Narrating Employability from English Studies: an ethnographic study

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Abstract

Government policy assumptions about employability characterise students as rational economic actors, motivated by maximising the return on their investment in higher education. Furthermore, policy documents emphasise the greater economic significance and potential returns from studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and more vocational disciplines. Beginning with a review of the literature and the political and historical developments which have led to the marketization of higher education, I trace the rise of employability as a high stakes issue. My thesis challenges government policy assumptions about employability with a specific focus on the non-vocational discipline of English Studies at Northern University. I explore the complexity and range of motivations which underlie individual choices of discipline, university and career and provide an account of employability from English through a longitudinal ethnographic study. I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted over five years to create case studies of the lives and early careers of students and graduates. In doing so I produce richly nuanced data about how employability is perceived, developed, embodied and articulated. I argue that employability is more than just getting a job, as government narratives imply; it is a complex, socially-embedded process of situated, lifelong learning. Using an analytical frame which draws on Bourdieu's concepts, I explore the impact of social structures on choices and perceptions of employability. I offer participant narratives which evidence that career motivations are linked to identity and subjective considerations rather than simply maximising economic outcomes. Those narratives contextualise skills within practice. My research confirms that English can lead to a wide range of careers. I place my findings in the context of changing workplace demands as the pace of technological change accelerates and conclude that the skills and capabilities which are developed by studying English are increasingly valuable for 21st century workplaces.

To Audrey and Ivo, the next generation, with much love.

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List of Key Acronyms

CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DCMS	Department for Culture Media and Sport
DfBIS	Department for Business Innovation and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DTI	Department for Trade and Industry
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education
EPSC	European Political Strategy Centre
HEA	Higher Education Academy (now HE Advance)
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
LEO	Longitudinal Economic Outcomes experimental dataset
Nesta	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (now a charitable innovation foundation)
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NSS	National Student Survey
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
ONS	Office for National Statistics
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SME	Small to Medium Enterprise
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths
REF	Research Excellence Framework
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK

Chapter 1. Narrating employability from English Studies

Introduction: Challenging government policy narratives; presenting a more nuanced and complex view

'English – another pointless degree!' Cameron, a student research participant, was telling me about a fishing club dinner he had attended, where his grandad's friends had been very dismissive of his choice of degree discipline (interview, 21.3.2016). Whilst Cameron had his own well-considered counter-narrative about the value he perceived in studying for a degree in English Studies, he had keenly felt this disparagement and had a sense of injustice about it. His experience was something which cropped up in other students' narratives. I heard stories of taxi-drivers, friends and family who questioned the value of a degree in English Studies and made assumptions about its limitations in terms of future employability. Dismissing English Studies as a 'pointless degree' echoes pervasive government policy narratives and a recent government-commissioned report, the Augar Review (Department for Education (DfE), 2019. Those policy narratives continue to emphasise the greater employability and value provided by Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects to individual students, in terms of future incomes and to the economy (Browne, 2010; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DfBIS), 2016). In this thesis, I challenge what I will argue are over-simplified government policy approaches to employability and higher education, which are based on narrow, instrumental, and economically-framed ideas about, for example, individual motivations to study for a degree and the relative value of disciplines. I make the case that, contrary to such public policy views and the popular discourse which questions the value of English Studies in employability terms, English Studies has employability embedded within it. The discipline can open up pathways into a very diverse range of careers.

The government policy narratives which I am challenging present employability as an outcome of a higher education. I am presenting a more nuanced and complex view. The overarching argument of this thesis is that employability is a socially-embedded process which involves situated lifelong learning within the social worlds of organisations and workplaces. I am arguing that developing employability involves the application, embodiment, and ownership of skilful and situated practices in the context of those social worlds, over time. The application and embodiment of skills and capabilities in context

enables employability to be understood, evidenced, and narrated by individuals. I draw on influential scholarship to support these arguments, including the work of Ruth Bridgstock (2016), Lee Harvey (2004), Leonard Holmes (2015), Michael Tomlinson (2017), Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke (2004), which I discuss in Chapter 2. I have sought to make my own contribution to scholarship through undertaking this detailed longitudinal research project. I have looked specifically at the lived experiences of staff and students in the School of English at Northern University (pseudonyms), including transitions into careers after graduation. I am arguing that English Studies provides a firm foundation for developing employability, rooted in its traditions and philosophy as a discipline (which I discuss in the following section) and its pedagogical approaches. Those approaches develop students and graduates as critical, reflexive, independent learners. This enables students to continue learning and adapting, to sustain and develop their employability; 'future-proofing' their knowledge and skills through the capacity for reflexive lifelong learning (Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018).

Three key themes have emerged from my research. Firstly, the complexities of choice of discipline and university for prospective students, which are affected by a complex range of influences including social class and background; secondly, personal growth, identities and values, which are bound up with individuals' journeys towards a career; and thirdly the ability to own, understand, and articulate the value of the skills and practices that are developed through the study of English. Many academic staff research participants clearly evidenced the ways in which the disciplinary learning and pedagogies of English Studies develop skills to support future employability. However, my research and earlier research studies have established that students can have difficulty understanding and articulating how the skills and capabilities developed through their disciplinary studies relate to their employability (Martin and Gawthrope, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011). I am arguing that there is a perception gap between the discourses of skills and how these are articulated in the context of a degree in English Studies, and the ways in which they are realised, applied, and narrated in specific work-related settings. As I will discuss, bridging this gap and coming to an understanding of the value of the skills from English Studies may occur during higher education, through engagement with more experiential modules, extra-curricular experiences, and part-time jobs. However, ultimately it is bridged within individual workplaces.

The stories of my student and staff research participants underpin my arguments and move employability away from being an abstract and generalised concept to one which can be understood through their richly detailed narratives. During my engagement with the people of the School of English, I have made long-term relationships and gathered extensive data over more than five years. I will bring in this temporal dimension - which is one of the key contributions of this research project - as I trace individual students' stories and their shifting ways of framing and understanding their transformative experiences and their employability over time, from the perspective of the graduates themselves. They have made transitions into a wide range of careers, and the graduates' testimony provides evidence of the value of English Studies to individuals and to their workplaces. The student research participants have generously shared their narratives with me; in telling their stories, I aim to tell a wider story of employability from the perspective of English Studies.

Growth through English: 50 years on

My study comes at an interesting moment in the history of the discipline, 50 years on from the Dartmouth Seminar. The Seminar was convened by educationalists involved with teaching English to address challenges to the learning and teaching of English Studies in schools and universities. These educationalists set out to find a way forward, to gain some shared understanding of what the study of English should offer at a time of considerable social change. The vision of personal growth through English, which was outlined by Dixon (1967) following the Seminar, has remained at the heart of teachers of the subject (Goodwyn, 2016) despite many challenges to the teaching of the subject by government and educational policy. In this thesis, I will set the discipline in its historical context and discuss the sense of social mission which has underpinned it. English Studies became central to British school curricula in the early twentieth century as 'an equipment for the understanding of life' (Board of Education, 1921) and a source of significant social and personal outcomes, in terms of increasing accessibility in education (Baldick, 1983). These ideas included moving away from the private education emphasis on the classics, which had excluded many from a university education and the professions. The Scrutiny movement, led by the Leavises, placed English as a central subject for university study from the 1930s (Mulhern, 1979). It has been argued that there is a current resurgence of interest in the work of the Leavises and the Scrutiny movement, due to their emphasis on the social importance of criticism and their opposition to calculative rationality in the 'machine age', which speaks

to the 'current market-led dehumanisation of social and educational life' (Hodgson, 2014:267). This emphasis on critical engagement and reflective thinking can offer a means to question and challenge dominant discourses and show them to be inadequate or shallow (Collini, 1993). This reflects the emancipatory vision for English as a discipline which was set out by Dixon (1967) in his seminal 'Growth through English'.

The Personal Growth model, which Dixon (*ibid.*) outlined following the Dartmouth Seminar, has been highly influential in informing the professional lives and work of English teachers (Goodwyn, 2016), as well as informing the discipline's own identity and sense of purpose . As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the data from my study shows that teachers make a significant impact on their students' choices to study the discipline at university. The Personal Growth approach is ultimately driven by opportunity for personal development and by social and political justice, addressing issues of social class and seeking to engage students from all communities (*ibid.*). This perspective included empowering students to be highly critical of the societies they are growing up in and to 'create meaning, shared and private, drawing principally on the lived experiences of young people' (*ibid.*:11). Despite the loss of autonomy experienced by teachers, and their need to operate within the 'policed space' of Ofsted and government structures such as National Curriculum requirements, which might be seen as in opposition to the Personal Growth approach (*ibid.*:17), Goodwyn's (*ibid.*) research with teachers in schools and in higher education revealed that Personal Growth was still seen as being at the heart of English.

This ethos of Personal Growth would seem to underpin the capacity which I have observed in the student research participants' consideration of their choices and careers, that is, to think more broadly than the economic outcomes of a higher education. The academic staff members' voices in Chapters 4, 6 and 7 of this thesis, speak of their strong commitment to learning and teaching which supports the development of their students as citizens and rounded people. They seek to avoid 'dumbing down' the discipline in response to consumer-oriented demands for 'satisfaction'. Their narratives, and the ethos of learning and teaching they reflect, encompasses both personal growth of students and the ways in which higher education and the study of English enriches and enhances individual understanding of the societal, cultural, and civic worlds to which they can contribute (Collini, 2012). This brings

together the public and private good understandings of the value of a university education in the interests of students' learning, development, and future progression into careers.

Initial research aims and emerging questions

I began this research project in October 2011, at a significant 'cultural moment' for UK higher education and the discipline, brought about by changes in government policy following the Browne Report (Browne, 2010). A tripling of tuition fees had been announced, beginning from the 2012-13 academic year. My initial research questions related to the exploration of whether, at a particular moment of history when fees were rising very significantly, there would be an impact on the non-vocational discipline of English. Would students continue to apply in the same numbers, or would students and parents become more instrumental in their approach to higher education subject choice, linked to perceptions of potential employability? English Studies does not offer any clear career paths, so on what basis do English students make their choice of discipline? How do they perceive their employability and how does higher education and the discipline prepare English Studies graduates for their futures and life after their degrees? I decided to use ethnographic methodology which would enable me to explore the lived complexity of employability, by situating it in its wider social context and coming to a deeper understanding through engagement with the experiences of the staff, students and graduates of the School of English at Northern University. Ethnographic methodology is recognised as having the potential to enable the researcher to identify new questions as a result of gaining different perspectives whilst immersed in the field (Madden, 2010). This proved to be the case and, as the research has progressed, a vastly greater complexity emerged from my fieldwork and long-term engagement with people and the life of the School than I had first imagined.

The stories which emerged from my research have told compellingly of deeper issues which have affected student research participants' higher education and career choices, including the influence of social class, background and education; sense of identity; emotions such as love, hope and anxiety; the webs of relationships people are embedded in; their broader ideas about success and their desire to find meaningful work in their future careers. There is a marked contrast between these richly detailed life stories and the simplistic government policy discourses about graduate employability which suggest that people are motivated to study in higher education by individualistic, economically-rational decisions, acting as

informed consumers seeking a return in their investment in education (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015; DfBIS, 2016). I have gathered individual stories about employability and careers as they are lived and experienced by the student research participants, and have contextualised them in a broader social and historical frame. In doing so I have aimed to contribute to knowledge by developing a deeper understanding of employability as a socially-embedded, complex, and ongoing project, rather than a consumable product of a higher education. I have also identified the perception gap which students can experience in terms of articulating their employability, which offers the opportunity for further research into how to support students in the earlier realisation of the value of their skills and capabilities in terms of the workplace.

Chapter summaries

My thesis is set out in 8 chapters:

Chapter 2 traces the history of the concept of employability and its emergence as a high stakes issue for higher education, placing employability in its historical and political context and critiquing the assumptions and theories on which government policy has been based. Employability is highly contested and difficult to define, since there are many differing perspectives: those of students, graduates, universities, employers, and governments. I discuss the key debates and perennial concerns within the extensive employability literature and discuss the ways in which I build on that foundation of scholarship in making my own contribution. There have been calls in the literature for more critical and theoretically-informed accounts of employability, since it is under-theorised and insufficiently understood (Holmes 2017; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). An aim of this research is to provide a more theoretically-informed consideration of employability in relation to English Studies.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of scholarship and theory which provide useful tools to 'think with' in the analysis of the research data. I have drawn on the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu, Steph Lawler, Diane Reay, Bev Skeggs, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to weave together a theoretical framework to use in my analysis. I consider sociological ideas about agency and structure, access to capitals and resources, identity and narrative identity, and situated learning within communities of practice, as a way of approaching employability in a research and theoretically-informed way. I bring an inter-disciplinary and sociological lens to the topic, aiming to develop a more nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of

employability as a socially-embedded, dynamic and relational process, that is understood, achieved, and articulated through narratives, themselves continuously developing through learning, experience and social interaction over time.

Chapter 4 describes the setting of this ethnographic research project. In it I include a range of voices from staff and students, which places the School, discipline and ideas about employability in the wider political, institutional, and societal context. I also provide a reflexive explanation of the research design and ethnographic methodology, and an account of how I collected the data; including observation and participation in the life of the School, and semi-structured interviews which deepened the data and my relationships with the staff and student research participants. I also provide details of the ways in which I have analysed and interpreted the research material which I gathered over more than five years. Ethnography as a methodology focuses on the particular but speaks to broader concerns (Macdonald, 2002). Whilst I do not argue that my findings can be generalised, the key learning from the research participants' lived experience provides insights into contemporary higher education and employability from English Studies 'from the perspectives of the people living it' (Degnen, 2012:3).

Chapter 5 provides a critical account of choices: I seek to understand how students make their choice of English Studies and universities. I challenge policy and rational actor ideas about how people approach their decision-making, challenging popular and dispiriting discourses about the value and career possibilities from a degree in English Studies. I am arguing that it is important to reflect on a deeper and more nuanced account of what influences and motivates student choices of university and discipline, recognising that choice is complex and is affected by a much broader range of factors than future employability and economic value. This challenges government policy depictions and creates an understanding of why and how the student research participants chose English Studies. Students have developed their own well considered counter-narratives which articulate the value they perceive in studying the discipline.

Chapter 6 discusses the traditions of the discipline and the philosophy of Personal Growth from English; an approach to learning and teaching which is evident in the sense of social and educational mission expressed by academic staff. Staff members shared with me their

recognition that higher education and English Studies need to prepare students for their future careers as 'rounded citizens of the world', by supporting students in achieving growing intellectual independence and critical abilities over their three years of study. This chapter discusses the ways in which students make their career decisions. It explores the transformational experiences which can occur through their university lives and disciplinary study of English and traces their transitions into a wide variety of careers. This includes consideration of the significance of identity, values and beliefs, and of gaining experiences through their academic, extra-curricular involvements, work and volunteering. Some students resisted parental expectations of getting a 'proper job' (in terms of economic criteria) in order to follow a trajectory which better fits with a sense of self, values, interests, and personal fulfilment. Students and graduates define success more broadly than economic exchange, thus challenging policy and rational actor ideas about the value and purpose of higher education, and government policy assumptions about employability.

Chapter 7 My student research participants often struggled to translate the skills from their non vocational discipline into terms which resonate for employers; a finding that confirms earlier research within the discipline (Martin and Gawthrope, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011). This chapter traces the ways in which students and graduates come to understand the value of their skills, including those developed by their disciplinary studies during their degree, by applying and embodying them in context and gaining the narrative resources to articulate them. This can be foreshadowed during higher education by more experiential modules, extra-curricular experiences, and part-time jobs. The students' and graduates' experiences provide opportunities to explore the ways in which English Studies prepares graduates for the demands of the twenty-first century workplace, related to their personal growth and ability as critical, reflexive independent learners, based on the broad knowledge and valuable skills and practices which come from their disciplinary studies.

Chapter 8 draws conclusions about the key findings and learning which has come from this research project. My conclusion reflects on how this might provide the basis for further research, and might inform pedagogy, practice, and policy in the future.

Chapter 2. The political and historical context; key debates in the literature

Introduction

Early in my research I travelled to a university in Northshire (an acronym) to attend a workshop entitled *Employability: addressing the gulf between academic, student and employer perspectives*. Waiting for the workshop to begin I inadvertently overheard two people from a Careers Service, who were sitting behind me, speaking about their view that it was important to involve employers in the work they were doing so that, ultimately, employers 'get a more rounded product'. This made me reflect on the gulf that did indeed seem to exist, since equating students to products for employers and denoting higher education as part of production process, seemed reductive and incongruent. Yet it did capture certain aspects of the ongoing debates and contestation which surround employability and the marketization of higher education (Atkins, 1999; Harvey, 2000; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Bauman, 2007; Williams, 2013).

In this chapter, I will discuss the political and historical developments which have led to the rise of employability as a high stakes issue. I will also review key literature, outline the key debates about employability, and discuss their implications for this study. The extent of the literature relating to employability within higher education reflects the high level of interest in the topic by academics, Higher Education Institutions, and governments, both in the UK and internationally. There have been a number of reviews of the literature (Lees, 2002; Tomlinson, 2012; Artess *et al.*, 2017). The most recent study commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, now HE Advance) recognises that there is a significant literature which predates 2012 and that this body of earlier work remains relevant, since it addresses what are perennial concerns (Artess *et al.*, 2017). I agree with this view and I make the case that the scholarship of academics such as Lee Harvey (2001, 2004), Peter Knight and Manz Yorke (2004), remains illuminating, alongside more recent literature and research which takes account of changing contemporary contexts.

It is striking that despite much attention over the last three decades, employability has remained hard to define (Tymon, 2013). Even the body leading on employability and enterprise for Higher Education Institutions – HE Advance - has explicitly recognised this issue (HEA, 2013; Artess *et al.,* 2017). Employability is a multi-dimensional and multivalent

concept which means different things to different people: graduates, Higher Education Institutions, academics, and employers (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Barrie, 2006; Tomlinson, 2012, 2017). Even the latest academic literature recognises that 'a common agreeable employability definition might be eternally elusive' (Tomlinson, 2017:30; see also McCash, 2017). Whilst employability is difficult to pin down in a definition, I am in agreement with views in the academic literature that employability is highly complex; it is not simply about getting a job, but is a lifelong and socially-embedded work in progress (Harvey, 2000, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017).

In the following section, I will outline the development of the overarching political narratives of employability over time and their impact on higher education. I will explain the considerable contestation which surrounds the policy approaches to employability, which forms the background to my study. Employability is presented simplistically in government policy, as a labour market outcome, following on from potentially 'unfettered individual choice' in institutions and opening up graduate outcomes in the shape of jobs (Burke *et al.*, 2017:90). Furthermore, employability is used by government as 'evidence' to judge the effectiveness of higher education and the success of individuals (Burke *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Yet, despite an emphatic government policy emphasis on employability in terms of economic outcomes and instrumental motivations, my study has confirmed that my student research participants have a range of motivations; including interest in studying a discipline and seeking lives and careers which are meaningful (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011; HEA, 2013; Purcell *et al.*, 2013; Artess *et al.*, 2017; Davidson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). My thesis will challenge government policy assumptions and aims to add to knowledge by deepening understanding of the complexity of employability. My study aims to make a contribution to understanding the issues, to outline the implications for institutional policy and academic debate, and identify what future research might be required. The themes which have emerged from my study weave into a more complex, nuanced, and theoretically-informed account of employability. This reflects the lived realities of students, graduates, and staff, and is set in the context of the non-vocational discipline of English Studies at Northern University.

How did employability become a high-stakes issue? A brief history and timeline.

To understand the rise of employability as a high-stakes issue within higher education, it is necessary to look at the history of government policy in relation to higher education and how it relates to changing social, economic, and political contexts since the Second World War (WWII). Following WWII, there emerged a political culture which led to the creation of the social democratic welfare state. As economic recovery based on manufacturing and industrial development gained momentum, there was both an expansion of the middle-classes and a concern to address issues of social equity, by increasing opportunities for access to higher education. University attendance had previously been reserved for an elite who were equipped with the appropriate financial and social capital (Trow, 2006; Williams, 2013; Malcolm, 2014).

The Anderson Committee Report (1960) made an important contribution to the removal of financial barriers to accessing a higher education, by providing the public policy foundation for a system of student grants. This system became mandatory for Local Education Authorities from 1962. The Anderson Committee Report (*ibid*.) argued that it was in the national interest for 'all potential talent to be given its chance to develop' (Anderson Committee, 1960:3, *cited in* Malcolm, 2014). This policy represented a move towards a greater democratization of higher education at a time when only 4% of young people attended university (Anderson, 2016). Following the Anderson Committee Report (*ibid*.), permission was given for the building of new universities on greenfield sites, including Lancaster and Warwick. There was also some expansion of access to higher education supported by the availability of student grants (Malcolm, 2014). The more often-cited 'Robbins Report' of 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), written at a time of increasing economic prosperity and social liberalisation, made the further recommendation that those who had the ability and qualifications should have the opportunity to study at university irrespective of social class (Trow, 2006; Tomlinson, 2012; Williams, 2013).

The Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) took the view that the expansion of higher education would be in the national interest at a time of economic growth and the emergence of new technologies. However, Lord Robbins also saw education as being important for society, citizenship, and democracy, and believed in a liberal educational approach. His views reflected an Arnoldian view, that access to culture and

learning could bind society together and would help to prevent political unrest and social anarchy (Williams, 2013). Both the reports mentioned above saw higher education as a public good which benefitted society as a whole and that those who benefitted as individuals would pay through their future taxation (Anderson, 2016). Free higher education was seen as progressive and appropriate within the more social democratic political climate and at a time of high public expenditure (Anderson, 2016). The demand for university education rose to 13% by 1980 and 30% during that decade (Wright, 2015; Anderson, 2016). However, there was not a per capita increase in government funding to sustain this expansion; indeed, there were cuts in 1973 and 1981 as part of reductions to public expenditure (Trow, 2006; Wright, 2015; Anderson, 2016). The 1970s were turbulent – both politically and economically - and this led to significant changes in political ideology introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (Anderson, 2016). Those changes were to have far-reaching effects on higher education.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Margaret Thatcher and John Major based government policy on neoliberal political theory, which was founded on market ideology and moved away from state intervention to greater individual responsibility. Thatcher and the Conservative Party were attempting to engineer a 'cultural reconstruction' (Peters, 2001), making a move from what she conceptualised as a culture of dependency to one of individual self-reliance. In a speech to the Small Business Bureau Conference, Thatcher famously stated that:

> "I came to power with one deliberate intent: to change Britain from a dependent to a self-reliant society….this means creating a new culture – an enterprise culture"
> (Thatcher, 1984)

Their neoliberal policies led to the 'rolling back of the state' from the statist approach of 1945 onwards, away from the more collective vision of a welfare state towards a more individualist vision of a market in which people could successfully participate by investing in their own education and training (Harvey, 2005; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Williams, 2013). This was seen by government as a means of achieving individual success, greater national prosperity, and competitive advantage.

Neoliberalism is a 'conceptually loose' (Hesmondhalgh *et al.*, 2014:98) and 'unruly' term (Winkler-Reid, 2017:5), however, it serves as useful shorthand to describe the 'macro-

economic paradigm' which has dominated from the 1970s (Watkins, 2010:7; Hesmondhalgh *et al.*, 2014). I use the term with critical awareness and have found anthropologist Mathieu Hilgers'(2011) and David Harvey's (2005) work helpful in gaining a critical understanding. Whilst acknowledging that there is no single agreed definition:

> "….anthropologists apply the term to a radicalised form of capitalism, based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention, and characterised by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, a belief that growth leads to development, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realisation that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible."
>
> (Hilgers, 2011:352)

As David Harvey (2005) has argued in his history of neoliberalism, the theory behind the ideology is to give freedom to the individual within a marketplace, however, each individual must take responsibility for their own actions. Success or failure are interpreted as 'entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings', such as not investing sufficiently in individual human capital through education, rather than being related to systemic or structural issues such as social class (Harvey, 2005:60). In United Kingdom political policy-making, marketplaces were created through the privatisation of previously state-owned industries, for example utilities (such as water and power) and assets (such as council housing). Markets were also introduced into areas such as health and education. These neoliberal policies brought in a cultural shift in the relationship between state and society. Citizens in neoliberal policy-thinking are characterised as individual service users, clients, customers, and consumers, making informed and rational decisions which they will take responsibility for, such as investing in their education (Bourdieu, 1998; Tomlinson, 2012; Williams, 2013; Wright, 2015). The theories and technologies of neoliberalism assume that 'ideal subjects' - the enterprising consumers of Thatcher's vision - are being created; yet, as Kipnis (2008) argues, the articulation of those subjects does not mean they are actually produced. The extent to which this is the case is recognised as being under-examined (Kipnis, 2007; Winkler-Reid, 2017). In this thesis, I am writing in the complexities of lived experience to create a more nuanced view than is presented by the overarching political project of neoliberalism, in order to gain insights into what motivates people in their thinking and decision-making about higher education, discipline, institution, and future careers.

Neoliberal government policy-making has been based on economically-framed Human Capital theory (Becker, 1975) which envisages that the more skilled the workforce, the more competitive the economy, and the higher the wages (Brown *et al.*, 2008). In Human Capital theory, education is seen as the most important investment for individuals (Becker, 1975) and as essential to driving the economy (Tomlinson, 2017). The dominant UK government policy narratives have characterised the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as the age of a rapidly changing, globalised, post-industrial, knowledge economy (Drucker, 1993), which is predominantly based on the generation and exploitation of knowledge rather than industrial production (Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), 1998). Education is seen to play a key role in creating the higher level skills which support economic prosperity (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1996, 1998; Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), 1997; Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998; DTI, 1998; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003; DfBIS, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). As a result of these assumptions and theories, government policy has emphasised the role of higher education in creating the higher level skills which are seen as necessary for economic growth. This is a supply-side approach which, as critics have pointed out, may not be matched by a corresponding demand within the labour market (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Tomlinson 2012, 2017).

There was some additional expansion of the higher education sector during the 1980s and 1990s, as demand for university education continued to grow. This included the granting of university status to the more technically-focussed polytechnics in 1992. Concerns about the financial sustainability of higher education led to the review of higher education undertaken by Lord Dearing ('Dearing Report') (Dearing, 1997); commissioned by a Conservative government but acted upon by Tony Blair and New Labour, who came to power in 1997 (Trow, 2006; Williams, 2013). Whilst recognising the importance of education and higher level skills to society and the economy, the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) positioned higher education as a private good, rather than a public good which the tax payer should pay for in full. Lord Dearing supported an increase in access to higher education and asserted that a university education should prepare graduates for the world of work. The report placed further emphasis on Human Capital ideas about education and returns on investment in terms of future employment. It recommended that students should be encouraged:

> "….to see himself/herself as an investor in receipt of a service, and to see, as an investor, value for money and a good return from investment."
>
> (Dearing, 1997: *online*)

The report made clear that there was a need for those who would benefit from education and training after the age of 18 to bear a greater share of the costs. However, this was seen to bring an expectation that:

> "….students of all ages will be increasingly discriminating investors in higher education, looking for quality, convenience, and relevance to their needs at a cost they consider affordable and justified by the probable return on their investment of time and money."
>
> (Dearing, 1997: *online*)

As part of this return on investment, the Dearing Report recommended that key skills should be developed by higher education; communication skills, numeracy, the use of information technology, and learning how to learn, in addition to cognitive and subject-specific skills (Dearing, 1997). It was argued that this would help graduates to remain employable in the future, since 'a lifelong career would increasingly become the exception' and people would need to continue to gain the knowledge and skills required to control and manage their own working lives (*ibid.*). This discourse of individual investment, individual responsibility, and the expectation of a return on investment linked to employment outcomes, has remained a strong central theme in policy and government reports.

Tony Blair and New Labour had continued with the neoliberal policy of creating markets in previously public spaces (Wright, 2015) and also adopted the idea of the enterprise culture, as part of their Third Way politics (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; 2012). Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his famous Third Way speech (Blair, 1999), set a target for participation in higher education of 50%. He argued this was in the interests not only of national economic prosperity but also of increasing social equity:

> "We know what a twenty-first century nation needs. A knowledge-based economy. A strong civic society. A confident place in the world….The challenge is how? The answer is people. The future is people. The liberation of human potential not just as workers but as citizens….If we are to succeed in the knowledge economy, we need - as parents, as teachers, as a country - to get a whole new attitude to learning….We have lifted the cap on student numbers and 100,000 more will go to university in the next 2 years….today I set a target of 50 per cent of young adults going into higher education in the next century."
>
> (Blair, 1999: *online*)

This narrative of the knowledge economy and of the 'liberation of human potential' (*ibid.*) within an enterprise culture have been recurrent themes in government policy rhetoric over the last three decades, during which higher education has moved from an elite to a mass system (Trow, 2006). Government policy has considered that a knowledge-driven economy requires flexible, highly-trained, and educated workers (DTI, 1998; DfBIS, 2016). Education, which is seen as crucial to delivering the higher level skills for a knowledge economy, should - in the Government's view - be shaped to meet the needs of business, employers, and the economy, to enhance employability and develop skills for employment and entrepreneurship (Dearing, 1997; DTI, 1998). Higher education was, therefore, encouraged to interact with business to increase technology and knowledge transfer, to strengthen higher skills development, and improve the employability and entrepreneurial skills of students (Dearing, 1997; DTI, 1998). However, the delivery of this anticipated need for knowledge workers or the advent of a more enterprising society has been questioned (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Tomlinson, 2012, 2017; Lauder, 2014), as I now go on to discuss.

The economic and technological changes of the post-industrialised late-twentieth century certainly affected labour market structures, creating greater instability and less continuity in careers. However, this has also been related to organisational restructuring. There has been a tendency for larger companies to de-layer and downsize, disaggregate into smaller and more flexible units, outsource and off-shore operations to cheaper locations, and reduce professional core workers (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Down, 2010; Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Atkins has argued that one of the drivers for creating employability skills as part of a higher education and the delivery of 'oven-ready' graduates to businesses, came from these structural changes in the economy, which resulted in a much increased small business sector (Atkins, 1999; Anderson *et al.*, 2000, 2012; Down, 2010). It has been

argued that this was because smaller firms lacked expertise in training and employing graduates (Atkins, 1999). The emphasis on the individual, which is embedded in the idea of a neoliberal enterprise culture, has meant that the responsibility for employability been located with individuals (DuGay, 1996; Skeggs, 2004c; Hilgers, 2011). The possibility of a 'job for life' was seen to have come to an end. Instead, government policy placed the initiative on individuals to concern themselves with ensuring they were employable; including developing relevant skills for changing work in a changing world through lifelong learning (DTI, 1998; DfES, 2003; Tomlinson, 2012, 2013a, 2017).

Social equity and the enhancement of life-chances were an increasing priority for the Labour government of the 1990s, and for subsequent governments which have been concerned to address the under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in higher education. However, whilst stating their commitment to the expansion of higher education (by offering places to 50% of young people) and to increasing social equity, Labour brought in fees within a few months of the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997); fees which could create further barriers to participation. Initially, students paid £1100, rising to a capped differential fee of £3000 in 2004. Although there have been moves to ensure that there is greater diversity and opportunity, including widening participation schemes, the overall direction of government policy has been to increase the information on which potential students can make their choices (DfBIS, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). However this fails to recognise underlying issues, such as the social structures which affect perceptions of whether and how to participate, and social reproduction, which I will discuss later in this Chapter (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; Reay *et al.*, 2004; Tomlinson, 2013a; Anderson, 2016). Whilst academic research has shown that there is not a direct relationship between the expansion of higher education and economic growth or increases in social equity (Wolf, 2007), policy has continued to be based on the assumption that greater social mobility will be an outcome of the enhanced employability developed by a university education (DfBIS, 2016).

A number of government-commissioned reports on higher education followed on from the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997). The Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration (Lambert, 2003), the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), the Browne Report (Browne, 2010), and the Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration (Wilson, 2012). Each report confirmed that graduate employability and skills are a central concern for Higher

Education Institutions and that higher education needs to be aligned to needs of employers and the economy. This stance included an increasing focus on the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects (DfBIS, 2009). There has been an emphasis on the importance of the provision of information for prospective students and the role of higher education as a preparation for work:

> "All universities should be expected to demonstrate how their institution prepares its students for employment including through training in modern workplace skills such as team-working, business awareness, and communication skills. This information should help students choose courses which offer the greatest returns in terms of graduate opportunity."
>
> (DfBIS, 2009:9)

The Browne Report (Browne, 2010) provided a stark and unequivocal vision of higher education as a market in which students are assumed to make 'rational economic decisions as educational consumers within a university marketplace' (Williams, 2013:117) in which:

> "HEIs actively compete for well-informed, discerning students on the basis of price and teaching quality, improving provision across the whole sector, within a framework that guarantees minimum standards."
>
> (Browne, 2010:8)

Competition between universities was presented as a way of increasing quality and choice. This thinking has ultimately led to the possibility for new private providers to enter the market (DfBIS, 2016). The Browne Report (Browne, 2010) positioned higher education even more clearly as a private good, so that students would bear an increased proportion of the cost of their education in return for the benefits their education was seen to offer, including enhanced employability leading to better, more well-paid jobs. Browne (*ibid.*) recommended lifting the cap on fees which ultimately led to the significant fee increase in 2012, when the majority of universities began to charge £9000 per year. The Browne Report (*ibid.*) continued in the instrumental vein of the earlier Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), which had recommended 'a focus on economically valuable skills' (*ibid.*:3), to identify the greater importance of STEM subjects to the economy. Ultimately this led to the discontinuation of the block teaching grant for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences from 2012-2013 (Richardson, 2010; Jameson *et al.*, 2012). This signalled that the Government was identifying a 'hierarchy of knowledges….with some being more valuable than others' (Jameson *et al.*,

2012). These government-commissioned reports and the policy developments which have followed on from them can be seen as a means of engineering student choice in various ways - towards certain subjects, universities, and potential career paths – which are considered by government policy to provide the best employment outcomes for students and for the economy (Jameson *et al.*, 2012; Williams, 2013; McGettigan, 2017a, 2017b). Ultimately, UK governments have implemented policies which have been based on these instrumental and economically framed assumptions about how people make their decisions (DfES, 2003; DfBIS, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2016).

