirely attributed to contemporary developments in culture; rather, it may be the influx of new academic participants in the wake of expansion that casts light on requirements that have always been present, merely hidden by the uniformity of academic institutions. In the following chapter I show how this same logic bears out in the true academic's beliefs about the role, purpose, and function of universities and the higher education project.

Chapter 5: The True Academic's Fantasies of Higher Education

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that a true academic makes legible their inner core of vocationality by engaging in ostentatious practices of overwork. However, ideals of what it is to be an academic are not just produced within HE, and are not related only to academic identity and work, but also to beliefs arising from fantasies and boilerplate visions of academics and academia, as this chapter explores.

Although not "real", these imaginaries and stereotypes contribute to and reflect ideals of what academics "should" be (Read & Leathwood, 2018), the role universities should have, and the proper purpose and function of HE, in the eyes of the true academic. These unattainable but highly desirable fictions represent what Berlant (2011: 2) calls 'optimistic attachments', echoing Gill's (2009: 241) observation that academics can remain bound to the job by 'deep love for the "myth" of what we thought being an intellectual would be like'—even if it fulfil's Berlant's (2011) 'cruel optimism' and does not deliver the fantasy. This chapter details these semi-mythical ideals, considering how romanticised illusions about the sector can lead to disillusionment and unbelonging both for those who do and who do not believe in these discourses, and also to particular views about "the neoliberal university" as a contemporary imaginary that sits in opposition to those outlined here, which I discuss in the next chapter.

I begin by illuminating the true academic's beliefs about the ideal role of the university, its construction as 'a great place of education' (P18), 'old-fashioned' (P9; P25) perceptions of its function, and beliefs about what its core missions should be. I then consider the purpose of HE and the true academic's investment in its inherent value, which is perceived to be undermined by the expansion of the sector, resulting in calls to limit the number of universities and admissions. Finally I outline idealised visions of the true academic's life in academia, linking these to fantasies of the golden age (Tight, 2010) and showing that disillusionment can be particularly acute amongst those who were more reliant on imagined or fictional representations of the HE

environment prior to engaging in HE themselves. The true academic is concluded to be an exclusionary ideal in part because its template and beliefs date back to a prior and not fully accurate conception of HE at a time when academia operated very differently, in part due to being occupied by very different identities.

5.2 The role of the university

This section highlights the main plank of belief about the ideal role and function of universities as entities and "the university" as a concept: the university as 'a place of just learning and knowing' (P18). This perspective is shown to be self-consciously 'old-fashioned' (P9; P25) and constructed in binary opposition to a reformulation of the university as a business (Fongwa, 2019). I argue that despite the nostalgic hue and connections to religious conservatism this perspective betrays, its framing as an anti-neoliberal sentiment is in danger of allowing its regressive ideology to go unrecognised.

As with the ideas of vocationality and calling discussed in the previous chapter, there is a research literature pertaining respectively to arguments around universities as sites of pure knowledge (HEIs should be public institutions educating students to become engaged democratic citizens and conducting research without consideration of economic utility), around universities as incubators for the workforce (HEIs should drive the knowledge economy through financially useful research and train students for their role in the labour market), and around disrupting the dichotomous binary often drawn between these functions. While I again gesture to some of this work to highlight the issues at stake, it should be noted that my aim in elucidating the idealised belief systems associated with the true academic is not to make a case for whether they are true, valid, accurate, correct, or desirable. Where I present an alternative perspective this is not to prove one "wrong" and the other "right", merely to illustrate the logical inconsistencies in the way these beliefs are strung together. I should also reiterate that this thesis is a discussion of meta-beliefs circulating in general discourse around HE, as identified primarily through participants' testimony as a whole and when read together; where individual participants are quoted these excerpts serve as an example of a certain strand of belief, but my analysis neither rests exclusively on these extracts nor should be taken to suggest that I interpret the individual in question to personally subscribe wholesale to the belief system under observation. Whether or not participants identified with the ideal patterns of thought detailed here, how they spoke

reveals dominant discourses with which they seemed to be in dialogue or negotiation, and it is these I have attempted to expose. For the present purposes I am less concerned with what the university or a higher education should or should not be or do than with how fixed, uninterrogated, politically tribalistic, high-minded, and/or binarised ideals around this might lead to internal tensions, irreconcilable beliefs, counterproductive actions, and increasing polarisation that can result in profound unbelonging. In the course of writing this argument I have articulated to my supervisors several times a degree of apprehension, even fear, about saying some of these things out loud. This is perhaps one indication of what is at stake when trenchant thought takes hold—the niggling worry that we will be unmasked as a thought impostor, a heretic.

5.2.1 The university as 'a great place of education'

Addison (2016: 73) notes that there are arguments both for and against the marketisation of academia, in which context '[i]t is important […] to consider the purpose of HE'. 'Is it', they ask, 'to extract a profit, or to offer an intrinsically valued education for education's sake? Is it to provide a public service, or to advance research, or is it to provide training for students' future careers?' (ibid.). While they acknowledge that '[t]hese competing aims are of course not mutually exclusive' (ibid.), participants in this project, and much of the literature, suggest that they are often perceived—or wished—to be. Indeed, Addison characterising these purposes as 'competing' problematises this assertion, positioning such views as antithetical, and I would argue that such a dichotomous presentation is the source of many issues, creating reductive, binarised, "two-party politics" around matters that can be seen in nuanced and complex ways (Read, 2018).

P18 laments:

> I see universities competing for students on who can offer them a free iPad or a free set of headphones, or how much money you make afterwards. And I think the direction of travel is away from sort of universities as a great place of education, towards a place where you go simply to get the highest paid job, which is a problem. They should be seen as a place of just learning and knowing as opposed to just how you make your own money.

It is particularly interesting that P18 thinks this way given their political views:

unusually for an academic—I mean most academics are left-wing, I'm not—
I'm, you know, pretty much as resolute a Conservative as you'll find, you
know, belief in the free market etcetera. But […] that kind of mindset doesn't
really suit higher education.

The idea that universities 'should be seen as a place of just learning and knowing' (and
the 'just' is pivotal) 'as *opposed* to' 'where you go simply to get the highest paid job'
(again, 'simply' does a lot of work here) was prevalent among participants, as was the
feeling that this 'is a problem' (although unclear why), and a recent one (Work, 2022).

Whether 'most academics are left-wing' because left-wing beliefs are definitive of
academic sensibilities, or whether the profession attracts those on the left because
'belief in the free market'—associated with the political right—is a mindset that
'doesn't really suit higher education' is debatable—so too, however, is the idea that
'universities as a great place of education' is necessarily a left-wing viewpoint. Although
the focus on a deregulated market attributed to neoliberalism is linked to the right
(Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher being early proponents; Radice, 2015; Tight,
2018), so too was the "golden age" of academia by virtue of being populated primarily
by white men from wealthy and aristocratic backgrounds associated with conservatism
(Read, 2018). That P18's view is backward-looking is suggested by the description of
competition between universities on financial grounds being a 'direction of travel' that
moves 'away' from the 'just learning and knowing' vision of the academy.
Consequently, it does not account for the contemporary landscape of either HE or
society more broadly; although the idea of the university as an arena where capitalism
has no place might masquerade as consonant with a quasi-socialist ideology, it is
untethered from the material realities facing those of lower socioeconomic means. In
this respect it can be seen a utopian ideal drawn from past formations of academia that
were predicated on elite exclusivity (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Tight, 2010), a time when
the university population could afford to disregard matters such as post-study earnings
or free equipment. Although there is a suggestion that universities competing with
these types of incentives debase themselves and cheapen the nature of academia or
'civic function of universities' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013: 339) in the process, why exactly
the connection between economics and education is so distasteful requires some
consideration (see Chapter 6).

5.2.2 The golden age of the university

The backward-looking ideals of the true academic were invoked by other participants, who held to beliefs that were characterised as 'old-fashioned' and demonstrated a sense that there is an increasing division between universities' and academics' respective perceptions of 'what university's for':

> industrialisation, commercialisation of institutions. […] It's put a lot of emphasis on benchmarks and meeting benchmarks and being very managerialist when it comes to doing your job and reaching targets. And when it comes to that, I'm very old-fashioned. That's not what university's for. (P25)

> It does feel like sometimes they're trying to run it like IBM or Hewlett Packard and it's like, for me that was never what universities were about. (P29)

> I'm still a bit old-fashioned and romantic. I think universities should be about learning and flourishing lives, and not worry about too much economic impacts, but [LAUGHING] that's old-fashioned. I mean I'm sure the university here wouldn't agree with it. Certainly [my previous institution] wouldn't have agreed with it. (P9)

'The university'—whoever or whatever that is—has an idea of itself that according to most participants is not 'what universities were about'. However, by their own admission those who hold these views are operating with outdated, 'romantic' ideals (Brown, 2020) and a rose-tinted, nostalgic lens that may not be an accurate representation of the past (Potter, 2021) let alone a viable vision for the future. Nonetheless it evokes an appealing 'image of like-minded individuals sharing knowledge and expertise in collegial collaboration for the betterment of society and the common good' (Brown, 2020: 2)—even if it is unrealistic and misrepresentative of the daily dynamics of university life (Harris, 2005).

McArthur (2011: 742) echoes participants' self-consciousness here, noting that 'the idea that people may engage in higher education to develop and realise their potential as human beings appears quaint and anachronistic' in a 'commercialised' setting where '[r]ather than higher education being a journey or transformative experience, it is simply a packaging and marketing process […] representing nothing other than its exchange value for higher salaries and status', but as I argue throughout this chapter, I see room for more than one type of value to co-exist. While it may be

true that 'constant pursuit of commodity fetishism, both through the identification of ourselves with our labour and with the goods that labour allows us to buy, can never fully satisfy what it means to be human' (ibid.: 743), labour and the material fruits of it may play a pivotal role in enabling us to 'realise our potential', and of course 'what it means to be human' is not universally agreed or singular. There are problems with prescribing "real" or "true" sources of meaning and self-realisation as there is the potential for value judgements to be made about what it is to be fulfilled or what an acceptable route to fulfilment is, especially if asceticism is valorised in the process. While I might not agree that a higher education *should* 'represent nothing other than its exchange value for higher salaries and status', I also think the idea that it is *just* for human development *is* 'quaint and anachronistic' in a context where at least *part* of the significance of attending university and gaining a qualification is its currency in the labour market. This being the case, my point is that the elevation of the "education for its own sake" ideology, regardless of whether one agrees with it, can sidestep the fact the horse has left the stable and become stuck in insisting that the horse should still be in the stable, with little consideration for whether or how it is possible to undo the chain of events our bolting stallion unleashed or what the consequences might be of doing so. Although commitment to this perspective can serve the function of signalling rejection of the political reality that gave rise to the 'commodity fetishist' model of HE, the damage done by holding this line too strongly may be more to ourselves, our colleagues, and our students—all of whom must exist in this reality—than to those with the power to reconceive it.

It is intriguing that being 'old-fashioned' in this context is worn with pride considering academic work is about learning and discovery—'romantic', perhaps, in the same way as a nostalgic fantasy of aristocratic Britain when we imagine ourselves a Lord or Lady, forgetting that our wealth would have been built on slavery and serfdom were we not, in fact, more likely to have been the serf ourselves. As Tight (2010: 113) argues:

> those of us […] who, in our later experience of academe, caught the echoes of something that sounded better and wished that we could have experienced it, are deluding ourselves. The golden age was not meant for the likes of us: it could not have occurred with us present. So, in that sense, for us, it really is a myth.

What was the cost, throughout society, for the few who got to have 'flourishing lives',

and who paid it? As Naidoo (2018: 613) observes, '[i]t is important to avoid adopting a nostalgic view of a golden age of HE that existed before new forms of competition entered the HE arena. HE has always contributed to enhancing equality as well as reproducing inequality'. It is also questionable how possible a 'flourishing life' is in a capitalist world without some concern for 'economic impacts'—and, as P22 points out, these things do not have to be antithetical; one can be 'encrusted in university' and 'love and look after' ideas even while 'exams and league tables and careers and money and shit' are attended to:

> I have discovered that the main place where ideas are loved and looked after and talked about, is universities. I think I'm pretty encrusted in university. And I know that sounds very naïve but I do think that about universities. Universities are a place where people talk about really, talk and think about really cool, life-changing kind of stuff about ideas and it's just really really important. I know it's tied up with exams and league tables and careers and money and shit, but it's also about that stuff.

'Careers and money' may be set up as the lesser half of this equation in comparison to what is 'really really important' but there is at least acknowledgement that it is not necessary for one "side" to cannibalise the other. As Fongwa (2019: 3) points out, the 'dichotomy of public and private good of higher education has largely outlived its relevance, as the boundaries between public and private benefits increasingly blur'. This is worth underlining: not only can the antithesis between individual good and collective good be questioned, but the separation between private and public that underlies it might also be probed: HE can yield both private and public goods *and* a single good linked to HE can have private and public impacts.

5.2.3 The core missions of the university

P20 and P26 both spoke of the purpose of universities in terms of their 'core missions' and, similar to participants above, struggled to present them other than as in opposition to the priorities that were seen to 'compromise' them:

> to me university has two main purposes. One is education and the other is, well, gaining knowledge in some way, shape or form. And I think both of those things are increasingly compromised as the core mission of universities in this country, if you look at what, how universities behave. (P20)

> [universities have] got to push to try and do these sorts of things, integrate

> companies and try to create spin-out companies and all that sort of stuff. They feel they need to do that, rather than perhaps what I view, the core missions of the university which is to educate people to do innovative and interesting research and supporting academics doing those things rather than sort of, you know, having 'sandbox ideas', you know, 'pushing the envelope' and all the kind of buzzwords that happen over in the business department. (P26)

While there appear to be more dimensions to the core mission of universities in contemporary times, it may not be accurate to say that they focus on, say, spin-out companies '*rather than*' 'educating people' or 'supporting academics' (note again the example of 'the business department' as emblematic of the 'wrong direction'). There is room for both, just as there is, in theory, room for academics to be committed and passionate about their jobs while still ensuring they have time to attend to other aspects of their life, be paid commensurately, and so on. This is not a zero sum game—but it is often represented in terms that create moral absolutes, such as Foster's (2017: 321) assertion that 'neoliberalism proposes that higher education should be viewed principally as a means to prepare students for productivity in the workforce *as opposed to* preparing citizens for active participation in democracy' (my italics). Similarly, Jovanovic (2017: 327) sees 'a growing insistence that higher education be regarded as private right designed for job creation *rather than* as a public good' and 'business-minded campus professionals' as using 'time *not to* advance learning but *instead* to determine how to best improve their rankings and prestige' (my italics). Likewise Brown (2015: 195) claims that 'professionalization aims at making young scholars *not into* teachers and thinkers, *but into* human capitals who learn to attract investors' (my italics). This sentence construction appears consistently across literature even that claims not to be making a case for universities and HE focusing only on one function, such as Ashwin's (2020: 1) assertion that 'we need to refocus our attention on the educational purposes of studying for an undergraduate degree *rather than* becoming fixated by the economic value of such a degree' (my italics) or McArthur's (2011: 743) view that '[u]nderneath the rhetoric of employability there is little to challenge the idea that students are being prepared to enter a workforce where their labour is understood primarily in terms of economic exchange value, *rather than* personal or social creative fulfilment' (my italics). Indeed, one amendment my examiners asked me to make to this thesis was to soften my own use of such binarising statements. Perhaps the above authors, like myself, did not mean to suggest

that only one perspective is possible and sought to momentarily erase one perception in order to foreground the possibility of a radically different view, but nonetheless it was illuminating to give greater attention to the way conventionalised, oppositional rhetorical arrangements can give an impression of a more forcefully monolithic position than intended—presenting a picture of an issue as if it has only two sides, as if those sides are mutually exclusive, and as if they are in perpetual battle for which will usurp the other.

The issue with this trap—into which I myself unconsciously fell—is that these sentiments, expressed in this manner, disguise the possibility of seemingly antithetical processes occurring simultaneously, or indeed in service of one another—there are ways in which 'improving rankings and prestige' allows for 'advancing learning', for example by increasing enrolment and thus resources to support teaching (likewise 'job creation' could also be interpreted through a 'public good' lens). Furthermore, even if the dominant discourse at work is in danger of shaping thought in the 'wrong direction'—for example, creating the idea that a higher education is to do nothing more than pump out docile workers—this does not guarantee that everyone will uncritically accept it (indeed, much scholarship on such matters actively refutes such ideologies) or that there is necessarily a direct relationship between the discourse and what actually happens. By which I mean, even if (for example), within an employability discourse, 'the danger is that students learn about the value of creativity or initiative […] *solely* in terms of exchange value *rather than* as an aspect of what makes us intrinsically human and, hopefully, good citizens' (McArthur, 2011: 743, my italics), they are still learning creativity and initiative—both, incidentally, skills that will help them see beyond their exchange value. Even if students are *taught* to value certain things in certain ways (and this is contestable given that, as this research would suggest, those doing the teaching do not generally seem to ascribe to such thinking) it cannot be ensured that this is what they will *learn*. While the argument of this thesis demonstrates that I clearly believe dominant and ideal ideologies have a powerful influence over how people constitute and understand themselves and how they negotiate their place in a given environment, and believe it is worthwhile interrogating the discourses we labour under, with, and against, it is important to recognise that individuals hold agency. The dangers of certain discursive furrows must be considered but can be overstated; the lived reality is almost always more complex and I would question whether it is likely or possible that anything can be taught, learnt, or

absorbed as 'solely' one thing or another. As Marginson (2011: 428) points out, even if learning and teaching can be "privatised" or individualised, knowledge is an 'irreducibly public component' and 'learning includes knowledge'.

The tendency of the public and private 'goods' (Marginson, 2011) of HE to be conceived of as mutually exclusive, in tandem with the elevation of academia as a sphere that should ideally be conducted with entirely public interest in mind or for its own sake, however, may indicate why academia can be hostile for many. This may, too, explain why academics are sometimes accused of not being part of the "real world", because there are certain patterns of thought that seem detached from quotidian concerns. There are respects in which the understanding that a true academic should believe primarily in the non-economic, de-individualised benefits of HE can be seen to encode elitist principles without overtly appearing to—in the context of the contemporary reality if not at root of the politico-ideological position itself—through only being achievable by those who have no need to worry about "basic" matters. Even though this was not true of many participants, several of whom had self-identified working-class origins, the prevalence of this viewpoint creates an aspirational vision of the university in which prospective academics can imagine that by the time they "make it" their more primitive concerns will have fallen away; the university will provide such that knowledge and self-actualisation become the only consideration. This undertone of moral purity might be understood as rooted in historical religious influences over HE, which Flavell (2022: 315) notes were imported to the Australian university system via British 'colonial ideologies […] primarily concerned with teaching as a mechanism to ensure morality and maintain class and racial stratification', demonstrating again the complex realities of "golden age" ideals when older iterations of HE are fully contextualised within their time period (Read, 2018). Attempts to identify examples of alternative models of HE governance and pedagogy (e.g. Hil et al, 2022) might find historical precedents that "prove" the possibility of the ideal, democratic, public-orientated purposes gestured to here, but must acknowledge also their sizeable shortcomings (the complete absence of women, for example). The tendency is to tack such caveats on as an addendum rather than to understand these aspects of such systems as potentially fundamental to their operation; I do not have the depth of knowledge necessary to adjudicate one way or another and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do so, but it does feel important to at least consider whether these unfortunate drawbacks of otherwise utopian institutions were in fact part of what

made them possible. There are reasons to be wary of anachronism.

5.3 The purpose of higher education

The ideal of the university as an institution and concept has its own mythos and represents something of which the education of students is only a part. In the previous section I considered what ideal beliefs about this mythos are for academics—what a true academic should believe a university is and is for—and I now move to discuss what ideal beliefs are around the concept of "higher education", the 'intrinsic value of academic work' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013: 339), and how these frame who the academic environment is set up for. While the unquestionable goodness of HE might seem a benign ideology rooted in an almost spiritual idealism, I posit that it enables and disguises an exclusionary discourse of contraction that proposes the reduction of HE provision as a solution to the neoliberal 'crisis' of value in which inherent good is subordinated to measurable benefit (Ashwin, 2020). While Marginson (2011: 429) points out that in academia '[t]he larger enemy of the public good and public sphere is not the economic market but the status hierarchy' and Potter (2021: 89) notes that in a US context at least 'neoliberalism may describe not what higher education has become, but what it has always been', the critique of economic market hierarchies is far louder than that of the status hierarchy, other than where the two intersect (for example in league tables and rankings), despite the clear "capitalist" logic underpinning both.[14]

5.3.1 Higher education as inherently valuable

Although HE is usually constructed as a positive institution, James (2017: 232) notes that the idea 'educational activity can only do good' is a 'myth', and this should be borne in mind throughout the discussion. Indeed, it is worth considering whether there is any such thing as 'intrinsic value' or "inherent good" when these are clearly

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[14] It is worth reiterating that national context is significant: many prominent anti-neoliberal higher education scholars—such as Giroux (e.g. 2002)—while talking of "neoliberal HE" are discussing a specifically US brand of neoliberal academia. The US system has always operated very differently to the UK, is for obvious reasons much newer, and consequently its relationship to capitalism and propensity to influence from corporate culture is distinct. I mention this because observations from US-centric commentators are not always qualified as such when used to support anti-neoliberal arguments in UK HE, and while the forces that are generally grouped under the neoliberal rubric may be similar across the Global North and West, their consequences both potential and actual are not conflatable.

moral judgements not only formed by human beings in relation to the human world but based on human cognitive activity: knowledge and education are concepts that cannot exist independently of people, which means there is nothing inherent about them. They are constructions, and as such so is the value attached to them—what is "good", who is it good *for*, and is all knowledge *really* good? I suggest that in reality, despite the idea that all knowledge is good knowledge, academics adjudicate between worthy and unworthy scholarship and that this gatekeeping is in fact a fundamental part of the academic role. There are, then, a range of value judgements involved in determining which knowledge is of 'intrinsic value' and which is "worthless"; as Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018: 144-45) point out:

> approaches to scholarship that centre whiteness have been unwilling and unable to see academic knowledge as a particular institutionalised (and therefore legitimised) branch of knowledge production. This works to silence and ignore knowledge produced outside of the confines set up by these institutions.

The belief in knowledge and education as inherently good smuggles in a variety of less noble perspectives that perpetuate exclusions, while insecurity about the role and significance given to HE in late capitalism can result in overstatements about the singular position of universities as sites of "civilisation" and democratisation through learning.

While there are various configurations of academic roles, participants reported that a "standard" academic contract encompassing both teaching and research is most strongly correlated with true academic identity. Although in theory the time allocation for these primary wings of academic activity is equal (and research generally more esteemed), teaching was perceived to loom larger as the more human, more insistent, more immediate responsibility—and the one with "customers". With HE funding dwindling, tuition fee and accommodation payments from students are primary income streams for HEIs and keeping students satisfied imperative. How to do this, as several participants noted, is difficult given that students, particularly before they have completed their studies, may not be equipped to assess the quality of their education, whether it represents good "value for money", or on what grounds they should be "satisfied". Learning can—some participants believed *should*—be challenging and uncomfortable (Burford et al, 2022), but this may not translate into positive appraisals.

It was difficult for participants who had internalised the notion that any and all

learning has inherent worth to relinquish this mindset (Read & Leathwood, 2018) and adapt to students holding greater power to determine its utility. This would appear to be ubiquitous: 'it is clear in the conversations I have with my colleagues that they continue to hold on to the idea that education and knowledge have an intrinsic value' (Work, 2022: 438). Likewise participants in this project were largely hostile to the 'vision of universities as marketplaces where educational products are consumed by students, and where the value of said educational products is determined by the extent to which graduates become productive workers within a capitalist economy' (Foster, 2017: 320). At the same time, especially for those with a keen awareness of social justice and class issues, it was hard to deny that "intrinsic value" might be a weak currency compared to the investment required to access it. For this reason most participants were in favour of abolishing tuition fees as part of a general untethering of finance from education—however, as I demonstrate more expansively in the next chapter, the idea that making HE free for students would remove the need for it to deliver certain outcomes is flawed.

That students might be preoccupied with considerations other than the unfettered joy of learning was troublesome for many participants, undermining what they considered the 'point' of HE:

> [students are] really anxious about doing well because this means pretty much everything. You don't get a second chance any more. If you mess this up that's a hideous amount of debt that you've put yourself in for not very much and so there's a lot of anxiety about doing well and getting through it and so many of them now seem to come in with this idea that they're just gonna get their head down and get it done so that they can go on to something else and it's sad, it kind of misses the point of going to university to me. (P1)

> They talk about their grade all the time. 'I need a 2:1.' 'Why, why do you think you need one?' 'Because that's success' and it's like, 'says who?' Like well 'my parents', you know, or 'my college said you need to get this because this is what you need to get a job'. And it's just like, God that is just the opposite of what you should be here for in many ways. (P27)

Similarly, P21 had a romantic, 'working-class idea' of what a university education offers rooted largely in literary fantasies of academia:

> I'm the first in the family to go to university. I don't know how widespread it is but I think there is an idea, a working-class idea of what you get when you

> go to university, which is all a bit Brideshead[15] but it's a sense that you can study something for its own sake, whatever it is.

For those with little personal or second-hand experience of HE, as P21 shows, fantasy may plug the gap, meaning not only that first-generation students can be disadvantaged by reduced familiarity with the environment but that they might hold particularly unrealistic ideas about 'what you get when you go to university'. These aspirations are thus especially prone to disillusionment, and consequently it was often working-class participants who were most firmly attached to ideals of HE as somewhere money should not matter. Indeed, those from under-represented backgrounds are more likely to have formed their perceptions of academia through fictional media representations such as those explored by Henderson and Reynolds (2022, n. p.) and may not subject these to a 'socio-historical lens' for accuracy or anachronisms. Therefore there was a common sentiment amongst participants that focus on anything other than the "university experience" is 'the opposite of what you should be here for' and 'misses the point of going to university', echoing McArthur's (2011: 743) assertion that '[e]ducation should be an experience, not an end'. This may be related to the idea that '[t]raditionally, entry to university has been a rite of passage for folks with privileged identities' (Jarldorn & Gatwiri, 2022: 531)—a thing one does in order to fulfil a life ritual rather than for a particular purpose. This may have left a residual impression that this is how *education* should operate rather than perhaps more accurately how *privilege* operates: for those in advantaged positions practically anything can be explained or justified this way as it need not be considered functionally. Perhaps the idea that so many students are 'missing the point' (P27) feeds the perception that there are 'too many universities' (P18) and 'this doesn't feel like higher education' (P21)—but, education can be an experience *and* an end, and, I would argue, cannot but be both, however political or pedagogical discourse frames it.

5.3.2 HE as exclusive: 'too many universities'

The belief that 'too many' (P18) young people are engaging in higher learning pervades both sides of the political spectrum despite this prevalent myth being questionable (see

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[15] *Brideshead Revisited* is a 1945 novel, set in the 1920s-40s, by Evelyn Waugh. It follows the story of an undergraduate at Oxford University who befriends a fellow student and their noble family. Told as a memoir, the novel is deeply nostalgic for the protagonist's youth, their experiences as a student, and the English class system of the period.

Ball, 2022). The problem with the perceived 'oversupply' is conceived of in different ways however, and again demonstrates the way views about HE can be intimately entwined with wider political beef (widening of access and raising of tuition fees attributed to both the left and right depending which policy era is the subject of focus):

> Tony Blair started the problem because he seemed to think that everybody should go to university, which is daft. And we've got too many universities, too many students going to universities where many of them are better off going somewhere else, either in a trade or running a business, getting a job. University doesn't suit them but we're pushing them into it. (P18)

> it's become almost default or de facto that you go to university because what else is there to do you know? And I think it means you've got a vast oversupply of students, or graduates, for the sort of economy that we have, that doesn't need – 'need' – so many graduates actually despite the rhetorics about it. We don't have, we don't have an employment demand for the supply of graduates that we're producing, which has all sorts of ill effects in terms of unemployment and under-employment and graduates saying 'well why did I do this and what's this for?' (P12)

Both participants 12 and 18 generally seemed to believe that HE is an inherent good, sharing P4's view that 'there is something intrinsic and genuinely valuable about passing on knowledge and or making new knowledge'. For P18, though, the idea that 'everybody should go to university' and have the opportunity to access this experience is 'daft' because university 'doesn't suit' everyone. This raises the question of who exactly is suited to HE, and why. P12, on the other hand, identifies a problem more practical than ideological, in that 'the rhetorics' about the value of a highly-educated population fall apart when faced with the reality that 'we don't have an employment demand for the supply of graduates that we're producing' (the evidence on this is conflicting). This leads to 'ill effects' such as 'unemployment and under-employment' and graduate disillusionment.

The first issue with limiting HE provision is deciding who gets access. How do we assess who university 'suits' without simply reproducing the inequalities that the expansion of HE was intended to level out? This is particularly troublesome if the impetus for reducing access is predicated on P4's idea that 'a lot of what corrupts that centrality of knowledge is the value of qualifications in order to do something else'. This suggests that by returning HE to an elite arena the purity of intellectual endeavour can be restored. If this is the case, then the only people admitted to university will be

those for whom money is no object, who do not need their education to provide them with anything other than scholarly fulfilment. Then we have to consider what to do with everyone who is left—the redundancies from closed universities, the young people who cannot go to university—and what the consequences are for either social mobility or the utopian ideal of a population appropriately schooled in democratic citizenship. This stage—the transition between how it is and how we might want it to be—is often skimmed over in manifestos for a better HE but the questions of whether we can get there, how, what the costs are, and who would front them, are important. If knowledge is 'corrupted' by being linked to qualifications—i.e. to having some sort of transactional utility or exchange value—then it is not an enormous stretch to wonder whether this means that the intrusion of those who need their investment in HE to provide a return beyond personal fulfilment has been that corrupting influence: is it the presence of the under-privileged in the academy that is understood to irrevocably pervert what HE is meant to be, do, and represent? (Burke, 2018; Gagnon, 2018).

As noble and romantic as the concept of the inherent value of education might seem, it also contains elitist, binary, and exclusionary logic in which knowledge must exist for its own sake only. In this view it is in its moral purity that its value exists, much as an academic's pure commitment to the vocation of academia irrespective of recompense is what makes them a true academic. This same expectation can then be shunted onto students, although in contradictory ways.

5.3.3 HE as exclusive: 'not everyone needs a degree'

The changing culture of HE is often linked to the increase of tuition fees payable by the student in 2012 (see Chapter 6). That this move was justified by the expansion of academia, even if it is understood by critics of the Conservative government of the time as an austerity measure to theoretically reduce government expenditure by rebranding it as a repayable loan (see Section 1.4.1), creates a connection between the increased proportion of non-traditional students, the rising neoliberalisation of HE, and the 'corruption' (P4) of academia's true purpose. This is further entrenched by the widespread opinion that part of the solution is reducing student numbers again.

