

Navigating the unknown:

**Exploring first in family students' sense of belonging during their
transition into university**

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MAR

2025

Navigating the unknown: Exploring first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university

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A thesis submitted to The University of Gloucestershire in accordance with the requirements of the degree of MA Education and Learning in the School of Education and Science.

October 2024

Word count: 32,920

Abstract

This research explores first in family students' sense of belonging at university.

Drawing upon data obtained from two focus groups, consisting of four and three participants respectively, and conducted during the participants first and second years, this research focuses on themes of belonging and identity, first in family status, family and school support, and peer connections. A focus group method has been utilised as it facilitates connections between the participants which aids their sense of belonging through recognition of their shared characteristic as first in family students, and through the sharing of experiences. Four female participants were recruited from a range of disciplines within the same university, all were white, one was a care leaver, and all had enrolled straight from secondary school or 6th form college, after having completed their A Levels. All lived away from home during term time.

Participant narratives have been analysed using discursive psychology, which considers the interactional work performed within the focus group discussions.

Discursive psychology enables exploration of discursive practices used by participants to achieve the action orientation of their discourse. Discursive psychology is concerned with how participants construct their language and position their identities and those of others in their discourses to achieve certain aims. This is explored within the context of the setting in which a narrative or discussion takes place. Within this research this is in the context of the focus group discussion. A focus on identity is salient within this research as a sense of belonging at university has been found to support the development of a student identity.

Findings highlight the strengths and achievements of the participants as enablers of their journey into and through university, challenging the deficit view of first in family

students and highlighting the significance of peer connections and the importance of creating a holistic approach to belonging across the student lifecycle.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of another academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

Date: 26th October 2024

DOI: 10.46289/ZMWL2458

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Alex Masardo, not only for your knowledge and guidance, but for the interest and enthusiasm you have shown throughout my research. I have thoroughly enjoyed our supervision meetings over coffee and appreciate the opportunities you have afforded me.

I also wish to express my thanks to Paul Vare for the support and guidance you provided during the completion of my PAF and ethics forms. I am also incredibly grateful to all the staff at the University of Gloucestershire who supported me in recruiting participants, particularly Omar El Masri, Rachael Bullingham, Martine Deighan and Charlie Parker who gave their time to offer advice on participant recruitment when the going got tough!

To my partner Bob and my beautiful son Otto, you have endured hours of gaming and tennis to enable me to have the time to study. Your love, patience and humorous antics have helped me incredibly over the last three years and have not gone unnoticed, thank you.

To two incredible women, my sister Trudie, who suffered many readings of this thesis and showed a genuine interest in my research and its progress, and to Emma who has championed me throughout thank you.

Finally, to the brilliant first in family students who took part in my focus groups, I cannot express enough my gratitude for your time and willingness to share your experiences and thoughts. I wish you every success in your studies and futures.

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Introduction

Widening Participation and first in family students:

In 1996, Gillian Shephard, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England, along with Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland appointed a committee to make recommendations on the development and direction of the higher education system in the United Kingdom. The report made 93 recommendations, including that ‘the provision of higher education should be expanded to allow for widening participation’ (Dearing, 1997). In its broadest sense, widening participation helps ‘underrepresented groups to access further or higher education to continue their education’ (Advance HE, 2020).

First in family students, defined for the purpose of this research as students whose parents, stepparents, or guardians, siblings and stepsiblings have not attended university, are included within these underrepresented groups (Coombs, 2022). Within this is recognition that first in family students do not benefit from a family history of higher education and therefore widening participation initiatives should aim to bridge the gap between first- and second-generation students social and cultural capital (Brosnan *et al.* 2016).

Dearing’s report was not, however, the instigator of widening participation within the United Kingdom. The idea of an expansion of the higher education system came from Robbins’ 1963 review on higher education, which considered the needs and resources of the post-war nation (education-UK.org). Here, the ‘Robbins principle’ (Hillman, 2023) in which ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Robbins, 1963) underscored all the report’s recommendations. Like Robbins’ report, which focused on the expansion of student numbers for 20 years until the

early 1980's, Dearing's report also focused on meeting 'the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years' (Dearing, 1997).

At the point of the Dearing report's publication in July 1997, Tony Blair's Labour government had been in power for two months, following a successful general election campaign in which 'breaking the cycle of underachievement' (Coughlan, 2007) was a Labour priority that impacted the education sector. At the 1999 Labour conference, Tony Blair set the target of increasing the participation of young people in higher education to 50 per cent by 2010 (Kernohan, 2023). This target was not, and has still not been reached, however, as Taylor *et al.* (2009, p.1) argue 'the successes and failures of widening participation go far beyond the increase in the number of students from under-represented sections of society.'

Questions around the successes and failures, or benefits and limitations of widening participation have been the subject of sociological and educational research, including the impact of widening participation on graduate outcomes (Stuart *et al.* 2011), working-class students' sense of belonging (Scanlon *et al.* 2020), and social class and mobility (Bathmaker, 2021). Crozier *et al.* (2008) discuss concerns surrounding widening participation, particularly the failure of elite universities to attract working-class students and 'to realize their potential for combining academic excellence with a rich social diversity' (Reay *et al.*, 2009). Focus group data from the discourses of '64 ethnically diverse working-class men' Archer *et al.* (2001, p.431) arguing for and against going to university, concluded that these men 'constructed participation in higher education in terms of loss' (Archer, *et al.* 2001, p.446) and that initiatives to raise aspirations of working-class men need to acknowledge the 'real', economic and social barriers to participating' (p.446) for this group. While the most recent of these studies is over 15 years old, the issue of diversity within the student

body, particularly in elite universities, remains. In 2018, UK rapper Stormzy launched a scholarship to provide financial support for Black UK students who have gained a place at the University of Cambridge (Cambridge). Over 40 students have so far benefited from this scholarship. However, in an interview with *The Guardian* (2023) Joseph Vambe, one of the first graduates of this initiative, who grew up on 'an inner-city deprived council estate' (*The Guardian*, 2023) talked of the culture shock of entering Cambridge, his initial isolation and the internal process he went through to move from thinking 'I'm lucky to be here' to 'I deserve to be here, I have a right to'. The disjuncture between Joseph's background and the field of an elite institution like Cambridge highlights that the issues raised by Archer (2001), Crozier (2008) and Reay (2009), still exist, and that 'working-class students at elite universities [continue to] face several dilemmas that their middle-class counterparts...do not have to confront (Jetten *et al.* 2008). However, there is recognition by the University of Cambridge (incidentally where Diane Reay is Professor of Education) that 'there is however still more work to be done to ensure that UK Black students not only apply to study at the University but feel at home here and achieve their full potential.' (University of Cambridge). There is hope therefore, through the acknowledgement that the success of this widening participation initiative must 'go far beyond the increase in the number of students from under-represented sections of society' (Taylor *et al.* 2009, p.1).

In the ten-year period after the Labour government came into power (1997-2007), the number of first in family students increased from 44,000 to 283,000 (Coughlan, 2007). HESA data on first in family student numbers show an increase of 24% during the period from the 2012-13 academic year where 526,460 UK first in family students were studying at undergraduate level, compared to the 2021-22 academic year

where this had increased to 651,965 (Universities UK). HESA data on first in family students is taken from the UCAS (University and Colleges Admissions Service) application question on whether parents or guardians hold higher education qualifications. Despite issues with the collection of first in family data, which will be discussed in the literature review, the HESA data does provide an understanding of the significant number of first in family undergraduate students studying at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom.

Although the macro view of first in family student numbers provides a broad context to this research, to understand the impact of widening participation on the experiences and outcomes for individual first in family students, one needs to explore the subject from a micro level perspective. Therefore, both initiatives and schemes set up to support first in family students, and the narratives of the students themselves, will be explored in this research.

Research questions:

What factors impact on first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university?

What are the experiences of first in family students in relation to their sense of belonging at university?

How do first in family students constitute their sense of belonging during their transition into university?

Research aims and objectives:

The aims of this research are:

- To explore first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university.

- To determine the impact of being a first in family student when navigating the transition into university.
- To analyse the barriers and enablers of the transition period for first in family students.
- To inform evidence-based approaches for engagement, involvement, and support for the transition into university for first in family students.

The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the experiences of first in family students' transitions into university.
- Explore the nature of the focus group as a means in itself to create a sense of belonging with this group of students.
- To utilise Discourse Analysis to analyse focus group data.

Rationale for this research:

My research will focus on the experiences of first in family students at a post 1992 university. This study contributes to the wealth of research into the experiences of first in family students, by exploring their sense of belonging during transition into university through to their second year. While research on first in family students and belonging is replete with data collected through surveys, questionnaires and interviews (Crozier *et al.* 2008; Stuart *et al.* 2011; Wainwright & Watts, 2021), less use has been made of the focus group method, with the exception of Briggs & Clark, 2012 and Potts, 2021. This study will therefore enhance current research by utilising the focus group method, not purely for the purpose of data collection, but to facilitate

connections between the participants. It is anticipated that this will aid their sense of belonging through recognition of their shared characteristics as first in family students, and through the sharing of experiences, thus playing out in real time the phenomena of forming a sense of belonging within a group setting.

Where focus groups have been utilized within research on first in family students, and belonging, the method of analysis is often thematic. This study will therefore extend current research through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology. Using these different orientations, it will examine how participants consider and interpret their experiences as first in family students and their sense of belonging at university, within a focus group setting. The use of these forms of analysis enables the examination of interaction within the discourse, focusing on not only what is said, but how it is said. The rationale for this research therefore is to provide participants with a platform in which to explore their individual experiences and perspectives with each other, fostering more dynamic discussions that an interview would.

The motivation for this research derives from my own experience as a first in family student from 1997-2000, and from 20 years' experience of working within the higher and further education sectors. My roles within the sector gave me an extensive view of the diversity of backgrounds, opportunities afforded to, and experiences of the students within it. During nine years at UCAS I visited a variety of secondary schools, from independent schools where day school fees were in excess of £14,000 per year, and students had access to golf clubs, to inner city schools where students walked through airport style metal detectors before entering the building. During my time working at a university, I have supported students who navigated their way

through difficult and complex situations including the loss of a parent, being a young carer, mental health issues and parental incarceration, to name a few.

All these experiences, these student narratives, including my own, built the initial foundations of this research. Through this I recognised the significance of equity within higher education, acknowledging that we do not all start in the same place, with the same knowledge and access, support and capital. Talking to these students, I have had the privilege of witnessing their strength, determination and perseverance during their studies. However, the positioning of some students, like these, as somehow lacking or deficit, because they do not fit the traditional mode of a university student, has been the view within some areas of higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Attridge, 2021). The allocation of resources, or initiatives to reach equal outcomes as part of providing equity, sometimes using contextual offers, where the student's background is taken into account by a university when making an offer (The Sutton Trust, 2019), should not then place the student in a position of deficit or lacking. However, as the perspective of one focus group participant in this research demonstrates, this is exactly how their contextual offer made them feel.

Underpinning this research, therefore, is the desire to explore the narratives of first in family students from a strengths-based perspective, through the application of an alternative lens, in which the enablers of their transition into, and journey through university are analysed.

First in family students and belonging:

Research has shown that for some first in family students the option of higher education is not an easy one (Reay *et al.* 2005), with concerns around finances (Universities UK), academic expectations (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Brosnan *et al.* 2016) and belonging (Araujo *et al.* 2014; Wonkhe, 2022) highlighted as factors

that contribute to first in family students dropping out of university (Universities UK 2018; O'Shea 2019). Research on first in family students has shown that having a social network and fitting in, helps to create a sense of belonging at university (Wilcox et al., 2006; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, 2018) which creates a buffer of support and increases retention. The 2022 Office for Students (OfS) consultation around student outcomes focuses on both student continuation and completion rates, and sets numerical thresholds for universities to meet, with penalties for those who do not. A report published by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation highlighted the importance of students' sense of belongingness and the strong links between belonging, retention, and success (Thomas *et al.*, 2017). This report highlighted that one size does not fit all, and that local contexts need to be acknowledged when considering interventions that may promote belonging and aid retention. This supports Taylor *et al.* (2009) argument that widening participation is more than just an increase in the number of underrepresented students. This current research is therefore pertinent at a time when student belonging and retention are high on the political agenda, and it is hoped that the findings gained from this research will help to inform evidence-based approaches for engagement, involvement, and support which may have implications for retention rates.

Literature review

This chapter will review literature that explores the topics considered within this research. It will start with a review of the literature on student belonging, with a particular focus on the impact of belonging on first in family students. This includes the factors that are encompassed within belonging, the impact of these factors on

both student retention and success, and recommendations of enablers of belonging.

One of the aims of this research is to analyse the enablers of the transition period for first in family students which will explore the students' narratives from a strengths-based perspective. Therefore, literature which has challenged the deficit view of first in family students will also be reviewed as this considers the characteristics and skills which first in family students use to navigate the field of higher education.

Finally, a review of the types of data used to measure disadvantage for widening participation purposes, along with the context of how these measurements are used within research on non-traditional students, including first in family students, is explored. This chapter will conclude with a justification of the use of parental education data, which indicates whether a student is the first in their family to attend university, as a measurement within this research.

Belonging:

A sense of belonging has been described as feeling 'at home' (Yuval-Davis 2006, p.197) and connected to others. Weiss (2021) enhances this further, explaining that it is a human need which sustains the holistic wellbeing of an individual. A student's sense of belonging during their transition into higher education and throughout their time at university has been a subject of considerable research into student retention and success (Thomas, 2012). Success can be viewed, not only in terms of academic achievements (Lewis and Hodges, 2015, in Weiss p.93), but in motivation (Araujo *et al.* 2014), in the building of relationships (Stuart, 2006; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020), and in personal growth (Stuart 2006). Within higher education, increasing focus has been

placed on belonging due to its impact on student success and retention, and as a result it has become somewhat of a buzzword within research (Wonkhe, 2022) and policy (HEPI, 2022).

The Wonkhe 2022 'Building belonging in higher education' report, which collated a significant amount of data from over 5000 students and 400 staff members across the UK, concluded that there are four foundations which form a sense of belonging: Connection, Inclusion, Support, and Autonomy. The report found that connection had the most profound impact on students, and that this is required at various levels, including with peers and both academic and support staff, at course and university level. The report saw the facilitation of connection as a responsibility of the university, through activities and initiatives, with emphasis on course pedagogy. This aspect is supported by Araujo *et al.* (2014) case study at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, where a Belonging Project was set up in conjunction with staff and students. The Belonging Project provided ongoing curriculum embedded 'structured opportunities' throughout the first year that supported student collaboration (Araujo *et al.*, 2014, p.25) and developed connection. This included small group activities during normal lecture times, where students were set a task that was tied in with the curriculum and completed it in a relaxed off-campus environment. This provided students with the opportunity to form peer to peer connections outside of the classroom, which subsequently enhanced classroom dynamics, confidence and motivation around their studies and helped form a connection to the course, and to the university.

Scanlon *et al.* (2020) research into the experiences of underrepresented groups of students at a university in Ireland found that the study participants, who had all entered the university through the HEAR widening participation programme, had

benefited significantly from a three-day intimate orientation programme with HEAR, which helped to develop their sense of belonging (Scanlon *et al.* 2020). Students found that sharing on-campus accommodation with people on the same course was particularly helpful in forming connections and building a sense of belonging before the start of their first semester.

Again, this supports Wonkhe (2022) findings that there needs to be more focus on course level connections with peers, and more recognition of how course peer connections help to build confidence. Staff respondents in the report gave mixed views on the facilitation of peer connections through the course, with one respondent acknowledging the course as a central place for student interaction and therefore a place where they can influence connections through the learning experience, whereas another respondent felt it would 'muddy the waters (let alone break teaching staff) to also have the responsibility to facilitate the building of social connections' (Wonkhe, 2022, p.10).

However, from a wider university perspective, creating and supporting a sense of belonging will increase retention rates and help to meet their Access and Participation Plan targets. It may also reflect positively on National Student Survey (NSS) results. The NSS is a survey that all final year students are asked to complete and includes questions around teaching, academic support, marking and assessment and organisation and management. The survey can be used by prospective students and their parents when deciding what and where to study, therefore another reason for universities to ensure all students, regardless of their background, are reporting a positive experience in their survey responses.

Araujo *et al.* (2014) case study viewed the notion of transition 'as a process, not an event' (Kift *et al.* 2010, in Araujo *et al.* p.21), through initiatives that fostered and sustained a sense of belonging throughout the first year and set the foundation for continuing these initiatives throughout the second and final years. Yuval-Davis (2006, p.199) explains that belonging is a 'dynamic process' and is only spoken about when it is 'threatened in some way'. Although Yuval-Davis's work considers belonging on a larger political scale, her view that belonging is not permanent, but changes with the dynamics of the hegemonic group in which a person finds themselves, is a concept that can be used within the study of belonging at university.

Factors that may hinder belonging:

Yuval-Davis's perception of belonging as impermanent can be understood through the experiences of some students in both the Araujo *et al.* (2014) and Scanlon *et al.* (2020) studies. Here, the students noticed a change in their feelings of belonging in a new semester or new academic year where they found themselves in classes with different peers, and having to make new friends again, but without the transitional support that was provided in the first semester by the university. In these cases, where the feelings of belonging are no longer a given, the individuals could articulate this lack of belonging due to the insecurity that they are feeling around belonging within a new group of peers. A key finding from the What Works? Programme (Thomas *et al.* 2017) identified that feelings of isolation, such as those experienced by students who find themselves outside of a previously formed group, is one of the reasons cited as to why they have considered leaving university.

The reluctance of some universities to embrace diverse forms of social and cultural capital is viewed as a factor that can hinder belonging in Brosnan, *et al.* (2016)

research into the experiences of first in family medical students. Here the lack of medical connections and financial support for first in family students' formed barriers between them and other students, and with medical staff whilst on placement, leaving them feeling isolated. However, as the research highlighted, 'the medical profession is not representative of the population it serves' (Brosnan, *et al.* 2016, p.843), providing a strong case for the need to consider the barriers faced by the very students who could bridge the gap between practitioners and those they serve. As one student commented 'I think I'll be mostly me with patients, but I don't know how I'm expected to behave around other doctors' (Brosnan, *et al.* 2016, p.849).

Supporting student retention through belonging:

To support student retention, it is important that the notion of transition is seen as an ongoing process in generating a culture of belonging and connection for students across the university, particularly at course level, where social integration can help build academic confidence, motivation and persistence.

For first in family students, ongoing support from peers, especially for those who do not necessarily have the support or understanding of family and friends at home, can fulfil the role of family support and encouragement that is often seen as a given for middle class students (Stuart, 2006). Stuart suggests that this type of support from friends and peers at university is a form of social capital, and for some first in family students it is central to their success. Peer support can sustain them through periods of exam stress, homesickness, and provide camaraderie in relation to academic studies.

Whiteside (2024) research on race, ethnicity and stratification within the experiences of first in family students in the United States supports Stuart's view. Highlighting the

significance of 'protective relationships with peers who had a shared racial or ethnic background' (p.11) for first in family students of colour who faced acts of racism, along with racial and ethnic inequalities on campus. Developing the navigational capital required to navigate hostile and unsupportive environments (Yosso, 2005) by building friendships with other students of a shared racial and ethnic background, 'alleviated some of the burdens around experiencing racial microaggressions and discrimination' (Whiteside, 2024, p. 12). Whiteside's research reinforces the importance of peer support from students who share racial and ethnic backgrounds, in building belonging and connections. This study also challenges the deficit view of students of colour, by utilising alternative theoretical lenses, such as Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Framework (CCW) to consider the difference forms of cultural capital used by communities of colour to navigate their way through institutions such as 'racially hostile' (Yosso, 2006, p.80) university campuses.

Scanlon *et al.* (2020) also found that peer connections helped create a sense of belonging based on the shared interest of the subject being studied. For students from backgrounds where family and friends may be ambivalent about higher education, the connection with others whose 'head(s) are in the same place' (Scanlon *et al.* 2020, p.759) provides a sense of belonging and connection. Counter to this is that the student may feel they no longer fit in at home as articulated by some participants in Attridge (2021). There is however an opposing argument that some students, due to their interests and aspirations of university, did not fully fit in at home or school before university. This is supported by Reay *et al.* (2009) and Scanlon *et al.* (2020) where some research participants explained that before university, they had not met other people who shared their interests and aspirations but had been able to form friendships based on those at university.

Christie (2009) further supports these findings by highlighting the emotional risks of having a student identity for non-traditional students and the fragility of this identity. Feeling connected to other students through shared interests and aspirations and feeling connected to the course and institution will strengthen their student identity. Feelings of belonging within the university environment will also help mitigate against the risk of dropping out and reinforce their decision to enter higher education. For some students, the decision to enter higher education is done so against the wishes and support of family (Stuart, 2006; Scanlon *et al.* 2020) which can create discordance between them and their families. However, as discussed within the second focus group in this research, for some students, despite family support of their decision to study at university, this discordance can be as a result of the development of a student identity and increased feelings of belonging at university, shifting the issue of belonging from the university environment to that of home.

Challenging the deficit view:

Crozier and Reay (2011), O'Shea (2016, 2019) and Attridge (2021) have challenged the deficit view of first in family students by exploring the characteristics and skills which have helped them navigate into and through university. Their research explores the barriers, challenges and risks faced by first in family students but with the acknowledgement that the students themselves are not problematic. Instead, they view the English state schooling system (Ferguson, 2017), along with the structure of individual universities (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Attridge, 2021), as failing to prepare and support non-traditional students throughout their higher education journey.