Higher education has moved from being described as a public good of benefit to society, to being seen as a mainly private good benefitting individuals. Students pay for their education and, by the logic of the market, gain in return outcomes such as employability (Williams, 2013; Wright, 2015). As a result, employability is positioned by government policy as a major outcome for students. Indeed, some scholars argue that employability has come to be seen as higher education's main outcome and defining purpose, 'eclipsing other benefits such as enhanced citizenship and cognitive enrichment' (Tomlinson, 2013b:125). As recently as 2016, the Government set out a policy position which is a continuation and deepening of the neoliberal discourse; clearly framing higher education as a route to achieving success in a knowledge economy based on market principles, reiterating the economic purpose of universities, and positioning the student even more emphatically as a consumer (DfBIS, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Yet, this does not represent my student research participants' motivations; there was very little evidence of identification with being a consumer, or of seeing higher future earnings as a primary basis for the choice of a discipline. As I will show in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, what is evident amongst my research participants is a broader and more heterogeneous understanding of the benefits of higher education and the value of intellectual and personal development through academic disciplinary study.

The higher education market which has been created is only a pseudo-market which is state-regulated (Williams, 2013). Universities cannot charge what the market would bear and there is not differentiation or competition on price (as the Browne Report (2010) had anticipated), since to charge less than the maximum fee permitted by government would be to imply lower quality (Wright, 2015). The means of state regulation is through policy levers, regulatory controls, and audit mechanisms. These are placed on institutions to ensure

accountability and responsiveness in delivering market-oriented and economically-focussed outcomes, such as 'value for money' and 'return on investment' (Kipnis, 2008; Hilgers, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012, 2013a; Shore and Wright, 2015; Wright, 2015). Within this environment, employability (or more accurately, employ*ment*) has become a key metric by which universities are being evaluated and compared. Other metrics include the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which controversially includes employability through equating quality of teaching with levels of graduate employment, along with the Key Information Sets which include graduate employability and prospects. The Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) statistics measure employment or further study six months after graduation. The DLHE data is contentious, because employment is being measured, yet labour markets and the availability of jobs are outside the control of Higher Education Institutions (Donald *et al.*, 2017). In response a new metric, the Graduate Outcomes survey which is completed 15 months after graduation, has replaced the DLHE survey, with the first data to be made available in 2020.

A new experimental set of data relating to graduate outcomes, the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO), has recently been published (Belfield *et al.*, 2018; Department for Education, 2018). LEO statistics (DfE, 2018) provide details of respondents' salaries one, three, five, and ten years after graduation. The policy rationale for providing this data is to provide a basis for more informed choices by students and to offer guidance as to the best graduate outcomes in terms of salaries and sustained employment from institutions and disciplines (DfBIS, 2016; Belfield *et al.*, 2018). However, other government policy aims have been identified, such as encouraging student choice towards subjects associated with higher incomes, thus helping to secure the repayment of student loans (McGettigan, 2017a). This has led to fears that certain disciplines which do not result in strong economic outcomes may be threatened if they are seen as damaging to overall institutional metrics (Grey, 2019). Other forms of pressure in the sector include the plethora of league tables which compare universities nationally and internationally and which include the employment prospects of their graduates (*e.g.* The Complete University Guide, 2018). Further indications of the policy view that the student is a consumer within a market are the creation of a new Office for Students to regulate the sector and students being given legal rights as consumers in relation to the higher education market (Tomlinson, 2017).

Employability has come to centre stage and, as Burke *et al.* (2017) have highlighted, a strong and very pervasive discourse of employability has become apparent throughout the field of higher education. Institutions have responded via both the need to demonstrate effectiveness in graduate employment to government and in communicating the potential for enhancing employability in their marketing to potential students. This in itself is a high-stakes activity on the part of universities; they need to put across the types of activity which will enhance future employability and job prospects (Tomlinson, 2013a, 2013b; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Yet earnings data and employment statistics offer a narrow interpretation of value and fail to capture the opportunities and experiences which come from studying for a degree (McGettigan, 2017a, 2017b; McKenzie, 2019).

As I will argue, government policy assumptions do not offer ways of answering key questions about how and why people choose a discipline and an institution, or how people develop their employability and decide on a career direction. I have sought to research these questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of employability in the context of English Studies. English, as I have outlined in my introduction, does not offer high salaries on graduation and is subject to various public discourses which question the utility and relevance of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (Hickman, 2014; Moro, 2018). The subject is not vocational yet as I will go on to show, it can produce high levels of sustained and satisfying employment, with a wide range of careers being achievable from English Studies.

Key debates and perennial concerns

Government policy continues to confirm the neoliberal narrative of informed choice and greater competition as the solution to delivering economic success and enhanced graduate outcomes, such as employability and social mobility. As I will discuss in the following sections, this is despite academic literature and research findings which challenge this position. The literature which has informed my study has widely and rightly critiqued the government policy approaches and assumptions which over-simplify complex issues. Scholarship has highlighted the need to stimulate an informed debate and challenge government policy (Keep and Mayhew, 2010). I am in agreement with Rothwell and Rothwell (2017), who suggest that the debate within government policy has not sufficiently evolved despite the time which has elapsed. It has been further argued that government

education policies have failed to respond to the complexity of a globalised economy and a rapidly changing society (Leach, 2019). In this complex and changing context, the market-driven approach to higher education policy has created consequences which work against the stated policy aims of increased access, social mobility through enhanced employability, and lifelong learning. These include the 51% drop in part-time students in England between 2010 and 2015, which has resulted from the changes to university fees and the loss of means-tested maintenance grants for part-time study (Cullinane, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2018). Whilst maintenance loans have been made available, this has resulted in students from the lower socio-economic groups graduating with the highest debt.

In response to contentious issues such as levels of student fees, debt, and value for money, the Conservative government ordered a review of post-18 education, undertaken by an independent panel chaired by banker and equities broker Sir Philip Augar. What has become known as the Augar Review (DfE, 2019) was published on 30th May 2019, making it possible for me to discuss its recommendations in this thesis. Those recommendations include a move to seek to create greater equity by reintroducing maintenance grants for eligible students. A lifelong learning loan is proposed to support ongoing flexible models of learning and increase equity of access, to reflect the diversity of potential students' lives and points of entry rather than the dominant model of a three year degree being taken from age 18. The Review (*ibid.*) recommends a reduction in student fees, with the shortfall for universities being replaced by government funding. Whilst stating that the post-18 education cannot be left entirely to market-forces, the review is still based on a strongly market-driven approach and seeks 'to ensure that the market works in the interests of all stakeholders' (*ibid.*: 63). It continues the narrative of prioritising STEM subject areas, which produce higher incomes for graduates and are seen to be important for the economy. Whilst recognising that the social value of some professions is not reflected in salaries, the review (*ibid.*) questions the extent of the provision of courses and the public subsidy (in terms of un-repaid student loans) for subjects such as the Arts, Humanities, Creative Arts, and Social Sciences. The argument of the review is that universities should be incentivised to offer more of the courses which are 'better aligned with the economy's needs' (*ibid.*:10) and which will help to secure greater levels of student loan repayment. Universities would be required to reduce what the review (*ibid.*) describes as an 'over-supply' in other areas. To ensure this is addressed, there is a recommendation that:

> "Government should intervene to address recruitment to courses with poor graduate employability and poor long-term earnings benefits by 2022-2023. Intervention should take the form of contextualised minimum entry threshold, a selective numbers cap, or a combination of both."
>
> (*ibid.*:102)

The Augar Review (DfE, 2019) has been published at a politically turbulent time and there is no certainty that it will inform policy. However, whilst there are helpful aspects of its wider view of the post-18 landscape and although some recommendations might support greater equity and flexibility, the existing market-based instrumental view of higher education and narrow interpretations of value remain strongly present. The recommendations are potentially to the significant detriment of disciplines in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, and would impoverish society and the economy. I will argue that, in the changing context of the digital age, there needs to be some re-evaluation of what is significant for employability for twenty-first century workplaces and a corresponding re-evaluation of the potential contribution and value which is added to this by disciplines such as English Studies.

Compelling research, which I will discuss in the following sections, has sought to gain more nuanced and dynamic perspectives which acknowledge the complexity of employability and contest over-simplification (Tomlinson, 2012, 2017; Speight *et al.*, 2013; Burke *et al.*, 2017). The government policy approach over the past 30 years has led to a flattening of the landscape of employability from higher education. In contrast, I present the richness and complexity of lived experience in relation to higher education and employability. I do so by using ethnography, a research methodology which reflects my student research participants' humanity and complexity as individuals embedded in social worlds (Macdonald, 1997, 2002). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, this approach enabled me to connect with students in relationships of trust and also for them to reach out to me over time, through their higher education experiences and into their early careers. In this way I am able to reflect the contours of this complex landscape in greater detail.

Contextualising agency within structures

Government policy conceptualizes students as active, rational, and agentic consumers freely making choices, investing in a university education to gain better, more highly paid jobs and to achieve social mobility (DfBIS, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). This view is widely critiqued by

scholars working in the field of employability and higher education. Those critiques are based on the recognition that individuals need to be placed in the wider social structures which shape motivations, actions, perceptions, and potential outcomes (Reay, 2004; Bathmaker, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Despite the policy rhetoric of equity and meritocracy, structural issues can act as significant barriers to participation (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015) and can contribute to the reproduction of social divisions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). Indeed, research has shown that government policy ideas about employability overemphasize the agency of individuals, although in actuality *many* factors affect the ability to gain employment. These factors include the impact of social class, gender, and ethnicity in terms of their effect on the perceptions and horizons of individuals. Other factors include the state of the economy, the availability of graduate jobs, and the recruitment practices of employers. The capacity of individuals to access the social and cultural capitals which can enhance the degree credential and the reputational capital associated with the university attended are also crucial (Reay, 1998, 2013; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007, 2008; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Mok and Wu, 2016; DeBlaquiere *et al.,* 2019).

Keep and Mayhew (2010) have critiqued government policy reliance on the creation of a supply of higher level skills as a solution to structurally-rooted issues and social problems. Such policy reliance over-simplifies complex social problems and again brings back responsibility to the individual for getting the right skills for employability, social mobility, and success. Social reproduction remains embedded in higher education and affects decision-making, choices, and access to the labour market (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015). For instance, Power and Whitty (2006) found that graduates from elite universities who had also attended elite schools were able to command higher salaries and had better jobs due to their social capital and networks. In my research project I have aimed to sensitively surface and explore structural issues, such as social class, in order to gain a deeper understanding about the effect of structure and agency on employability. I have explored how individual employability is perceived, articulated, and achieved, and how transitions from university to work and future careers are managed. Thus, I have sought to place individuals in the context of their social worlds.

A promising development in more recent employability literature, is the recognition that Bourdieu's theoretical framework can offer ways to consider the deeply buried social structures which shape people's sense of what is possible and what is appropriate. This includes for example, whether to seek a higher education, how to navigate the reputational hierarchy of institutions which has emerged, and which career paths might be open to them – what is 'thinkable' for them within the constraints of the dispositions of the habitus (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Tomlinson, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Rather than taking a Human Capital theory approach which focuses on skills (Becker, 1975), it is important to consider other forms of capital and how they fit with the structures of the labour market (Holmes, 2013a, 2013b; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Students' backgrounds may, or may not, provide them with the necessary resources or the social and cultural capitals to enable them to progress in the fields of higher education and employment (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Tholen, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2017). A key theme which has emerged from my research is the complexity of choice, which is subject to many influences and which Bourdieu's concepts are helpful in interpreting. Student research participants have also had transformational experiences as a result of their higher education, which has changed what is 'thinkable' for them and led to careers which they were not previously aware of. In the following chapter, I will outline my use of Bourdieu's work to gain analytical purchase and deepen understanding of these complexities, in relation to student research participants' choices in higher education and their understanding of their employability and potential career paths.

Access to good jobs?

The links between higher education, employability, and the potential for enhanced career success, have been made explicit and have become an expectation for students and their families (Oliver, 2015; Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017). Yet the massification of higher education has created much larger numbers of graduates, which has made securing the return on investment envisioned in government policy more complex to achieve. There has been an 'increase in positional competition for a limited supply of good jobs' (Keep and Mayhew, 2004:299). Due to the increased numbers of graduates, the degree credential is widely seen as no longer enough on its own (Tomlinson, 2007), creating pressure on students to 'stand out from the crowd' by other means of differentiation, such as work experience, internships, extra-curricular activities, and post-graduate study. Human capital policies have focused on creating a supply of higher level skills, but to gain good jobs there

must be a demand for those higher skills in the economy. Economic downturns and recession, such as was experienced following the financial crash in 2008, can affect the availability of graduate jobs (Blenkinsopp and Scurry, 2007; Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011; Elias and Purcell, 2013).There are issues with under-employment, with the longitudinal Futuretrack research project (Purcell *et al.*, 2013) reporting 30% of graduates working in non-graduate roles. However, this reflects both structural issues of availability and graduates' more subjective decision-making about taking a role, perhaps as a way of entering a field and a means of gaining experience to support their development and progress (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011; Purcell *et al.*, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

There is increasing diversity in what is considered to constitute a graduate job with new areas of work being added, including marketing and digital media (Elias and Purcell, 2013). The changes in the structure of a post-industrial labour market (which I have discussed in an earlier section) have changed expectations about flexibility and the probability of job changes, with people changing jobs on average every four years (Donald *et al.*, 2017). It has been argued that there is a more 'protean' - that is to say more individually-driven approach - in Generation X, the cohort of people born between the 1960s and 1990s and who are seen as placing a greater emphasis on personal values, flexibility, and adaptability during the working life-course (Hall, 2004; Clarke, 2013; Mowforth, 2018). Whilst I am not accepting this as a homogeneous characterisation, I have been exploring motivations and influences on my student research participants, such as those from their backgrounds and education.

Consuming higher education as a route to a job?

Whilst there is some evidence that students have become more instrumental and more likely to act as consumers, with expectations of both qualifications and work-related employability skills in return for their investment (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005), research has also established that potential students have a range of motivations (Jameson *et al.*, 2012; Strudwich and Jameson, 2010; Kandico and Mawer, 2013; Purcell *et al.*, 2013). There is evidence that, with the exception of those applying for law and medical degrees which have particular vocational pathways, many students across most disciplines are seeking to enhance their job prospects by studying for a degree rather than to gain a particular job (Kandico and Mawer, 2013). The message that a degree is an important way of enhancing employability begins in schools (Williams, 2013); indeed the numbers of students going on to

university from each school is a metric applied and published by government (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). As student research participant Catriona told me, the pressure to think about employability and higher education began during her high school education. The longitudinal research carried out by the Futuretrack project (Purcell *et al.*, 2013) with students and graduates across all disciplines, suggests that subjective factors play a strong role, rather than decision making being based on economic outcomes:

> "Graduates value jobs which offer interesting and challenging work and continual skills development and, in the current economic climate, are likely to be attracted by these to provide them with useful experience of employment and the opportunity to create evidence of developing employability skills, even in jobs which do not require their qualifications or recognise these in the payment structure."
>
> (Purcell *et al.*, 2013:70)

Research with Social Sciences students has also found that there were a complex and abstract range of reasons for attending university beyond future employability (Strudwick and Jameson, 2010). Whilst the pre-entry students showed an awareness of the connection between university study, employability, and careers, they also wanted to enjoy studying and the experience of university education, thus recognising 'the significance of personal growth from university life' (Strudwick and Jameson, 2010: 4; see also Jameson *et al.*, 2012). This indicates that students are not making their choice of discipline in the way that policy assumes them to. This is an important aspect of their experience which demands closer exploration.

Career decision-making also links to meaning-making and identity, reflecting 'individuals' sense of who they are, who they wish to be, and their hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations' (Young and Collin, 2000:5). I examine these subjective considerations and the ways in which the student research participants worked to make sense of them in their everyday experiences during their studies and after graduation, in the data chapters of this thesis. I have explored students' motivations in taking a degree in English, how they made their decisions, and how they approached their careers. However, I have also needed to consider that choices and individual agency, which are given great prominence in policy, are affected by social and economic structures, and may be limited by them. As I will go on to show in later chapters, my research demonstrates that amongst my student research participants,

people were seeking experiences which were meaningful and would develop them, rather than simply seeing themselves as consumers investing in their employability.

Skills: use with caution and critical awareness!

Employability is largely conceptualised in terms of a dominant discourse of skills, even though the language of skills is unclear and contested (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Holmes, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Tran 2015). Skills are not objects which can be measured but are related to the person, to situated practice, and to performance in context (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In this thesis, I am not conceptualising employability in terms of the possession of sets of generic skills but in terms of skilful and reflexive practices within social worlds, as a social process involving engagement in social interaction and in situated practice. Given the instability and uncertainty of the contemporary jobs market, the disruptive effect on jobs associated with the digital age, and the vastly increased competition for graduate jobs, I argue with Bridgstock (2016) and Barnett (2004) that there is a need to prepare for the future more holistically and broadly than focussing narrowly on sets of imprecisely defined, de-contextualised graduate skills. Such lists have been generated by many HE institutions, organisations, and employers, in their various attempts to map and define employability, including Northern University. Lists of skills and attributes can prompt a tick-box approach to employability, rather than a more holistic approach which reflects the social nature and processes of employability (Bridgstock, 2009; Tyrer *et al.,* 2013). I am arguing that work is highly contextualised. I am in agreement with the view that it involves complex professional actions which bring together different areas of knowledge and skills involving tacit knowledge, personal understanding of people and situations, self-knowledge, attitudes, values, and emotions (Eraut, 2004; Tyrer *et al.,* 2013). I argue that understanding employability requires research into how individuals apply their skills and capabilities and engage in social interactions and practices within these contexts. I have, therefore, explored these areas in my research.

Whilst my position is that generic graduate skills divorced from practice and context are too simplistic as a means of understanding employability (Bridgstock, 2009), I also recognise that the language of skills is a form of shorthand in which fluency is a means of communicating potential, for example to employers (Holmes, 2001, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). I have used the language of skills as a heuristic device in my research work. Staff and students

were comfortable to talk in terms of skills, although I found that students had difficulty in understanding how the skills from English related to their employability. Thus, what I have sought to do is to understand skills as they are practised in context. I have done so through my discussions with student research participants; through hearing their stories and listening to the ways in which skills have been embodied in practices and owned, articulated, and understood, in contexts of the social worlds of their part-time jobs, extra-curricular projects, volunteering, and ultimately in their careers.

This understanding of skills and employability as a situated social process has been important for my research and is significant for graduates of English Studies. Earlier research by Martin and Gawthrope (2004) and more recent work by Rust and Froud (2011) reported that students of English found it difficult to articulate the skills from their disciplinary studies and connect them to the world of work. Other reports and research with students, across all disciplines, suggest that students find the articulation of skills for the workplace from a university education problematic (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Bryant, 2005; HEA, 2015). This was also found to be the case more generally for Arts faculty students (Speight *et al.*, 2013); these findings echoed a report from across all disciplines (HEA, 2015) that students can have difficulty understanding their skills and knowledge in relation to employment. This was even the case for STEM students:

> "Graduates may be suffering from sub-optimal employment outcomes owing to a lack of awareness and understanding about how the skills and knowledge they have developed during their degrees relate and map onto the jobs market."
>
> (Wakeham, 2016:3)

My research has enabled me to explore the significance of situated practice as a way of embodying, understanding, and narrating employability. This may have a wider significance given that a cross-section of students from different disciplines have difficulty framing and articulating their skills in terms that resonate for employers. In this study I move beyond ideas of employability as the possession of skills by considering how graduates apply, take ownership of, and articulate the capabilities which enable them to understand their employability in context.

False dichotomies?

The seismic changes in higher education and the marketization of the sector have highlighted concerns about the threat to academic learning implied in the priority given to employability by government policy (Speight *et al.*, 2013). A narrow, skills-led, approach has been seen as inconsistent with traditional scholarship and the aims of an academic education (Rust and Froud, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013b). The discourse of employability sets out certain social and educational norms and implies an expectation that people within the academy will reconfigure their approaches and ideas about what matters. This has created strong feelings and tensions in the academic community (Harvey, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Boden and Neveda, 2010; Speight *et al.*, 2013; Collini, 2010, 2012). Government policy approaches which seek to shape education towards developing skills for employability have not been positively regarded within academic communities and have given rise to questions about the fundamental purpose of higher education: does it exist to create and disseminate knowledge or to produce a workforce for employers? These policy approaches have been seen as a distraction from the core aims of an academic education at a time of expansion in the sector, with accompanying intensification of work for academic staff (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Boden and Neveda, 2010; Yorke, 2010; Speight *et al.*, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013a). The Government's approach has also been regarded as an anti-intellectual erosion of academic freedoms, by focusing on training graduates for jobs (Atkins, 1999; Harvey, 2000; Collini, 2010, 2012). Collini (2010) has asserted that universities have been expected to become agencies for equipping graduates to earn higher salaries. However during my research project, I have found that differing views co-exist.

There is understandable opposition in principle to the over-arching political agendas which have sought to create a competitive market within higher education. Those political policies have emphasised that employability is a major outcome of a higher education and have placed ever-increasing pressures from policy levers and metrics on institutions and individual staff members. Yet, as I will discuss in my data chapters, there is also an enduring commitment to students and to providing support at a day to day level which enables them to have the best possible chances after graduation. Many academic staff research participants expressed their clear commitment to developing their students in ways which support them in becoming employable citizens. They also spoke of their awareness of the value of the skills and capabilities which are developed by English Studies. I argue that there

is indeed what Rust and Froud (2011) have described as a false dichotomy between skills for academic learning and skills for employability. The capabilities which are valued by academics - and which a higher education seeks to develop - are also valuable for employment, including analysis, evaluation, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. I will discuss this in much greater depth in my data chapters (Chapters 6 and 7). I will also link my argument to the traditions and philosophy of English Studies.

Changing work – what will be significant for future employability?

As I have outlined in a previous section of this chapter, although government policy has continued to emphasise the advent of the knowledge economy since the late twentieth century, scholarship has questioned whether it has been actually been delivered (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Tomlinson, 2012, 2017). Lauder (2014) has described the policy rhetoric of the knowledge economy as being 'punctured'. Many high-skilled 'knowledge' jobs have been routinized by technology or off-shored to lower-waged economies (Brown and Lauder, 2001; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). However, in the twenty-first century, the pace of change in relation to work and technology is accelerating and is becoming increasingly disruptive. The demands of the labour market are ever more challenging (Tomlinson, 2013b; Bridgstock, 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017). New types of work have been emerging, particularly related to the digital sphere; some of my student research participants have taken jobs in fields such as social media marketing and Artificial Intelligence which did not exist 5 to 10 years ago. I have been interested to explore these complexities and gain understanding about how students are negotiating these fields, their motivations, their perceptions of their employability, the value of their skills in the labour market, and their capacity to narrate this in order to access graduate jobs. The picture is further complicated by the rapidly changing contemporary world and the advent of what has been termed the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which I argue is both adding to potential job categories and to changing perceptions of the value of skills and capabilities which are developed by the Humanities.

In my data chapters, I will discuss the extensive reports and literature which consider the changing needs of workplaces anticipated in the coming decades (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Autor, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; Frey and Osborne,

2014, 2017; Universities UK (UUK), 2016, 2018; Bakhshi *et al.*, 2017; Taylor, 2017). In my research, I have been exploring how these changing needs relate to the capabilities which are developed by the study of English. Given the fast-changing world and the complexities of work, it has been recognised that graduates need to be critical lifelong learners (Harvey, 2001; Tomlinson, 2013b; Tomlinson, 2017), able to 'offer creative added-value, assimilate and apply abstract knowledge, meta-task, and engage in ongoing-reflective learning' (Tomlinson, 2013b:127; see also Guile, 2010). Barnett (2004) argues that higher education needs to prepare graduates for uncertain and even unknown futures in a super-complex world, which requires flexibility to contend with constant flux and inherent instability. Yet, the current trends within a neoliberal, marketized, and commodified system and the pressures on institutions of achieving success in terms of the all-important metrics of employability, may tend to prioritise more vocational courses and more instrumental and utilitarian learning and pedagogies; influenced by achieving economic outcomes, responding to present labour markets, and consumer demands (Barnett, 2004; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Bridgstock, 2016; Davidson, 2017). Such approaches include discourses around the frameworks of graduate skills and generic skills which aim to reduce uncertainty (Barnett, 2004; Bridgstock, 2016).

Yet more utilitarian learning is the antithesis of the independent and more challenging forms of learning which are needed to enable graduates to thrive in uncertain future roles and careers (Barnett, 2004; Tomlinson, 2013b; Davidson, 2017; Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018). I will argue that the non-vocational discipline of English Studies - with its emphasis on independent learning, critical analysis, and research, and which requires self-motivation, self-discipline, and self-reflection - provides an appropriate preparation for future careers in an ever more complex world. I do so by drawing on the data from my student research participants, their experiences during higher education, and their diverse career trajectories.

Moving from skills to graduate identity

As I have discussed, the dominant discourse in relation to employability is skills. This has tended to be used uncritically despite the recognition in the literature that the language of skills is imprecise. A promising alternative way of thinking about employability has been proposed. The 'graduate identity' approach developed by Leonard Holmes (2001, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) is based on the argument that the process of transition into the workplace and

employment requires graduates to negotiate and make sense of their emerging career identity (Holmes, 2001, 2013a, 2015; see also Tomlinson, 2017). Graduates must be able to provide examples of the application of skills, hence, engaging in 'successful dialogue' in language which employers understand (Holmes, 2013a:233) and which is meaningful for the graduates themselves, thus enabling them to negotiate their identity through interaction. Their identity claims must be validated (Holmes, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Jenkins, 2014) so that a graduate can claim the identity of someone able to take on a graduate level job (Holmes, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). Rather than employability being the possession of skills, it instead relates to how people present themselves to employers and make claims to being graduates worthy of employment, which may be affirmed or disaffirmed (Holmes, 2015). This approach recognises that identity is situated and relational, and that different identities will be 'in play' in different settings. Graduate identity is, therefore, socially constructed, negotiated, and subject to contestation, which also helps to highlight that graduate employment is not a given (Holmes, 2015). Other key literature and research emphasises that evidencing employability involves making convincing claims to employers in coherent narratives (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007, 2017). As Knight and Yorke (2004) have identified, students may have significant achievements but if they are unable to articulate them in a language which resonates with employers then their capitals - intellectual, social and cultural - may be unrealised. Thus, as I have argued in a previous section of this chapter, the ability to articulate employability is highly significant.

However, although the capacity to articulate employability is recognised as crucial, I am arguing that there is a perception gap. Students can have difficulty in understanding and articulating the skills from their discipline in terms which will resonate for employers. This perception gap represents a potential disadvantage to English Studies students, who perceive they are studying a non vocational discipline. Therefore they may not recognise their skills in workplace terms. In this thesis, I am deepening my consideration of identity and the complex processes of understanding, embodying, and articulating employability. I argue that this relates not only to the point at which a graduate needs to claim a graduate identity in the context of jobs, as identified by Holmes (2001, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). I broaden consideration of registers of identity and employability over time. In doing so I have sought to gain an understanding of how developing identities play into choices of discipline, university, ideas about career directions and seeking meaning, including subjective

considerations and structural influences. These influences are recognised as having significance in academic literature but are not reflected in government policy assumptions. The student research participants' life stories and reflections provide insights into their identities in differing settings and the ways in which this intersects with their understanding of their employability. To do this I draw on sociological ideas about identity and narrative identity to explore how identity and narrative are bound up with employability and careers. In the following chapter, I will outline the theoretical framework which I have used to analyse and interpret the complex social processes involved in the ongoing work of developing identity, making sense of the world and creating the meaningful narratives which can evidence employability (Lawler 2002, 2014; Polkinghorne 1988).

Employability and English Studies

I have heard many stories from student research participants about people - taxi drivers, friends, family members - questioning the value of a degree in English Studies and making assumptions about the limitations it has in terms of potential future careers. This is also reflected in popular and media discourses (*e.g.* Shukman, 2014). Contrary to this, the students and graduates had their own convincing counter-narratives, as I will discuss in Chapter 5. The student research participants went on to take up a wide range of careers, as I will outline in Chapters 6 and 7. It may well be that government policy 'engineering' might be expected to deter students from studying a non vocational discipline and one which does not provide high starting salaries (Martin and Gawthrope, 2004; Grey, 2019; McGettigan, 2017a, 2017b). Yet English Studies continues to attract students, and those students go on to achieve high levels of sustained employment (Belfield *et al.*, 2018; DfE, 2018). Recent Longitudinal Economic Outcomes data, at five years after graduation, showed that English graduates achieved a level of 87% in sustained employment, the 8th highest out of all the disciplines which were available for analysis (Belfield *et al.,* 2018). English graduates were also earning close to the median salary for all graduates five years after graduation (Boyd and Kernohan, 2018). I have seen that students studying English have a passion for their subject, an understanding of the value of learning and studying a discipline they love, whilst expanding their minds and developing critical and communication abilities. This leads to employability in ways which are not touched by government policy; these are the stories which I am bringing to your attention in my thesis. My student research participants have gone on to have a wide range of careers and their skills and capabilities are highly valued.

The stories of their lives and careers provide rich data about how employability is perceived, developed, and embodied, thus challenging policy and popular thinking and providing a more research informed account of employability from English Studies.

Chapter conclusions

In the opening section of this chapter, I reflected on the use of the language of production in relation to higher education and employability. Representing graduates and employability as products neglects the complexity of people as individuals, who are not simply 'the sum of their Human Capital' (Bauman, 2007:6). Employability is a 'process of learning' (Harvey, 2004:2), which again needs to be understood individually rather than being seen as an automatic outcome, a 'product' of a higher education. I seek to explore and represent this complexity, heterogeneity, and learning as they relate to the employability and careers of my student research participants.

This chapter has outlined the key debates in the field and the government policy landscape. Employability has become a high-stakes issue because, over time, higher education has been repositioned as a mainly private good within a marketized system. Employability is conceptualised in government policy as a return on individual investment in education and as a measure of the effectiveness of Higher Education Institutions. Yet, despite its prominence, employability remains highly contested, as my discussion of the literature has shown. I will introduce further literature and research both in the following chapter - in which I outline the theoretical frame for the thesis - and in subsequent chapters in which the data and findings are discussed. Against this background, three key themes have emerged from my research which I will discuss fully in my data chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Firstly, I explore the complexity of the processes of choice of discipline and institution and the factors which influence those choices, including subjective considerations and structural issues. Secondly, I discuss the transitions made by students, the personal growth and transformational experiences which can occur during a higher education, and the broader definitions of success which inform career decision-making and directions. Thirdly, whilst students find it difficult to understand and articulate the skills they have gained from studying English, I explore the ways in which they are ultimately able to bridge this perception gap and gain ownership and understanding of their capabilities and employability through situated practice, and the embodiment and application of those skills in context.

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which people make sense of their employability, how they manage and develop their career and employability narratives, the stories which are created to frame and give meaning and continuity to past, present, and future, career related experiences (Ashforth and Fugate, 2001). I further investigate the argument that graduate employability is not just about gaining a degree, but requires ongoing learning (Harvey, 2004) and co-ordination during graduates' working lives (Tomlinson, 2012, 2017). Through my longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork and the detailed case studies of English students and graduates, my research has responded to an identified need for research into graduate careers over time, including insights from graduates within the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012, 2017). Although my research is focused on a small number of graduates, I have also responded to Donald *et al.'s* (2017) identification that there is a paucity of research with students about their career orientations before and after graduation.

In carrying out this research project I have moved away from employability as a generalised abstract concept to one which can be understood through richly detailed individual stories and experiences. This has enabled me to observe the drivers of employability and career decision-making for individual student research participants, including gaining insights into subjective considerations, such as a desire for meaningful work. This is an aspect which the literature identifies as requiring further research (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011; Birkin *et al.*, 2016). I am also seeking to address the recognition within the literature that employability is under-theorised and that 'the concept of employability needs further development and analysis' (Burke *et al.*, 2017:88) by using a theoretical frame which offers analytical and interpretative power. I have also aimed to contribute to the recent agenda set by Holmes (2017) for a more research-informed approach to employability, so that future initiatives can be grounded in research. Research is required which develops a more theoretically-informed understanding of how structural factors and individual agency relate to each other and how this varies in different contexts, in order to nuance and enrich the narrow instrumentalist ideas about employability which inform policy and practice (*ibid.*). I have used appropriate methodology and theoretical approaches with the aim of achieving this richer and more nuanced understanding and to inform pedagogy. Furthermore, I have contextualised this in the changing demands of the twenty-first century workplace. I will discuss, in the light of emerging research and reports, how the skills and capabilities developed by English Studies relate to employability. In Chapter 3, I turn to the theoretical frame for my thesis.

Chapter 3. The theoretical framework

Introduction

'I was following the rules….'. Student Catriona was telling me about her decision, three years earlier, to study business at Northern University. A degree in Business Studies had been seen by her school teachers and parents as a route to a job after graduation. Catriona had made her decision to apply for Business Studies on the basis of 'fear rather than….interest' and based on 'following the rules'. Reflecting back on her experience, she felt that there were rules which related to where you were from and 'what your family was like' (interview, 10.12.2014). Catriona had been the first in her family to go to university and her parents' expectations of a higher education included getting a 'proper job' after graduation. However, the transition to university enabled Catriona to come to an understanding that rather than employability being her primary concern, it was more important to her to study a subject she loved and enjoyed. So, instead of continuing with the more vocational discipline of Business Studies, Catriona applied for a transfer during Stage 2 and the following academic year began studying English at Stage 1. This was just one aspect of the wider story she shared with me over time. Catriona's story revealed the influences on her choices, which included teachers, family, expectations about jobs, and government policy narratives about higher education and employability. Her university life and studies had ultimately been a transformational experience, enabling her to gain new insights into her sense of who she was and what she wanted to achieve. Catriona saw on reflection that she had been following her own and others' expectations of what was appropriate, but her sense of what was possible changed over time. To analyse and interpret Catriona's experience and my other student research participants' stories, and to develop my thesis, I have needed to draw on a number of sociological frameworks and ideas, which I discuss in this chapter.