P13, along with others, made the case to

> get rid of fees, reduce the number of students getting degrees or number of
> places, and create other forms of very valuable education that people can be

more tailored to. Rather than it feeling like, that's what you go on and do. Not everyone needs a degree.

There are good reasons to 'create other forms of very valuable education' and a degree should not be the only "respectable" option for further training. However, the prevalent belief that 'not everyone needs a degree' is complicated by the equally strong sentiment that attending university is an intrinsically positive experience and something that should rightly be done for its own sake, as discussed above. To say that not everyone 'needs' a degree undermines the idea that a degree is not something one should undertake out of need. Either a degree has a purpose, and only people who intend to use them for that purpose should have access to them, or a degree is inherently valuable, in which case they cannot ethically be limited only to some people. The language of "need" as it applies to HE undoes many of the primary objections to the marketisation of academia, further instrumentalising education and subordinating its inherent value to its credentialising function. At the same time, those who 'glorify uneducated and often vacuous celebrity' by publicly celebrating successes achieved without a degree are seen as the height of populist anti-intellectualism (Brown, 2015: 191). Perhaps it is permissible to be 'uneducated' as long as proper shame is demonstrated, as long as it hampers achievement, as long as it remains hidden and silent like the ignorant "should"? This is a thorny bundle to unpick, especially considering that many of those who are most invested in the intrinsic merit of higher learning also work in areas of scholarship that habitually question institutionalised knowledge, and are firmly committed to ideals of democracy and citizen engagement, whilst simultaneously upholding hierarchies of education that reassert crisis narratives about the decline of the university and consequent imminent fall of civilisation.

Ashwin (2020: 3), for example, is very clear that

> the educational purpose of a university education is not to prepare someone for their role in the future workforce. Rather, the educational purpose of a higher education is to bring students into a transformational relationship to knowledge that changes their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world.

However, is the 'educational purpose' the only purpose of a university education, can it be detached from whatever other purposes there might be, and can it not, does it not, both prepare people for work and change their sense of who they are (and more)? And if it does, how are we to decide who "needs" this transformational

experience and who can do without? Ashwin does acknowledge that contributions to the labour market do constitute contributions to society also, but maintains that this should be a 'by-product of the central educational purpose of a higher education rather than its driving force' (ibid.). My rejoinder to this would be: how much, in practice, does it matter which is the driver and which is the by-product, especially if the individual economic argument for pursuing a higher education is what induces a greater proportion of people to engage with it? The sense of "needing" a degree in order to be prepared for the workplace may be the excuse that allows participation for those who would otherwise see HE as an indulgence, an end in itself they can ill afford, an endeavour that is "not for them". While there are potential problems with "duping" students into a degree they do not "need" and burying them in debt, if we really think HE is a public good and a worthwhile pursuit in its own right should not we be celebrating greater engagement, even if pedagogically some concessions are made to "employability"? Ashwin (2020: 24) is concerned that there are problems with the assumptions that a university education confers transferrable skills or that holding a degree makes a graduate any more equipped for the workplace because in this view 'mass higher education doesn't actually change students in any way. It simply leads to a situation in which jobs that used to be done by non-graduates are now done by graduates without any increase in the quality or productivity of the work undertaken'. However, even if the employability justification does not bear out in the workplace, is illogical, or even opens the door to the idea that 'there is nothing special about the knowledge that students engage with in higher education and nothing important about the educational process' (ibid.), this does not mean that there *is* nothing special or important about HE or that those engaged in teaching and learning do not undergo change. One of the difficulties I have with work in this area is that it at once seems to overstate the importance of the university and betray insecurity about its potential to have an impact. In one sense, no-one "needs" a degree, and a degree certainly is not the only way to access knowledge, engage in learning, be changed by coming into contact with ideas, or develop into an engaged and democratic citizen (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). At the same time, it is difficult to imagine that anyone—even someone who had fully swallowed the rhetoric about pursuing a degree so as to signal their employability—could 'stay the course for three or four years' (ibid.) and not be changed simply by participating in an academic environment. While I of course recognise that Ashwin, along with other researchers in this area and the participants in

this project, are speaking of the risks of certain political messaging, much as I am signalling the risks of certain idealised belief systems, it bears repeating that underneath these discourses is a material reality: are the things we are afraid of happening actually happening? Are the impacts as negative as we imagined?

Ashwin (ibid.) points to 'class snobbery' as a feature of the tethering of degrees to employability, but there are problems of exclusion whatever "purpose" HE is assigned, as above with the notion that some people are not 'suited' or 'tailored to' a degree, that they will struggle with this type of study, or that they would not be able to get the "full benefit" of it. All these viewpoints contain at their heart the sense that a university education is "wasted" on some people, who do a degree for "impure" reasons. Conversely, the 'moral panic' (Ashwin, 2020: 17) that students might graduate and go to work in insalubrious confines—stacking shelves or working for McDonalds—raises questions of 'what's it all for?' (Addison, 2016: 77), seemingly undermining the idea that education is inherently "worth it". This is a curious tension—education is a powerful good but not equal to the cost, priceless but only if it is free. There are also questions provoked around how it would be possible to justify restricting access, particularly if it relies upon determining whether or not a person might be 'suited' at the age of just 18. What does it mean to be suited to academia? How is that judgement made and by whom? Ideas of what a university or education is for and on what grounds they should be valued point to a less directly articulated conception of *who* academia is for. Similarly, idealised visions of what the academic life entails may construct an image of the true academic that is not readily accessible to many.

5.4 The life of an academic

Having explored idealised images of the role, purpose, and function of the university and HE respectively, I close this chapter by discussing fantasy conceptions of academic life. Where in the previous chapter I analysed ideal academic identity and in Chapter 7 I discuss academic constitution, here I am concerned with "the academic" as a character within the broader fiction of the university as a 'great place of learning'. How do these three mythologies of HE (of the university, the education, the academic) bind together to produce a narrative that simultaneously may invoke outdated and exclusionary conceptions and covers its tracks with contemporary critique? Potter

(2021: 88) writes of US HE when stating that 'what faculty see as a "traditional" workplace, uncorrupted by money and centered primarily on the interests of students and faculty, may never have existed' and 'expectations for what college and university should be, for students and faculty, are a fantasy' (ibid.: 89), but nonetheless these are considerations worth holding in mind.

5.4.1 Academia as 'a nice place to be yourself'

Although, as I discuss in Chapter 7, there are 'outward expectations' of academics in terms of visual templates for how they should appear, P25 proposes that 'in practice' there is no 'standard profile':

> there is no such thing as like an academic standard profile. I mean I know there's the outward expectation where professors are old men with beards and tweed jackets and that sort of stuff but in practice I think academia's quite a nice place to be yourself in.

But is this in itself an illusion? Can academia be 'a nice place to be yourself in' when there is an echo of an expectation that 'professors are old men with beards'—unless one is, or is destined to become, such a figure? Whether academia is a 'nice place' to be oneself is contingent on what 'being yourself' means in the context; for those who find the environment unwilling to bend around them, not fitting may be more bruising. Some types of self are more accepted, and although there may not be 'an academic standard profile' in practice, there is a strong set of ideals—haunted by the spectre of the beardy old man—governing what constitutes a *desirable* academic (Lumsden, 2022; Morris et al, 2022; Stone, 2022). The fantasy that HE is accepting of diversity, perhaps rooted in the sense of unified intellectual purpose suggested in the previous sections, may not bear out for all.

Many participants reported that they personally did not find HE a 'nice place to be themselves in'. However, there may be a greater expectation that one can 'be themselves' in academia because of the significance of identity discussed in Chapter 4; the job requires more of the self, and the self defines itself by the job. In this sense, academia theoretically provides an opportunity to bring an "authentic" self to work— however, the fact that it *requires* this investment, and that not all selves are equally valued, means it is not necessarily a *nice* place for this. It may also be that a topical increase in diversity obscures the reality that even if the stereotype of the beardy

professor no longer bears out in terms of demographics, values and practices may not have moved on commensurately (Bailyn, 2003; Hook, 2022; Lumsden, 2022). Thus it might be acceptable to 'be yourself' as, say, a young woman of colour, so long as work is conducted on the terms set by old white men (Leonard, 2001). The terms of the tweedy professor, despite being outdated, are nonetheless seductive, and even those who recognised the limited availability of places in HE during the golden age of the don were held in some thrall by this sepia-tinted fantasy.

5.4.2 The 'cushy' life

Drawing on a similar stereotype to P25, above, P28 reflects on 'that kind of, pipe in the office door, "hello old chap", that kind of thing' vision of academic life, lamenting 'I think those days have gone, I think I'm a little bit sad about that but I think they're gone'. However, as P6 notes, if this conception of an academic ever existed, it was not available to everyone (Tight, 2010):

> you can look back at an imagined kind of golden age when everyone had a nice big office and lots of time and, you know, a permanent position and all this sort of thing. But when I imagine, I'm not in there, you know. I wouldn't have been-, I wouldn't have access to that. (P6)

Only some can imagine themselves in the golden age, but perhaps this makes it easier to accept the realities of the present. P29 agrees that 'there's this notion from maybe from when we were younger that an academic's life is quite a cushy life', but adds 'I just don't think it is any more'. However, the degree to which academia was ever as 'cushy' as second-hand memories make it appear, even if only for some, is debatable given the prevalence of the proven cognitive biases 'rosy retrospection' and 'declinism' that warp perceptions of the past through nostalgia, reflecting a general tendency for people to romanticise history and apply narratives of decline to the present and future (Mitchell & Thompson, 1994). Consequently, some were more critical in their characterisation of the 'old idea of the university space' (P27) in recognition of both the illusory nature of these ideas and the tangible problems within this older space. P28's confession of being 'a little bit sad' perhaps indicates a certain ambivalence for similar reasons—a slightly different flavour of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) in which the fantasy is already tainted with the knowledge that were we to live it we would have to embody that which we repudiate.

Thus P27 took a dim view of academics who 'cling' to their historical practices—in this case prompted by the refusal of some colleagues to take a register:

> we have staff have been here a long time and they are clinging to this old idea of the university space, you know, where they walk in kind of whenever they want, talk at the front with a bit of paper about ideas that they've had about whatever subject it is for an hour and then they put a film on and that's enough.

Although there might be appeal to emulating this pipe-smoking, lackadaisical figure who wanders into the lecture hall and rambles aimlessly until he gets bored then presses Play, it is, in a different way, as ruthlessly individualistic a caricature as the "neoliberal entrepreneur". Although there is a collective nostalgia for these halcyon days of ultimate academic autonomy, the student is absent from the encounter: it sounds 'cushy' indeed for the academic, but how does this approach fit with the 'great place of learning', and what about everyone else? Of course, even if an accurate characterisation, this was not necessarily the prevailing mode of academic conduct in the days of the ivory tower, but it is worth noting that the professionalisation of teaching in particular, although largely a response to students' consumer status, may actually be producing a better learning experience through not assuming that all knowledge delivered by academics has intrinsic value. While several participants resented the perceived lack of trust afforded to academics, and the increased bureaucracy in the wake of breaches being exposed, we can likely all point to at least one member of our department who even *with* such measures fails or refuses to engage. The idea that all academics are trustworthy or working to the same agenda and priorities (as discussed also in Chapter 7) is part of the fantasy too. Indeed, P27's example of the register is illustrative of an exercise that performs several functions; although attendance monitoring became essential for reasons unrelated to pedagogy (to monitor international students' visa compliance) it is nonetheless, as P27 pointed out, a useful tool for keeping track of students' progress and signalling potential welfare issues. Even things brought in for suspect reasons can have beneficial dimensions, especially if the experiences of other key stakeholders in academia—notably students and professional services staff—are taken into account (Addison, 2016). In this context it is interesting that research has found that those who feel "called" to their work become 'less receptive over time to advice from trusted mentors that threatened their sense of calling' (Duffy & Dik, 2013: 433), suggesting

possible reasons for resistance to progress or adaptation even when promoted by close allies, particularly if it appears to be "neoliberal" in nature and thus 'threatening' to true academic beliefs.

Having considered fantasies of teaching, what of the golden days of research? Cribb and Gewirtz (2013: 341) draw a connection between research quality audits and a focus on 'collective modes of academic working and production line approaches to publication', setting this up as a negative 'opposed to the model of the "lone scholar" digging deep in order to produce a major monograph'—but again is this not a form of individualism? The sense that the past was a collegiate wonderland that has been 'colonised' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Harris, 2005; Tight, 2018) by present "neoliberal" priorities is overly simplistic (and Cribb and Gewirtz do acknowledge that their 2013 article about the 'hollowed-out university' is a 'simplification'). Consequently assumptions are made about the "goodness" and value of previous modes of practice and the "badness" and 'utilitarian conception' (ibid.) of contemporary academia, such that a monograph produced through 'digging deep […] over very many years' (ibid.) is assumed to be a quality contribution to knowledge when it could equally be a self-indulgent "passion project" of little use, relevance, or interest to either the scholarly or wider society. The perceived 'attack' (Loveday, 2021) and 'assault' on (Gill, 2014), and state of 'crisis' in (Loveday, 2021), HE can lead to defensiveness where it becomes impossible to say that some knowledge might lack value (intrinsic or otherwise) in case this lends weight to detractor discourses around "Mickey Mouse" subjects or gives the "other side" ammunition. Likewise, to acknowledge that some academics do not pull their weight (Bothello & Roulet, 2019) and, whatever their age, operate as 'bed blockers' (George & Maguire, 2020), is verboten, unspeakable in 'official' settings even if gossip of this sort circulates regularly in less formal contexts (cf. Pereira, 2017, on public versus "private" discussions of the epistemic status of women's, feminist, and gender studies as a discipline). While participants (and some literature about neoliberal HE) did criticise other academics, complaints centred on distinctly neoliberal characters: the hyperproductive, "individualistic", "instrumental", and "uncollegiate" figure who makes colleagues look bad whilst shunting invisible labour onto them (rather than the shambolic pipe-smoker discussed above). This insecurity around acknowledging academic shortcomings both stems from and props up the fantasies discussed in this chapter, creating an "emperor's new clothes" situation that may, rather than preserving academic value, render it vulnerable through overstating its

worth.

The belief that all knowledge is intrinsically valuable and academics should be left alone to "be themselves" can act as a modesty blanket for the clear fact that a considerable amount of academic work is devoted to gatekeeping which knowledge is "worthy" and which is not (what is peer review if not a determination of value?). Indeed, peer review, as I discuss in Chapter 7, can be used as an opportunity for venting these sub rosa frustrations through a cloak of anonymity where there are no repercussions for "speaking aloud". Furthermore, while there is intermittent pearl-clutching about the "death" of certain subjects that become unpopular and phased out of university study, the world changes, new things become relevant as others are no longer so resonant with contemporary needs; this does not erase the existing canon of research and scholarship in these areas or render them "worthless", but it may mean they are not the best use of resources for this moment (I recognise that changing patterns in what is taught in compulsory education influence HE provision considerably; my point is that these are not the only influences—and there are complexities within them also). While belief that all knowledge has value is not tantamount to saying all knowledge has *equal* value, this tends to be the logical extension of the argument, but, like everything, currency varies by context and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise: I believe this thesis to offer worthwhile insights, but its discoveries are not going to save your life, and that is clearly a lesser order of magnitude than some others' work. The proclivity to inflate value is perhaps the flipside of the 'somewhat obscene quality' of overstating the 'injuries' of academia (Gill, 2009: 242)—both the virtues and the vices of academic work and culture should be brought to light (that other situations are worse does not negate all "inferior" hardships) but we must remain aware of their relation to the wider world. The shattering of the "inherent value" illusion, however, can be painful for those who are committed to the fantasy of academia as an arena governed by collegiality and intellectual freedom.

5.4.3 Shattered illusions

Outmoded visions of academia can 'be unhelpful' (P9) when they meet the idealistic tendencies of academics (see Chapter 7). The distance between the imagined life and the realities of the job can be difficult to reconcile and lead to 'dispiritment' (Read &

Leathwood, 2018):

> I see a lot of people become quite dispirited. I think we all think it's going to
> be this wonderful, thoughtful, reflective job and it's not. It's tough and hard
> and difficult and irregular and whatever else. So I think there's a fantasy of
> academia that can be unhelpful. (P9)

While P9 is confident that their fantasy of academia as 'wonderful, thoughtful, reflective' is a shared ideal, P4 is less clear about what exactly they imagined—there is an obvious sense of disappointment with the reality of English HE, but less overt awareness of what had been hoped for:

> I probably am [disillusioned] but I don't know exactly what form those
> illusions had really and how realistic they might have been. Perhaps what I
> wanted or what I thought would be the case exists, just not over here [in
> England].

Although P4 is the only participant to articulate this feeling in these terms, I could sense—more than hear in the words spoken—a thread of betrayal and let-down running through several interviews. Sometimes it manifested as dejection, at other times as frustration; there was a permeating feeling that academia had not lived up to its promises (Gill, 2018), even if the promises themselves were unclear. Something was missing, leading participants to question whether it was their expectations that were unrealistic or whether HE was failing to deliver—and, if the latter, whether that was because of a shortcoming in HE or in themselves. This is supported by Work's (2022: 438) observation that their colleagues' 'dogged attachment' to the 'idea that education and knowledge have an intrinsic value' meant they 'experience a simultaneous disaffection with and commitment to their work'. Berlant's (2011: 2) 'cruel optimism' reappears here, disillusionment perhaps a result of realising the full, if subtle, cruelties of belonging and unbelonging dynamics in HE, where 'the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming'. Ball (2015: 259) calls this 'ontological insecurity'—'a loss of sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do'—and while this may be painful to contemplate I might propose it is worth investigating: what *is* important in what we do? *Is* what we do important? The notion of "inherent value" allows for avoidance of such questions but it is a flimsy screen when value is a construct dependent on context—and a highly contested one at that.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter proposed that two of the strongest beliefs ideally associated with the true academic are that education is an inherent (and public) good and the role of universities is to facilitate the acquisition and transmission of knowledge for its own sake. Much like the sense that a true academic is defined by their academic identity, as detailed in Chapter 4, this ideal vision of HEIs relies on purity of mission: education being asked to provide benefits beyond its intrinsic value or universities attending to matters other than delivering teaching and enabling research are seen to sully the nature of academic endeavour. These ways of thinking, I have suggested, are legacies of historical ideals, supported by Harris' (2005: 423) contention that '[t]he key themes which underpinned the medieval university included institutional autonomy, and the value of study and critical discourse'. In tandem with a nostalgic fantasy of academic life, the contemporary realities of HE and the incompatibility of past iterations with a diverse academic population can foster experiences of unbelonging and 'dispiritment' (P9) as well as enabling problematic ideals to flourish under the guise of defending academic value(s).

While Gill (2018: 106) points to the 'particular' variety of 'alienation' related to 'feeling unable to carry out one's job as one believes it should be done', these beliefs about how the job 'should be done' are less often questioned, either in terms of their veracity or their appropriateness to modern reality. Although I am not the first to observe the binarised discourse around the ideal purpose of HE (e.g. Ashwin, 2020; Giroux, 2002; Marginson, 2011; McArthur, 2011), and although some literature in this area claims not to uphold the notion that the roles of academics and universities should be purely focused on non-economic concerns, the prevailing sentiment appears to be that economic considerations must be subordinated to pedagogical priorities. While the employability discourse that frames HE as a preparation for labour market participation is presented as the dominant one *outside* academia, I remain convinced that *inside* academia the more prevalent, and certainly more idealised, belief is in HE as a public good (De Gayardon, 2020; Giroux, 2002; Marginson, 2011), an end in itself (McArthur, 2011), and a transformational process (Ashwin, 2020). However, even the sense that one purpose must be subordinated to another maintains a hierarchical and competitive distinction between them that does seem to keep the ideal function of the contemporary university somewhat disarticulated from its context—but perhaps I am

simply less optimistic, more nihilistic, than others in this area. I think the capitalist ship has well and truly sailed, and our duty is to teach students to navigate the capitalist world as best they can; however much we may want to stuff the genie back in the bottle, resist the employability agenda, refuse to see our roles as educators as partly about training the next generation to be good at a system we abhor, do we not have a responsibility to equip them with the tools and credentials promised, even if we did not make the promises and do not agree they should have been made? Even if an individual student pursues their degree in a ruthlessly individualistic manner, to exploit the most private good from it possible, they still emerge more educated than they went in and cannot but be transformed in the process. Thus if we truly believe that knowledge is a public good and that a more educated populace is broadly societally beneficial (Giroux, 2002), there must be more than just private interests served; as Fongwa (2019: 9) points out, there is a 'need for more nuanced research to uncover the public benefit within the suggested private benefits' of HE. In this respect perhaps I am *more* optimistic than my peers in believing there to be something inalienable about the acquisition of knowledge and the process of learning, whatever guise it is delivered under, that, in conjunction with human cognition and curiosity, cannot be 'corrupted' (P4).

In this chapter I have attempted to unpick some of these considerations and highlight issues presented by regressive philosophies of academia and the academic's life. I now move to address some of these questions more directly by investigating how the beliefs explored in this chapter align with views about the introduction of tuition fees, their effect on student relations, and attitudes to institutional management.

Chapter 6: The True Academic on "the Neoliberal University"

6.1 Introduction

A central question raised by recent shifts in policy relates to the function of universities and HE (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017). The 2017 Higher Education and Research Bill, and especially the white paper that preceded it (BIS, 2016), made clear that in the government's view, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a tertiary-level qualification is to be seen largely in terms of the economic benefits it brings to the graduate and exchequer (Loveday, 2018b)—a framing that is often criticised by those working in or researching HE as "instrumental" and "neoliberal" (Allen et al, 2013). However, as outlined in Chapter 1, the role HE plays in social mobility and increasing employment potential, and the negative impacts of the poverty trap, mean there are good (if flawed) reasons to consider the economic utility of academia despite some of the criticisms gestured to in Chapter 5 (e.g. Ashwin, 2020; McArthur, 2011). While some perceive such discourses to have 'really' been a 'Trojan horse' for neoliberal values (Foster, 2017: 321), I would suggest that critique of neoliberalism could also be seen as a Trojan horse for elitist and exclusionary ideals of who the university environment is for (as well, of course, as other interpretations—in turning the neoliberal argument on its head I am not suggesting that these two perspectives are the only ones possible or that they necessarily be mutually exclusive, rather demonstrating that the same evidence can provide at least one radically alternative reading and therefore a spectrum of others in between).

In the previous chapter I expanded the beliefs of the true academic first explored in Chapter 4, focusing on ideologies about the function of the university and the purpose of HE and suggesting that the dominant discourses surrounding these topics, which the true academic should ideally subscribe to, may uphold outmoded aristocratic attitudes towards money and those for whom it is a concern. The true academic was shown to understand universities as sites of pure knowledge and hold "old-fashioned" views about the inherent value of HE, seeing the creation and transmission of ideas—whether in relation to teaching, learning, or research—as a

noble undertaking that should properly be undertaken for its own sake (Allen Collinson, 2004).

In this chapter I demonstrate how this ideology can extend to a variety of related positions, such as antipathy towards tuition fees, investment in the idea that financial considerations change relationship dynamics between students, academics, and HEIs in negative ways, and extreme suspicion of managers and "the university" on account of their perceived sympathies to neoliberalism. These ways of thinking, I contend, are in danger of producing unresolvable inner conflicts for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, entrenching false divisions within institutions, and continually reconstructing the HE environment as one that is hostile to anyone who wants or needs academia to have utility beyond itself. Becoming legible as an academic who conforms to such views, while increasing visibility as a true academic, also results in a downward spiral of negativity across the sector driven by the imperative to vocally criticise any development that moves away from traditional notions of what academia should be for, regardless of how unrealistic they may be. I conclude that in holding on to legacy ideals the true academic perpetuates a vision of HE that is, in the contemporary reality, often untethered from the concerns of many of its people and could be accused of being "out of touch" with both "the real world" and its own privileged status and conditions in comparison to other areas of modern British society. At the same time, this may reveal a certain insecurity about the profession, for, as Bothello and Roulet (2019: 854) observe, impostor and unbelonging feelings are not just related to doubt about one's abilities but fears that it will be revealed their occupation is a 'sham' or 'bullshit job'. There are concerns, perhaps, both about being personally unmasked as a sham academic, and about our subject specialism, discipline, or sector becoming, or being exposed as, a bullshit job in the context of the 2020s.

6.2 On the "student-consumer"

If, according to the beliefs of the true academic, the university should be just 'a place of great education' (P18) and the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge should be regarded only in terms of their intrinsic value, financial sustainability should not be a question—or should be a problem solved by a benevolent government at a solid arm's length. As I have suggested, the ideal of a university untainted by plebeian concerns such as accruing mountains of debt or finding stable employment carries a genetic

imprint of the historical "ivory tower", which, as Tight (2010: 113) confirms, 'could not have occurred' with 'the likes of us'. Although resistance to the marketisation of HE is often framed as staunchly left-wing and anti-neoliberal, the logical conclusion of arguments from this position tends to replicate an elitist conservatism. In the following sections I unpick this further, considering how the true academic's commitment to high-minded ideals of HE's purpose and value entails holding certain attitudes towards the introduction of tuition fees, its perceived consequences on students' self-conception, and the subjects of money and extrinsic reward more generally. I then move to consider beliefs about the true academic's ideal perspectives on institutions, using relationship to management—as a concept and concretely—as a proxy.

6.2.1 Tuition fees are 'destroying everything'

Although the notion that students now see themselves as consumers due to raised tuition fees was mentioned by several participants, not all agreed that they have actually internalised this perceived rebranding. Nonetheless, the circulation of this discourse has effects, and there are signs that dynamics between students and HEIs, students and academics, and academics and HEIs, are shifting even if this may be a consequence as much of academics seeing students as customers as students themselves:

> A lot of my colleagues do say this, that students, you know, now, feel they're customers and require more of us. I don't actually get that sense from most students. I do however feel an obligation as someone who is part of an organisation that's charging these people over £9000 a year. I feel perhaps more of an obligation than I did to deliver, because it's a huge amount of money. (P26)

Naidoo (2018: 613) suggests that '[t]here are major anxieties that the reconceptualisation of students as consumers has the potential to result in students gaining a sense of false entitlement, abdicating responsibility for their education and opting for instrumental learning' and fears that 'academics are likely to opt for safe, risk-free spoon-feeding teaching'. However, although there is a dominant perception that students' new position as customers is both novel and originating from students (via government policy changes and language), P26's sense of 'obligation' to 'deliver' something worthy of the 'huge amount of money' represents instead an academic-led

sense of student 'entitlement'. It must also be stressed that these 'major anxieties' are *perceptions*, fears, and not necessarily something that is actually happening (although the continued repetition of such perspectives increase the chances of a self-fulfilling prophecy). In this sense, academic rhetoric around the 'reconceptualisation of students' may be contributing to the assimilation of this role reconfiguration, in addition to perhaps a somewhat infantilising lack of trust in students' motivations and judgements. While pushback against the student-as-consumer discourse is used to make a political objection to the marketisation of HE as represented by increased tuition fees, the regurgitation of assumptions that simply because government policy positions students in such a manner they will uncritically absorb this new identity is at risk of turning students into pawns or weapons in a political argument that gives them little agency to constitute themselves. It could also be questioned what exactly 'safe, risk-free' teaching is or whether 'spoon-feeding' knowledge is really possible, what it means, and how it constructs ideal learning as difficult and perhaps even "dangerous"—is this characterisation accurate, or what we want learning to be? Even if students do come in with this expectation or desire, can it be used as an educational opportunity in itself, to discuss how teaching and learning can be more active processes, particularly at degree level, and to consider how "risky" pedagogy might be encouraged but in a way that will not create anxiety about "failure" given the (perceived) importance for students of achieving good grades (see Section 6.2.4)?

The unanimous sentiment amongst participants that fees are bad (Ingleby, 2015), while borne out on some levels, can also act as a fig leaf for a variety of other ideas, many of which are rooted in deeply embedded ideological antipathy towards the prominence of money as part of the conversation and consciousness in academia. The belief that the introduction of tuition fees was a wholesale negative move and that it is almost single-handedly responsible for detrimental effects on HE is heavily intertwined with the belief in knowledge and education as intrinsically valuable, both of which also represent a way of signalling a political stance against a landscape of long-term Conservative policymaking (though it should not be overlooked that tuition fees were first introduced by a Labour government and the socio-political background both within England and globally cannot be reduced to a single moment, action, or impetus). Strength of feeling on this matter was impassioned and "emotional" in the sense that there were not often clear articulations of why fees are so evil beyond an instinctive feeling that they are 'destroying everything' and sending things in the 'wrong direction'

(P14). While the tripling of tuition fees payable by domestic undergraduates in 2012 appears to have become emblematic of a general trend towards the businessification of universities it is worth remembering that the "increase" of tuition fees does not translate to more money for HEIs—in fact, because the maximum fee has been capped for several years, in real terms fee income decreases. This may be moot when it comes to the expectations of students, who are likely unaware that their increased contribution does not endow their institutions with more resources, but it is important in considering why universities are so fervent about their finances. Likewise, the charitable status of public institutions should be kept in mind when considering discourses of "profit", and notions of "consumerism" similarly viewed askance: it is not only a perception that 'students are positioned more like consumers now' (Addison, 2016: 76) but a legal fact—and one that offers important protections and safeguards under consumer law even if it also has some negative effects.

6.2.2 Barriers to access

For some, the high cost of tuition is problematic because it is a barrier to access:

> I don't think education should be paid for, because some people immediately see that as a barrier. 'I'm not going to go because I can't afford it.' Regardless of a student loan, they just see money, 'well I've not got that so I'm not going'. (P11)

> I worry about the economics of being a student, cos I was, you know, a single parent family, full grant, tuition fees paid for. I wouldn't have done medicine without that. […] I'm quite a cautious person. I don't think I would have taken on 50, 60, 70k of debt when I was 18, however the government tries to badge it as graduate tax or whatever. I just don't think I'd have done it. I'd have ended up working in a bank or something without a degree. So I think that's a real worry, access. (P9)

Harrison (2017) notes that tuition fees have not had the off-putting effect anticipated, even for students of lower socioeconomic status, but certainly there are differences in how decisions about whether to attend university, which university to attend, and what programme to study are likely to be taken depending on students' aims, position, and how weighty the prospect of considerable student debt feels (De Gayardon, 2020; James, 2017; Read et al, 2003; Work, 2022). To accrue so much debt, the payoff has to be "worth it", whether in terms of grade, future prospects, earning potential,

fulfilment, experience, or whatever measure of worth is being used. The pressure on everyone is increased to 'deliver' or achieve something worth the cost and make the "right" choice in a context where 'the risks, costs and implications of participation vary greatly' and attending HE 'will not mean the same thing to everyone' (James, 2017: 234). *However*, abolishing fees would not completely solve this problem, and De Gayardon (2020) points out that there are very few truly free education systems globally and access and participation are correlated much more strongly with national economic development than the cost of HE attendance. Money is not the only resource a degree requires and it is not only awareness of the financial implications of undertaking HE that leads students to think about the value and worth of their programme. In other words, the "consumer mindset" several participants pointed to as a particular poison brought in with tuition fees is seemingly not only a consequence of payment being required but of wider economic circumstances that mean today's young people have very specific considerations to weigh up when planning their futures: feelings about higher education for both students and academics (and other stakeholders) manifest against a wider economic, societal, and political backdrop. Even if it "costs nothing", taking the time out of employment and taking on the other financial responsibilities of being a student for three or four years is not something everyone can afford to do (or do to the full, as Nyström et al, 2019, point out in their research on Swedish HE, which is both nominally free and funded), especially if the programme of study does not lead to a practical qualification and clear career trajectory. Studying something for its own sake is an enormous privilege or a difficult life choice in the current economy, regardless of how much it costs—again, we may wish this not to be the case, but if it is we must be realistic about why our students are here and what they need from us to survive the world they inherited.