Exploring how one cohort of first in family students transitioned into university, O'Shea (2016) utilises Yosso (2005) US based Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)

framework which challenges deficit views of 'Communities of Color' as places of cultural poverty. O'Shea uses the CCW framework as a strengths-based lens with which to reconsider the assumed shortfalls of first in family students. O'Shea focuses on areas such as 'aspirational capital' which is the ability to strive towards their future hopes and dreams despite the obstacles in their way, and 'navigational capital' which is used to 'move effectively through social institutions' such as universities (O'Shea, 2016, p.63).

O'Shea's research was conducted at a large Australian university, situated within a geographical area of lower levels of educational achievement and high unemployment rates. It highlights the importance of recognising the intersections of individual identities and social contexts within the first in family group, and the impact of variables such as social class, age, ethnicity and gender, which may provide 'fundamental but equally rich personal resources' (O'Shea, 2016, p.70) from which to draw upon when there is not a family history of higher education to support them. Thus, moving away from the 'lack' of higher education history towards a strengths-based view.

O'Shea's research provides a deeper description of the backgrounds of participants than the other studies discussed here, detailing the demographics of the 23 participants including sex, age, dependants, course of study, marriage status, and previous employment, variables which are considered utilising Yosso's framework. For example, the participants' ages range from 17 – 64, which gives the study a broader perspective than that of Attridge where the ages of participants are not given, but from the information provided by participants and the questions asked, it is assumed that the participants have attended university straight from school. Crozier and Reay's (2011) research include four mature students, but does not provide

demographic details on age, marital status, dependants, or employment prior to university, and therefore although some aspects, such as juggling studies around childcare are discussed, they are not an explicit consideration of a strengths-based view.

Crozier and Reay's (2011) research challenge the perception of first in family students as problematic and the view that the accountability and responsibility of these shortcomings lie with the individual student. Examining the pedagogic processes at two UK institutions; one elite (Southern University) and one post-1992 (Northern University), they focus on the impact these processes have on the working-class students in their study; all of whom are first in family. They found that the students at both institutions had little prior knowledge of what to expect and what was expected of them when it came to their academic studies, such as the structure and requirements of their course.

The students at the Northern University tended to work part time and live at home, therefore rather than immersing themselves fully into the wider university culture, university was just part of what they did. The university, with an awareness of its students' other commitments, provided a loose structure to academic work, such as non-compulsory lectures and personal tutor one to one time to support them.

Unfortunately, for the students in the study, this left them uninitiated, uninformed and at times floundering (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Rather than viewing this outcome as the students' lack of academic ability, Crozier and Reay see this as a failing of the university to offer academic framing and structure which would support academic progression for those who do not have a prior history of higher education.

The academic structure at the Southern university, aimed at tightly controlling the learning experience, through regular tutorials, direct feedback on progress, and clear direction, ensured the students understood what was expected of them. However, it also created an intense and competitive environment, which left some of the first in family students in the study 'on shaky ground compared to other students who knew what it was all about' (Crozier & Reay, 2011, p.148). Southern is a selective university, and the students will have beaten fierce competition to gain a place, therefore the academic ability of these students is not in question. However, their deficit, as perceived by some universities (see Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Brosnan *et al.* 2016) will be in their lack of understanding of academic expectations and structures, and they are therefore learning how to learn at this level, and trying to understand what is expected of them, whilst undertaking their academic studies.

Attridge (2021) argues that first in family students have a limited understanding of HE culture compared to their more privileged peers whose schooling and parental education gives them an advantage. This is not seen as a deficit of the student but rather a result of the inequality of the English state schooling system in which 'working class children get less of everything' (Ferguson, 2017) including support in preparation for HE. As one participant in Attridge's study explained:

'I don't think Oxford is very beginner friendly. having not done things before by not having the opportunity to, it felt like I was locked out of a lot of places' (Attridge, 2021, p.1445).

Attridge's study focuses on working class students; again, all of whom are first in family, at the University of Oxford. As with the students at Southern, these students are academically capable, and despite many challenges, know they have a right to

be at Oxford. Attridge; a black mixed-race working-class woman who graduated from an elite university, challenges the deficit view of these students arguing that their strong work ethic enabled them to overcome the barriers that their more privileged peers did not face, and their lack of self-belief and feelings of 'imposter syndrome' (Attridge, 2021, p.1445) were used to drive them to succeed at Oxford.

However, I would challenge Attridge's perception of the above and argue at what cost to the student socially. The identity of the individual, as a student at Oxford, who is first in family and working class, is divided. The students in the study are trying to manage a 'duality of identity' (Attridge, 2021, p.1447) between home and university, with challenges from family and friends around how they speak since starting university, and an expectation of the identity of a typical Oxford student from university staff, which they don't fit. For some of these students, this is managed by a degree of self-exclusion (Reay, 2021) from the university culture and a decision to remove themselves from the Oxford bubble (Attridge, 2021). This reduces their experience of university to a purely academic one with little or no social aspects, leaving them trapped by their academic success rather than liberated and empowered by it (Reay, 2021).

It is of note that several participants speak of the 'bubble' of the elite university, highlighting its intensity and their need to spend time away from it in the real world (Reay, 2021) in order to get away from the pressure cooker environment (Attridge, 2021), and away from any potential feelings of 'inferiority, lack of belonging, deficit and discomfort' (Reay, 2021, p.57). Reay (2021) highlights the lack of symmetry between the working-class habitus, and the field of the elite university as the cause of discomfort for the students in her research and argues for change in the culture

and ethos of higher education, in particular elite institutions to achieve a better social class mix and to create more diversity.

Reay (2021) and Attridge (2021), and to some extent Crozier and Reay (2011) research focus on the experiences of working class and first in family students at elite institutions. They seek to understand the impact on the individual, of a working-class habitus in a field where the capitals of the middle and upper classes dominate, and where first in family students excel academically but struggle socially. My research will focus on the experiences of first in family students at a post 1992 university, and therefore some of the issues and challenges faced by first in family students in the field of elite higher education, such as acculturation into the dominant middle / upper class culture, is significantly reduced. However, studies have shown that the transition for first in family students into higher education, whether at an elite institution or a post 1992 university requires an assimilation into a new culture which can be more challenging for first in family students who have a 'limited a priori understanding of the university environment' (Collier and Morgan 2008, in O'Shea 2019, p.98).

This section has examined previous research which challenges the deficit view of first in family students. This provides a grounding for my research, in which I will continue to challenge deficit views and offer an alternative lens in which to view the experiences of first in family students during their transition into university. A lens which recognises their strengths and achievements and considers how universities can recognise the different starting points in their students' higher education experiences, and deliver equity through engagement, involvement, and support.

Data on UK First in family students: justification for using the data, and comparison with other forms of WP data:

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for the 2021/22 cycle showed that 554,220 UK domiciled students were studying in the first year of their first degree at a UK higher education institution (HEI). In the same cycle, 195,480 students who had enrolled in the first year of a full-time undergraduate degree course had selected that they were first in family students on their UCAS application. The UCAS application asks, 'Do any of your parents, stepparents or guardians have any higher education qualifications, such as a degree, diploma, or certificate of higher education?' (UCAS). It is this question which determines whether a student is from a family where no one has achieved a higher education qualification. This information may be used by institutions within their Access and Participation Plans that they submit to the Office for Students (OFS) to demonstrate how they will 'improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education' (OFS, 2023).

However, there are a few issues with this data. Firstly, the question asks whether a parent, stepparent or guardian *has* a higher education qualification. This means that an applicant can select 'no' as their answer, although a parent, stepparent or guardian could have applied to and attended university for a period, but without gaining a formal qualification, and therefore they will have some experience of the application process and of university life which can be of benefit to the applicant. This is different to someone who comes from a background where no one has applied to or attended university, as there is no history of higher education to fall back on.

In my research, the definition of first in family is a student whose parents, stepparents, or guardians, siblings and stepsiblings have not attended university. In this definition, the first in family student will have no history of higher education in their immediate family with which to help prepare them for university. I have included siblings within this definition as having a sibling who has attended university also provides a history of higher education, and in many cases a more recent history with which to gain understanding and support from.

The second issue with the HESA data is that it does not provide a full picture of the numbers of first in family students as the UCAS parental education question is optional. Additionally, first in family applicants completing the UCAS form can also choose 'don't know' and 'I prefer not to say' in answer to this question. HESA data shows that 43% of students in the 2021/22 cycle had selected 'no' to their parents, stepparents or guardians having a higher education qualification, thus rendering them first in family students, however this number may be higher. Despite the data issues discussed above, the HESA figure of 44% does however highlight the significant number of students studying at UK HEIs who are first in family students.

The information about first in family students derived from the parental education question is the focus within this research, however it is important to put this information into context alongside other forms of measurements that are used by universities within their Access and Participation Plans. To gain an understanding of what these measurements tell us about the backgrounds of non-traditional students and whether these are useful measurements for widening participation (WP) strategies I will now consider some of these measurements in more detail.

Overview of alternative forms of data for measuring disadvantage for widening participation purposes:

Studies have highlighted the different ways in which a young person's socio-economic background can influence their academic attainment and achievements (Ingram 2009; Ilie *et al.* 2017; Hunter *et al.* 2018), with parental occupation, parental education, and eligibility for free school meals (FSM) used as some of the proxies of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on education at household level (Ilie *et al.* 2017).

Ilie *et al.* (2017) explore the use of FSM eligibility; 'the most widely used proxy in the UK context' (Ilie *et al.* 2017, p.257) as a measure of deprivation in which to identify children who are at risk of low achievement in order to direct funding to these children and their schools. Ilie *et al.* (2017) compare FSM data to other measures, including parental education, and highlight several issues with it. This includes its failure to recognise children in working poor households (Hobbs & Vignoles, 2009) who may not meet the FSM criteria which requires their household income to be less than £7,400 a year after tax (Gov.uk), along with those who choose not to claim for FSM due to dietary requirements or cultural reasons (Iniesta-Martinez and Evans 2012; Lord *et al.* 2013).

In 2017 the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which was the independent regulator of fair access to higher education prior to Office for Students (OfS), gave a briefing on developing WP interventions in which 'Disadvantage [*was*] identified as a key barrier to HE access' (Hunter 2018, p.38) with suggestions to use both FSM and POLAR data (which I will discuss later) as two of the potential proxies of this disadvantage. To support the gathering of this data for entry into higher education, the UCAS application form asks a question about receipt of FSM between the ages of 11 and

18. UCAS explains that the information given by the applicant provides universities with details of ‘any circumstances that you might need support for during your studies’ (UCAS.com). This demonstrates the use of FSM information to indicate socio-economic deprivation to universities, used to help make contextual offers, which consider the barriers faced by some students in entering higher education. However, as discussed, there are many disadvantaged children who do not meet the FSM criteria, and therefore this is not an adequate indicator of a barrier into higher education.

Ilie *et al.* (2017), and Hunter *et al.* (2018) explore some of the measurements used to monitor the impact of socio-economic status on educational achievement levels. Along with FSM, their research explores measurements including the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (Ilie *et al.* 2017), the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) (Ilie 2017), and POLAR3 (now POLAR4) data. IMD considers seven areas to indicate deprivation, including health, education, income and employment. IDACI measures the proportion of all children aged 0-15 living in income deprived families, and POLAR4 measures participation rates in higher education based on postcode, with quintile 1 being the lowest rates into higher education and quintile 5 being the highest (Hunter *et al.* 2018). IMD, IDACI and POLAR4 proxies all measure deprivation at neighbourhood level as opposed to household level.

Hunter *et al.* (2018) argue that the use of neighbourhood level measurements of deprivation as indicators for WP policies are problematic because they are too wide in their scope. For example, when entering a postcode for POLAR4 data, it returns information linked to the Middle Layer Super Output Area (MOSA) which is a small area statistic boundary set by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The issue with

this is that in some areas there is a large discrepancy between the occupants of those areas. Hunter *et al.* (2018) gives the example of London, where both 'highly affluent and highly deprived populations (...) reside in close proximity' (Hunter *et al.* 2018, p.39). Therefore, children of poorer households, living in quintile 5 areas may be missed if universities use this measure. Additionally, children living in quintile 1 areas may attend school within a quintile 5 area and yet be considered for contextual admissions. To put this into context, a family in which a parent, or both parents have a degree may live in a quintile 1 area, however their child may attend a school in a quintile 5 area. If a university were to use only POLAR4 data to consider the child's UCAS application for contextual admissions, they would not have the full picture of the child's circumstances. Therefore, combining the use of both FSM and POLAR4 proxies, as recommended in OFFA's (2017) briefing will not necessarily highlight the disadvantage faced by some students due to them either not being eligible for FSM, or to the measures used being too wide in their scope as in the case of POLAR4.

Social class: parental occupation:

A significant amount of research into non-traditional students uses social class as the main indicator of disadvantage for students applying to and progressing through university (Attridge, 2021; Bathmaker *et al.* 2016; Crozier and Reay 2011; Ferguson 2017; Reay 2018). Within several of these studies where the focus is primarily on social class, the student's first in family status is highlighted as a significant factor in their preparedness and understanding of higher education (Attridge 2021; Bathmaker *et al.* 2016; Crozier and Reay 2011). In her study on the identity of working-class students at Oxford, Attridge (2021) highlights that although the students were selected based on self-identifying as working class, a significant amount (11 out of 15) identified as first in family and met other criteria for the

university's access and participation targets, such as FSM eligibility (10 out of 15). Of note, only 4 out of the 13 who provided postcode information, came from either quintile 1 or 2 areas. Although there is no further detail on this measurement in the study, as previously discussed, this low number may be due to discrepancies in the occupants of a particular postcode area where both highly affluent and poorer households reside in proximity. Alternatively, a student may have attended a school in a POLAR 5 area where entry into higher education is viewed as a natural progression route. Again, this highlights the issues with using neighbourhood level measurements such as POLAR data.

Attridge (2021) use of social class, in this case using working class as the primary key indicator of disadvantage in her research, is significant. Although she does not discuss the measurement used for participants to identify their social class in the research, she does however discuss the 'complexity of class identity' (Attridge, 2021, p.1438) in relation to her research. She draws on not only the quantitative data such as economic status as measured by parental occupation and family earnings, but also qualitative data such as cultural and social which are also linked to class identity. The complexity of measuring social class for access and participation purposes will now be considered.

Information about parental occupation is taken from the UCAS application. This mandatory question uses the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) from the ONS to measure the socio-economic status of the applicant's background. The NS-SEC uses 8 'classes' (ONS) in which to classify the adult population based on occupation, with class 1 = higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations through to class 8 = never worked / long-term unemployed. On the UCAS application, the applicant must free type an occupation

title, such as mechanic, which then returns a list of results (51 in this instance) with mechanic in the title, such as aircraft mechanic or car mechanic and each of these will be classified within 1 of the 8 NS-SEC classes. It is this information that is used by universities to understand the social class background of the applicant when considering access and participation.

Social class is more than just economic status, and the NS-SEC measurement, despite advising that it is (just) a measurement of 'socio-economic positions in modern societies' (ONS) also provides details of the qualifications required for a particular occupation. This information therefore helps to build an understanding about a student's cultural capital which is 'institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications' (Bourdieu, 1986, in Seal 2022, p.24). An understanding of the social capital of a student can also be derived from this measurement. Social capital is linked to the network of people around an individual, therefore a student whose family background is one of solicitor or doctor (NS-SEC code 1) will have better access to the required resources necessary to enter and navigate through higher education, compared to a student whose background is one of car mechanic (code 5) or retail assistant (code 6). Simply put, a case of 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' (Seal, 2022, p.24).

The NS-SEC measurement for the UCAS parental occupation question therefore does provide universities with some insight into the social class of individual students. However, whereas this may be a straightforward task for some occupations such as solicitors or doctors, for other occupations it may not be as obvious as to what the social class of the student is. Another consideration is that the occupation selected for the UCAS application does not necessarily give the full picture around qualifications, economic situation or social and cultural capital, as at the point of

application a parent may be in an occupation that does not require a degree, despite having a degree level qualification. Given that university admissions officers spend on average less than 2 minutes looking at a student's personal statement (Adams, 2023) it is highly unlikely that they have the time to delve into this level of investigation to understand the student's social class. Given the complexity around social class and what this means for understanding a student's readiness for university, it is important that the parent's educational background is taken into consideration as part of a university's access and participation plans, to help 'improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education' (OFS, 2023).

Justification for using FIF data in research: What can first in family status tell us about a student and why is it important to know?

In the previous section I explored the complexity of using social class as an indicator of disadvantage for those entering university, and within research on non-traditional students. In this section I will discuss the significance of first in family status when identifying the barriers faced by non-traditional students, and the support that can aid transition, success and belonging at university.

As discussed in the section on NS-SEC data, parental education status can influence social capital, as the network of relationships around a student can aid their preparation for, understanding of, and transition into university. A family history of higher education, along with the cultural and social capital that a degree education can provide, means that second generation students often benefit from information, experience and support that first in family students do not necessarily have access to (See Moschetti and Hudley; 2008 and Attridge; 2021). For example, in their research on the experiences of first in family medical students, Brosnan *et al.* (2016) explain

that aside from their own GP (general practitioner), these students have little access to health professionals to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of what a medical career involves, what happens at medical school and in order to gain access to relevant work experience, resulting in a lack of confidence and insight that their peers do not necessarily struggle with.

The significance of Brosnan *et al.* (2016) research is twofold. First it suggests that equity initiatives directed at students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as mentoring and role modelling programmes with faculty staff from similar backgrounds, have been shown to benefit the students by 'forging connections and social capital' (Brosnan *et al.* 2016, p.850) which aids student retention and success. Second, through the experiences of the study participants who discussed how their own backgrounds enabled them to relate to patients better than some of their peers, the study highlighted the importance of diversity within the medical profession, starting with its students. Arguing that 'Health care is deeply relational' Brosnan *et al.* (2016) suggest that to serve 'diverse communities, medical care must continuously review its practices, institutional arrangements and forms of professionalism' (Brosnan *et al.*, 2016, p.850) to ensure that it understands and responds to social changes. In other words, the medical community needs to train and retain medical staff from diverse communities to support amongst other things the relational aspect of doctor / patient interactions. Brosnan *et al.* (2016) research highlights how first in family status can impact on a student's experience, and why it is important for universities to deliver targeted support to bridge the gaps in social and cultural capital that can result in a more confident student and a happier and more successful university experience. Looking at this from a wider perspective, universities also need to consider the benefit to the wider community of a more

diverse student and graduate cohort, with many serving the diverse communities in which they live.

Conclusion:

In this section I have discussed some of the measurements used by universities to identify non-traditional or underrepresented students for widening participation purposes. Examining FSM, POLAR and parental occupation data, all of which are collected via the UCAS application form for use in contextual admissions, I have argued that there are shortcomings with these forms of data which may result in students not being considered as part of a university's Access and Participation Plan. The eligibility requirements for FSM mean that many working poor families do not qualify and yet continue to live within extremely difficult financial circumstances which impact on educational achievement. As a neighbourhood level measurement, POLAR data is too wide in its scope and therefore misses out poorer families who live within a quintile 5 area. Finally, despite providing information about cultural and social capital, parental occupation can be a difficult measurement to use within contextual admissions as the information provided does not necessarily give a full understanding of a student's social class background, or their preparedness for higher education. Time is required to delve into the details of individual students to gain further understanding of social class, and this is not a luxury that many admissions teams have.

The use of parental education data is significant in targeting those students who; regardless of whether they are eligible for FSM, or live in a lower quintile area, and regardless of parental occupation, have no history of higher education in their family. It is this history which helps a student to develop an understanding of what they can expect, and what is expected of them at university. It enables them to ask questions

of those who have gone before them, and to have a safety net or buffer of prior experience. A family history of higher education provides a grounding for the student, in which they understand that higher education is an option for them, it is a world in which they can be a part of. For those who do not have this history, it is hugely beneficial to both the student and their university that the student receives the necessary support to help them to feel a sense of belonging on an academic, social and institutional level. This sense of belonging will provide a buffer to support their navigation through university, and to fall back on when they are struggling with imposter syndrome, submission deadlines, exams and other difficulties that may arise. This buffer of support can make the difference between a student continuing with or withdrawing from their studies, if they continue this not only benefits the student, but also benefits the university by having a positive impact on retention rates and as previously discussed, potentially positive NSS results too.

Methodological overview and rationale:

This research is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm, using qualitative data obtained from two focus groups conducted a year apart between 2023 and 2024. An interpretivist paradigm recognises that knowledge and experience are subjective, formed and filtered through social class, gender, race and ethnicity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The benefit of qualitative data is in its richness of descriptions and interpretations, which not only makes for an interesting study, but also reminds one of the people at the centre of this research, the first in family students themselves. The complexities of social phenomena are explored and analysed through a qualitative lens (Lim, 2025). Qualitative research is not in competition with quantitative research (Lim, 2025) but is 'against the way counting and coding often

obscure the activities being done with talk...' (Potter, 2021, p.205). For example, media reporting around the "Stormzy Effect" (The Guardian, 2023) revealed the rise in applications from Black and mixed-Black students between 2017 (87) and 2022 (182), acknowledging the influence that Stormzy had in raising the university's profile within this underrepresented community. This paints a progressive picture and these numbers do provide a high level understanding of the progress that is being made at Cambridge in attracting Black students. However, what these numbers do not reveal is what the experience of studying and living within the 'bubble' (Attridge, 2021; Reay, 2021) of an elite university was like for these students. Would qualitative information have also painted a progressive picture of this widening participation initiative? Within my research, the application of a qualitative lens acknowledges and enables the exploration of individual experiences, reflections and discourses of belonging as a first in family student.