In this thesis, I am arguing that employability is a lifelong process of situated learning through interaction within social worlds. In contrast to government policy ideas about employability which emphasise agency, and which I have discussed in Chapter 2, the stories of my student research participants evidence tensions between agency and structure. Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work has helped me to consider those tensions: he saw the goal of his sociological research as uncovering 'deeply buried structures' of social worlds and the ways

in which those structures are reproduced or transformed (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a, 1984; Reay 2004:431). These analytical insights open up ways of thinking which cut across government higher education policy discourses of meritocracy, choice, graduate outcomes, and employability. They create an awareness of issues such as cultural power and the perpetuation of existing advantage (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; English and Bolton, 2016). Bourdieu's work acknowledges choice and constraint, agency and structure, and places the self in the social world (Maton, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Bourdieu's concepts also enable theoretical analysis of the ways in which forms of capital - not only economic capital but also individuals' social, cultural, and symbolic capital - influence perceptions of employability and employment outcomes (Burke *et al.*, 2017). As Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) have argued, social factors permeate every aspect of students' experiences, yet the government policy discourses of employability neglect them (Morley, 2001; Tomlinson, 2017). I have interwoven Bourdieu's influential scholarship with sociological ideas about identity, narrative identity, and communities of practice, to explore the three main themes which have emerged from my ethnographic research project, which I have outlined briefly in the concluding section to Chapter 2. This is a chapter of two related halves. Firstly, it is helpful to place Bourdieu's work in its historical and temporal context and to outline the key aspects of his framework. Then, in the following sections, I will turn to the key ideas about identity, narrative identity, and communities of practice, which have together provided the theoretical framework for this thesis.

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework

Pierre Bourdieu is regarded as one of the leading social philosophers of the twentieth century and the citation of his work is extensive, as is the corpus of his writings. I have drawn on his writings in the fields of anthropology, sociology, education, culture and politics. However he wrote about a very wide range of other fields, including economics, art, law, religion, media, and philosophy. Although Bourdieu was writing at a particular time and place in history (namely twentieth century France), his work was concerned with social issues which have great relevance for my study. He undertook empirical research which looked at a wide range of societal issues. These include the reproduction of social inequalities, despite the government policy rhetoric of social mobility and diversity, and significant changes in the educational field, such as marketization, which are associated with the neoliberal policies which Bourdieu vehemently opposed (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977,

1979; Bourdieu, 1998, 1999; Lane, 2000; Grenfell, 2012b, 2012d). Bourdieu was prescient in highlighting these trends (Lane, 2000). Despite arguments that higher education was being democratized through increased access, he identified the devaluation of degree credentials, highlighted that some disciplines were declining in prestige, and drew attention to increases in the qualifications required for jobs (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Lane 2000). Thus, whilst there is a need to acknowledge the national and historical context of his work, Bourdieu's research can speak to the contemporary issues in the UK which have been developing from similar and pervasive policy ideas since the 1980s. Ideas described by Morris (2015:2) as the 'neoliberal colonization' of higher education, which, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, have led to an increased focus on graduate employability as an outcome and a performance measure of higher education. I have used Bourdieu's conceptual tools with other sociological ideas to think through my research data.

In terms of the history of ideas in the social sciences, Bourdieu's work is in the post-structuralist tradition, though he resisted being labelled as such (Bourdieu, 1989; Grenfell, 1996, 2012a; Robbins, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Although Bourdieu was educated in the structuralist and objectivist tradition exemplified by Levi-Strauss, which is based on the existence of objective reality and truth, and the notion that our social existence is largely determined by societal structures, he moved away from this view. Instead, he took a constructionist view, which understands that ideas and reality are being constructed through discourse (Grenfell, 2012a; Robbins, 2012). In the 1940s and 1950s, the dominant traditions in French intellectual thought were structuralism and existentialism. Existentialism characterised individual choice and decision-making as acts of personal freedom in which people accepted the consequences of their actions. This was in contrast to the structuralist anthropology of Levi-Strauss, which advanced the idea that social rules determined how people behaved (Robbins, 2012). Neither perspective explained what Bourdieu had observed in his ethnographic work in Algeria and the Béarn, in which rules were interpreted flexibly and did not always apply, although neither were individuals totally free to act in terms of personal will (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a; Maton, 2012; Robbins, 2012). Bourdieu developed his theory of practice in order to interpret his empirical work, breaking with the dichotomous subjectivist and objectivist traditions but taking account of both (Maton, 2012; Robbins, 2012; Skeggs, 2004b).

Bourdieu recognised that in order to understand the social world he needed to go beyond these oppositions, which he saw as being 'the most fundamental and the most ruinous' (Bourdieu, 1990a:25; Robbins, 2012). Although we may experience the world as agents who are seemingly free to choose, there are regularities and patterns which characterise human behaviour, even though there are no explicit rules governing those practices (Maton, 2012). Bourdieu sought to understand this:

> "All my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?"
>
> (Bourdieu, 1990b:65)

Bourdieu set out to reconcile the imagined gulf between social structures and individual agency through his theory of practice, which bridges the two. His concept of habitus is the link between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency (Maton, 2012). The individual may have unique experiences, but they will share structures with others, such as social class, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and nationality, thus linking the objective with the subjective by describing how structures are internalised, how the dispositions of the habitus underlie our actions and, at the same time, contribute to social structures (Maton, 2012). Bourdieu's theory of practice moves away from ideas of practice as following rules, to actors developing practice experientially and gaining mastery of those practices (Bourdieu, 1990a). Thus, they come to an understanding of 'the rules of the game' and how to play it, whilst having a sense of the structures and regularities which apply (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99; Jenkins, 2002).

Bourdieu emphasised the relational nature of his key concepts - habitus, field, and capitals - which need to be understood as a set of interlocking 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989:50). The logic of practice comes from the dynamic interaction of habitus, field, and capitals (Maton, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Bourdieu sought to understand the social world through a research-based engagement with the complexities of social life (Jenkins, 2002) and a process of critical reflection. He summarised this as the 'objectification of the act of objectification' (Bourdieu, 1990b:59), taking a careful, reflexive, and sceptical approach in order to better illuminate research topics (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992a; Burke, 2010; Burke *et al.*, 2012; Grenfell, 2012c). He was an ethnographer and

acknowledged the significance of everyday experience in understanding social worlds, through engaging with the messiness of social reality:

> "….to be able to see and describe the world as it is, you have to be ready to be always dealing with things that are complicated, confused, uncertain, all of which run counter to the idea of intellectual rigour."
>
> (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991:259)

Bourdieu's work brings together day to day and broader social issues, providing a theoretical means of understanding and interpreting practice in terms of relationships and social structures, including those of power (Moi, 1991; Adkins, 2004; Lawler, 2004; Maton, 2012). For example, engaging with individual experience through ethnographic research and using Bourdieu's conceptual framework can make visible the ways in which education reinforces power structures and reproduces the advantages of the dominant middle classes.

Bourdieu sought to challenge the view that the increased numbers of students entering French higher education was evidence of the democratisation of education. His research showed the picture was more complex, with structural issues such as class and gender continuing to affect success (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Lane, 2000). Bourdieu noted that, following the increase in access to higher education, further forms of distinction and differentiation emerged, with middle class students choosing more prestigious subjects (such as Medicine and Law) and changing their focus to more selective institutions. Thus existing advantages and class divisions were being reproduced. Furthermore, the increased number of graduates meant that the degree qualification was devalued, increasing the importance of inherited social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Lane, 2000). The choices enacted were based on the 'practical mastery' of the social field which is internalised in the habitus. This enables the dominant and most powerful classes to know which practices and moves in the game will be most productive (Bourdieu, 1984). The acceptance of such domination is a form of 'symbolic violence', which Bourdieu saw as 'the violence which is exercised on a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:167). This is 'misrecognised' as the order of things, is taken for granted and therefore is not challenged by those who are being dominated. Bourdieu saw neoliberal markets and ideologies as a form of misrecognised domination and symbolic, structural violence (Bourdieu, 1998).

Awareness of the complex and unspoken power structures which underlie social practice is valuable in considering employability. Becoming employable through access to a university education is presented in government policy in linear and meritocratic terms. A university education may offer the opportunity for new and transformative experiences, however, social structures - such as class and individual background - create the potential for the habitus to restrict choices and for differential access to forms of capital to inhibit progress. My ethnographic work has enabled me to observe the messy realities and complicated nature of the social world in the every day, as I have explored perceptions and experiences of staff, students, and graduates within the social environment of the university and in the world of work. This has highlighted the complexities of employability, the gaps in perception, the impact of background and education on choices and career-thinking, the significance of identity, social worlds and situated practice, and the broader definitions of success than economic outcomes which have emerged.

Limitations with Bourdieu's work are recognised but, once acknowledged, they do not inhibit his usefulness. His theories have been seen as overly deterministic, emphasising the immutability of structures rather than the scope for agency or change (Jenkins, 2002). However, as I will discuss in this chapter, there is significant evidence of Bourdieu's acknowledgement of the capacity for habitus to evolve, for individuals to develop, adapt, and change, for example through their educational experiences (Bourdieu, 1990b, 2005a; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b; Reay 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2009). Bourdieu has been critiqued for his contentious views on working-class people and cultures (Bourdieu, 1984), which can be seen as reductive (Lane, 2000; Crossley, 2012). In my own research I have sought to reflect the diversity of lived experience and to avoid essentialism, whilst using Bourdieu's concepts to think *with* in relation to class. As a researcher and scholar working in the twentieth century, Bourdieu has been seen as being 'under-theorized in terms of gender' (Moi, 1991:1020) but, nonetheless, feminist scholars have been able to appropriate, apply, and evolve his concepts (*e.g.* Moi, 1991; Adkins, 2004; Skeggs, 2004a). As an ethnographer, Bourdieu saw the value of 'participant objectification' (Bourdieu, 1989:33), stepping into the shoes of those being researched and participating in the world of practice, which is in line with feminist epistemologies (Adkins, 2004). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the cohorts studying English at Northern University are predominantly women, which reflects the overall national gender split in English Studies (University and College Admissions Services (UCAS),

2016). However, despite this predominance, gender has not emerged as a main theme in my research. At times gender has woven into the narrative, for example, Catriona talked to me about her experiences of differences in her family's attitude which she attributed to gender, such as their expectation that she would work in part-time jobs from an early age, something which was not expected of her brother. Perceptions have been expressed about the additional emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) which is expected of women within family settings and in supporting students.

Although I acknowledge that Bourdieu's work has significant limitations in the area of gender, his ideas remain helpful. Indeed, feminist scholar Moi (1991:1019) argues that Bourdieu has 'considerable theoretical relevance for feminism', since his concepts offer a 'micro-theory of social power' (*ibid*.:1019). They enable analysis of the mundane details of everyday life to reveal the larger ideology and power structures which are at work. This has relevance for my thesis, which attends to the individual stories of students and graduates set in the every day in order to gain more nuanced understandings of lived experiences of employability. Whilst acknowledging their limitations, Moi (1991) suggests that Bourdieu's concepts can be productively applied in the theorizing and analysis of gender, taking gender in the same way as class as a general social field rather than a field in itself. As Skeggs (2004a:23) argues, gender is 'hidden under the surface of categories' such as occupation and types of education. Although gender has not emerged as a key theme in this thesis, my use of Bourdieu's ideas enables me to mark out potential issues relating to gender for more detailed future consideration and research.

Bourdieu's work has been extremely influential and extensively applied. However a number of scholars have been justly critical of research which takes a 'Bourdieu-lite' approach by employing concepts such as 'capitals' and 'habitus' superficially, as 'the theoretical icing on the cake' (Maton, 2012:62). This superficial approach is not consistent with Bourdieu's own views about the empirical and reflective way that his concepts might be used or his emphasis on the relational, interlocking nature of his 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989:50). In my research, I have sought to place my student research participants in their social contexts through listening to their life stories, in order to consider habitus and the capitals which are in play within contextual fields. Bourdieu's concepts can make the taken-for-granted seem unfamiliar and problematic. I have found this helpful in providing

ways of thinking about the multi-dimensional nature of the social world and its underlying structures (Reay, 2004; Redmond, 2006). In the following sections I will discuss each of Bourdieu's key concepts, which will in turn permit me to make analyses and interpretations of my research data in later chapters.

Habitus

Habitus is a concept intended to reconcile individual agency and social structure. It reflects the way in which social practices are characterised by regularities, such as Willis's (1977) research which showed the ways in which working-class kids get working-class jobs (Maton, 2012). Bourdieu describes habitus as:

> "….an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore, constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures."
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:133)

This complex individual and collective set of dispositions, which underlie practice, is 'internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56) and is constantly developing:

> "Habitus, as a product of social conditions, and thus of a history (unlike character) is endlessly transformed, either in a direction which reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with those expectations, or in a direction that transforms it, and, for instance, raises or lowers the level of expectations and aspirations."
>
> (Bourdieu, 1990b:116)

Habitus includes the ways in which we act, our perceptions, practices, feelings, thinking, and being; it encompasses our histories and the ways in which those histories influence us as we encounter changing circumstances and choices in our lives (Maton, 2012). It is important to place actors within their fields and social worlds; practices are not a simple outcome of our habitus, but are affected by the contextual fields that we are active in (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989; Maton, 2012). Fields will offer choices and options for action, but our habitus will affect what we see as possible or appropriate. To understand practices, we need to consider both habitus and the contextual field (Bourdieu, 1990a; Maton, 2012). The

analogy of a game is widely used by Bourdieu to suggest the sense of activity and practices in a field, where people understand the 'rules of the game' and have a sense of how to play it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99; Hillier and Rooksby, 2005).

Bourdieu uses the metaphor of a 'fish moving in water' to convey the ease with which a habitus which has an appropriate 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:127) and the practices within a field, can move through social space:

> "….when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water'; it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted."
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:127)

However, moving into new and unfamiliar situations can result in people experiencing a lack of social fit and feeling like a fish *out* of water because the unwritten 'rules of the game' are not known and understood (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b; Reay *et al.*, 2009; Maton, 2012). In Bourdieu's terms, as a result of their background some people do not have the 'doxic' knowledge which underlies the practice of the field (Bourdieu, 1990a; Reay *et al.*, 2009; Maton, 2012). The doxa encompasses fundamental core beliefs and attitudes, the social rules of the game, which are unconsciously accepted as being like 'second nature' (Bourdieu, 1990b:63) and therefore seem 'natural' (Deer, 2012; English and Bolton, 2016). In addition to attitudes and perceptions, habitus is also 'inscribed in our bodies, in things, in situations and everyday lives' (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991:51); it is 'the social embodied' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:128). In terms of choices of university, discipline, and potential career paths, habitus can affect perceptions of what is possible and viable and may mean that some choices are not even visible. Habitus is embodied in dress, accent, deportment, and taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b; Reay, 2004; English and Bolton, 2016), all of which are significant for employability and employment. They are signifiers of fitting into a field, of having the appropriate cultural capital and playing by 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99) - or of struggling to achieve either.

Bourdieu acknowledged that habitus may be transformed through experiences which raise or lower an individual's expectations (Bourdieu, 1990b, 2005a). Higher education can offer this potential for raising expectations. Making transitions across the boundaries from home

and school into the new socio-cultural environment of the University, entering new fields (such as the discipline being studied, and the social groups involved in extra-curricular activities) involves experiencing discontinuities and learning about the roles, context, language, and expectations of the new setting. This involves confronting the unfamiliar and experiencing a lack of shared references (Wenger, 1998:152). As such, this creates potential for change in the habitus by learning 'the rules of the game' in a new field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99) and accumulating capitals, developing new social networks, and gaining new knowledge. This may enable expectations to be raised, by providing new perspectives on the '*field of the possibles*' (Bourdieu, 1984:110, emphasis in original) in terms of future career directions. My data chapters discuss the experiences of my student research participants during their higher education, which confirmed expectations for some students and raised them for others, by creating disjunctures, by engaging in new practices, and becoming involved in different social contexts. Discontinuities and new expectations were also created following their transitions into the workplace, which affected perceptions of employability and potential career trajectories.

Diane Reay has made a significant contribution to the application of Bourdieusian concepts in the field of the Sociology of Education, in particular in relation to social reproduction in higher education and the lived experiences of working-class students (*e.g.* Reay 1998; Reay, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2009; Reay *et al.*, 2010; James *et al.*, 2010). However, whilst recognising the usefulness of the concept, she argues for caution in its application. Habitus is a 'way of understanding the world' (2004:439) and is a highly complex concept which should not be used casually as a gloss. Instead, it must be used to interrogate and interpret data within a research setting (Reay, 2004). Reay (1998) describes the way in which habitus:

> "….enables us to understand individuals as a complex amalgam of their past and present, but an amalgam which is always in the process of completion. There is no finality or finished identity. At the same time habitus also includes a set of diverse complex predispositions. It invokes understandings of identity premised on familial legacy and early childhood socialisation. As such it is primarily a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective, interiorized and permeating both body and psyche."
>
> (Reay, 1998:521)

This view of the habitus and identity as being inextricably linked, with both having fluidity and capacity for continual development, have been helpful in my own research. This has led me to draw on sociological theories of identity, which are themselves indebted to Bourdieu; including Steph Lawler's influential work on the profoundly social nature of identity and its creation (Lawler, 2014). The habitus is innate and unconscious (Bourdieu, 2005a; Maton, 2012). However, the articulation of identity and the narratives which underpin a sense of identity in a contextual field (such as a university or a workplace) offer opportunities to interpret the effects of the habitus, for example on choices and career decision-making. Those narratives can help trace changes and the development of the habitus as students and graduates make their transitions and enter new fields.

During the course of my research I have heard both from students who found their transitions smooth, like fish in water, and from those who were entering unfamiliar fields, in which they faced new experiences and social norms. These latter stories reveal the discomfort and dissonance which can occur as people encounter situations in which they have felt like fish out of water, due to a lack of experience and understanding of the unwritten rules, and the practices of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b; Reay, 2004; Maton, 2012). However, these disjunctures have also had the potential to create change and to transform the habitus. In Reay *et al.*'s (2009) study of working-class students studying at elite universities, the students are confronted by a new and unfamiliar educational field; there is a sense of dislocation between their 'old and newly evolving habitus' (*ibid.*:1112) as they move towards 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990b:61) and establish their positions through hard work and a critical re-evaluation of the new field. They are critically aware of their university as a potentially problematic social space whilst, at the same time, fitting in through their academic abilities. They 'move in and out of different identity positionings' (Reay *et al.*, 2009:1115), developing identities as learners at an elite university whilst retaining their loyalty to their social and family backgrounds. The students from working-class backgrounds were 'strangers' in their own school backgrounds due to their academic interests. However, although they were 'strangers' in the elite institution in terms of their social class, their focus on their academic work enabled them to fit in as learners and to do well, thus, achieving academic success. These students had managed the tensions between habitus and field since early childhood and 'their combination of highly developed academic

dispositions and reflexive habituses generate opportunities and academic success' at university (*ibid.*).

Thus Reay uses Bourdieu's concepts to develop a nuanced analysis of the complexities of the social situation - including the 'porosity' of the habitus, the ongoing development of identity and the possibility for changes in dispositions and trajectories. I have sought to apply this theoretical frame in a similar way in my own analysis. This has included the ways in which transitions from school to higher education, and subsequently into the workplace, create dissonance and provide access to experiences which may change the habitus and open up new fields. Thus ideas about possible career trajectories may be changed. I have also been able to observe ways in which identities as students, graduates, employees, and freelancers are being developed and experienced. I have heard from student research participants about their different identity positionings in differing social worlds and the ways in which they have learned to fit in and I will refer to this in later chapters.

My student research participants are from a range of social backgrounds. Some came to Northern University through widening participation schemes, some identified as working-class and have been the first in the family to go to university. In some cases, people stayed close to home rather than applying outside their local area in order to save costs by living at home. Some of these students did not get involved with university social life as much as others and some had jobs due to financial constraints and family perceptions that it is important to 'pay your way'. In addition, some students could feel like fish out of water when they returned home. Some students had middle-class backgrounds which helped their transition and shaped their expectations, sometimes through parental experience of attending university. Others had attended private schools which gave them high expectations of their university experience and their post-university career pathways. Thus, students in the School are differentially positioned and choice (for example, about future career paths) can be bounded by what is 'thinkable' in terms of habitus. Since habitus works unconsciously, it also means there may be other possibilities which are not being taken into account and which will remain 'unthinkable' (Reay, 1998, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2012:30; English and Bolton, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Knowledge, such as knowing about the hierarchy of universities and the differential value of the degrees they award, is part of

power and is not neutral; it is part of the exercise of power within fields (English and Bolton, 2016). As Skeggs argues, for Bourdieu (1988), knowledge is always a matter of positioning:

> "It is the space from which we speak, the political, disciplinary and social inheritances that we travel through, which leave traces and marks on us, enabling us to see some things and be blind to others."
>
> (Skeggs, 2004b:45)

This extends to choice of university and the potential career paths which are seen as possible, or even come into consciousness as possibilities (Reay, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2012; English and Bolton, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2017).

My findings have reflected research and scholarship which has shown the impact of social, economic, and psychological resources and the influence of family and background in relation to choice of university and experiences whilst at university (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; Reay 1998, 2004; Redmond, 2006; Reay *et al.*, 2009, 2010; Burke *et al.,* 2012; Tomlinson 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013). I have found that these factors, which can create limitations and barriers to participation, can also affect approaches to and perceptions of employability and possible trajectories after graduation. Habitus means that young people acquire expectations, 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:64; Reay 1998, 2004) or 'not for the likes of us'. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977:226) found that behaviour tends to be governed by what is 'reasonable to expect.' Despite schemes for widening participation which encourage students from less advantaged backgrounds to attend high status institutions such as Russell Group universities, there remain inequalities of access to capitals which bound ideas of what may be possible. Reay *et al.* (2010) also found that parents influence and shape students ideas, though this was more the case with middle-class parents, because working-class parents did not have the same kinds of information or experience to draw upon. My research shows that this influencing group also includes teachers. This focus on the influence of family and teachers is also helpful in considering that there are additional people who shape dispositions and perceptions and who contribute to choices which may ultimately affect employability - and that some students lack this support. Thus, habitus needs to be contextualised in field, the related concept to which I now turn.

Field

Bourdieu suggests that, in social space, the various actors are moving within specialised fields and will occupy more than one field; there are relationships, and some blurring, across and between fields (Thomson, 2012). Fields are 'meaningful worlds' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:127) which have their own logic and values in which people will compete, struggle, and come into conflict and friction. Habitus impacts on their expectations, their understanding of 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99). Their capitals provide the resources they need to progress (Bourdieu, 1990a; English and Bolton, 2016). In terms of this study, the actors are within the field of education and the sub-fields of higher education, part-time work, study, extra-curricular activities; they are immersed in the multiple fields of their social worlds. Later, graduates become actors in the field of their careers. Within those overarching fields, people participate in the social worlds of their workplaces. In this thesis, I take the view that Lave and Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) further nuances Bourdieu's concept of field in a way which is consistent with Bourdieu's framework and theory of practice. A community of practice is in itself a 'meaningful world' with its own logic, values, power structures, discourses, and 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99) in which people participate. However, a community of practice can be more readily understood as an individual school, organisation, or workplace, contextualised in a broader field such as education or the Arts. My research data has covered participants' higher education experience, their life histories and schooling, and their transitions into employment in a range of fields and workplaces in which their employability has been applied, understood, and validated in context. I will outline developments in the field of higher education in terms of Bourdieu's conceptual framework, before turning to communities of practice in a subsequent section of this chapter.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, the political field of power has created significant change in the field of higher education, based on policy assumptions about societal and economic needs and the role of education in delivering those needs. Fields are places of inequality and power relationships (Thomson, 2012). As Bathmaker (2015) argues, Bourdieu recognised that degrees of autonomy are important within fields. A key change which has occurred since the 1960s - when higher education was more autonomous - is the reduction of that autonomy and an increase in heteronomy which has led to greater contestation, struggle,

and tensions (Bathmaker, 2015; Wright, 2015; English and Bolton, 2016). The massification and marketization of higher education has created a field of conflict and struggle, in which universities are seeking to retain their places in the hierarchy. Employability is one of the key aspects of the rules of the game (Wright, 2015). In Chapter 2, I have discussed the wider historical, policy, and institutional context within which universities have had to play a high-stakes game in competing for students. They are seeking to enhance their capitals, their positions, and their relative power in the field of higher education (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Wright, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017).

The increase in access to higher education and the Government's imposition of market principles, as discussed in Chapter 2, has resulted in structural change and development of the field (Thomson, 2012). There has been increased managerialism and corporatism (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Tomlinson, 2013a; Wright, 2015) bringing with it a new market-oriented language. This has created new games with new rules, which has led to mismatches between new expectations and existing dispositions and practices within the field (Wright, 2015). As Tomlinson (2013a:180) has identified, Higher Education Institutions are working within a 'market-oriented and hierarchical system driven by reputation and institutional prestige.' Employability initiatives have emerged as part of the new and legitimated practices which institutional actors are engaging with, and responding to, in order to rise in the hierarchy. These include graduate prospects and employability as key metrics, used as a means of control by government and of increasing competitive advantage and relative power in the marketplace by institutions themselves.

Developments in the field have also created changes in the legitimacy of the symbolic capital of a degree. More people have degrees and credential inflation is changing what people regard as valuable and what is demanded by employers (Tomlinson, 2007, 2013a). A hierarchy of universities within the field has been established; qualifications from institutions within the Russell Group are regarded as being more valuable, providing greater symbolic capital within the field. Degrees from those which are lower in the league tables are less valued by employers (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Tomlinson, 2007). Smetherham's (2006) research found that graduates with first-class degrees from elite institutions were four times more likely to be accepted for fast-track graduate schemes. At lower levels of achievement, graduates from elite institutions were twice as likely to be accepted than graduates from

other less prestigious universities. Indeed, since there is not a real market in an economic sense, because most universities in England are charging the full fees (Wright, 2015), reputation and prestige can be seen as significant forms of capital within the field which are used to enhance status in a competitive hierarchy (Tomlinson, 2013a, 2013b). The relative hierarchy within the field also means that social reproduction continues to occur (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2017).

Universities are embedded in complex relations of power with other universities and will attempt to achieve better positions (Naidoo, 2004). Graduate prospects and employability are used as key 'selling points.' Many of my student research participants have shown their awareness of the relative position and symbolic capital of their institution in the hierarchy and the relative decline in the value of the degree qualification, resulting in a greater need to add to their degree through extra-curricular or work experience. Student research participants have also shown their understanding that employability is not an automatic outcome of their university education. They need to acquire other evidence in addition to the symbolic capital of their degree, such as work experience or extra-curricular activity, which could also add to their social and cultural capitals and enable them to progress in the fields of their careers.

Although all the student research participants in this study did successfully apply to Northern University, their journeys were not all an unquestioned linear progression. Some people did not initially include Northern University within their horizons of possibility. As I will discuss, the influence of teachers, family, peers, widening participation support structures, and part-time employers at key points in their decision-making, enabled them to gain different perspectives and understanding of the possibilities which could exist. Similarly, some students had experiences during their higher education which enabled them to gain new perspectives on potential careers which they had not previously been aware of or considered were possibilities for them. They gained knowledge and forms of capital which enabled them to transition to and progress within the fields and communities of practice of their workplaces. In the following section I will discuss Bourdieu's concept of capitals, the means by which people are able to access their contextual fields and to progress within them.

Capitals

Within and across the social spaces of their fields of activity, individual actors are legitimated and acquire value through their relationships, perspectives, power, the cultural resources and educational credentials which they hold and have access to: their 'capitals' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986; Moore, 2012). Capitals give individuals power and influence, through their social connections and their legitimate cultural credentials, the value of which are recognised within the field. Bourdieu describes four main forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital is wealth, money and assets. Other forms of capital, such as the symbolic capital of academic qualifications and credentials, can be converted into economic capital (Thomson, 2012); they can give access to connections and careers. Social capital is the membership of networks and the connections which give access to resources and opportunities (English and Bolton, 2016), and involves family, and religious and cultural heritage (Thomson, 2012). Cultural capital relates to 'forms of knowledge; taste, aesthetic, and cultural preferences; language, narrative, and voice' (*ibid.*:67). Capitals confer power and influence within fields. Those who enter the field with greater capitals are advantaged by them and 'capital is not equally distributed nor is it equally accessible to all social agents' (English and Bolton, 2016:58).

Bourdieu's use of the economic metaphor of capital can be confusing, since he emphasised that he saw his interlocking concepts as encompassing a much broader and more complex view than the economic one (Skeggs, 2004b; Bourdieu, 1986). It is important to recognise that, despite the policy focus on the economic, exchange value also inheres in the cultural (Skeggs, 2004b:153). Grenfell (2012b) argues that Bourdieu uses an economic metaphor to break with economism. Bourdieu was developing his ideas at the same time as Gary Becker (1975) was developing his concept of Human Capital, which extended the idea of self-interested, rational decision making motivated by economic gain into all areas of life, as I have discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to higher education. Bourdieu found Human Capital theory 'vague and flabby' and 'heavily laden with sociologically unacceptable assumptions' (Bourdieu, 2005b:2). Whilst Becker (1975) argued that rational decisions were made in terms of costs and profits, Bourdieu used an economic analogy differently, by arguing that action was based on interests which would create social and cultural benefits or losses as well as economic ones (Grenfell, 2012b). This further underlines the argument which I have put forward in Chapter 2, about the inadequacy of policy assumptions based on Human Capital

theory and Rational Actor approaches. Bourdieu considered that a dominant ideological discourse in a field - such as the economically-framed neoliberal ideology of individual freedom within a marketplace which in practice is the commodification of public spaces - becomes accepted as 'the order of things' and is taken for granted. However this is actually 'a misrecognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:168). Indeed, Strathern (1999) argues that the idea of a market as a coherent over-arching system is one of the great misrecognitions of Western modern society. Bourdieu argued that decisions about investing in education will be made not simply on an economic basis of actual financial costs or potential future earnings but on the overall social, economic, and cultural forms of capital which will be in play. Choices will be affected by the dispositions created by past experience and home culture, which can create reproduction in the choices and outcomes of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Grenfell, 2012b). This represents a much more complex and nuanced way of seeing and understanding choice and decision-making.

Bourdieu critiqued Rational Action theory (Scott, 2000) as a 'well founded illusion' and the 'choices of a pure mind commanding a perfect will' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:125). He saw this as being in opposition to lived realities, in which trajectories are affected by habitus, capitals, and position in a field, rather than being established by planning (Grenfell, 2012b). For Bourdieu, 'economic' practice needs to be understood more broadly:

> "Practices form an economy, that is, follow an immanent reason that cannot be restricted to economic reason, for the economy of practices may be defined by reference to a wide range of functions and ends."
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:119)

The differential access to forms of capital and the habitus of individuals will restrict their ability to progress within a field. In this thesis, I consider cultural, social, and economic influences in order to gain an understanding of the dynamics which are at play. Chances are not equal, social mobility and choice can be seen as being constrained by structures. In any consideration of employability and of individual decisions about which discipline, which university and which potential job, this must be taken into account (Burke *et al.*, 2017). Bourdieu's own research showed the perpetuation of class inequalities within the education system, which occurs because privilege and power are seen as inherent (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; Skeggs, 2004b; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Those who have political power and

control legitimate their power and privilege by, for example, controlling education. In Bourdieu's terms, this is misrecognised as the natural order of things and goes unchallenged (Bourdieu, 1990b; Skeggs, 2004b; English and Bolton, 2016). The ideological discourse of neoliberalism and the market, with its rhetoric of social mobility and freedom of choice, legitimates a position in which capitals, power, and knowledge, are not symmetrical. This reinforces the status quo and potentially results in the misrecognition of the barriers and challenges which exist (English and Bolton, 2016). As Skeggs points out:

> "Choice is a resource, to which some lack access and which they cannot see as a possibility, it is not within their field of vision, their plausibility structure."
>
> (Skeggs, 2004b:139)

However, although agents who have greater power and capital will dominate the field, Bourdieu recognised that people are individuals and there is scope for agency and change because people are:

> "….not particles subject to mechanical forces, and acting under the constraint of causes; nor are they conscious and knowing subjects acting with full knowledge of the facts, as champions of rational actor theory believe….[they are] active and knowing agents endowed with practical sense that is an acquired system of preferences, of principles, of vision and….schemes of action."
>
> (Bourdieu, 1988:25)

I have been observing the significance of social and cultural capital - and the lack of it - as this has been revealed in the stories and narratives of employability of my student research participants. It is helpful to take a broader view of value than the economic, which Bourdieu's ideas about differing forms of capital permit. I am in agreement with Skeggs and Loveday (2012:476) that it is also useful to extend the idea of capitals 'to think of value economically (the distribution of resources) *and* relationally, as a more general ethos for living, for sociality, for connecting to others through dispositions, practices and orientations'. Conceptions of value can be precise (quantification of exchange value) or slippery, in the sense of 'moral understandings of what matters to people' (Skeggs, 2011:496).

Graeber (2001) argues that value can be seen as the importance people attribute to action. This is how I am understanding values and observing the way in which what matters to

people. Their general ethos for living, their sense of identity and self play out in their practices, their beliefs, values, and their decisions about future careers; these have been based on broader ideas about value and success than economic rewards. I am also relating the ethos and approach within the School of English, values and beliefs which I argue underpin the teaching, learning and work of the staff, to the social mission of English Studies.

Identity, narrative, and employability

In this and the following sections, I move to discuss ideas about identity, narrative and communities of practice, which I have interwoven with Bourdieu's work to create the theoretical frame for my thesis. The student research participants' experiences of transition, along with the challenges of moving into new fields (both university and later into their work environments), their sense of self and identity, and the subjective considerations which have ultimately informed their career trajectories, have emerged as major themes from my research. I discuss these in Chapter 6. I have observed the role of identity, values, beliefs, and motivations, including seeking meaningful work and defining success in broader terms than prioritizing economic outcomes. I am arguing that employability is not an objective construct, but a social process involving social interactions within social worlds. As such it involves personal self-discovery, self-reflection, and transformations, as a result of lived experience, through which 'students can better see their values and abilities - and thus their identities - reflected' (Kruger and Lincoln, 2009:69). My data provides evidence that graduates' career decisions are influenced by their sense of identity. Their understanding of their employability is developed through situated practice within their fields, which creates experience which enables graduates to understand their employability in context, and provides narrative resources to evidence their capabilities.