6.2.3 The student-institution relationship

For those students who are not put off by the cost, the rising price can be seen to 'change the relationship' (P2) between them and the institution by requiring the nature of each party's responsibilities to be made explicit. The student takes on the role of the consumer (Naidoo, 2018), and the HEI becomes the service provider; academics, for their part, become operatives, or service delivery personnel, tasked with making the "product" available to the "customer".

Several participants remarked negatively (Ingleby, 2015) upon this perceived shift:

> I think there are huge changes obviously with the introduction of higher fees that it changes the relationship between students and the institution. And also the, even if it doesn't change the relationship, it changes the perception of the relationship on both sides with the universities becoming more and more defensive and 'we have to think about this, we have to think about that' and adopting the consumerist language. (P2)

> the culture of the students is quite different and the culture increasingly so, obviously, maybe not obviously but I believe, when fees come in, the students as consumers really kicks off and the university's response to that is, in my experience, was a bit too much kind of pandering to those students as consumers, and spoon-feeding as we might call it in terms of making sure that every, you know, the path was really really smoothed. […] It was feeling more like you were, you know, you would kind of, I don't know how to express it, you were kind of serving the students in a different way […]. And the first time I got on an evaluation, was when I saw this notion coming in, was I was 'good value for money'. […] And it just made me cringe. (P13)

> students now have got a much more contractual relationship with us. If anything goes wrong, you know, they get angry and say, 'what am I spending my £9000 for?' And I don't blame them, you know, they've been forced into that situation but also […] many of them have full-time jobs so […] it becomes much more about, 'never mind the learning, just tell me what I have to do'. (P29)

Most participants were cognisant of the difficult position students find themselves in and did not criticise them for being (perceived as) more demanding, seeing this as a product of being 'forced into' their consumer role. However, it could be argued that it would be reasonable to complain if 'anything goes wrong' even without a £9000 per year price tag, and it is interesting to note again the dichotomisation of learning from attainment and the link between "instrumentalist" approaches such as 'never mind the learning, just tell me what I have to do' and socioeconomic needs. Students may undertake paid work because loan provision is not substantial enough to cover costs without other support, they do not wish to take a loan, they have dependents, in order to build work experience to ease post-study transitions, or etcetera, none of which are immediately related to tuition fees. While I acknowledge that tuition fees have become a shorthand for a variety of other "neoliberal" changes in HE and its funding, including the removal of maintenance grants, the emphasis on the changing role of the student can be seen to reflect changes in who studies at HE level as well as

changes to HE itself, although fears that UK HE is beginning to resemble US academia were raised by some participants—a matter on which Eagleton (2015) is particularly excoriating. This is especially notable in light of the antipathy towards 'serving the students in a different way' (P13) and P14's observation that 'in the United States people are under the impression that universities are primarily there to serve students, which is not what anyone in this country seems to think'. It is worth at least considering whether all critiques of shifting relational dynamics between students and institutions are as orientated to students' interests as they might appear, and how they might intersect with observations from those such as P14 who have experience of other academic environments against which the British attitude that students are 'the kind of distraction that one would be happier without' becomes visible.

Furthermore, as observed by P22, even if students are "instrumental" about their grades, they are a way of motivating students to learn, not the antithesis of learning, and the 'contractual relationship', while frowned upon for formalising and rendering transactional processes that a true academic believes should not be tampered with or quantified, offers protections when things 'go wrong'. There is clear discomfort, though, with the 'consumerist language', the 'pandering' of the university to 'smooth the path' for students, and the 'defensive' attitude of HEIs when it comes to keeping students happy. This can, as Arday (2018: 4) points out, be a consequence of institutions' 'careful negotiation of factors or subjects that may unsettle the student experience' that can, in eagerness to 'smooth the path', remove any topic (in Arday's example, race) or occurrence that might be challenging, to the detriment of pedagogy, development, or social justice. However, this is again an issue of implementation rather than principle. In *principle* student satisfaction probably should be a significant consideration, and the fact that in practice this can play out badly, prioritise the satisfaction of some students over others, or make assumptions about what they want, does not make it an inherently bad proposition—even if the prospect of students using 'consumer levers' to 'demand high-quality provision' is met with a wrinkled nose (Naidoo, 2018: 610). Furthermore, students taking on this consumer role, rather than necessarily representing a 'mirroring' of neoliberal values (Ingleby, 2015: 527), can also be seen as attempts at empowerment, questioning hierarchies and 'placing themselves in a more central position in the world of the academy' (Read et al, 2003: 273)—this self-righteous customer identity may be easier for some to inhabit than that of the confident, independent learner, thus it is worth considering precisely what we are

reacting to, and what else may be being communicated, when students invoke consumer discourse. Students leveraging their customer position to ensure they receive adequate provision is not necessarily or simply a demonstration of alignment with "neoliberal values" but use of the system to their advantage—something academics also do to survive the contemporary academy, and that begs the question of how seriously student satisfaction was taken before they could use their £9000 as a bargaining chip. It is a problem that "money talks" given endemically high levels of economic inequality, but in some senses in the HE context it gives all students a level of financial investment that may entitle them to complain. Student complaint can be framed as a bad thing—as 'false entitlement' (Naidoo, 2018: 613)—but who is to decide which entitlements are legitimate or 'false', and who may feel more empowered to raise grievances with £9000 behind them where previously they might have remained silent or absented themselves entirely? Can we connect greater questioning of institutional power to this same sense of entitlement, and does equality, diversity, and inclusion have to be taken more seriously when those who might previously have gone gentle into the good night are incentivised to rage against the dying of the light? Without claiming that greater consumerism or commodification of education is a good thing or the best impetus for greater attention to inequalities, I do want to gesture to the potential intricacies of the interplay between these developments.

Students holding consumer power is consistently framed as not how learner-institution and learner-teacher relationship dynamics are "meant" to be formulated (Read & Leathwood, 2020). However, while it may be a good thing that students are playing a more active role in ensuring they get 'value for money'—or simply value—this does not mean they are always the best judges of worth, use the right measures to assess it, or that universities respond in the most appropriate way to student dissatisfaction (or the potential threat of it). As P25 points out, getting a degree is a long game:

> students are a lot more aware of how much university education costs. They are a lot more vocal about what they perceive as quality education. But with the way society goes these days and the concepts of instant gratification and all the things that social media thrives on, that doesn't work for a university education. There is no such thing as instant gratification when you're on a three-year degree. You have to work your arse off to get there and then whatever's at the end is at the end.

At the same time, the fact that 'whatever's at the end is at the end' contributes to students' anxiety around the quality of their education; it is an even bigger risk if the reward cannot be known until after 'working your arse off' for three years and an investment of tens of thousands of pounds. This, too, can be seen to contain inflexible ideals of what a 'university education' is and its pollution by the expectations of students 'these days': even if it is true that cultures have shifted in the direction of 'instant gratification', and even if this is a result of 'social media', perhaps education should change to keep pace with these developments. Is it possible that young people are better positioned to perceive what 'quality education' is in the contemporary context where inherent value is not enough, to that their anxiety about whether they are receiving it reflects the high-stakes circumstances increasing numbers of students are in?

6.2.4 Attainment anxiety

Several participants noted that students' anxiety about doing well had appeared to increase with the level of financial commitment required. This was lamented as 'sad' by P1, rendering engagement with HE, as observed by P29, instrumental, joyless, 'never mind the learning'. Others registered similar sentiments:

> somewhat paradoxically there is a detachment and an increasing feeling of anxiety about higher education. Detachment in the sense that it's more and more about getting the diploma in the end rather than the learning. I think that the reasoning is, 'I'm not going to sink this much money and not get something out of it in the end'. Whereas with a smaller investment you can think, 'well I'll do it just because I want, just because I care, because it's rewarding' on a more immediate and less instrumental level. £27k is a lot for just a bit of fun. […] You see that for example in increased attendance to anything that's regularly assessed. Or decreased attendance to any voluntary activities. At the same time, you see a lot more anxiety. (P4)

> the grade doesn't matter, you know, and also it's about the experience and you think, 'you're not having any fun. You're not enjoying the experience of being at university away from home. You're not enjoying the experience of being on a course that's challenging you to think', like there's no joy at all. It's just pure, 'I need to complete this and I need to succeed'. (P27)

However, although the pleasures of learning and the instrumental benefits of a qualification tend to be set up as in opposition, they do not have to be—indeed,

cannot be given it is not possible to 'get something out of it' without putting something into it. Furthermore, this anxiety could also be interpreted as reduced confidence—something P4 acknowledged and framed as 'impostor syndrome'—reflecting Burke's (2018: 377) assertion that '[t]he student constructed as "non-traditional" often reproduces the narrative of lack of self-confidence and is thus repositioned as the weak, needy and passive student at the centre of derogatory discourses of widening participation'. As Burke (ibid.) observes, confidence is 'a signifier of the "proper" university student'—like the "independent learner" (Read et al, 2003)—'and yet is often framed as a neutral, decontextualised and disembodied trait', lack of which is a personal deficiency resulting in a need for 'spoon feeding' and stemming from 'lowering of standards' (Burke, 2018: 377).

It is a common perception that students caring about their grades or declining to attend unassessed activities means it is 'less about the learning' for them, but it could also be that they are—like academics themselves—judicious about where they put their time and attention. The idea that attainment is unimportant is clearly common, as Wong and Chiu (2021: 499) also found 'social science lecturers in England to conceive their ideal students as prepared, engaged, committed, critical, reflective and progressing, whilst highlighting the insignificance of student attainment'. However, while we may wish that 'the grade doesn't matter', the problem is not, perhaps, that students have been programmed to be unable to 'have fun' with their degree, but that the grade *does* matter. It all matters. £27k *is* a lot for 'just a bit of fun', but even three free years is a lot when the end result is graduating into the current economic climate with nothing more than the intrinsic reward of learning. It is not just HE that has changed—the world has changed, the entire context in which students study now is different, and, rather than (or in addition to) driving these changes, developments in HE policy could be seen to reflect broader societal shifts. We may do better by our students if we furnish them with what they need to survive this world and understand the different pressures it exerts on them and focus less on trying to hold back a tide that has already washed away the rosy-hued golden days of the ivory tower. While it is distressing to see students so anxious, urging them to find the joy we think they should feel or expecting them to live out fantasies of an unfettered intellectual life may give them something else to fail at. It is worth considering whether exhorting students to 'have fun' and 'enjoy the experience' is another version of the gratitude culture discussed in the previous chapter, a projection of the increased anxiety academics are

reportedly experiencing (Foster, 2017; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b), or perhaps even a wish for them to stop being 'needy' so we can get on with some work (Read et al, 2003).

The sense that 'the grade doesn't matter' may also hark back to a time when the bar for entering HE was higher and students were drawn primarily from the elite. This social group may need to work less hard to obtain good results due both to a privileged educational background and base level of comfort in the environment. Likewise the costs of doing less well are not so significant as other forms of capital can be drawn upon to garner post-study success. For whom is enjoying the "university experience" to the full and deprioritising attainment just fulfilling the stereotype of an undergraduate and for whom is it a mark of disrespect? Who needs to perform diligence to be seen as a "good student" and who is seen as falling short for 'not having any fun'? It is difficult to disentangle criticisms of student behaviour from underlying responses to students' identities, especially when "problematic" attitudes from learners are perceived as fee-related and can be used to prop up anti-neoliberal arguments.

6.2.5 Degradation of standards

The discussions above potentially lead to an implication, although crucially not a stated opinion, that the rise in students from diverse backgrounds is responsible for degradations in how HE is valued and conducted, which creeps in through a variety of sentiments (Burke, 2018; Gagnon, 2018). P4's sense, for example, that anxiety about attainment is connected to impostor syndrome in students who believe they are 'not the right kind of person' for HE, has a shadow of it. Consternation about the lowering of grade boundaries in order to attract more students for their fee payments—linked to the 'too many students' discourse discussed in the previous chapter—also heads in this direction:

> [competition for students] leads to universities like lowering their grade boundaries and just accepting anybody. It knocks on to staff morale because they feel like they can't just teach for, I guess enjoyment of the subject. They have to sort of build skills. (P18)

> I'm still not convinced that the fees going up was a good thing, because it's made competition between institutions a lot fiercer. I mean if you just look at […] competition around Clearing, institutions take students on that three years ago they wouldn't have touched with a bargepole and that will then

> filter down through the institutions in the lower categories and now institutions are much more likely to drop entry requirements just to maintain the number of students that they have or to increase the number of students that they have. Whether that's good for students, I don't know. Probably not. But yeah there's that and I think the associated industrialisation, commercialisation of institutions, that comes with that. (P25)

> Students pay these fees and so on but again right, I mean what do you make money with? Well you build student dorms and rent them out to the students. [...] [S]o we tell departments to take more students, not I mean for any educational purposes or whatever but just so that we can justify building the student dorms. They want theatres and hotels and restaurants and whatnot. All of these are kind of not the core mission of the university or not what it should be in my opinion. (P20)

The fact that tuition fees (in combination with the removal of the student number cap) have led to a potential lowering of entry conditions has several dimensions—on the one hand, it widens access to HE by offering those with lower grades the opportunity to study at more selective HEIs (or at all), and on the other, as P25 notes, this might not ultimately be good for students if they arrive at university ill-equipped to undertake degree-level study or unsupported in adapting to the environment (Mallon, 2022; Read et al, 2003). This leads, at least in P18's assessment, to academics being unable to teach for 'enjoyment of the subject' due to the need to 'build skills', suggesting that less able students render the job less pleasurable.

However, even if the target of critique is high-handed "neoliberal" institutional decisions, students taken in under these conditions should not be thrown under the bus in the way such complaints are phrased; issues with treating students as "cash cows" might be less problematically focused on the disservice this may do them than on the principle of institutions 'just accepting anybody'. In principle, it was consonant with the ideal beliefs of the true academic that "anybody" should have the opportunity to attend university if they wish to; in practicality, how exactly that is enabled in a way that is good for everyone involved is a complicated question (Mallon, 2022). It is also worth noting that ideals of what a university-level education "is" tend to originate from a time when most students had a very different style of compulsory schooling; the sense that students who take longer to adjust to the 'pace' of university are intellectually inferior (Read et al, 2003) is a reflection, perhaps, of a changing student population (as much as a changing style of secondary schooling, which several participants mentioned).

There is also a sense, particularly in the United States, that the intrusion of business interests into HE degrades academic provision. Jovanovic (2017: 328) points to the buyout of economically unstable colleges by banks and the consequent sway these corporate entities have over the curriculum, interpreted as 'the demise of education at the hands of the neoliberal agenda'. Without wishing to advocate for the uncritical teaching of Ayn Rand, as BB&T bank did as a condition of their investment (ibid.), I do want to raise some questions about the precise nature of the vehement disgust at this. Rand's philosophies have been influential and simply teaching them is not tantamount to promoting them—furthermore, if, as previously discussed, education is inherently good and knowledge intrinsically valuable, how can even courses that 'teach the fundamentals of capitalism' (ibid.) be "bad"? Is the issue what is being taught, how it is being taught, or who decided that it should be taught—i.e. that content is no longer "the exclusive and serious responsibility of the college faculty" (Beets, quoted in Jovanovic, 2017: 328), who are assumed to be left-wing?

I am not necessarily saying there are no problems with cash-for-curriculum arrangements, merely highlighting the conflation of several concerns into one, most notably a political distaste for right-wing populist thinkers (Trump, Rand), who are framed as having no place in a proper academic curriculum, and a similarly ideological antipathy towards corporate sponsorship in HE. Although in this particular example the two are linked, they are not intrinsically bound, however the dual rejection of them suggests that certain learnings are in fact not inherently good but inherently *bad*—the "innate" value of education depends, then, on what is being taught and whether the "right" side are policing it. Fasenfest (2021: 1059) makes a similar claim, that 'the absence of a robust intellectual agenda made it easier for departments to become service providers offering courses that filled the classroom rather than ones that stimulated students' but again this is worth questioning—is filling the classroom antithetical to intellectual stimulation? Is providing a service inherently "unintellectual"? Does a level of student interest that fills the room not suggest precisely that the topic is in fact stimulating? Who should hold the authority to dictate the curriculum? Are these false distinctions?

6.2.6 False dichotomies

Binary modes of thought around finance and HE are difficult to escape, both in the

literature and for participants. The idea that there is a 'wrong direction' (P14; P18; P29), towards a more marketised academy—and, by inference, a suggestion that the "right" direction would be away from this—and that we are heading in it, was voiced several times. P29 felt that tuition fees had

> just set up everything to be focused on the wrong things. It focuses the VCs in the wrong direction because they begin to think, you know, they're running Nestlé or something and it focuses the students in the wrong direction. And if your higher management and your student body are all just looking in their purses instead of looking at the world around them, then that's no good for higher education.

Here, managers and students 'looking in their purses' is something done 'instead of' taking a wider view and 'looking at the world around them'. However, it is possible to look at both, and purses both individual and collective are a part of the world around us, including the world of HE.

The motif of academia as separate from the wider world is also the basis of the idea that it should be governed by different rules and financial realities. P22 sums up the view of many participants in stating that 'my third wish is to somehow magically insulate the lovely world of ideas and care that is my fluffy dream university from the nasty savage dirty money-grabbing world of finance and management'. Again, the opposition of two realms that should never meet lest the 'nasty savage money-grabbing' sphere corrupt the 'lovely world of ideas and care' is invoked. Interestingly, though, P22 was also one of the most vocal defenders of the idea that a university education can fulfil more than one function and the only participant to highlight the classism buried in purist notions of HE:

> Everyone's allowed to earn money. It's part of how we live in neoliberal capitalism. And I've got no, I mean I might have problems with neoliberal capitalism but I've got no problem with someone who wants to play the game and get the bit of paper. Why should I have a problem with that? People can't live on literary theory and thin air. (P22)

> [T]here's all sorts of weird class stuff. So I have no problem with someone coming to university to get their paper to get a job and earn money and have nice holidays. That's absolutely fine. But there is a sense like, 'oh that's not what it's for, it's for the enrichment of the mind'. But like it can be for the mind and someone's life as well. (P22)

Although P22 does not relate 'playing the game' and 'getting the bit of paper' directly

to tuition fees, for others the link between charging for HE and manifesting a conception of academia directed towards making money is more overt:

> I would like to see student fees abolished and for it to be funded indirectly, because yeah that's part of rolling back that whole idea that the only point of a university is to make more as an individual. (P6)

However, as P22 points out, HE 'can be for the mind and someone's life as well' and it does not entail that introducing money into the educational relationship means the *only* point of university must become 'making more as an individual'. The 'enrichment of the mind' does not have to sit in opposition to 'earning money and having nice holidays', as touched upon in the previous chapter.

The explicit acknowledgement that earning money is 'part of how we live in neoliberal capitalism' is a realist take, although it is worth noting P22's confirmation that this is not to be taken as an endorsement of neoliberalism. However, the 'weird class stuff' complicates discussions for academics, too, despite the fact that 'it's true isn't it that academics are worried about their pensions and [...] we're worried about our pay, we're worried about our terms and conditions? So it's not just, you know, pure intellectual ether for us either' (P22). As Gill (2009: 233) observes, picking up on arguments from Chapter 4, there is a taboo against speaking of pay as it may call 'commitment or integrity' into question; 'the academic's refusal to grubby his or her hands with talk about money is related to the idea of scholarship as a "noble" calling or vocation'—and, as I have suggested, may be related to who traditionally occupied scholarly roles.

The true academic's views on tuition fees and student relations, then, are strongly tied to the ideals of HE and universities discussed in the previous chapter, working together to produce a regressive imaginary of how academic life should be. While students represent the "downstream" face of the neoliberal university, management—as both concept and in the flesh—embody the "upstream" and stand in for the nebulous entity of "the institution", acting as a screen upon which discontent with broader shifts in academia can be projected.

6.3 On managers and/as "the institution"

The belief that knowledge and education are inherently good, and that the job of universities is to dispense them free of charge, without regard for either practical

utility to the student or financial viability of the institution, is a cornerstone of the true academic's ideology. That actual universities—as distinct from "the university" as a concept—do not (and cannot) do this therefore sows seeds of discontent between academics and institutions and those who run them. One method of outwardly communicating alignment with this way of thinking, then, is to criticise the university as an institutional entity and anyone in a position of institutional power, especially if they are not of academic pedigree.

It was common for participants to see HEIs as suspect and pursuant of a hostile agenda, framing academia as an environment riven with conflict, complaint, and enmity between perceived factions of staff interpreted to hold opposing priorities and interests (Addison, 2016). Relations between individual academic staff and managers therefore act as a proxy for the relationship between staff and the diffuse concept of "the institution", constructing a binary relationship between "collegiality" and "managerialism" (Loveday, 2021).[16]

6.3.1 A manager is not an academic

It was acknowledged by several participants that occupying a management role, especially a mid-level one, was a difficult prospect with relative lack of power to effect change; however, those in such posts voiced frustration at the tendency of staff to complain about management without putting themselves forward:

> one thing I got really sick of early on, talking to fellow academics saying, 'all the managers are shit, if I was running this department this is how I'd do it'. So I'd say, 'well ok why don't you stand to run this department?' 'Oh no I wouldn't. Wouldn't do that.' And I kind of feel we get the management we deserve, so if nobody wants to step forward and do it, then it's going to be shit. (P8)

This reluctance may be because academics who move into management positions can be seen as "defectors":

> some people would tell you I'm not an academic now anyway because I've taken a management role. […] I was on our branch committee with UCU and I was doing casework, trade union work and as soon as I became a manager, it was really funny. I got handed a, metaphorically a pearl-handled

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[16] Even though many managers are manager-academics, as I shall demonstrate these two identities struggle to co-exist, particularly in other academics' perceptions.

> revolver and was made to resign on the same day, and now nobody speaks
> to me. (P8)

By taking a management role, P8 becomes 'not an academic' and is 'made to resign' from their union work, suggesting that there is an inbuilt conflict of interest between managers and other staff, the 'pearl-handled revolver' symbolically representing the death of academic identity in the eyes of colleagues.

To take on management responsibilities, then, can be seen as betraying the true academic calling and acting in cahoots with the institution and therefore on the "wrong side"—it may be 'looked down upon' (McKenzie, 2021: 535) even though many managers are still, contractually, academics as well. However, as P8 notes, this understanding means 'it's going to be shit' because these roles will continue to attract the same kinds of people—those who might, as I have been guilty of describing it, be seen as "careerist". P22 rightly pulls me up on this ungenerous characterisation:

> you used the phrase 'careerist' and I'm not so keen on that. I mean of course there are evil nasty careerist people everywhere in the world, ok who want to climb the greasy pole. But my observation is that most people who go the admin path […] do it because they're quite good at it. They do it because they quite enjoy organising things. They like to make things happen. They're kind of doers and also it's the case that that's where more money is.

Management being 'where more money is' may be key to unpicking why it is treated with distaste in the academic community at large, with the potential to even wreck friendships between academics (McKenzie, 2021). The fact that management roles come with higher salaries and a defined route to "the top" makes it easy for those who 'go the admin path' to be thought of as 'evil nasty careerist people' whose only goal is to 'climb the greasy pole'. However, as P22 points out, many academic managers go into this line of work 'because they're quite good at it', and presumably being good at it also increases their chances of being promoted. Their positions of power also make them more visible, whereas maybe few notice when a Lecturer makes Professor with surprising swiftness, even if they employ some less than collegial tactics to get there. That managers are stripped of their academic identity only further bifurcates distinctions between staff, rendering it increasingly unlikely that anyone with a firm attachment to a "true academic" identity would take on such a position.

6.3.2 Managers are failed academics

In addition to the perception that once academics become managers they relinquish their academic identity, participants reported a sense that transferring into these roles was something failed academics might do to cover up their lack of success. In this view, management positions are seen as easier to acquire, and, consonant with the previously discussed intellectual snobbery towards business schools, more about 'gloss and spin' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013) than anything of substantial value.

P26 noted that for academics whose career was not going so well, sidestepping, or in some opinions 'selling out' (McKenzie, 2021: 535), into management was an option:

> if [staff who struggle to win funding are] a bit more senior sometimes they'll end up being more of a sort of a managerial administrator type position I guess. Like a Pro-Vice-Chancellor something or other. Usually people try and disguise the fact that their research has died. (P26)

Where research is contingent on winning funding to conduct large-scale scientific projects, those who have an unlucky streak can have their research 'die', and one way of remaining employed (and respected) is to 'disguise' this by moving into 'a managerial administrator type position'. Despite the fact that, as P22 points out, many senior managers end up in these positions because they are good at them and enjoy them—whether or not they discover this by accident as a consequence of a floundering research career—a perception that academics who change track are largely those without the drive, mettle, or ability to stick an academic career persists. In being happy to step back from research, compromise their ability to openly criticise the institution, and separate themselves from their colleagues—or even, as with P8, seek a more balanced life—managers may be viewed as betraying the academic vocation and thus become suspect.

Literature that critiques neoliberal academia points to "managerialism" as a harbinger of 'decline' because those in charge of HEIs frequently no longer hold academic credentials as was once the case (e.g. Fasenfest, 2021). That universities are 'increasingly managed by professionals treating the institutions as businesses' (ibid.: 1057) in contrast to a time when 'most universities were primarily bottom-up organizations driven by intellectual agendas' (ibid.: 1058) is perhaps the root of this scepticism towards manager-academics, who become tainted by their association with

management and administration 'professionals'—though we might question whose agendas, exactly, were in the driving seat and whether they were any better just because they were 'intellectual' or 'collegiate' (Loveday 2021). The subject of criticism in many accounts of contemporary HE, like Fasenfest's (2021), appears to be the managers, as if they are the driving force behind the marketisation of the sector. However, the implementation of professional managers who understand corporate operations could be seen as a response to wider policy changes that require universities to align with principles more readily associated with business than public institutions—if this is the case, it is not automatically bad that people who know how to run organisations in this way are drafted in (whether they are individually good at this or not is a separate point). Indeed, were academics expected to govern universities through this new era there may be the same complaints we already hear— that such considerations are not academic, not intellectual, feeding the neoliberal beast. This is an intractable issue: we may not agree that HE should have to be run in this way, but for reasons beyond the control of any individual institution they *do* have to be run like this in order to satisfy nationwide policy and global relationships, and, this being the case, someone has to run the place. For this reason I cannot support Fasenfest's (2021: 1061) appeal that '[s]mall-mindedness and self-interest have to end in order to faculty to resist the onslaught of business managers' (although small-mindedness and self-interest are unappealing traits in themselves) and might suggest that attempts are made to foster collaboration and co-operation between academics and management (and also with other HE staff, whether managers, "previous" academics or not); as P27 says,

> I'd like to see a culture of respect for everybody who works in academia because I don't see how it's going to get better unless there's some kind of collective appreciation for what everybody's doing. And that includes on one level the people at the top who are trying to keep the places open, you know. Not that I would ever defend a lot of their decisions but a collective understanding of what it is to be at university now and what we can do and what we can't do in terms of effecting change I think is vital.

Although there is a prevalent perception that 'there has been a shift in the core values and purpose of HE in light of neoliberalism, where profits, student numbers, and a competitive advantage replace a sense of collegiality and moral responsibility' (Addison, 2016: 79) I would again suggest that these do not have to be competing or mutually

exclusive aims. The continued repetition of much discourse around the marketisation of HE and its managerial evils only serves to further entrench division between positions that are primarily at odds because it is insisted that they must be. Every time a perception is reported it is reconfirmed, recirculated, and in danger of becoming more true even if it initially reflected a falsehood.

6.3.3 Management are 'the other side'

Most participants held negative opinions of management as a concept and felt that acquiring managerial responsibilities themselves would decrease the time available to focus on the academic parts of the job. There was also an idea that taking on these positions would mean 'going to the other side' (P12) and that managerialism 'replaces' collegiality (Addison, 2016).[17]

For P12 in particular, the division between 'the troops' and the 'bosses' is stark and, with the invocation of war imagery, combative: 'one of the reasons I ran into trouble with bosses at [my former institution] was because I wouldn't go over to their side because I was, you know, wanted to be with the troops and argue for them'. Being in a job-hunting position following redundancy from this post, they were offered the opportunity to become an integral part of "their side", but declined:

> I had an interview to be like an Associate Dean for Research in quite a big role in quite a big faculty and I was told afterwards that if I'd have turned up even, if I'd have just turned up I would've been given it, but I thought 'actually do I really want to be going to the other side and making people do stuff that they don't wanna do and just enforcing this kind of metric pressure and the sorts of bollocks that make it all so shit?' and I thought 'no I don't actually' so I didn't go to the interview.