Rationale for using a focus group:

A focus group method was chosen for its facilitation of group discussion around identity and belonging. Previous research on first in family students and around student belonging has used various methods of data collection, notably the use of individual interviews (O'Shea, 2007, 2015, 2019; Attridge, 2021), statistical data collection (Henderson *et al.*, 2020; Wonkhe, 2022) and a combination of interview and focus group methods (Scanlon *et al.*, 2020). The decision to use a focus group, as opposed to individual interviews method, or a combination of the two, centred around the hope that the focus group would create a space in which the participants could discuss their experiences of belonging as first in family students. 'Focus groups link both local discourses..., and societal discourses' (Heap and Wolverson, 2020, p.2021), enabling the use of Discursive Psychology and Critical Discourse

Analysis to analyse participant discourse. The social setting of the focus group provided the participants with the opportunity to understand and reflect on their own experiences, gain new perspectives through listening to the experiences of others, and to challenge both themselves and others. As the facilitator, this method also enabled me the privilege of doing the same, whilst observing the interactions of the group.

Finally, connection between students helps to form a sense of belonging (Wonkhe, 2022), and the nature of the focus group as a means in itself to create a sense of belonging, will be demonstrated in this research.

Recruitment:

Participants were recruited for the first focus group through an online survey sent out to first year students at one university. Academic staff from a mixture of disciplines supported this research by encouraging the students to complete the survey and enabling me to present my research to classes, with the aim to recruit participants. 74 students completed the survey, of which 63% were first in family. Those who identified as first in family were asked if they would like to participate in a focus group. Eight students, of which six were female, agreed to participate. However, when I contacted the eight students, only six (all females) agreed to attend and only four were able to attend the focus group due to other commitments.

The focus group took place at the university and participants were asked to commit two hours of their time in total, with 90 minutes for the focus group discussion. The discussion was recorded using two digital voice recorders, which were later transcribed by the researcher using Jefferson transcription system symbols

(Jefferson, 2004). Details of this system are given in the Quality in the interpretation of data section.

The focus group was facilitated by the researcher, starting with an overview of the research and the focus group agenda. This was followed by a group discussion around ground rules within the focus group which was written onto flip chart paper by the researcher and put onto the wall. Prior to starting the discussion, an icebreaker activity was carried out, in which the group wrote down words that they link with belonging. This was also written onto flipchart paper and put on the wall to remind the group of their responses.

Discussion topics were sectioned under six themes that were covered in a rough chronological order, starting with the application process and ending with a discussion around their identities as first in family students. The six topics were: 1. Choosing university, 2. At university: first few weeks, 3. Peer connections on your course, 4. Staff connections and academic work, 5. Supporting others and 6. Identity. Questions were open ended and designed to support discussion, for example, 'Let's talk about your first few weeks /months at university, can you describe how it was for you?'. Some questions had subsections to prompt discussion, if necessary, for example under 'Let's talk about your first few weeks...' was the question 'How did you get to know other students?'.

The second focus group, conducted in the students' second semester of their second year, was conducted and transcribed in the same way as the first, with three out of the four participants from the first group, attending. For this focus group, the researcher was able to thank the participants for their time with the presentation of £20 Amazon vouchers. Although this focus group started off with a general 'how are

you?’ question, which initiated a lengthy discussion around how they were getting on in their second year, the focus group schedule, in which themes were introduced throughout, mirrored the first session. Some of the previous themes were revisited, although with changes in the questions asked, with a view to understand what, if anything, had changed for the students during the year since the first focus group. For example, when considering the area of belonging I asked the group ‘has there been a time or a situation within this second year where you felt a real strong sense of belonging?’. Some questions were asked in the hope of challenging the deficit view of first in family students, for example when considering barriers and enablers in year two I asked, ‘has there been a time in your second year when you’ve thought “I’m winning at this”? which elicited an energetic discussion around achievements and experiences during their second year. These included involvement in research on World War Two diaries, volunteering at a local charity supporting vulnerable families, which led to a job interview, and getting positive feedback from patients on placement.

Both focus groups were a positive experience for the researcher and participants alike, with one participant commenting, ‘This was a great experience that I’m glad I could be a part of. I can’t wait to see your research’.

Analysis of the focus group: Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, specifically critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology have been used in the analysis of the focus group discussions.

Critical discourse analysis has been used to consider the social impact of macro discourses, of higher education and student identity, through powerful institutions such as the media and the government.

Discursive psychology examines the interaction within the discourse, focusing on what is trying to be accomplished, through the examination of what is said and how it is said. Using discursive psychology in the analysis of a focus group enables the consideration of how participants position themselves and others in their discourses, and how they explain or describe an event or action in the context of the focus group discussion.

Method

Introduction:

Rehman and Alharthi (2016) advise that before embarking on a research project, the researcher must consider the starting position from which they will conduct their research by understanding their own ontological and epistemological belief systems. Coe *et al.* (2021) emphasise the importance of understanding philosophical assumptions as they act to frame the research via four key areas, which in turn feed into each other in the design of the research project. These key areas are ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.

I will start this chapter by exploring the underpinnings of my research through the ontological and epistemological philosophical assumptions which provide the foundations of my methodology and the justification for choosing my research methods. This will allow me to contextualise my reasons for choosing to embark on this project and supports my reflexivity as a researcher. Reflexivity is imperative throughout the research process, as it ensures an awareness and understanding of how my own experiences and perceptions have influenced my decision to undertake this research and how they may impact on the research process. I will discuss reflexivity in relation to my research later in the chapter.

Ontology:

Ontology refers to our individual assumptions about the nature or form of social reality (Rehman and Alharthi 2016; Coe *et al.*, 2021). This questions whether there is one singular verifiable truth or knowledge that is objectifiable and independent of individual perceptions (Paton 2002; Coe *et al.*, 2021) or if reality is socially constructed in the minds of individuals and is therefore not a singular truth but multiple subjective realities formed, filtered, and interpreted through cultural, educational, familial and gendered experiences.

'The ontological position or paradigm of the researcher influences several elements of the research including the researcher's assumptions around the subject (Cassell, 2005), question formulation (Agee, 2009), interaction with participants (Reay, 1996; Archer, 2001 & 2002; Allen, 2005), and data analysis and representation' (Allen, 2005 in King, 2022, p.10). A researcher whose ontological assumptions lead them to believe that there is a singular objective truth or knowledge will start from a realist ontological position (Coe *et al.*, 2021) and work within a positivist epistemological paradigm.

Working within a positivist paradigm assumes that knowledge is achieved through 'direct observation or measurement of the phenomena being investigated' (Coe *et al.*, 2021, p.15) and may use quantitative methods such as surveys to gather statistical data (Bui, 2002). The method of using a questionnaire is useful in studies where the researcher is hypothesising about a particular phenomenon (Hagler, Christensen and Rhodes, 2021), or where large-scale data is investigated. For example, Hixenbaugh *et al.* (2012) quantitative longitudinal study used an online survey to gain an understanding of the first year (level 4) student experience to

develop evidence-based interventions within policy and practice that would increase retention and improve final degree outcome. The survey was sent to three cohorts of first year students over a three-year period, with 429 students completing it in the first year, 42% of which were first in family students. The justification for conducting this research using a quantitative methodology within a positivist paradigm was that the university needed to demonstrate 'measurable progress on Widening Participation against benchmarks' (Hixenbaugh *et al.*, 2021, p. 286) to meet the then Office for Fair Access (OFFA), now Office for Students (OfS), requirements around access agreements (now referred to as access and participation plans as discussed in the previous chapter). In other words, the external requirements set by OFFA determined that this study would be conducted in a positivist paradigm because it needed to measure a large amount of data.

'Whereas a positivist position assumes knowledge to be real and objective and generalises data findings to others (Opie, 2004), an interpretivist position recognises that knowledge of phenomena is gained through the questioning and observations of those who live it' (Opie, 2004 in King, 2022, p.11). Hagler *et al.* (2021) quantitative study on mentoring relationships concluded that to enhance their quantitative findings, future research may benefit from 'qualitative approaches to enrich understanding of how mentoring relationships form, change, and end over time...' (Hagler *et al.*, 2021, p.22). Whereas Hixenbaugh *et al.* research used a positivist approach to produce large statistical measurements, including percentage information on first in family students, other research into the experiences of first in family students use an interpretive approach to gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences within a particular context, such as studying at a particular university or within a particular subject area.

My ontological position within this study:

My inherent ontological position as an educational researcher will now be considered in relation to my decision to study the experiences of first in family students, and to my choice of methodology and methods within my research.

Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) argue that a person's view of the world is influenced by their individual history and cultural context, and their underlying assumptions about the meaning of truth and reality, in other words their ontological positioning is unconscious and taken for granted. My desire to embark upon this research project stems from my own history as a first in family undergraduate from 1997-2000. I struggled with the transition into university as I did not have a family history of higher education to help buffer this significant period in my life. I had already left school when I applied to university, therefore I did not benefit from the support of my school through the application process. What helped me to persevere was a determination to get a degree, and the eudaimonic happiness that I felt through finding meaning and purpose through my academic achievements. However, despite enjoying my university experience, I went through my undergraduate years feeling like I did not belong in the university environment.

After university I worked within higher education, including roles at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) where I worked with a diverse range of students and educational establishments both nationally and internationally. I now work at a university where I provide support to students with any issues and concerns during their time at university. Through these experiences I have come to recognise that, like me as a first in family student who had limited understanding of higher education, students do not embark upon their higher education experience

from the same starting place. Their educational, familial, cultural, gender and economic histories impact on their starting point. My passion for understanding and supporting students, in particular 'non-traditional' students, such as first in family students, has grown out of 20-years' experience within the higher education sector where I have witnessed first-hand the difficulties that some students encounter and the characteristics and skills they use to navigate successfully through university. My ontological position is therefore reflected within my belief that reality is socially constructed and subjectively formed and filtered through individual experience.

Epistemological position:

'My research will therefore be conducted using a subjectivist epistemology (Levers, 2013) which believes that knowledge is filtered through gender, social class, race and ethnicity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I will work within an interpretivist paradigm which recognises that knowledge is subjective (Cassell, 2019) and developed through a process of interpretation. An interpretivist paradigm generates qualitative data (Ward, 2022) through the exploration of multiple views and experiences, thus creating a richness of descriptions (Ward, 2022), accounts and interpretations' (in King, 2022, pp.10-11). My epistemological approach is informed by my experiences of working in higher education and by my own experience as a first in family student, and these experiences are invaluable when establishing the framework for my research and the methods chosen. However, I cannot assume to 'know' the realities of the first in family students in my study by simply observing them from an objective detachment, I must seek to understand their realities through asking questions and listening to their individual answers, perspectives and opinions. This will not result in

a generalised one size fits all finding or conclusion, instead it provides a richer in-depth exploration of individual experiences.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity clarifies the 'position of the researcher in relation to the researched' (Reay, 1996, p. 443), it facilitates the exploration of power relations between the researcher and the researched, acknowledging that the researchers 'own knowledge is socially and culturally constructed' (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p.198) impacting on what they see and how they see it (Buscatto, in Silverman, 2017) and recognising that they should not position themselves as a 'sovereign authority' of truth (Phillips and Jorgensen, p.198).

Reflexivity was developed through the work of ethnographic sociologists as a response to the positivist claims that the relativism of social constructionism reduces the academic merit of the research (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). From the positivist standpoint, the knowledge production of methods such as constructing hypotheses and questionnaires produce objective, reliable and valid data (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002) and ensures that researchers will not be 'caught up in or tripped up by preconceptions' (Buscatto, in Silverman, 2017, p.138) although this last point is challenged by the social constructionist view that scientific knowledge is a 'contingent construction of reality' (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p.196) just like other forms of knowledge, which 'run into social biases that disrupt the positivist ideal' (Buscatto, in Silverman, 2017, p.148).

The use of qualitative methods of data collection such as focus groups and interviews in which the researcher is interacting with participants and immersing

within the research environment, works towards establishing a relationship between the researcher and the researched. The subjectivity of qualitative methods is therefore not just concerned with the individual perceptions of participants used to build a picture of a particular phenomenon, but also with the interpretations of the researcher, taken from what they see and hear, which is inevitably a product of their own personal biases, ideologies, assumptions and preconceptions (Buscatto, in Silverman, 2017).

An amusing example of this comes from Reay (1996) in which she discusses the use of reflexivity within her own PhD research diary. Interviewing working-class and middle-class women about their educational experiences, Reay admits to identifying with the working-class women and to class envy and contempt towards some of the middle-class women; 'bloody hell, yet another chandelier in the kitchen!' (Reay, 2006, p.449). Reay acknowledges that she is interpreting the data she is collecting through the lens of her inauthentic working-class identity, an identity that is in conflict with her now 'veneer of middle-classness' (Reay, 2006, p.453) as an educated professional. Reay acknowledges that she is writing from a position where she can provide a platform for working class women who are still experiencing the 'class territories' (Reay, 2006, p.453) that Reay herself experienced in her own schooling, however her current position as a researcher is one of privilege which has created a gulf between the very women, she seeks to give voice to.

By working within a subjectivist epistemology, I am not approaching my research from an objective standpoint, I am part of the research process (Reid, 2022) bringing to it my own life experiences. Therefore, I need to consider how these experiences may influence my research and explore how my identity can lead to preconceptions

and assumptions which may impact on interactions within, and the analysis of the focus group discussions.

During the first focus group with the first in family student participants I became more aware of the age difference between them and myself. This happened on several occasions starting with my explanation of why I was conducting the research in which I talked about applying to UCAS on a *paper* application form. The focus group transcript of this interaction reads:

(group laughter)

Facilitator: *that's how long ago it was (.) the shock on your face!*

Writing this I then remind myself that I am old enough to be their mother, although on some level I consider myself to be just like them in that I am current student and I am a first in family graduate, I have no idea how they view me, but I'm sure they do not see me as falling into the same category as them.

I started working at UCAS in 2004, the same year that the Schwartz report on 'Fair Admissions to Higher Education' was published. This report highlighted the use of contextual factors within the admissions process of individual universities. Contextual factors are 'mitigating social or personal factors' (McCaig *et al.*, 2008, p.16) that are considered as part of a holistic approach to a student's application to a university. Individual factors, such as being a care leaver, or eligibility for free school meals, along with school and areas level factors, can impact on students' grades, or grade predictions and may be used by a university to make the student an offer based on a reduced grade or grades to that of a standard offer (Boliver *et al.*, 2017, p.3). By 2006 my role at UCAS involved travelling around the UK to deliver presentations and training to schools and colleges. This gave me a rich experience of the different

starting points that students apply to university from and made me an advocate for contextualised admissions. My own experience as a first in family student who did not benefit from contextualised admissions was not lost on me at this time.

However, during the first focus group with the first in family students I experienced another perspective of contextualised admissions which I had not considered, and which made me revisit my earlier stance on the subject. The following is an excerpt from the transcript where Erica describes receiving a contextual offer from a Russell Group university. The Russell Group consists of 24 world-class research-intensive universities within the UK:

Erica: I sort of feel a sense of pride, um that I'm the first one to go in my family, I feel like that's a sense of achievement (.) but I would say as well that through the application process, when I applied to a university, um, they sort of came back and they said, um we're going to make it like sort of slightly easier for you to get in, um because you're first in the family and because like you went to a comprehensive school and all that, and I kind of thought I don't really like that, just because I'm first in the family, and sort of went to a comprehensive school and that, doesn't mean like that I can't get the grades that you first said, so I sort of thought, oh I don't really like that you've just liked pointed that out like I don't think that should sort of define me in a sense,... so I thought I'm not going to that uni anymore!, I'm going to go to another uni because I don't... No other uni pointed out that fact and said we're going to make it easier for you, I thought I didn't need it to be easier, I thought

I can get those grades, and I did get above those grades actually, so I thought yeah I showed you!'.

I was struck by this discourse in several ways. First, with Erica's awareness and pride at being first in her family to attend university. As I reflect upon my own experience, I was not aware at the time that my lack of family history of higher education made a difference to my own university experience, I was just aware that I did not feel that I belonged. Being unaware also meant that I did not feel a pride at being first in my family, and even now, 24 years after my graduation I still do not feel a sense of pride, rather I still question what might have been if I had been a second-generation student.

Despite Erica's pride in her first in family status, she did not feel that it should define her, and this in part fuelled her defiance of the contextual offer in which she was given a lower grade offer. Her defiance was centred on her perception that the university did not believe she could meet the standard offer conditions, and were therefore offering an easier option, in her eyes. Her anger at their assumption that she would require a lower offer resulted in her decision not to accept their offer and to choose the university in which this research takes place instead (which incidentally required a lower entry grade than a Russell Group university but did not do this in the form of a contextual offer). Erica further displayed her anger through her statement 'I thought I can get those grades (as in the standard offer grades) and I did get above those grades actually, so I though yeah I showed you'. I did not enquire as to the time lapse between the offer and Erica taking her exams but have wondered since if the *audacity* of this offer fuelled her determination to work hard and obtain a good grade.

Reay (1996) argues that reflexivity is more than simply analysing the position of the researcher within the research process, as this only accounts for the aspects within the researcher that they are conscious of, it does not consider those aspects that remain outside the 'reflexive grasp' (Reay, 1996, p.443). Reay supports Giddens' (1991) continuous interrogation where reflexivity is an ongoing process throughout the research. Erica's questioning and subsequent rejection of the authority of the university, through her decline of their contextual offer is an example of Giddens' continuous interrogation, in which 'shifting perspectives on the social world...have a mobile relation to changes in value orientations' (Giddens, 1990, p.44). Here Erica's perception of the university's perspective of her comprehensive schooling, challenges their practice of the use of a contextual offer, in what is from her perspective, a deficit view of her secondary education. Erica's questioning of this practice is reflexive in that she doesn't simply accept it, nor does she view the contextual offer as a positive thing.

As the researcher, in this instance, my own continuous interrogation involved revisiting previously accepted views on contextual offers, in light of new knowledge and perspectives provided by Erica. Prior to this discussion with Erica, I viewed contextual offers purely as a progressive aspect of the widening participation agenda. Following the focus group, I have reflected on this view and whilst I do believe contextual offers have been beneficial for students from underrepresented backgrounds, I can also appreciate how important it is for the wording of the offer not to suggest to the student that the university is 'doing them a favour' and viewing them as someone who is lacking through deficits in their education or background.

As Patton (2005) explains using the analogy of a book, the individual reads it differently every time depending on where they are at that specific point in time,

although the book does not change. In this case, the concept of contextual offers has not changed, however through this interaction, I am aware that my viewpoint on them has shifted through the interaction with group participants.

Discourse Analysis:

Introduction:

This section will begin by detailing how the methods of analysis were chosen and applied. It will then move on to provide an overview of discourse analysis, before moving on to give an example of how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which will be utilised within my analysis, can be applied to understand how institutions use language to influence and enact power within societies and how this can be played out in everyday conversations. Using examples from the focus groups, I will then provide an overview of Discursive Psychology which builds upon and is influenced by discourse analysis (Edwards and Potter 1992; Lester, O'Reilly and Steele, 2023), as the second analytical approach that I have used in my research. In using two discourse analysis approaches my research will make use of Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) view that a discourse analysis package can be formed out of the combination of elements of different discourse analysis approaches, which can produce a broader understanding of a phenomenon.

The application of Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology in this research:

The transcription of the first focus group was completed over a period of several months, in which the recordings were listened to in detail to ensure accuracy of data collection and to identify themes of interest which met the aims and objectives of the research. It was around the same time that the decision to use discourse analysis was decided upon after reading several papers in which different approaches of

discourse analysis had been used to analyse data providing an alternative to thematic analysis for focus groups (Molina *et al.*, 2019; Heap and Wolverson, 2020; Butler and Farrants, 2021).

Following this, further research into discourse analysis, combined with detailed knowledge of the data within the recordings, lead to the decision to apply both CDA (Statham, 2022) and Discursive Psychology (DP) (Edwards and Potter, 1992). There are significant differences in these two approaches. CDA focuses on social and political contexts of language construction, considering discourse in constructing and maintaining social power, this focus is on the macro level. DP is interested in the interactional work performed at the micro level. It considers the how people use their discourse to accomplish certain aims. However, both approaches are useful in the analysis of this focus group data as the macro level scope of CDA ensures the analysis of wider social and political influences and considerations within the discussion, whilst DP focuses on how, when and why a topic may be discussed.

Heap and Wolverson 2020, using a CDA framework and Butler and Farrants, 2021, using DP to analyse interview data, utilised Jefferson (2004) transcription system. Drawing upon this approach, Jefferson's system was then applied to the transcript. This was then repeated with the second focus group transcript.

The data extracts of both focus group transcripts that were chosen for analysis met some or all the following criteria:

1. Extract in which CDA could be applied.
2. Extract in which attribution theory (in DP) could be applied.
3. Extract in which action orientation (in DP) could be applied.
4. Extract that ensured each participant's voice is heard in this research.