I have needed to draw on a theoretically-grounded account of identity and narrative identity using theories, concepts, and scholarship, which in themselves are deeply influenced by and indebted to Bourdieu. The work of Beverley Skeggs, Steph Lawler and Diane Reay, who have extensively applied and interpreted Bourdieusian concepts, provides a source of seminal scholarship to underpin this analysis. This scholarship argues that our identities are interwoven with social structures and are continually being formed through our interactions within the messy realities and contradictions of the social world. In this view of identity,

Bourdieusian ideas about the habitus - positioned in the contextual field and taking into account the capitals in play - are helpful in bringing together the self and the social world. These ideas cut across sameness and difference, body and mind, individual and collective, 'outer' and 'inner', thus, providing a way of thinking about the 'social incorporated into the self' (Lawler 2014:145) which is processual and relational (Maton, 2012; Jenkins 2014; Lawler 2014). As Maton (2012:60) argues, Bourdieu encourages researchers to 'adopt a relational mode of thinking that goes beyond surface empirical practices to excavate their underlying structural principles'. The key task is to reveal those structural principles. The habitus itself cannot be 'seen', instead it is the effects of the habitus which may be observable. The practices enacted in our overlapping fields and communities of practice (such as university and work) which embody and articulate those effects can be observed and analysed, by studying the narratives through which we story the self and develop our identities. This allows for habitus, capitals, and field to be considered together in the relational manner which Bourdieu envisaged. A focus on the socially-embedded stories of my student research participants has enabled me to draw out patterns and insights from my data which contribute to a richer picture of employability.

Narratives and stories underpin our sense of self and identity and, as Lawler (2002) argues, they merit consideration in order to increase our understanding:

> "If we want to find out how people make identities, make sense of the world and of their place within it – if we want to find out how they interpret the world and themselves – we will have to attend to the stories they tell."
>
> (Lawler, 2002:255)

My ethnographic research has attended to the stories which student research participants have told. Those stories encompass their backgrounds and life histories, their ideas about employability, their thoughts about future careers, their identities as students, as workers, and as members of a range of communities of practice. Their narratives draw on their experience in context and carry traces of myriads of influences, their dispositions, their habitus and capitals, and reflect their developing and multiple identities, their sense of who they are, and also who they are not.

It is important to reflect with precision on the theoretical ideas about identity and narrative identity which I will use in my analysis. This study understands identity as a social and collective process and not, as Western traditions tend to invoke it, as a unique and individual possession (Lawler, 2014). Identity is both experienced as roles and categories - such as class, gender, and race - and personally as a reflexive sense of who we are (Lawler, 2014). These differing outward and inner senses of oneself 'are not identical but nevertheless exist in a relationship....a highly complex one' (*ibid.*:2014:2). Western ideas of identity rely on two ways of understanding, a combination of sameness and difference (Jackson, 2002). We share common identities, as human beings, men, women, our ethnicity, class (and so on) but we also have a sense of our own uniqueness as individuals: thus, 'one's humanity is simultaneously shared and singular' (*ibid.*:142). Lawler's highly influential work on identity draws on the work of Mead (1934), Elias (1994), and Goffman (1967, 1990 [1959]), all of whom attempt to understand identity as a process rather than something innate or owned, to argue that identity is 'an active, processual engagement with the social world' (Lawler 2014:10). It is this approach I adopt in my work.

People are bound together in complex networks of interdependencies (Elias, 1994). This is a key idea which Lawler (2014) argues the Western notion of identity does not sufficiently recognise, because it places identity outside the social world. Lawler challenges this tendency, drawing on Elias's work, and argues that 'selfhood and identity are produced through social relations' which people use as resources for understanding themselves (Lawler, 2014:17). In seeking to understand the formation of identity in the context of my research, I argue that it is important to take into account Lawler's (2014) insight that identity is socially produced and socially embedded. This social production of identities is achieved through 'narratives, kin networks, unconscious processes, governance, interpellation, performance, politics' (Lawler, 2014:180) and all identities are of a deeply social character. They are negotiated and constructed in social settings, including family, education, and workplaces (Taylor, 2007; Holmes, 2013a, 2013b; Lawler, 2014). They are not 'done' in isolation and are not fixed, but are social and relational (Lawler, 2014) and need to be validated:

> "Our identifications also require validation by others. It is not enough to assert an identity, as we cannot see ourselves without also seeing how others see us; interpretations, readings and understandings are negotiated in social encounters."
>
> (Taylor, 2007:8)

Thus, doing identity, as Goffman (1967, 1990 [1959]) argues, is bound up with performing ourselves because identity is not achieved in isolation; it is not owned, innate, or fixed. It is done as we perform our various roles convincingly, for example in the workplace or our family roles, and are validated by others. Thus, 'social identities and indeed social reality is made through performance' (Lawler, 2014:122). However the roles we perform are not acted or masks, they are the presentation of ourselves as persons in interaction (Jenkins, 2014:18).

In terms of employability, I am arguing that we present ourselves in a variety of settings, such as the social worlds of workplaces. They form the context for performing our roles, our interactions, and active engagement in practice. Our participation in social worlds such as a family, school, university, society, or workplace is part of our identity and within those communities:

> 'The work of identity is always ongoing, involving constant renegotiation throughout life. Identity is a trajectory, involving continuous motion, bringing coherence to connect past, present and future.'
>
> (Wenger, 1998:153)

We learn within those communities and this becomes part of our identity:

> "….because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information but a process of becoming….we accumulate skills and information, not as abstract ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity. It is in that formation of an identity that learning can become a source of meaningfulness and of personal and social energy."
>
> (Wenger, 1998:215)

Lawler argues powerfully that identities are made through narratives, which are the means through which people make sense of, understand and live their lives, producing their identities through autobiography (Lawler, 2014). Narrative identity is created and reworked

through the stories and narratives which we are constantly developing, as a way of understanding our identities. This does not imply that we are fabricating our identities but suggests that we are creatively producing them by drawing on experiences, memories, episodes, and interpretations. Thus we are 'making a story out of a life' (Lawler 2014:23) in order to make sense of that life and to create coherence. Polkinghorne's work on narrative identity identifies that:

> "We achieve our personal identities and self concept through the use of narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story….self identity becomes linked to a person's life story, which connects up the actions into an integrating plot."
> (Polkinghorne, 1988:150)

Polkinghorne (*ibid.*) draws on the work of Roland Barthes (1966) who argued that narratives have been central in human life throughout history, both at an individual level and culturally. People seek to construe meaning, find cohesion, and place their own lives within shared societal beliefs and values. Lawler (2014), for her part, emphasises the need for the key elements identified by Ricoeur (1980): a narrative needs to have characters, action, including movement through time, and plot, which brings events into a meaningful whole. Ricoeur (*ibid.*:183) argues that when constructing narratives we read time backwards, 'reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end', creating a coherence which brings the events of the narrative to 'natural' conclusions. In narrative identity, these same key elements need to be in place; we create a unity for our identity and make sense of the social world we inhabit and our relationships within it, including our workplace identity. This aligns with Bourdieu's ideas about social fit, our understanding of the norms and expectations of the social space we move through and the identity work involved. This is observable in the identity work of the working-class students at an elite university, whom Diane Reay (Reay *et al.*, 2009) identified were able to move through different identity positionings to fit their differing social contexts, the communities of practice of their academic learning, and of their home environment.

We revise the plot as our lives develop, creating a historical unity of events using the cultural resources and shared cultural understandings which are available to us from our backgrounds and social milieu. Thus, 'the self is narrative in process' (Polkinghorne

1988:154) and is creative work. However, this must not be fictional; it must relate to lived experience, not be invented, so it can be validated by others (*ibid.*, 1988; Jenkins, 2014; Lawler, 2014). Narrative identity recognises that people are not 'atomised individuals' but exist in complex networks (Lawler, 2014):

> "Identity is configured over time and through narrative….it is profoundly social and is continuously interpreted and reinterpreted as people interact with each other in a web of social relations."
>
> (Lawler, 2014:30)

Identity is described by Lawler, drawing on Ricoeur's work, as a spiral of interpretation and reinterpretation which is dynamic, linking past and present, and including processes of identification, such as class (Ricoeur, 1980; Lawler, 2014). Although class has been portrayed in dominant discourses as largely irrelevant in contemporary society, research shows it remains deeply embedded in everyday social life and institutional processes, affecting individuals, their choices, and life chances (Skeggs 2004b; Reay 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015). In analysing and interpreting the data from my study, social class is evident in the stories and lived experience of some of the student research participants. For example in the cultural resources they draw upon or do not have access to and in the difficult negotiation of identity where their academic success has made them feel different from their friends and family.

Government policy adopts a discourse of meritocracy about enhanced employability, social mobility, and student choice, associated with the expansion of higher education (DfBIS, 2016). Yet, recent work by Savage *et al.* (2015:3) has shown that 'inequality is remaking class today'. Their research has also shown that, despite massively increased participation in higher education, the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged has narrowed very little. Thus 'different universities provide different pathways into the class structure' (*ibid.*:245) in terms of the hierarchy of institutions, by attracting students from different social groups in which habitus, capitals, and identity play a part. Bourdieu argued that the dominant groups were better placed through their 'practical mastery' of the social field, which would enable them to navigate the best trajectories and better understand *'the field of the possibles'*, thus ensuring the reproduction of existing advantage continued (Bourdieu, 1984:110 emphasis in original; see also Lane, 2000). For example, the cultural resources for self-making and the techniques for self-production can be seen as class processes (Skeggs,

2004c). Experiences such as cultural education, going to galleries, music, and ballet lessons, are not only morally 'good' but later in life become cultural capital for employability and social networking (Skeggs, 2004c). Some identities are more valued than others and broader social categories, such as class, are configured into identities; whilst we might see ourselves as individuals, we associate with those with whom we identify (Jenkins, 2014). Along with inequality of access to opportunities to gain cultural and social capital, some possibilities might not be in people's fields of vision as a result of their identifications and backgrounds, making identity an unequal resource (Skeggs, 2004c).

Despite the powerful contemporary neoliberal policy rhetoric of choice and autonomy, we cannot simply choose whatever we want to be, we are embedded in the social world and produced by it (Lawler, 2014:181). In contrast to public policy depictions:

> "The idea that we can be whatever we want to be relies on an illusory eclipsing of the social world….the social world both produces and constrains us as persons."
>
> (Lawler, 2014:181)

Thus we are both products and producers of the social worlds and, as Bourdieu has suggested, contribute ourselves to determining what determines us, although, as Lawler argues, this does not mean we are 'cultural dupes' (Lawler, 2014:182). Instead, people are:

> "engaged social actors doing (rather than having) identities through time and space, within social constraints. The idea of identity suggests a coherence that covers over the cracks and fissures of our lives and our personhoods, obscuring the multiplicity of identities we must do in and through our lives."
>
> (Lawler, 2014:182)

The self and identity are multiple, continuously developing and are 'done' within social networks rather than being owned and perfected (Jenkins, 2014; Lawler, 2014:186). Identity can only be understood as a process of being or becoming, it is never a final or settled matter; it is not essentialist, fixed, or immutable (Jenkins, 2014).

These theoretical insights – understanding identity as a process, which is embedded in social relations and which is being narratively made and re-made over time - have informed my analysis of the data. Identities continue to be developed during higher education. I have

found that sense of self and identity have influenced the choices and career decision-making of my student research participants and that narratives are significant in these processes. After graduation, identities continue to be developed within workplaces, within which employability is established through situated practice and the application of skills in context. In the following section, I will discuss the concept of communities of practice, which has helped me to consider the contextual social worlds of organisations and workplaces.

Communities of Practice

In Chapter 2, I discussed the importance of individuals being able to understand and articulate their capabilities in order to evidence their employability. However, I also identified that there is a perception gap; students of English Studies can have difficulty understanding how the skills they have developed through their disciplinary studies relate to the workplace. I am arguing in this thesis that it is the application of skills in context which enables the student or graduate to come to an understanding of their employability through situated practice. This provides the narrative resources they need to evidence their employability. Context is important because, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, the application of skills is highly contextualised within workplaces (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Bridgstock, 2016). Every individual workplace is a social world, with cultures and sub-cultures within which action, interaction, learning, and enskillment are occurring and in which workplace identities are being developed (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Each organisational or workplace social world has its own practices, stories, tacit knowledge, forms of learning, narratives, and ways of articulating what is significant and valued. To gain understanding of these workplace social worlds, I have found sociological ideas about communities of practice illuminating (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The concept of participation in a community of practice enables an understanding that there can be a number of ways of learning (as opposed to the dichotomy of formal or informal learning). Thus 'learning is not so much acquiring particular skills as it is increasing participation in a community of practitioners' and knowing about the attitudes, stories, practices, which are part of being a member of that community (Pelissier, 1991:90). As Pelissier (*ibid.*:88) suggests, within such communities, skills, norms, and roles, are 'learned in the doing', through situated learning, interaction, and practice in a social context (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Sennett, 2008). Learning is itself a social practice and it is

through participation in learning that identities are developed, through engagement in everyday activity and lived experience (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is aligned with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, which enables a break with the dualisms which reduce people to 'their minds, mental processes to instrumental rationalism, and learning to the acquisition of knowledge' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:50). Instead, theorising in terms of practice requires a focus on the nature of motivation, social and cultural relations, and the ways in which human agency and social structures interact, hence 'emphasising the integration in practice of agent, world and activity' (*ibid.*, 1991:50). Our identities are bound up with, are continuously developed by and negotiated through the communities of practice in which we participate (Wenger, 1998). Within those communities of practice, narratives and stories are significant, helping us place ourselves in the social world, work out our relations with each other, and enabling us to gain 'a lived sense of who we are' (*ibid.*:192).

Communities of practice involve mutual engagement in pursuit of a purpose, but this does not imply 'homogeneity, co-presence or well-defined, clearly visible boundaries' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:98). Instead, communities of practice involve participation in activity, shared understandings, and the existence of diverse and unique identities (*ibid.*; Wenger, 1998). People come together in communities of practice not because they are the same but because they are interested in engaging in a practice, or are taking up work which involves mutual engagement in practices which pursue a purpose and provide a way of making meaning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Thus, English Studies has been described by Ben Knights as a community of practice (Knights, 2005). In the context of my research, although there is an overarching mutual understanding about being part of the discipline of English Studies, a separate subject area (such as Linguistics) can, as academic staff member Jacob outlined to me, see itself as a science which has different yet equally valid epistemological and ontological approaches to other parts of the discipline.

Communities of practice have shared repertoires of resources and shared understandings of practices, which provide shared reference points (Wenger, 1998). When joining a new community of practice, we experience discontinuity because we do not yet share those reference points; we need to confront the unfamiliar and start to negotiate our identity within the community. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, some research participants, like student Rosie, experienced differences in relation to fellow members when joining the University

community. Rosie reflected on the relative positions of those she came into contact with at Northern University and in the School in terms of background, education, networks, capitals, and past experiences. When taking up employment, there will be further disjunctures, new shared repertoires and reference points to be learned, and identities to be negotiated, as people transition into their workplace community of practice. This can be compared to Bourdieu's view that the habitus may experience dissonance when encountering an unfamiliar field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990a, 1990b, 2005a; Reay 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2009). This dissonance can create changes in dispositions, developing new practices, thus enabling people to gain new perspectives and to understand different possibilities (Bourdieu, 2005a).

As a community of practice, English Studies has its own repertoires, practices, and discourses which are learned and validated in the social context of the discipline and the School. The skills and practices which come from the study of English can be applied in a wide range of careers and settings. However previous research (Martin and Gawthrope, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011) and my own data shows that many students struggle with the translation into terms which would resonate with employers. When asked about their skills, many students drew on the repertoire of skills and practices which are valued within the School and which they are being validated against as students of English. This might include an understanding of what it means, for example, to practice literary criticism, develop argument, analyse language, apply linguistic theory, understand language acquisition, or create new writing.

As I will discuss in Chapter 7, in 2015 the School of English Staff Student Committee (SSC) carried out a student-led research project about employability with the School student body. This project resulted in responses which were more closely related to these skills and practices, such as concise essay writing and close analysis of text. Student research participants in my study mentioned skills, such as communication, group work, independent working, analysis, time management, and personal organisation, but the contextualisation was often in relation to the writing of a dissertation or essays. These are skills which are well understood within the community of practice of a School of English, but are not so easily relatable to the workplace. Yet, I observed that where students have work experience or practical experience - through the curriculum, through a project, or volunteering, or after taking up a job after graduation - they do have experience in the social context of a workplace and community of practice. This provides students with experience of

participation, which enables them to understand and articulate their skills and capabilities, including those skills developed by their discipline, in context. In Chapter 7, I will discuss student research participants' experiences, during projects and modules, which involve 'learning by doing' (Sennett, 2008:96; see also Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988). Examples of this included opportunities to relate to and work with other people in different settings, including refugees, children, or people working on placement in creative organisations. This provides the participants with narrative resources and provides examples of how their skills are being applied in practice. I will draw on further theory in my data chapters, where I consider pedagogical research which underpins the value of experiential, active learning and meta-cognition, the 'joining-up' of learning and experience through reflection. I argue this is significant for understanding and articulating employability.

My thesis provides evidence of the significance of these narrative resources and the need to support students to develop them. I am arguing that workplace identities are developed through interaction in a social context and that this will be ongoing. This is not a project which will be completed, but one which will continue over time and potentially in different workplace contexts and communities of practice, as individuals change roles and jobs. Students who have been part of the English Studies community of practice transition into the communities of practice of their workplaces within their contextual fields. Here they apply the skills and capabilities they have developed and will experience the processes of integration, learning, language, and narrative formation. This is key to being validated as a participant in their workplace social world. Understanding, owning, and articulating those skills in narratives is very significant in understanding employability and in demonstrating potential as an employable graduate in a Curriculum Vitae, job applications, and in progressing within workplaces. Yet, as my research also shows, for many students there is a perception gap about the nature and value of the skills from English Studies as a discipline in employability terms. I have aimed to deepen understanding of this and to identify further research needs.

Chapter conclusions

I began this chapter by introducing Catriona, who was able to reflect on the way she had made choices, based on expectations of what was appropriate for her, by choosing a discipline which could lead to employment but which she did not enjoy. However, her

habitus evolved through her engagement in the unfamiliar field of higher education and, as she gained a sense of 'the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b: 99), learning the practices and possibilities within it. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, she was able to see that different choices were possible and that following her own sense of self and interests was important to her. Ultimately, Catriona's interest and engagement with her discipline and university life led her to an understanding of the career path she wished to follow and of her employability within that field. As I will show, her sense of identity, her values and beliefs, the narration of her past and present experiences set in their social contexts and her imagined futures were to be highly significant, both in her eventual choice of profession and her confidence in her employability. Catriona's story and the stories of the students which I discuss in subsequent chapters, are illustrative of identity and employability being processes and social relations which are narratively made.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I will use the theoretical ideas which I have introduced in this chapter to interpret the rich and detailed data which I have gathered, to come to a deeper and more contextualised understanding of employability. I will use them to explore the key themes which have emerged from my research. Bourdieu sought to bring what he called a *metanoia,* (a 'new gaze') to the topics he studied (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:251). My aim is to achieve a new gaze for employability, by drawing on the day to day experience which has been generously shared with me. It is clear that a higher education does have the potential to enhance students' prospects socially and economically. However, despite the prevailing government policy discourse of freedom of choice, social mobility and graduate outcomes in the shape of better jobs and incomes, the issues of social reproduction and perpetuation of social inequality pose questions about the underlying structures and constraints on agency (English and Bolton, 2016). The lens of Bourdieu's conceptual ideas helps to bring this into focus, revealing the inequalities and reproduction which are present in the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; English and Bolton, 2016). However, as my data evidences, higher education can also open up '*the field of the possibles'* (Bourdieu, 1984:110 emphasis in original), creating social and cultural capital which does not exist in students' own backgrounds.

As my data will demonstrate, some students are enabled to have transformational experiences and understand their potential employability in fields they had previously been

unaware of, thus supporting their agency in considering careers. Unearthing the deeply embedded issues which can create inequalities may provide knowledge from which to create change and to better support individuals in enhancing their life chances, including their employability and career prospects (English and Bolton, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Theoretical ideas relating to identity, narrative identity, situated practice and learning in the social worlds and communities of practice of workplaces are helpful in deepening analysis and understanding of students' and graduates' choices, transitions, and sense of their employability. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the Ethnographic Setting and the methodology I have used to conduct this research project.

Chapter 4. The ethnographic setting

Introduction

The hallway of the School was buzzing with activity, as an impressive feast was assembled by a team of volunteers. Academic staff member Lena had been driving around the city picking up contributions of food from colleagues. Students and staff were carrying in boxes and plates. I was helping to set out a wide variety of food: vegan, vegetarian, salads, meats, pork pies, quiches, chicken, cheeses, breads, fruit and desserts. The bar had been set up in the foyer near the main doors, so that people would be able to pick up a glass of wine or a soft drink and wander outside, to enjoy the glorious evening sunshine. The School is in the heart of the oldest part of Northern University, with lawns and colourful flower beds creating a lovely setting for the speeches which would be given later in the evening. The occasion was the annual School play - an endeavour involving staff and students - which provided a focus of enthusiasm and a burst of energy at the end of the academic year. This year also marked the retirement of the play's director, Paul, after many years working as a member of academic staff with the School so it was particularly notable. One of the volunteers stayed to 'guard' the food. Support staff members Alison, Ellen and I walked over to the nearby theatre where the play was being performed. Tudor music and fanfares played by a period music group rang melodiously around the auditorium as the large audience assembled to be entertained. We enjoyed an engaging and amusing performance before slipping out near the end to go back to the School and make the final preparations for serving the food.

People started arriving and chatting in the foyer and outside the main doors, staff members, guests who had taught in the school in the past, students from all stages of study and some of their families, excitedly engaged in many conversations. Matthew, Head of School, called us out into the sunshine and then paid a very touching tribute to Paul, for his long and much valued contribution to the life of the school. Matthew also spoke specifically about the play itself, which Paul had directed for many years, as being part of the ethos of the school. The play always brought people from across the whole school together and Paul had been part of mobilising that spirit of community, because he was someone who was 'good at helping people be good at what they do'. This theme of caring and supporting others was something which I noted many times during my fieldwork and which, ultimately, I have related back to the traditions and philosophy of the discipline in my interpretation and analysis. There was

the giving of retirement gifts and much warm applause. In his response Paul shared engaging memories of his time with the School, and thanked all those who had made the play and the social occasion afterwards happen. A song was sung and a dance was danced, again to warm applause, before everyone went in to enjoy the feast awaiting them.

This was a very vibrant occasion when the ethos and sense of community of the School, its warmth and humanity, felt very present. As an ethnographer I felt 'there' in the fabric of that community, accepted, knowing people, chatting with them. Some of my research participants had acted in the play, others were helping, or had been in the audience. In our conversations they shared their happiness in being part of this moment as well as their feelings about the end of term and, for some of them, the end of their university studies and their graduations. This very happy event and its warm atmosphere was taking place in a space normally empty apart from the occasional open days for prospective students and their parents. Those open days, when the School's public spaces bustled with significant numbers of people, were another aspect of School life which revealed what an academic staff member had described to me as the 'soul of the School'. In the early days of my fieldwork, I had noticed that the foyer and hall were often deserted and quiet, which brought questions to mind about how the 'lone scholars' of English Studies were connecting with each other. However, over the time I was in the field, the space was transformed into a student-led café with tables for working and socialising, with groups of students clustering around them.

My fieldwork revealed that the school was often experienced as a very welcoming and supportive place, by both students and staff. The school plays and the interactions in the social spaces of the building provided an expression of this supportive community, which I was able to experience and record over time through observation and participation in the life, and with the people, of the School. Ethnography has been a highly appropriate way of engaging with the complex processes of employability, as contextualised in this particular site. It has enabled me to gain insights into the links between employability, identity, and everyday experience 'from the perspectives of the people living it' (Degnen, 2012:3) and, through participation and observation, to 'see' the structures and influences which are shaping people's lives (Madden, 2010:172). Ethnographic engagement in the field can challenge and change preconceived ideas and bring up new questions (Madden, 2010;

Okley, 2012) and indeed, my own research questions developed and deepened over time. In the following section I will discuss ethnography as a research method. I will then provide detail of the ethnographic setting within which this research occurred, which in turn provides the background for the data Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Ethnography as unfolding narratives: methodology and ethical considerations

Anthropologist Sharon Macdonald (2002) describes an ethnography as a story of a particular time and place which speaks of and to broader concerns. The ethnographic account in this thesis draws on the testimonies and perceptions of individual students and staff; the formal presentations which are made to the outside world; the day to day encounters, meetings and lives of individuals and communities, their rhythms and transitions, their stories and silences, as they have lived through a time of considerable change. This story of a particular time and place is set in the wider context of far-reaching changes - which have been wrought in Higher Education by shifts in government policy and their reverberations - and aims to speak of, and to, broader concerns within the sector and wider British society. Employability has become a very visible concern for multiple stakeholders. As I have outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, I have sought to move away from employability as a set of abstract ideas to gain understanding of how it is experienced by individual students and graduates. Social life is produced by continuous actions in a long term process (Elias *et al.*, 1997). Therefore, it has been important to observe, participate and listen to my research participants as they have narrated their social interactions in context and over time, to me and to themselves. Ethnography involves engagement with these complex social processes to 'bring multiple threads of meaning-making together' (Degnen, 2012:23) to gain a deeper understanding of the social phenomena under scrutiny. The setting for my fieldwork has been the School of English and it, too, is complex and multivalent.

The ethnographic setting is shifting and negotiated and as an ethnographer I have needed to recognise that, as Wallman (1997) argues, context is always in process and culture is changing through time. I have looked for glimpses of meaningful categories and patterns at work in those shifting spaces (Ardener, 1982 *cited in* Macdonald, 1997; Macdonald, 1997) and have tried to represent the complexity of the setting, the diversity of people within it, and the context. My account can only be partial but I have sought to 'tell the story right'. It is important to be reflexive about my own position, especially since I have been working close

to home rather than in a culturally distant setting, which might have brought culturally specific events and their context dependency into greater relief (Strathern, 1987; Macdonald 1997). I began writing about the ethnographic setting after more than four years of observing, participating, and engaging with the School and the people within it. I have learned that, as Macdonald (1997) suggests, ethnographers need to develop an awareness of their own humanity as meaning-makers, apply care and thoughtfulness about the order of text, the emphases, and avoid producing particularized meanings which can lead to a lack of balance and over-simplification.

The years of my fieldwork, from 2011 to 2016, have been a highly political time in the higher education sector: texts are also political and can be 'an event capable of affecting the status and careers of individuals' (*ibid.*:1997) as well as organisations. Indeed, reflexivity and ethical responsibilities are embedded in ethnographic methodology because it is based on close human contacts, reciprocity, and gaining trust (Madden, 2010). I have been committed to the 'ethically-led representation of research participants' (Zanchetta et al., 2012: 611). Having been allowed to share in people's everyday lives as a researcher, I have a duty of care, a responsibility to 'do right', when representing people and their lives (Degnen, 2012:140). I have taken this very seriously. Given that reality is multiple and socially constructed (Rapport, 1997), with 'plural and limitless subjects not singular and limited objects' (Macdonald, 2002), it is important to include the multiple voices of those whom I am representing. This includes staff and students, but also recognizes that social reality is complex and many layered; culture is 'multi-vocal' (Rapport, 1997).

In this thesis I write about the very untidiness of ordinary life in its context (Wallman, 1997) and have reflected on the way people negotiate those messy realities, the various pressures and demands which they experience. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that the ways in which people represent themselves and their 'world views' and what they do in the face of everyday contingencies are not always in harmony and can be at odds (James *et al.*, 1997). As an ethnographer, I have been trying reflexively to notice and record such moments as they play out in the ethnographic setting against the wider field of government policy and changes in higher education (Wright, 2015). The untidiness of life means that different perspectives coexist – there is strength of feeling and ambivalence, there are contradictions and dilemmas, clashing of systems and finding the ways to live with incongruent ideas, such

as higher education as a business and education as a product. There are differing languages in use, some of which respond to institutional and governmental expectations publicly, and other more congruent ways of speaking at a School and individual level.

I have aimed to get beyond the government policy and institutional rhetoric of employability to understand lived realities and worlds of meaning, by entering the flux and flow of the life of the School at a particular and significant moment in history. My project began in 2011 when I met with potential gatekeepers, discussed the research with them, and began the process of negotiating access. I began my fieldwork during 2011 and left the field in 2016. However, I have continued to meet with and correspond with some of my research participants since that time. During my fieldwork I observed and participated in a range of activities, including lectures and seminars; open days for prospective students and their parents; helping with the catering at the annual school plays; attending staff meetings and Staff Student committee meetings; student coffee mornings; student inductions at each stage of study; careers and employability events; studying the School calendar; reading the notice-boards; and other ways of just 'being there'. I kept field diaries in which I recorded my experiences and observations, writing handwritten notes during and immediately after those experiences (Okely, 2008; Madden, 2010). In addition to keeping field diaries, I extended my chances to get to know people - and deepened the data I was gathering - by using semi-structured interviews. Early in my fieldwork, I held two focus groups with students but made the decision that one-to-one interviews were a more appropriate way of developing trusting and sensitive relationships (Okely, 2012). Interviews as part of ethnography are helpful in revealing the emotional dimensions of social experience and experiences of identity (Lamont and Swidler, 2014). The combination of observation and interviewing has been used to create a richer, more complete, and complex account of social life and worlds (Gersen and Horowitz, 2002) through time.

I carried out interviews with individual students to gain insights into their developing perspectives on employability during their degrees. I had obtained ethical clearance from the University to carry out research with students, staff and graduates, including the creation of graduate case studies. An aim of the research was to explore employability from English and the value of English as a preparation for careers. This would involve interviews after graduation. In my discussions with students and graduates I outlined the aims and

value of the research. Many research participants were happy to become case studies and be interviewed after they had graduated. I was careful to explain that this would involve me asking them questions about their lives, careers, motivations and future plans. From an ethical perspective, I made research participants aware that they could withdraw from the research at any point. Research participants were given a participant information sheet and an informed consent form; these were explained and discussed with the participants before the consent forms were signed (*see* Appendix E). The interviews, the two focus groups, the ongoing interviews and email correspondence with graduates were covered by informed consent. The body of data which I gathered has enabled me to create the detailed individual case studies which I have drawn on in my data chapters. Where I have quoted directly from a named speaker whom I have observed at events such as open days, the speaker has had sight of the text and quotations and has agreed to their inclusion. In all, I carried out 126 interviews (students and graduates 84; academic staff 32; careers and professional services staff 8; national higher education organisation staff 2). The vast majority of interviews were recorded and transcribed, but in a few cases circumstances did not permit recording. In those cases I wrote detailed notes. Whilst some of the research participants were happy to be identified I made the decision to anonymise everyone who participated. Therefore I have used pseudonyms for names and places, and have changed some details to disguise identities. In some cases I have attributed quotes to more than one person and have withheld identifiable details, to avoid leaving 'easy traces' (Okely, 2008:70).

I have been able to establish trust with my research participants which led to ongoing relationships, some of them lasting for more than five years, during which people continued to share their experiences with me. Each research participant I have worked with is a socially distinct person, yet is embedded in webs of social relationships. They have shared a multiplicity of deeper and more nuanced stories that have given insights into their perceptions of, attitudes towards and experiences of employability. Initially it took time to recruit research participants from the student body, through attending inductions and events, shout-outs in lectures, emails, posters, and speaking to students I met in the School. At the beginning, few people got involved and employability did not seem to be a topic of interest. As I was to discover, careers events held within the School did not attract many people and take-up of central careers services was low. If, as government policy would suggest, people are instrumentally motivated and see higher education as a means to

becoming employable, then this in itself was data which suggested a disjoint. However, as the fieldwork progressed, I met and got to know 25 students who were willing to participate. Whilst I recognise that my research participants have self-selected, they came from differing family and educational backgrounds, different parts of the discipline, and went on to a range of career trajectories. They represent a good range of differing perspectives and experiences.

More recently, I asked some of the research participants whom I first met as under-graduates why it was that they decided to engage with this project. I wanted to try and understand what motivated them to speak with me, be interviewed and to stay in touch. Some of their responses are discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter. I have met with many members of staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, alumni, and professional support staff. All in all, this has enabled me to listen to a variety of voices and perspectives on employability which coexist within the School and the University. This in turn has informed the rich description of the ethnographic setting which I present in this chapter. However the main focus of the research (which is analysed and interpreted in data Chapters 5, 6 and 7) has been on staff, undergraduates, and recent graduates.

Researcher positionality and biography

The need for reflexivity in ethnographic work, and an awareness of autobiography in the analysis of fieldwork and writing about research, has become well accepted (Okely and Callaway, 1992; Okely, 2008; Madden, 2010). Indeed, the researcher's positionality and personal history can be a resource which can have implications for access, relationships, and trust (Okely, 2012). As part of the reflexivity which is crucial to ethnography, I have considered elements of my own biography. My age, experience, past career, and current work have all affected my frames of reference as well as my ability to relate to people within the social world of the School (Okely and Callaway, 1992; Okely 2012). I initially approached the research project from a point of some confidence about what employability meant, having been an employer for 34 years and having been involved regionally and nationally in what was known in policy and practice as the 'Skills Agenda'. Over time, I have come to see that my confidence was mistaken and came from being immersed in a particular paradigm which I have reflexively stepped away from during the research project. My research experiences have led to me now being able to place ideas about employability in a much

broader social and cultural context and to see employability more holistically as a social process, affected by many influences. I have needed to be reflexive and escape my preconceptions, by acknowledging them and approaching my empirical research with openness. This has been a life-changing academic journey and learning experience and has fundamentally changed my perspective on my research topic. I have needed to acknowledge the need for what O'Reilly calls 'the reflexive turn' by recognising that 'ethnographies are constructed by human beings who make choices about what to research, interpret what they see and hear, decide what to write and how, and that they do all this in the context of their own personal biographies' (O'Reilly, 2012:213). Ethnographers are embedded in their own social and cultural worlds and their work or disciplinary domains (Hammersley, 1998; Seale, 1999; Spencer, 2001).