The problem, as P8 points out, is that *someone* has to be in the role of 'making people do stuff they don't wanna do' and if those who are critical of 'metric pressure' and those 'sorts of bollocks' decline to take up an "enemy" position they lose the potential to implement these things in a better way. The perception of this as 'the other side' rather than a different role in a team, while perhaps understandable given conditions in

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[17] Interestingly in their narrative of occupying both administrative and academic roles, Leary (2022: 517) notes that in moving from administration to faculty they were perceived as having 'crossed over to the dark side'—in this sense, suspicion of managers by non-managerial academics is just one dimension of a broader (perceived) academic/administration divide.

contemporary HE, nonetheless increases division. Those keeping their true academic identity pure by not becoming complicit in power retain the moral high ground from which to critique. However, no-one likes a backseat driver and if no-one for whom these posts represent an ethical conflict takes on the driving, the momentum and direction will likely continue to be determined by those for whom there is no such quandary. Management will remain 'the grubby end', as P28, who after a stint in senior management stepped back down into a lower level managerial academic role, characterised it:

> I just felt that I don't want that role. I don't want to be a Director or a Dean of a department. That's not what I'm that interested in. It's too distant from the subject, distant from the students and too close to a Vice-Chancellor's executive group which feels like the grubby end of academia to me. (P28)

Having experience of senior management confirmed for P28 that 'these were not my people', repeating the idea that managers are a different "type". This perception reinforces separations between academics and managers, adding to the sense that in adopting a managerial identity academic identity must be relinquished—that the two are mutually exclusive. But are they? While I can empathise with discomfort about becoming complicit in practices that present a moral dilemma, the idea that it is only managers who perform this function overlooks the complicity everyone has by virtue of being associated with an institution (and, in a way, by refusing to take on responsibility for running it), as discussed in Chapter 4. Although Loveday (2018b: 163) claims that 'those who find themselves in structurally advantageous positions may have not only failed to challenge the neoliberalisation of the sector, but may have aided and abetted these modes of governance', I suggest that we cannot help but 'aid and abet'— and benefit from in certain ways—these modes simply by participating in institutional dynamics. We may feel better about staying at the "clean end" but it might not leave us as unsullied as we imagine.

Attempts to remain "clean" inevitably involve a degree of self-marginalisation, if institutional power becomes synonymous with 'grubbiness'. This reinscribes impostor feelings but also may reinforce claims an outsider identity as more 'authentic' (Raghavan & Hurley, 2022: 596) in comparison to a "centre" that is perceived to be exclusionary, homogenous, uncritical, and blinkered. Raghavan and Hurley (2022: 596) observe that 'the academy's constitutive dynamics of othering' lead to a 'relentless commodification and fetishization of otherness' that can result in 'a certain kind of

affective investment in injury, besiegement, and defensiveness'—even when the need for such embattlement has fallen away. Besiegement mentality can lead academics to 'see themselves as embodying a righteousness, even a political purity, which the rest of the academy'—in this case, management—'threatens' (Piepmeier, 2011: 125). This claim to attack can also function as a shield with which people 'absolve themselves of negative behaviours and ideologies without actually addressing or changing' them (ibid.: 130)—in other words, positions of besiegement and unbelonging can be used to elide responsibility for both complicity and more active hostility, which might be understood as a reasonable "defence" against a perceived "attack". This can be especially problematic when the need to demonstrate which 'side' one is on becomes a public matter, such as during periods of industrial action where the besiegement narrative is invoked very strongly and tensions run high, entrenching divisions between 'righteousness' and 'political purity' on the one hand and 'threat' on the other. For those who cannot afford the luxury of purity, their recasting as a threat can produce profound distress.

6.3.4 Industrial action

For participants who held management positions, straddling worlds could prove difficult to negotiate, particularly when conflicts erupt across the sector such as the continuing run of industrial action by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) beginning in 2018 (see Bergfeld, 2018). This initial set of strikes took place during the first wave of participant interviews, and while some participants found them unifying, for others they were divisive in terms of the wider sector, their institutions, their colleagues, and their identity.

P5 felt deeply conflicted about which side of the picket line to ally with:

> I haven't been striking, well no I did, I did one day as a marker in the sand. But I don't know what would happen if I didn't pick up all the bits. I'm really worried and I'm kind of gutted. […] It makes me feel terrible to not be with my colleagues but at the same time if I did [strike], the state of the mess is bad.

One problem with labour withdrawal in HE, as P5 points out, is that although the function of industrial action is to be disruptive, allowing things to fall apart without 'picking up all the bits' can ultimately be an act of self-harm for individuals and

departments that has little impact on the wider institution or senior management while producing intensely difficult feelings for those in the middle. Given the intertwined interests of academics and their institutions it is unclear whether striking is an effective mode of resistance in the HE sector, especially as thus far they have been non-continuous. This approach does not appear to hobble institutions sufficiently to send a clear message, with disruption primarily affecting students and those who do not, or cannot, strike—particularly professional services staff, whose interests are not necessarily served by the demands of the action, and whose labour keeps core institutional services running even in the absence of academics (Back, 2018). The target of the action is not easily identified and therefore neither is its impact; this perhaps suggests that academia is not so marketised as it may appear given that there is no obvious profiteer and no clear route to putting the damage on their purse. In HE the immediate fallout of strikes affects those in closest proximity to striking colleagues and barely touches leadership—constituent parts of the institution are liable to go up in flames long before Vice-Chancellors so much as take off their jacket. Hence P5's ambivalence:

> I think it's affecting me quite badly actually because I can't settle on a position that makes sense to me. And I think it's because I always want to please everybody in a sense, like there's a part of me that cannot let various sort of financial catastrophes happen. Maybe I should, maybe I should say no. But I just feel like long term down the line that has human consequences too and I don't think I can live with them and yet at the same time then I am not there with my colleagues and some of them are not happy about that […]. So it's partly I've internalised the conflict myself whereas […] quite a number of them are probably quite happy that I've not let everything go belly-up. So that is, yeah it's horrible. Also you end up feeling like the mother in every conceivable situation. (P5)

There are different decisions to be made depending on one's position. It could be argued that managers have an increased imperative to strike as the impact will be bigger, but, as P5 says, 'down the line that has human consequences too'. Part of the job of managers is to take a long view and make strategic decisions—even unpopular ones—using the knowledge this type of position affords to try and make the best choice for the most people (Loveday, 2021). Given that some will simply disagree and others may not have the information necessary to understand these decisions, the chances of being stuck in the middle are high—as represented, in this case, by the

tension between the colleagues who are 'not happy' that P5 is 'not there' and those who are 'probably quite happy that I've not let everything go belly-up'. P5 acknowledges that their response is in part personal to them—a tendency to 'want to please everybody' and having 'internalised the conflict'—but nonetheless they articulate a tension that clearly exists, whether or not an individual absorbs it. For them, the managerial role is gendered (Deem, 2003) and resembles parenting, 'feeling like the mother in every conceivable situation'. I interpret this to mean carrying a sense of responsibility for making thankless decisions, perhaps being resented; this echoes Mountz et al's (2015: 1242) similar domestic metaphor of institutional relations with their parallel between the 'unproductive scholar' and the 'unproductive housewife'. Institutions, and those tasked with responsibility for them, are more likely to be seen as interfering, overbearing parents than supportive ones.

6.3.5 Institutional interference

Viewing HEIs as suspicious entities run by shady cabals of managers with dubious motives meant that some participants had difficulty understanding themselves as part of their university. This is interesting in light of Hawley's (2019: 978) observation that impostor thinking and conspiracy theorising can be seen to stem from the same cognitive basis, as in both cases 'such thinking will be attractive where standard information sources seem to be mutually co-ordinated, or be motivated by goals other than conveying the truth'. Scepticism towards institutions, then, may contribute to the prevalence of unbelonging and self-doubt—success by the standard measures cannot be internalised if the measures and measurers are untrustworthy and misaligned with our values.

For P28 the trouble 'clipping together' academic and institutional identity was in part related to location—an academic who 'sits at home in his study writing' and an institutional representative who 'comes in and moves things around spreadsheets':

> There's one person who sits at home in his study writing or doing creative stuff, whatever that is, and then there's the person who comes in and moves things around spreadsheets here and I can't quite clip that together and I think a lot of colleagues have that same problem. (P28)

That the institution underwrites the "proper" academic activity conducted off-premises is obscured by the very fact of its untethering from a work environment,

leading to a split identity—one academic, one institutional. Given that many academics only go to campus to engage in meetings or teaching and perform other responsibilities in the field, at home, or in other off-campus locations, the sense that, as discussed earlier, this work is being "stolen" by the institution may be increased. As Cronin's (2016) university press officers point out, it is easy for academics to forget that the freedom to determine their own location is a unique aspect of academic jobs (especially at "entry level") and something the university facilitates. Reluctance to become entwined in institutional machinery therefore could be seen as a way of continuing to avoid acknowledging the level of interdependence between academics and HEIs and remain in a position where 'I still haven't squared that away, that as an academic you're linked to an institution' (P28).

Participants displayed considerable resentment towards their institutions, which were largely interpreted as perpetrators, not fellow victims, of neoliberal agendas. For P20 and P29 this was about the amount of oversight in certain areas despite, in the case of P29, feelings of institutional abandonment in others:

> Don't tell people from the top down what their research should be about. I mean, just don't micromanage stuff. Value people. (P20)

> create a good environment for people where they can do well, but leave them alone. I mean just get good people and let them do their thing. (P20)

> give us a tool and let us experiment with it and let us play with it and let us if we choose to have the academic freedom to use it but don't force us to be performing monkeys because that's not our role. (P29)

Central issues here are the fact directives come 'from the top down' and the feeling that the institution has no trust in its people, thus 'micromanages' them through technology and paperwork. This mistrust runs both ways. Pereira's (2017: 8) observation that academics can be uncomfortable with HE research because they are used to being the subjects, not the objects, of study, in combination with Work's (2022: 437) assertion that neoliberalism turns academics into 'commodities' that likewise transition from subject to object, suggests a certain hypocrisy. Academics in general are accustomed to objectifying the rest of the world through scholarship, but fiercely oppose receiving such a gaze. While I can understand the recalcitrance and resentment around the perceived intensification of audit, monitoring, and employer "meddling", and while resistance to scrutiny and surveillance is in part emblematic of a

wider political rejection of society's move in this direction, it is worth again noting that the academic role continues to retain a higher degree of freedom than many—perhaps most—other jobs. Although the particular frustrations in HE connect to the specific technologies through which accountability is enforced in this sector (e.g. the REF, TEF, NSS, and so on), and once more without advocating a race to the bottom mindset, if academia is exceptional in any sense it is perhaps more in remaining relatively untouched by the broader trajectory of contemporary working culture for longer than in being peculiarly subject to its vagaries.

Furthermore, there is a balance to be struck, for it could be argued that P20's preferred management approach of 'just get good people and let them do their thing', 'leave them alone', is the unsupported situation P29 found themselves in as a new staff member. For those who feel confident in what they are doing and comfortable in the environment, being 'left alone' may be the ideal situation, where for others it may be experienced as abandonment, isolation, being left to 'sink or swim' (P29; Herman et al, 2021). It is also worth noting a sense of entitlement that academics should be given free rein to 'do their thing': is it a reasonable expectation? Why should academics be granted the freedom to do as they please? Who decides who are 'good people' that can be trusted to 'do their thing' in the "right" areas in the "right" ways? Is some form of oversight and accountability appropriate given that academic salaries are funded by public money and so is the majority of research funding? Most domestic students' payments for tuition and accommodation are likewise, in the short-to-medium-term, paid for from public funds via student loans from the UK or other countries, or billed directly to the student themselves. Should someone other than the individual academic, then, have say in what gets taught and researched and how? There is an implication in some testimonies that academics' wants and needs should come first, manifest in distaste towards the student-as-customer narrative that reorientates focus towards student priorities. Although this critique, like that of institutions, is dressed as aversion to neoliberal and financial considerations, there is also scope to see it as a response to academics no longer holding the sovereign seat of power. Similar sentiments arise in response to the "impact agenda", in which research must demonstrate anticipated or retrospective positive outcomes. In all cases it is easy to understand why this scrutiny may be unwelcome, but less clear that it is inherently "bad"; even if these developments *are* "neoliberal", should not there be accountability?

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I demonstrated that the ideal ideologies held by the true academic explored in Chapter 5 can lead to antipathy towards tuition fees, investment in the idea that financial considerations change relationship dynamics between students, academics, and HEIs in negative ways, and extreme suspicion of managers and "the university" on account of their perceived sympathies to neoliberalism. This can produce unresolvable inner conflicts for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, entrench false divisions within institutions, and assemble the HE environment as one that is hostile to anyone who wants or needs academia to have utility beyond itself. Becoming legible as an academic who conforms to such views therefore involves casting students in ways that may not be accurate and maintaining distance from the institution, both of which may increase unbelonging and limit possibilities for improved conditions. These perspectives, while coherent with anti-neoliberal sentiment, carry with them equally exclusionary and problematic narratives that also uphold legacy ideals unsuitable for the contemporary age and its HE population. Although they appear benign, the idealisation of such beliefs is not without consequence.

Chapter 7: The Self-Conception of the True Academic

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I lay out key beliefs about the inner qualities that are seen to constitute the true academic—the traits, character, and mindset that participants identified as emblematic of someone who 'thinks like an academic' (P14) and the way these are made externally legible. As Stone (2022: 136) points out, '[t]o fit into the academy, one must possess or at least acquire the right type of cultural capital that is legitimised in that field'; in a sense, this chapter speaks of the legitimised cultural capital of the true academic, although I do not use these terms.

I begin with an exploration of the academic mindset and the perception of the true academic as an intellectual, then consider how these traits are conveyed before moving to discuss how the true academic explains their professional success, foregrounding luck, hard work, and perseverance. In the process I highlight the inextricability of privilege from these factors; what exactly luck, hard work, and perseverance are, how they manifest, and the degrees of agency and resource available to mobilise them are unpicked, demonstrating the inequalities lurking within apparently randomly-distributed qualities. Finally I tease out beliefs about the motivations and pleasures of the true academic, using these ideals to add texture to the true academic's constitution—they are an idealist, motivated by social justice, independent and with a strong understanding of themselves as someone with a need for autonomy. That academia confers a range of individual benefits, however, is disguised by the altruistic framing of true academic motivations, focus on hard work, and attentiveness to problems in HE, all of which can be justified by the understanding of academics as occupationally 'negative people' (P22)—this, too, is a character trait. These contradictory characteristics, like the false dichotomies exposed in Chapters 5 and 6 and uncomfortable complicities of Chapter 4, create potential for unbelonging, illegibility, and ambivalence.

7.2 The true academic mindset

As demonstrated, a true academic is strongly invested in their identity and demonstrates their calling in part through working practices and also through holding particular ideologies about the function and purpose of HE. These beliefs and practices, however, do not bring full definition to the wider constitution of the true academic, while at the same time being a product of certain inner characteristics. In this section I explore the true academic mindset: what does it mean to 'think like an academic' (P14)?

7.2.1 Intellectual ability: critical thinking

Although participants did not often stipulate cleverness as an ideal academic trait, perhaps because this was taken as a given, several commented on the difficulty of maintaining a sense of belonging in an industry that is comprised of the highly intelligent and qualified, where every room is crammed with 'smart' people:

> generally speaking I don't think I have [impostor syndrome] as bad as a lot of people I talk to. But I have the moments, I think we all do. Because it is the nature of being in a profession where it's that thing isn't it? If you're the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room. Because it's just the nature of what we do. (P8)

Because intelligence was rarely mentioned aside from as something required to participate in 'the nature of what we do', it is difficult to appraise whether participants understood it to be innate or something that can be cultivated, with the exception of P18 who believed that to be an academic '[y]ou do have to be clever. I think that's the number one thing, either you're good at it or you're not'. Although participants spoke of developing students through teaching, this seemed to be more related to stretching their minds than instilling intelligence, lending support to the idea that academia can be seen as a 'genius culture', the 'primary distinguishing feature' of which is 'its background beliefs, norms, and values express a commitment to the view that intelligence is fixed and innate rather than malleable and teachable' (Slank, 2019: 214). This is relevant because in Slank's (2019) view genius cultures promote impostor thinking by positioning effort (active) as antithetical to talent (innate); in an academic context this reinforces the idea that academics are born not made, producing an

incentive to hide effort (cf. Nyström et al, 2019). When it comes to self-comparison, then, others appear effortlessly smart because 'individuals alter their self-presentations in order to align with what they perceive to be the theory of intelligence dominant in their domain' whereas we have 'special access' to the efforts we expended ourselves (Slank, 2019: 215).

While being 'clever' is a central element—'the nature of what we do'—it was also highlighted that the ideal academic thinks in a particular way that goes beyond book-smarts: a true academic is an *intellectual*. In other words, true academics do not just know things, or become imbued with transmitted knowledge, they *think* about things. As P14 says,

> [being an academic has] probably worked its way into my identity, because I do feel like I have the right to question things, which is what makes me difficult and independent, and I, I don't want to turn that off. I don't want to be like 'oh I have no opinions at work about how things are run', you know, I feel like I, I like being able to at least say I have a right to my own voice about things in this sector because of what it is. (P14)

'The right to question things', then, is linked to being 'difficult and independent' and also having 'opinions at work about how things are run'—a true academic is a critic. Indeed, Leary (2022: 518) sees it as of 'pivotal significance in the role and responsibility of being an academic' to 'critique the status quo', suggesting academic work can never be done, contentment impossible: the status quo wanders about and we ceaselessly dismantle it.

As P18 points out, this tendency can easily fall out of balance: 'people look at you like you're mad if you say, you know, good things about academia'. The 'right to question things' as an idealised academic trait can also become a *requirement* to question things such that it becomes difficult to spiral upward, feeding an increasingly joyless environment. It also complicates academic identity, which on the one hand is defined by intellectual idealism and on the other by institutional cynicism, putting these two opposing mindsets into competition in a manner that re-entrenches the idea that institutions are the enemies of ideas. Consequently, how far academia enables an intellectual life was contested, though it is also worth noting that the 'right' to one's own voice is not simply a consequence of 'the sector' but of the academic position specifically; other types of HE staff do not have 'the same freedoms as academics' in this respect, more often being the ones opinions about how things are run are

directed at (Addison, 2016: 191).

7.2.2 Critical thinking: criticism

As noted, bundled up with notions of intellectualism is the importance of being a critical thinker—someone who questions things, mounts rigorous challenges to new ideas, and applies an analytical lens. Danvers (2018: 548) asserts that critical thought is comprised of 'a diverse set of knowledge practices involving in-depth questioning and academic debate that have come to represent the intellectual mission of higher education institutions'. This means the true academic does not just critique the wider world but engages in 'academic debate' with others' work.

Although participants could be pained when their research was critiqued, they acknowledged that poking holes is a key aspect of what academics do and a core part of how they think (Allen Collinson, 2004). P10 says, 'I have no issue with people being critical because that's the whole point of academic, you know, academic culture is to critique', whilst P9 agrees 'I expect things to be shot down and the job of us putting ourselves out there is to be attacked, in a nice way'. Whether it is possible to be attacked 'in a nice way', or how 'nice' might be interpreted and experienced differently by different people, is questionable, however (see Section 5.4.1). While ideal academic critique might be a 'nice attack', this is not everyone's experience and the fact that 'shooting things down' is 'the whole point of academic culture' can make the boundary between professional criticism and outright antagonism blurry (Gill, 2009). That thinking in this way is seen as central to being a true academic has significant consequences for the types of people who are most legible in this site of belonging, given that there are cultural-historical assumptions about who is most capable of wielding their intellect in this way (Read et al, 2005) and strong associations between masculine bodies and critical thinking (Danvers, 2018). It also means that those who do not engage in critique in the ritualised manner expected in academia can be perceived as less intelligent, less valid, less "academic" (Pereira, 2017).

In this sense hostility is built in to many aspects of academic practice and into conceptions of the true academic mindset, providing incentives to demonstrate uncompromising flintiness in response to others and their work in order to make visible, and thus legible, these idealised traits. As P17 observes, the fact that this is 'the nature of research' can provide cover for those who engage in criticism in bad ways or

for bad reasons, as a peacocking exercise more than a intellectual one:

> academia itself is, you are constantly surrounded by smart people who are asking questions about your work. Sometimes they ask questions about your work because they genuinely care and they are genuinely interested in whether or not this is actually working. And sometimes they ask because they like being the smartest voice in the room.

Therefore although there is an fantasy version of academia in which all parties behave in a mature and professional manner and take critique on the chin (Allen Collinson, 2004), as exemplified by P25's recollection 'I've had arguments with senior professors and go for a beer with them afterwards. That's what you do as an academic, you have academic arguments', this congeniality may not be the norm. Furthermore, as Hawley (2019: 979) notes, '[i]mpostor thinkers are prone to giving undue weight to negative feedback', meaning that given the high levels of unbelonging experienced in contemporary HE 'it may matter more than we realise how such feedback is presented, since it cannot easily be balanced by sheer quantity of accompanying positive feedback'. In other words, criticism cannot be countered with praise, especially for those who already have anxiety about whether they "fit", therefore insensitive feedback is likely to disproportionately impact under-included identities and newer scholars, potentially resulting in early exit from academia.

Indeed, participants reported circumstances where arguments strayed from the strictly academic or ECAs were treated callously as an indoctrination into academic life (Bothello & Roulet, 2019), and although peer review is not something I have space to discuss here it was cited multiple times as potentially career-stopping if conducted without respect at crucial early points in the academic trajectory (Gill, 2009; Loveday, 2018b; Read et al, 2005). Strongly negative feedback, especially if cruelly delivered, could confirm a sense of unbelonging and cause less experienced academics to re-evaluate their career choices. Furthermore, some academic specialisms and methods—notably but not exclusively in the social sciences—are intertwined with academics' personal experiences and identities, and there can be differences in the level of challenge academics are subjected to based on their biography (Pereira, 2017)—and its intersection with their area of scholarship. The danger, therefore, is that those who cannot respond in a sanguine manner to criticism because they are heavily invested in their topic (or working on "heavy" topics), particularly if the critique delegitimises the field or subject as a whole, are seen as too "emotional" or lacking in rigour or

objectivity, reinscribing a rational/emotional binary (Bacevic, 2021; Cixous & Clément, 1986/1975; Danvers, 2018; Nunn, 2016). There is also a potential for critical debate to be associated with "temerity" and "vigour", so not just for certain ways of thinking to be correlated with particular bodies but for these mental traits to be spoken of in terms of physical metaphors. This, as Gillberg (2020: 19-20) observes, can feed an ableist discourse where strength of mind is twinned with robustness of body, and vice versa:

> Physical strength has traditionally been described as a moral and indeed intellectual virtue. Feeble-mindedness, by contrast, inhabits ailing bodies. So it is not a leap of the imagination to assume the reverse: disabled bodies do not house sharp intellects.

There are ways, then, that the idealisation of 'academic' or 'rational' arguments as distinct from regular arguments (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) creates exclusions in who can participate in a manner befitting the true academic.[18] However, similar to vocationality (see Chapter 4), and echoing Gillberg above, the metaphorical weight of one's brain is not immediately visible, thus the true academic mindset must be made legible through behaviour and corporeality. This is especially challenging if there are other aspects of embodiment—such as being perceptibly disabled—that may undermine claims to legitimacy.

7.3 Embodying intellect

Interior qualities such as intellectualism and criticism, which as noted above are often seen as emblematic of the true academic, are not outwardly observable and thus must be made legible via exterior signals such as comportment. However, 'knowledge producers are inescapably embodied creatures and […] in sexist and racist societies this embodiment makes a difference to how others perceive their epistemic and professional capacity' (Pereira, 2017: 133; Pereira, 2019a: 339), so we are not full in control of how our legitimacy is read or of what denotes legitimacy in a particular context.

As Mountford-Brown (2022: 202) observes, 'the notion of intelligence and

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[18] This is a topic I have written on in the past but do not have space to expand here, most notably in my MA dissertation, which can be found along with links to my other outputs at: https://www.research.lancs.ac.uk/portal/en/people/jess-butler(845a806b-a7e6-4ce5-a3d0-a88caf4be748).html.

"intellectual" is not an objective state but is socially and culturally (re)constructed through everyday interactions and institutions'. These expectations about how an intellectual should appear further entrench inequalities through normalising white, middle-class maleness as the visual template for the academic mindset laid out above (Danvers, 2018; Grassi, 2022; Lumsden, 2022; Morris et al, 2022; Pereira, 2019a; Powell et al, 2009; Read & Leathwood, 2018). As P11 points out, "serious" academic women convey this by

> saying things like, you know, 'oh I haven't had a haircut in five years. I actually haven't had time for that'. […] Or, 'oh I just threw this on' when they're wearing tshirt and jeans, because you're not allowed to care about such frivolities as looking a certain way or wearing makeup or having your hair done, or that sense that, 'well I'm a *proper* academic because I put the learning before, you know, washing my hair in the morning'. I get the sense of that quite a bit. Because I always wear dresses, I don't wear anything else, there have been comments sort of like, 'oh another new dress, another dress. Where's the party?' (P11)

Reflecting wider cultural norms in which intellectualism is constructed in opposition to 'frivolous' and peculiarly "feminine" considerations such as appearance and party-going, the ideal woman academic demonstrates her commitment to knowledge and serious-mindedness by eschewing her corporeality, becoming disembodied (Powell et al, 2009). To attend to style—or even basic hygiene—is framed here as wasteful, profligate, and a poor use of time that should be properly spent on scholarship. This evokes earlier discussions around overwork and vocationalism, suggesting that a true academic spends any and all available resource on professional pursuits to the exclusion of 'corrupting' (P4) concerns, but means too that 'clothing […] can be also be used to challenge academic dress codes and conventions' (Grassi, 2022: 351).

One might be excused for failing to resemble a middle-class white man in body, however, if they cultivate a demeanour of 'elegance' (Danvers, 2018: 555) befitting this group, but there are penalties for those who do not:

> one of the other trials assistants was black, black British background like myself and she had a harder time of it. London born and bred […] and people called her kind of unruly or unwilling or she had an attitude problem. […] Whereas I think I ask questions in a different way, whereas she's a bit more upfront […] but then I'm very used to being patronised and just deflecting it. Being told that I, 'oh you speak very well' or blah blah blah. (P23)

Although there is nothing to expressly disallow certain identities from participating in academia, responses to those who do not conform to norms of behaviour and conduct associated with historically dominant academic subjectivities reinforce the sense of who has a right to—and is right for—academic space. Speaking 'well', not being too 'upfront', adopting a more stereotypically middle-class and less 'London born and bred' manner, all pay dividends in communicating genteel compliance in comparison to being parsed as 'unruly', 'unwilling', or 'noisy and disruptive' (Burke, 2018: 375). As Jarldorn and Gatwiri (2022: 534) observe, '[t]o become a "proper or ideal" academic, one must demonstrate intellect and eloquence in a way that is measured through western theories, methodologies and epistemologies'—and a particular kind of "deracialised", middle-class 'western'.

P16, partly as a consequence of their tattoos and coloured hair, furthermore due to a particularly "girly" name, also felt they were not taken seriously because '[t]here's like a trope of the academic and I don't know if I quite achieve that', echoing Mountford-Brown's (2022: 199) assertion that '[w]hat we look like, sound like and behave like are often combinatory signifiers that mark out "fit" and "belonging" as well as "intelligence"'. As P14 observes, assessments of who is a true academic are rooted in 'a feeling of who has gravitas' endowed through a combination of research area and other ways of projecting 'intellectual powerhouse' energy:

> I've watched people give advice to PhD students, like 'don't work on any of that gender stuff, that's not going to make you seem like a bigshot' [see Pereira 2017, 2019a, 2019b]. So I think that 'performance of a bigshot' thing is what people are responding to a lot of the time. Like 'do you seem like an intellectual heavyweight?' Nobody's reading each other's publications frankly [...] so it's more of a feeling of who has gravitas you know? Who's an intellectual powerhouse. All this stuff that's really gendered stuff but also like, also very much about class performance and obviously like racialised in a way that people are not able to recognise.

Certain academic identities such as the 'bigshot' are consonant with particular attributes that are also seen to confer this status; the idea of who has 'gravitas' or is an 'intellectual heavyweight' in HE is not separate from the kinds of bodies in which these properties are seen as "natural" in society more broadly (Nyström et al, 2019). As Slank (2019: 215) points out, this is a particular feature of 'genius environments' where it is conventional to 'give the appearance of having natural, raw, and outsized intellectual firepower'. In converse, behaviours such as being helpful can reflect a 'low-

status' position and lack of intellectualism, the wrong type of 'class performance': 'I was there helping her all the time but it made her think I was less, like that maybe I wasn't very smart because I was willing to help her, I was behaving like a low-status person' (P14). Bodies are coded 'in a way that people are not able to recognise' (P14) consciously, and 'being and doing caring' is equated with 'intellectual lack of rigour' (Rogers, 2016: 5); elsewhere P14 talks of 'people reading your class but not being sure that's what they're reading', highlighting again the significance of corporeal cues and behaviours in communicating *something*, albeit imperceptible to the conscious mind. Such are the subtle cruelties of prejudice.

7.4 True academic routes to success

Given the patterns of inequality observed so far, how participants account for their successes is significant in tracing who is most readily poised to achieve, and what forces or qualities the true academic can legitimately cite as influences on their trajectory without undermining this identity. Furthermore, 'it is crucial to explore what shapes perceptions of success (both self-perceptions and perceptions of others)' as '[o]nly by doing this are we able to make visible and challenge discourses that privilege some social categories over others' (Nyström et al, 2019: 14).

This project provided a wealth of data relating to success, only some of which I have space to explore here. As in other areas of academic life, although meanings of success are contested (Hoskins, 2010) there are means by which success is perceived as "meant" to happen and participants' accounts fell broadly into two strands, one locating successfulness as a product of the individual, and the other understanding it as conferred at least in part by external factors. For some, this was a difficult line to tread, with several participants struggling to admit personal involvement in their own success lest they appear uncomprehending of the wider social context that enabled their achievement—whilst also wishing to acknowledge that their successes were not simply handed to them. At the same time, success could be problematic, suggestive of complicity with "the system", for, as Piepmeier (2011: 133) observes, 'according to the besiegement narrative, success can be seen as evidence of selling out. There's an ideological purity demanded by the besiegement mentality'. Likewise, "self-promotion" and media engagement can be seen as cheapening, allied with "neoliberal" demands to craft an "entrepreneurial" identity and aligned with "pop culture", attracting

backhanded compliments from colleagues such as being branded an 'academic Beyoncé' (Bothello & Roulet, 2019: 858). This is supported by a participant in Hoskins' (2010: 137) research who branded success 'innately corrupting' and Fasenfest's (2021: 1059) assertion that 'promotion and tenure processes are used to validate compliance with departmental norms'—a fact that they present as incoming with 'neoliberal' reform but that I might suggest "'twas ever thus"; all environments reward those who comply with their norms and if anything has changed in academia it is perhaps the norms themselves not the reward system. Nonetheless, success, like many other areas of academic work, was something about which participants displayed ambivalence, attempting to balance subjective and objective denotations of success (Hoskins, 2010) and settle on a narrative that supported their desired identity.