5. Extract that included discussion between participants.
6. Extracts that answered the research questions and met the research aims and objectives.

Discourse Analysis:

Discourse analysis in its broadest sense studies the construction and use of language, including what is expressed verbally, through gestures and expressions, and how language is created, how it is used, and how it evolves within different social, political, cultural and historical settings. Discourse analysis is interested in how individuals describe past events, how they construct their argument or version of accounts through 'attributing or implying accountability' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.4) and through constructing and negotiating (Melia *et al.* 2021) within their talk in an interaction. Discourse analysis investigates social interactions within specific contexts to understand how people relate to each other, connect, or disconnect with each other (Molina *et al.* 2019), and how power relations and statuses are distributed (Gee, 1999).

Phillips and Jorgensen (2002, p1) describe discourse as a 'particular way of talking about and understanding the world'. Statham (2022) explains that discourse is more than just language, it works beyond what is said, to 'capture what happens when these language forms are played out in different social, political, and cultural arenas (Simpson, Mayr and Statham, 2018, in Statham 2022).

Critical Discourse Analysis

On a macro level, discourse analysis, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates how language is used by institutions such as governments and the media to enact influence and power within society (Statham, 2022). CDA is

interested in the social impact of discourses used by these institutions to construct ideologies which can exercise 'unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation' (Statham, 2022, p.16) whilst at the same time legitimising their use of language in the eyes of society, resulting in racism, classism, and sexism within society (Statham, 2022).

CDA is used by many with the purpose of exposing, challenging, and changing the discourses and actions of powerful groups (Statham, 2022). For example, in their study on discourses of personhood with a group of dementia caregivers at two residential homes, Heap and Wolverson (2020) used CDA to analyse transcripts of two focus groups conducted with the caregivers before and after Intensive Interaction training which offered a different perspective to medicalised discourses of dementia. Within the study Heap and Wolverson used Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of CDA as a guide (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 2001) which works through four stages of analysis. The first stage identified the social problem, in this case the medicalisation of dementia in dementia care, resulting in the loss of personhood. The second stage identified obstacles towards tackling the problem, in this case discourses around dementia which stem from the medicalisation of dementia, along with the economic efficiency model of care that limits the time in which care staff can spend interacting with a resident. The third stage seeks to understand how society *needs* the problem to benefit the status quo, here the medicalisation of dementia provides a distance from the emotions and vulnerability connected with dementia; people's fear of 'looking into their own possible future' (Heap and Wolverson, 2020, p. 2030) and it also provides hope that one day we may find a cure for dementia. Finally, the model supports the consideration of possible solutions to the obstacles. Through Intensive Interaction

training, care staff progressed from medicalised discourses of dementia to person-centred discourses in which they could go 'into the world' of the person with dementia, viewing them as 'communicative agents' (Heap and Wolverson, 2020, p. 2027) with whom they can build relationships.

Heap and Wolverson (2020) demonstrated through CDA how language can 'shape practice while also reflecting it' (Fjortoft *et al.* 2019, p.1013). In other words, on a macro level the medical discourse of dementia which results in the loss of personhood shapes how dementia patients are viewed and subsequently how they are cared for. Whereas on a micro level CDA highlighted how individual participants, after completing the training, reflected on this discourse and considered the application of other discourses of dementia such as person centred within their caregiving practices.

CDA builds on the social constructionist view of language as playing a role in enabling those with power in society to ensure that their interests are served and that their views become culturally embedded and perceived as real by its members (Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999; Patton, 2015). For example, in their Paired Peers project, which examines the impact of class on the experiences of students, Bathmaker *et al.* (2016) observe how narratives about the two universities within the study; University of Bristol (UoB) and the University of the West of England (UWE) have been constructed on a macro level, creating reputations that are carried overtime, to become a 'naturalised account of reality' (Bathmaker, *et al.*, 2016, p.52, in King, 2021, p. 4).

Higher education consists of different types of institutions, including the research-intensive Russell Group universities (of which UoB is one) and post-1992 (formerly

polytechnic) universities which include UWE. These institutions are characterised by their symbolic and objective rankings, on which the future prospects of their students are dependent (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990). Macro discourses of the rankings, along with the understandings of the cultures and ethos's of different types of universities, solidify their cultural reputations which feed into the decisions that students make about the type of university they could fit into.

What CDA also highlights here is that these macro discourses of higher education ensure that working-class students continue to know their place in society when choosing a university, excluding themselves from particular universities, thus keeping the status quo of elite institutions as a place for the middle and upper classes (Reay, 2021). An example of this self-exclusion was examined within Bathmaker's study when one student described why, as a working-class student, she chose UWE over UoB, as the reputation of UoB made her uncomfortable. 'UWE would have been my first choice even though I know my law teacher told me that Bristol University would probably look better on your application to a solicitors' firm...I just...I felt comfortable here' (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016, pp. 82-83). As Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, p.42) argue 'the major thrust of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture comes from exclusion, which perhaps has the most symbolic force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion.' Through CDA it can be viewed that the social impact of the macro discourses of higher education helps to ensure that the middle and upper classes continue to dominate the space of the elite universities by ensuring that working-class students recognise that they will not fit into these spaces (Reay, 2021).

Drawing upon Fairclough's (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 2001) 4 stage analysis approach, CDA will be used within the analysis of my focus groups to

recognise the influence of powerful institutions such as the media in everyday language. For example, during the first focus group, when I asked the participants “what does being a student mean to you, and do you see yourself identifying with that?” two of the participants, Erica and Ava who shared a house with other students discussed how they felt that they weren’t ‘typical’ students because they did not go out partying:

Erica: *because I think when people go are you making the most of the student life, they mean like are you going out partying*

Facilitator: *yes!*

Erica: *[all that]*

Ava: *[are you going to clubs]*

Facilitator: *yeah*

Erica: *so I think students do sort of have that sort of like stigma on them, that they go out just partying all the time, and that, but I, I do still identify as a student*

Ava: *[yeah]*

Erica: *I think even though I don’t fit into that like stereotypical category of like going out partying all the time, because I would still say yeah I’m like a uni student.*

Within this discussion the identity of a student is synonymous with partying and getting drunk, which has been the view of students portrayed through various media outlets (The Sun, 2021; The Guardian, 2023). This is the first stage of Fairclough’s model, the identification of a social problem (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999;

Fairclough 2001), in this case the generalisation of all students as partying hard throughout their time at university. Both Erica and Ava described the macro view of a stereotypical student, as viewed negatively in the media, as someone who is out all-night partying, which they do not identify with. This is the second stage, in which the obstacles toward tackling this view are highlighted, in this case, the UK media's perpetuation of outdated portrayals of UK students.

The third stage is to try and understand how 'the social problem fits into the social order of things' (Heap and Wolverson, 2020, p.2024). The UK media know that sensationalism sells, therefore pictures of students during freshers' week on a night out with the heading 'Feeling fresh, Hard-partying students hit the town and pour into bars and nightclubs as Freshers' Week begins' (The Sun online, 2021) will encourage viewers to read further. The UK media caters to an older generation, with 50% of newspaper subscribers being over the age of 55 compared to 12% of the 18-24 age group (YouGov, 2020) and 85% of the over 55 group using the TV for news, compared to 49% of 16-24 year olds (ofcom, 2024). Therefore, stories or perspectives of these outlets are aimed at the older generation as this is the target audience.

Research by Nacro (2024), a charity that supports young people, reported that media coverage on under 25s is 'twice as likely to be negative (28%) than positive (14%)' and their analysis of national and local media over the course of a year found that only 21% features the voices or perspectives of young people. The UK media's representation of university students may have shifted from a focus on carefree partying to one that highlights the financial implications for some students (Jeffreys, 2024) and the increase in mental health difficulties (Fuller and Starr, 2024), however the perpetuation of negative reporting at a macro level enables the views of media

outlets to become culturally embedded and perceived as real (Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999; Patton, 2015) leaving readers and viewers with a negative framing of students.

On a micro level, albeit with the recognition that the macro level filters down to influence and give meaning in the everyday conversation, discourse analysis interprets and explains how an individual's understanding and categorisation of the world is a product of their own historically and culturally specific view of the world, considering gender, class, race, age and sexual orientation. This also builds on the social constructionist view that an individual's own knowledge and reality of the world is constructed through their social interactions and experiences (Berger and Luckman, 1991; Hruby, 2001). From their personal perspectives as students who live and socialise together, both Erica and Ava still identified with being a university student, despite them having no interest in partying, as the student identity holds different connotations for them. Their reality of student life, along with that of their housemates, constructed through their social interactions and experiences since being at university, was one of holding board games nights at home and attending the local quiz. Within this the macro is recognised as an influence but dismissed as a personal reality for Erica and Ava. This is the final stage of Fairclough's framework – how the analysis contributes to addressing the social problem, here Ava and Erica's identification of themselves as students, despite their disinterest in partying, adds to the literature around the reality of student life, which is heterogeneous as opposed to one size fits all (The Guardian, 2014; Brooks and O'Shea, 2021).

Discursive Psychology

Introduced by Edwards and Potter (1992), Discursive Psychology (DP) is interested in the 'action orientation of talk and writing' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.2), with the

central focus on the interactional work performed, in other words what is the aim of, or what is accomplished by people's talk. Edwards and Potter are critical of the understanding of cognition within psychology, arguing that psychologists cannot 'accurately assess what people 'really think' (Goodman, 2017, p.143) as there is no objective truth or single version of events. According to DP the psychological understanding of what a person thinks is understood via social interaction with the person, and therefore discourse (what is said and how) should be examined within the context of the situation in which a phenomenon is described. 'The past is reconstructed according to the functional concerns of the present and it is here that the analysis of discourse has much to say about the study of cognition' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.24). The study of cognition within DP is concerned with 'truth and error, mind and reality, memory and perception, knowledge and inference' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.17) which people use in everyday discursive practices to achieve the aim or the action orientation of their discourse.

I will now explain two aspects of DP that I will use within the analysis of my focus groups, starting with the action orientation of discourse. In my explanation of action orientation, I will focus on the action of positioning identity within discourse, as the identity of first in family students is a salient part of my research. The second aspect will consider the use of attribution theory within DP and how this will be applied within my analysis.

Action orientation: positioning of identity within discourse

One example of an action orientation finding within DP is the concern within which speakers position their own identities and those of others within their discourse.

Identity is not fixed, instead particular identities are drawn upon or constructed to

achieve certain aims within a particular social interaction. DP analyses how and when identity constructions are drawn upon and to what end (Goodman, 2017).

For example, during the first focus group, when I asked the group to think back to when they started to consider university as an option, Molly drew upon her identity as a care leaver to explain how her decision process around whether to attend university was very different to that of the other participants.

Molly – um, so I'm a care leaver |so um I grew up in foster care an::d um (.) it was like I never thought about university when I was younger , um then when I was 14 my social worker said like if you go to university you get a lot of support |and then, from then on I was like OK well I'm going to university, um and I don't really (h) no one like cared at all apart from my social worker who just wanted me to get to university, so it was kind of all up to on like where I went, what I did.

Here Molly beings by positioning herself as a care leaver in the first instance and then explaining that the idea of university was first put to her by her social worker who framed university as somewhere where care leavers get support, and this was the definitive moment; *from then on I was like OK well I'm going to university*, in which she made the decision to go to university. Although Molly does not specify what type of support she necessarily expected to receive at university, the word support, within the context of Molly's identity as a care leaver may be viewed in several ways, including financial, emotional, and academic, all of which may help to increase her sense of belonging at university and her identity as a student. Molly's decision to attend university contrasts with the experiences of two other participants

who from early on in secondary school had seen university as the next step after school:

Erica: *well I think I always sort of knew I wanted to go to university*

Ava: *I think for me it always felt like a natural next step*

And in contrast to Lily whose mum had given her the option of *you either go to uni or like >you get a job<*

Molly's rhetoric explains that there was no parental support available to her regarding her future and her social worker's construction of university as a place where she can get *support* was the deciding factor in her choosing to go to university.

Discursive psychology also considers the 'sequential placing' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.10) of people's accounts and the 'context of their occurrence' in terms of the actions or aims that they accomplish at a specific time in a specific social setting (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.2). Molly was the last participant to volunteer information in relation to the question about considering whether to go to university, so here the 'pragmatic placing' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.17) of her discourse can be seen as the action of Molly positioning her experience, one in which *no one like cared at all apart from my social worker*, as different to those of the other participants, all of whom talked prior to her about the support and input they received from their parents. Another action orientation of Molly's discourse can be seen within her positioning of her identity as the only care leaver in the group early on when answering the first question. In doing this she also sets the foundation for later discourse within the focus group setting, as her care leaver identity is entwined throughout her discourses.

Attribution Theory

Discursive psychology offers an alternative position on Attribution theory, moving away from Heider (1958) cognitive model to consider how people use discourse to 'make causal sense' of, or how they explain and describe everyday actions and events (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.81). The focus is not on the production of an explanation of an action, but on 'how it is accomplished discursively' within a particular context (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.107). Edwards and Potter (1992) provide the example of the action of a decline by one friend to an invitation from another friend to go shopping, to describe how the decline is accomplished through the discourse. In this "E" does not explicitly refuse to go shopping with "N" but reports that she has hurt her foot:

E: ...and I had to have my foot up on a pillow for two days, you know...

Through this E is attributing the 'non-intentional causality' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.107) of the injured foot to her inability to go shopping, and by doing this, rather than explicitly declining the invitation which may be attributed to her own desire not to go shopping, she does it implicitly. In attributing the injury as accountable for her decline to the invite, E's rhetoric demonstrates her consideration of the impact that her decline could have on her relationship with N. What attributional theory has achieved here is to demonstrate how E discursively constructs her decline of the invitation.

By applying attribution theory to Molly's discourse on considering whether to go to university, DP enables the analysis of how Molly produces her description of her decision around this. For example, the action of Molly's statement that (h) *no one like*

cared at all not only positions Molly in contrast to the other participants where they talk about their parent's care but is also constructed as a fact. Therefore, the action of this statement may also be to ensure that this is not questioned or contested by anyone. If Molly had said, *I felt like no one cared at all*, then this would be open to discussion. Edwards and Potter (1992) use Latour and Woolgar's (1986) A Hierarchy of Modalization continuum to explain how speakers use different 'rhetorical resources' to construct fact (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.106) and these rhetorical resources enable the positioning of statements in this hierarchy. At the one end of the continuum statements such as *X is possible*, or *I guess that X*, are highly contingent on the speaker, (*I felt like no one cared at all*) whereas at the other end, statements such as *X is a fact*, or *X*, are a given, 'they are simply assumed' (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.106). Molly's statement *no one like cared at all* would be situated on the *X is a fact* end of the continuum, it is constructed as a fact, independent of Molly's views, mental processes, or emotions, it is a given.

Using attribution theory enables an understanding of how Molly describes her journey to higher education. Attribution theory highlights how Molly has constructed a comparison to the other participants, set the scene as a care leaver, and implicitly compared her journey which she undertook on her own (*so it was kind of all up to on like where I went, what I did*) because unlike the other participants she was on her own through this journey.

Quality within discourse analysis:

In this final section I will discuss the importance of demonstrating the quality and rigour of my research. By using a qualitative framework, my research is not constructed in an experimental, or lab-based context where a systematic process

supports the transparency and assessment of quality. However, the concern with quality, standards and transparency in qualitative research has been a consideration within studies (O'Brien *et al.* 2014; O'Reilly *et al.* 2021) and I will now explain how some of these considerations will be used to demonstrate quality through transparency in my research, beginning with quality in both CDA and DP and finishing with the complicated relationship between reflexivity and DP.

Quality in the interpretation of data

Heap and Wolverson's (2020) application of CDA benefited from the implementation of Triangulation to reduce bias. Triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of data, for example the sources used within a literature review, to check against the researcher's interpretations of the data. This method will also be applied within my research to provide a more robust analysis.

Within the analysis of the focus group data, I will use the Jefferson model of transcription (Jefferson, 2004) which is a system that DP has 'borrowed' (O'Reilly, 2021, p.412) from another branch of discourse analysis - Conversational Analysis and has also been utilised in studies using CDA (Heap and Wolverson, 2020). The Jefferson model of transcription is used to detail not only the words used in the talk, but more importantly the paralinguistic details of the talk. With DP's emphasis placed on the *how* of the talk, rather than on the *what*, the paralinguistic details highlighted in the Jefferson transcript provide the transparency of the *how*. Some examples of this include a square bracket [] around talk indicating overlapping talk, a dot in parenthesis (.) indicating a brief interval between talk, and a colon indicating prolonged vowel or consonant - an::d. The use of Jefferson's transcription model, along with the inclusion of the entire transcripts within my research will enable the

reader to judge for themselves the claims and conclusions that I draw from the data. This will provide transparency and, it is hoped, trust in my research process and outcomes.

Iteration as a marker of quality

It is important to demonstrate transparency at this point by advising that although I had chosen to use discourse analysis early in the research process, it was not until after I had conducted the second focus group that I decided which forms of discourse analysis to use. Goodman (2017) recommends that the decision on what type of analysis to use should be made at the beginning of the research as, in the case of DP, this feeds into what type of questions are asked. For example, within DP *how do* questions are recommended as they enable the exploration of *how* people talk about a subject, such as *how do first in family students construct their sense of belonging during their transition into university within a focus group setting*. However, Lester, O'Reilly and Steele (2023) argue that although research questions help to form the direction of the study, gaining further insight through the data can result in the evolution of questions.

Part of my own reflexivity within my research is to recognise and understand why I made certain decisions, and how I may change things for next time. I did not start my research with the knowledge that CDA and DP would be the forms of analysis. However, I view my research as an iterative process, one in which I am not only learning about the subject area, but also learning how to research, and how not to research, and as such changes to the research questions and aims have been required, this is in part due to the decision to use CDA and DP but also because of what has come out of the emerging data.

The use of an iterative process in research is advocated as a marker of quality within DP in particular as it allows for the researcher to revisit certain elements of the research as ‘areas of interest emerge from the data’ as opposed to using a linear approach (O’Reilly *et al*, 2021, p.416). My research idea was initially constructed with a broader view of utilising discourse analysis for two reasons. Firstly, due to choosing focus groups as a method of data collection as they support the examination of talk. Secondly, due to the research subject area. Exploring first in family students’ sense of belonging is linked to social life and discourse analysis approaches maintain ‘an explicit commitment to studying social life through the close attention to talk’ (Potter, 1997 in O’Reilly *et al*, 2021, p.407). Therefore, although changes to my research question and aims may be required to support the DP analysis in particular, my epistemological and ontological underpinnings which already supported a broader discourse analysis approach have, through a process of iteration evolved to include the DP ontological position that reality is constructed through language (O’Reilly *et al*. 2021).

Reflexivity as a marker of quality

I previously discussed my reflexivity as a researcher and how this positions me in relation to the subject area and the data. In conclusion of this chapter, I will finish by acknowledging the importance of reflexivity within the area of quality and the complicated relationship of reflexivity within DP.

Although the use of the Jefferson system goes some way to verifying the claims made by the researcher in that these claims are based on what can be observed in the transcript, there is still a question about the position of the researcher in relation to how and what they analyse and how they draw conclusions from the data. O’Reilly

et al. (2021, p.414) stress the importance of the researcher approaching the data as a 'blank canvas, without these preconceived ideas to be able to honestly engage with the data'. However, they move on to advise that the 'self-positioning' of the researcher is considered a 'social action' in DP and therefore also open to 'scrutiny' (O'Reilly *et al.* 2021, p. 418). To counteract this, it is suggested that the researcher includes direct quotes from their research journal to demonstrate integrity and 'relational ethics with the readers' (Guba 1981; Lather 1986, in O'Reilly *et al.* 2021, p.418) although this too can be viewed as a 'performative action' in that the researcher is 'doing reflexivity' (O'Reilly, *et al.* 2021, p.418). My note, scribbled on the article text was *so now what????*, where does this leave me as a researcher in demonstrating quality and reliability through reflexivity?

Conclusion:

To conclude this chapter, I will return to Patton's 2005 analogy of the book in which the book remains the same, but the individual reads it differently every time depending on where they are at that specific point in time. Like Patton's analogy, DP examines talk within a specific situational context and acknowledges how the same talk may change in different situational contexts with different people. This can also be said of the researcher's (and the reader's) analysis and conclusion of the data. It is impossible to approach the data as a blank canvas, however it is possible to recognise preconceived ideas and bias and produce transparency of this, and to support claims through the triangulation of other sources as in the case of CDA, and by doing so it is possible for the reader to trust in the research process and the claims and conclusions produced by the researcher.

Analysis of focus groups

Introduction: Participant recruitment

This research draws upon data from two focus groups consisting of the same participants: with the first focus group conducted in the participants' first year of undergraduate study, and the second focus group in their second year. The focus group participants were recruited following an online survey sent out to first year

First survey

The initial aim of this research was to conduct one focus group with first in family male students. It was hoped that these students could be recruited for a focus group following the completion of the online survey sent out to both male and female first year students at the university. The survey link was emailed to first year undergraduate students across a range of courses and campuses at the university via academic and administration staff. I had presented a brief overview of my research to several classes to increase interest and participation and following this a total of 74 students completed the survey, of which 19 (25%) identified as male. From the 74 participants, 47 (63%) advised that they were first in family (this included three students who had a parent or sibling currently at university) and of this 47, 10 (21%) were male. At the end of the survey participants' who had selected that they were first in family were invited to take part in the focus group and eight people, including two males, confirmed that they would be interested in participating. Due to the small number I decided to conduct a mixed focus group with both male and female participants, however when I reached out to the eight, one male participant responded to say he had changed his mind, and the other did not respond. Due to the logistics of organising a time and place that would work for everyone, from the

six remaining female respondents I was able to run a focus group with four female participants.