I was the first in my family to have a higher education at a time when only 5% of young people attended university. My parents came from working-class backgrounds. My mother left school at 14 and felt hugely disenfranchised by her family not sending her to grammar school because they could not afford the uniform. My father attended grammar school, leaving at 16 to become an apprentice and then joining the RAF; he attended night school to achieve an HND and progressed as an engineer, subsequently gaining a senior professional management role. My family saw themselves as socially mobile and middle-class. I attended a girl's grammar school (prior to the introduction of the comprehensive system) and was one of a very small number of students who applied to university. The majority of my peers attended teacher-training college or went into employment. My parents wanted me to study economics or a business discipline, although initially I was interested in studying art. I resisted their more vocationally-focused influence and applied to study English Language and Literature. English was my best subject in terms of A level results and I loved studying it. My parents wanted me to gain a degree partly to redress their own lack of opportunity, which in my mother's case was deeply felt. I had a very good experience studying English and went on to take a master's degree. I felt that my learning from the discipline and the skilful practices which I had learned to apply were extremely valuable during my subsequent business career. Reflecting on the research process, my own story has not intruded and I have aimed through reflexivity to transcend it (Okely, 2012). However there were times when it gave me an empathy and appreciation for the people I came to know (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002; Okely, 2008).

My biography helped me navigate the social world of the ethnographic setting and win the trust of the staff. As Degnen (2012) argues, when navigating social relations, having something which is shared can be significant. This may relate to experience, place, the past and emotion. My love of the discipline, my desire to 'defend' it in the face of perceived policy onslaughts, helped staff to see me as a supporter and to open up when to talking to me. Following a long career in business, I had started working at a university as an enterprise educator in 2010, teaching for the Careers Service, Business School and ultimately the School of Music. I have since been immersed in the social worlds of university work and in developing my own academic credentials. This has, in some ways, mirrored the people who have so generously worked with me and shared their perceptions. I have been an early career academic, precariously employed on a fractional contract. I have been seeking to validate my employability, gaining teaching qualifications, and balancing the many demands of working within a sector in which (despite the pressures, workload models, casualisation of employment and evaluation-by-metrics) the individual people I have met are motivated by work they see as meaningful; they show great commitment to their discipline and to their students. I have been a part-time PhD student, learning in fields that were completely new to me, experiencing the need to fit in and learn the ropes, to become a member of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). The challenges associated with that process have been linked to developing my employability; the credentials and experience which provide validation of being employable in my chosen field.

My ethnographic work has involved immersion in the social worlds of universities and the School; I have been both participating and observing as someone employed by a university and as a student. Though I am not a sociologist or anthropologist by discipline, I have learned the value of taking an approach informed by sociology and anthropology; one which seeks to unpack and contest assumptions and representations through deeper critical analysis, looking beneath the surface to see what is going on, to engage with the messiness and non-linearity of everyday life, and to try and make sense of it all.

Entering the field

In retrospect, when I began the research I was somewhat naïve about the political dimensions of employability, although this began to emerge in the initial PhD mapping session held with some staff members using KETSO, a means of gathering, sharing and

recording people's views working as a group (KETSO, 2019). The session provided glimpses and insights into perceptions about employability. The University was seen by a long-term staff member as 'a federal system, with employability driven top down' (field diary, 6.10.2011). Employability was viewed by a member of academic staff as an alien language which was 'quite foreign to most people.' There was recognition of an understandable reluctance on the part of staff to prioritize skill-development and employability, due to their heavy workloads and their focus on content and teaching. An Alumni Advisory Board had been set up in June 2011; this was seen as a source of future support for the School and its approach to employability, with potential for collaboration between the School, Advisory Board, and the Careers Service. Greater connectivity between subject content and employability, embedding 'careers thinking' in modules, and asking employers and alumni for input, were put forward as ideas and as questions. However, it was also suggested that there should be debate around how far post-university activity should determine university curricula; a question which has been an ongoing and highly controversial issue within the Academy since the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997).

An academic staff member suggested there should be more debate or study of the social value and purpose of what is studied in university English, rather than the translation into economic value implied in employability. This reflected wider concerns about the impact of a focus on employability and preparing students for their careers during higher education. This raised questions about the role and purpose of universities and the expectations placed on schools and staff, which I would come to appreciate through my research. Indeed, this broadening of thinking in respect of employability, to consider social and cultural value - rather than simply value as economic exchange - and to reflect on the social value of English throughout its history was to become fundamental to this research project and to my developing thesis.

In 2011, the previous Head of School's aims for the School's approach to employability had been expressed in an email sent by a member of the Alumni Relations Office staff to potential Advisory Board Members:

> "The Head of School is very keen to do what she can to ensure that the School is providing the most valuable student experience possible. With the increasing focus on employability, *we are keen to ensure that programmes within the School of English give students the opportunity to develop transferable skills for the workplace without compromising the School's core academic values.* Our aim now is to get as much help as we can from graduates who have been successful in the move from student to professional so that we can ensure that students in the School of English are offered a truly well-rounded experience." [emphasis mine]
>
> (personal communication, 16.02.2011)

This articulates clearly that, at that moment in time, employability was being conceptualised as skills for the workplace which would enhance students' experience and help their transition into the world of work, but without compromise on the academic values of the School and the discipline. This recognises that employability is increasingly being fore-grounded in higher education, but that this is to be integrated with the School's existing work.

To begin my wider engagement with and entry to the field, I emailed staff members to provide information about my PhD project and ask them if they would be willing to speak with me about their views on employability. My growing understanding of the political dimensions and controversial nature of employability led me to place the word in inverted commas: 'What does the term 'employability' mean to staff and students?' (field diary, 5.3.2012). A few people responded, conversations and interviews took place in the subsequent weeks, and I started to establish relationships beyond the leadership of the School.

Coding the data and identifying themes

During the time that I was collecting data within the social world of the School, I used a range of sources and methods, from field diaries to found evidence and interviews. I read through and reflected on this data at regular intervals to start thinking about whether there were any emerging themes or any gaps and silences. Once I left the field, I coded the data fully to identify themes by reading all notes and interview transcripts on multiple occasions and listening to recordings. The range of data which I engaged with during the process of coding and analysis were thirteen A5 field diaries, the interview recordings and transcripts and email correspondence with research participants. I found that day-to-day experience

produced rich data and that 'the conversational detail, narrative accounts and fine threads of meaning which play out at the level of everyday life, the banal, the revelatory and what is in between' was a crucial way of gaining insight and understanding (Degnen, 2012:14).
I coded the data manually, rather than using computer software, in order to engage closely with it, by using post-it notes, indexed notebooks and a thematic grid to make a thematic analysis. This was a time-consuming but valuable immersion in the data, involving a process of looking for 'relationships and patterns (and non-relationships and patterns)' (Madden, 2010:144). A number of key themes emerged. A summary of the main themes and insights which emerged from the coding of the data is included in Appendix D.

Analysis and reflection on these main themes, the patterns and relationships which I traced, led to the identification of the three thematic foci of the data chapters. The data chapters explore the ways in which perceptions and experiences of the concept of employability and motivations towards careers develop over time. Firstly, I explore how students make their choice of discipline and university - a complex range of motivations and influences on these decisions emerged from the data, in contrast to government policy assumptions. Secondly as students engage with their higher education and their university experiences, how do their ideas about employability and their thinking about future career trajectories develop? Motivations towards careers emerged from a complex range of experiences and influences, again in contrast to more simplistic government policy assumptions. A perception gap was identified by both staff members and from students' own testimonies, between the range of skills and capabilities developed by studying English and students' perceptions of what the non-vocational discipline of English enabled them to offer in the workplace. This was explored through graduates' experiences in the workplace, as graduates reflected on their skills and capabilities through the lens of their experience of applying and taking ownership of those skills and capabilities in context. I have analysed and interpreted the key themes using the theoretical and conceptual framework which I have presented in Chapter 3 and which I discuss in the data chapters of this thesis. However, firstly, I will provide an account of the ethnographic setting itself.

The ethnographic setting: a sea of change

When writing about the ethnographic setting, it is important to place the School in the context of the wider cultures which influence that world (Willis, 1977; Macdonald, 2002;

O'Reilly, 2012). I locate my ethnographic narrative in its wider historical, geographic, and political context and in terms of the local and institutional structures of power. I must also locate the fieldwork temporally - beginning in 2011, at a particular time of significant uncertainties, when the tripling of fees to £9000 per annum was anticipated. The increasing Government focus on graduate employability metrics and the announcement of further measures such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) were also exerting pressures and causing concern for the Institution and the School. Would the new fee regime have an impact on student recruitment and, in particular, recruitment to non-vocational disciplines such as English? Would it encourage more instrumental choices based on future job prospects? Although I have been observing a time of change, that is not to imply that there had been previous stability or a golden age of academe which has been swept away (Williams, 2013; Wright, 2015). There have been ongoing tensions between liberal academic goals and more instrumental vocational goals linked to the perceived needs of the economy and national competitiveness since the nineteenth century when red brick universities were established (Vernon, 2010; Williams 2013).

However, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, since the Browne Report (Browne, 2010) and subsequent government policy documents - such as 'Students at the Heart of the System' (DfBIS, 2011a, 2011b) and 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (DfBIS, 2016) - this has arguably become more pronounced. These policy documents place a greater focus on instrumental and economic utility, with students characterised as consumers and academics as service providers, measured in terms of 'value for money', customer satisfaction, potential future earnings and contribution to the economy. This drive for economic utility and the loss of the government block grant funding for the Arts and Humanities, which appears to devalue disciplines such as English, formed part of the political context of this ethnographic setting at the time. This was seen as being of such concern at a national level that texts, such as 'The Public Value of the Humanities' (Bate, 2011) and 'The Value of the Humanities' (Small, 2013), were published in response; putting the case for the Humanities and their crucial cultural and intellectual contribution to knowledge and society. The challenge to the value of the Humanities and the assumptions within government policy, and in society at large, created a sense of embattlement in the sector nationally. Articles such as 'The war against the Humanities at Britain's Universities'

(Preston, 2015) and 'The disfiguring of higher education' (Warner, 2015) mounted a spirited defence.

The pressures of government policy and the resulting marketization of higher education have created corresponding pressures at an institutional level. During 2015, Northern University's Vice Chancellor announced the implementation of a target-driven performance management system - Aiming Higher (a pseudonym) - and a 'research expectations' agenda. These were management responses to global drivers of change, all justified by management with the rationale that it is essential for the University to 'raise its game' to remain in the Top 100 institutions globally, and to rise in the rankings, to ensure competitiveness. This was seen by staff as placing greater expectations on them. There was opposition through the University and College Union (UCU), with email correspondence and meetings showing that Aiming Higher created anxiety and mobilised some will to resist. A long-term member of staff observed that during their considerable time in the University, there have been ongoing changes that have created 'swirls and eddies' of anxiety and which tend to settle; in their experience the rise in fees to £9,000 had been the most concerning development so far (personal communication with research participant, 2016). However, Aiming Higher was an issue of concern not only for staff at Northern University, it also attracted wider interest.

One academic, from a different school at Northern University, responded by developing a research project investigating how such target-driven strategies affect staff. This included their working practices, well-being, and approach to research, its influence on staff-student relations, teaching, the university's collegiate atmosphere, and workload, in order to assess the human dimension of Aiming Higher. The leader of the project which responded to Aiming Higher proposed this as a way of making an impartial assessment of the strategy, to engage staff collectively in thinking about what was happening, and about how university governance might be approached differently in the future. She included the possibility that positive outcomes might emerge from Aiming Higher, in which case Northern University could help other institutions 'negotiate neoliberalism' (personal communication, email correspondence, 2016). Her stated aim was to 'speak truth to power, but in love.' My final round of staff interviews took place from September to December 2015, when Aiming Higher was a very current issue which was being mentioned by staff; their concerns about it are likely to have contributed to the views being expressed here. The Teaching Excellence

Framework (TEF), another new and uncharted performance metric, was also on the horizon. This ongoing plethora of expectations, proposals, and changes, and their predication on consumer and market ideologies, along with calls for resistance and challenge, form the wider context in which the institution, the School and its communities were living and working during the time of my fieldwork.

As I progressed with the research I observed that many staff members were unconvinced by over-simplified government neoliberal policy thinking about higher education and the positioning of the student as consumer. However they *were* committed to supporting students in developing their skills and capabilities and making successful transitions into careers. In interviews, individual members of staff expressed their concerns about the increasing emphasis on satisfying consumers implied in government policy and what this means for an academic education, including the constraints that may be placed on challenging students as learners in 'processes of potentially uncomfortable intellectual struggle' (Williams, 2013:141). However, whilst the government, media, and popular discourses are constructing students as consumers and customers because they are paying fees, I observed resistance amongst my student research participants to being seen as a homogeneous group of consumers looking for a return on their investment. I interacted with, interviewed, and got to know a diverse group of students from a range of backgrounds who have overwhelmingly chosen to study English for love of the subject. Many of the research participants told me that they felt they could do well by studying a discipline which they loved. Many shared with me their hopes of doing something after graduation which would make a difference and which they would find fulfilling, as opposed to simply choosing career paths which offer the best financial return. Staff and students spoke of the impact of the high fees, and the difficult and highly-competitive jobs market, which have resulted in greater levels of anxiety and fear of failure, and even to greater mental health issues. Again this departs from economically-framed policy depictions, which make a seamless connection between investment in higher education and jobs. This is in spite of evidence that as many more graduates are emerging from a massified higher education sector, the competition for jobs has become ever more challenging.

The apparent devaluation of the Arts and Humanities by government (DfBIS, 2009; Browne, 2010) resulted in some perceptions amongst staff of potential positive outcomes which my

PhD project might bring. Joanna, a member of academic staff expressed her hopes that it might provide evidence (from the life and work of the School community) of the actual value of English Studies for graduates and society as a whole. The data was also as potentially helpful in illustrating what is possible with a degree in English. There was an awareness and, indeed, vividly lived experience of popular and policy assumptions about the discipline and about how it is studied; in Chapter 5 I will discuss these dispiriting popular and media discourses and prejudices, along with the counter-narratives which students have developed.

The school's vital statistics in 2014-2015

The School offers a comprehensive range of undergraduate degree programmes across English Literature, Language, Linguistics, and English Literature and Creative Writing. Students can also opt for Linguistics combined with a number of Modern Languages, or for English Literature and History. The largest cohort of students was in Literature, with considerably smaller cohorts in Language, Linguistics and other degree combinations.
The School offers a very diverse range of English disciplines, from canonical literature to film and creative writing. The inclusion of Linguistics within the School is seen by some Linguistics staff members as unusual ('an accident of history') since Linguistics is perceived as a science-based discipline linked to the Humanities (interview, 24.9.2015). This is an example of the diversity of the culture within the School, where colleagues are working with very different epistemological approaches. Linguistics uses quantitative research and draws on scientific disciplines; as one member of academic staff told me, it would be much easier to explain research in Linguistics to a Physicist than to colleagues in other subject areas.

There has been a gradual increase in applications and entries year on year since 2012. In 2013, in the wake of the fees hike, a Literature Section meeting reflected on the way that the School had 'grown the cake' despite a more gloomy national picture (field diary, 9.1.2013). I noted during my fieldwork that on occasions academic staff could find the institutional language in relation to recruitment and employability drew uncomfortably on the world of business and management. Although some degree programmes (such as the combined English Language and Literature degree) were proving less popular than in past years, others had increased in numbers. There had also been some impact from the lowering of grade requirements, from AAB to ABB. Of the 2014-15 cohort, 17% of students gained

places through Widening Participation schemes. The School draws its students from a range of backgrounds but with a preponderance of women, with an ongoing approximate split of 80% women and 20% men (in 2015 the School Recruitment statistics show student applications as 77% women and 23% men). There is a perception, expressed by some staff and students, that there are many students from independent schools studying in the School. However, recent admissions statistics show that the actual admissions from independent schools is lower than these perceptions (2016-17: 5.4%; 2017-18: 14.8%). The overall gradual growth in recruitment, which has continued in the intervening years, suggests that the higher fees had not been deterring students from studying English at Northern University.

Presenting the school and employability from English at open days

A key way in which the School presents itself to the outside world is at open days; when prospective students and parents come to see the University and hear about the School and what it can offer in terms of learning, teaching, and ethos. At these events, staff members provide an engaging account to outside audiences. In addition to providing details about the degrees on offer, prominence is also given to the metrics which might influence applicants' choices, such as student satisfaction and graduate employability. Government policy narratives recognise parents as co-consumers (DfBIS, 2011a, 2011b), who have influence in students' decisions (Williams, 2013). This is reflected in the University's marketing efforts and the School open days. Separate parents' sessions include reassurances about employability following an English degree and provide information about the wide range of careers which alumni have been successful in. The University's central marketing team produces a 'Guide for Parents' which outlines 'enhanced career prospects', 'higher earning potential', and 'life changing experience', at a university which has 'one of the best records for graduate employment in the UK.' It suggests that 'We know that many students choose a course with a career goal in mind'. However my research has shown this is generally not the case for the student research participants, many of whom described their decision to study the discipline out of love and enjoyment, rather than for instrumental reasons linked to career prospects or earnings potential. Although, as I will go on to show, they did ultimately come to an understanding that English opened up a wide range of career options. Professional support staff members who are closely involved with organising the open days,

told me that in their experience, it is parents who ask questions about careers and employability rather than students.

At open days, the ethos of the School is described as one which values and cares for students with the aim of creating a happy and high-achieving student body. Staff are celebrated for 'making their subjects' through leading their research fields and providing research-led teaching from the 'coalface to the classroom' (field diary, 22.4.2015). Staff and students speak of the richness and diversity of the discipline which opens up so much possibility to students: 'You study life' (a quote from a student speaking at an open day). Academic staff put the case for studying English; emphasising the breadth of the knowledge and skills which could be gained 'in case parents think it is a dangerously non vocational subject' (field diary, 3.4.2013). Matthew (speaking at an open day), emphasised the way in which students develop growing intellectual independence over three years, which is seen as key to the workplace skills the degree can develop:

> "….to think and write critically, with real independence, to pursue a project – professional people do things independently. You develop the ability to [synthesise] complex information into a well shaped argument, add value, offer reports, without prompting and micro-management. Employers are looking for people who can be autonomous and have their own ideas, creative, imaginative solutions, add to how things can be improved. English students are highly desired and are recruited enthusiastically by large firms, it is not about knowledge of Jane Eyre, but the ability to write, think, present ideas, work to deadlines….You will get reflective skills on the literature side and analytical skills from the language side, using this you can make a reasonable pitch [to employers]. Managing time effectively is a skill developed by studying English."
>
> (field diary, 27.6.2015)

Graduate destinations from English Studies are also presented, showing a wide variety and range of jobs (including advertising, marketing and accounting) based on skills in communication, the ability to tell a good story and present it well, and being able to analyse and see patterns in data. Staff members speak very passionately and compellingly about the School, its culture, and the opportunities which it offers to prospective students.

Although the ideal is presented and valorised at open days, elements of this also play a significant role in some aspects of the School's larger identity. There is a collective sense of

achievement and value linked to the School and the ongoing achievements of its staff: the excellent reputation for research, the esteem with which the School is held, and its high levels of student satisfaction. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the confirmation by individual staff members that it is indeed a caring and supportive environment. Many described their strong commitment to research and teaching, and to the provision of a learning and developmental experience for students which will ultimately help students to get jobs after graduation.

Staff perceptions of the culture of the school and institution

During the time when I was in the field, from 2011 until 2016, the majority of staff members I interacted with - from all parts of the discipline and at different levels of seniority - described the School's culture and ethos as supportive, friendly, and welcoming. It was considered to have an unusually strong sense of collegiality which is thought not to be the norm in the wider University or in higher education more generally. What is more, the School is thought to be in contrast to certain elite British universities, which are perceived as having more competitive and antagonistic cultures, based on the experience of some staff members who have worked and studied there. Highlighting this contrast, David, a member of academic staff, found the School to be more 'down to earth and easy going, though there has been a significant shift in professional culture as part of a wider cultural shift in the sector, which is disempowering for academics' (interview, 29.10.2015).

This awareness of the overall context of the University and the higher education sector exerting pressures and creating uncertainty for individuals was described by Alison, a member of academic staff, as the 'stormy edges' of the culture (interview, 19.11.2015). The sea of change (as discussed in an earlier section) has been and continues to be a challenge for those who must navigate it as individual staff members. This was also the case for those who manage the School's internal dynamics as well as its relationship with the Institution. In a Staff Section meeting in January 2013, it was reported that Faculty management had complimented the School on 'mastering the new environment' (field diary, 9.1.2013). That new higher education and institutional environment has gone on evolving; new initiatives and changes have continued to impact on the School and its context. A sense of gathering storminess and anxiety created by that context was reflected in the way that people were speaking - using metaphors and language of foreboding and danger.

As the new pressures and unknowns of Aiming Higher, research expectations, and the new TEF loomed large, academic staff member Isla felt there was a need for 'Orwellian double-think' in which outside agendas are recognised and pressures from outside are worked with, whilst the community quietly retains its ethos and values (interview, 3.11.2015). This was echoed by another academic staff member, Zak, who felt that 'the sense of community….has been eroded by REF and now by TEF, by metrics just generally' (interview, 9.11.2015). For Luke, an early career academic, the culture of the School was welcoming and supportive; however, he recognised that that he and his younger colleagues were only experiencing the first cycles of change. He was aware of the sea of constant change which has had to be coped with and is anticipating further changes which will impact on staff:

> "I think I have a higher tolerance for things than older members of staff who have had to adapt to multiple systems, multiple Government guidelines. At the moment I am still in my first period of adaptation as a lecturer so I tend to be more optimistic than the people at the meetings. On the other hand, I can see already kind of squeezing of lecturers' research times seems almost inevitable as more and more measurement of their work seems to be coming down the road, particularly terrifying was the recent news that between REFs there would be mini-REFs based on metrics. As for the TEF….it is still so unclear what that represents that it is very hard to comment on it and also the extent to which it will be an institutional thing rather than an individual teaching thing….I am sensitive more to the wariness around me….I can see their wariness which worries me in a sense of foreboding, I suppose…."
>
> (interview, 9.11.2015)

Getting a job in the Academy was seen by some as a 'cut-throat struggle' with very few new jobs being created (interview, 20.12.2013). Some staff members described their stress and anxiety linked to the prevalence of short term contracts and, where those contracts are 'teaching only', the difficulty for Early Career Academics to build a career in academia when there is little time for research and publishing. Research assistants also faced short-term contracts and uncertainty and they too described their anxiety, such as when facing redundancy when project funding comes to an end. There are some differences between longer-term staff (with permanent positions) and younger staff and research assistants (on temporary contracts). Those on short-term contracts are facing precarity in their employment in a highly competitive world in which there are few academic jobs and, thus, they have to deal with the additional stress of job insecurity. However, mental health and stress are concerns expressed by members of both permanent *and* temporary staff. These

issues emerged in conversations, meetings, and interviews. They were also seen in correspondence circulating as an expression of staff concerns about Aiming Higher, which was regarded by many staff as a top-down initiative on which they had not been consulted. This was lowering morale and increasing anxiety at the time of my fieldwork.

Staff members described the pressures from, and concerns about, the policy narrative of the student as consumer in a marketized higher education and in which the university has become a business and a 'conveyor belt' (interviews, 24.9.2015, 3.11.2015, 18.11.2015, 19.11.2015). The consumer model was seen as being acutely at play, yet the fundamental difference to a mainstream business - in which the customer is always right - was also clear (Grayling, 2002; Williams, 2013). Students in higher education are not likely to be in a position to know what a good education should be and the intellectual challenge which is part of an academic education can involve discomfort. As academic staff member Mary told me:

> "….my Facebook feed today is full of an article about the fact that students don't know what is a good education essentially, which I think is true that there are experiences in education which are very uncomfortable, and that actually that is very good for you. You know you don't learn, progress and develop intellectually without a certain amount of discomfort, in the same way as you don't progress and develop physically without a certain amount of discomfort. But when you ask students about their levels of satisfaction they will often feel that those uncomfortable moments were undesirable and so if you then take a student satisfaction score as an indication of good quality education, you might have an inverse effect."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2015)

Education at GCSE and A level has become much more structured, with much hand-holding to ensure good results, so that the transition to university is more challenging. This can mean students express dissatisfaction. Due to the focus on the National Student Survey (NSS), this can result in changes being made to ensure greater student satisfaction, with resulting stress and anxieties for staff members. The University wants to have a good reputation and to continue to attract students in a competitive higher education sector and therefore high NSS scores are seen as essential by the institution. This is seen as a conflict, which can potentially have a negative impact on staff and the education they deliver. Academic staff member Sienna expressed her fears around staff being constrained and becoming 'biscuit-cutter teachers' who are unable to use pedagogical innovation, or even be themselves, for

fear of students not being satisfied (interview, 9.11.2015). This is likely to 'stifle creative pedagogic practice' and mean that risks are avoided to the detriment of learning, ultimately creating the danger of 'placing automata in front and producing a workforce' (interview, 9.11.2015). It is perceived that satisfying students - which might involve 'dumbing down' the curriculum - is rewarded institutionally at all levels, although this is seen as a problematic situation which might ultimately mean that students are going out into the world unprepared. Mary saw the NSS as a problematic metric:

> "I think the NSS for example is a point that simultaneously frustrates and stresses staff. You know that there is a strong sense in which everybody is doing their best and working really hard and so the NSS feels quite out of our control because you think well, what more could I do, and yet there is the high emphasis on the need to improve NSS scores. And that extends to all of these kinds of metric based things…. 'Cos I think it is the case in this School that we are very good at teaching and frankly and that most staff in the School are very committed to teaching, and I don't think that is necessarily true across the University or across the academic world as a whole. I think that is the culture within this School - that it is important we do care about our students and so then these kinds of outside things are both stressful and also quite disrespectful."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2015)

The closing words of this quote capture a significant aspect of the culture, ethos, and identity, of the School of English which has emerged from the research: caring about students despite the stresses of the context of higher education and the implied disrespect of government policy and ministerial pronouncements about student experience and graduate outcomes. As academic staff member Kathryn told me:

> "The tension is around implied criticism that academics don't care about these things. David Willetts made comments, just as the REF was due in, that academics were not doing enough about student experience and doing too much on research – when the REF <u>requires</u> research."
>
> (interview, 20.12.2014)

Beliefs and values emerged as key motivations to work in higher education and to teach and research in English. Peter, a member of academic staff, spoke of his view that 'No one is in this job for the money - we really care about what we are doing' (interview, 16.11.2014). Many staff research participants spoke of the value of English and the Humanities for individuals and for wider society. However, there was a sense that space to move was being

lost within higher education (both for students and staff) due to policy drivers and metrics, such as employability, student satisfaction, REF, and TEF. Space was seen as being lost for student inquisitiveness, creativity, making mistakes which can be learned from, and creating resilience in students; Zak felt that 'Resilience is needed in the workplace, yet it is being drained out of people in higher education' (interview, 9.11.2015). The metrics approach in higher education was seen as reducing the space for academics too, since it does not allow for mistakes or creativity in teaching, learning, and research, and that this was contributing to the creation of some stormy edges in a supportive, caring, and welcoming culture.

Staff perceptions of employability during my fieldwork

The concept of employability elicited a range of perceptions and responses from members of staff. There was not a simple duality of views, for and against, but a range of views which co-existed. A member of academic staff described how she did not have problems engaging with employability because:

> "it is important to articulate the value of what we do. With English Literature students it's really our job to give them the kind of language that they need in order to communicate the skills that they've learnt on the degree to possible future employers."
>
> (field diary, 23.4.2012)

The future employability and job prospects of students was seen as an important issue by many of the academic staff who shared their views with me. As Kathryn told me:

> "With employability [I am] not saying there are no dissenting voices, but in this School people are agreed that it matters. People like to hear what students are doing post degree, it is exciting to see where students go on to, some to Academia - but we are under no illusions that people want to be employable and get a job. Everyone is signed up – people agree that students need to have a good experience and get jobs."
>
> (interview, 20.12.2014)

In an interview early in the research project, an academic staff member expressed concern that although English had traditionally been regarded as a 'good degree' for a wide range of careers, this seemed to have changed and the choice of English now needed to be justified in terms of employability (Interview, 31.5.2012). Other staff members expressed their concern about the focus on employability as potentially reductive, limiting, utilitarian, and over-

determined; viewing employability as a deeply problematic measure of a course of study at university. However, even those who found employability problematic as a focus and were concerned about the impact of the wider policy context, spoke of the excellent skills for future employability which come from English – 'more than from any other degree' – Sienna spoke of the importance of helping students develop those skills and her concerns that a metrics and consumer culture might have a detrimental impact on learning and development:

> "....to engage critically with texts, to understand the importance and the relevance and the capacity for debate and discussion and exchange of ideas and the ability to think critically about the world around them and to understand the importance of context. I really do not think that there is any other degree that provides that at all. I mean Sociology maybe but not to the same extent I don't think. So I think a very good strong English department, which this is. It is a very strong English department in terms of its research, in terms of a lot of its teaching you know, it is producing students who should have all those qualities, at least the awareness that they should have those qualities, but as I say my worry is that kind of the focus on metrics is just going to drive that out of the window."
>
> (interview, 9.11.2015)

Yet, whilst staff demonstrated an awareness of the value of the skills which are being developed by their disciplinary studies, as I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 7, there was also a recognition that students do not fully understand their usefulness and applicability. Mary shared her thoughts:

> "I think the term employability tends to be associated with, and perhaps to some extent directed towards an idea of sort of career-focussed learning. The idea that you will be going into some particular kind of career….and I think that is quite problematic, because it is very limiting, and really an English Literature degree is much more about learning skills which should be applicable across a wide range of careers. Having said that I think one thing that we could probably do more of is opening up the idea that precisely there are those skills that are valuable skills and are useful in a wide range of contexts."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2015)

Thus, although the concept of employability is seen as potentially limiting, the skills learned through the academic study of English were identified as very valuable in a variety of careers. The process of enabling students to understand their skills was seen as something

which could usefully be engaged in for the benefit of students; in a sense this reframes the concept to escape the limitations of the word employability.

Reflecting the multivalent nature of employability as a concept, which means different things to different people (Tomlinson 2012, 2017), Jacob, Sienna and Heather did not have confidence in the idea that academics actually know what employability is or what employers require in terms of preparing students for their future careers. Jacob suggested that 'if we decide we know what is good in terms of employability, we will tailor things too much, constrain and miss things' (interview, 24.9.2015). Mary saw potential value in the new employability event for Stage 2 which was being planned for the following year, when students would be able to 'step out of the academic space and reflect on what they are getting from being in the academic space' during an event which would be led by the Careers Service (interview, 25.11.2015). This will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

A recurring theme in interviews with staff was a strong sense of the value and importance of the Arts and Humanities for society, seeing them as collaborative, creative, bringing engagement with and awareness of the world, and creating cultural and societal value which goes beyond the economic. The value of the Arts and Humanities was emphasised by academic staff member Isabella:

> "[I would like to say] one final thing about the value of Language and Literature degrees and Arts degrees and Humanity subjects. Again it is often seen as a kind of quaint or impossibly old fashioned thing. You could have a belief in the value of something that isn't monetary, knowledge for its own sake or wanting to live the life of someone who pays attention to the world around them and asks questions of it rather than feeling confused and depressed and pushed aside by it. I don't think that that is an old fashioned attitude, I think that Humanities degrees exist within the University which also offers medical degrees and business degrees and science and mathematics degrees and nursing degrees and they are a very, very important part of society and it is a very important strand of education, the creative, collaborative, enquiring side of it but ultimately the side of it that leads to engagement and awareness of the mind in the world, so I don't think there is anything that is not urgent or compelling or useful."
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

There is a sense here of a battle within universities to get the Arts and Humanities to be supported adequately and their value recognised, because within government policy priority is given to STEM subjects. A theme which emerged from my conversations with staff was the

idea of a discipline such as English drawing on the principles of a Liberal Arts education, to create rounded and thoughtful citizens of the world, which comes from providing intellectual challenge and enabling students to think for themselves during their education in the School. Isla, an academic staff member, felt that the School and the discipline equip students for life by developing their autonomy along with flexible, creative and analytical thinking. This enables students to 'think as free agents', reflecting on everything in contemporary life, able to question the system, and see themselves as individuals in society. The education provided by the School and from the study of English is seen by academic staff as enabling students to make conceptual leaps, think independently and work things out for themselves; thus creating self-motivated, independent people, who can manage themselves and their workload and so develop skills which are highly valued in the workplace. Isabella shared her perspective:

> "….what Literature degrees have I think, again regardless of the subject in a way, Literature, because it is so closely bound with the writing and reading and speaking you develop qualities of attention and concentration and an eye for detail and these are useful regardless in every job, in every career, in the home or outside the home. Those qualities are crucial for any life, for any work."
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

Matthew too provided his perspectives on the skills for employability which the study of English developed, recognising that the ability to narrate fluently those valuable skills and practices to employers in appropriate terms was significant:

> "[at interviews] no one will ever ask you about [the subject itself]....[employers] are interested in the ability to talk about and present complicated ideas in a sophisticated way, to create arguments, to tell stories, to imagine, to work creatively and constructively and what you have developed by studying complicated, intricate literary texts are actually skills in the management of data and problems of the highest order. The skills that they have learned by studying literature are so flexible and adaptable to so many instances in the workplace. Part of the role is to enable students through studying English, to pursue a wider goal....intellectual competence, autonomy, imagination, communication, all these kinds of self-management, self-motivating skills…."
>
> (interview, 25.3.2014)

Yet, as some staff members, such as Mary, Isabella and Alison told me (interviews 25.11.2015, 11.11.2015, 19.11.2015) students could struggle to recognise the skills they

were gaining and to articulate 'how those intellectual skills function in the real world' (interview, 25.11.2015). Although skills were not generally being mentioned to students in a 'heavy-handed' way, staff members described how they drew students' attention to aspects of their modules, seminars, and assessments, which developed skills that are helpful for life and work, doing so in more subtle ways. Employability-related activity was seen as needing to be carefully integrated, so as not to detract from good teaching and learning and - crucially - in ensuring that there is the intellectual challenge which develops students. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, this sense that the experience of and response to intellectual challenge - along with the capacity for critical, reflective, lifelong learning - is what underpins capability in the workplace. This accords with research and literature arguing that employability is inherent in a good academic education (e.g., Harvey, 1997, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011). However, policy has tended to depart from this more integrated approach because employability has become a separate 'industry' and metric (despite the recognised difficulty of defining and measuring it which I have discussed in Chapter 2).