7.4.1 Luck

Most participants attributed their success to a cocktail of factors—luck, privilege, hard work, perseverance, personal temperament, intellectual ability, and so on—but foregrounded different areas. The distinction between, or potential for conflation of, luck and privilege was particularly noteworthy for some, as was the relationship between luck and hard work. Naturally, participants were less sure how to quantify the effect of their relative advantage versus rewards yielded more directly from active efforts. In many cases "luck" was invoked as a fallback for explaining how participants had established their career standing in a highly competitive arena without having, in their view, anything to place them above their rivals. It was noted, for example, that a base level of intelligence, hard work, determination, and social advantage were needed by anyone hoping for an academic career, so none of these things could be uniquely claimed as reasons for succeeding where others failed. As Slank (2019: 211) highlights, 'there are usually considerable non-talent causal forces at work in the production of our various successes' and, rather than necessarily signalling impostor thinking as often assumed, admitting the impact of these 'fluky forces' can be understood as a rational comprehension of this fact: success cannot be *entirely* attributed to luck, but neither are we the exclusive architects of our destiny. Luck, then, might better be conceived of as "'chance".

Loveday (2018a), in their research with fixed-term academics, also found that participants narrativised luck to explain their successes, whilst personalising their

failures. They argue that this 'is indicative of the diminished agency of casualized academic staff' (ibid.: 5), however my data suggests it is not merely a quirk exhibited by the precarious. In this context, then, I interpret the invocation of luck as acknowledgement that luck may realistically be the thing that sets one apart on a given day, and as a nod to the diffuse role of privilege in contributing to lucky circumstances. Like Loveday's (2018a: 6) participants, luck was not 'consciously invoked as a way of denying advantage'—although, as I show, some elision between these concepts is perhaps inevitable—rather 'participants appeared to take recourse to these notions when describing situations over which they felt no control'.

Raghavan and Hurley (2022: 600) point out that imposterism is not only a 'marginal-response' sensation but a 'privilege-response' performance in the context of an academy that commodifies and fetishises "authentic" otherness, thus claims to marginality or exceptionalism can be a form of 'guilt-denial' that obscures privilege through foregrounding structural impediments. There is room, then, for discourses of luck—particularly when accompanied by 'confessional-superficial' (ibid.) explanations for how "miraculous" one's achievement has been—to be understood as a method of claiming an outsider identity that creates distance from both the institution (and its neoliberal ideals) and the various forms of relative advantage held.

The idea of luck took various forms in participants' accounts of the role good fortune played in success:

> I know some really really great clever people who meet all those criteria, who didn't get academic jobs cos they just weren't lucky. And that's terrible. (P22)

> you have to show that you are a really strong independent researcher, you can work independently and you are willing to take on other responsibilities, and you're going to be an asset to the university and they want your teaching and they want your research. And you're not going to be a psychopath and you're going to be open and friendly and all the other stuff. And even if you are all those things, on the day you might not be. (P11)

> I think luck and I'm just glad I didn't give up before. (P20)

> I'll say luck again cos that's a massive bit of it. Particularly because everybody's so well qualified now and everyone's so high achieving one way or another, that there has to be a bit of luck somewhere. (P19)

> Part of it is luck. I've happened to be in the right place at the right time more than once in my life and yeah, that has nothing to do with talent or work

ethic. […] I got my PhD because I finished my Master's and my Master's supervisor happened to have money for a PhD. And the person he was planning to offer the PhD to had decided to take a PhD in Australia. Now he offered it to me because I did a really good job at the Master's but the money was only there because someone else decided not to take it. (P17)

[I] [w]orked, but there are other people who have worked just the same. So I got some chances and I took them. That puts me ahead of other people who have not had quite, you know, didn't get the same chance or didn't get the same bit of luck. So to some degree luck. Not only that but I bear that in mind. (P21)

I don't think it's just luck but I also don't want to toot my own horn too much. (P11)

I group these quotes because they show a central notion of luck-as-chance but some add a further element, demonstrating that luck alone cannot be held responsible even if, like P11, there is some discomfort in claiming one's own role in becoming successful. As P22 points out, an aspiring academic can have the full package and still fall out of HE because 'they just aren't lucky' or cannot demonstrate it 'on the day' (P11). Of course, in some situations being "unlucky" may be a cover for a more insidious or sinister forces such as systemic discrimination or unconscious bias, but these are harder to see when the failure rate is so high across the board and the number of variables contributing to success are so varied. This may be why, as Jarldorn and Gatwiri (2022: 534) note, academics of colour are 'likely to attribute their successes to luck'—though, as I have discussed elsewhere, the atomisation of research populations can sometimes make it hard to see collective patterns. Although aggregate data shows unequal trends in academic attainment at both student and academic level (see Section 1.4), on a local level measures of success and aspects of personal and academic identity are so intertwined that it is easy to reach for plausible deniability (Maseti, 2018). As P14 says, 'discrimination is not the first place my mind goes to because it's not helpful really, functionally' and P6 shares a similar sentiment, noting that even if structural inequalities—or personal circumstances—affect individual success, 'you can't do anything about it' so it is better to 'work with that you've got'.

For Loveday (2018a: 15) the backgrounding of personal merit means mobilising luck can be a 'means of puncturing neoliberal discourses' and 'unmoors the neoliberal logic of "enterprise": hard work does not always pay off, merit is not evenly rewarded'. I suggest that this may have been participants' intention here—in a sense,

"virtue-signalling". At the same time, the above accounts demonstrate that reward is never *just* about luck, or even luck *and* advantage, but luck *with*. There is an inextricability of good fortune from contextual factors, whether personal attributes—perseverance, in P20's case, hard work in P21's—or the ability to capitalise on lucky breaks. In P17 and P21's testimonies luck is synonymous with 'getting some chances' but this obscures the circumstances necessary to jump on those chances—and we should always bear in mind why some people are offered opportunities others cannot seem to access. As Pereira (2017: 140) summarises, '[l]uck and chance do play a decisive role, but in the context of, and articulation with, more ossified unequal distributions of authority between individuals'—as well as in relation to a certain amount of individual merit.

Although participants were conscientious about framing their social position as privilege rather than luck, the intermediary function of an elevated social position in enabling individuals to frame and achieve their goals can be hard to recognise. P18 acknowledges:

> I'm always very clear that I've had it easier than most people. Because it is undoubtedly a help that you're sort of a white straight man who was privately educated and gone to [Elite University]. You know, undoubtedly an easier route than if you were the opposite of all of those, probably. Cos you see that the difficulties, and the statistics are quite clear in terms of women and ethnic minorities and all the different problems that they face that I never faced because of who I am. (P18)

Advantages of these sort, and the role they play in increasing a person's cache of "luck", are especially worth keeping in mind when considering the relationship between luck and "fate" or "destiny" (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Cases of happenstance can support a narrative of calling by confirming 'this is what I'm meant to be doing' (P11) where, conversely, the unlucky (or those for whom luck cannot compensate for 'the different problems that they face') receive the opposite message. Indeed, the voices of the "unlucky" are absent from this project—not everyone can afford to wait for the hand of fate.

7.4.2 Hard work

The discourse of "hard work" is a little slippery. As an explanation for success it is in many ways the opposite of luck or privilege, or at least a complicating factor—not *just*

luck or pre-existing advantage, also the deployment of personal graft. While participants were generally happy to acknowledge their unearned privilege, they were clear that success was also earned through the virtuous practice of working hard. This echoes Nyström et al's (2019: 6) findings with HE students, where 'it was recognised that hard work was essential' to academic success and to some degree 'considered a moral obligation'. However, it is not always obvious what variety of 'hard work' is being invoked—applying oneself diligently to being productive within the hours assigned to work, or working an excessive number of hours, or expending effort on a difficult problem? Is it hard because it is gruelling or because it is cognitively burdensome? Again, I group participants' quotes around hard work to show both the similarities and nuances in how this language is deployed:

> I know that [lucky breaks] wouldn't necessarily happen without hard work but I really hate the people who say that, you know, 'I got where I am cos of hard work, and that means everyone else can too', cos they didn't. And so I always try and stay aware that there's been a lot of help as well. (P19)

> [I attribute my success to] [h]ard work, really really loving my job. (P22)

> I do feel like it comes from me. I don't feel it's luck. I do feel I worked really hard to try to work out what would constitute, you know, success and how to do that, and worked really hard at trying to make what I was doing right, and to keep going. (P6)

> I found my PhD very very strenuous, and I am the clench your jaw and pull through type, which is the only reason I finished it. (P4)

> I would say that it does have something to do with personal stuff like how hard you work, how much you work, in a way that isn't simple, so that I know, and again this is a current debate isn't it, about the hours that people put in and how one should feel about overworking, but I know I vastly overworked, just ridiculous sorts of hours, during the early and middle part of my career and I suspect if I hadn't done that I wouldn't have been as productive and therefore as successful as I've been now. (P12)

> Just hard work I think. And also a paper technique that I can write efficiently I think. It doesn't take me very long to write papers and I think that's to some extent more of a natural thing. Some people struggle writing, I just write quickly, really quickly. But then I work hard and I think mainly because I love doing it probably. Because it's a vocation. You know when I have to think, 'oh I've got to get this paper in or get this grant in'. I've never ever thought of it as work. So because I enjoy it, that probably drives me to do more than perhaps some other people would. (P18)

> It's probably bloody-mindedness [LAUGHS], determination. If I decide to do something I usually do do it. I do, I see it through even though it might be quite hard to get there. (P13)

Both P12 and P18 signal that for them hard work is at least in part about putting in more hours, although P12 distinguishes between 'how hard' and 'how much'. While P18 does own their privilege, as quoted earlier, they also attribute their success to 'just hard work', before adding that because they enjoy it they 'never ever thought of it as work'. This is tied to the fact they find the work easy, are able to write 'really quickly', and that they 'love doing it' because 'it's a vocation', which is contrasted with others whose reduced productivity is linked to lower 'drive' (rather than, say, other responsibilities). Elsewhere in the interview P12 acknowledges that their ability to 'vastly overwork ridiculous numbers of hours' in their early career was enabled by a supportive family structure (Grummell et al, 2009), foreshadowing P19's distaste for those who uncritically repeat the meritocratic ideals that claim hard work is all it takes and that anyone who works hard can succeed. As P19 points out, this overlooks the 'help' that individuals receive in both being able to dedicate themselves to work to this degree and in converting that hard work into success, which in turn conceals the impact of not having help on those who produce less.

It is interesting that although P18 cites their elite education at secondary and tertiary level as part of their privilege, they see their ability to write quickly as 'a natural thing' and what sets them apart from 'some other people' in terms of willingness and ability to work extra hours as being their enjoyment of the job. In other words, for P18, despite recognition of their multiple privileges, success is largely a personal matter and there is little consideration of how their love of what they do is related to the relative ease with which they are able to do it, or how that ease is itself a consequence of privilege. In fact, for P18 the main thing they thought would increase their success was higher pay (a version of the more common answer 'more time'; Gill, 2014):

> If you got paid more, it would undoubtedly help you, because you know, rent's quite high and you're always a little bit worried even on a Lecturer's salary, about paying your bills. Which does cause you stress. And you know, I do one or two things outside of academia to get a little bit of extra money. If I didn't have to do that then I'd have more time to do the academia I think.

As detailed in Chapter 4, visibly working hard—in the sense of working a lot—is

valorised for academics, while finding the work hard, or 'effort' (Slank, 2019), is not. This is perhaps the "grown-up" version of Nyström et al's (2018: 7) findings that within the student community more currency is achieved through seemingly effortless success, such as 'being regarded as a genius and being seen as cool and laidback'. While they note that there is a long history of these discourses being more readily associated with boys, men, and particular masculinities, appearing 'cool and laidback' seems to lose its polish in the sphere of academic work. P18 perhaps represents the acceptable face of the continuum here—working long hours, but finding it enjoyable and unstrenuous—as there was a clear suspicion amongst participants of anyone who appeared to succeed too easily and were not 'meritocratically legitimate' (Friedman et al, 2021: 727), creating further incentives to foreground toil and struggle. As Slank (2019: 215) points out, there is a difference between effort ('strenuous cognitive exertion put forth when one finds accomplishing a task difficult') and hard work ('devotion of most of one's time and attention to a task'), therefore 'effort-hiding is consistent with widespread hard-work signalling' and both are a feature of 'genius cultures' such as academia.

Given the perceived scarcity of academic jobs, demonstrating that success has been earned is one method of insuring against accusations of unsavoury practice or resentment from peers. However, discourses of hard work can have ableist undertones and often disguise contextual reasons why people might not be able to demonstrate "deservingness" through working in this way, suggesting that those who are perceived to work less hard are "undeserving", especially if they have not had barriers to overcome (Friedman et al, 2021). In combination with the theme of vocationality already discussed this also, in the academic sphere, undermines claims to true academic identity—perhaps, in this view, those who do not work to the maximum extent possible simply do not love it enough and, as suggested by P8's anonymous correspondent, should quit to make room for someone with adequate zeal who is willing to perform deservingness. Even viewing working in this way as 'overwork', as P12 does, may be seen to suggest a lack of passion—one can never, as the saying goes, have too much of a good thing. However, although hard work is often invoked as a way of disavowing the primacy of privilege in manifesting individual success (Friedman et al, 2021), it also acts as a fig leaf for the forms of privilege that allow people to work in this manner—whether that be background support from partners and family (Grummell et al, 2009), financial security, good health, physical

capability, lack of other responsibilities, aptitude, or etcetera—as well as obscuring the extent to which privilege alone is responsible. In this light, P18's 'just hard work' explanation can be read another way: hard work as the only ingredient requiring supply from the individual in order to mobilise their pre-existing advantages, where someone facing more barriers would need to do more than diligently pop out papers to achieve the same level of success.

7.5 Academic pleasures and motivations

Contrary to Simone de Beauvoir's iconic statement that one becomes a woman rather than being born one, the true academic is believed to be simply "made that way"— "becoming" an academic in the sense of getting an academic job is a second-order, externally visible, becoming. However, although many participants had internalised an idea of themselves as innately academic, they still rationalised why pursuing an academic career was a worthy aspiration and what about the academic role suited them, revealing further ideal beliefs around what an academic "is". Despite the culture of complaint discussed above, there are positives and, as P18 acknowledges, overall an academic job is still 'more cushy than a lot of jobs': 'I can think of hundreds of different professions where the stress levels, the responsibility, etcetera are far more than academia'. P22 summarises the benefits:

> one of the things that all the jobs I did taught me, was how great academia is, because, you know, you have control of your time even at quite a junior level. I know you have lots to do but you can control when you do it. You don't have to wear a suit. The line management is relatively soft touch compared to accountants or solicitors. And it's about talking and thinking about ideas and developing ideas and that's kind of like a terrible terrible drug which once you've got, you can't undo. (P22)

In this section I summarise beliefs about the central pleasures, rewards, and motivations associated with being a true academic—aside from fulfilling a calling, what is ideally understood to make academia an appealing job and a calling worth pursuing; what feeling does the 'terrible terrible drug' to which the true academic should be addicted deliver?

7.5.1 Autonomy

As I have noted, the sense of autonomy associated with the academic role is a significant draw (Bailyn, 2003; Harris, 2005 Hoskins, 2010; Leary, 2022), echoed by Foster's (2017: 325) observation that academics 'typically have the freedom to decide how to work, what to work on, when to work, and, increasingly, where to work'. Participants' specific pleasures ranged from valuing the freedom to pursue areas of interest and having control over their schedule to a more generalised distaste for being subordinate, but the sense of independence was both paramount and idealised as a proper academic trait (lending further insight into the academic/institution relationship dynamics discussed in the previous chapter).

When asked what made them become an academic P20 answered that it happened 'partly by accident but also partly because I enjoy it and because I have a dislike for authority and so I don't want to have a boss'. P19 likewise stated that they 'don't like authority', and this independent, subversive quality may shed light on other ideals of the true academic, particularly the critical mind (see Section 7.2) and tendency towards suspicion of oversight (see Chapter 6). Others were less forthright but equally appreciative of the opportunity to 'do what I want all day' and be an 'independent human':

> As long as I kind of, you know, do the teaching that I'm supposed to do and turn up for meetings and bring in some money and publish some stuff I can kind of do what I want all day and that's lovely, it's so great, I'm still basically an independent human that can follow stuff basically for curiosity's sake. (P1)

Having 'choice' was important to P21, along with the ability to keep a hand in the doing of research rather than overseeing it, giving HE the edge over positions in industry or indeed more senior roles within HE:

> It's the one place I get some sort of choice about what I work on and that I can still be directly involved. If I were in an equivalent position in industry, I would not get to do any of this. I'd be overseeing other people doing it. And actually if I rose higher in the university I probably wouldn't be doing any either.

P21 had chosen to remain at Senior Lecturer level rather than apply for promotion in order to retain this autonomy, and like other participants with the potential to work in industrial roles chose academia due to the mission and purpose of HE and the greater

freedom to pursue an intellectual more than economic agenda (see Chapter 5):

> If I was in a sort of equivalent position in industry, I would be being paid more money. So there's a financial incentive to be in the sort of, in the private sector. But I think in terms of an intellectual perspective, I like the freedom you have in academia to sort of pursue your own interests. (P26)

Although P26 acknowledges that even in HE the freedom to pursue one's own interests only applies 'within what's funded', this nonetheless was a more palatable constraint for many participants than only being able to conduct research that meets the interests of business. Indeed, there is a sense of moral virtue in repudiating the 'financial incentive' of industry and committing to the 'intellectual perspective' of academia, echoing points made in previous chapters. It is worth noting, however, that '[b]eing successful in an objective sense improves an individual's capacity to be autonomous' (Hoskins, 2010: 138) and therefore the degree of choice and freedom academics have in practice is affected by factors that may stunt or enable achieving the types of successes belonging to LZ1: academic incentives are not equally distributed, perhaps suggesting why some experience disillusionment.

One aspect of personal freedom that did not arise as much as I might have expected was time. P10 highlighted the value of this type of autonomy, describing the ability to set their own schedule as 'the reason why I want to stay in academia'. It is perhaps reflective of the fact many participants had not had significant experience outside HE that this was not raised more frequently, as it is a relatively unique feature of academic work (although notably not in all disciplines—laboratory-based subjects, for example, can have more rigid hours; Deem, 2003). This is a substantial advantage compared to other jobs:

> you feel like your time is your time and you can kind of work it and I love the flexibility. So if I wanted to go to the cinema this afternoon I could just go and do that and work later. There's no kind of set hours, whereas working in some of the organisations I worked with before, you know there was a clocking-in, clocking-out and you really did have someone breathing down your neck and I don't work or flourish well in that kind of environment. (P10)

Although framed negatively here, one advantage of 'clocking in, clocking out' is that it puts firm parameters around working time, again demonstrating the distinction between bounded "just a job" jobs and boundless academic work as discussed in Chapter 4. The "true academic" vocation (autonomous, self-managing) is once more

framed as tethered to a limitless timescape, but if all 'your time is your time' it also becomes indistinguishable from the institution's time.

There are differences, then, between those who might benefit from a Head of Department telling them to go home (P4) and those who prize their autonomy above all, raising again the question of whether self-management may be a price of freedom. It is also interesting that P10 was not the only participant to identify themselves as ill-suited for working environments with a 'clocking-out' culture, suggesting an assumption of entitlement to conditions that enable personal 'flourishing'. However, by rendering these traits distinctly "academic" there is perhaps an implication that there are people who *do* work well with 'someone breathing down their neck' or in environments with little scope for fulfilment. This parallels the idea discussed in Chapter 5 that 'not everyone needs a degree' (P13), shoring up distinctions between "true" academics and pretenders: those who drop or are squeezed out might be seen to mark themselves as not true both by failing to forge an academic career and in not having the same level of "need" for one that would be demonstrated by continual scratching at the door. As there are clear inequalities in who can afford to keep trying, this perpetuates ideals of who can build an identity as a true academic. The idea of needing autonomy, then, can be linked to a (distinctly academic) craving for meaningful employment, and for participants meaning was often ideally believed to be derived from a sense of contributing to a greater good.

7.5.2 Changing the world

Desire to improve the world was a key factor in many participants' motivations for pursuing academia, but although the sense of contributing to change was a common appeal (James, 2017; McKenzie, 2021; Pereira, 2017; Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019), how this could or should be achieved was debated. P11, for example, was strongly motivated by the social and applied utility of academia and took a dim view of those who 'just want to write books' and emblemise the 'old-fashioned' ideals discussed in Chapter 5, against which they position themselves:

> some of my colleagues here, that they got into it because they just want to research and they just want to write books and they don't want to have to deal with people. Which is a little bit concerning. So actually they're very much research-focused academics, but I was going into it thinking it needs to

> be stuff that can be taught, that has application, that has public interest, that isn't just me and my computer, typing away.

Similarly, P19 saw academia as an arena in which activist tendencies could be complemented by intellectual pursuit:

> one of the reasons I went for academia was because I kind of want to change things somehow and I thought well this is one way I could do it. As an activist I'd burn out too much so this is a way I could also kind of do my whole pretence about being an intellectual and stuff. But also maybe try and have some kind of impact somewhere.

There were strongly-held attachments to 'the sense of making a contribution to something that's larger than yourself' (P4) for, as Harris (2016: 5) notes, 'the highs of carrying out research and then gaining affirmation is a very part of [academics'] being and incredibly pleasurable and gratifying'. For P20, this makes academics 'idealists': 'I think part of being idealistic is kind of related to being an academic. […] I mean this trying to seek some form of, pure form of truth I think is a fairly kind of academic feature and I think a quite idealistic one'. This tendency towards idealism shows up in various ways, from romantic notions of "making a difference" to the sense that 'you have to care' (P25). Variations on P17's statement 'I like the idea of a job where I get to work on interesting problems that actually matter to someone' were common as were the notion of civic duty, doing something important, and truth-seeking (Allen Collinson, 2004). However, this propensity to cling to doing things that 'actually matter' also has the potential to result in over-estimation of academic importance, which then has to be tempered with claims to altruistic principles so as not to evoke less esteemed iterations of the proper academic consonant with "neoliberal" values of individualism.

7.5.3 Altruism

The notion of academia as an altruistic profession was hinted at by several participants. The sense of 'making something that's bigger than you' (P5) and 'wide-eyed aspiration to contribute to the greater good' (Bothello & Roulet, 2019: 855) was shared by most whether it be via collaboration, teaching, or engaging with research stakeholders.

Although teaching was perceived as an undesirable and low-reward activity in HE culture (Morris et al, 2022), most participants were in practice gratified by playing a

part in abetting the learning process (Herman et al, 2021; Hoskins, 2010; James, 2017; Morris et al, 2022):

> that's what I love about [teaching] the most, the sense of satisfaction and I guess pride in the students when they, you know, excel. And just the sense that actually they've had a little bit of you, and what you're doing has helped them. I suppose it's the same for a doctor when they treat a patient. You help them get better. (P18)

> a lot of our students, they're the first to go to university from their family, so they really value the experience that they're getting and they're quite, not skittish but there's that kind of sense of, 'am I supposed to be here'. And then they get their mark back and they go, 'oh yeah I'm supposed to be here'. It's a great feeling. (P11)

> you really see [students] grow and thrive and you are setting them up for the world, you know, to make an impact in the world. I think that's immensely rewarding. (P28)

> the little nugget, the little core of new ideas and kind of really opening up people's creative potential and making something new that will benefit others and the people making it. You know that whole thing of that whole kind of stuff about human creativity and invention and so on which is really the core of it. That's fantastic. (P5)

> I love teaching and I think that where one might have a good teaching day, that's amazing when I have, when you kind of are in class and you see students suddenly understanding something or they come and say to you, 'oh I hadn't thought of that', etcetera. That is a real, it kind of gives you a real buzz and to me that's really worth it. (P2)

There is a sense of 'pride' and 'satisfaction', the 'buzz', is 'a great feeling', 'immensely rewarding', and in validating that students are 'supposed to be here' academics likewise legitimise themselves as someone qualified to make this judgement. This is also an area where self-congratulation becomes acceptable because it is packaged as altruistic, focused on the betterment of others and 'setting them up for the world', compared to less desirable tendencies towards bragging about research that were identified in more "neoliberal" academic identities. In a sense, then, the relative lack of cultural kudos attached to teaching (Morris et al, 2022) makes this an arena in which individuals are permitted to acknowledge their success without appearing self-promotional—in this context, serving students is seen in a positive light, as long as they are served pedagogically and not as "customers".

Gill (2018: 98) agrees that '[c]onversations with students, expressions of appreciation, moments when someone suddenly "gets it" or sees something in a new way—these are why higher education matters'. This is set up in opposition to the 'trinkets and baubles of academia' which are seen to be antithetical to 'what really counts (yet is not counted)' (ibid.), again inscribing a sense that it is precisely their uncounted nature that makes these things '*really* count' (my italics). This type of motivation is also desirable in students, as Foster (2017: 322) illustrates in their distinction between open day conversations that are 'torture' because the prospective student enquires about post-study job prospects versus the 'lively and inspired' talks with under-privileged potentials who want to study to 'give back': self-interest is clearly communicated as a "wrong" reason to pursue a programme. Likewise the language of 'giving back' was used by Hoskins' (2010) participants and while I do not doubt that these are indeed strong motivational forces, my point is that they are also presented as the most acceptable and consonant with the true academic identity narrative. Therefore those like P8 who admit to being primarily driven by the personal benefits of academia can become pariahs, unworthy and undeserving of their place in the HE community.

Interestingly, there is evidence that workers in professions that would not commonly be considered "vocational", such as hospital cleaning staff and hairdressers, 'craft their jobs in ways that allow them to experience their work as meaningful, often in a manner that contributed to others' well-being' (Dik & Duffy, 2009: 430), suggesting that there may be a more general drive to attribute (altruistic) meaning to labour. However, while the concept of calling and altruism may be present across employment types, academia may be in a smaller sub-set that makes adherence to these values a requirement of being legible or where this is the prevailing sentiment of most workers; hairdressers may derive meaning from their work or see it as a vocation but it is not, perhaps, a pre-requisite to being a "proper" hairdresser, and being seen as a proper hairdresser might not play such a pivotal role in professional success or personal identity.

Many participants noted that the long processes involved in much of academia sap enthusiasm because gratification, if it comes, is so delayed, leading to 'overload' (Bailyn, 2003; Leary, 2022). Teaching, then, while demanding immediate attention in a way that research often does not, can also provide this sense of instant reward. In the same vein, while the lack of professional esteem and institutional reward associated

with teaching was lamented by participants, it could also be argued, as above, that it is in its relative lack of status that it becomes possible to see teaching as altruistic, noble, and therefore permissible to reward *oneself* for. The shadow side of responsibilities that become externally valued is increased quality measurement and raised likelihood that those who focus on these areas will be perceived as chasing recognition or setting themselves up as "good neoliberal subjects". Dichotomously, academics who shun or background institutional validation and dedicate themselves more to less rewarded activities may be granted higher peer esteem, reinforcing the true academic belief in inherent value even as the lack of recognition attributed to certain tasks is complained about (Addison, 2016). This mirrors P26's delineation between the public and private sector as being partly about money; it is in undertaking the work in a "thankless" manner that the most virtue and purity of purpose can be claimed.

Slank (2019: 216-17) also views reorientation of self-worth towards 'epistemic virtues like humility' as a salve for impostor thinking related to meritocratic competitiveness in 'genius cultures', proposing that

> To the virtuous agent, the usual sorts of socially embedded institutional and professional achievements that provide access to greater positional goods and increased social standing don't hold a candle to what is genuinely valuable—for instance, epistemic goods such as truth and understanding.

I would therefore suggest that participants' appeals to luck, hard work, altruism, and ideals of the intrinsic worth of knowledge—'truth and understanding'—discussed earlier are attempts to position the true academic outside of neoliberal meritocratic norms of 'genius culture', drawing instead on virtue ethics to foreground what Slank (2019) calls the 'non-talent' aspects of success (and non-personal benefits of it). This is in part about signalling and aligning with beliefs about what is 'genuinely valuable' in contrast to the foxfire of 'socially embedded' successes that lead less virtuous colleagues astray. However, as P12 points out, this backgrounding of individual achievements and tendency towards martyrdom should be balanced with honesty about who ultimately stands to gain from the work we do:

> we have to be really honest about what we do and who it's for and who benefits and, you know, it's me. I benefit. I've known that for a long time, you know. Flipping 'eck the prime beneficiary of all this research that I do with poor people and blah blah blah is me! That's just a fact. We can't pretend otherwise, we shouldn't pretend otherwise cos it would be hypocritical. So I

know that, that doesn't mean that one doesn't try then to make your research useful and beneficial for other people too but I think you, one, needs to be a bit honest about it. […] I've got a nice life and I've got a job and I have a salary and a pension and much of my work has been really enjoyable and rewarding and much better than other people's work. (P12)

This said, while HE is still a much better place to be than a lot of professions, there are great injustices that cannot be overlooked (Bailyn, 2003). The degree of belonging and comfort permitted is not equal. The ability to achieve institutional success (or have that success properly recognised) and the likelihood of holding or being able to make good on the required beliefs (or of being assumed to hold them) is predicated in large part on other contextual factors rooted in aspects of personal identity unrelated to the academic sphere that affect legibility as the true academic. There are differences in how much pleasure can be derived from academic work and how generous or self-sacrificing academics can be, as well as how honest.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed beliefs about the true academic's mindset, narratives of success, and motivations. I have shown that true academics are ideally beyond simply "clever"—they do 'something with knowledge for a reason' (P11) rather than learning and regurgitating. This was framed as 'having that intellectual thing' (P22) and constituted being a philosophically-minded critical thinker; the true academic has 'disciplinary consciousness' (P22), 'questions whatever's around them' (P14), has a distinctly and indiscriminately academic "gaze" that cannot help but turn itself both outward and inward. In other words, true academics are hyper-conscious, 'over-evolved' (P15) people with a particular way of seeing the world and their place in it.

In contrast to other types of proper academic seen to be more valued in neoliberal HE, whose successes participants attributed to selfish, instrumental, uncollegiate behaviour or 'nepotism' (P8), this chapter demonstrated that the true academic sees their success as a product of primarily luck and hard work. As conscious individuals they acknowledge their various forms of privilege but nonetheless foreground the effects of chance and personal drive on their ability to sustain an academic career. This was also shown to be related to true academic reasons for pursuing this type of work, seeing it as the logical and in some cases inevitable culmination of academic identity understood to be emblemised in traits of idealism,

social awareness, and strong need for freedom and independence. Together these frame academia as an altruistic profession with proper motivation constructed as desire to improve the world and help others develop: those who pursue the job for self-serving reasons or act out of self-interest in forging their career are, like managers, suspect. These perspectives are supported by the observations of the previous chapters, where the difficult aspects of academia were shown to be foregrounded and consideration of individual concerns or benefits (especially financial ones) met with disapproval and possibly branded as "instrumentalist" and "neoliberal", out of keeping with the utopian, nostalgic vision of HE as a place of 'just learning and knowing' (P18). Consistent throughout has been the construction of the true academic's labour as believed to be morally virtuous, and binary formulations of ideal academic operations that emphasise purity, placing academic participants in positions where many of their interests conflict with the practices necessary to communicate an identity legible as aligned with the true academic.