Despite the wealth of data that I obtained from the first focus group, I still hoped to run a focus group with first in family males, and therefore in the next academic year I sent out a second online survey to the new cohort of level 4 undergraduate students during their first semester at the university. Again, to increase participation I presented an overview of my research to several classes. Due to the lack of uptake for the first focus group, I included more questions in the second survey in the hope that I would obtain more information about first in family students at the university, in case it did not result in another focus group.

Second survey

The second survey had a smaller response rate than the first with 23 respondents. Of these, three (13%) were male, and 13 (57%) out of the total 23 respondents were either first in family or had a family member currently studying at university. Six respondents provided contact details for inclusion in a focus group, but none were male. Therefore, I decided that although I would utilise the survey data; as there are ethical considerations around taking up 'time and energies' of participants (Barbour, 2007) particularly if the data is not used, I would not however conduct a focus group with a new cohort of students.

Decision to run a second focus group with the same participants

Instead, I decided to reach out to the four students who had participated in the first focus group to ask if they would like to participate in a second focus group, which

would provide longitudinal data on their sense of belonging as first in family students during their transition into their second year. Research into student belonging (Araujo *et al.* 2014; Scanlon *et al.* 2020) has found that feelings of belonging can change when students transition into a new semester or year and find themselves in new classes with new peers and navigating the dynamics of a new group. The transitional support provided when students first arrive at university to promote belonging and connectedness and 'the openness to meeting new people' (Scanlon *et al.* 2020, p761) can be 'rigidly fixed to a singular moment in the student lifecycle' (Araujo *et al.* 2014, p.24) which does not support a continual transitional process over the course of their time at university. During the first focus group, two of the participants talked about the difficulties they faced when transitioning from first to second semester which had reduced their sense of belonging with certain aspects of university life. This finding enabled me to consider belonging over a longer period, and my decision to conduct a second focus group a year later was affirmed when again some of the participants discussed the difficulties they had experienced when transitioning into their second year. These findings will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter; however, it is important to introduce them here, in the context of explaining the reasoning for conducting a longitudinal study.

Both focus groups were conducted during the first few weeks of the second semester with discussions taking place in a classroom at the university, ranging from 1 hour 20 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes in length. The four participants had attended university straight after completing school or sixth form college and were all 18-19 years of age during the first focus group. All were white. One was a care leaver. They had all relocated to study at the university and were living in halls at the time the first

focus group took place, moving to private rental with other university students in their second year. They were studying a range of courses, sociology, history, sport and psychology across two campuses. From the four participants, three took part in the second focus group as one participant cancelled their attendance on the day.

The focus group discussions were centred around the following themes: the participants first in family status, their sense of belonging, their identity as students, and barriers and enablers of their sense of belonging during their time at university.

I will discuss and analyse the findings of the focus group along with some of the survey data in the chapter; however, it is important at this point to consider and reflect upon the difficulties experienced in recruiting first in family male participants within my research.

Reflection on recruiting male participants

The aim of this research changed from the initial focus on the experiences of first in family males in relation to their class and masculine identities, to that of four female participants whose genuine interest in this study resulted in two focus groups, with a request from the participants for another focus group in their final year. The lack of interest from male students in both the survey and focus groups will now be considered, along with the response rates from males in other educational studies and in the context of the relationship that working-class males have with education.

It is salient to highlight at this point the difficulty in the use of the different categorisations within these areas of research in terms of understanding the lack of male interest in educational research. The males within these studies may fit into both the working-class and first in family categories. However, some may just fit into

one category, some working-class males will not become first in family students due to their decision not to go to university, some first in family males will not come from working-class families and some working-class students will not be first in family. It therefore cannot be assumed that the male students at the university within this study who did not engage with any aspect of the research fit into any or all these categories. However, the survey responses have demonstrated that some first in family male students did engage to some degree but were not able or willing to engage any more than this.

Male participants in educational research

There is a wealth of research into the experiences of working-class students in higher education (Crozier & Reay 2011; Reay 2017 & 2018; Attridge 2021), first in family students (Brosnan *et al.* 2016; O'Shea 2015), first year undergraduate student transitions into university (Scanlon, 2020) and belonging at university (Wonkhe, 2022). Each of these studies have used qualitative data taken from interviews, focus groups and surveys with students to gain an understanding of their experiences of university. One of the reasons for choosing to focus my research on the experiences of first in family male students was the lack of data from male participants within this area of research. For example, Attridge (2021) study conducted 15 interviews with working-class students (of which 11 were first in family) at the University of Oxford. Although the study does not advise on the male to female ratio of the 15 student participants, nine students who were quoted in the study were given pseudonyms in line with their gender, and all nine had a female name. Therefore, even if the rest of the participants were male, 60% were female.

Crozier and Reay (2011) research detail the case studies of 17 working-class students from two universities over two academic years to understand their experiences of academic learning at university level. Of the 17, only 35% were male. Scanlon *et al.* (2020) study on working class student reflections on their transitions into university compiled data from 12 individual interviews and a focus group consisting of four people. Of this, six of the participants were male, 10 were female. In 2022 Wonkhe compiled a report on belonging at university, in which 5,233 students across 15 institutions completed an online survey. Of this only 34% were male, compared to 61% female, with 2% non-binary and 2% prefer not to say. O'Shea (2015) study on first in family student success at an Australian university conducted 23 interviews with 17 female (74%) and six male students (26%).

It can of course be argued that a lower male to female ratio at the institutions within these studies, along with the number of working-class or first in family males at each institution, plays a part in the number of male participants. HESA data for UK higher education supports this with male student enrolments for the 2021/2022 academic year at around 44% compared to 55% female. At the university where this research took place, HESA numbers for the 2021/22 cycle, the cycle in which the first survey and focus group took place, show that 39% of undergraduate students were male compared to 60.5% female. Again, this needs to be considered when examining the lack of male engagement in this research. However, I would argue that the Wonkhe (2022) report demonstrates that even within a large volume of responses, across a range of institutions, the male response rate is significantly less than the female.

Working-class male student statistics

Although the working-class males in Archer *et al.* (2001) research viewed male students as middle-class ‘boffins’ Archer *et al.* (2001, p.435) and despite perceptions of working-class students as non-traditional, undergraduate working-class student numbers are not inconsequential. HESA socio-economic classification data from the 2021/22 cycle showed that students from the bottom three classification classes made up 23% of first year, first degree enrolments for that cycle. It must be noted that this is only considering enrolments onto degree courses, not other undergraduate courses such as HNCs or HNDs which may lead to a degree.

Another note of importance is the difficulty in applying the socio-economic classification to a particular class, as previously discussed, due to its complexity, social class is not a clean measurement (Attridge, 2021). Finally, the HESA data does not specify the percentage of males in each socio-economic classification. Despite these issues, what this measurement does is to highlight that not all male university students are ‘middle class boffins’, there are working-class male students studying at university.

Where does this leave the question around why there is a lack of male engagement in educational research? As previously mentioned, research into the experiences of male students within education has highlighted that for working-class boys in particular there is a problematic relationship from early childhood with education in which their working-class identity does not fit with educational success (Ingram, 2009). For the boys in Ingram’s study who aspired to go to university, there was an uncomfortable negotiation of their working-class identity, closely linked to the local area where they lived, with their educational aspirations. Here Ingram discusses the acculturation of the working-class habitus to the middle-class field of higher

education, something that although the boys may not have been able to articulate, they certainly understood their need to negotiate.

It is perhaps within this aspect of Ingram's study that an understanding of the lack of male engagement in educational research can be considered, as despite the desire to continue with their education, these boys live within a location where there is a 'culture of resistance to schooling as a means of maintaining (...) local identity' (Ingram, 2009, p. 422). Ingram references Bourdieu's concept of habitus defining it as 'modes of thought, opinion and behaviours that are the internalisation of experiences built up over a lifetime' (Ingram, 2009, p. 422). Using this concept, it can be considered that despite the desire and ability to continue with one's education at university level, working-class males are negotiating a habitus that has been built up over their lives from the people around them and from their experiences, particularly their experiences of education. It can perhaps be argued that this culture of resistance to education is demonstrated through adverseness to participating in additional activities such as research participation whilst at university. Working-class males may experience ambivalence about their educational experiences prior to and at university, which may manifest in them choosing to do enough to gain their degree, but no more.

The question around the indifference of male students towards my research was raised during the second focus group when I asked the participants whether they had any views as to why the male students did not engage. I had not necessarily expected the participants to have much to say about this as they had attended with the understanding that they would discuss their own experiences, not to give their

opinions on others. However, the question elicited interesting discussion and insights from the group, starting with Lily who quickly gave with her view from a sport perspective:

Lily: I feel like from the sports kind of side, I feel like (.) might be very, a big bold statement out there but I feel like the guys aren't as involved, they're quite, just turn up, do bear minimum as much as possible just so they pass, that is it, that's all the uni experience is, go play a sport and that is it kind of thing.

Here Lily explains that for the males on her sports course, their main reason for attending university is to play sport, therefore they do enough work to pass their course, but no more, as their focus is on participating in sport, not studying it. Lily positions her perspective as a 'big, bold statement out there', however this is vindicated by Ava and followed by a shared experience of male student behaviour and attitude towards preparation and participation in lectures:

Ava: like some of the guys in class, it does feel like they just show up (.) do work and then leave

Facilitator: *ok*

Ava: and then

Lily: = none of them do work, just show up

All: (H)

Erica: *That is it(H) be like, oh can I borrow a pen, I'll be like, how do you not bring a pen!*

Erica's comment above demonstrates a lack of preparedness for the learning environment; a core area of university life, and by doing so contextualises the lack of engagement with this research by constructing male student engagement with the wider university life as unenthusiastic, showing little motivation to participate more than necessary. Discursively Erica justifies her discourse by drawing upon a rhetorical strategy of using her knowledge as a sociology student to provide an academic perspective:

Erica: *Like I feel like with school and uni and stuff, I remember learning about it, it's almost like the feminisation of school so I feel like it's almost this (.) men see like school maybe as more like female and obviously I feel like there's some maybe stereotypes and expectations put on (.) boys maybe not to do this kind of thing 'cause it's not cool*

Facilitator: *yep*

Erica: *it's not very masculine, there's kind of that (.) yeah stereotype, um you know I feel like if some men did it, the- their friendship group would be more likely to go oh why are you doing that as opposed to a girl and like () I feel like that's maybe from like I dunno just societal expectations, social-socialisation.*

Here Erica positions the 'feminine' field of education as in conflict with masculine stereotypes, and therefore if male students were to engage in extracurricular activities such as participating in research, they would be questioned about it by their

friends. Erica's sociological perspective echoes Archer *et al.* (2001) research which explores working-class male's association of 'education with 'femininity' (p.433) and their 'constructions of masculinity (which) may prevent them from perceiving participation as a 'manly' option' (p.434). Although Archer *et al.* study analyses the discourses of working-class males who chose *not* to participate in higher education, it does support Ingram (2009) insight into the working-class male habitus and its relationship with education which would appear to impact both engagement and enthusiasm for extracurricular academic activities at university.

Reflection of own experience of engagement as a first in family student

Although it is out of the scope of this research to consider this area in more detail, as a first in family student from a working-class background I wanted to conclude this section by reflecting on my own experience as an undergraduate with the aim of offering a further explanation of the lack of male engagement in my research. During the three years of my degree, I did not engage in any activities outside of the scope of what was expected for the course. I worked hard academically and engaged with group work outside of lectures, however I never put myself forward for any other activities, academic or social. This was purely because I did not feel a sense of belonging within the university environment and did not form a sense of student identity until my final year.

Briggs *et al.* (2012) explain that during the transition into university, students are developing their student identity and learning to adjust to the new environment, and that connections between pre-university and university experience aid this. As a working-class first in family student, I did not make the connections between pre-university and university, they were two entirely different worlds. I was there to study

but did not view it as a place where I could fully immerse myself in its culture.

Reflecting on this I am inclined to consider whether this discordance between a working-class or first in family habitus, where there is no history of higher education, and the field of higher education, also plays a part in the lack of engagement of first in family males in my research. The limit (and irony) here is that to gain a better understanding of the reasons, one would need engagement from those who do not engage.

Discussion of focus group findings and analysis

In this section I will discuss and analyse the findings from both focus groups, exploring the following themes: participants first in family status, their sense of belonging, their identity as students, and barriers and enablers of their sense of belonging during their time at university.

First in family status

The focus group questions were approached in a linear fashion, starting with a discussion around how, as first in family students, the participants made the decision to go to university and who (if anyone) inspired them. Within this discussion, their first in family status was implicit in their responses, although their responses did not support an awareness of a direct correlation of their experiences with being first in family.

All the participants discussed the influence of both school / college and home in their decisions to apply to university. Two of the participants; Erica and Ava, advised that they had considered university for a considerable amount of time and saw it as the 'natural next step' due to their academic abilities. Both Erica and Ava talked of their awareness whilst at school of their academic abilities with Ava advising that since

her early years of secondary school, university had always been her next step. What both narratives highlight is that despite there being no prior family experience of higher education, both participants had seen university as an option for a considerable period, and both made it clear in their narratives that their parents recognised their academic abilities and supported their aspirations. The significance of their parents' input cannot be ignored, as Wilks and Wilson (2012) in their study into access and participation in university discuss; 'the educational aspirations of young people reflect ... the influence of parents and siblings (cultural capital)' (p.83).

Although this research will move on to consider how, in the case of Ava, her parents lack of knowledge of higher education resulted in her guiding them through the process, it is salient to inform that a lack of knowledge of higher education, or even the broader education system does not reflect a lack of appreciation of its benefits. Reflecting on my own experience of school I can vividly remember my father instilling into me the importance of education. Whilst at primary school he supported me with a project on Isambard Kingdom Brunel by taking me to Bristol to see the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the SS Great Britain. Therefore, although neither of my parents understood the higher education system, which I navigated on my own, they always recognised the wider benefits of education, supporting me where they could.

Family support and understanding

As with the survey responses, there was a mixed response from participants when discussing the level of support they received from family members during the

application and decision-making process, with some parents playing an active role in helping the student decide which university to apply to:

Erica: again through like the whole university process like she's was there doing it with me, like she'd sit there with me when I've been doing it online and that, she'd come to the open days with me, and I actually heard about () uni when she'd been talking to people at her work about it and asking around about universities and that, so she was, even though like she hasn't been to university.

In this extract Erica positions the level of support her mum provided as significant despite not attending university herself, advising that her mum sat with her as she researched and applied online and that it was her mum who suggested the university as an option after a discussion with a work colleague. By advising 'I actually heard' Erica is giving her mum the credit for introducing her to the university that she now studies at. The action orientation of Erica's discourse is to demonstrate the significance of her mum's support in the process. Erica goes on to explain that her mum is also academic and regrets not going to university where she would have liked to study maths which further contextualises the amount of effort and support her mum put into helping her with the application process.

This extract lends further evidence to O'Shea (2015) claim that research on educational participation demonstrates clear links between parent and carer's attitudes towards and experiences of education and a child's educational pathways and attainment. Erica's description of her mum as academic, and of her desire to have studied maths is an example of the parental attitude towards, if not actual experience of education. Erica's mum has not experienced higher education herself,

however her active support of Erica's desire to go to university demonstrates a positive attitude towards a continuation of post compulsory education, which has positively impacted on Erica's experience of university.

Erica's experience of parental support echoed some of the responses from the survey. In the extract below the survey respondent advises that the support they received, in this case not from a parent but from other family members, was provided throughout the entire application process, despite no family history of higher education:

I receive (sic) support from my Auntie, Uncle and Grandma. I feel as though they give me more than enough support and they helped me throughout the entire process of applying to University, despite not attending or applying themselves.

The significance of parental (or family) support is the topic of Benito-Gomez *et al.* (2022) research which explores the impact of parental support on student adjustment, highlighting that students' whose parents engaged in 'supportive strategies [felt] motivated and reassured' (p.3385). The impact of supportive strategies during the university application and decision-making process, particularly for first in family students, cannot be underestimated. 'As students transition to higher education institutions, they rely on their parents for emotional and decision-making support' (Benito-Gomez *et al.* 2022, pp. 3375-3276). For any student, the decision around which university and course to apply for can be daunting, with the support of parents and family members providing a safety-net as students make this important decision. However, for first in family students, who are pioneers of the higher education system within their families, the reassurance they receive from the

support of family members, helps to build confidence and motivation as they transition into university.

Erica's narrative in which her mum was able to actively support her differs to that of some of the other focus group participants in which their parents either didn't know how to help, such as Ava's parents, or they were given little guidance such as Lily who despite being given an ultimatum of 'university or nothing' by her mum, moved on to explain 'but she left like where I go all up to me though'.

What came through from all their narratives however was that, as first in family students, they were the ones who lead on this process, in some cases guiding their parents through the process:

mine was more like my mum just didn't really know what to do... like I could tell she wanted to do more..., but it was more like, I was telling her what she needed to do

In this extract Ava explains that although her mum was very supportive and wanted to be more involved in the process, she didn't know enough about the process, or about higher education in general to be able to help more. Ava's experience here is similar to that of some of the survey respondents who advised that a lack of knowledge about higher education left them with little support: 'My family didn't know much about university, this made it very difficult to get any help from them' (survey respondent). Despite this lack of knowledge of the higher education system, some respondents advised that there were other ways in which their families supported them: 'I received support from my family but [it was] more moral/emotional support' (survey respondent).

Both of Ava's parents provided support where they could, such as attending open days and meeting with her teachers, yet this was still unknown territory for the family. This experience is not unique, and educational studies have discussed how 'insider knowledge' (O'Shea, 2015, p.141) stemming from a family history of higher education can provide a student with the 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) that only first-hand experience can deliver, as opposed to the official knowledge that may be derived from a university website or academic talk at an open day.

However, as the student narratives from both the survey and focus groups demonstrate, there are other ways in which families can support a student through the transition process that does not have to rely on prior experience of university. Enabling the student to discuss their thoughts and decisions, providing emotional support such as listening to them and offering advice or reassurance, along with showing how proud they are and celebrating their child's success, are all familial support strategies that these first in family students have benefited from.

School support

Molly's discourse on deciding to apply to university differed to that of the other participants as she discussed the support she received from her school before talking about the (lack) of support from home. Molly began by advising that she was a care leaver and in doing this, positioned her experience of applying to university as different to that of the other participants, who had all discussed the input they had received from their parents prior to Molly disclosing her experience. Molly's rhetoric informed the group that unlike them, she did not have parents behind her who cared about her next steps and that it was a social worker, as opposed to a parent, who put the idea of university into her head:

no one like cared at all apart from my social worker who just wanted me to get to university, so it was kind of all up to () on like where I went, what I did...

By stressing her own unique situation of not having parental support, to the group, the function of Molly's rhetoric was to attribute her success of getting into university in part to the support she received from her school. However, within this discourse Molly also highlights how the inequality of the education system gambles with the educational trajectory of pupils.

Molly experienced a change of schools when she started sixth form; despite her old school having a sixth form, as her foster parents supported the move 'into a better school' (Molly). Her discourse below presents a comparison of the two schools, the function of which was to highlight how the class difference of the two schools influenced the number of students who moved onto university and the unfairness of this situation, whilst at the same time emphasising how this change provided the support she needed, which she didn't have at home, enabling her to go to university:

*but I went to quite a um,> I don't know how you call it<, like lower class school
so they don't expect anyone to go to university like it was never spoken
about but then I ended up moving for 6th form and I went to like a higher-class
school where they expected everyone to go to university*

Here Molly rhetorically uses extreme case formulation to emphasise the difference in the two schools, positioning the lower-class school in which 'they don't expect *anyone* to go to university', in stark comparison to the higher-class school where 'they expect *everyone* to go'. In reference to her first school, Molly's use of *anyone*, meaning any person or any people (Cambridge.org), suggests that they did not

expect *any* of their students to go onto university, whereas at her second school the expectation was that *all* their students would progress onto university.

Molly's use of the word expect is salient here. The formation of expectations and their bearing on future educational achievements has been the focus of several studies (Boxer *et al.*, 2011; Archer *et al.*, 2014; Khattab, 2015; Harrison and Waller, 2018). These studies argue that higher education policy such as the DfES White paper (2003a) use a 'deficit discourse' (Harrison and Waller, 2018, p.915) in which the educational achievements of young people from families without a history of higher education are seen as a direct result of their own low personal aspirations, rather than as a result of school attainment, or the expectations shaped by the adults around them such as parents and teachers which can impact on attainment.

To highlight this point, Harrison and Waller (2018) reference the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) 2014 National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education, in which the word aspiration is used 23 times, again placing the issue of low educational achievement firmly in the hands of the learner. Harrison and Waller's research argues against this view citing previous research (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Leondari, 2007) which distinguishes between a learner's aspirations (what they desire to be) and their expectations (what is probable). Harrison and Waller argue that young people have similar aspirations regardless of social background but that their expectations are influenced by a variety of factors including personal experiences and the adults surrounding them. What is probable is demonstrated to them within school, home and local communities.