In the course of my fieldwork and interviews, staff and students spoke of a range of exciting extra-curricular projects and opportunities which develop understanding, skills, and attributes, through experience. These included a story-writing and book production project. Another example given was a series of practical and creative drama workshops run in partnership with a theatre company, for which undergraduates were able to apply for places. One of the students I worked with, Catriona, had taken part in the project and it gave her transformational insights into what she wanted to do as a career and an understanding of her strengths. Staff members did not explicitly describe these activities as opportunities to develop skills and experience for employment, but Catriona and other students have experienced them in that way.

Staff perceptions of employability during my fieldwork spoke of and to the broader concerns within higher education. The rhetoric and policy depictions were questioned and seen as limited. However a clear theme of caring about students, of supporting them as they develop as people through their university studies and helping them become employable graduates, emerged strongly from the research. This led me to explore further the underpinning traditions and philosophy of the disciplines of English Studies, the Dartmouth

Seminar and Personal Growth from English (Dixon, 1967; Goodwyn, 2016) which I have discussed in Chapter 1 and will further discuss in Chapter 6. Staff members who participated in the research saw the value of the skills developed by English and placed them in the wider context. They felt that the potential constraints and 'dumbing down' of curricula in the interests of 'customer satisfaction' would in reality not be in the interests of students' development and personal growth, since independence of thought and critical awareness required potentially challenging learning experiences. This theme led me to explore research which has focused on effective pedagogy and on emerging needs of twenty-first century workplaces which I have introduced in Chapter 2 and will discuss more fully in Chapters 6 and 7. Employability has remained a significant concern at both a School and institutional level. Initiatives within the School have included a range of strategies, such as the Alumni Advisory Board, a student-led questionnaire and report through the Staff Student Committee (2014-2015), and an annual major employability event for all Stage 2 students (from 2016 onwards). These initiatives will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Student perceptions of the School and of employability

Students' testimony confirmed that they found the School has a supportive culture, 'comfortable and relaxed' and welcoming and friendly, though they recognised it as being a lone-scholar discipline in comparison to disciplines such as Business Studies and Modern Languages (field diary, 8.10.2015). Study groups (small groups of peers working together) were seen as important, though people recognised they had to learn to work independently. Some students, like Catriona, spoke of their consciousness of a North-South divide which is partly class-related within the School community, though she had nonetheless found friends. Students found the staff to be very approachable. Although students felt well supported, some expressed a wish that there were more contact hours.

Government policy constructs students as rational economic consumers, making informed choices in their higher education which will result in employment and higher earnings after graduation. In contrast, interviews and field diaries provide evidence that students in the School have overwhelmingly applied to study English at university for love of the subject and not because they had a career in mind. As student Lucy told me:

> "I always loved reading, loved finding new writers….I loved English at school….I absolutely love it, have got a huge amount out of doing the degree, I have a passion for the subject….I didn't just settle for it."
>
> (interview, 25.9.2014)

It is often only towards the end of their degree that students decide on a career path. However during their studies, when challenged, for example by friends studying other subjects, about the value of their discipline, usually in economic and job-related terms, students were able to respond with counter-narratives which showed their awareness that their degree in English opened up a wide range of possibilities and career trajectories. They also perceived value and success more broadly than in economic terms, seeking job satisfaction and meaning in their future careers. However individual students did not seem confident in their ability to articulate the skills from the discipline in ways that would appeal to employers; a School Careers Liaison document recorded that 'students struggle to understand why a degree in English makes them employable' (field diary, School careers document, 28.12.2012). This was confirmed by students; for example, Amelia told me she had struggled to identify and put across her skills in job and volunteering applications (interview, 8.12.2014). These themes – of loving their discipline, understanding its value and potential, yet being uncertain of how to articulate their skills - are discussed in my data chapters through the stories of individual students.

Whilst I found that students made their choice out of love and interest, as they progressed towards graduation, they did express concerns about their future transitions, even having attended a highly-ranked School in a Russell Group university. They spoke of their awareness, from school days onwards, of the emphasis on individual responsibility for enterprise and employability. Catriona shared with me that 'The word 'employable' haunts the youth of today' and 'the whole enterprise thing is a crocodile to be wrestled with', she saw the transition beyond university as 'the Abyss' which is both exciting and frightening (interview, 10.12.2014). The anticipation of the realities of a highly competitive jobs market emerged as a source of concern. Student Elizabeth spoke about the increasing pressure she felt to try and differentiate herself, because a degree is no longer enough:

> "So many people go to Uni now it seems like it's so much harder to stand apart from the crowd….[you need to] have….five different societies and get a first and have lots of previous work experience….know how to work a blog and have a social standing on the internet…."
>
> (interview, 18.6.2015)

However, again, a variety of perspectives coexist. For some students, the rhetoric of employability felt incongruent. For instance, student Mollie told me 'Employability is a rubbishy term…feels very unskilled, fill out my tick boxes, data entry' (interview, 21.10.2014), whereas other students, such as Fiona, did consider how to develop and evidence their employability, as I will discuss in the data chapters of this thesis.

Why did students share their life stories?

In 2018 I asked some student and graduate research participants why they had taken part in the study and shared their experiences with me over time. The main reasons I was given were interest in the topic and enjoyment in discussing it. Some spoke of the relationships of trust which we had established, of the value of reflection about skills and careers, even the therapeutic value they had found in discussing their feelings and stories with me. Student Grace spoke of her loyalty for the School which made her want to help. As a researcher, her words were important to me as a reflection of my role as ethnographer:

> "I liked the opportunity to reflect on my career at these intervals. It's been interesting and illuminating. Also you are nice to talk to. You've always been non-judgemental and pleasant to share my experiences with."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 6.3.2018)

The significance of trust and rapport and engaging with interest and without judgment, is crucial to good interviewing, and as Gerson and Horowitz (2002:210) have identified, people appreciate a supportive listener and can be energised by the insights gained. As a graduate Lily participated in the research because she was keen to share the unusual route she had taken into Artificial Intelligence and the technology sector and wanted her voice to be heard through the research. In the data Chapters, I explore these individual student and graduate narratives and trace their career paths as a way of gaining more nuanced perspectives on employability in the context of English Studies.

Chapter conclusions

When I began my research in 2011, it was a time of some significant concerns and unknowns; the impact of a substantial fee rise, the pending introduction of further metrics such as the TEF and the possible imposition of a performance management system, Aiming Higher. At that particular moment within this ethnographic setting, it was noticeable that the levels of anxiety amongst both staff (facing what seemed like constant change, powerful centralised agendas and, potentially, dual pressures and competing priorities of REF and TEF) and students (who hope to gain a good degree to progress in their careers and but faced higher fees and feared failure) had risen and were being expressed. These issues and concerns reflect the overarching political and historical context which I have discussed in Chapter 2.

Many of the staff research participants spoke compelling about their values and their belief in the value of the Humanities for individuals and wider society, a position which appears to be challenged by government policy. Many also expressed the value of the skills and practices which the study of a Humanities discipline such as English develops in terms of future employability. Employability as a separate 'black box', top-down concept was perceived by some academic staff as potentially limiting, however making students aware of the valuable skills they were developing was seen as important. Indeed, many academic staff research participants spoke about the importance of helping their students prepare for their futures. As I will go on to discuss in subsequent chapters, I argue that this is rooted in the traditions and philosophy of the disciplines of English, the Personal Growth approach (Dixon, 1967; Goodwyn, 2016). Staff research participants described their commitment to developing their students as individuals and in terms of their skills, through their studies and the opportunities created alongside core curricula; skills and capabilities which are valuable for their future employability. I argue – an argument which I develop further in my data chapters - that this demonstrates that employability is embedded in English. Since the time of my field work, proactive work has continued on employability initiatives within the School aimed at supporting students, from the ongoing engagement with the Alumni Advisory Board to an employability challenge for Stage 2 students.

I have observed during my research that the study of English has enabled individual students to develop skills for their future employment and careers. Yet as some academic staff

research participants identified, students found it difficult to recognise and articulate the valuable skills they were developing in terms of their employability. This highlighted the perception gap which I have identified in Chapter 2. Some student research participants confirmed that they had difficulty in understanding and expressing their skills in employment terms. In the chapters which follow I will provide detailed data about employability from staff, student, and graduate perspectives, gathered during my long-term immersion in the ethnographic setting and as a result of the relationships of trust which I have been privileged to develop over time. The key themes which have emerged from my research are explored in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter 5. Higher education choices: a critical account

Introduction

It was a warm, late summer Saturday afternoon in North City and the centre of town was bustling with shoppers. Michael, a recent English Language graduate, had agreed to meet with me to bring me up to date and talk about his first job after graduation. We talked about life in general, as we queued in the coffee shop waiting for our drinks, and then managed to find a table. Michael reflected on his new job with Teach First, his sense of vocation rooted in his own personal experience, his love of youth work, and of his sense that he was establishing 'a professional and structured life' following his graduation three months earlier. We touched on the fees for higher education, the cost of getting a degree, and his feelings about his student debt. His response had a deep impact on me:

> "I was never given the time to worry about fees, because my dad was *very* worried about them. Going to university was not something my family had done. My dad saw '£50,000 of debt' on the TV….and he took some convincing!"
>
> (interview, 16.9.2017)

Michael faced much more than making a choice of a discipline to study and a university to study at, he needed to overcome his father's fears about debt and his expectations that after school the expected route for his family was into work. Michael's experience brought the complexities of choice into sharp relief. His school, his teachers, friends, and a widening participation scheme had been highly influential in making his choice of English Studies at Northern University seem possible, as I will discuss in a subsequent section.

In this Chapter, I will consider how the students and graduates who participated in this study approached their higher education choices of university and discipline, which ultimately are likely to have an impact on their potential employability and career trajectories. I will argue that choice is not a straightforward matter of weighing up a range of options which are equally available to all, as government policy would suggest (DfBIS, 2016). Instead, I will provide a more critical account of choice, drawing on the lived experiences of students and graduates, which highlights the inadequacies of the Human Capital theory (Becker, 1975) and Rational Actor approaches (Scott, 2000) underpinning government policy, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. I have come to recognise, through my research, that the idea of

choice is highly complex and problematic since many of our 'choices' depend on our social class, background, schooling, and previous family experience of higher education. I will draw from Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives to place choices and decisions about university education - which in turn influence employment and careers - in their social and cultural context. This enables the hidden structures, which underlie the social world and which may be taken for granted, to be unearthed and considered in order to create a more critical account of higher education choices. Following Reay *et al.* (2005), who have adapted Bourdieu's work and applied his conceptual tools extensively in the field of sociology of education, I argue that consideration of habitus, capitals, and field provides a more informed and critical means of understanding those choices. This is in contrast to the assumptions about decision-making and equality of choice for all, which inform government policy.

The complexities of 'choice'

Bourdieu's argument, that access to cultural, symbolic, and social capitals make a significant contribution to life-chances beyond the economic capital that transfers from generation to generation, is well recognised (Savage *et al.* 2015:49; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Reay, 1998). This argument is helpful because it reminds us of the underlying social and cultural structures which affect the accepted norms, the tastes, and preferences which are seen as most valued but which are not a direct inheritance like economic wealth. This approach reminds us, in short, that the transmission of cultural capital is 'opaque and….masked in the language of meritocratic achievement and hard work' (Savage *et al.*, 2015:50). Similarly, social capital and the connections it provides to networks, information, and opportunities is important for accessing jobs and developing careers. Lack of such resources creates and reinforces inequalities, limits possibilities, and reproduces the social order (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; English and Bolton, 2016). Habitus, which is the dispositions 'durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, proscribed in objective conditions' (Bourdieu, 1990a:54) is unconscious and is developed through people's lives and experiences, and shapes their ideas about what is possible. Therefore, as Reay *et al.* (2005:24) argue, 'improbable practices are rejected as unthinkable'. The process of choice-making is affected by social and cultural capital, economic capital and material constraints, social perceptions, and forms of self-exclusion. So, there are both external and internalised, unconscious, constraints on choices (Bourdieu, 1990a; Reay *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Reay, 2017).

For some students, the choice is not whether to go to university. Their biographies have made higher education a given and they are 'moving as fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:127). The choice facing them is which university they would like to go to (Bourdieu, 1990a; Reay *et al.*, 2005). These students are likely to have an understanding of the stratified higher education system - in which the more elite Russell Group universities are more highly valued - and the middle-class taste and distinction associated with making that choice (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Reay, 2017). Indeed, as Clayton *et al.* (2009:165) report, for many middle-class students, going to university and moving away from home was an 'unquestioned rite of passage'. However, for a different group of students, mainly from working-class backgrounds, choice is often limited by a lack of first-hand knowledge of higher education processes and institutions, via school and family support and their expectations of what is right for them. Using Bourdieu's conceptual framework, choices can be understood as being limited by both external factors and by an internalised sense of what is possible, what is appropriate, and what is beyond the realms of possibility (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984, 1990a; Reay *et al.*, 2002, 2005; Reay 2017). Bourdieu's work is also valuable in highlighting the ways in which the assumptions of the middle classes are normalised and seen as self-evident or, in his terms, misrecognised as such.

'Choice' is, thus, deeply classed. Despite assertions by some that social class has become a 'zombie category ' and is inappropriate today, because it has its roots in a nineteenth century modernity (Beck, 2004), class remains deeply embedded in everyday British social life and institutional processes (Reay, 1998, 2017; Savage, 2003; Skeggs, 2004b; Lawler, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015). UK governments have claimed that a 'classless society' has been emerging (Major, 1991; Brown, 2007) in which education is a major way of achieving equality. Yet social class has been shown as highly influential on education and life chances (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977; Reay, 2017), whilst disparities and inequalities have continued to increase (ONS, 2017a, 2017b; Sutton Trust and BCG, 2017). Rather than a zombie category, Reay (2006:289) argues convincingly that class is the 'troublesome undead'. Recent research has shown that, despite significant increases in the number of young people attending university, the playing field remains uneven. Different universities, holding differential positions and reputations in the hierarchy of universities, offer 'different pathways into the class structure and the labour market' (Savage

et al., 2015:245). Widening participation and access has increased numbers of people from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas attending universities. However, the numbers attending higher status universities remains relatively low (Salisbury, 2018; Hazell, 2018; UCAS, 2018). As Reay (2006:302) points out, such initiatives follow many years of schooling which may also have been imbued with inequalities depending on socio-economic factors and geographic location.

Such inequality is potentially intensified by the 'competitive market' in education, which results in competition for places at the best performing schools and which may well result in a polarised social mix in school communities. Those better performing schools can be more easily accessed by middle-class families who can move house or travel to attend, thus increasing social inequalities for others (Thrupp, 1999; Reay, 2005:163). Thrupp's (1999) research, which also draws on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) work on the reproduction of middle-class advantage in the education system, has identified the contextual benefits of a school population which includes the middle-classes, including the impact of their resources and capitals in addition to academic effectiveness. His study showed that, where working-class students attended schools with a middle-class social mix, they were more likely to achieve academic success. Like Thrupp (1999:126), I am not taking 'a deficit approach to working-class culture' but recognising that there is a middle-class bias in schooling and that the issues of social inequality - which Thrupp has highlighted through his research - are a reflection of that bias.

Whilst simple class boundaries need to be contested, dominant groups (such as the middle-classes) are better placed through their 'practical mastery' of the social field (Bourdieu, 1990b:63). This enables these groups to navigate the most advantageous trajectories, using their social and cultural capital, to reproduce existing social advantage (Bourdieu, 1984; Lane, 2000), for example by choosing more valued universities and degree courses. Following Bourdieu, class needs to be understood as related to economic, social and cultural capital and inequalities, rather than being related to occupations (Savage *et al.* 2015). In the students' stories, social processes and practices, predispositions, actions, judgements, feelings, and emotions can be identified. This provides a more nuanced account of how class is playing out in their lives - their perceptions of employability, and their possible careers – rather than the self-identification they have provided of working-class or middle- class,

which can be viewed as 'simplistic divisions [which] convey only a fraction of the story of social class' (Reay *et al.*, 2005:16). It is also important to recognise that, as Skeggs (2004b) has argued, any analysis of class should not be undertaken uncritically. Indeed, the ambiguity, 'fuzzy boundaries', struggles, and dynamism of class positioning - which Skeggs (*ibid* :5) identifies in her work - is present in the stories I have been gathering.

Research has found that social class may be difficult for people to discuss and may threaten their sense of self-respect (Savage *et al.*, 2001; Sayer, 2002). This may result in ambivalence and reflection about which class they belong to, or a defensive reaction in relation to their upward mobility (Walkerdine, 2003:243), emphasising that the latter is the result of their own hard work (Savage *et al.*, 2001; 2015). Others may identify with collective, class-related values which they see as significant for them and to assert that they have had no undeserved advantage relative to other people (Sayer, 2002). Alternatively, people might actively distance themselves from what they see as less valued identities, for example some forms of identity associated with the working-classes (Skeggs, 1997). As Savage *et al.* (2001:878) suggest, in view of these complexities in relation to discussing social class and positioning in relation to social class, it is important to attempt to read behind what is said - or not said - about the experiences and processes of a classed life. Recognising these difficulties, and the potentially loaded valence of talking about class in British social life, I have been careful to ask questions about social class only after establishing a relationship of trust with students, in order not to threaten their self-respect. As such, I asked all students to give a subjective self-identification of their social class. Their responses reflect the discussion above, with their stories requiring thoughtful reading and also ongoing reflection on the longitudinal data, as students' sense of self and narratives have developed over time. The students have narrated me into their life worlds and, hence, into their experiences of the lived processes of social class, education, 'choices', and careers.

As I will argue, the life stories that students and graduates shared with me during the fieldwork reveal a range of influences on their choices and what they saw as being possible. In Chapter 3, I discussed the innate and unconscious habitus which affects a sense of what is possible and appropriate (Bourdieu, 1990a; Maton, 2012). My analysis and interpretation of my student participants' stories in this Chapter, and Chapters 6 and 7, aim to understand the workings of the habitus through the interpretation of their narratives, and articulation of

identities set within contextual fields. I will first discuss ways in which student participants have positioned themselves in relation to social class and how this has played into their decisions about which university to attend.

In my account of the ethnographic setting and the people within the School, in Chapter 4, I introduced the differing voices and perspectives which co-exist and which create a complex and heterogeneous social world. Now, I will turn to the students and graduates I have interacted with over time. These are complex and self-reflexive young people whom I have observed developing over time, articulating their sense of identity, values, beliefs, and emotions, including their hopes for the future and desire to do something meaningful beyond making a living. Each person has an individual history: their family and educational backgrounds, their social class and gender, where they have come from geographically, and their webs of relationships. All play a part in their choices. However, as Reay (1998:125) argues, it is important to understand that there is a plurality of differences and commonalities when discussing issues such as social class. One dimensional approaches – such as location in the labour market or a binary division into unitary working-class or middle-class groupings – do risk over-simplification. That is to say, there are differences and similarities within and between classes.

Similarly, there is a complex interplay of influences and expectations of cultural, social, and economic resources and understandings which are interwoven into the lives of the students and graduates, which I seek to represent here without over-simplification. I am not placing people in fixed or binary categories based on taken-for-granted assumptions. I am providing these details as aspects of a multi-faceted account which I am presenting in this chapter and those which follow, which will represent the variety and complexity of lived experiences. I will also draw on comparative details from data held on the Government's schools performance comparison website (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England 2018) and in Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reports. This will provide the reader with officially published data, for example about numbers of students going to universities, including those gaining places at Russell Group universities, from the schools attended by the student research participants. I use these sources to provide some additional, contextual details as part of the much deeper and more detailed stories I am telling. However, I stress that the availability of such data on websites and these forms of measurement are actually

an expression of the neoliberal 'competitive market' in education (discussed above) and of policy ideas about choice. These policy ideas are based on comparing performance and making rational decisions about the 'best' schools to apply for, by judging schools on key performance statistics. This is based on the same Rational Actor assumptions (Scott, 2000) which have been applied to government policy on higher education choices, which I am challenging in this thesis.

The order in which I am introducing the students and graduates is not intended to represent a hierarchy, or to reflect a hierarchical class system. However, I do argue that class affects decision-making about university and, therefore, I will discuss people's stories in relation to their self-identification of social class.

Choosing a university

In this section I will introduce three students, Michael, Catriona and Amelia, who were very clear in their identification as working-class, and I explore their experiences of choice and their trajectories to Northern University.

Why can't I?

At the beginning of this Chapter, I introduced Michael. I met Michael in his first few weeks at Northern University, where he was studying English Language. At that time he was age 18. Michael told me that he came from a very deprived neighbourhood of North City, a few miles from Northern University. In England, multiple socio-economic deprivation is measured in terms of a comparative index which reviews relative deprivation in income, employment, education, skills, training, health, crime, barriers to housing and services, and living environment in specific areas (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2015). According to this index, Michael's family lived in one of the 10% most deprived wards in the country (*ibid.*). He had attended a faith school geographically close to his home. However, this was not the school he would usually have been expected to attend; instead, his mother had encouraged him to move to the faith school when he was 11. Neither of Michael's parents had attended university, they had started work on leaving school; his father was a production worker who had more recently taken on a supervisory role and his mother was an administrator.

Michael self-identified as working-class and he wished to retain 'working-class values', though he was aware that his education and aspirations were likely to lead him to 'a career where a lot of people identify as middle-class.' Politically he told me he leaned quite strongly to the 'working-class left' (interview, 16.9.2017); this was the only occasion when a student research participant mentioned their political views. Michael associated working-class values with what Skeggs (1997) describes as respectable working-class culture, with a sense of community and of mutual respect (Attfield, 2016). However, he was not sure how much class mattered to him personally, because he mixed with people from different backgrounds; such as from his working-class neighbourhood, his middle-class school friends, and the business people he met through his voluntary work. However, as Sayer (2002) has argued, even though people may deny its relevance and say that they do not think about class, inequalities relating to social class exist and can make a difference to life-chances. Michael came to a different way of thinking about the influence of his background and the challenges he had faced, reflecting back over his life during the meeting in the coffee shop with me three years later and just after graduation. He brought a new coherence to his story and narrative identity (Lawler, 2014), feeling that he had had to overcome barriers due to his background. Michael was aware that there had not been many people from his background at his school:

> "For students like me there is an air of being up against it from the start. It is a driver to achieve things, not to be a stereotype from where you grow up."
>
> (interview, 16.9.2017)

He felt that he had needed a certain defiance, recognising that 'meritocracy is difficult for people like me' (interview, 16.9.2017). Michael recognised that stereotypes of working-class people living in areas of multiple deprivation have been created through the media, reality TV, and political rhetoric. These stereotypes devalue working-class identities and present them as 'lack' in comparison to normative middle-class identities and behaviours (Skeggs, 2004b; Lawler, 2004). There was no previous history of university attendance in his family, where the norm had been to leave school at 16 and get a job. Michael attended his local primary school but his mother, concerned at the educational standards and reputation of the high school he would have been expected to progress to, encouraged him to think about applying to a nearby faith school. Reay's (1998) research into the role of mothers in their

children's education showed that mothers - irrespective of social class - placed high value on education, though it can be more difficult to actualise this without access to appropriate resources and power. The school was in the family's neighbourhood and the application for a place was accepted, even though Michael and his family were not churchgoers.

The faith school has been rated by Ofsted as an 'outstanding' school. By contrast, the high school Michael would have been expected to attend (from 2007) was rated by Ofsted as 'satisfactory overall' in 2001, although results in GCSE, A-S, and A level, were considered well below the average point scores of similar schools. By contrast, the faith school is reportedly one of the top state schools in England (school website), with high levels of university entrance (63%) and 32% going to Russell Group universities (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Michael's school, whilst located in an area of high multiple deprivation, had a social mix which included students drawn from thirteen parishes across the city, including prosperous suburbs. The school also attracted people irrespective of faith, due to its reputation. Michael reflected on this:

> "I can't quite explain why, but the school had this odd sense of privilege about it. Everybody seemed to buy into the religious ethos, which looking back on it now is very strange for the demographic of the pupils, which was (and is evermore so) extremely varied."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 30.10.2017)

The school has slightly higher numbers of students who, over the past six years, had been entitled to free school meals; a higher measure of relative disadvantage than the national average (32.5% as compared with 29.1%). The school's Ofsted Report highlights that those classified as disadvantaged students at the school do equally well in terms of university entrance, with 67% gaining university places and 33% attending Russell Group universities (compared with a national average of 13%). Michael's story confirms that he was supported in a range of ways by his school, which enabled him to progress academically and ultimately to consider a university education.

Reflecting back on his decision to change schools, Michael remembered his 'fascination with the Eton-boys-school-stereotype', the attraction of the tie and smart jacket, and the sense of heritage and tradition at the school, even though he was then only age 11 (interview,

16.9.2017). His reflection on this embodiment of class in terms of clothing, appearance, and practices - which Bourdieu argues is embedded in the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992b; English and Bolton, 2016; Reay, 2004) - suggests that he was aware of class differences. Michael told me that he and his mother had talked about the move to the school in great depth. He had not been worried about it; he felt he would be able to make friends. He did well at the school, made lasting friendships, and also became involved in extra-curricular activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award, through which he volunteered at the Riverside Youth Project. I will provide more information about this project and its significance later in this chapter. This brought Michael into contact with people and experiences which ultimately created important networks and related social and cultural capital for him (Thrupp, 1999).

Before doing his A levels, Michael had not really thought about university because:

> "I didn't really know much about university or being the first in the family to go to university, no one has like ever mentioned it."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2014)

However, when he became aware of his friends' intentions to go to university, Michael experienced disjuncture which opened up his sense of what was possible (Bourdieu, 1984, 2005a; Reay, 2004). He described his friends as middle-class, with professional parents who were doctors and academics. Michael thought, 'they are going to university, why can't I?'. In an interview with me following his graduation (interview, 16.9.2017), Michael recognised the different outcomes, in terms of higher education, of his home friendship group, his peers from his primary school, and the high school he would have been expected to attend where only one of his friends from primary school had gone to university. By contrast, all 25 of his friendship group peers from the faith school had gone to university. Michael saw that attending the faith school had potentially changed his own trajectory. The faith school was part of a widening participation scheme at Northern University, which Michael was eligible for. He applied there to minimise his risk of failing to get into university because he had been offered a lower entry grade for a place. The school had a progression coach who provided advice and guidance; 'she sort of put ideas in people's heads' (interview, 25.11.2014). He also wanted to stay close to home due to his 'family ties and general sense of belonging'

(field diary, email correspondence 6.3.2017). Michael originally thought about living in halls but ultimately lived at home whilst studying, to save subsistence and accommodation costs:

> "….I had applied and got an offer of accommodation at Parkside Halls with a friend from high school. What put me off in the end was the thought of….£85 a week for something I could get for free."
>
> (field diary 6.3.2017)

In Michael's story, going to university was not a given and it involved tensions within his family. His father was concerned about whether higher education was appropriate for Michael and worried about the risks in terms of debt and future job prospects involved in going beyond the more usual trajectory in the family of getting a job after school. There was no past experience of higher education to draw on. Thus Michael's decision to go to university was influenced by his school and his friends - and support from his mother - but also involved the defiance he described to me as driving his achievements (interview, 16.9.2017).

'Moving ahead with my life'

At the beginning of Chapter 3, I introduced Catriona who had initially begun studying Business Studies at Northern University. Catriona had the full support of both her parents in her decision to attend university. However, after 18 months, she realised she was not enjoying her course and decided to change her degree programme. When I met Catriona, she was 20 years old. She had just transferred from the Business School and had recommenced her first year, now studying English Literature. Catriona's family lived in a relatively affluent large village, a prosperous suburb of a Northern City. By contrast, the City centre was one of the 10% most deprived areas nationally. All of Catriona's family, going back more than three generations, had come from this City. She attended the co-educational high school in her home village and was the first in her family to go to university. Catriona's father had taken an apprenticeship after school and had worked as an engineer. Her mother had been a factory supervisor. Her father had subsequently set up a successful business. Catriona was passionate in her self-identification as working-class. She sees her family as being 'spiritually working-class' despite their current relative affluence; Catriona feels they have created that success themselves through hard work:

Jane: "How do you self-identify yourself in terms of social class?"

Catriona: "Social class?"

Jane: "Yes how do you see yourself? Weird question, sorry".

Catriona: "Now you are like bringing in like identity, in terms of kind of place and stuff. As somebody from, oh God, somebody from the North who has deep-rooted ideas about like South/North divide and you know what kind of person it is important to be, I would identify as working-class, 'cos I could never, even if I was kind of in the socio-economic grouping of somebody who was like middle-class, I would never want to identify as that. I don't know why, I think I have just grown up with too many people who are kind of….have you ever seen Shane Meadows, This is England?"

Jane: "No."

Catriona: "Oh OK. I don't know, that's kind of my kind of people. Just like salt of the earth."

(interview, 8.10.2015)

Reflecting upon the problematic issues of talking about class, Catriona felt that she just got on with life rather than thinking about her social class. She felt that she moved in 'different circles of people and identifies with each of them in small ways' (interview, 8.10.2015). Catriona saw 'her kind of people' as 'the salt of the earth', a term which signifies respect and denotes the symbolic value associated with respectable working-class culture (Skeggs, 1997). She felt that her family's strong work ethic had resulted in their increased affluence and her positioning suggested that she wanted to clarify that any middle-class capitals have been created through their own efforts, rather than through unearned advantages. Her reference to Shane Meadows' film ('This is England') can be interpreted as relating to Meadows' wish to represent Skinheads - a maligned group - with integrity; he had belonged to a Skinhead group as a young man, a grouping which originally had huge pride in being working-class. He writes that the film is about 'sticking up for mates and beliefs' at a time before the Skinhead 'tribe' became associated with racism and nationalism (Meadows, 2007).

However, although Catriona wished to have a working-class identity, and felt she could never identify as middle-class, she began to feel identity differences to her family and friends. Catriona told me that her brother had deeply hurt her, by telling her that her family

and friends could experience her new knowledge and perspectives as belittling them. She felt she needed to constantly be making a 'cultural translation' and navigating barriers:

> "I am not going to go home to my brother and he says 'do you want to go to Mali?' and I'll say 'No, because it is an example of neo-colonialism in the modern world and I am not interested in engaging in that practice'….or even I feel like there are some things that I understand differently to other people and it is hard to manoeuvre between high academic practice and you know, not sounding like a knob head. But I suppose that is the same thing that everybody has to come across, of like you understand things differently to what everybody else does and you have experienced different things to what everybody else does, it is just the way that it has got to go."
>
> (interview, 23.1.2017)

I argue that in evidence here is Catriona's experience of what Bourdieu (1999:511) identifies as the 'successive allegiances and multiple identities' of the movement of habitus across the field of class involved in upward social mobility (Walkerdine, 2003; Reay, 2013). I will discuss Catriona's experiences and the impact on her career decisions more fully in the following Chapter.

As with Michael's family, there was no previous experience of university attendance for Catriona to draw upon. However, like Michael, she attended a school which was supportive of university entrance, with 'high levels' of students going on to university (79%) and 21% gaining places at Russell Group institutions (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018; school website). The school was rated as 'good' by Ofsted and it has lower numbers of students eligible for free school meals over the last six years than the national average (24.8% as compared with 29.1%). Catriona felt she had always wanted to go to university but, reflecting back on her experience, felt that her school had been 'a production line for university' and had created a sense that there were no other appropriate options. The school had also emphasised employability and enterprise from an early stage, which had affected her initial choice to study business, based on what her teachers and parents considered might result in better job prospects in the future (interview, 23.1.2017). Catriona chose to move away from home, as part of a way of moving ahead in her life, leaving her friends to 'work their lives away' (interview, 23.1.2017). Ultimately, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, this led her to feel 'caught between two worlds' (Reay, 2017:108) as a result of her decision to go to university. This emphasised differences to her friends and family.

Catriona adopted differing identities across the various social worlds she found herself within, including the university, her part-time jobs, and her home environment.

Serendipity

Amelia was studying English Language and Literature and was in her third year when I met her at a student coffee morning. She was 20 at the time. She described her background as being 'quite poor' and she self-identified as working-class. There was no previous experience of higher education in her family and she told me that her local state high school had not been very helpful in providing information and support: 'my school didn't prepare me very well at all'. Amelia was from Winton City, in the Midlands, where her father worked as an engineer and her mother was an administrator; her older siblings had not attended university. Her school was rated 'satisfactory' by Ofsted at the time she attended and, in 2016-17 57% of students went on to university, with 9% gaining places at Russell Group institutions. Her school had lower than national average numbers of students on free school meals, 14.3% as compared to 29.1%, which suggests that there were lower levels of disadvantage in the school catchment (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Amelia had been encouraged by a teacher to consider higher education and so she had searched the internet for courses in English which would interest her. It was serendipity and her search of university websites which brought her to Northern University, rather than a conscious strategy of aiming for a Russell Group university:

> "I just found Northern Uni I think just on the internet and I was like, oh I will just put it in. I hadn't really looked into it at all, Northern Uni, but then I came on the open day and as soon as I got over the bridge, I was like, I have to live here, I can't be anywhere else. I didn't really know anything about it and then as soon as I got here I knew that I wanted to come to this Uni."
>
> (interview, 8.12.2014)

Amelia was academically very able, achieving AAA at A level. She had 'no idea what uni was like' and felt a 'bit lost and overwhelmed' when making her decisions about which universities to apply to. However, having been inspired by her English teacher and because at that time she wanted to be a teacher herself, Amelia knew she wanted a university education (interview, 8.6.2015). Reflecting back during an interview in her final undergraduate year, she felt that by having met an 'amazingly high' number of people at

Northern University who had attended private schools, which was 'a different world' she had not known existed, she had come to understand that these schools supported their students better, for example by explaining university requirements from an early stage:

> "If you want to do Medicine you will need to get *x*….especially at GCSE, all A*s….private school kids get all that from an early age."
>
> (field diary 8.6.2015)

Amelia had become aware of the ways that people she met at Northern University were able to draw on their social and cultural capital and knowledge of how to progress, through their understanding of 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99). Amelia decided to apply to Northern University because it enabled her to study a combined Language and Literature degree. Amelia also based her decision on her emotional response, her sense that as her train came into the City on the way to the open day, and she saw the cityscape, that she wanted to live there and study at Northern University.