Ideal beliefs about, and held by, the true academic have thus been demonstrated as rooted in at best outdated and at worst fantastical illusions of what HE offers and the value, purpose, and function of the university, leading to conflicted and contradictory positions for both academics and students, especially those who align less readily with the often elitist understandings of how academic identities should present (Taylor & Breeze, 2020). This perpetuates an environment rife with potential for experiences of unbelonging and illegibility but also where adapting to the "new normal" is discouraged in favour of "resistance". The difficulty of maintaining balance or instituting personal boundaries, then, can be seen not simply as an anxious response to neoliberal imperatives but also as consonant with older, exclusionary ideals of the true academic that position this figure as single-minded (Thornton, 2013), self-sacrificing, and ascetic—an intellectual monk, self-governing, devoted to the cause, free of worldly concerns, left to pursue their calling however the spirit moves them to.

Chapter 8: Conclusions, Recommendations, Reflections

8.1 Recap

I began this thesis by outlining its background context, indicating some of the central inequalities troubling contemporary British society and its HE system, and suggesting that the role of HE in improving socioeconomic conditions makes its internal inequalities especially important to address. I claimed that one explanation for pervasive injustices is disparities in experiences of belonging, which undermine attempts to widen academic participation, and therefore that gaining greater insight into the 'culture of power' (Delpit, 1988) of contemporary HE is a worthwhile project. While "neoliberal" influences are often framed as causative of competitiveness, anxiety, and overwork in academia, I posited that neoliberalism is an unhelpful concept with which to analyse these trends, with many of its supposed novelties being traceable to an older ideal of the university that can be romanticised as a "golden age". I proposed to explore these inconsistencies through examination of the dominant norms governing academic identity and practice, with particular attention to the ideal functions, purposes, and ideologies of academia and the academic role.

I then accounted for my research process, describing the choices and activities enacted in designing and conducting the project. Alongside this was commentary on the presentation of research methods, particularly in the social sciences, as a means of highlighting the relationships between discourse, practice, and perceived legitimacy (or "properness"). I closed the first half of the thesis by defining three major concepts at the heart of this research: the proper academic, unbelonging, and legibility zones (LZs). I argued that these work together to create an unattainable ideal in relation to which unbelonging is frequently experienced by academics in England, whether transiently, acutely, or chronically. The layering and linking of LZs, I proposed, leaves some especially vulnerable to exclusion by marking them as "impostors", suggesting that it is useful to consider how concrete features of the proper academic from LZ1 and LZ3 stand in for, shore up, and sometimes disguise, beliefs from LZ2 despite at times appearing contradictory.

The second half of the thesis was given to exploring a particular "strain" of the

proper academic, drawing on beliefs participants represented as marking individuals to be what they considered a "true academic". The true academic is constituted primarily through holding certain beliefs about academic identity, the purpose of academic practice, and academic ways of seeing and thinking. Because these are largely features of interior life, however, I suggested that academics must engage in particular practices and behaviours to make themselves legible as true academics, to experience belonging, and to achieve professional success. I demonstrated that there are dividends for becoming legible and penalties for not, both professionally and personally, due to the intertwined nature of academic identity, but that the ability and willingness to do so is not evenly distributed.

I introduced the belief in academia as a vocation or "calling" and the idea that for a true academic "being an academic" is about more than simply holding an academic role, forming an integral part of personal identity. I demonstrated the difference between being and *being*, discussed the centrality of the notion that academia is more than "just a job" (particularly in contrast to "the 9-5"), and explored academic becoming, unbecoming, and conflict. I then showed how commitment to academia is signalled through working practices that make true academic identity legible, most notably in conscious demonstrations of excessive work. I argued that although academics are generally critical of what are perceived to be neoliberal institutional imperatives to hyperproduce, there are several reasons overwork is normalised in academic culture, not all of which are external impetuses. Furthermore, I highlighted that those from groups with historically low representation in HE are more likely to have restrictions on their time and resources that mean they cannot perform true academic identity in the same way as others, creating further barriers to academic legibility: a vicious cycle (Bleijenbergh, 2013; Handforth, 2022; Hook, 2022; Lund, 2012).

I then moved to discuss idealised beliefs that education is an inherent good and that the role of universities is to facilitate the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Much like the sense that a true academic is defined by their academic identity, this ideal vision of HEIs was shown to rely on purity of mission: education being asked to provide benefits beyond its intrinsic value, or universities attending to matters other than delivering teaching and enabling research, are liable to be seen as "corrupting". I argued that this is especially true of fiscal concerns, which it is strongly suggested a true academic, ideal student, and proper university should have little

regard for. These ways of thinking, I have suggested, can be seen as legacies of exclusionary historical ideals. Therefore I proposed that for some the feeling that academia is not meeting their expectations can lead to thoughts that they themselves are 'not right' (P6) for HE.

I then suggested that perceived or actual divisions between different academic populations, most notably academics and students and academics and those with management responsibilities, can construct institutions as malevolent organisations with hostile neoliberal agendas that fail to recognise the true value of the educational mission and stand in opposition to what is "really important". However, although the ideal beliefs of the true academic also encompass left-wing and progressive tendencies that claim to be invested in egalitarian principles of widening participation, I questioned whether these attitudes perpetuate an exclusionary vision of the type of student who "deserves" a place in HE. This could mean that not only is there a disconnection between the ideal image of HE and the realities of many students' lives, but also that potential participants in academia may be put off by the feeling that they are not adequately single-minded, resilient, or focused on the "true value" of HE—difficulties that are also apt to affect academics. Those for whom academia needs to deliver more than whatever inherent worth it may provide were therefore highlighted as more likely to experience unbelonging and illegibility, compounding existing anxieties.

Finally, I discussed beliefs about the true academic's mindset, narratives of success, and motivations. I showed that academics are ideally beyond simply "clever" and also have 'that intellectual thing' (P22): a distinctly and indiscriminately academic "gaze". In contrast to other types of proper academic seen to be more valued in neoliberal HE, whose successes participants attributed to selfish, instrumental, uncollegiate behaviour or 'nepotism' (P8), I demonstrated that the true academic ideally sees their success as a product of primarily luck and hard work. As conscious individuals they acknowledge their various forms of privilege but nonetheless foreground the effects of chance and personal drive on their ability to sustain an academic career. This was also shown to be related to ideal reasons for pursuing this type of work, where it is seen as the logical and in some cases inevitable culmination of academic identity understood to be emblemised in traits of idealism, social awareness, and strong need for freedom and independence. Together these frame an ideal belief in academia as an altruistic profession, with proper motivation constructed as desire to improve the world and help others develop: those who pursue the job for self-serving

reasons or act out of self-interest in forging their career are, like managers, suspect.

Consistent throughout my argument has been attention to the belief in "true academic" labour as morally virtuous, and elucidation of binary formulations of ideal academic operations that emphasise purity, placing academic participants in positions where many of their interests conflict with the practices necessary to communicate true academic identity. Therefore ideals of the true academic have been demonstrated as rooted, to some degree at least, in at best outdated and at worst fantastical illusions of what HE offers and the ideal value, purpose, and function of the university, leading to conflicted and contradictory positions for both academics and students, especially those who align less readily with the often elitist understandings of how academic identities should present (Taylor & Breeze, 2020). This, I conclude, perpetuates an environment rife with potential for experiences of unbelonging and illegibility but also where adapting to the "new normal" is discouraged in favour of "resistance". The difficulty of maintaining balance or instituting personal boundaries, then, has been shown not only as an anxious response to neoliberal imperatives but as consonant with older ideals of the true academic that position this figure as single-minded (Thornton, 2013), self-sacrificing, and ascetic—an intellectual monk, self-governing, devoted to the cause, free of worldly concerns, left to pursue their calling however the spirit moves them to. This approach is neither available nor desirable to all, for both structural and individual reasons, thus inequalities are built in to the very idea of what a "true" academic "is" or should be.

8.2 Closing thoughts

Ideals of the true academic—and more specifically the beliefs the true academic should hold and embody, as explored in this thesis—can support a fantasy of academia as a 'community of learners' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013: 344) or 'community of scholars' (Ball, 2015: 259; Harris, 2005: 424) more than 'a site of exclusion, elitism and power' (Harris, 2005: 424). The idea that intellectual labour should be properly undertaken for love, with money taking a firm back seat, and that demanding payment is 'grubby' (P8; P28), sits uncomfortably alongside exhortations to widen access and create an inclusive environment. This is further complicated by the sense that following the money is a thing that failed academics do, whether manager-academics or those who leave academia entirely:

> I think it's a really difficult career to sustain. And my brother did a PhD and he now works in a private company. A person who did a PhD with me at the same time has also left academia to go and work in the private sector […]. They didn't really have the passion for the topic they were doing I think and that meant that they went for other things. Much better money. (P10)

Here, lack of 'passion for the topic', academia being 'a really difficult career to sustain', leaving HE 'to go and work in the private sector', and 'much better money' are linked into a narrative where those without this passion are positioned as unable to tolerate difficulty and are content to leave for something "easier" and more lucrative. By extension, then, rhetorically speaking, stability and money are set up as "not academic", as are boundaries between work and personal life—so how do we advocate for healthier practices when unhealthy ones are believed to be so imperative for academic success and identity?

While the literature is consistent in its suggestions that we must 'resist' neoliberalisation (Loveday, 2018b: 163) and the individualisation of responsibility for the negative emotions it may bring, my message is less hopeful. Resist what, exactly? Resist how, practically? Gill (2018: 106) agrees 'it is genuinely hard to know how to proceed: how to resist, how to take care of ourselves and each other in all of this', while Radice (2013: 416) posits the gloomy possibility that 'precisely because higher education is such a core component in the reproduction of élite power in contemporary capitalism, a truly democratic alternative can only be imagined starting from an alternative conception of society'. Resistance sounds futile, perhaps if only because we are so heavily implicated in what we do: maybe we need to prioritise finding new ways to cooperate across stakeholders in HE, to bring the best parts of higher education as a public good to the political reality of modern times in which some degree of private interest is not just a necessary evil but a prompt to instil the boundaries that make capitalism survivable. These are recognitions that may serve as a reminder to place guardrails around our labour, whether it be done out of neoliberal servitude, or "passion", or belief that education will save the world.

I also want to consider for a moment the bigger picture. In research about particular niches it is easy to forget that the area we devote so much energy to studying is just one part of life. I have demonstrated that for academics work occupies a central position by virtue of being strongly (ideally) associated with personal identity, thus the problems identified here are writ large for many working in HE and feel

deeply, intimately, if subtly cruel. But—*but*—however much we identify with our academic role, however much we tell ourselves, and each other, and the neoliberal baddies who reduce us to units of measurement, that this is not "just a job"—

<u>it *is* just a job.</u>

I overstate this—of course, nothing is every *just* anything—but I want to be clear that there is more. If there is one gift that the advancement of late capitalism brings it is in reminding us of this, in giving us reasons both political and practical to disarticulate our identity from our labour and define ourselves by other than our work.

Although when we speak of inequalities of success there may be a background assumption that levelling out distributions of professional achievement naturally leads to greater equalities of health, happiness, and wellbeing, I am wary of this logic. Instead I think it is better to focus on equalising these latter resources rather than assuming they flow from any particular source. In an academic context we should not assume that happiness is attained purely through career success, or that "failure" leads to misery. One mode of "resistance" that might tool individuals with the ability to distance themselves from the anxieties so prevalent in HE, then, is to recognise the true academic and its dogma not as a figure to aspire to or emulate but an illusory, hegemonic spectre that, like academia itself, may not deliver the feelings we imagined, whether they be arrival, deliverance, belonging, success, or legitimacy—and that these feelings, if felt, may not deliver the happiness or security we imagine either. Furthermore, a certain amount of discomfort, "failure", and rejection can be generative; this project was conceived, after a long gestation period, from having my own work deemed "not academic enough", and I am not alone in finding inspiration from such quarters—as revealed by Bothello and Roulet's (2019: 861) acknowledgement: 'we thank all those that dismissed our work and our ability as academics, thus inspiring this essay'.

Of course, hardship is not the only route to creativity and not all failures are enlightening—and perhaps efforts to make everything "useful" or "productive" should be queried (all part of the neoliberal logic?)—but, equally, processing experiences in this way can be a method of making sense of and reappropriating them. It also, of course, must be emphasised that the creative potential of struggle is no justification for failing to address gross inequalities in who must face the most, and the most damaging,

challenges. At the same time, observations about impediments to achievement, particularly when these are consequences of decisions such as having a family, often concentrate on success particularly in professional terms, yet career performance may not necessarily correlate with higher overall wellbeing. The things that hold us back in some areas can in some cases facilitate flourishing in others, so for all the doom and gloom about academic career options I do not want to replicate the notion that academics' whole beings are, or must be, dominated by their work:

Go home. Have a life.

8.3 Future research

The contribution of this project

It is my hope that this research offers something that can be useful to others, whether in an academic sense or simply in reassuring those who experience feelings of unbelonging, out-of-placeness, illegibility, outsiderhood, and so on, that these sensations are a product of academia being what it is—an environment built on competitive, elitist principles that were never meant to serve the diversity of participants now engaging in HE—and not a sign of fault or failure. They are perhaps also a product of being human and the terrifying dependence we have on social structures that may or may not welcome us in.

The three concepts detailed in Chapter 3 are a concrete contribution that other scholars may deploy, adapt, expand, or evolve (e.g. Graham & Muir, 2022), while the substantive argument of the thesis I hope offers some insights into why inequalities perpetuate in HE and prompt deeper thought about potential solutions. Without wishing to provoke guilt or promote gratitude culture it is also my wish that these reflections might enable greater acknowledgment of the many and varied complicities and benefits an academic life entails, and the role we play in exploiting ourselves and each other through attachment to the beliefs and practices laid out in this thesis.

Further work

This project produced a large amount of data and, as I have mentioned, there were various analyses that could have been pursued and that may be explored in future. As questions centred on participants' experiences of their work and identity in general

this could be taken in many directions.

In terms of future projects, I would be interested to see comparative studies looking at equivalent ideals of the true academic in other contexts, especially considering the posited connection between older incarnations of the British class system and attitudes to the financialisation of HE. The US would be a particularly fruitful case study as it was noted by one participant that understandings of student relations are especially different in comparison to the sense that 'people are just generally not respectful of students in the UK' and see them as 'the kind of distraction that one would be happier without' (P14). There could also be mileage in examining different sub-types of the proper academic, for example through analysis of recruitment literature, to map the ideals of other stakeholders in academia and how they interact with the "academic's academic" detailed here. Further sociological research on the ongoing industrial action undertaken by UCU, particularly on colleague relationships, would likewise be an interesting avenue for exploration, as would investigation of the putative academic/administrator divide.

Personally, I am most interested in belonging and unbelonging and would be keen to expand these ideas in other contexts. I find the intricacies of what is valued and idealised within tribes and cultures intriguing, especially how these create in- and out-groups and enable hierarchies to form. What does belonging mean amongst different populations? What makes certain identities, roles, and objects what they "are"?

8.4 Epilogue

The version of this thesis submitted for examination ended after the previous section—welcome to these final, post-viva reflections composed by my new band, "Jess and the Minor Corrections".

My examiners, Jan McArthur and Maria do Mar Pereira, made four requests for amendments, one of which was greater attention to the conclusion—to bring back the "heart" and the personal voice that they had observed declined in the latter half of the thesis. I could have achieved this more traditionally, by slipping in a few extra paragraphs and trying to seamlessly integrate them with what you have just read, but I wanted to talk to you, to end on this personal note, to be self-conscious about this addendum, not just because I have commented throughout on the process of conducting research but because it got me thinking. Why was my conclusion

unsatisfactory? Why did I fail to bring "Jess" to these latter chapters (word count issues, which were significant, aside)? Why did the final draft skirt the emotional implications of unbelonging when they were so present in participants' testimonies (and have been explored in other outputs)?

Last week I attended a launch event for the report *Slow Train Coming? Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in UK Music Higher Education* by Anna Bull, Diljeet Bhachu, Amy Blier-Carruthers, Alexander Bradley, and Seferin James.[19] During the presentation, Diljeet spoke of having to step back from the project at times, at being overwhelmed by the content of the qualitative data, at the personal impact of handling narratives of inequalities, discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, despair. This is not something I elaborated upon in this thesis, but it reminded me that there were times I, too, needed to put my mind in other places; I make room for the possibility that my argument, "bright-siding" as it is in places, might be an attempt to polish the painful. At the same time, there was a conscious choice to move away from focusing on individual stories and from becoming mired in the doom and gloom, to try and see further, to the causes, to our own implication, to the ways we can help ourselves, and not to drown in the helplessness I often felt when researching not just the state of academia but of the world. Because while our existences as humans and as academics take place within a social and political context, however much we disavow alignment with it, there *are* reciprocalities, there are things we do to ourselves and to each other. I have highlighted those here not because we are to "blame", not to downplay or erase the circumstances in which we live and work, but because it is a piece of the puzzle—and the one we have most direct control over.

One of the first things a therapist will teach you is that you cannot control what others do or the hand the universe deals you. The only hope you have for agency in relation to external stimuli is in determining what your response will be. While this should not supplant attempts to make a more equitable, less harmful universe, self-reflection can usefully remind us to update our thinking. Many participants in this project had carried a sense of being, or aspiring to realise their identity as, an academic for a significant chunk of their lives, oftentimes from before they even engaged with HE, and consequently the need to succeed, the sense of striving for professional recognition, the search for belonging, became habitual. This drive could be rooted in

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[19] See https://edims.network/report/slowtraincoming.

the beliefs laid out in this thesis—underpinning, foundational ideologies attached to the idea of what it is to be an academic that become assumed into the narrative of justification both for pursuing this career and critiquing the contemporary landscape. In this context, "neoliberal" developments in HE are experienced as injurious and ranking technologies such as the Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Excellence Framework, and other forms of metricisation, come to represent the many opportunities for comparison between colleagues, pressure for productivity, and powerful downward force of the neoliberal boot. I have avoided discussion of these measurement apparatuses here primarily because as sites of belonging allocated to the administrative and institutional legibility zone they are less relevant to this particular argument given space constraints, but they are of course all elements in the field in which academics today are striving to 'fit'. These, perhaps, are less subtle cruelties than those explicated so far, as the more tangible, overt mechanisms of discerning between who 'fits the world' and who does not. The ideal beliefs of the true academic discussed in this thesis, and their link to certain modes of practice such as overwork, fall at the subtler end of the spectrum, as feelings of being out of place but unsure why, of uncertainty, of bewilderment, of frustration, of being out of resonance with the prevailing frequency, of doing all the right things but somehow not quite "getting there". This is in part because "there" is a moving target, not just resituated by HEIs and policy but by ourselves as we meet one challenge and look for the next. How do we learn to self-soothe, self-validate, find feelings of safety in an environment, a world, that will not provide this for us? It feels impossible, it feels unfair that it should fall to us to sew up wounds we do not believe we made, but perhaps with every stitch we reinforce the boundary for everyone, we pledge that we will not spill over and out into our work so far that it can hurt us, we devalorise the exhibition of scars and bruises, we no longer need to show our bones to legitimise our struggle or our success.

As with previous outputs, between submitting my thesis and having the viva, I sent it to project participants for their approval. One response underscored the stakes, and with grateful permission I share here an update from P18, four years on from our interview:

> reflecting on my quotes about loving working weekends etc, how naive I was. It was a bad thing to do and to romanticise. In the most recent years, I've suffered from burnout and poor mental health and I've really started to move against the university machine. The burnout was caused by this 7 day working.

> I dont do it anymore, i cant. […] [T]here was an inevitable crash after, even if I couldn't see it at the time.

This participant, one of the more socioeconomically privileged in the sample, and having had an easier route into permanent employment than most, was in 2018 an enthusiastic champion of the positive aspects of academia (indeed I sought to include them in the project for exactly this reason). As you may recall from Section 4.3, they worked—and enjoyed—long hours in support of their career and at the time found this an unproblematic practice. It is especially pertinent, then, that this participant has experienced a radical shift in the intervening years (while acknowledging that the Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented stressor for most people), and that they have joined the ranks of other participants who reached an 'inevitable crash' point, because it demonstrates the inevitability of experiencing negative consequences from unboundaried work—*even if the work is enjoyable, even if one occupies a position of relative privilege*. Those in this position might be able to sustain excessive working for longer, may be less able to 'see it at the time', but ill effects are seemingly coming down the pike to all. So: *this* is what to resist—not just the neoliberal imperative to give ourselves over, but the seductive belief in our love of what we do, perhaps even the fantasy that what we love cannot do us harm. But: resist not just for the sake of your health, or for holding the line with colleagues, but because giving more than we get back to any object of affection soon breeds resentment—that which we justify doing out of love might ultimately become something we hate. Therefore: resist for the sake of your joy.

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Glossary of Key Terms and Abbreviations

ECA early-career academic

EDI equality, diversity, and inclusion

FE further education; post-compulsory sub-degree level education

HE higher education; post-compulsory degree-level education

HEI higher education institution

LZ legibility zone

NSS National Student Survey

Post-92s former polytechnic colleges granted university status in 1992

RAE Research Assessment Exercise; predecessor to the REF

REF Research Excellence Framework; a nationwide audit of research quality based on peer assessments of research outputs, research impact, and research environment (see www.ref.ac.uk for more information)

Russell Group a set of 24 research-intensive universities (see https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/ for information and membership)

SB site of belonging

SSI small specialist institution; a type of HEI focused on a particular discipline

TEF Teaching Excellence Framework; a nationwide audit of various indicators used as proxies for teaching quality, resulting in an award of gold, silver, or bronze (see https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/ for more information)

Appendix 1

Participant Invitation Email

Dear [prospective participant],

Apologies for the intrusion into your undoubtedly busy inbox, but I'm writing to you as I am conducting doctoral research into cultures of inequality in contemporary higher education in England and was hoping you might agree to be interviewed for this project.

About the project:

My research examines the relationship between inequalities in contemporary English higher education and binary gender archetypes. I will be speaking to academics and analysing academic policy and practice to gain insight into the dominant cultures operating in university life and the inequalities they may create or reflect. I hope to identify what traits and practices are required of academic citizens in order to succeed in this environment, and consider how this might affect academic staff, both individually and collectively, alongside the wider implications of my findings.

This project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and has been approved by the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School's Ethics Committee.

About me:

I am a PhD student in Gender Studies, co-supervised by Dr Anne Cronin and Professor Carolyn Jackson across the Departments of Sociology and Educational Research at Lancaster University. My previous educational background is in English literature and literary theory, and I also have almost a decade of experience working in higher education in various administrative roles.

About your participation:

I appreciate that your time is limited and subject to competing pressures and will thus endeavour not to take up too much of it. I aim to complete interviews within an hour, but if you're able to budget for 90 minutes in case we run over it would be greatly appreciated. The interview would be conducted at a location and time convenient for you.

Why I have approached you:

[Reasons specific to individual approached.]

Further information:

Please see the attached documents (Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form) for more information and contact details for my supervisory team.

Thank you for your time in consideration of this invitation. Please be aware that you are under no obligation to participate in this project and the attached documents are for information only at this stage. The details and documents in this correspondence are not confidential; if you have any colleagues or contacts who you feel may have fruitful insights of benefit to the research and who may be willing to participate, please feel free to forward this email to them.

Should you wish to participate in the research or have any questions about it, please don't hesitate to contact me by return email to resolve any queries, arrange a time to discuss this further, or schedule an in-person interview at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Jessica Butler

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: **Gender and inequalities in contemporary higher education in England**
Name of Researcher: Jessica Butler
Email: j.butler4@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during, or within two weeks of, my interview, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable. Fully anonymised data will be offered to Lancaster Pure and will be made available to future research for re-use (secondary analysis).	☐
4. I understand that my name and the name of any current or previous institutions to which I have been affiliated will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentations without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that my interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that this data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept, according to University guidelines, for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ Date _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Participant Information Sheet

My name is Jessica Butler and I am an AHRC-funded PhD student at Lancaster University in the departments of Sociology and Educational Research, with an employment background in university administration.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research into cultures of inequality in contemporary higher education.

Please read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

My research examines the relationship between inequalities in contemporary English higher education and binary gender archetypes. I will be speaking to academics and analysing academic policy and practice to gain insight into the dominant cultures operating in university life and the inequalities they may create or reflect. I hope to identify what traits and practices are required of academic citizens in order to succeed in this environment, and consider how this might affect academic staff, both individually and collectively, alongside the wider implications of my findings.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because you are currently working, or have previously worked, as an academic, and I believe you are in a position to offer unique and useful insights on matters relevant to this project.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decide to take part this will involve a 60-90-minute face-to-face interview, arranged to accommodate your schedule and in a location convenient for you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this study will enable you to voice your feelings about, and experiences of, working in higher education. This project hopes to contribute to scholarship invested in improving academic conditions and equality, which will benefit all participants in academia.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind you are free to withdraw at any time before, during, or within two weeks of your participation in this study (i.e. within two weeks of your interview). If you want to withdraw, please let me know and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I do not anticipate any disadvantages to taking part, but the interview will require 60-90 minutes of your time.

You are under no obligation to respond to any question that makes you uncomfortable and may terminate the interview at any time.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I (the researcher conducting this study) and my supervisors will have access to the ideas you share with me in a form in which you can be identified. The only other person who will have access to what you contributed is a professional transcriber who will listen to the recordings and produce a written record of what you have said. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential to the research team (me and my supervisors). I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution.

How will the information I have shared be used and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and may also include articles in journals, the media, or online, book chapters, monographs, or papers at academic conferences.

When disseminating this research some of the views and ideas you shared with me will be reproduced, but I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so although your exact words may be used you will not be identified.

However, if anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisors. If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

Who has reviewed the project?

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me or my supervisors:

Researcher: Jessica Butler / j.butler4@lancaster.ac.uk
Supervisor 1: Dr Anne Cronin / a.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk
Supervisor 2: Professor Carolyn Jackson / c.jackson2@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Head of Department (Sociology): Professor Corinne May-Chahal / c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 2

First Participant Contact Email—Monitoring Questions

Hi [Prospective Participant],

Thanks so much for your interest in participating in my research. Unfortunately I am unlikely to be able to interview everyone who volunteered as this self-selecting sample is proving rather unbalanced! (However, this is in itself very interesting and will feed into the research.)

Please find attached the consent form and participant information sheet with further details about the project and what you'd be signing up for. If you're still happy to be involved please would you mind answering a few screening questions so I can check your eligibility? These questions are entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to answer anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.

· Current employment status/job title:
· Institution and department:
· Institutional profile URL (if applicable):
· Subject area/REF UoA to which you'll be returned (if known/applicable):
· Gender:
· Ethnicity:

Thanks again for your interest and support,
Jess

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about your current role?

2. Can you say more about your previous experience and how you came to where you are now?

3. And what are your plans for the future?

4. How would you describe your identity if you had to summarise yourself in a couple of sentences?

5. How core to your identity and sense of self is being an academic?

6. Has this changed at all over the course of your career, and in what ways, when, and why?

7. Have you perceived changes in higher education over the course of your career and do you think they've been for better or worse?

8. What would be your wish list if you could change anything about academia?

9. What do you like and dislike about your work as an academic, and how do these things make you feel?

10. Reflecting on your career, are there periods or events that you particularly remember, for either positive or negative reasons?

11. Did any of these things have more long-term consequences, either in your personal or professional life, maybe representing turning points or affecting decisions you made?

12. Do you consider yourself to be successful?
    - How do you measure your success?
    - To what do you attribute your success?
    - Is there anything you think would make you more successful?

13. Have you ever felt like a failure?
    - What kinds of things are 'fails'?
    - How do you deal with a sense of failure?

14. Does your job affect your esteem or emotional life at all?
    - What are the most common feelings you experience in relation to work?

15. Would you recommend academia as a career?
    - To who?
    - What do you think it takes to succeed in academia?

16. Have you experienced times when you felt 'at odds' with the requirements of your role as an academic, or like you were going against the grain of the culture you were working in?

17. Have you ever had the feeling that you're 'supposed' to be a particular way or conform to certain identities or practices?
    - When?
    - Do you now?
    - What changed?
    - Do you resist this at all?

18. When it comes to applying for new academic posts or promotion within your existing role, how active have you been in engaging with these opportunities, and what's been the reason for that?

19. Can you tell me about your experience of academic writing and putting papers forward for publication and how you feel about these things?
    - If you publish, why do you publish?

20. What about presenting at conferences?

21. If someone is critical of your work or ideas, how do you feel about that?

22. Is there anything else you would like to say, or ask?

Appendix 4

Interview length, month, and location

Interview Number	Interview Month	Interview Location	Interview Duration
1	November 2017	Participant's home	1:27
2	December 2018	Participant's home	1:24
3	February 2018	On campus (office)	1:34
4	March 2018	Another university	2:02
5	March 2018	Participant's home	1:36
6	March 2018	Participant's home	1:34
7	March 2018	Another university	1:43
8	March 2018	Another university	1:27
9	March 2018	On campus (office)	1:22
10	April 2018	On campus (another room)	1:28
11	April 2018	On campus (office)	1:35
12	April 2018	Participant's home	2:09
13	April 2018	Participant's home	1:34
14	April 2018	Participant's home	2:18
15	May 2018	On campus (office)	1:05
16	May 2018	Participant's home	1:28
17	June 2018	Another university	1:20
18	July 2018	Participant's home	1:01
19	July 2018	On campus (office)	1:25
20	August 2018	Another university	1:30
21	August 2018	On campus (another room)	1:19
22	August 2018	Participant's home	2:14
23	September 2018	On campus (another room)	1:46
24	September 2018	Participant's home	1:41
25	September 2018	On campus (office)	1:07
26	September 2018	On campus (office)	1:32
27	October 2018	On campus (another room)	1:46
28	October 2018	On campus (another room)	2:23
29	October 2018	Participant's home	1:28

Appendix 5

August 2020 Followup Participant Email

Hi [Participant],

I hope this finds you well in these strange times, and managing to enjoy some time off during the summer vacation. What a year it's been!

I'm writing to you as you participated in my doctoral research project on unequal cultures in UK higher education, and I have a few preliminary outputs to share with you. I'm sorry for the delay to this—progress has been a little slow due to, well, life, work, and Coronavirus has certainly not helped matters!

The reason for sending this is twofold: so that you can see how the project is shaping up, and more importantly so you can check you are happy with the way I'm using your contributions and representing your input so far.

Enclosed is:

1. The final draft of a chapter contribution to a forthcoming handbook on impostor syndrome in HE (please let me know if you have any discomfort with the use or interpretation of any of your quotes) (attached)

2. The link to script and slides from a conference presentation at the Gender and Education Association meeting in 2018: https://lancaster.academia.edu/JessicaWrenButler/Conference-Presentations

3. The same for a short panel contribution for a Feminist and Women's Studies Association anniversary and launch event in 2019: https://lancaster.academia.edu/JessicaWrenButler/Conference-Presentations

4. The link to a digital version of a research seminar I was due to give at King's College London that was cancelled due to Covid: https://vimeo.com/434831789.