Further to this, Cummings *et al.* (2012) research into educational aspirations and attainment reported some evidence to support that aspirations may be raised through interventions such as parental involvement, school mentoring and extracurricular activities. Whereas Gorard *et al.* (2012) reported that attainment can increase aspirations 'by making "higher" options seem achievable' (Harrison and Waller, 2018, p920). In addition to this, I would argue that there is a link between both Cummings *et al.* (2012) and Gorard *et al.* (2012) findings, as interventions can support an increase in attainment by building positive links with education. These positive links help to build confidence and a sense of belonging within school for the student, therefore increasing the likelihood of achieving higher grades. Both parental and school interventions can also be linked to their expectations of their students, as this also demonstrates both interest in and encouragement for the future educational trajectory of students. The subsequent increase in attainment from these interventions can help towards raising aspirations. However, the point here is that without the demonstration of expectations from schools and parents through interventions which can help to raise attainment, aspirations alone are not enough.

Critical discourse analysis view of aspirational discourse

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be utilised to analyse aspirational discourse at a macro level. Taking Harrison and Waller (2018) example of the DBIS 2014 access strategy, CDA demonstrates how policy makers proffer the idea of raising aspirations as the answer to increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. As noted by Bowes-Brown, Ingram and Burke (2019) this promotes a discourse in which the individual's educational success or failure is dependent on their own '(in)capacity to imagine a suitable future, and in

their motivation to achieve it' (p.207). With the focus on the individual, the impact of both societal and educational contexts and inequalities can be disregarded, enabling meritocratic discourses of higher education as 'universally accessible, irrespective of social position or financial circumstance' (Gale and Parker, 2015, p.142) to be promoted, there for the taking for those who aim higher!

Molly's description of her two schools challenges this rhetoric by highlighting the difference in the number of students progressing to higher education and linking these numbers to the inequalities between the two schools based on their lower and higher-class statuses and their expectations of their students, rather than on the aspirations of individual students:

but maybe I'd say like 10 people that I know from my old school went to university ... and I'd say like 90% of the people in the new school have all gone onto university and some of them have gone to like quite high up universities

Molly continues to emphasise the differences between the two schools by advising that some students in her second school had gained places at 'quite high up universities'. By including this information, Molly provides evidence in support of her rhetoric of how attending a 'higher class school' can benefit a student through them gaining a place at a prestigious university. I suggest that through the comparison of her two schools, Molly has explained that her journey into higher education was enabled through the move to a 'better' school, which counterbalanced the lack of support she received outside of school. Through this discourse Molly again challenges the meritocratic view of higher education as accessible for all irrespective of social and educational circumstances. As a first in family student and a care

leaver, the move into a school where students were expected to progress to higher education can be viewed as an enabler of Molly's journey into university.

However, despite Molly's challenge to the aspirational discourse, what struck me during her discourse on applying to university was that although she gave significant credit to her second school, it was clear that Molly navigated important parts of the process on her own. Molly begins by informing the group that her head of sixth form got involved in everything:

>um, the school were really good< the school that I moved to and like the head of 6th form got involved in everything...

but then moves on to say that she only booked herself onto one open day and had to go on her own, which she attributes to being a procrastinator and not knowing what she wanted to do:

but like um (.) >I'm quite a procrastinator < so I didn't like (.) know what I wanted to do so I ended up only booking one open day and it was in Birmingham and like I had to go by myself (h) because I didn't have anyone else to go with me and I didn't like know what I was looking for at all

Rather than giving herself credit for organising and attending an open day by herself without the support of parents or teachers, Molly just focuses on the fact that she only attended one and that this was down to her procrastination, therefore taking full responsibility for not attending more.

Molly's description of her own deficit being the reason for not attending more open days connects with the responses from first in family working class students interviewed in Stuart (2006) research. Their responses demonstrated that they viewed themselves as the 'centre of action' (Beck, 1992, p135) in which their

success or failure was entirely reliant on their own individual capabilities, as they did not have the same support or resources as the middle-class students to fall back on. Again, by using CDA it can be considered that the social impact of macro discourses of meritocracy ensures that students from non-traditional backgrounds continue to perceive their personal success or failure as a result of their own (in)capabilities, rather than as a result of social and educational inequalities.

Although Molly positions herself as the centre of action, which she constructs as necessary for her to progress to university; 'so it was kind of all up to () on like where I went, what I did', her discourse also demonstrated her desire for support from home, 'I kind of wish I had more guidance from them'. The action of this discourse, using the word 'had' is to inform the listeners of her desire to *have* guidance from home. If Molly had said 'I wish I'd had', using the past tense of 'I'd', the action of her discourse would have been to inform her desire to have had support just through the application process, as it is, using the phrase 'I kind of wish I had' implies that she continues to require guidance that she does not have, guidance that the other students demonstrated they did receive through their discourses about parental support.

Molly's rhetorical use of mitigating laughter, indicated by a small (h) within the transcript, appears several times throughout the parental support discourse:

*I had to go by myself (h) because I didn't have anyone else to go with' and
'now they don't even like ask how I'm doing at university, um(.) that makes me
low (h)*

Here Molly's use of mitigating laughter may be an attempt to lessen the feelings that her discourse has raised for her. This may be for several reasons. First her

disclosure has reminded her of what little support and guidance she received from home which may raise negative feelings. Second, Molly's disclosure is to a group of other students who have received parental support, therefore the action of her laughter may be to cover up embarrassment, to display a nonchalant attitude towards her circumstances, or perhaps in an attempt to prevent others in the group from feeling uncomfortable or feeling sorry for her.

Enabler of entry into higher education

Like the students in Stuart (2006) study, Molly is quick to blame her own perceived deficits as the reason for any failure such as attending just one open day. However, when I pointed out how much she had achieved on her own, despite the barriers she faced, I felt that Molly did not fully recognise her personal attributes as significant enablers of her journey into higher education. As a care leaver, who initially attended a school of low progression into higher education, the expectations of Molly by the adults surrounding her would not have been high. However, despite this, her attainment was of a standard in which she was able to apply to university, and her personal determination and confidence to go it alone ensured that she gained a place at university.

Returning to O'Shea (2016) challenge of the deficit view of first in family students, as discussed in the literature review chapter, Molly's journey into higher education can be viewed from a strengths-based perspective. Enablers of Molly's journey include her aspirational capital, which, despite the obstacles in her way, she continued to maintain and pursue possibilities, resulting in a place at university. Navigational capital, which has enabled Molly to not only manoeuvre through the change of secondary schools and into university, but to also to continue to achieve at a high

standard despite experiencing instability and low expectations and support from those around her.

Molly is one of a small number of care leavers who progress onto university, with around 14 per cent of care leavers under the age of 19 progressing into higher education (Civitas, 2023). Despite the support available at many universities, including financial and social, care leavers still experience feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and loneliness (University of Sheffield, 2020) during all stages of university, without the familial support required to buffer these feelings. Molly's navigational capital has enabled her to progress through university despite this lack of support.

Sense of belonging during the transition into university

The second theme discussed within the focus group was around the students' sense of belonging during their first semester at university, particularly their first few weeks. As previously discussed, student belonging within higher education has become an area of increasing focus due to its impact on student success and retention.

An exciting development occurred within the belonging discourse, as this was the point where the group, rather than taking turns to speak and waiting to be invited to contribute, started to form a connection due to their shared experience of their first few weeks at university. This began when Lily disclosed how the university accommodation team had set up a Facebook group chat for all the first-year students living in on-campus accommodation. This enabled the students to build connections prior to starting university and to work out who lived in the same block, or on the same floor as them, helping to reduce some of the anxiety around meeting new people:

Lily: so the whole campus got made to go to one big group chat and then everyone else split off into like different blocks and then we all like split off into like floors as well so already kind of knew

Following Lily's disclosure, Erica and Ava quickly drew upon their shared identity with Lily as first-year first in family students by disclosing similar experiences of the accommodation led group chat. The following extract details the interaction between the participants as they connect over their shared experiences. A note, written by me during the transcription process, describes the enthusiasm that can be heard in their voices during the discussion:

With this section of the conversation, you can hear the excitement. As they are all talking about the same experience and bouncing off each other.

This enthusiasm is also evident in the use of brackets within the transcription, which represents overlapping conversation:

Facilitator: (in reference to the group chat) so that's all set up with accommodation?

Lily: [yeah]

Erica: [yeah]

Ava: [cause there's the new students Facebook group chat]

Lily: [yeah]

Erica: [and from that we got the Snapchat]

Ava: [and everybody kind of puts up], somebody, it just takes one person to be like I'm in this block and then everyone comments on that

Facilitator: *ah*

Lily: *like here's my snapchat, and*

Lily and Ava together: *they'll add you to a group chat*

Ava: *[yeah]*

Lily: *[so yeah]*

Facilitator: *oh great, so that*

Erica: *so that definitely helps with belonging*

Lily: *[yeah]*

Firstly, this extract provides evidence of the benefit of participating in a focus group discussion for these first in family students. Wonkhe (2022) research into belonging advised that forming connection between students will have the 'greatest impact' (Wonkhe, 2022, p.5) on their sense of belonging. Therefore, the bringing together of these first in family students within a focus group setting has helped to build a connection between them, thus aiding their sense of belonging. This is through both their recognition of their shared characteristic as first in family students, and through the group sharing of experiences of starting university without a family history of higher education to provide a buffer of prior understanding and experience.

Sharing these experiences within the focus group may help to validate personal feelings and perspectives of their university experience so far, enabling individual participants to feel a sense of belonging with the other students in the group, which is especially important during their first year at university.

Prior to this discourse, despite the shared characteristics within the group there had been little interaction between the participants, as their discourses until this point had been personal to them. However, the shared experience of the accommodation initiative resulted in the group becoming more animated and responsive to each other's input.

Secondly, this extract supports findings from several studies (York & Thomas, 2003; Briggs, Clarke & Hall, 2012; Scanlon *et al.*, 2019; Wonkhe, 2022) which report that universities play an integral part in building a sense of belonging within their student body through initiatives and activities, some of which start before students arrive on campus. These activities and initiatives, such as the accommodation Facebook group chat, support student adjustment to life at university and help to bridge the transition between school/home and university.

Responses from the survey also demonstrated the positive impact of course-led initiatives on students' sense of belonging during their initial weeks at university:

There was a task which was set by the university for GIS mapping, this put us in groups of around 5/6 and this is the activity which made me a few friends and we are still friends (survey respondent).

there was a group task during the week where in groups we had to analyse street art. this was beneficial as I was in a group with some completely new people and go (sic) to know them well (survey respondent).

Research into belonging in higher education describes starting university for first in family students as 'akin to travelling to a foreign country and not knowing the language and appropriate cultural practices' (Meehan and Howells, 2018, p.1378).

For first in family students, the culture shock of travelling to this foreign country

called university, with its new language and culture can be reduced. Firstly, through prior understanding and awareness and secondly through structured activities which bring students together and encourage inclusion and belonging. Contact with other students via course-led group activities and initiatives such as the Facebook group chat, are therefore significant enablers of first in family students' sense of belonging during the transition period.

Belonging through peer connection

University led initiatives and practices help to facilitate the building of peer connections. This not only aids stability and adjustment during the first year but can also help to buffer the integration into academic life (Noyens et al., 2018; Scanlon et al., 2019), particularly during stressful periods such as exams or during presentations. Within the first focus group there were mixed experiences of university led connection initiatives. Whilst Erica talked positively about how a residential field trip early in the first semester helped her to form friendships with students on other courses, Lily and Ava both discussed their struggles in infiltrating already formed cliques within the classroom. All the participants disclosed feeling uncomfortable or anxious at times during lectures, and this was often due to being in the lecture on their own and feeling the pressure of taking the lead in interacting with others in the class. However, this was particularly pertinent for Lily as her course involved a lot of working in pairs and she would sometimes find herself having to tag on to another pair or work on her own. Whilst this was not a problem during the first semester as she had made friends with people on her course, Lily found herself with a new group of students in her second semester modules with the difficult task of trying to integrate into already formed groups:

Lily: I feel like it was more in the first semester I was like yeah cool because I had them people that I get on with more and the second semester, it got like, our groups completely got changed, I'm not with anyone...sometimes you kind of want to feel that want from someone else, oh they want to work with you instead of you just kind of hey can I work with you guys? And you're just pushing yourself onto them which was a bit mmm but, yeah(h)

Lily had previously spoken of 'not fully belonging' and through this she highlighted an important aspect of belonging which is that it is not static, it can change depending on environment and the people you are with. Here the action orientation of Lily's discourse above is to position her feelings of belonging in the second semester in comparison to the first semester. Rhetorically, her description of her feelings in the first semester, 'I was like yeah cool' informed the group that she felt relaxed because she had made friends with people taking the same modules. However, she advised that in her second semester classes 'I'm not with anyone', suggesting that none of her friends were in any of her classes. The action orientation of this discourse is to support her description of 'not fully belonging' as her peer-to-peer connections have not carried across into her second semester. Lily further emphasises the difference in her sense of belonging between the two semesters advising 'sometimes you kind of want to feel that want from someone else' when describing how she would have liked someone to have invited her to join their group in semester two. Her use of the word 'you' as opposed to 'I' frames her statement as a given experience, one that is shared by the rest of the group, and as such the action orientation of this discourse can be viewed as Lily forming a connection with other members of the focus group by appealing to their understanding, as fellow students, of the need for inclusion and connection with class peers.

Lily's struggle to infiltrate already formed peer / friendship groups during lectures in her second semester is not unusual and can be a significant barrier to belonging. Whilst meeting new people and forming friendships are cited by many students as the most challenging aspect of starting university (Meehan and Howells, 2019; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020), it is noted that the 'openness to meeting new people' tends to be particular to the first year of university (Scanlon *et al.*, 2020, p761) with the focus on belonging 'emphasised in the first weeks of university transition and then abandoned' (Araujo *et al.*, 2014, p.24). What these findings demonstrate is that once the initial frenzy of university coordinated activity designed to form connections has concluded, students can be left to navigate the building of peer relationships on their own. This is often at a point where the commonality of everyone making the effort to connect with others has subsided as friendship groups are already formed, making the process of forming new connections and friendships, which help to establish a sense of belonging, more difficult.

In addition to the importance of peer-to-peer connection in establishing a sense of belonging, Meehan and Howell (2019) research highlighted the significance of belonging for the formation of a learner identity. This is supported by Dweck (1999) who stressed the importance of connection with peers which can help with the development of 'concepts of self that are associated with learning and achievement' (In Briggs and Clark, 2012, p.5) thus also aiding the creation of a learner or student identity. All these aspects help support the student's adjustment to academic learning at university level. Therefore, is it of the benefit of both the student and the university that the student forms meaningful connections with others on their course as this can be an important factor in their academic success, and for student retention.

Araujo *et al.* (2014) case study of 'The Belonging Project' demonstrated how sustained classroom structured activities help foster belonging and academic engagement whilst recognising and supporting the continuing process of transition throughout the student life cycle. This four-year project created a cohort experience using 'co-curricular initiatives and curriculum-embedded activities' (Araujo *et al.* 2014, p.26) aimed at supporting peer-to-peer connections and staff and student interactions. The foundation of the project was the belief that belonging should be cultivated and nurtured throughout the student lifecycle, with second semester initiatives 'capitalising' on the success of the first semester initiatives (Araujo *et al.* 2014, p.29). The success of the project was in its sustainment of a sense of community amongst the student cohort, resulting in both students and staff reporting increased student motivation and engagement along with a relaxed and supportive classroom environment.

Lily's disclosure of her struggle to infiltrate already established groups in her second semester, along with Ava's disclosure of similar struggles on her dual degree, highlights the requirement of university-led initiatives for building and sustaining connections amongst cohorts. By establishing a holistic approach to belonging across the student lifecycle and recognising that module choices and course structures can result in students finding themselves having to build new peer connections throughout the academic year, university-led initiatives can help embed inclusive learning environments which encourage collaboration and social belonging across cohorts.

Enabler: participation and engagement

Following her disclosure of her difficulty in forming connections in semester two, Lily draws upon her identity as a proactive and engaged learner perhaps to counterbalance any perception she may have given to the group that she is unassertive.

I'm quite active though in practicals, and will always like offering (sic) to help and everything, I'm really like pushing myself out there to like...to get with it yeah...

Here Lily demonstrates that despite barriers to her sense of belonging within the classroom, she can draw upon her individual agency and act independently, choosing to volunteer for classroom activities that will shape and enhance her knowledge, confidence and skills. Noyens *et al.* (2018) empirical research exploring the directional links between academic motivation and social integration found that students who have positive peer-to-peer interactions are more likely to experience a high level of academic motivation. Although Lily did not experience the positive peer-to-peer interactions in her second semester, she enabled the sustainment of her academic motivation through active involvement in the classroom in an alternative way.

Building belonging and student identity through the support of others

Throughout both focus groups the students discussed how activities with peers and friends developed and sustained their sense of belonging. During the first focus group, the students talked about how they had supported friends with academic work, which helps to build connections and provide a 'sense of security and acceptance' (Wonkhe, 2022, p.9). In this discourse Ava captures the essence of

supporting others: 'it creates this kind of knowing that we can ask each other for help', thus highlighting the mutual benefits of building connections with others.

In the extract below, Ava explains how she supported a housemate with an experiment for her assignment, this is quickly picked up by Molly who is working on the same assignment:

Ava: oh and the other day a girl in my house, I literally got home, just walked in...she was like do you mind sticking your hand in this ice water!

Molly: ((gasps loudly)) I'M DOING THAT!

Ava: yeah, for like the, like the pain endurance

Molly: for the crim, for the psychology report, yeah

Note: ((BOTH TALKING OVER EACH OTHER IN THEIR EXCITEMENT))

In this interaction, Ava and Molly are connecting with each other over the shared experience of the assignment, and Molly has drawn upon her identity as a psychology student to connect with Ava who supported another psychology student with the same assignment. This interaction occurred prior to my question to the group about whether they felt that they identified as students, to which Molly responded saying that because she did not always feel a sense of belonging, she also did not always identify with being a student:

Molly: I think it's also because of the belonging thing, I don't really feel like I fit into like a uni student thing or like I kind of feel out of place quite a lot... Um, but that goes up and down, I think.

Briggs *et al.* (2012) explain that part of the transition into university involves the formation of a student identity, but that for students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as first in family and care leavers, there is the potential for feelings of isolation if they do 'not fit the university's expectation of them' (Briggs *et al.* 2012, p.4), something that Molly highlights in her discourse when she disclosed 'I kind of feel out of place quite a lot'. Briggs *et al.* (2012) advise that adjustment to university is enhanced through positive connections with staff and other students, both inside and outside of the classroom, as this helps with integration into university life, therefore enabling the student to 'feel they fit in' (Briggs *et al.* 2012, p.4). This in turn supports the development of a student identity. During the brief interaction between Ava and Molly, it can be argued that Molly's sense of student identity increased due to the shared experience of the psychology experiment with another student.

Molly's gasp of recognition, followed by the loud exclamation 'I'M DOING THAT!' signifies her delight in the shared experience with Ava. During the first part of the discourse, Molly and Ava are excitedly talking over each other to establish that they are discussing the same experiment. Later in the discourse both students ask each other questions to determine the specific details of their individual experiences. The action orientation of Ava's initial discourse was to demonstrate her willingness to support others, by stating 'I literally got home, just walked in' Ava expresses her willingness to provide support without hesitation. By the end of this discourse a performative function had emerged, one in which both Ava and Molly had formed a connection through their shared experience.

Earlier in the focus group, Molly had also disclosed how she felt demotivated in her academic work and was struggling to turn up to lectures, yet when Ava talked about

the experiment, Molly became animated and enthusiastic about this piece of academic work. Noyens *et al.* (2018, p.80) discuss the directional links between academic motivation and social integration in which 'The results point at the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters the interactions between fellow students and supports less-motivated students'. This very point was demonstrated within the brief interaction between Ava and Molly in which Molly's building enthusiasm for this piece of academic work was evident, potentially fuelling her motivation for completing the assignment. Finally, possibly unbeknown to Ava, through her discourse on support, she may also have supported another student by increasing Molly's enthusiasm in her academic work along with her identity as a student.

Belonging in the second year

During the second focus group I asked, 'has there been a time or a situation within this second year where you felt a real strong sense of belonging'. The responses from the students were very different in their nature. In the first extract Erica discloses how her module placement created a strong sense of belonging, whereas Lily explains how a peer-led initiative designed to support others helped her feel connected to her peers.

Erica: um, well I dunno if this is, I guess it's kind of relevant but um coz I do, one of my modules this year is a placement...uh and I volunteer in () like twice a week, um and I just feel like as the weeks have gone on there, like I just kind of felt like I'm fitting in quite well there when I've, um hopefully getting a job there as well

Facilitator: *[amazing]*

Erica: *and I just feel like because it's linked as well to what I want to do in the future*

Facilitator: *yeah*

Erica: *like I just feel like I belong there, I'm chatting to the parents, I'm chatting to the people that like work there, and because it's linked to university because I'm doing it via the uni it just makes me think, yeah I'm definitely glad I came to uni because I've had that opportunity*

Facilitator: *yeah*

Erica: *and it's definitely something that I want to go into so is that kinda answering () (HH)*

Erica's disclosure highlighted the different levels of belonging that a student may feel, and touched upon a theme that, certainly within the literature I have read, has received limited consideration. In fact, Erica herself was tentative in her response as she was unsure if she had answered the question sufficiently. However, I believe that her description of her module placement at a local charity demonstrates how a student's sense of belonging can be wider than both course and university level. My question to the group asked about a time when they felt a *strong* sense of belonging and from all the examples that Erica had disclosed already within the focus group, this was the one that she felt demonstrated a strong sense of belonging.