Russell Group or post-1992?

Some of the students and graduates I met, such as Rosie, Audrey, Fiona, and Jonathan, saw themselves as being at the boundaries of class identities; describing themselves as being 'kind of middle-class', 'middle-class but not affluent', lower middle-class but still close to working-class roots. In the following chapters I will discuss their stories in more detail. Here though, I would like to introduce Rosie and discuss her decision-making and choices.

Rosie was age 20 when I first met her and in her final year studying English Literature. She was from Spinley, a large industrial town, and had attended a faith school. Rosie spoke about her uncomfortable experiences of feeling like a 'fish out of water' rather than 'moving like a fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:127) when she made the transition to university. She had less certainty about her social class positioning, feeling that her family had become lower middle-class but had working-class roots. Rosie describes the ways in which what she saw as culturally-meaningful markers of middle-class taste and distinction were manifest in her parents' lives, including how they would like to retire in France and have jobs which today require degrees. Rosie's family had some experience of higher education, because her mother had a degree. Her father, however, had not taken up a place

to study at university due to his family's difficult financial situation. Rosie's original intention had been to apply to post-1992 universities, in common with her group of friends. In a much later interview, when she reflected from the vantage point of her career after graduation, she felt that when she was making her university choices she was perhaps being insular (interview, 15.1.2015), but:

> "….when I was like 17 big posh Universities did not appeal to me….[they] just do all the traditional stuff…..they won't be like full of people from similar backgrounds to me."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

In a subsequent interview, however, Rosie explained that she had also thought that higher status universities focused more on traditional literature and less on the contemporary literature which she was more interested in. She also spoke of her perception that 'posh universities' were those which students from private schools had expectations of attending (interview, 2.4.2015). Rosie had initially excluded higher status 'posh' universities from her choices. In doing so she reflects Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977:226) research findings about the tendency to make choices which fitted with what was reasonable to expect: what is 'for the likes of me'. Whilst she felt that her school was not very supportive at an individual level, they did encourage their students to consider higher education. The school was rated as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, when she attended, but more recently was classified as 'requiring improvement'. Levels of disadvantage, measured by the numbers of students eligible for free school meals, was greater than average: 31% compared with the national average of 29.1% (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Rosie thought that the school was concerned with expectations and targets about its students progressing to higher education. She spoke of an attitude of 'it's good for our numbers' and how the school would be judged, which she felt was held by the school's management team (interview, 15.1.2015). The school does have high numbers progressing to university (79%), with only 15% going on to Russell Group institutions.

Rosie's English teacher and her mother, who worked in Human Resources, encouraged her to think about higher status universities based on her expected A level results. After attending an open day, her ideas about her choice changed, because she realised that she wanted to study at Northern University. Ultimately, she gained a place through what she

described as 'the skin of her teeth' because her A level grades were only just good enough. Rosie acknowledged that she would have chosen a lower status university, due to her perceptions about higher status 'posh' universities. She felt they would attract 'posh' people and that she would find it hard to fit in. She had a sense that their curricula would be more traditional. She had also been influenced by her peer group. This reflects the ways in which what is 'thinkable' affects choices (Reay 1998, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Archer *et al.*, 2012; English and Bolton, 2016). However, her mother's and English teacher's encouragement combined with experiences of an open day, helped Rosie to see that Northern University could be 'thinkable' for her.

Confidently choosing a higher status university

The schooling of some students, and the experience of higher education in their families, gave them insights into the importance of choosing a university in the Russell Group. Other students, such as Emily and Anna who identify as middle-class and attended private schools, had an understanding of 'the rules of the game' and how to play it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99), thus choosing a more highly valued university with confidence. Their position can be seen as having a more 'self-assured relationship to the world' (Bourdieu, 1984:56) which is associated with middle-class habitus. As Reay *et al.* (2005) argue, high levels of cultural capital generate greater confidence and certainty; Emily's story seems to support this point. Emily was from Melkley, an industrial city. I met Emily when she was 20 and in her final year studying Linguistics. She had three generations of university attendance in her family and identified as middle class. Emily's parents were both professionals with their own businesses.

Emily attended a private school and at her school 'university was the only option'. The school was rated as excellent by the Independent Schools Inspectorate but does not publish the kind of data which state schools are required to make public, such as the numbers going on to university. As Reay *et al.* (2005:58) have identified, private schools can impose a degree of conformity and 'narrowly defined parameters of acceptable choice' of higher status universities. Even though Emily considered committing 'an act of rebellion' against this, she came to a realisation that she actually did want to go to university (interview, 23.6.2014). Emily's perspective can also be interpreted as part of her 'practical mastery' of the social field, with a self-assurance which means her habitus does not restrict her thinking

about her potential choices (Bourdieu, 1990b:63). She told me that she did not want to be a clone, she wanted to be individual and did not see herself as being on a pre-determined route; this was at the root of her resistance. The principles of Emily's school, which are articulated on its website, seem to be reflected in Emily's approach and sense of herself as someone who is willing to speak out and to take on representative roles. The school aims to create students with personal confidence, who hold opinions and express them, are independent learners, take involvement in school life, and engage with a range of academic and extra-curricular interests. The school is happy for students to embrace controversial ideas, as long as they can substantiate their arguments for them with evidence (Bursary notes, from school website). Whilst I acknowledge that the school's web content needs to be read with critical awareness, since it is a form of marketing, it does openly position itself within a particular frame. The school's website also has a section devoted to underlining the benefits of investing in a private education, here expressed in terms of a beneficial return on investment in relation to the substantial costs involved, which it suggests translate into a 20% salary premium by age 33. This reflects the dominant contemporary narrative of investment in education as a means to gain enhanced economic outcomes. Ultimately, Emily decided to go to university to continue her studies, which meant that she followed the accepted route for maintaining and building on middle-class advantage by attending a high status university.

Grace was also from what she acknowledged was an affluent background. She was age 18 and in her first year studying English Literature when we met. She originally lived in the south of England but her mother had moved to a Northern city. Grace's parents were both professionals working in the sciences. Grace self-identified as upper middle-class. Grace had significant experience of higher education within her family; her parents and grandparents had all attended university. She has always wanted to work in the theatre and 'could not imagine doing anything else' (interview, 3.5.2013). Grace's parents fully supported her intentions. Her school was a large state school, which was very unusual in its buildings and location and had a very long history. Grace described the school as:

> "….a big, unwieldy comprehensive in Woodley. It was a great school. It was a brilliant school when my big brothers went, and then it got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger as the population of the local area grew, and by the time I left they were really struggling. The communication had broken down between different departments and it was too difficult to organise anything or keep a cohesive kind of aim for the school, where we should be going and results were starting to go down so I was a little bit unlucky in that it wasn't at its best when I was there, but it is a great place. It was a very special place because we had a real mixture. I come from a reasonably privileged background. I have got two professional parents, but there were people from all sorts of life there, which was a fantastic social education."
>
> (interview, 11.6.2015)

The school was rated as 'requiring improvement' by Ofsted in 2014, though in 2016 was rated as 'good'. Currently, the school has significantly fewer than the national average for students receiving free school meals (13.8% compared with 29.1%). In 2016-17, 63% of the sixth form students gained university places, with 13% gaining places at Russell Group universities (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). James *et al.'s* study (2010:635), into counter-intuitive middle-class secondary school choice, found that the middle-class families they researched were able to make choices which the competitive education market would suggest are less favourable, without losing out on their 'educational credentials, opportunities and progression'. This was due to parental willingness to intervene and influence outcomes and to schools being anxious to hold on to their middle-class students. They retained their middle-class advantage despite attending a school which did not appear to offer the best results (*ibid.*). This, in turn, underlines that 'neoliberal assumptions about market, choice, and quality, are simply too crude to cope with the subtlety of the relationship between social class and education' (*ibid.*:635). Grace put huge effort and hard work into her school studies and the life of the school, becoming Head Girl; these achievements are not diminished by the recognition that her decision to attend university was also informed by her family's cultural capital and past experience of higher education.

Grace had always intended to go to university; there was no other option in her mind. She decided to take a degree in English and to study drama after her first degree. She applied to another university in the Russell Group, with Northern as her insurance choice. In retrospect, however, she felt that she had been very fortunate to study at Northern, where she had

found the staff very caring; they had 'invested in our personal development' (interview, 28.10.2015). She told me that she felt:

> "….a loyalty and affection for Northern Uni, and its English department, to which I owe a real debt of gratitude."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 16.4.2018)

As a first-year student she recognised university as a key point of transition, at which 'you get general life skills, the social side of it….you need to think how you fit into the wider social strata' (interview, 3.5.2013). As a first year, Grace was aware of the stratification of higher education and recognised the importance of knowing which universities offered the best chances:

> "Employability? – it's a high status degree from a high status university."
>
> (interview, 3.5.2013)

Grace felt fully supported by her family in her choices, unlike Lucy who battled with her father about her higher education. Lucy wanted to study drama, but her father was concerned about the precarious nature of careers in the theatre. Although he had come from a background of 'borderline poverty', he had attended university, thus 'bettering himself' (interview 25.9.2014; 1.6.2015). He regarded Lucy's ambitions as taking a 'step back from the comfortable upbringing' and the advantages her parents had provided (interview 1.6.2015). Lucy was age 20 when we first met and was studying English Literature. She was from Stockridge and had attended the local state high school, which she told me was academically ambitious and which she thought was 'weird for a state school'. The school was rated as 'outstanding' (Ofsted report) during Lucy's time there. She was part of a 'gifted and talented' programme which offered additional learning opportunities and support for applications to Russell Group universities to the top 10% of students academically. The school has considerably lower than the national average of students qualifying for free school meals (10.6% compared with 29.1%) and 70% of students gain places at university, with 28% going to Russell Group institutions (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Both of Lucy's parents had degrees, so there was experience of higher education in her family. She applied for a top university and a drama school but did not get

accepted by either. She described this as a 'knock-back' which she had to quickly recover from and re-think what she was going to do. Lucy had a passion for English and had loved studying it at school, though she did consider studying Law which her father would have preferred. She was aware from her family, as well as her school, that Northern University was 'a really good one':

> "I knew of Northern University actually quite well because my Godmother's daughter came here to do Law, which was the subject that I was originally applying to University for, so when I made the concession about drama school my last act of rebellion was applying for English rather than that, so yeah, I knew that the University was a really good one."
>
> (interview, 1.6.2015)

As Lucy told me, when she reflected back over her decisions just before she graduated, her father had told her he considered studying English at University 'a waste of time' yet, once she could show him how well she was doing academically, he 'came around to it' (interview, 1.6.2015). Ultimately Lucy pursued her ambitions to become an actor and writer, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

The students' stories presented here demonstrate that background, social class and schooling can affect an individual's choices and expectations of which university to attend. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977, 1979) work in the field of education showed that social context, background, family, and schools were found to be highly influential and this is widely acknowledged in scholarship (Reay 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Redmond, 2006; Burke *et al.*, 2012; Tomlinson, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; English and Bolton, 2016). My data provides evidence that middle-class advantage is passed on in a number of ways, including through family, schools, and peers. However, schools and teachers can play a key role for those whose family does not have previous experience of higher education. Conversely, where middle-class students attend schools which do not have a strong record of entrants to higher status institutions, middle-class cultural capital has been an important factor in guiding choices. In this discussion, parents, teachers and friends have emerged as key influencers, although some students lacked that support, as will be further explored in the following section.

Choosing English Studies

Having contextualised 'choice' in relation to my student research participants' decisions to attend Northern University, I will now turn my attention to another important aspect of choice in higher education. In this section I will consider what influenced the choice of the discipline of English Studies amongst my student research participants. Government policy discourse suggests motivations to enter higher education are the individualistic, calculated, and economically rational decisions of informed consumers seeking to maximise the economic returns on their investment in a university education (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2015; Reay, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Yet, as with Reay *et al.'s* (2005) study, I found little evidence of this amongst my student research participants. Instead, in the main, they expressed their wishes to follow courses of study which they would enjoy and were congruent with their sense of self. English Studies did not give a clear career path, in contrast to choosing a more vocational discipline such as Law, Medicine, or Business Studies. Popular media discourse, such as the online magazine 'the Tab' (Shuckman, 2014) and research studies (*e.g.* Sutton Trust and de Vries, 2014) have reported that graduates in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences tend to earn less than those studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects. More recently, these findings have been confirmed by the Government's LEO data (DfE, 2018).

However, rather than placing ideas about potential employability and future earnings to the fore, the overwhelming motivation which students spoke of was to study a subject they loved. Whilst many were conscious that there would be decisions in the future about jobs and careers, for many people employability was an idea which only began to come more clearly into focus as time went on and they progressed towards graduation. Even where students did begin considering their employability at earlier stages, they told me their decision to study English had been made based on their interest and fascination with the subject. My data shows that emotional rather than simply rational processes are involved in students' choices; love for the subject and a sense, expressed by a number of people, of being able to do better academically if you study something you enjoy. Most people had very little idea about their future careers during their university studies, although they did acknowledge they would ultimately need to get a job. Many parents had encouraged a choice of a discipline which their sons and daughters would enjoy. Some students' parents, like Anna's father, were an influential and ongoing presence in their lives and their decisions

about university, module choices, and preparing for employment; others, like Lucy's father, created tensions about her imagined future, and tried to influence her to take a more vocational pathway.

Emily's teacher had studied Linguistics at Northern University and inspired her; she was fascinated by language and wanted to study it at university level. Jonathan, whom I met as a recent graduate, had not studied English at A Level, but was very interested in learning about Linguistics and applied out of interest in the subject. He had studied for his A levels at a Further Education college which was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted, which has 21% of its students progressing to university and 2% going to the Russell Group. Jonathan self-identified as middle-class 'but not affluent'. His parents were both teachers who have university educations and they fully supported Jonathan in his choices:

> "I was absolutely fascinated by the subject and obviously I studied the foreign language on the side of that which opened up a number of opportunities as well, but really….the main reason….that I chose English was just a real feeling that this is what I want to study, this is what I am interested in."
>
> (interview, 29.1.2015)

Grace's parents wanted her to be happy; she loved studying English and had a sense of a vocation for the theatre which she wanted to follow:

> "I want to be challenged and I want to be challenged in the areas I am interested in.…I felt my brain's a little bit of a diva in that regard, if I was just a little bit less fascinated by English Lit and by theatre then I could probably be happy doing something else."
>
> (interview, 8.10.2014)

Although Grace acknowledged her background was relatively affluent, she was aware of the cost of a university education, she told me that the 'Nine grand a year' kept her working hard, she didn't want to waste it (interview, 3.5.2013). Grace felt that the discipline of English and her extra-curricular involvement in drama, which she loved, would also help her achieve her aims to be an actor.

Student Zoe had chosen English because she enjoyed it at school. She had no clear ideas about her future career and her mother had stressed the importance of studying something she would enjoy. Zoe was 18 when I first met her. She felt that going to university had been the expected route for everyone from her faith grammar school in Apperley, a market town in the North of England. The school was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted and had very high levels of students going to university (88%) with 58% gaining places in the Russell Group. Eligibility for free school meals amongst the school population was very low at 3.7% in comparison to the national average of 29.1% (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Zoe self-identified as middle class and both of her parents have degrees, so she had experience of higher education in her family to support her choices.

Ashley's mum, who had a degree and was professionally qualified in her field, also encouraged her to do something which she enjoyed whether it led to a job or not, rather than taking a degree in Law which Ashley had been considering. Ashley was from a small town in the South of England, Winchurch, and attended the local state high school. The school was rated as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted in 2012, but has more recently been identified as requiring improvement. 62% of its students go to university with 16% going to Russell Group universities (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Ashley was 21 when I met her and was studying English Literature. Morgan, who identified as working-class and came from Riverbank in the North of England, was 20 when I first met her. Morgan had started a degree in Law at another Russell Group university but had not enjoyed it. Even though a Law degree might have offered a stable career path, she decided to change to English Literature at Northern University in order to study a subject she was interested in.

Emma also chose to study English because it was a subject that she loved. She was age 20 and in her second year studying English Language when we met. She came from Linwood, a city in the Midlands, where she had attended a state school. The school is rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted and has lower than average levels of students eligible for free school meals, 9% as compared with 29.1%. At the school, 51% of students go on to university with 20% gaining places at Russell Group institutions (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Emma was the first in her family to attend university. Her father was an engineer and her mother was a manager. Both were very keen for Emma to take up the opportunity for a higher education which they had not had themselves. She told me her

parents had a 'massive drive' for their daughter to go to university and for her to choose a discipline she would enjoy:

> "I think now more so University is kind of a natural choice and one that you….well I certainly felt it was a natural progression….but I also think within our family there is a lot of support from mums, dads, aunts and uncles to do what they weren't able to and I think….well I know definitely….my parents feel like they could be a lot further or could have progressed a lot quicker to where they are now in their careers had they been to university."
>
> (interview, 24.6. 2015)

> "My parents didn't influence my discipline, they only stressed that they wanted me to study something I was interested in and would enjoy. They were great when it came to choosing a university, driving me to open days, looking through all of the literature, speaking to friends whose children attended university."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 14.11.2016)

Cameron, Ashley, and Amelia, spoke of their 'fantastic' and 'inspiring' teachers who had enabled them to imagine studying English at University. Overall, the student research participants made a conscious choice to study a subject they loved which did not offer any clear vocational pathway; they did not talk in terms of a rational calculation of what this would mean in career and return on investment, which stands in contrast to policy ideas of motivations towards university study. Although few students spoke of their future employability when discussing their choices, in the following section I will explore the ways in which some students did think about their future employability, for example as a result of parental pressures and concerns, their sense of vocation for a particular profession, or their concerns about making a financial contribution to help offset family costs.

How does employability intersect with choices?

In government policy, employability is seen as a major motivating factor in students' choices. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which students talked to me about employability in relation to their choice of discipline. However, firstly, I also note that considerations about employability had not generally influenced students' decisions to apply to study English at Northern University. An indicator of this finding came from the open days. In Chapter 4, I have outlined the way in which open days enable potential students and their parents to find out more about the degree programmes and the university itself. Many students told

me that the open day had been important in their decision-making process: seeing the School and the University; hearing about the degree programmes; meeting staff and students; and finding out about the surrounding city. This specific content of the open days had helped students make their choice. However, their choices were *not* made on the basis of future employability. As I have outlined in Chapter 4, students did not usually ask questions relating to employability and careers at open days. When students made the choice of an institution and a discipline, they were focused on their transition into their higher education with three years stretching in front of them. Many of my student research participants only began to consider their future careers as they approached the end of their studies. However, as I got to know these students, they shared with me some of the pressures they had experienced when making their choice of discipline.

Choices and employability: parent and school pressures

Catriona had been influenced by her parents and her school to choose a subject area which might lead to employment. As we have seen, after one and a half academic years at Northern University, she decided it was not what she wanted to study. She changed courses and took English, choosing the discipline for love of the subject. Catriona felt her original choice had been made out of fear: 'I have just got to choose something that would get me a job easily afterwards' (interview, 10.12.2014). Catriona found she was much happier studying English Literature despite its lack of a clear career pathway. Enjoying her studies was important to Catriona. Her non-linear trajectory - which meant that she had to repeat 18 months of study and take additional time along with studying a non-vocational subject and increasing her costs - was clearly not made on the basis of Rational Actor theory.

Catriona did not know what she wanted to do as a career and focused on enjoying the subject she had chosen, this time making her choice out of 'joy and interest'. She did not take any career development modules which focused on employability, because she wanted to take the opportunity to study as many English modules as she could whilst she had the opportunity. However, in her final year, she was feeling the anxieties of the next transition looming and compared the stresses and tensions of the university environment to a diver going deeper and deeper in the sea, with the pressure becoming stronger and stronger as the years went on. In her third year she felt:

> "….really stressed out….and I am really scared. I am terribly afraid of not getting the grade I want, wasting all this money and five years of my life and I do look around and think, was it worth it?"
>
> (interview, 23.1.2017)

The fear and anxiety Catriona was experiencing may have been a reflection of the risk she had taken moving into the classed field of higher education and the expectations created by doing so, which she felt she needed to live up to. Catriona loved the subject and found the School a comfortable and welcoming place. However, despite enjoying her studies and working hard, she was afraid of failing to achieve the degree result she felt was needed to be counted as a success and to be able to move on to the kind of career she was hoping for. Lucey and Reay's (2002) study of social class differentiation and anxiety at a time of transition during education, offers insights into the pressures faced by young people like Catriona. This is due to the deepening social divisions within a marketized educational system in which academic success is associated with achieving, or maintaining, social and cultural locations 'as a defence against uncertainty' (Lucey and Reay, 2002:334). Yet, this involves 'a great deal of social, cultural and psychic work' (*ibid.*:334). Many students, whether self-identifying as working-class like Catriona or middle-class like Anna, felt anxieties about their degree results and their future transition into a career. This anxiety prompted students to engage in significant additional extra-curricular work to create additional credentials that might help them achieve success.

Anna's father played a key role in her decision-making. Anna was age 18 and in her first year studying English Literature when we first met. She was from a town in the North of England. Anna's father worked for a major organisation in recruitment and her mother had retired after working in administration. Anna identified as middle class and had attended a fee-paying independent school. She told me she had always intended to apply for a Russell Group university and was aware of their higher status. Her school's website describes the strong support structure it has put in place to encourage applications to Oxbridge and other highly competitive university courses. The school was inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, which found that senior students were 'exceptionally well educated'. Anna's parents and teachers encouraged her to take a subject she would enjoy; she was interested in a career in the media or the Arts. Anna also spoke on several occasions about the influence of her father who was very 'career-oriented', due to his professional involvement

in recruitment, and who was always happy to give her advice. A module which involved a placement with a creative sector organisation was a 'selling point' for Anna when choosing Northern due to her interest in working in the Arts (interview, 12.12.2012). Anna and her father viewed the module as a good way of 'getting a foot in the door' from a employment perspective (interview, 11.6.2015).

Parental influence, which passes on social and cultural capital and distinction through practical mastery and tacit knowledge, can help children progress (Savage *et al.*, 2015); Anna's father was well versed in 'employability thinking' due to his work in recruitment. He made Anna clearly aware of how to create social and cultural capital, for example giving her advice *not* to have a job during term time. He advised her, instead, to concentrate on societies, extra-curricular activity, and on her role in a university sports team - which she eventually captained. These were activities which provided her with connections and valuable experience for her CV and job applications.

Choices and employability: a sense of vocation

A small minority of my student research participants told me that they knew from their school days what they wanted to do after university. This sense of vocation made them aware of developing their employability for their chosen field. Grace and Lucy wanted to work in the theatre and had chosen courses which offered them the opportunity to be involved with drama. They both sought out the extra-curricular activities, such as the University theatre society and youth theatres, and specific modules which related to their interest in drama. Grace and Lucy saw this as being helpful to their aim to progress to drama school and to help validate their potential employability for a career in the theatre. Audrey also had a sense of her vocation as a writer and became involved with a writers' organisation outside the university from Stage 1 onwards. She knew that it was difficult to earn a living as a writer, telling me 'poetry would not buy her bread'. She was aware that she would need to find work to sustain her (interview, 24.9.2014). Audrey was age 18 and in her first year when we met. She was studying English Literature and was very involved in extra-curricular creative writing activities, both in the university and outside it. Audrey was from Colnwich, a town in the South of England. Her father had attended university and had a professional job and her mother worked in administration. Audrey had attended the local state high school and a large 6th Form college, which is currently rated as 'good' by Ofsted. The college

supports students in their applications to universities, including the Russell Group. 52% of its students went to university, of which 11% had gained places in a Russell Group institution (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Audrey had decided to go 'far away' to university and had wanted to go to a Russell Group university. She identified as lower middle-class; Audrey felt her family were 'sort of middle-class', telling me that they lived in a small council house and had been hard up in the past but were now comfortable. Audrey was gaining experience which would support her development and practice as a creative writer, and by doing so was laying foundations for her future.

However, very few of the students had this clear sense of what they wanted to do in the future and they were not actively considering careers or employability when making their choices. Often, individuals' experiences during their higher education studies helped them identify what they hoped for or what they did not see themselves as doing. Audrey, Grace, and Lucy joined particular communities of practice alongside their studies (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), relating to creative writing or the theatre. This helped them begin to build the credentials and experience that would develop their practice and thus their employability. I will explore this further in Chapters 6 and 7.

Choices and employability: 'looking after my pocket'

Michael did not have a particular career in mind when he applied to university, although he was interested in journalism, marketing, advertising, and writing (interview, 25.11.2014). When I first met him, in his first term at Northern University, he felt that his future career was a 'mystery' (interview, 25.11.2014). Michael felt that he was good at the subject at school, so it was not something he 'had to grapple with' and his teachers had made it appealing. However, in his second year he had started to think about his future employability and spoke of the way that he felt he needed to 'make himself as employable as possible'. Michael had always had part-time jobs since doing a paper round when he was age 12 – very few of my research participants had worked to this extent. He was always aware that he needed a job at the end of his degree, but he also felt that he needed to earn money during his studies: 'I have to look after my pocket unfortunately' (interview, 8.10.2015). Michael worked around 10 hours per week in a customer service role with an upmarket, highly-regarded retailer based in a prosperous suburb. He also volunteered at the Riverside Youth Project, which is based in a very deprived part of the city near to his own

home area (field diary 25.11.2014). The project's aims are to work with 11-25 year olds to address the disadvantage which comes from low income, lack of opportunity, unemployment, and various forms of exclusion. Michael regarded the project as being very important for his local community. Both his dad's and his mum's bosses had emphasised to him that 'experience counts more these days than it used to….it sets people apart…degrees are becoming more and more common and as such less valuable….' (interview, 8.10.2015). Hence, Michael's wider social networks provided access to information and advice and created cultural capital. Michael was therefore aware that work experience and volunteering were helpful to his employability, but he felt that he did not choose to do them for that particular reason. Michael's trajectory will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Fiona told me that she had always had in mind that she needed to get a job after graduation, due to her family circumstances. However, she had chosen English Studies rather than a more vocational discipline because she was attracted by studying language and Linguistics, rather than on the basis of enhancing her employability:

> "I never felt any pressure to choose a vocational degree which would automatically lead to a job. I definitely wanted to study something I was interested in."
>
> (interview 13.11.2014)

Fiona was age 20 when I met her. She described her family as a single-parent family which had struggled financially. Fiona's mother had studied for a degree as a mature student on a government-funded scheme. Whilst Fiona felt that in some ways she was working-class, she actually lived in a 'nice middle-class village and went to a nice middle-class school', which she suggested implied she was middle-class. Her school was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted, had very low numbers of students eligible for free school meals (6.1% compared with a national average of 29.1%) and had significant numbers of students gaining places at university (70%) including at Russell Group universities (50%) (National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Fiona told me that she was determined to avoid having financial struggles, even though her family were now more comfortable. She even aimed to be financially independent during her studies through having a part-time job. This could be seen as part of Fiona's habitus; her past experiences and sense of distance from necessity are shaping her approach to present circumstances and future possibilities (Bourdieu, 1984;

Savage *et al.*, 2015). She had chosen to study English with a foreign language as a subsidiary subject. However, in terms of module choices within her course, Fiona decided to combine her part-time work (with the university marketing team) with centrally-provided career development modules. This enabled her to save study time by gaining academic credit for the paid work she was already doing. Fiona saw this as a means of achieving financial independence and to building up work experience that would help to differentiate her in the future.

Although some students seemed more aware of a need to consider their employability, due to their sense of vocation or to their awareness of the need to earn a living, everyone I worked with told me they had chosen their discipline out of love and interest. Catriona and Morgan, for instance, had chosen a more vocational degree but had changed to English in order to enjoy their studies, rather than continue with a degree they were not enjoying. However, many student research participants spoke of difficult conversations with family, friends, and peers about what a degree in English would mean in the future. These students were able to counter perceptions of the limited value of a degree in English, a point I now turn to in further detail.

Choice of discipline: running counter to 'dispiriting discourses'.

As I have outlined in a previous section, students actively chose English Studies because they loved it and had been inspired to apply to spend three years studying the subject at university. However, a number of students spoke of their experience of what one of the Heads of School referred to as the 'dispiriting discourse' around studying English. Indeed, during my research with students, I heard them relate several anecdotes about taxi drivers, the media, relatives, and friends studying other subjects, disparaging the discipline and the people they came across and making assumptions about the limitations of career paths and incomes following graduation. Yet students themselves were able to counter those dispiriting popular discourses and assumptions with positive expressions of the value of English Studies. They demonstrated their awareness of the potential and openness it created for them in terms of future careers.

Students Grace and Ashley both related how taxi-drivers had asked them: 'English Lit – what are you going to do with that?' Rosie, Megan, Morgan and Cameron had all experienced

their friends from other disciplines making assumptions of the limitations on their career possibilities: 'So you are going to be a teacher'. Zoe told me about an article in the online Tab Magazine (Shuckman, 2014) entitled 'How much money will you earn with your useless degree?' which gave details of graduate income statistics, claiming that only Music graduates earn less than English graduates. Rosie's boyfriend and his friends, who were studying engineering and sciences, felt that it would be difficult to get a job with a degree in English.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Cameron's grandfather (a retired scientist) and his friends had told him they saw English as 'a pointless degree'. Similarly Lucy's father thought English was a 'waste of time'. Megan's friends, who were taking sciences, saw English as a lightweight option because there was very little contact time, but did not realise the amount of independent work that was required. Some of Ashley's friendship group had mocked her degree and lack of contact time, '£9,000 for 6 hours a week!' (field diary, 25.6.2015); however, she did not accept that fees and contact time could be related to each other. Ultimately, Ashley believed that the self discipline and commitment which English required became a virtue in terms of showing capability and the capacity for independent learning. Like Ashley, other students responded with positive counter-narratives. Cameron felt that:

> "English is like the widest of all the Humanities. Like you just have a massive perspective on life. You know if you know how to communicate, which is obviously important and I just think it's, like, you know, when you study how people communicate and why people write things down and why people say things, then you just have a broader perspective."
>
> (interview, 10.6.2015)

Cameron did not agree with his grandfather that his degree was pointless, because it gave significant insights into how people work, human nature, and communications. Because English is so broad, it opened up job choices and Cameron felt he could go into anything from it. People used a number of metaphors relating to this openness and the opportunities it could create for the future. For Catriona, English was a springboard and 'a great way to get a general foundation laid' (interview, 10.12.2014). Emma saw that English left a lot of doors open and, for Grace, 'Literature is the study of life' (interview, 3.5.2013) which meant that English gave great depth and insight in many ways.

Megan also felt that English was a very open degree, which gave her options – she felt that this meant that there was no need to know what comes afterwards, in terms of jobs, when making the choice to study English. For Michael, English offered a 'multitude of routes after university' (interview, 8.10.2015). He was happy to be doing a non-vocational subject because of this. Michael also felt that his communication skills were better than his friends who had taken STEM subjects, he considered that 'they can't communicate well' in comparison. Abigail told me she saw her discipline as an open path, it was not a dead end, unlike a vocational degree. Fiona saw the benefit of the independent working, because people are not spoon-fed during an English degree and, for Ruby, English is an 'all-round-subject' creating rounded people (interview, 23.4.2013).

Thus, students understood and expressed the value of their discipline in terms which are much broader than economic value and recognises the potential for a wide range of career trajectories. In choosing English they are resisting the popular policy discourses which can be seen as presenting more vocational disciplines as more attractive and leading to better-remunerated careers.

Chapter conclusions

In this Chapter I have discussed the multifaceted idea of 'choice'. I have contrasted the complex trajectories of the student research participants with more linear and restricted government policy ideas about the nature of choice. The stories of the students show that choice is affected by the webs of relationships and influences which individuals are embedded in, including social class, family background, schooling, and friendship groups. However, there are also commonalities and differences which cut across and within class, family, and schooling; people do not fall into simple categories. Each of the student research participants had attended schools which support university applications. Yet, schools are being judged on their success in the levels of students getting into university, and into the Russell Group. They are expected to collect and present such data (*e.g.* National Statistics, Find and compare schools in England, 2018). Therefore, an awareness of the possibility of attending university may well increasingly come into people's consciousness even where parents do not have past experience of higher education.

For many students in this study, however, university has been a 'natural' choice and part of their expected middle-class trajectory; they have been aware of the significance of attending a Russell Group university in terms of the hierarchy of Higher Education Institutions. Cultural capital can be seen to play a role, for instance Anna and Emily's private schooling made a Russell Group university the 'obvious' choice. Middle-class students, such as Grace and Ashley, attended schools which were not delivering the best results in terms of their Ofsted inspections and were not achieving such high levels of students going to more high status universities. Yet, Ashley and Grace's family experience, cultural capital, and knowledge of middle class distinctions and tastes, have helped to inform their choices. Lucy attended a state school, which had a gifted and talented scheme aimed at getting students into Russell Group universities; she also had middle-class family knowledge of the value of Northern University and the Russell Group. However, her path was complicated by issues relating to class, parental resistance, and what she described as her acts of rebellion. She needed to manage her father's anxieties about her choices.