If your contributions do not appear in this content, or do not appear substantially, it is by no means a reflection of the relevance and utility of your interview! It is merely a reflection of the fact that, when these pieces were due, I had not yet fully analysed (or even received) all the transcripts, so I was working with preliminary analysis of initial data and the experiences most directly related to the themes under discussion. The final thesis will of course be richer in detail and deeper in analysis, including data from everyone who participated in the project.

Thank you so much again for the time you gave to this. I have received very positive

feedback from the conference attendees and my annual/upgrade panels who have seen some of these outputs, and other academics in particular have found strong resonances with many of your words. Having now read the transcripts many times as well as listening back to the recordings of our interview, I feel strangely invested! When I am having moments of doubt or frustration, returning to the transcripts always reconnects me to the project and my reasons for undertaking it, and that is in part thanks to you.

There is no obligation to read or comment on any of the enclosed. But should you wish to say or ask anything about your data, or, as a fellow scholar, about the work in general, I welcome your feedback and questions. I would also love to hear how you are, if you feel comfortable to share, and I hope life has developed positively for you since we spoke.

When you first volunteered to participate in the project I asked you to complete a monitoring form to assist me in constructing a representative sample. I would like to soften this a little from the rather rigid categories previously used when it comes to tabulating the total sample in the thesis, so could I please ask you to let me know how you would like to be described in gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, class identity, and career stage terms (at the time of our interview)? Your own words and definitions are fine. This information will not be attributed to you directly other than where it is articulated in your transcripts, but will appear in a table summary. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

I'd be very grateful if you could confirm receipt of this email.

With many thanks,
Jess

April 2021 Followup Participant Email

Hi there,

I hope this finds you well, especially considering the year we've all had.

Back in 2018 you participated in a research project I'm conducting, and in August last year I got in touch to share some initial outputs for you to vet. I've recently had another article accepted for publication and similarly would like to ensure you are happy with how I have represented/interpreted any included content from our interview before it is published. Please do let me know if anything doesn't sit right with you.

Your participant number is the same, but if you don't have a record of it please get in touch. Likewise, if you would prefer I don't contact you again (or if you would prefer I use a different email address), just say the word and I won't clog up your inbox in future 🙂

Thank you again for your generous participation—it truly is what keeps me going when everything feels too hard!
Jess

Appendix 6

Jessica Wren Butler

'No-one's safe': Gendered competitiveness, inequalities, and academics' experiences of belonging in precarious English higher education

Contents

List of contents

Introduction (~1500)

Introduction to thesis, structure, main arguments, and research questions:

- <u>RQ1:</u> In what academic activities, policies, and related literature does a culture of competition, and its surrounding discourses of success and failure, manifest, and how?
- <u>RQ2:</u> Do constructions of 'ideal' academics emerge from these analyses and in what ways are they gendered?
- <u>RQ3:</u> To what extent are these ideals experienced, internalised, or resisted by individual academics and what is the personal and professional impact of negotiating any disparity between the perceived ideal and subjective identities, values, and aptitudes?
- <u>RQ4:</u> What can an understanding of these questions offer to wider discussions of inequality, in HE and beyond, and its potential remedies?

1. Background: Policy and theory (~10,000) *RQ1, 2*

Loosely, the literature review (or the closest thing there will be to one) and an overview of theoretical frameworks drawn on. Covering:

- The ivory tower/elitism/origins of HE
- The policy context/massification/recent history of English HE
- Neoliberalism: and education/and work; precarity and insecurity
- Ideals and values: hegemonic masculinity/hegemonic academic; capital
- (Feminist) epistemology/issues related to knowledge production and 'proper' knowledge (/practice)
- Competition: hierarchies, binaries, success, failure, 'excellence'
- Inequalities (within and beyond HE)

  The basic argument:

  a) The historical conventions and policies of HE are based in elitist and archetypally masculine values and approaches ('hegemonic masculinity') that are now being played out through, and also in tension with, the neoliberalised expansion of the academy in England. The common thread linking these ideologies is their 'fetishisation' of competition (to use Naidoo's (2018) terminology);

  b) This affects what universities, and all who work within them, do, how they do it, and what is generally signalled as most valuable or important through attracting the greatest reward (i.e. the 'ideal');

  c) Some people are, or are seen to be, more equipped to do the 'right' things in the 'right' way, and therefore to resemble, or be able to resemble, this ideal (the 'hegemonic academic'). These people have fewer barriers to achieving success as defined by the values of the dominant culture, and may even be assumed to be successful without demonstrated ability or output. Conversely, others are seen to be lacking the skills required even when there is evidence to the contrary;

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2. Method (~6000)

Description of recruitment, fieldwork, methods, approach, decision to focus on academics, questions asked, etc.

The basic argument:

d) To determine the characteristics of the dominant culture and of the ideal academic most equipped to succeed in that culture as understood by academic staff, and the experience of working in it, I interviewed 29 current or recently ex-academics;

3. Belonging (~6000) *RQ1, 2, 3*

Headline findings from data and definitions of belonging.

The basic argument:

e) The degree to which academics are seen emulate the ideal, and to which they feel secure and/or successful, is based on whether they appear to, or feel they, or feel they appear to, 'belong' to the environment/whether the environment belongs to them;

f) There are multiple ideals according to local cultural norms (e.g at institution, department, research group, or discipline level) and these interact with the overarching dominant norm in different ways;

g) Belonging is circular in that success is one way of demonstrating an identity that belongs, but (perceived) belonging is also a form of success in itself;

h) Success, and therefore belonging, is communicated, read, and experienced through three main legibility zones: bureaucracy, philosophy, and embodiment;

4. Bureaucratic belonging: administrative legibility (~10,000) *RQ1, 2, 3*

Data-based analysis of the ways in which ideal academic identities are constructed and read through institutional apparatuses.

The basic argument:

i) Belonging is signalled and experienced through intelligibility within administrative and bureaucratic structures such as: contract type; employment status; voluntary or mandatory redundancy schemes; workload; performance monitoring; probation and promotion; student feedback; Research Excellence Framework administration and submissions; relationship to the institution; institutional affiliation; publication; league tables; rankings; institutional KPIs and targets; National Student Survey results; proximity to workplace; institutional space allocation; distribution of internal resources; competitive research funding; conferences and events; institutional role; title/salutation; membership of professional bodies; consultations;

5. Philosophical belonging: ideological legibility (~10,000) *RQ1, 2, 3*

Data-based analysis of the ways in which ideal academic identities are constructed and read through belief systems.

The basic argument:

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j) Belonging is also signalled and experienced through holding certain perspectives on the world, particularly around the function and value of higher education and the role of the academic. This encompasses ideas around what universities are for; what makes an academic an academic; what constitutes success; what indicates failure; the role of management; political stances; pedagogical approaches; disciplinary hierarchies and definitions; worthwhile research areas; motivations for becoming an academic;

6. Embodied belonging: legible identity (~10,000) *RQ1, 2, 3*

Data-based analysis of the ways in which ideal academic identities are constructed and read through corporeal and corporeal-adjacent (e.g. invisible but material) cues.

The basic argument:

k) Belonging is also signalled and experienced through physical, identity, and lived-experience characteristics such as: sex; gender identity; race; class; age; nationality; religion; comportment; dress; abledness; level of national or global mobility; level of family support; caring responsibilities; first language; immigration status; sexual orientation; relationship status; accent; manner;

7. Performing belonging (~10,000) *RQ1, 2, 3*

Data-based analysis of the ways in which ideal academic identities are engaged with by academics.

The basic argument:

l) (Sense of) belonging is mutable, contingent, and contextual;

m) Academics curate, perform, and promote their identities in each of the three areas, to varying extents and with varying degrees of mimesis, in order to project or feel a sense of belonging and heighten both actual and perceived success;

n) The ability to do this, the level of mimesis required, and the penalty or reward associated, is not evenly distributed. Some are more negatively impacted by the prevailing culture than others; however, the underlying feeling of insecurity propelling the need to gain a sense of belonging is collective;

o) The hegemonic academic is performed on stages such as: social media; the CV; publications/outputs; staff webpages; conferences; public engagement; email; reputation/mythos; staff meetings; teaching; research funding applications; event organisation;

8. Consequences: individual and collective (~10,000) *RQ3, 4*

Data-based analysis of the actual and potential problems resulting from everything discussed in the previous chapters.

The basic argument:

p) The consequences of a hypercompetitive culture characterised by insecurity, academics feeling compelled to perform certain identities, and the unequal distribution of acceptable

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characteristics, are problematic for individuals, the higher education sector, and society more broadly;

q) Consequences manifest as (could probably split this into different categories too): bullying; lack of collegiality; anxiety; ill health – mental/physical, chronic/acute; burnout; suicide; isolation; leaving academia; decreased productivity; quality/quantity production imbalance; fractured identity; profound ambivalence; personal crisis; narrowing or shallowing of research; lack of diversity; tail wagging the dog; disillusionment; instrumentalisation; self-doubt; guilt; shame; redundancy; closure of departments or institutions; legitimising of toxic behaviour; reduced autonomy; reduced investment; conflicts of interest; individualism; wasted resources; reduced innovation/risk aversion; resentment/feeling of being a hostage; voicelessness; lack of agency; condoned selfishness; loss of integrity; dubious ethics; lack of continuity/institutional memory; high staff turnover; poor student experience; sense of inauthenticity;

r) These consequences have negative impacts and perpetuate existing values and unequal social power relations and the culture therefore needs to change.

9. Recommendations: understanding, accepting, exploiting, and challenging belonging (~ 5000) *RQ3, 4*

Recommendations for changes that can be made to limit the most damaging excesses of competitive culture in academia and create a more inclusive environment in which a greater spectrum of people can be and feel secure, and suggestions for further work in the area.

The basic argument:

s) Cultural change can be made at individual, departmental, institutional, sectoral, and policy levels, with some crossover;

t) Individual ameliorants (for self and/or others) include: mentorship within the academy; support systems beyond the academy; hobbies or interests unrelated to academic life; strong sense of self; independence; firm, clear boundaries; care – for and by self and others; being heard; celebration of achievements, however minor; collegiality; alignment of values; time to think; positive feedback; learning and teaching the tools of the trade; considerate peer review; union membership; using positions of marginality as a buffer; maintaining awareness of complicity; spirit of generosity and compassion; finding solidarity; taking personal responsibility; visible role models;

u) Departmental and institutional good practice includes: effective, supportive management structures and personnel; adherence to reasonable working hours; humane maternity leave arrangements;

v) Beneficial policy and sector-wide changes include: reform to research funding allocation; decreased casualised, precarious employment; reduced reliance on metrics as proxies by which quality is assessed; reform to secondary education; consideration of quotas/affirmative action for staff hire and student intake;

w) Work in this area can be extended in a variety of directions.

Conclusion (~1500)

Conclusion drawing together the main points made in the thesis.

Appendix 7

Research Excellence Framework 2021: Equalities Impact Assessment and Final Evaluation, July 2021

Contents

This document is available in large-print and other alternative formats, please contact research@gsmd.ac.uk stating the format you require.

SECTION A: Background

1. Introduction, purpose, and scope

This document is intended to be a thorough and systematic analysis of the potential and actual effects of the policies and processes designed and enacted by Guildhall School of Music & Drama to meet the requirements laid out by the Research Excellence Framework 2021,[1] particularly with respect to any unequal impacts on particular groups as defined by their shared 'protected characteristics',[2] but also with a wider view of equality in mind. This document should be read in conjunction with the School's REF Code of Practice,[3] which explains the terms of reference used here and details the full and final set of policies and procedures under discussion.

The scope of this report is to:

- Explain the risks identified, the amendments incorporated, and the mitigations applied to prevent discrimination during the design and application of the REF policies and processes with most potential for bias in implementation and/or unequal outcomes;
- Based on statistical analysis of the final submission and post-submission review of key policies and processes, assess whether unequal treatment, unintentional or otherwise, may have occurred, and if so how much;
- Provide an action plan for future institutional changes and policy-making and process design through identifying opportunities for further positive steps stemming from lessons learned.

The policies and procedures under scrutiny pertain to five central aspects of constructing a REF submission, the first two of which are included as they are integral to enabling the equitable practice of the final three, which are required by REF:

1. The development of the Code of Practice (CoP) governing REF policies and procedures;
2. The formation of the committee responsible for ratifying all REF-related decisions and documents, including the CoP (REF Sub-committee);
3. The identification of 'Category A submitted' staff;
4. The determination of 'research independence';
5. The selection of research outputs for submission.

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[1] The Research Excellence Framework is the system for assessing research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It was first conducted in 2014, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

[2] The UK Equality Act 2010 legislates against unfair, discriminatory treatment of any individual or group based on their identity. Protected characteristics include: age, sex (including pregnancy and maternity), sexual orientation, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, marriage and civil partnership, and disability.

[3] The Code of Practice can be found at:
https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/about_the_school/research/research_excellence_framework/

2. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) responsibilities and authorship

The School's REF Sub-committee, a subsidiary of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, is the body ultimately responsible for signing off all REF policies and procedures and ratifying all decisions stemming from them, including staff eligibility and selection of outputs. Responsibility for considering equality, diversity, and inclusion issues does not fall to any individual(s) but is embedded in the CoP through its five guiding principles of transparency, inclusivity, professional diversity, accountability, and consistency. Interrogation of potential discrimination or bias is therefore one of the Sub-committee's responsibilities when discussing and approving decisions stemming from the application of the CoP. The CoP itself and the interim EIAs within it were written by the School's Senior Research Manager at the time, reviewed by the Head of Research, and subject to wide internal consultation.

The present report was produced on behalf of the School by Jessica Wren Butler, a consultant who alongside the Head of Research implemented the School's REF submission processes, including staff eligibility assessment and output selection, as well as acting as REF Sub-committee Secretary, between May 2020 and April 2021. Wren Butler is also a researcher with particular interest in (in)equalities and higher education. Statistical data was provided by both the School's local HR team and City of London Corporation HR. Following review by the Head of Research, the report was signed off by the School Principal.

3. Interim EIAs and the approach of this evaluation

Interim EIAs on key policies were completed as the CoP was being developed and can be found on pages 18, 20, 24, and 34-37 of the CoP. This report, whilst incorporating the points made in these assessments, which are reflected in the development of the policies, does not follow the same structure. This is in part because this report refrains from attributing particular impacts to particular groups except in obvious cases, in order to accommodate a progressively broad view of discrimination that includes: bias falling short of legal definitions; bias that leads to unequal opportunities or outcomes for staff regardless of protected characteristic status; potential inequalities resulting from intersections of characteristics or hidden characteristics that may result in indirect or cumulative discrimination; and in recognition that those with particular protected characteristics are often structurally disadvantaged and thus more affected by 'neutral' risks.

This report, moreover, takes the view that inequalities are complex and should be considered holistically, with attention to how certain policies and processes may represent more significant barriers or burdens for some people than others even if they do not visibly discriminate. It also should not be assumed that discrimination can only occur through exclusion: particularly in the context of this institution (see below), there is variance in circumstances and attitudes to the REF such that it is possible that some may have perceived (or have come to perceive) inclusion in the exercise to be disadvantageous. The terms 'equalities' and 'inequalities' are used in the plural to reflect the dynamic, variable, and overlapping nature of social and institutional power relations.

4. Structure of the analysis

Each policy area is considered separately, with each aspect of the policy that may, in the course of its implementation, have produced unsatisfactory or unintended results, itemised and numbered as Policy [X]. The equalities risk identified as associated with that policy is correspondingly numbered Risk [X], with [X.x] used for multiple risks. Where steps were taken to mitigate the risk, this is numbered as Action [X] (or [X.x]). Where this action constitutes a further aspect of, or new or additional, policy, this is denoted by Action [X]/Policy [Y]. This continues until the full and final policy, accounting for all interim mitigations, has been assessed. In some cases these mitigations are identified through the interim EIAs published in the CoP, and in others they were applied as a consequence of unforeseen issues arising from policies in practice. Where there are residual considerations that either could not be sufficiently addressed at the time (due to time constraints, practicality, and/or enmeshment with processes already undertaken) or have become apparent through post-hoc analysis, these are labelled Future Action [X] and should be taken as recommendations to be considered for wider institutional change and/or future policy-making and process design.

5. Institutional context

As explained in further detail in the CoP, Guildhall School of Music & Drama is relatively unique in the higher education sector by virtue of being a small specialist institution (SSI), a performing arts conservatoire focused largely on creative practice, and a department of the City of London Corporation (CoLC). This backdrop significantly affects both the practicalities and the impacts of designing policies and processes for the REF, as the relationship of the School's staff to the School itself and to research activity not only varies widely within the School but is different from that at more traditional higher education institutions (HEIs). The School's REF remit is also narrower than at most HEIs as all its work falls into a single Unit of Assessment (UoA, 33 in REF2021).

The key general points affecting REF policies and processes are:

- School research culture is growing but does not have the level of infrastructure in place at larger or more research-intensive HEIs; this means that the level of resource available to design and enact processes is relatively smaller and a balance must be struck between what is most equitable and what is practicable.

- There were 665 'academic' staff on School payroll on the census date, about 500 of which are actively engaged with the School at any one time, on a diverse range of contract types, mostly hourly-paid, that in considerable majority do not map easily onto HESA definitions. As is the conservatoire sector norm in School disciplines, most staff have 'portfolio' careers in which their work with the School runs alongside professional practice. Accordingly, for most staff members there is fluctuation both across and within REF cycles in terms of number of hours worked, research activity, research independence, and also different understandings of whether work undertaken either constitutes 'research' or is conducted under the banner of the School. This means that assessing Category A eligibility and submissibility is

complicated, time-consuming, and, as per the CoP, almost entirely based on individual circumstances rather than purely contractually determined. This inevitably increases both the potential for bias, unconscious or otherwise, and the burden of labour on an already small team.

- The guidance offered by REF on conducting Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs) focuses on ensuring that no-one is negatively impacted by unfair *exclusion* from the REF, reflecting the fact that in most disciplines and for those who pursue traditional academic careers with a focus on research, inclusion in the REF is a factor of esteem and mark of 'excellence' that can confer future employability benefits and more immediate feelings of belonging to an institutional research culture. Furthermore, for those who produce 'traditional' research outputs such as journal articles and books, and for those on standard academic contracts in which research time is allocated workload space, engagement with the REF at least in theory does not place an additional or unremunerated burden on eligible staff. By contrast, this type of researcher is in a minority at the School; this means that the motivation to be included in the REF is variable, the work involved in preparing outputs for submission is frequently significant (i.e. practice-based research that often requires contextual information, 300-word supporting statements, and/or substantial (re)packaging into a form suitable for REF submission and assessment), and the automatic time and compensation for involvement in the REF may not be immediately available – or, indeed, desired by those who have a full schedule of work outside the School or limited interest in being part of a wider research culture. Therefore it is possible that some staff may feel disadvantaged by their *inclusion* in the REF, and this may be experienced more acutely by those with protected characteristics that make engagement under these circumstances more burdensome. This makes designing policies and processes that at once fulfil the REF criteria and do not disproportionately disadvantage any individuals or groups through either inclusion or exclusion whilst still being practical to implement particularly challenging.

SECTION B: Equalities Impact Assessments

1. Developing policy and processes: The Code of Practice

CoP Policy 1: The CoP will be made available to all staff in draft, and a consultation form provided for feedback on the proposed policies and processes and any potentially discriminatory or unequal consequences they may have.

CoP Risk 1.1: The low level of REF literacy across the School may deplete engagement as staff may not see this as relevant to them; those with certain protected characteristics may be less familiar with UK-specific HE terminology.

CoP Risk 1.2: Hourly-paid staff who are not remunerated for engaging with aspects of School operations outside their direct remit may be unwilling to take the time to read and respond to this relatively extensive documentation, especially if they are

unclear how relevant it is to them personally; those with protected characteristics may be less able to sustain this burden.

CoP Risk 1.3: Staff who have a small fractional affiliation to the School or who are away from the School may not receive communications in time to respond, or at all; these individuals are more likely to have certain protected characteristics (i.e. disability, maternity/paternity).

CoP Risk 1.4: Staff with protected characteristics may not wish to draw attention to particular issues in case this reveals their status.

CoP Action 1.1: Staff will be actively encouraged to participate in the discussion by their line managers.

CoP Action 1.2: The all-staff email containing information about the CoP will be one of very few the School sends for precisely the reasons outlined.

CoP Action 1.3: HR will ensure hard copy communications are sent to anyone on leave from the School for maternity, paternity, adoption, sickness, or any other reason.

Outcome: Very few responses to the consultation were received and no equality issues were raised. This could signal satisfaction with the policies described or low engagement, but it is hard to tell which.

Future Action 1: Further consideration should be given to barriers to participation in consultations, and proactive support advertised for those for whom the time commitment and lack of remuneration for such involvement may be offputting. The School's existing hourly rate for meeting attendance should be reviewed and publicised along with the dissemination of any materials to ensure all staff are aware of its existence, that it can be claimed for this activity, and how to claim it.

Future Action 2: A mechanism for (anonymously) measuring engagement levels and identifying any trends in non-participation should be devised and embedded. This would increase confidence that if a small number of consultation forms are returned this is due to the fitness of the policies rather than complacency or lack of engagement (by choice or due to participation barriers).

Future Action 3: Now that the School has an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (as of late 2020), any similar document should be reviewed by this group first in order to avoid placing the burden of identifying potential issues onto those most likely to be affected by them.

2. Formation of the REF Sub-committee

The REF Sub-committee holds decision-making power not just in the development of the CoP but in the ratification of decisions resulting from applying the CoP, including staff eligibility

and output selection. It is therefore of high importance that this group is as free from bias and as attuned to issues of equality as possible, as this is a key area in which potential discrimination can be introduced or enshrined into policy through consensus.

REFSC Policy 1: Members of the sub-committee are required to countersign a commitment to attend three training programmes: equality in the workplace, a REF guidance workshop, and unconscious bias awareness.

> REFSC Risk 1.1: Members do not complete the training.
>
> REFSC Risk 1.2: The training is not adequate (the effectiveness of unconscious bias training in general is contested[4]) and does not counter conscious, collective, or unacknowledged bias. The assumption that all people want to, and are capable of, eradicating bias from their unconscious and that a single training event can achieve this is unrealistic and in any case fails to account for structural and institutional prejudice.

REFSC Policy 2: The sub-committee will be comprised of diverse membership from across the School to ensure adequate representation across protected characteristics, career stages, and subject areas.

> REFSC Risk 2.1: The diversity of contract types, research experience, and REF literacy across the School may mean some committee members are more confident in their views and/or have more time to engage with committee responsibilities, leading to an imbalance in who affirms or contests decisions.
>
> REFSC Risk 2.2: Competing timetables and the impact of Covid-19 may make it more difficult to find a time when all committee members are able to attend meetings and/or standing meeting times may exclude certain members by default if it clashes with scheduled teaching.

Outcome: In practice, several committee members were not able to attend consecutive meetings occurring at crucial decision-making points, for a variety of reasons mostly related to additional teaching and pastoral workloads in the wake of Covid-19 and the institutional ramifications of Black Lives Matter protests in mid-2020. This affected the gender and career stage balance of the attendance, skewing it towards senior male colleagues who also tended to be the most familiar with the REF. The pressures of Covid-19, staff turnover at crucial junctures, and comparative lack of resource for REF preparations more generally on account of the size of the institution meant that papers were not always disseminated well enough in advance of committee meetings for fractionally-employed colleagues to synthesise the information and meaningfully contribute to discussion.

Future Action 1: Comprehensive REF training should be provided, in multiple sessions across the cycle and with focus on particular aspects of policy and practice at times relevant for decision-making, to ensure that all committee members feel confident in their ability to

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[4] For example: https://www.tidalequality.com/blog/dont-do-unconscious-bias-training

understand and assess the topics under discussion and their compliance with REF guidelines, the CoP, and equalities issues.

Future Action 2: Any commitment to undertake training should be followed up to ensure it has taken place recently.

Future Action 3: If online meetings persist, a method of collecting yes/no/undecided/abstain votes from all committee members should be devised in order that all contributions are accounted for and votes can be cast independently (i.e. the most confident opinions do not overshadow or sway the more tentative). It should be made clear from the outset whether assent must be by majority or universal, and if the former the number of votes in each category should be recorded in the minutes.

Future Action 4: If a committee member is no longer able to attend, or attend regularly, they should be replaced so as to preserve the diversity of the membership.

Future Action 5: Maximum efforts should be made to ensure that meetings are not overburdened with agenda items to leave adequate time for explanation and discussion, that papers are disseminated a week in advance, and that all committee members are compensated for their time both at the meeting and in preparation.

Future Action 6: As far as possible, intersections of characteristics should be considered in composing the committee and reviewed when membership changes such that, for example, early-career researchers are not mostly female and senior colleagues mostly male, to avoid compounding power imbalances within the committee itself that may feed into bias later on. If this cannot be achieved measures should be devised to minimise the impact and retain awareness of any imbalance.

3. Identification of 'Category A Submitted' staff

As outlined above, the process of ascertaining staff eligibility is complex for the School, and the processes around this designed to balance equitability with feasibility.

CAS Policy 1: As the threshold for inclusion in the REF is a contract of 0.2 FTE or more, the first step will be to assess each staff member's fractional affiliation to the School to determine who may be eligible. For staff on hourly-paid contracts this is determined by averaging the hours worked per year across the REF cycle (or since their start date if employment commenced mid-cycle); see Outcome, below, for more detail.

> CAS Risk 1: Members of research-active staff whose hours increase towards the end of the cycle or fluctuate substantially within it and thus do not meet the average threshold may be rendered ineligible; those with certain protected characteristics may be more likely to fall into this group, such as those with caring responsibilities or health needs.

CAS Action 1/ CAS Policy 2: Staff who are in this position will be offered fixed-term research contracts covering the census date in recognition of their research relationship with the School.

CAS Risk 2: These staff may not be identified due to CAS Policy 1/Risk 1.

CAS Action 2/ CAS Policy 3: Concurrently with administrative assessments of eligibility, the School will invite all staff to self-identify as research-active, regardless of fraction, in order that individual assessments can be made.

CAS Risk 3.1: This may not capture those who are not research-active at the point of invitation, given that research activity at the School is often non-continuous; this may disproportionately affect those with certain protected characteristics, who may be more likely to take time away from research (e.g. those with caring responsibilities or health needs).

CAS Risk 3.2: If the onus is on the individual to come forward, some may not feel comfortable doing so, such as those who are less confident about their research, early in their careers, approaching retirement, overburdened with other responsibilities, unclear about the REF, daunted by other processes contained in the CoP (such as quality assessments for selecting outputs), and so on.

CAS Risk 3.3: If aspects of eligibility relating to research activity, significant responsibility for research, and research independence, are assessed within the context of an individual discussion and initially for the purposes only of determining whether the researcher should be supported to formalise their research connection to the School in a manner that meets the REF criteria (as opposed to formally assessing these aspects of someone who has already been assumed to meet the criteria through an established relationship with the Research Department), there is scope for error and bias to affect not just who is determined as eligible but who is deemed worthy of becoming eligible.

CAS Risk 3.4: Staff who are familiar with the REF criteria may self-eliminate if they perceive themselves not to meet other requirements or if they are concerned about not having enough outputs.

CAS Action 3/CAS Policy 4: Audits of research activity will be undertaken annually and meetings will where possible be attended by more than one member of the Research Department to reduce potential for individual bias.

CAS Policy 5: The second step in determining Category A eligibility, for those who have been determined to meet the 0.2 FTE threshold, is to ascertain research activity as denoted by *either* a job description with expectation of significant research activity *or* evidence of research activity.

CAS Risk 5.1: Although in this case the list of staff who meet the 0.2 FTE threshold is known, evidence of research activity remains in most cases a matter of self-disclosure

from within a numerically very large possible pool. This contains the same risks as outlined above, plus the potential, considering the sometimes difficult distinction between pedagogy, practice, and practice-based research, for differing assessments of what constitutes 'research'. As the REF cycle is long and guidance is released at different times, these assessments may not be performed consistently, or by the same individuals, and may be coloured by assumptions about what a researcher 'looks like' or based on perceived quality rather than research content.

CAS Risk 5.2: Where staff self-declare as research-active, either before or after being determined as meeting the 0.2 FTE threshold, and are subsequently deemed not to meet the REF eligibility criteria, this may create feelings of exclusion that might be felt more fully by those with protected characteristics if they are minoritised in other ways.

CAS Risk 5.3: In cases where eligibility is decided for staff on the basis of their job description or evidence of research activity is provided by a source other than themselves, this may be disempowering; this feeling may be more acute for those with certain protected characteristics who are already more culturally disempowered.

CAS Action 5/CAS Policy 6: All staff will have the right to appeal decisions made about their eligibility.

CAS Risk 6.1: The timeframe for appeals may not be long enough for staff on smaller fractions, especially if notification comes over the summer when most staff are less engaged with the School.

CAS Risk 6.2: Staff may be unaware of potential inequalities they may wish to query (e.g. who is offered a 0.2 FTE contract and who is not) until it is too late to appeal them (or ever); see Outcome, below, for more detail.

CAS Risk 6.3: Staff with protected characteristics may be especially reluctant to appeal due to time constraints, fear of being seen as 'difficult', etc.

CAS Risk 6.4: The same bias may be present in the appeals process as in the assessment process, notwithstanding the independence of the Chair.

CAS Policy 7: After the determination of 'research independence' (assessed below), the final stage of considering eligibility is whether an individual holds 'significant responsibility for research'. This will be assessed by *either* a job description with two or more clauses pertaining to research *or* institutionally-provided time and resources for research activity during the REF cycle.

CAS Risk 7.1: Attempting to access time and resources for research, such as internal or external funding or curation of research events, may not have yielded fruit, meaning that those who have spent time demonstrating that they wish to be research active are rendered ineligible for failing to secure competitive funding; these

outcomes may affect those with protected characteristics more, given that generally there are known inequalities in who, and what types of research, are more likely to win grant bids.

CAS Risk 7.3: Staff who wish to bid for time and resources may not be able to do so if the work to compile the application is not remunerated; hourly-paid staff and those with protected characteristics are more likely to have constraints on their time and finances due to structural and generational wealth gaps, health issues, caring responsibilities, etc.

CAS Risk 7.2: If there is institutional bias in the types of research projects or researchers that are supported through these mechanisms this will follow into who is able to conduct research and who meets the REF eligibility criteria.