Erica's example demonstrates a holistic sense of belonging through the connections between the university, course and placement. Erica's choice of placement, which had been a very positive experience, was linked to her future career pathway and

further cemented her belief that she had made the right decision about her choice of university and course which fuelled her sense of belonging. The placement afforded her this opportunity where she formed connections with colleagues and clients and felt a sense of belonging in the placement environment.

For Lily, the time in which she felt a strong sense of belonging was linked to peer support during the exam period. In the following extract Lily explains how a peer initiative resulted in a group revision session which created a connection between those who attended.

Lily: Um, I wanna say when we, right before exam, like on exam week, um someone in our sports group chat messaged and was like I'm going to one of the booked-out rooms if anyone wants to come with me and like revise and stuff, and somehow like half of our class just ended up in the same [room]

Facilitator: *[OH FAB]*

Lily: everyone's like just sharing notes, just practising together, and it was just like really nice...that kind of like boosted me for, so yeah.

Applying attribution theory to Lily's discourse enables an examination of how Lily positions the importance of peer support within her discourse of belonging.

Attribution theory considers the words Lily has used in her description, which are salient in understanding Lily's own perspective and comprehension of the event (Edwards and Potter, 1993). For example, earlier in the focus group discussion Lily had disclosed, 'I feel a bit (.) u:m (0.3) >I dunno<, like kind of on the side a bit still'. By using the word 'still' Lily placed emphasis on the fact that she had struggled to infiltrate her peer group since the second semester of year one. Context is therefore

important here, because for Lily, the inclusion within her peer group is significant for her sense of belonging, as it has the power to stop her from *still* being on the side.

Discursively Lily begins by placing an emphasis on the collective when she initially said 'I wanna say when we', which she then changed to 'someone'. Rhetorically, this can be viewed as Lily specifically focusing her interest on the action of the peer group coming together in support of each other, an action which positioned her as part of the group and moved her away from being on the side.

Edwards and Potter (1993, p.87) explain that attribution theory is concerned with how the words people use to describe actions and states have 'powerful implications for the 'causal explanation of (...) events'. Lily's emphasis on collective words such as 'everyone' and 'together' as in 'everyone's like just sharing notes, just practising together' explains why the group revision event caused her to feel a strong sense of belonging, because it was a time when the peer group worked together in support of each other. Lily's focus on peer support during exam time can also be considered in view of her identity as a first in family student. As previously mentioned, without the familial buffer which supports the transition into academic life, peer support can help students navigate through stressful periods such as exams.

The action orientation of Lily's discourse is to emphasise what this event meant to her. By advising 'it was just like really nice' and adding 'that kind of like boosted me for so yeah' describes the positive effect that the group revision had on her.

Linking this back to the previous section on peer connections further emphasises the significance of a holistic approach to belonging across the student lifecycle. As this example demonstrates, feelings of inclusion and connection can still be established later in the student lifecycle. In this example, this event was created by the students

themselves, however course-level initiatives can also help to imbed connection and inclusion.

Belonging and identity in year two

In the second focus group I asked the students whether they had noticed any changes in themselves and their sense of identity between their first and second years. The students used words such as ‘confident’ and ‘more mature’ to describe the changes they had noticed in themselves. However, it was Ava’s description of the changes she experienced within her relationships at home and at university that will be the focus of this final section for several reasons. First, it returns us to the concept that belonging, along with a sense of identity, is not static, it can change within different contexts. Second, Ava’s discourse is a reminder that first in family students are pioneers, and as such are not only navigating their way through university without a family history of higher education to buffer them, but they are also learning to negotiate the impact of the changes in themselves on their relationships at home.

Ava: not like I don't talk to my family at home as much and stuff, it's a different relationship with them, but now people at uni have become like my people to talk to

In the extract above Ava begins by positioning her relationship with her family as still being a close one. The use of ‘not like I don’t talk to’ mitigates against potential negative perspectives that the group may have about Ava’s relationship with her family. Ava’s rhetoric here is to inform the group that despite what she is about to disclose, she is still able to talk to her family, and therefore continues to have a good relationship with them. Ava moves on to disclose that the change she has noticed in

herself is that she will turn to friends at university before talking to her family. By advising 'but now people at uni have become my people to talk to' the action orientation of Ava's discourse is to explain how she now identifies more closely with other students than her family and will choose to discuss things with them before her family.

It can be argued that as Ava spends most of her time away from home, living and studying alongside other students who are going through similar experiences, it is only natural that she will turn to university friends who can relate to what she is experiencing. However, as a first in family student, Ava, along with her family, may not have considered that moving away to university would impact on her relationships with those back home, resulting in her struggling with both her sense of belonging and identity as disclosed in the below extract:

Ava: um this is very recent, in the fact that I've been struggling with the fact that it feels more like, like I know here, like I've no issue with belonging here, it's more that, like at home.

It is evident from Ava's discourse that she has a close relationship with her family, however since starting her second year she had felt 'disconnected' from them as they had grown used to her not being at home all the time, whilst she was still trying to exist within two worlds.

The impact of university on the identity of the student is the focus of O'Shea's (2014) research on first in family female students' identity formation, in which 17 first in family students are interviewed 4 times over the duration of their first year to obtain a better understanding of the 'continuing evolving concept' of identity (O'Shea, 2014, p.139). This research highlights how, in relation to identity, the transition into

university can result in the re-evaluation of existing identity and relationships, leading 'to changes in individual perception about self-identity, life significance and self-concept' (O'Shea, 2014, p.140) which impacts not only the individual but those around them. These changes do not have to be perceived as negative or problematic and O'Shea gives the example of passing an assignment as 'not only indicating belongingness but also redefined learner identities' (p.155) for first in family students, to counteract a deficit perspective of identity change.

In the first focus group Ava had explained how her mum did not necessarily understand her degree or talk in much detail with her about her academic work, but that she was interested in the social side of university life, so this was a common ground about Ava's university experience that they could converse on. It could be argued that Ava continued to discuss her social life with her mum during the first year as she found her feet at university, but that as she connected with those around her, the need to do this lessened as she had those discussions with housemates and university friends instead. Therefore, the connection between them decreased, resulting in Ava feeling less of a belonging with those at home, and learning to navigate her feelings around this change.

O'Shea (2014), along with Attridge (2021) and Wainwright & Watts (2021) research provides exploration of the impact of attending university on first in family students' relationships with their families and their self-identities. However, as Wainwright & Watts (2021) advise, this area of research is in its infancy, and further exploration is required into how familial relationships are impacted, with an appeal for universities to engage more with the families of students. I would argue that with the pressure already faced by staff (Wonkhe, 2022) the responsibility of facilitating this level of engagement is not necessarily practical. However, Ava's disclosure of her

disconnection from her family was met with nodding from Lily, which enabled them both to understand that this feeling was not unique to them. Therefore, as part of a holistic approach to belonging across the lifecycle, as demonstrated in Araujo (2014) Belonging Project, it can be argued that the sharing of experiences, such as those in the focus group, supports the nurturing of belonging and student identity beyond the first year, by acknowledging and working with the changes that this brings for the individual.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the discourses of four first in family students, focusing on themes of belonging and identity, first in family status, family and school support, and peer connections, during transition and into the second year of university.

With an acknowledgement that the size of the focus group was very small, the findings from the research are however consistent with other studies on student belonging (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; Araujo, 2014; Scanlon *et al.* 2019; Wonkhe, 2022), supporting the importance placed on peer connections, the significance of a holistic approach to belonging within universities and the impact of family support and understanding throughout the student lifecycle. Whilst this means that these findings will not come as a surprise to those with an interest in the student experience, the discourses of the four students provides a rich comprehension of what it means to belong and to not belong, and the potential enablers and barriers to belonging for first in family students.

The use of a focus group method facilitated connections between the participants and provided first-hand experience of some of the enablers of belonging that were

raised by the group. Gaining an understanding of other first in family students' experiences and 'learning a bit more about how the experience might have affected us in a way that we hadn't actually thought about' (Erica) enabled the formation of peer connections with other first in family students in the focus group. The focus group method itself demonstrates the benefit of targeted initiatives which bring students together and support the creation of a community between them. Whereas individual interviews would have produced individual narratives, the focus group brought those narratives together, providing the opportunity for participants to 'hear everything and just like, just learn from other people as well' (Lily).

Conclusion

This research explored first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university. Two focus groups were conducted to facilitate discussions around first in family status, belonging and identity, and enablers and barriers of the transition period. Both focus groups consisted of the same students, with four participating in the first focus group and three participating in the second, which was conducted a year later during the students' second year of undergraduate study.

Summary of findings

Aim. To explore first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university

The building of friendships and peer to peer support were integral in the discussions around participants' sense of belonging, where discourses centred around three areas: university and course-led initiatives, student-led initiatives and building belonging through the support of others.

The narratives of the students supported the need for initiatives, particularly at course level, which aid interaction, connection and inclusion. With the first focus group taking place in the second semester of the students' first year, this timing produced surprising insights into the students' experiences of transitioning into the new semester. Whereas the transition into university was supported at both university and course level, resulting in the student's forming connections, the transition into the second semester, where some of the students found themselves trying to infiltrate already formed peer groups in new modules, was more difficult. This was also the case for some of the students during their transition into their second year. Their narratives support arguments (Arajuo *et al.* 2014; Scanlon *et al.*

2020) for a sustained approach to student belonging throughout the student lifecycle, which recognises that one's sense of belonging is not static and can fluctuate depending on environment and those around them. The benefit of a sustained approach is the creation of a sense of community amongst the student body, resulting in increased motivation and engagement.

Peer led initiatives also had a significant impact on the students' sense of belonging, as Lily's discourse on a peer led group revision session highlighted. This initiative, which resulted in half of the class turning up to support one another boosted Lily's sense of belonging and helped buffer her throughout the stressful exam period. For first in family students, who do not have a prior understanding of academic study at university level, the support of peers throughout their time at university is integral for navigating this unknown territory.

Objective: Explore the nature of the focus group as a means in itself to create a sense of belonging with this group of students

The use of a focus group method within this research as a way of creating a sense of belonging amongst participants was validated several times. Firstly, when asked about university-led initiatives that aided their sense of belonging during transition, the students became animated and excited. During a discussion on how the accommodation team enabled students to form connections with each other prior to living in halls of residence, the students started talking directly to each other for the first time within the focus group, asking each other questions and responding to each other. Prior to this they had all patiently waited for each other to speak, however this discussion resulted in them talking over each other in their enthusiasm for this shared experience.

The discourse on building belonging and identity through the support of others also validated the use of a focus group method for creating a sense of belonging. During this discourse, Ava and Molly formed a connection through their shared experience of a psychology experiment. Prior to this Molly had disclosed feeling demotivated in her academic work and feeling out of place within the university environment. However, her excitement in this shared experience was evident through her loud exclamation 'I'M DOING THAT', which preceded an enthusiastic discussion around the experiment. This example highlighted the significance of social integration in increasing and sustaining academic motivation (Noyens *et al.*, 2018). The forming of connections between the students during the focus group was therefore evident, and supported the arguments (Dweck, 1999; Araujo *et al.* 2014) for course-led coordinated activities to foster belonging and support academic adjustment.

Aim: To determine the impact of being a first in family student when navigating the transition into university

Responses from the participants suggested that although they were aware of their first in family status, they did not necessarily link any of their experiences of transitioning into university to being a first in family student. What came through in their narratives, along with feedback from survey respondents, was that due to their first in family status, it was the students themselves who led on the process of applying to and transitioning into university, sometimes guiding their parents or carers through the process. This was often managed with the support of their school, however as Molly's narrative demonstrated, school support varied.

Although the students guided their parents or carers through the application process, in most cases the students benefited significantly from the support of their families. A

variety of familial support strategies enabled the transition into university. These included emotional and moral support, practical support with the application process and with preparing for life at university, providing a sounding board for decisions around university and course choice, offering advice and reassurance, and celebrating the achievements of the student. The impact of these strategies on the transition process for first in family students cannot be underestimated. Although the buffer of a family history of higher education is not available for these students, if the buffer of family support is available, as the narratives of these students have demonstrated, it provides a foundation of security that they can return to if required.

Aim: To analyse the barriers and enablers of the transition period for first in family students

Barriers

Molly's discourse on her experience of attending two schools with different expectations of their student's educational trajectory, formed the basis of an unexpected discussion within this research. Through the consideration of Molly's use of the word *expect*, this research, utilising critical discourse analysis, explored the macro discourses of the aspirations of young people and the deficit view of non-traditional students that these discourses produce.

This research explored the argument that policy makers promote discourses in which the individual's educational success or failure is purely dependent on their own aspirations and their motivation to achieve them. Along with this, the macro discourse of meritocracy advocates higher education as universally accessible regardless of personal circumstances, diminishing the impact of wider societal and educational contexts and inequalities. Although it is out of the scope of this research

to consider this in any further detail, what this does highlight is that the expansion of higher education to allow for widening participation as recommended by Dearing (1997) is not enough, if the earlier educational experiences of young people from non-traditional backgrounds do not encourage expectations of higher education.

Enablers

The narratives of first in family students in this research have been viewed from a strengths-based perspective, considering the enablers of their journey's into and through university. It has been a privilege to work with these students, who are the main enablers of their journeys, navigating their ways through uncertain territory and utilising their own individual capitals when faced with difficulties. Such as Lilly, who struggled to infiltrate previously formed groups during her second semester. Yet through proactive and engaged involvement, as demonstrated by volunteering to help in practicals, Lily enabled the sustainment of her academic motivation and enhanced her knowledge, confidence and skills in her chosen area of study.

Family support during the application and transition stage cannot be underestimated. For both the survey respondents and the focus group participants, family support, regardless of previous experience of higher education, was imperative to forming a secure foundation for the student to flourish from. During the focus group discussions, the participants returned time and again to discourses on family support and influence, particularly in their first year.

Understandably perhaps, the reliance on family support reduced in their second year and was replaced by support from friends, notably housemates. The change in relationship dynamics with home during the second year caused some insecurity

with one participant, Ava, who explained that she was navigating feelings of disconnection with her family. This disclosure, in which Ava advised that she felt more of a sense of belonging at university than at home, was an unexpected revelation. This research has discussed the need for universities to develop a sustained approach to belonging, recognising that belonging is not static and can fluctuate. Reflecting on this, it should therefore not come as a surprise that student's sense of belonging at home may also fluctuate, and that perhaps for first in family students and their families, this is something to be mindful of as the students' progress through university.

Aim: To inform evidence-based approaches for engagement, involvement, and support for the transition into university for first in family students

Evidence from survey responses and focus group discourses suggests that university and course led initiatives are essential for the building of connections between students prior to arrival and through the initial weeks at university. Small group tasks and field trips were given as examples of successful methods for building belonging. However, focus group discussions highlighted that these initiatives need to be sustained throughout the student lifecycle to nurture a continuation of connection and belonging, which has been seen (Araujo *et al.*, 2014) to increase student motivation and engagement.

Objective: To utilise Discourse Analysis to analyse focus group data

This research provides an alternative form of analysis through the application of Discourse Analysis, which enabled the examination of individual first in family discourses within the context of a focus group discussion. Discourse analysis,

particularly discursive psychology has been utilised in this research to consider how participants position themselves and others in their discourses, the action orientation of their discourses and, through the lens of attribution theory, to explore the words used by the participants which considers how they explain or describe an event or action in the context of the focus group discussion.

Limitations of the research

Based on the plethora and diversity of information afforded by the participants, there is justification in suggesting that the same research would benefit from a larger number of participants. The lack of diversity within the group means that the narratives of male students and students from other ethnic groups are not included in this research, therefore these findings cannot be generalised to all first in family students. Further consideration therefore should be given to how to engage more male and ethnic minority students. This would not only add to the richness of discourses on belonging but also enhance the focus group experience for all involved.

Finally, a diversity of discourses will also give weight to the suggestion that universities develop a more holistic approach to student belonging, recognising the need and benefits of continued targeted initiatives for peer-to-peer connections. Which, along with supporting the development of a student identity and building academic confidence and achievement, will also have a positive impact on both student retention and National Student Survey (NSS) results.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Participant Consent Form for student participation in the research

Navigating the unknown: Exploring first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to be involved with my research. Before I can proceed with the focus group, I need to obtain written consent from you and therefore ask you to read the points below carefully. I will bring a copy with me to the focus group for you to sign. If you are no longer interested in participating in my research or have any queries, please contact me.

You are invited to take part in a focus group discussion. In the current research project, I want to know about your experiences as a first in family student with a particular focus on your feelings of belonging through your transition into university. I will ensure that the environment is safe and comfortable. I will ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion, although you may decide not to make comments at certain times in the discussion. This is your right.

If this research project interests you, please read the following set of ethical considerations listed below. Before the focus group begins, I will review these ethical considerations with you.

I, _____ Print name _____, agree to participate in this research project on "Navigating the unknown: Exploring first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university." that is being conducted by Alison King

Ethical considerations:

1. I understand that the purpose of this study is to hold a focus group interview to find out about first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university. I understand that the person leading the group will attempt to keep the discussion focused on this research topic, but I am aware that myself and others in the group may act individually or collectively, wanting to discuss issues outside of these topics.
2. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project up to two weeks after the focus group, I can do so by contacting the researcher by email within 14 days and quoting my name/pseudonym.
3. I understand that the researcher will preserve my anonymity and use a pseudonym to protect my identity.

4. I understand that due to the nature of the focus group, there are limits on confidentiality and anonymity as other group participants may disclose my involvement, identity or what I say in the focus group. I understand there will be a briefing session at the start of the focus group to remind participants to exercise respect for the confidentiality and anonymity of others in the group.
5. I understand that the study involves a focus group interview that lasts 2 hours or less, which will be digitally recorded. Once recruitment is completed, only the researcher will have access to any of the recruitment information, and these records will be stored on a password protected computer file. Once transcription is complete, only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to the recordings that were made, and these recordings and transcripts will be stored in a password protected computer file. I understand that if the researcher decides to reuse the recordings in any written or oral presentations in the future the researcher will contact all participants prior to their use. The researcher has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.

If I am affected by any of this research, I understand that I can contact the researcher, Alison King or contact one of the support teams at the University of Gloucestershire via the My Help tile:

<https://connectglosac.sharepoint.com/sites/health-and-wellbeing>

or contact the organisations listed below:

Student Minds: <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/>

Nightline: <https://connectglosac.sharepoint.com/sites/health-and-wellbeing/SitePages/Nightline.aspx>

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact me, Alison King:

You can also contact my supervisor Dr Alex

Masardo: amasardo@glos.ac.uk, Room QW124, FCH campus.

Having read the participation consent sheet and the University of Gloucestershire Research Participants Privacy Notice, I agree to consent to this research.

I, consent to participate in the research conducted by Alison King, MA by Research researcher, School of Education and Humanities, University of Gloucestershire.

Signed:
Contact:

Date

Appendix Two: Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Alison King.

Before you decide to take part in this study it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. I am happy to answer any questions you have or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

I am exploring first in family students' sense of belonging during their transition into university. This is to determine the impact of being a first in family student when navigating the transition into university and to analyse the barriers and enablers of the transition period for first in family students, with the aim of informing evidence-based approaches for engagement, involvement, and support for the transition into the University of Gloucestershire for first in family students.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you have indicated through my survey that you are a 'first in family' student at the University of Gloucestershire, and that you are happy to participate in a focus group. For the purpose of my research, 'first in family' refers to students whose parents or carers, and siblings have not attended university, or are currently attending university.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this research is voluntary and you can choose not to take part. If you decide later that you no longer wish to take part, then you can withdraw for up to two weeks after your contribution to the research. After this time, I will no longer be able to track your individual responses.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I plan to run a focus group consisting of 6 - 8 first in family students from across the University of Gloucestershire. During the focus group you will be asked to discuss your experiences of your transition into university, and your feelings of belonging during this period. I will lead the discussion and guide you through the various issues I want to explore. There are no right or wrong answers in a discussion of this kind, I am simply interested in your opinions and experiences. The focus group will be in person and will last around 2 hours and will be arranged at a convenient time for the people involved. I am happy to run them during the day or early evening depending on participants preferences.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

This research will be asking you to give 2 hours of your time for the focus group. The possible benefits arise from contributing to research which I hope will improve understanding about the transition into university for first in family students and their feelings of belonging during this time. It is hoped this will inform evidence-based approaches for engagement, involvement, and support for first in family students.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All information will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will be anonymised, and no responses will be able to be linked to a specific individual or organisation. I will also make sure that your information will be kept secure and anonymous, in a password protected computer file. Group participants will be asked to sign a participant consent form where they will agree to respect the privacy of other participants and not disclose any personal or sensitive information shared within the group.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The research will be written up to form part of my Master's thesis and findings may be presented at an academic conference. The information in my thesis or presentations, any resulting publications or presentations will be anonymised. There will be no means of identifying any individual. Short quotes from discussions may be included; this will be done in a way that will not disclose your identity to others outside the group.

Ethical review of the study

This project has received ethical approval by the University of Gloucestershire. If you have any concerns please contact Dr Hilary Weeks, Ethics Research Lead for Education and Humanities: hweeks@glos.ac.uk.

Contact for further information:

Appendix Three: Jefferson Transcript

Symbol	Definition and use
[yeah]	Overlapping talk
[okay]	
=	End of one TCU and beginning of next begin with no gap/pause in between (sometimes a slight overlap if there is speaker change). Can also be used when TCU continues on new line in transcript.
(.)	Brief interval, usually between 0.08 and 0.2 seconds
(1.4)	Time (in absolute seconds) between end of a word and beginning of next. Alternative method: "none-one-thousand-two-one-thousand...": 0.2, 0.5, 0.7, 1.0 seconds, etc.
Word [first letter underlined]	Underlining indicates emphasis. Placement
Wo:rd [colon underlined]	indicates which syllable(s) are emphasised.

Symbol	Definition and use
	Placement within word may also indicate timing/direction of pitch movement (later underlining may indicate location of pitch movement)
wo::rd	Colon indicates prolonged vowel or consonant. One or two colons common, three or more colons only in extreme cases.
↑word	Marked shift in pitch, up (↑) or down (↓). Double arrows can be used with extreme pitch shifts.
↓word	
.,_¿?	Markers of final pitch direction at TCU boundary: Final falling intonation (.) Slight rising intonation (,) Level/flat intonation (_) Medium (falling-)rising intonation (¿) (a dip and a rise) Sharp rising intonation (?)

Symbol	Definition and use
WORD	Upper case indicates syllables or words louder than surrounding speech by the same speaker
°word°	Degree sign indicate syllables or words distinctly quieter than surrounding speech by the same speaker
<word< td="" style="box-sizing: border-box; word-break: normal;"></word<>	Pre-positioned left carat indicates a hurried start of a word, typically at TCU beginning
word-	A dash indicates a cut-off. In phonetic terms this is typically a glottal stop
>word<	Right/left carats indicate increased speaking rate (speeding up)
	Left/right carats indicate decreased speaking rate (slowing down)

Symbol	Definition and use
.hhh	Inbreath. Three letters indicate 'normal' duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.
Hhh	Outbreath. Three letters indicate 'normal' duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.
Whhord	Can also indicate aspiration/breathiness if within a word (not laughter)
w(h)ord	Indicates abrupt spurts of breathiness, as in laughing while talking
£word£	Pound sign indicates smiley voice, or suppressed laughter
#word#	Hash sign indicates creaky voice
~word~	Tilde sign indicates shaky voice (as in crying)
(word)	Parentheses indicate uncertain word; no plausible candidate if empty

Symbol	Definition and use
(())	Double parentheses contain analyst comments or descriptions

Showing 1 to 24 of 24 entries

There is another table, which is slightly different, although we do not use this ourselves.

Jefferson Transcription System Symbols

Symbol	Description
(.)	A micropause - a pause of no significant length.
(0.7)	A timed pause - long enough to indicate a time.
[]	Square brackets show where speech overlaps.
> <	Arrows showing that the pace of speech has quickened.
< >	Arrows showing that the pace of the speech has slowed down.
()	Unclear section.
(())	An entry requiring comment but without a symbol to explain it.

Symbol	Description
Underlining	Denotes a raise in volume or emphasis.
↑	Rise in intonation
↓	Drop in intonation
→	Entered by the analyst to show a sentence of particular interest. Not usually added by the transcriber.
CAPITALS	Louder or shouted words.
(h)	Laughter in the conversation/speech.
=	Will be at the end of one sentence and the start of the next. It indicates that there was no pause between them.
:::	Colons - indicate a stretched sound.

Appendix Four: Extract of Focus Group Transcript February 2023

Facilitator: So I've got 6 sections with questions that I'd like to go through, so the section we are starting with actually choosing university, um so I will just introduce each section >that's more for me to remember when looking back transcribing and stuff< (.). So my first question in section one is about choosing university, um so if I can get you to think back to when you started to consider university as an option, um,(.) as the first person within your family to attend university, um, can you just talk about the process of deciding to come to university in terms of, kind of what made you think about to university, who inspired you, other options, that sort of thing, so () > it's that awkward bit where everyone goes who's going to go first< (h), >but yeah<, if you can think about that part of choosing university
(.2)

Erica: Um, well I think I always sort of knew I wanted to go to university , it was always something I thought that I could do, um because I was happy with how I did sort of in my A Levels I thought yeah university is something I could do and like, um (.) my family have always been sort of supportive of like whatever I do so >if I went to uni that's great, if I didn't they would have been that's great too< <um>, so I never really had any sort of pressure like to go or not to go, or to go down a certain route, um, and then I feel like when I was actually choosing university I kind of knew that I wanted to be somewhere relatively close to home just because I am close with my family and just sort of that sense of if anything happened they're only like 40
Facilitator: [yeah]

Erica: minutes down the road kind of thing, um, and as, and again sort of I wanted maybe a small knit small sort of, close knit university feel as well which I think you get from (name of university)

Facilitator: [yeah]

Erica: university, um just because I sort of can kind of be quite shy in some situations and I feel like, and because university's sort of quite a big thing, I think I thought if it's more close knit then I sort might of feel more at home

Facilitator: [yeah]

Erica: more comfortable in the environment, um so when I was sort of looking at unis, I sort of did sort of bear that um in mind

Facilitator: [yeah]

Erica: in that sense yeah

Facilitator: yeah thank you

Ava: =I think for me it always felt like a natural next step, it was something from very early in like secondary school, not just during 6th form it felt like that's what I wanted to do although when it came to actually going ok it's time to start applying it kind of gave me this anxiety, the fact that cause I have an older sister, it's always like, she was the Guinea pig , she does everything first

Facilitator: right

Ava: but she didn't go down university route, I was like, I don't know what I'm doing

Facilitator: right

Ava: but it was still like, my mum has always been very much like, supportive

Erica: [yeah, yeah] (confirming that she had support from her mum too)

Ava: she was very like, she's like it's just, it's just you[↑], because she knows I'm quite like academic, I was more academic than my older sister, she was like, if it's natural don't be put off just because my sister didn't do it, and then again when I was picking universities it was important to me that it was a smaller university[↑], even though it's quite (.) there's a lot of students, it feels quite (.) like the classes aren't massive

Facilitator: yes

Ava: > you're not in massive lecture halls, you're not getting lost in the crowd< because if it was, and it's not a big city[↑] because if I went to a big city university

Facilitator: [yeah]

Ava: I would have felt it was too much, it's already a big change in your life, and then again it's somewhere, somewhere far enough away from home so I feel independent

Facilitator: yeah

Ava: but close enough so if there was something that happened I can go back

Facilitator: where is home for you?

Ava: um ()

Facilitator: right, ok, ok so again not too far

Ava: yeah

Facilitator: OK, how about yourself

Lily: um, so my journey was more, like I went down the classic route constantly, so secondary school, college, um and then it got to like then college and my mum was like, you either go to uni or like >you get a job<, and then like I don't really feel like I had an option in that it was more like what my mum said

Facilitator: ok

Lily: so that was what she kind of pushed me to go into university, but she left like where I go all up to me though

Facilitator: ok

Lily: but then like all of the universities that I looked at were places I've been to before so it's like a bit more like I'd be recognised in places if I do get into them, if that makes sense?

Facilitator: yep

Lily: And like I still kind of looked a bit more further away from home just to get out of that environment anyways um just so I'm like a bit more independent cause I've grown up in a bit more like strict kind of parents

Facilitator: ok

Lily: just wanted like that bit more freedom for myself, yeah,

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: but like it's still not, it's not far from my parents anyways, but it's still that bit more a distance

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: but yeah, um I didn't really consider any other options to be fair because my mum was just like university or like nothing, but I kind of I still had a say into what course I wanted into and like where I'll go and all that so, > it wasn't too bad, and I still enjoy it though so yeah<. (feels like she needs to balance out what may be perceived as negative comments about her mum 'making' her go to uni?)

Facilitator: and where's home for you

Lily: ()

Facilitator: (), OK

Lily: yeah

Facilitator: ok, so again not too far away (why do I keep saying this?), great, thank you

Facilitator: (to Molly) yourself?

Molly: um, so I'm a care leaver | so um I grew up in foster care and um (.) it was like I never thought about university when I was younger , um then when I was 14 my social worker said like if you go to university you get a lot of support | and then, from then on I was like OK well I'm going to university, um and I don't really(h) no one like cared at all apart from my social worker who just wanted me to get to university, so it was kind of all up to on like where I went, what I did, um, I like, I even debating, I'm from Wales , so I debating about going up to Scotland ,

Facilitator: [right]

Molly: um and then I applied for Birmingham but I got rejected on results day so I had a bit of a freak out but I had a friend who had like looked into this uni and said it was really good and they have like a lot of support for care leavers and people like me, um (.) so (.) I called them up and I then came here, but >I ALSO FELT LIKE I DIDN'T REALLY HAVE ANOTHER OPTION| <

Facilitator: ●ok● ((I should have asked her to expand on this))

Molly: um, but at the same time I don't feel like I was necessarily pushed to go down this route

Facilitator: yep

Molly: um (.), I feel like I , in my head was like, cause I'm quite good academically so it was, it just seemed like the next option to me | but I went to quite a um,> I don't know how you call it< like lower class school| so they don't expect anyone to go to university | like it was never spoken about but then I ended up moving for 6th form

and I went to like a higher class school where they expected everyone to go to university |

Facilitator: ok

Molly: um which was a lot more helpful because they'd help with like, um , UCAS applications and everything, but (.) um (.2) I feel like it was just very different in the fact that like (.2) I didn::'t (.) um, I didn't know anything about it at all, and like um it was kind of all up to me which was very scary, um (.) a:nd I felt like, >I feel like it was quite cool< that I didn't have any pressure on me, but that meant I had to like motivate myself to do it as well

Facilitator: =you put pressure on yourself to do it=

Molly: [yeah] but like then I do it too much as well which like makes it worse

Facilitator: you put the pressure on yourself?

Molly: yeah (H)

Facilitator: ok, ok

Molly: (h)

Facilitator: we might come back to that thank you, | um, >so it sounds like maybe apart from yourself (Lily) to a certain extent, that all of you had kind of made the decision, and you were saying yourself that actually the idea was put into your head from the age of 14 <

Molly: =yeah=

Facilitator: you know so you had quite a few years then to kind of make that decision and think kind of maybe a bit longer term that university would be an option. Can I just go back to um maybe, your, your schools as well, um so you (Molly) said for your first school, before you moved for 6th form actually, there was, >was there a 6th form at that school? | , so was there<

Molly: [there was] but like if I (.) tell you the comparison there was like 60 people in the whole of 6th form for my first school

Facilitator: = ok=

Molly: = and then 200 people in the one that I moved to=

Facilitator: =right, ok=

Molly: =um= but maybe I'd say like 10 people that I know from my old school went to university and all the others either they dropped out or like they have a job and stuff , and I'd say like 90% of the people in the new school have all gone onto university and some of them have gone to like quite high up universities

Facilitator: ok

Molly: um (.) but also it was quite clear that there was a very big class difference as well which like annoys me, because um the new school was in like a really rich area and my old school was in like, it was on like council estates and everything, um (.1) which like just shows how unfair it is

Facilitator: yeah, ok, that's interesting, anyone else want to come in?

Erica: um, well I went to sort of a comprehensive high school with a 6th form, so sort of a mixture of people there, um I would say I've just remembered one incident where the um career peo-, careers sort of people were giving talks on either doing the apprenticeship route or doing the university route, and when it came to it there were two rooms, you go in this room for the apprenticeship talk, that one for the uni talk and someone I know was going into the university talk and the career person said you do realise this is the university talk and not(h) the apprenticeship talk?

(Laughter of disbelief from the group)

Facilitator: right

Erica: a:nd (h), and I remember, just sort of remembered that and I was thinking that does show how so::me (.) people do have that sort of like stereotype and do sort of think oh you don't belong to, you know do that route, >so there is kind of that stigma, if you're this type of person you do the apprenticeship, if you're that type of person you go to university< and I remember hearing that and was like how can a career person openly(h) say that to a student, they're meant to be supporting students not putting that sort of stigma on them and saying you shouldn't do this and that and I just thought that was quite interesting, the fact that they so openly said that at a school

Facilitator: =absolutely=

Erica: [um] >| but I would say generally my school was quite supportive with the whole application process<, um I don't think there was any other major issues apart from that one incident, | um, yeah, so

Appendix Five: Extract of focus Group Transcript February 2024

Facilitator: OK, brilliant stuff, ok, um, is there anything that you struggled with in year 2 that you didn't in year 1 in terms of your sense of belonging and if so how have you dealt with this, or have you reached out to anybody else to kind of help you

Ava: Um, I've been like, um this is very recent, in the fact that I've been struggling with the fact that it feels more like, like I know here, like I've no issue with belonging here, it's more that, like at home, it's like why don't you ring us as much as you did in your first year, why don't you do this, and they

Facilitator: right

Ava: and then

Erica to Ava ()

Ava: yeah, and it's like they're making me feel a little bit guilty for like being at uni, so it feels like, not that I don't belong, but it feels like I'm struggling because I'm struggling to settle in more to this year, because like mum's always, like the other day I rang my mum and she's like who is this I don't even have your number saved anymore, and it was like a joke but you, like when I hung up I was like ()

Facilitator: yeah

Ava: like I, like I already don't see them a lot and it would be nice for them to be a little bit more positive on the phone

Facilitator: OK

Ava: like we do have nice conversations obviously, cause my mum, we get along, um, but yeah, then my sister has just decided that they're not going to go to uni like nobody told me, they were like well you're not here, and so I'm like well I'd still like to know

Facilitator: right

Ava: um, so I am struggling a bit in that sense, but they are getting better. And also it's like, whenever I say are you going to come up and visit because they haven't been up to visit before, only like when they are coming to pick me up for like Christmas break or something, they're always like, you can get the train down to see us, I was like I haven't, I can't take the weekend off as I always work and stuff but like if your guys wanted to come up one, like an afternoon when I've got no lectures and the rest of the day I'm only in until 10am, like it's not, it's only a one and a half hour drive, it's not like it's miles away

Facilitator: no

Ava: my mum doesn't work most days of the week, well she does, she volunteers but, um, sometimes I feel like it, they don't wanna come see me but then they're annoyed when I don't go back

Facilitator: OK

Ava: so it's a little bit, [struggling]

Facilitator: [so] that's interesting, you've obviously just mentioned something, and I can see nods from yourself as well, so that's really interesting that, maybe you're finding that you're feeling the belonging here, >and I don't want to put words into your mouth so tell me if I'm wrong< but you're feeling the sense of belong here, but at the cost of, there's a um (hhh) what's the word, you're, you're not feeling that that closeness, or you're feeling that that gap between home now because you've kind of established something here ↑ ?

Ava: I [said]

Facilitator: [tell me if I'm wrong]

Ava: I said at home, () I said to my mum, like I got upset and I was like I feel disconnected to you all

Facilitator: that was the word, thank you

Ava: um, cause like we went to the music festival together like we do every year, and like whilst we were there, they were all talking about stuff and I just had no idea what they were on about, like I have 5 siblings yet none of them thought ↑ oh that, that would be something to tell Ava ↑ like she's away and everything,

Facilitator: mmm, mmm

Ava: um it just, it doesn't like massively upset me, but it's one of those things where it's, cause I'm still like involved in their lives but it's like a bit

Facilitator: it's a new awareness isn't it of

Ava: yeah

Facilitator: you know, because you are physically away from them now and things are happening that you would, everyday stuff that you would just be aware of because you're there hhh, and now you're not hhh

Ava: it's like they're not excited anymore that I am at uni

Facilitator: ok

Ava: and so they're just, cause they're just oh it's normal you're not here, and stuff

Facilitator: yeah

Ava: and when I'm home they're like, oh God we've got to buy more groceries

All - (HHHH)

Ava: um

Facilitator: sorry! (HHH)

Ava: () for your extra mouth to feed, and I'm like well I'm only home for a little bit, and they're like why aren't you home for longer, and I'm like aaargh what do you want me to do .hhh, so yeah

Facilitator: what about yourselves? Saw a few nods there

Lily: well, I don't really have time to go home anymore, cause I've got a job as well now here

Facilitator: OK

Lily: kind of (to balance) everything, so I feel like this year I have a lot more on my plate

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: compared to last year, so it's kind of normal for me not to go home for about a month and then I turn up, but I don't wanna say like I'm more disconnected from my parents though cause my parents are quite like, I'm messaging them throughout the week and then every single Sunday after work I call them the second I get through the door so it's like routine at this point

Facilitator: OK

Lily: so like, I wanna say like, it's kinda brought us closer, but then it's not the same as being in person kind of thing

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: and I do get, I feel like I get more homesick kind of this year [but]

Facilitator: [right]

Lily: with everything else though it feels pretty much the same as last year it's just still catching up on work (H) that's the only issue just from, from what's like left behind from like last year and stuff and then just, just procrastinating

Facilitator: yep

E – it's s:o bad

Facilitator: yeah, ok, yeah

Lily: but everything else is pretty much the same though, not too bad, yeah

Facilitator: so for you it's that, that work pressure, um that actually also eats into the time that you can actually spend maybe

Lily: hhh

Facilitator: going home to your parents, but

Lily: yeah

Facilitator: you obviously put something in place on a weekly basis where you're calling them and having those conversations

Lily: yeah, so it's not too bad, but at the same time, I dunno, I feel more like grown up and like more of like an individual now

Facilitator: independent

Lily: yeah, independent from my parents

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: which I'm really enjoying but it's kind of scary now like just the thought of like, I was just a little kid, like literally like 3 years ago, still living with my parents and everything and now I'm just like > in my own house, buying my own groceries<

Erica: yep

Lily: doing everything for myself, and like it's so scary

Erica: = I was just going to say, cause obviously we've got like our own like proper house now, cause in the first year we were in student accommodation

Facilitator: yep

Erica: whereas now got a proper landlord and everything and it, we do like feel a bit more grown up because we've got to deal with stu(h)ff in () like you know, when do we put the heating on

Ava: () stood, stood around the

Erica: what was the energy

Ava: the electric

Erica: the smart meter

Ava: yep that, that

Erica: yeah

Ava: and we're all just going, seems like it's higher today for some reason and someone's like ah I used the tumble dryer

Facilitator: (HHH)

Ava: and we're like ah ok

Erica: and so yeah

Ava: he still tells us () and we're like, he's like hmmm you could use the heating more you know and we're like yeah but we don't want to spend too much

(HHH)

Facilitator: put another sweater on

Erica: yeah

Ava: yeah

Facilitator: ok, so, so that's interesting and you (to Lily), you also nodded along to that as well, have you found, you know what has maybe been a struggle for you this year that wasn't last year if anything at all?

Erica: Uh, no to be fair I feel like it's pretty much the same, I still feel like connected to like my family, um , cause like I still will message them, and ring them and they do come up and see me, so I don't feel like it's any like different to that, but I just remember L was telling me cause when she just got off the phone call to her mum, she was a little bit upset, so I was just remember you saying, mentioning that about, about that but, [yeah]

Facilitator: [yeah], it's kind of like they've stayed and you've moved

Ava: yeah

Facilitator: so then the, the effort needs to be on your part

Ava: mmm

Facilitator: and maybe do you think also and I'm just bringing this in, it may not be this at all but again because you're first in family students and there hasn't been that history where they've done that themselves that maybe again there's that disconnect, using your word, of an understanding of actually how much you've got on your plate

Ava: yeah, [guess ()]

Lily: [slightly], hmmm, my mum's gone back to college though

Facilitator: ah

Lily: so she kind of understands the whole work school kind of balance

Facilitator: OK, yeah

Lily: so yeah so, and like we both had exam week at around like the same time

Facilitator: right, ok

Lily: so, we were just like, how was your exam, my exam's ok, how was your exams

Facilitator: (HHH)

Lily: so it's kind of that thing, so like, I dunno, I feel it's a bit more my dad that's more disconnected kind of thing, but my mum pretty much understands like how school is with [work with]

Facilitator: [that's really interesting]

Lily: so yeah, it's not too bad, I feel like I'm a lot more closer with my mum now than when I was like younger, I was living at home and stuff, so yeah

Facilitator: =is there more of closeness than there was this time last year do

Lily: yeah definitely

Facilitator: = and do you think going back to studying has, and again I don't want to put words in your mouth

Lily: hhh I don't know, maybe like subconsciously, but

Facilitator: hmm

Lily: nothing likes been really said out loud but

Facilitator: sure, sure

Lily: yeah, I dunno, I'm kinda just relating when she's like argh, like when she procrastinates work

Facilitator: (HHH) both of you

Lily: and I'm sitting there, she's like I'm going to have to do this, and I'm like, great so do it and she used to do this to me as well and I'm like it's, it's switched now (H)

Facilitator: yeah

Lily: she's doing the same thing as me like I dunno I'm kinda realising like how similar me and my mum are as well , and especially with like school stuff as well but I dunno

Facilitator: you realised where you get it from

Lily: yeah, exactly (HHH)

Facilitator: (HHH)

Lily: but yeah, uh it's not really like, yeah (H)