Outcome: 145 staff were deemed as at, above, or near the 0.2 FTE threshold. Of these, 31 were eventually deemed to meet the remaining eligibility criteria and therefore determined Category A Submitted. For a breakdown of the final submission and its comparison to the demography of both the 'academic' population of the School as a whole and the 0.2 FTE group, please see Section C, below. In reality, as conversations around research activity began early in the REF cycle and were repeated annually, the eligibility assessment processes, which were intended to be applied sequentially, were conducted iteratively. After identification of 0.2 FTE staff, five staff were offered fixed-term research contracts in recognition of the research work they undertook for the School that, because not formalised, did not meet the REF criteria as their hourly workload had fluctuated across the REF cycle (although the School assessed eligibility on an average across the years, the REF criteria dictated that in order to be eligible staff must meet the equivalent of 0.2 FTE in every year of the cycle). The list of eligible staff was published in the School e-zine, with eligible staff being contacted directly (and made known to each other), and there were no appeals regarding eligibility. In several cases eligibility was unclear and debated at some length by the REF Sub-committee. Assessment of staff eligibility at this institution was a very substantial piece of work further complicated by the fact neither local nor corporate HR have in-depth understanding of higher education or the REF and administering School HR is only part of their remit.[5] The complexity of the task, the number of permutations, and the limited administrative resource given the proportion of research-active staff to staff more generally, mean that these processes, whilst the most practicable under the circumstances, are not as straightforward, clear, or robust as they would ideally be.

Future Action 1: Whilst acknowledging the complexities and potential negative impacts in other areas caused by contractual changes, it would reduce uncertainty and the potential for bias in determining REF eligibility if the School's academic staff contracts resembled those at other HEIs so that responsibility for, and expectation of, research was clearer to both staff and the Research Department.

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[5] Local HR is responsible for the Guildhall School and the Barbican; Corporate HR is responsible for the City of London Corporation as a whole. The School, for the purposes of both, is largely treated as any other department of local government rather than an HEI and accordingly the systems, expertise, and terminology are not consistent with the REF or HE more broadly.

Future Action 2: Where REF eligibility is determined by proxy measures that themselves may be open to discriminatory processes (e.g. anything apportioned through competitive applications, especially where the time to place the application is not remunerated) or are not in the staff member's control (e.g. job description), alternative measures should be identified and included.

Future Action 3: Work undertaken on research, whether for the REF or not, if it is to be claimed by the School, should be compensated adequately, and this should be made clear from the outset, so that no staff member is disadvantaged by participating in research or deterred from self-declaring their research activity because of the perception or reality that it will require unrecognised/unremunerated labour. This future action will necessarily have a bearing on multiple processes and frameworks within the School, including but not limited to staff development, academic pay and grading, academic progression, and the conferment of job-titles recognisable across UK HE.

Future Action 4: Any process relying on self-disclosure should make clear what the potential benefits and requirements of doing so are with the aim of increasing both inclusivity and informed decision-making. Mechanisms should be developed and put in place to identify those who require additional support to reach their potential so that those who could benefit from targeted support do not self-select out of the process before their needs can become known.

4. Determination of 'research independence'

IR Policy 1: Independence is considered for each individual staff member conducting research during the REF cycle based on a variety of factors as 'research independence' is not a fixed characteristic: staff may have gained independence previously but may not assert/exercise their independence during the cycle, may no longer be considered independent following a change of direction in their practice, or may be undertaking formal research for the first time in which case independence may not be ascertained until completion of an independent project.

> IR Risk 1.1: Independence may be misunderstood as associated with age or research career stage conflated with overall career stage (e.g. many early-career researchers are senior practitioners).

> IR Risk 1.2: Staff who have been unable to achieve research independence or are not eligible for the REF may feel this excludes them from the School research community.

> IR Risk 1.3: Staff with protected characteristics may be slower to achieve the markers of research independence, or may be considered to have lapsed in independence, especially where this entails periods of leave or reduced productivity.

<u>IR Risk 1.4</u>: The lack of clear distinction in the definition of research independence, especially as independence can be fluid, may result in inconsistent assessments or unknown changes of status.

> <u>IR Action 1.1</u>: All literature will make it clear that research independence and early-career denotations are not related to physical age or seniority in other respects.

> <u>IR Action 1.2</u>: It will be emphasised that all staff who declare themselves research active are considered members of the School's research community regardless of independence, career stage, or REF eligibility status.

<u>Future Action 1</u>: See Future Action 1, above.

5. Selection of research outputs for submission

<u>ROS Policy 1</u>: All Category A Submitted (CAS) staff will be expected to make their research outputs available for potential inclusion in the REF.

<u>ROS Policy 2</u>: All REF-eligible outputs will be reviewed by at least two external experts who will be asked to provide a score and commentary in line with the REF grading system based on the REF criteria of significance, originality, and rigour, fit with Unit of Assessment 33 (Music, Dance, Drama, and Performing Arts), and a judgement of whether double-weighting should be requested.

> <u>ROS Risk 2.1</u>: As this cannot feasibly be a double-blind exercise, reviewers may exhibit bias in assessment of outputs based on actual or perceived characteristics of the researcher, or towards/against particular kinds of research or research topic within a field (and those with certain protected characteristics may be more likely to conduct research in these areas).

> <u>ROS Risk 2.2</u>: In the case of practice-based research it may be difficult for reviewers to disentangle their perception of artistic merit from assessment of research quality and/or for researchers to make this distinction when receiving feedback.

> <u>ROS Risk 2.3</u>: External reviewers available, particularly in certain fields, may not represent diverse perspectives either because the field is limited or their specialism is narrow.

<u>ROS Action 2/ROS Policy 3</u>: Outputs requiring further drafting and outputs with conflicting scores will be reviewed a second time, by new reviewers who will be selected to offer different perspectives to those from round one.

<u>ROS Policy 4</u>: The scores and feedback from external reviewers will be communicated to researchers.

ROS Risk 4: This may not be expected by either reviewers or staff, such that reviews are not written with the intention of being read by the researcher and researchers may be unprepared for receiving feedback and unclear how or whether to act upon it. This may be especially difficult to navigate for newer researchers and creative practitioners who are less familiar both with having their work assessed in this way and with the specific criteria of REF grading, particularly if there are conflicting reviews.

ROS Action 4/ROS Policy 5: Researchers will be contacted in advance of feedback being sent in order that they can be made aware of the limits of the review (i.e. that it is an assessment of the output's suitability for REF, not a judgement of its overall quality or artistic value) and asked to state whether they would like feedback and if so whether verbatim or in summary at a meeting with the Head of Research. All researchers who produce outputs that require additional material specifically for REF assessment (e.g. textual statements and/or contextual information) will be encouraged to discuss the most appropriate way of incorporating feedback with the Head of Research. Where staff have multiple outputs direction should be given regarding which to focus on.

ROS Policy 6: Each staff member must have a minimum of one output attributed to them. The remaining outputs required for the submission will be drawn from the additional outputs available, with in both cases highest-scoring outputs selected first. Final decisions will be discussed and ratified by the REF Sub-committee.

ROS Risk 6.1: If average scores are used to determine the highest scoring outputs this may obscure reviewer bias or disadvantage outputs that benefited from improved supporting material between reviews one and two.

ROS Risk 6.2: Given the small number of 'spare' outputs, the submission may become disproportionately weighted towards some individuals or research types, particularly if there is a risk of bias in the assessment of their outputs by either external reviewers or Sub-committee members.

ROS Action 6/ROS Policy 7: All feedback and scores will be interrogated individually and in comparison to other reviews so that potential biases or inconsistencies in scoring can be considered and contextualised. Average scores will be assigned a symbol to denote whether they are a 'safe' score (all reviewers generally agree) or a 'chaotic' score (an average of high and low scores). Where scores are roundly equal, outputs will be chosen with the intention of achieving a balanced submission in all respects.

ROS Policy 8: Staff members who have been unable to work as productively as expected due to circumstances covered by the REF criteria are invited to declare these circumstances to the Research Department or HR in order that the School may apply for a reduction in outputs required for the submission.

ROS Risk 8: Staff may not feel comfortable revealing their circumstances if this is of no personal benefit to them or there is fear of disadvantage.

<u>ROS Risk 8.2</u>: Circumstances being known might result in bias or discrimination in the assessment of work by staff with circumstances.

<u>ROS Risk 8.3</u>: Staff who choose not to declare circumstances that are known to others may fear being perceived as unco-operative.

<u>ROS Risk 8.4</u>: Declaring certain kinds of circumstances may be re-traumatising.

<u>Outcome</u>: 37 distinct outputs were selected for submission, two of which were associated with two researchers each and four of which were double-weighted and supported with reserve outputs, for a total of 43 main outputs and four reserves. Analysis of the composition of the main outputs submission can be found below.

<u>Future Action 1</u>: Output identifiers should not reveal the identity of the researcher so that scores can be discussed without preconception, with acknowledgement that in practice it is challenging to retain anonymity within a small committee and wide range of output types.

<u>Future Action 2</u>: In being invited to declare circumstances, adequate consideration should be given to the consequences of this for staff and the process should be used as an opportunity to provide further support to those individuals rather than simply collect information for institutional benefit. The invitation should be phrased so as not to pressure individual staff members in any way to disclose circumstances.

<u>Future Action 3</u>: All staff who are eligible for submission should be given adequate training on the remit, purpose, and terminology of the REF so that there is a common baseline of understanding of the exercise and its implications, in particular the fact it is an institutional assessment not a personal one.

<u>Future Action 4</u>: A self-service institutional repository enabling staff to upload their own outputs for the record and for open access compliance should be considered, both to increase visibility of School research and to enable the Research Department to audit the School's research output without directly involving staff in the early stages of REF scoping. If this has the capability to integrate with REF systems (e.g. PURE) it could reduce manual processes in the Research Department, reducing the potential for error and liberating time that could be used to, amongst other things, consider equalities impacts more thoroughly.

<u>Future Action 5</u>: A clear precis of the REF guidelines pertaining to outputs and the School's approach to complex outputs should be provided as early as possible in the REF cycle so that staff are confident in how to compile their work and what is required from additional statements, in order to minimise conflicting advice and reduce redrafting. Research England can make this easier by publishing definitive guidelines earlier in the cycle.

SECTION C: Statistical Analysis of Final Submission

1. Staff

Total staff (665)[6]
Academic staff not Category A submitted (solid): 634/95%

Category A submitted staff (pattern): 31/5%

All academic staff: REF Eligibility
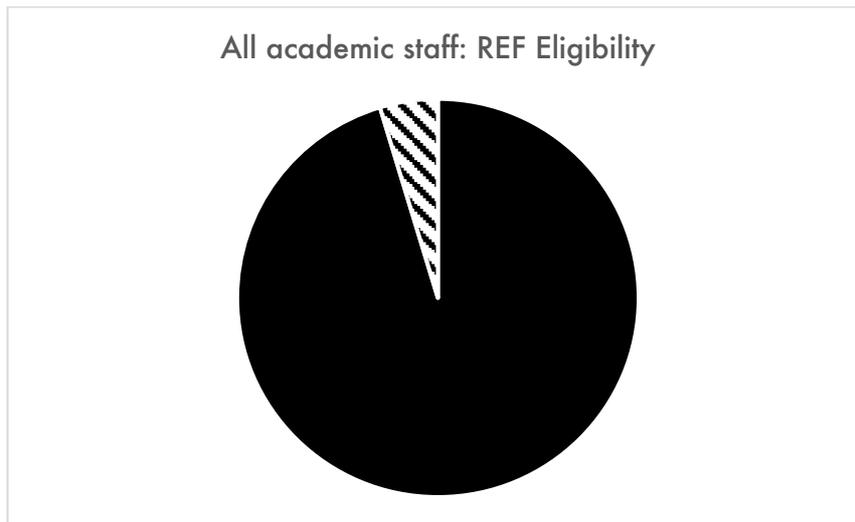
Gender

All academic staff: 40% female (solid), 60% male (pattern) by headcount

Category A submitted staff: 32% female (solid), 68% male (pattern) by headcount; 34% female, 66% male by FTE

All academic staff: Gender

Submitted staff: Gender

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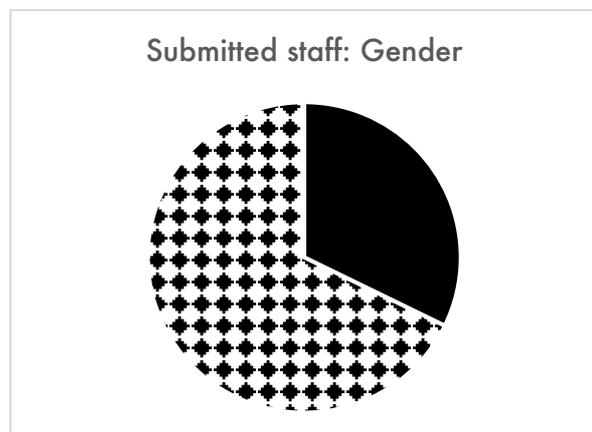
[6] This is the total number of staff on the School's payroll on the census date of 31 July 2020 with a contract that would be returned to HESA as teaching-only, research-only, or teaching and research. 'All academic staff' data was provided by Corporate HR. 'Submitted staff' data was provided by local HR.

Compared to the School as a whole by headcount (40% female), a smaller proportion of women were classed as Category A submitted (32% of the submission), demonstrating that there could be some bias in who is enabled to be research active or who is assessed as research active. When accounting for the FTE of submitted staff, the discrepancy reduced but persisted: female staff counted for 34% of the total FTE. This suggests that female staff could benefit from targeted support to develop their research careers and participate in the REF.

The small numbers involved make statistical analysis of gender reassignment, maternity/paternity, marital status, and sexual orientation difficult to assess with any significance as numbers fewer than five are not reported individually.

Ethnicity

All academic staff: 91% all White ethnicities (solid), 6% all ethnicities other than White (pattern), 2% undisclosed

Category A submitted staff: 94% all White ethnicities (solid), 6% all ethnicities other than White (pattern)
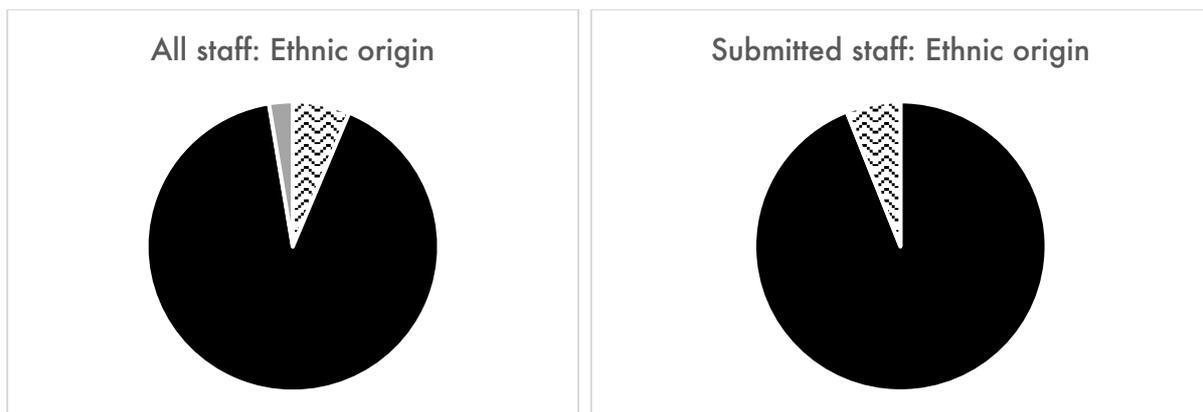

The small numbers involve make statistical analysis of individual ethnic and racial groups difficult to assess with any significance as numbers fewer than 5 are not reported individually.

Although the percentage of staff disclosing an ethnic origin other than White is consistent between all academic staff and the group submitted to REF, these statistics demonstrate a broader issue with diversity in the School as a whole that is only in part straightforwardly reflective of wider sectoral and cultural inequalities.

Disability

All academic staff: 81% abled (solid), 2% disabled (pattern), 16% undisclosed (grey)

Category A submitted staff: 94% abled (solid), 6% disabled (pattern)

All academic staff: Disability

Submitted staff: Disability
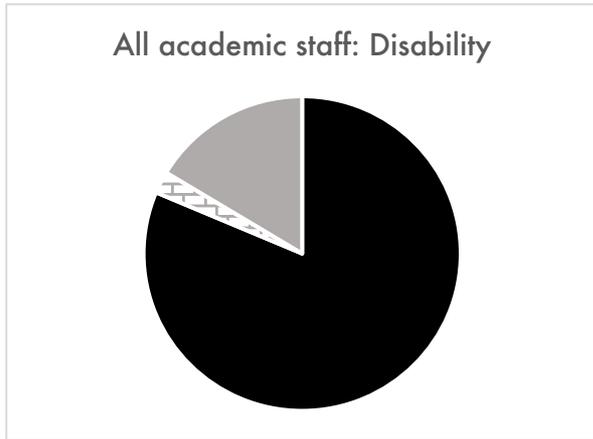
The numbers involved in this category are too small to draw any statistically significant conclusions.

Age

All academic staff:

Up to 30: 5%
31-40: 22%
41-50: 25%
51-60: 25%
61+: 22%

Category A submitted staff:

Up to 30: 0%
31-40: 16%
41-50: 29%
51-60: 32%
61+: 22%

All academic staff: Age

Submitted staff: Age
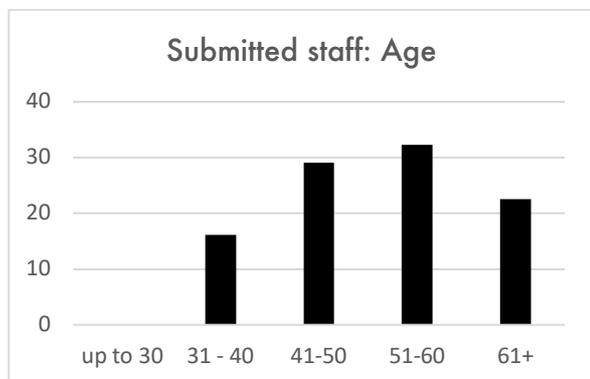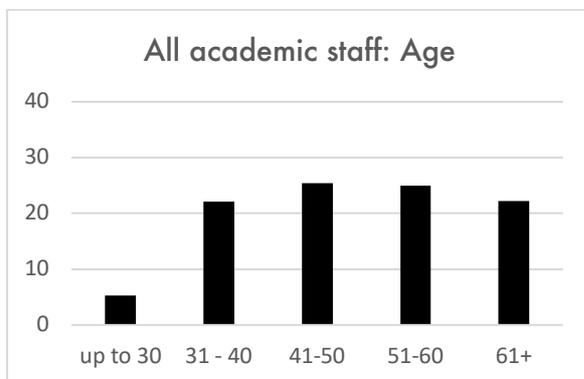
The headcount of submitted staff in the age group 51-60 are over-represented (32%) compared to the overall pool of academic staff (25%). This is even more pronounced when calculated in terms of FTE, where the percentage rises to 36%. The data suggests that

younger staff could be better supported to consolidate research careers, as they are under-represented both objectively and in comparison to the academic staff of the School as a whole.

Intersectional comparisons

The numbers of staff in the Category A submitted set are too small to perform any analysis of combined characteristics.

2. Outputs

As the pool of outputs submitted includes outputs authored by two previous staff, the percentages in this section do not directly map on to those in the previous section, but comparisons have been provided as an illustration.

43 outputs were submitted in total. The below charts show the percentage submitted that were authored by staff with each characteristic.

Gender

30% of submitted outputs were authored by women (pattern), and 70% by men (solid). This shows a small tendency to privilege outputs by men over those by women in comparison to the Category A submitted list, in which women comprise 34% of the FTE.

Authorship of outputs submitted: Gender
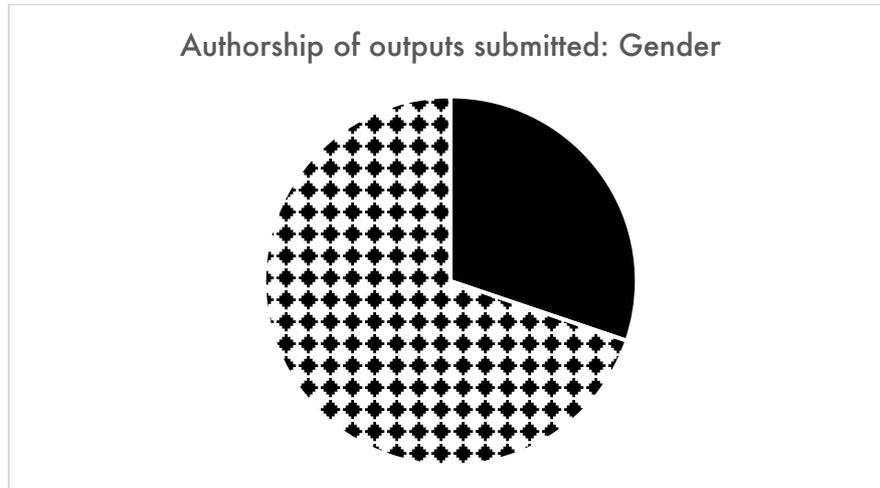
Ethnicity

The numbers in each category provided are too small to analyse.

Disability

88% of outputs submitted were authored by abled staff, 12% were authored by disabled or undisclosed disability status staff. This does not show a significant discrepancy in comparison to the Category A submitted list, but the School should continue to consider how it can best support disabled staff whether or not their disability is declared.

Authorship of outputs submitted: Disability
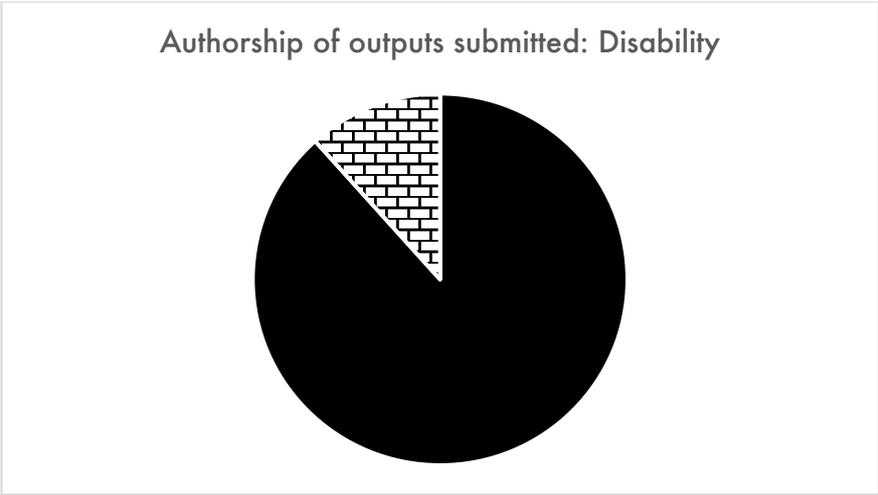
Age

Up to 30: 0%
31-40: 14%
41-50: 30%
51-60: 42%
61+: 14%

The data suggests that outputs authored by staff in the 51-60 age bracket (42%) were privileged over those from other age brackets in comparison to their headcount (32%) and FTE (36%), which is already disproportionate to the demography of the School more broadly. Whilst it is logical that researchers in this age group may have been receiving School support for longer and could potentially be further into their research careers, thus having more outputs to draw from, this may indicate either that researchers in other age groups could benefit from further support to produce REF-suitable outputs or that there was bias in scoring outputs authored by those in this age bracket. This should be borne in mind for the next REF.

Authorship of outputs submitted: Age
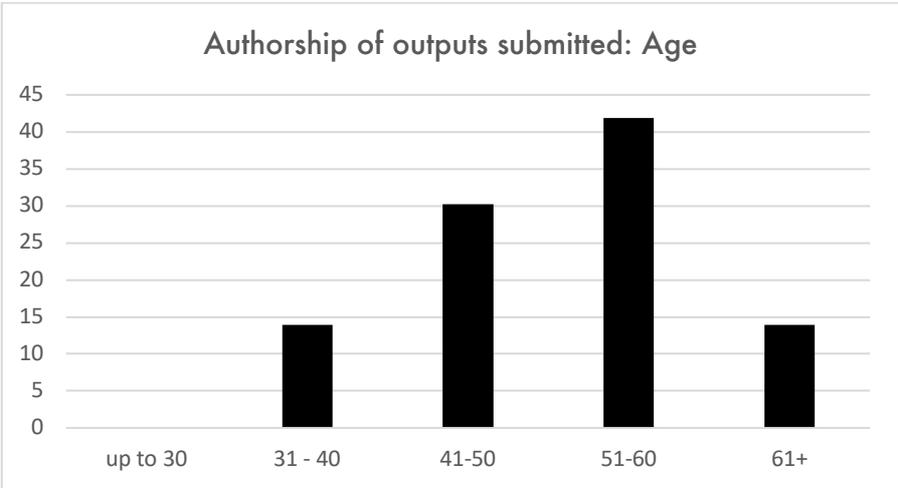
3. Summary

Whilst the lack of diversity in the School means the numbers are in most cases too small to show any statistically significant deviation, gender and age appear to be two areas in which the School could offer support to improve the equality of research participation and (perceived) standard such that the REF submission could better represent the demography of the institution. Further work should be done to examine how the set of submitted outputs compares to the pool of potential outputs in order to ascertain whether the disproportionate representation of certain groups is more likely a result of fewer outputs being available to choose from or trends in output scoring.

SECTION D: Further Considerations and Recommendations

Impact Case Studies

- It is not required that HEIs devise policies and processes for the selection of impact case studies (ICSs) in the CoP, and therefore there is no requirement to report on the potential equalities impacts of these processes. However, given that ICSs are the most time-consuming and burdensome aspect of the REF submission, that impact continues to trail outputs in terms of esteem, that responsibility for ICSs falls on a smaller set of staff, and that impact is not portable, it is advisable that more attention is given to this in future REF exercises.

REF policy more generally

- In many cases of bias that fall short of clear discrimination, policies and processes may discriminate by proxy – e.g. definitions of 'excellence' may adhere more to some kinds or topics of research (and researchers) than others, and certain types of people may be more likely to conduct particular kinds of research. Whilst the Research Excellence Framework is naturally highly invested in the concept of excellence, the idea that excellence can be objectively assessed, or is an objective term in the first place, is as false as the belief that bias can be eradicated on either an individual or institutional level when we exist in a deeply unequal world. Peer review, even with the best of intentions, cannot transcend wider biases, especially where they are inscribed in measurement apparatuses and definitions. This is not an excuse not to do the work to minimise this as far as possible in policy design and personal conduct, but a recommendation to acknowledge that bias will inevitably be present, that ideas of what is fair are not universal, and that it is therefore better to recognise the limitations to equality than to claim to have achieved it, especially as the potential for bias in institutional policy and practice is in some cases 'baked in' to the REF criteria from the outset.

- For institutions like the School where staff eligibility rests on so many variable factors, some of which are non-linear, the fact that eligibility is anchored to the census date, and that the census date is so close to the end of the cycle, means that realistically eligibility can only be finally determined retrospectively and by this time, especially if the staff member has only newly moved into one of the eligibility categories (e.g.

research independence, or having time and resources to dedicate to research), it may not be possible for research to appear in the public domain in time. Similarly, the fact the School's staff are disproportionately on small-fraction contracts means that although the overall output pool is reduced to account for the total FTE and further unit reductions can be requested on the basis of staff circumstances, the minimum of one output per person regardless of fraction can be difficult to reach, especially where a minimal contract intersects with other characteristics that reduce capacity for work across the REF cycle.

- The fact that only outputs scored 3* or 4* attract funding (at least according to the REF2014 formula) leads to devaluation of high quality and necessary research that does not meet this threshold, risking the perception that it is 'wasted space' in the submission and, crucially for an institution of this kind, in the research environment as a whole. This disproportionately disadvantages early-career researchers, part-time researchers, researchers who have taken career breaks, and any researcher with demands on their time outside of research such that they have not been able to produce sustained work yet, i.e. work more likely to attain this standard. It also disadvantages researchers who work in areas that are less easily assessed by REF measures. Beyond the School specifically, based on staff experience imported from similar work at other, more traditional HEIs, it has been observed that the perceived need for an entire REF submission to be comprised of 3* and 4* outputs particularly disadvantages those who apply for REF-eligible positions close to the census date as they are expected to 'bring with them' enough REF-quality outputs to make it 'worth' having them on the payroll.[7] This means that competition for academic jobs, even and especially post-doctoral fellowships or teaching replacement posts that are occupied by those early in their careers who have had less time to amass research outputs, is more acute than usual at particular points in the REF cycle. For fellowships with post-PhD time restrictions, this disadvantages some cohorts of doctoral graduates more than others. Overall this raises the bar such that newly-minted PhDs are expected to have already published 3* and 4* outputs in order to have a chance at acquiring academic employment, placing further pressure on a career stage that is already known to cause mental health problems and meaning that realistically most early-career researchers will be required to produce research outputs in their own time, unwaged, which as well as being undesirable is less achieveable for those with certain protected characteristics, replicating existing inequalities in the HE sector. Attaching funding to all grades of research output from 1-4*, albeit on a sliding scale, would help to ensure that all research is valued and enable institutions to better support early-career and disadvantaged researchers without financial penalty (that in turn affects what can be supported in future).

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[7] Whilst appreciating that the REF guidance makes allowance for reduced productivity by early-career researchers and those with other circumstances, the mythos of the REF is such that the finer points often do not circulate. This in combination with the element of doubt associated with output reduction requests based on staff circumstances creates an incentive to 'play it safe'. The REF criteria leaves room for institutions to make fair, ethical, and equitable decisions, but, from assessing the best policies to implementing them, this is complex, time-consuming, and risky. Given that the reduced QR funding that would likely result from an 'equalities first' rather than 'money first' approach has long-term consequences that also have a human cost, there is no easy solution.

Appendix 8

HE Employment/Study History

<u>2007</u>   **Clerical Officer** • School of Arts • University of Sussex

<u>2007-2010</u> **BA English with creative writing** • Goldsmiths, University of London

<u>2010-2015</u> **Fees Officer** • Student Services • Goldsmiths, University of London

<u>2011-2013</u> **MA Comparative Literary Studies: Modern Literary Theory** • Goldsmiths, University of London

<u>2014-2015</u> **Postgraduate Coordinator** • Department of History • Goldsmiths, University of London

<u>2015</u>   **Senior Enrolments and Records Officer (Research Students)** • Student Services • Goldsmiths, University of London

<u>2016-2017</u> **Programmes Officer** • Department of History • Department of Classics • King's College London

<u>2016-2017</u> **PhD Student Representative** • Department of Sociology • Lancaster University

<u>2016-2017</u> **Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team Member** • Department of Sociology • Lancaster University

<u>2016-2022</u> **PhD Gender Studies** • Department of Sociology • Department of Educational Research • Lancaster University

<u>2017</u>   **Research Administrator** • Arts and Sciences Research Office • King's College London

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