In instructive contrast are the experiences of those students self-identifying as working-class and lower middle-class who have come to Northern University. Their pathways are also varied, sometimes arriving through serendipitous changes in their trajectories. Michael attended a school with a middle-class social mix rather than the school he would have been expected to attend, which led to his realisation that university could be 'for the likes of me' (Bourdieu, 1990a:64; see also Thrupp, 1999). This led to Michael accessing a higher education through a widening participation scheme. Rosie was influenced away from her original choices of universities and her fears of not being able to fit in at a high status university by her teacher and her mother. Both Michael and Rosie have gone on to have transformational experiences in the field of education which have changed their habitus and helped them gain social and cultural capital. This influenced their trajectories and supported their employability. Catriona and Michael became aware of the reputational capital of Northern University and the relative symbolic capital associated with its degrees. However, they have experienced some difficult negotiations of identity and anxieties in their other social worlds as they have navigated the journey of upward social mobility. For middle-class, privately-educated students, like Anna, there are also anxieties and tensions about their future trajectories as they try to meet the expectations of gaining a graduate job and consolidate the advantages from their backgrounds, schooling, social and cultural capital and

high status degree (Ehrenreich, 1990). The students' transitions and their decision-making about their careers will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 6. Traditions, transformations and transitions

Introduction

The lecture theatre was filling up with prospective students and their parents. It was an extremely busy open day, so much so that I waited to see if there would be a seat, having agreed with the Head of School that I wouldn't take a place that a potential student might need. The crowded room came to a hush as the Degree Programme Director began to speak about the School, its staff, students, and curricula. He described the setting of the University and the vibrant city which surrounds it. Speaking of future destinations and careers from English Studies, the Head of School then asked a deep and searching question of the students: 'What do you want to do with your life?' The dispiriting public discourses which I have outlined in Chapter 5, characterise English Studies as limiting in terms of future careers. Yet, rather than the constraints so clearly expressed in the taxi driver's question - 'What are you going to do with that?!' - the Head of School asked the prospective students this much deeper and more open question, full of possibility and potential. He suggested that this was not just a question of getting a job; there were more profound considerations at stake. A choice to study English opens up not only 'very broad perspectives on life' (as recognised in the counter-narratives of students explored in Chapter 5, which align the views of the Head of School and the philosophy of Personal Growth) but also a very wide choice of careers, as the testimony and destinations of the student research participants evidences. This includes students and graduates actively seeking what they will find meaningful, satisfying, and enjoyable as a career.

Academic staff member Mary had told me during my fieldwork that, in her experience, as students near graduation and consider their next transition, they often needed help to tell 'the story which is beyond the story that is on their transcripts'. These are the stories which this chapter will tell, stories which are much richer and more complex than government policy ideas based on Human Capital (Becker, 1975) and Rational Actor (Scott, 2000) theories, which define success in economic terms and which take access to opportunity as a given. Having provided a critical account of choices in Chapter 5, in this chapter I will trace the experiences of a number of students and graduates of English Studies from Northern University, and their developing ideas about career directions congruent with their identities, which they considered would offer them the possibility of happiness and

fulfilment. They defined success in broader terms than economic outcomes. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, although some student participants struggled to articulate what they could offer an employer in terms of their disciplinary studies, they did ultimately come to an understanding of the value of their skills, including those that they recognised had been developed by the degree-level study of English, in the context of their careers.

In this chapter, I will present some of the student research participants' stories as they have developed over time. I have been privileged to hear them not only during the students' time at Northern University, but also after their graduation and entry into their careers. I will also reflect on the social mission of English Studies, which was established during the formation of the discipline and which remains important even today. Research has shown (Goodwyn, 1992; Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999) that personal growth remains a philosophy which is strongly embedded in the teaching of English. My own research suggests it informs the ethos of the School and has played a role in the personal development and ultimately the career decisions of my research participants. In this chapter I am arguing that this ethos, and the curricula and pedagogical approaches of the discipline themselves, help to develop employable graduates by providing a broader preparation for twenty-first century work than a focus on generic employability skills or narrow vocationalism.

This argument must also be set in the context of the increasing complexity of the workplace at a time of rapid and uncertain shifts in the economy and society, including the impact of technological changes resulting from the digital age. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, these shifts and changes have been creating ever more challenging demands within the labour market (Harvey, 2001; Tomlinson, 2013b; Bridgstock, 2016, 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017). Concerns about changing work, jobs, and future skills needs, have led to a plethora of research, articles, and reports (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2014, 2017; Autor, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; UUK, 2016, 2018; Deming 2017; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017; Taylor, 2017; Diamond, 2018; McKeon, 2018; Moro, 2018) which outline the anticipated needs of future workplaces. In response, employability needs to be understood as a work in progress throughout a working life (Yorke, 2004; European Policy Strategy Centre (EPSC), 2016). It is anticipated that there will be further disruption as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics lead to greater automation, although the extent to which this will affect the number of jobs is the subject of debate. Research by

Deloitte (2015) suggests that, although AI and robotics have been developing rapidly, between 2001 and 2015 it is estimated that automation has created four times as many jobs as have been lost (*ibid.*). Although increasing automation may reduce some job roles, Frey and Osborne (2014) predict that roles which are high in human empathy, interaction, emotional intelligence, and creativity will continue.

The need for higher education to provide learning which supports the development of critical capabilities and enabling people to 'filter and synthesise information effectively', has been identified by Bridgstock (2016:314). She carried out research with professionals and organisations working in the digital sphere, including fields such as online marketing, communications, and digital publishing. They saw value in recruiting graduates who had a capacity for continual learning, who could relate to people and think broadly; graduates who were able to understand the expectations of audiences and bring a critical awareness to the proliferation of sources on-line. On-line sources required a critical approach and created the need to demonstrate quality and credibility (*ibid*.). These professionals and organisations valued:

> "….critical thinking, communication and even meta-cognitive skills, such as learning how to learn. The interviewees' preference was to hire graduates from courses other than those focusing on digital content, particularly the Arts and Humanities."
>
> (Bridgstock, 2016:309)

This echoed an email which I had been copied into, sent by an academic staff-member, which offered an interesting perspective from her own experience on the possibilities for Humanities graduates in the digital age:

> "A friend of mine left North City last year to go to a very swanky job with Google at their head office in CA, and he has a PhD in philosophy. The only other person I know who has a senior role in IT has a music degree, and has told me that he'd rather recruit a Humanities graduate with good analytical and communications skills and train them in computing than recruit someone with a computing background who lacks those 'soft' skills."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 21.5.2012)

Research commissioned by innovation foundation Nesta (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2017) considers overall economic and societal trends and drivers of change, and how these might influence

the creation of new jobs as well as the impacts of automation. Their research report, 'The future of skills: Employment in 2030' (*ibid.*), identifies that there will be a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills, as organisations 'navigate the cultural context in which globalisation and the spread of digital technology are taking place' (Tett, 2017:1). Higher order cognitive skills, such as active learning and fluency of ideas, are also predicted to be important. Systems skills, the ability to recognise, understand, and act on interconnections between society's complex infrastructures and human behaviours (including interaction with technologies in the workplace) which require analysis, judgement, evaluation, and decision-making, will also be significant (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2017). Social skills and perceptiveness are of increasing importance in the labour market (Deming, 2017). From their research, Bakhshi *et al.* (2017) predict that the future workforce will need broad-based knowledge in addition to specific professional knowledge for particular occupations, identifying broad-based areas such as English Language as being associated with jobs which are projected to increase in the future (*ibid.*). Given these predictions about future skills needs, I am arguing that the disciplines of English Studies - with their emphasis on personal development and growth, the embedded skills of critical analysis, of learning how to learn and the ability to place human experience in context - provide an appropriate preparation for twenty-first century work and participation in society at a time of rapid change.

As I have outlined in Chapter 2, Rust and Froud (2011) identify a false dichotomy between disciplinary learning and learning for employability. My research evidences, through the testimony of staff, students, and graduates, that employability can be developed by disciplinary learning within English Studies. Whilst some of the employability literature highlights the concerns of stakeholders that employability is a threat to disciplinary learning (Speight *et al.*, 2013), other scholars argue that good higher education learning in itself creates employable graduates, who are critical, analytical thinkers who can quickly adapt in the workplace (Harvey, 2003, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011). Harvey (2003:1) argues that employability 'grows out of good learning' and that it is not simply about getting a job. Instead 'the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. Employment is a by-product of this enabling process' (Harvey, 2004:3). The evidence from my study supports these latter views.

This thesis argues that employability is a complex, socially embedded process of lifelong situated learning (Wenger, 1998; Harvey, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2004), which needs to be seen holistically and understood in context. I am arguing that the concept of personal growth from English (Dixon, 1967) - which I discussed in my introduction - is a powerful philosophy which, by supporting individuals in their personal development, underpins their future employability. As Gibbons (2017) has identified, personal growth is not a neatly-defined model but a progressive approach based on empowerment and challenge which is highly student-centred. Many academic staff members - and students too – perceived the overarching governmental discourses of employability limiting, lacking integration with the discipline, and reflective of larger, institutional, national, and international agendas rather than the students' day to day experience. At the same time, it was clearly evident that staff members were focused on developing their students and enabling them to become graduates who, as academic staff member Sienna told me, are 'critical-thinking subjects' (interview, 9.11.2015) and citizens of the world and society; people who will be highly valued by employers and who will be able to progress within the careers they choose to follow. Staff members sought to support the personal growth of individuals, which in turn develops people who are employable in a wide range of fields.

The 25 students I worked most closely with have gone into a wide range of careers in 19 different sectors. This is an indication of the many routes that were available to them, which they sought out and were equipped to take on. A chart showing their destinations is included in the appendices (Appendix B), although presenting this in chart form is not intended to place people whom I know and respect as complex individuals into neat boxes. This chart is intended to inform and assist the reader of this thesis, by drawing together and presenting key aspects of each individual's experience, whilst acknowledging that this can only be a brief summary of the richly detailed data which has been shared with me. Some people have gone into fields which are particularly difficult to enter, such as the Arts; some have taken graduate posts with major national and international organisations and businesses; others have entered professions such as teaching. They have developed as people who have a sense of their identity, who can imagine and pursue a career direction which feels right for them. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, they have bridged the perception gap about their skills and are making a valued contribution to the organisations they work for. This has been supported by their disciplinary studies and module choices, their extra-

curricular activities, their part-time working and volunteering, and their approaches to exploring and identifying future career possibilities. I have also noted that, whilst graduates have been able to take a variety of directions after their studies, the playing field is not even. Opportunities are not equally available and this is part of the complex picture that I am presenting. It is important to consider the testimony about the ethos of the School and discipline, gathered from staff and students, which contributes to an understanding of students' career motivations, definitions of success and employability from English.

Employability and English Studies

In Chapter 5, I outlined my findings that students choosing to study for a degree in English largely did not have specific career intentions, but chose the subject for love and interest. Three years of study and the major transition into higher education were more to the forefront of people's minds than their career and their employability after graduation. As Grace told me:

> "…not many people in Stage 1 know what they are going to do after university….the working world feels a long way from academia."
>
> (interview, 3.5.2013)

She felt that people were 'finding their feet' when they first arrived at university. Grace did not use the Careers Service very much, despite her recognition that in Stage 3 'it was almost too late'. Similarly, Olivia told me that she was not considering careers during her first year and that she was not yet able to think about what she might be doing 5 or 10 years in the future (interview, 24.11.2014). Careers Service staff members confirmed the low take-up of central services by students from the School (field diary, 12.2.2013, 15.8.2014, 9.11.2015). Academic staff member Mary mentioned the conversations she had with final year students each year who were still not clear on what would come next or what their destination would be (interview, 25.11.2015). There were exceptions, such as student Fiona, who was focused on careers and on developing her employability throughout her studies, as I will discuss later in this chapter. These findings are supported via research by Gilworth (2017a, 2017b) which has shown that in England up to 50% of undergraduates still have no firm career intentions when they begin their final year of study. Academic staff members told me they were aware of this tendency for students to leave career decision-making until later in their university

careers. Mary had a sense that if they were to create a stronger focus on employability and 'career focused learning' at earlier stages, this would be likely to limit people's sense of what they can do (interview, 25.11.2015). Sienna and Mary felt it more appropriate not to 'produce a workforce' but, instead, to prepare students who could 'think both deeply and widely' in developing skills which, as Isabella told me, were useful 'in every job, in every career' (interview 11.11.2015). This will be discussed in greater depth in the following section.

My research has found that students are developing as people over time and their disciplinary studies and wider experiences during their time at university has the potential to change them and their ideas about their futures. Northern University and the study of English can act as catalysts, the opening up of possibilities, or in Bourdieu's terms *'the field of the possibles'* (1984:110 emphasis in original) and awakenings of consciousness (Bourdieu, 1977; 2005a). This can develop skills and practices which are valuable, supporting progression into careers, providing cultural and social resources even where they did not exist within students' own backgrounds. Michael used the metaphor 'eye opening' several times when speaking of his experiences as a student. Rosie's placement during an English module created new understandings of 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant,1992b:99) which enabled her to see the possibility of working in the Arts. Various forms of capital can be gained through such connections and experiences during higher education studies. They support progression in the field, and later in fields of employment and careers (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Skeggs, 2004b; Burke *et al.*, 2017). The ethos of the School, which has supported students during their studies and as they made their transition into independent lives, is highly significant to their development.

Employability and English Studies: the ethos of the School

My ethnographic methodology has enabled different perspectives and a range of voices to be heard, revealing an ethos and culture which differs from more powerful, top-down, Government policy narratives about employability. Those narratives are very pervasive in higher education. However, my data evidences that in the School staff and students share values and ambitions; they are teaching, learning, and engaging with English Studies out of love and interest. As I will show in this chapter, staff are seeking to create critical independent thinkers who are employable citizens. In the testimonies of those I worked

with, there was an absence of transactional economic exchange and consumer thinking. I argue that the traditions within disciplines that have been neglected have become invisible; yet they are valuable and are still powerfully at work. As I have already outlined in Chapter 4, despite the dominant discourses of the employability 'agenda', along with the focus on employability skills as a market outcome of a higher education and the neoliberal technologies of measurement (such as the TEF, DHLE, and league tables), staff members' narrative accounts of their experiences evidenced that they were very much focused on teaching, caring for and supporting their students. They sought to develop them as rounded citizens and reflexive learners who could contribute effectively to society and who were therefore employable. That is to say, staff members were concerned with developing their students through their disciplinary studies which, in turn, prepare them for their future lives and ongoing employability. I am arguing that this care and concern are part of the ethos of the School and the vision for the discipline over time, and that the individual responses of staff and students relate to their beliefs, values, and sense of identity, rather than to larger political systems (Kipnis, 2007, 2008; Winkler-Reid, 2017). Staff members are seeing employability as emergent from disciplinary learning and the pedagogical approaches used in English Studies. This is a view which, as I have argued in the previous section, is supported by scholarship as developing skills for employability and preparing students for twenty-first century workplaces. This can also be related to the social mission and philosophy of English.

As I have outlined in Chapter 1, the introduction to my thesis, during its history as a discipline since the early 1900s, English Studies has had a sense of social mission and an underpinning philosophy expressed through documents such as the Newbolt Report (Board of Education, 1921). This was further developed and articulated through the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966 (Dixon, 1967), which involved academics and school teachers in considering what the study of English should offer and what the process of studying English should develop and support for young people. The Dartmouth Seminar took place at a time of change educationally, when comprehensive education was beginning to be introduced and of significant social change as the UK emerged from the years of post-war austerity. This social mission and philosophy was expressed in terms of 'personal growth'. This was seen as emancipatory and relevant to all irrespective of social class and background, achieved through engagement with language and literature, enabling people to become citizens who

can question, criticise, and challenge (London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE), 1956; Dixon, 1967; Goodwyn, 1992, 2016; Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999; Gibbons, 2017).

In this chapter, drawing on my ethnographic data, I am linking this vision and language of personal growth to the ways in which English Studies is understood by its practitioners as preparing people for the world beyond the university and their future careers. Dixon's (1967) articulation of that vision includes, for example, ideas about resilience, challenge, empathy and questioning, all of which resonate with contemporary ideas of what makes an individual employable in a fast-changing and uncertain world:

> "In an English classroom as we envisage it, pupils and teacher combine to keep alert all that is challenging, new, uncertain and even painful in experience. Refusing to accept the comfortable stereotypes, stock responses and perfunctory arguments that deaden our sensitivity to people and situations, they work together to keep language alive, and in doing so to enrich and diversify personal growth."
>
> (Dixon, 1967:13)

I am arguing that instrumental government policy constructions of employability in higher education do not resonate well with staff and students within the discipline of English, which has a strong sense of its social mission. This was a theme expressed by the staff voices which I have discussed in Chapter 4 and discuss further in this chapter; academic staff members speak of their aim to develop the whole person both individually and as a member of wider society, which will also develop their employability.

I will further argue that this concern with personal growth, through the study of English at University, enables English graduates to be employable in a wide variety of careers. Ben Knights (2005) argues that personal growth, along with the work of the London Association for the Teaching of English and the Dartmouth Seminar (Dixon, 1967) have represented forms of 'cultural resistance' which have created identities for those within the discipline. He further argues that, currently and in our own significant moment within higher education, there is a need to resist neoliberal commodification, the rise of instrumental rationality, and a primary concern with employability (Knights, 2005:48). Knights (*ibid.*), along with other scholars such as Barnett (2011) and Collini (2012), has suggested that 'cultural resistance' is part of the role of the university. I have found that academic staff research participants are

not driven by the over-arching political systems of neoliberalism and consumerism, and the creation of 'ideal subjects' but, instead, by their values and beliefs in the day to day (Kipnis, 2007, 2008; Winkler-Reid, 2017). They are motivated to develop their students' capacity for critical and cultural enquiry and a sense of identity as members of a community of practice (Knights, 2005:48). The theme of resistance to instrumental definitions and ideas of employability, which has emerged from my data, is present in the testimony of staff and students; though this is achieved positively and constructively, doing what is effective pedagogically whilst successfully navigating the requirements of the institution. Thus, staff are supporting employability and preparing students for their futures effectively, as is evidenced by my research findings.

At the open day, when Head of School Matthew asked potential students about what they wanted to do with their lives, he also presented ideas about the breadth and depth involved in the study of English. He echoed Matthew Arnold's (1865) writings, which have been highly influential in establishing the social mission of English (Baldick, 1983). The Head of School emphasised that language and literature are 'connected with the nature of human life' and that studying these subjects involves consideration of the cultural landscape and the wider world. This includes the significance of context, such as the social and political dimensions of literature and language. 'Our aim is to support our students in developing a growing intellectual independence over the three years' including the opportunity to pursue an independent project, through researching and writing a dissertation (field diary, 27.6.2015). This commitment to personal growth and development, which it was argued would also help prepare for future careers, was echoed by other staff voices across the school at different moments in my fieldwork. For instance, academic staff member Isabella spoke of her own beliefs and values, how she understands the value of English Studies and has an approach of developing the intellectual independence of her students, which in turn helps to equip them for their futures:

> "….the discussions that we have in seminars….to what degree is an individual responsible, to what degree does your reason govern your actions every day, to what extent do you question the world around you….and again these aren't obviously employability-related issues, but they are all, I would hope, leading the students to think of themselves as free agents in the world, to realise the value that they have in themselves as human beings, because that again is what a Humanities degree is about….it is about the individual, it is about society, it is about what can exist to each other, so the very subject matter of the text that we look at invites them to reflect upon everything to do with their lives in the world today. So yeah, political awareness and questions of the world they are living in now."
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

Isabella spoke of the issues which government policy and neoliberal political systems can give rise to, such as a sense that the value of a university education can be reduced to economic valuation, to financial gains and losses. Yet studying English creates much greater and more complex value; enabling its students to gain critical abilities, intellectual independence, and an awareness of the social, cultural, and political, contexts in which language and literary texts must be located and understood. During their studies, students may not yet be focused on their future careers and they may not as yet appreciate the value that their degree in English will bring. Isabella's approach is to help students develop as people through their studies and, by doing so, to support them as they embark on their careers as self-motivated, self-reliant and independent employees:

> "….the degrees that our students are studying are placing them in a world of much wider value which again they might not see at the moment. Again they might not be encouraged to think about because everything is telling them to look for financial gain and loss rather than intellectual or human or social or political gain. But again also the qualities of enquiring, of asking questions….I don't want them to think like me. I want to give them ways of thinking, ways of questioning, I want them to have that intellectual freedom that it took me a very long time to get and that I now feel I have a responsibility to assist them in developing. And again you know employers often talk about things like self-motivated, self-reliant, independent employees."
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

Critical thinking is defined very cogently here by Isabella, who also identifies ways that a capacity for critical thinking is developed through the curricula and pedagogies of English Studies. Although critical thinking is a difficult term to define, Isabella's views have informed my understanding of it in this thesis – the ability to question and to think independently,

drawing on the broad knowledge, values, and practices which have been developed through disciplinary study.

Similarly, Sienna has a strong sense of her role in developing students and supporting their personal growth, defining employability in terms of an ability to critically, creatively, and responsively engage with the world in their future lives as citizens of the world and as employees. Despite the metrics culture which has been discussed in Chapter 4, and which places pressures on staff time, Sienna has a determination to teach in ways which will support her students:

> "....certainly for the Liberal Arts what employability is about….[a] Liberal Arts degree should provide is to produce students who are critical-thinking subjects and that they are able to engage with the world critically around them, not just for the six months or two years or whatever after graduation, but throughout their working life and their personal life….I am interested in producing creative responsive engaged citizens of the world and I will continue to teach the way I teach because that's, you know….I can see it working."
>
> (interview, 9.11.2015)

Sienna and Isabella's points are valuable in understanding the nature of employability within this ethnographic setting. For these two members of staff, higher education is not simply about getting initial employment, as measured by the DLHE statistics six months after graduating. Instead, higher education enables graduates to understand they can continue developing their employability during their careers and throughout their lives as a result of the capabilities developed by their discipline, as well as their wider university experience. Sienna also echoes the theme of resistance to what are seen as inappropriate strictures and expectations which a consumer model of higher education can introduce, which I have discussed in Chapter 4. A number of academic staff voices spoke out about the importance of delivering a curriculum and learning experiences which develop students and enable them to be prepared for life and work after graduation. As Jacob and Sienna suggested, not 'dumbing down' the curriculum and the intellectual challenge in ways that might 'satisfy' students, but result in them being sent out less prepared for their futures (interviews, 24.9.2015, 9.11.2015 respectively). Sienna, Isabella and Sylvia all spoke of their view that students of English were gaining skills for employability, were being prepared for twenty-first century citizenship and would be therefore be good employees (interviews, 9.11.2015;

11.11.2015; 29.6.2015). The students' own testimony in a following section demonstrates a similar perspective, one that converges in many respects with the narrative of the open day and as expressed by these staff members.

Barnett (2004) has identified that there has been a tendency to introduce more utilitarian approaches to learning and teaching in higher education, in response to metrics such as graduate employability and student satisfaction, and that greater risk is perceived in more open pedagogies and ontologies. But, in contrast to this, Mary told me that although students arrive from school liking lecturers to tell them what to do, it was essential to get them to learn what they need for themselves (interview, 25.11.2015). Mary, along with other academic staff members, spoke of the 'fantastic skills' which the students gained through their disciplinary studies. She recognised that students need to understand that learning is not always comfortable, despite pressures to 'satisfy' students within a marketized system (Barnett, 2004; Williams, 2013; Davidson, 2017). English Studies is a subject area which relies on student engagement with texts and curricula. As a result there is comparatively little contact time but much expectation of independent reading, researching, and learning. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, in relation to pedagogical research, independent study has been shown to enhance learning gain (Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), 2017). Within the School, the pedagogical approaches which academic staff members have discussed with me are student-centred. Academic staff member Phil defined English Literature as a 'doing degree, not just a reading degree', denoting active engagement with the subject during which students must proactively manage their time, think critically, and work independently; ways of working which are highly congruent with becoming employable (interview, 4.3.2015). In the following sections, I will explore the ways in which students working within the influence of this ethos of the School and discipline have made their career decisions, and the influences and experiences during their time at university which have affected their future trajectories.

Developing students: identities, beliefs, values, and employability

In this section, I turn to students' perceptions of how they have been developing during their higher education and, as they have developed, how they have been establishing their sense of identity, their beliefs, and values. This has led to them holding broader ideas about value than economic gain (Graeber, 2001; Skeggs, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). On occasions,

it has led to resistance to parental and peer group ideas about future employment and getting 'a proper job' defined in terms of economic success. Although making an income is recognised as a reality of life, my student research participants overwhelmingly opted to do something that is meaningful, and congruent with their sense of identity and beliefs, despite for example the precarity of the Arts and cultural sector, or the lower salaries associated with teaching. This mirrors the sense of mission associated with the discipline and the resistance to instrumental neoliberal ideas about employability, which I have discussed in Chapter 2 and in the previous section. Whilst there is recognition by staff members that students are anxious about getting good results in their degrees, I did not find evidence of consumerist attitudes and expectations on the part of students. Many students spoke of their understanding of the value of the increasing intellectual and personal independence which was required during the course of their degrees. They recognised that this had supported their development, their confidence, and capabilities. They also had formed their counter-narratives (which I have discussed in Chapter 5) which show their recognition of the value of their discipline in terms of their own development and the openness which English Studies gives them in terms of future career trajectories.

Identity, sense of self, beliefs and values play a role in the academic staff's approach to teaching and learning as is evidenced by the testimony of Isabella, Sienna, and Matthew; and in the staff voices which we heard in Chapter 4. Similarly, identity, sense of self, beliefs and values play a role in the career decisions of the student research participants. Many students spoke of their desire to enjoy their work, to make a difference in the world, and do something meaningful which is congruent with their sense of who they are, in addition to making a living. They spoke to me of their lives and interests, their struggles and moments of insight about their futures, in narratives which revealed their sense of self and identity. As I have discussed in Chapter 3, identities are developed through interaction in a social context. This will be ongoing, not a project which will be completed, but one which will continue over time and potentially in different contexts and communities of practice as individuals change roles and jobs (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Elias, 1994; Wenger, 1998; Lawler, 2014). The narratives which have been developed over time, and which I have been privileged to hear, are ways in which identities and the habitus find expression and can reveal how people are perceiving and making sense of the world (Polkinghorne, 1988; Lawler, 2002, 2014; Maton, 2012). Some students' stories provide evidence of changes to the habitus through their

education and the potential for gaining social and cultural capitals through their experiences within the School of English at Northern University, capitals which they did not have from their own backgrounds which helped them gain access to their careers.

Catriona – registers of identity, beliefs, values, and career decision-making

As I show in both Chapter 5 and in this section, Catriona has narrated her development, her sense of identity, beliefs and values, during her university career. Her story illustrates the significance of identity, beliefs and values to employability and career decisions and I will, therefore, give a detailed account of her changing registers of identity and to her struggles with some class-related issues of identity. Catriona found that she had to negotiate multiple identities across the boundaries of the social groups and complex social networks she is part of (Elias, 1994; Lawler, 2014); these included her family, friends and home, her university life, the School of English and her part-time work environments. In her interactions with her friends and family at home she felt constrained, she could not be the person or the identity which she had developed in her university life (Reay *et al.*, 2009; Lawler, 2014):

> "….it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to talk about. It was just all I had in my system to share because of all I had experienced but I would go home and there would be a big kind of barrier as to what could be spoken about. So just tell them stories about other things I could think of."
>
> (interview, 23.1.2017)

I argue that Catriona was experiencing loss and challenges to her sense of identity as a result of her upward social mobility (Lawler, 1999; Lucey *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, she felt that there were some issues of translation and complex negotiation between herself and her family, who did not see work as something to be enjoyed but as a means to the end of making a living. Catriona felt that her parents wanted her to get a 'proper job' and that they had an instrumental attitude, that a job is a job 'you go, you don't enjoy it. You go home, you complain about it,' (interview, 10.12.2014). She saw that her brother was not fulfilled in his main work. He was 'wildly miserable' though he was happier and found greater meaning in his family life and more creative freelance work in digital design (interview, 8.10.2015). Catriona wished to do something meaningful rather than just make a living, work to take pride in and enjoy, because she saw that work is a major part of life (interview, 8.10.2015).

In her final year, she reflected on the way that, five years previously, she thought she was doing better than her friends at home by going to university, she had seen herself as moving forward and they were staying to 'work their lives away' (interview, 23.1.2017). Catriona thought:

> "Yeah, yeah, I am off kids, you are staying here. You can work your lives away, I am going to uni and then I am going to get a killer job and I am just going to rule the world and I always meant it, like, in jest, but it was how I got through the day."
> (interview, 23.1.2017)

As she had progressed through university, she had seen that her friends at home had moved on, seemed happy, had independence, jobs in beauty therapy and retail, their own homes, money and time for friends and family. These were things which Catriona felt had value and meaning. She felt she was five years behind them and had some feelings of anxiety that she would not get what she wanted in her life (interview, 23.1.2017). Catriona also had struggles related to her sense of identity, because her university education and experience had changed how she understands herself and the world (Lawler, 2002, 2014). Catriona is a highly reflexive person who felt the pains of social mobility very deeply. She felt that when she went home, she was struggling to avoid doing what her brother had described: that talking about her university experiences and academic interests was inadvertently belittling others (interview, 23.1.2017). This sense of difference to her friends and the need to 'silence' the person she had become was a negotiation of identity which Catriona found hurtful and difficult. Social mobility can involve 'the multiplicity and fracturing of past and present, belonging, not belonging, the dreams, aspirations and defences' (Walkerdine, 2003). These experiences and emotions have been very vividly narrated by Catriona over the years.

She adopted identities and personas such as 'Sasha Fierce' (pop-singer Beyoncé's on stage alter-ego) to help her feel more confident and she spoke of her sense that doing her job as a part-time university student ambassador produced the 'best version' of herself. When Catriona came to a realisation that she knew what she wanted to do as a career, she contacted me by email in a way which showed her excitement and which reflected Matthew's question at the open day:

> "I thought you might be interested to hear about some career-y stuff going on with me? Basically, I HAVE DECIDED WHAT I WANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE AND IT FEELS GOOD! Also, lots and lots of drama is going on that will probably be easier to explain to you in person...."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 7.12.2015, *capitalisation from original*)

In the subsequent interview, Catriona shared with me that her realisation had come through working on a drama project within the School of English, after years of being unsure of what to do after university. She expressed this in terms of a socially embedded narrative and an identity which she could imagine for herself, as a teacher passionate about her subject and her students:

> "….if I think about the teachers that I really respected and admired when I was a young person, they were the people who really, really, really cared about their subjects and you could tell with everything that they were saying that that was their life. They absolutely loved it and when you walked into a room you could feel that of coming from them of love my subject, love my subject, and I think I would like to be the teacher, I would like to be the teacher that the kids are like she is absolutely nuts but you can't fault her on how much she loves the subject and how much she cares that we do well."
>
> (interview, 9.12.2015)

Catriona told me she had found her vocation, which she was happy with and which involved sharing her love of her discipline. As a member of the School of English drama project, she had been working with children in a teaching role. This had helped her understand her potential employability and enabled her to feel confident in pursuing teaching as a career. She had progressed from not knowing what she wanted to do in the future to a clear sense of vocation, which she came to through her disciplinary and extra-curricular experiences in the School of English. This led Catriona to successfully apply for a paid graduate adviser role in a school and, having found this extremely fulfilling, to subsequently begin training as a teacher. Catriona's choice of career trajectory was based on her values and beliefs, a role which fitted with her sense of self and what was important to her, which holds meaning and enjoyment for her (Young and Collin, 2000; Kruger and Lincoln, 2009), rather than prioritising economic value and return on investment in terms of salary.

Catriona had felt the need to resist her parents' and home friends' definitions of 'proper jobs' and find something which was meaningful for her. Getting a 'proper job' as measured

by a good salary was spoken of as a parental and friendship group expectation by a number of the research participants, whom for the most part felt at odds with this approach. Amelia, whose story I have reflected on in Chapter 5, also found that her parents saw a job in terms of 'keeping a roof over our heads' rather than as something to be enjoyed. Parental expectations about appropriate careers, with success defined in economic terms and in line with policy narratives, can bring students into positions of resistance. Catriona and Amelia's parents and Michael's father, whose own working lives had been focused on earning money to sustain their families irrespective of job satisfaction, expressed similar expectations of their children. A consciousness of economic outcomes can form part of the habitus, for example Fiona's determination to achieve financial independence, which she attributed to growing up in a single parent family in which money had been scarce (Bourdieu, 1984; Crossley, 2012; Savage *et al.*, 2015). Government policy narratives, Human Capital theory (Becker, 1975), and Rational Actor assumptions (Scott, 2000) about returns on investment in a higher education can also affect parental expectations, due both to the strong narrative of positive graduate outcomes and the high cost of a higher education which results in significant long-term student debt.

Whereas previous generations have had a greater expectation of stability in careers (Tomlinson, 2012; Barnett, 2014; Bridgstock, 2017), my student research participants were aware that in a world of rapid, ongoing change there are no longer any jobs for life. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, 18-35 year olds change jobs on average every four years (Donald *et al.*, 2017). Many of them also recognised that, in the digital era, new kinds of jobs have been coming into being and that there are new ways of finding jobs, with many using the internet and digital channels to identify jobs they were interested in. As Emma told me, her job searches involved 'lots of Googling' (interview, 24.6.2015). They have shown a willingness to move jobs to find what they are looking for, which they describe in terms of enjoyment, fulfilment, and making a difference. This could even mean leaving a secure job to explore other options, as graduate Emma did and which I will discuss in Chapter 7 (Hall, 2004; Clarke, 2013; Mowforth, 2018). Whilst some people have expressed bravado in response to peer and family expectations (Catriona's 'killer job', interview, 23.1.2017; Emily's assertion that 'I have big ambitions', interview, 10.1.2014) they have ultimately been looking for fulfilment in work wherever possible. Thus, some students resisted parental influences, have gone on to further study or to establish their careers, taking a balanced view of their sense of self,

vocation, and need for job satisfaction, with the need to earn a living. In doing so they were redressing the generational difference they observed in some of their parents' approaches to their working lives and expectations. Many of my student research participants were concerned to address social and cultural issues through their careers and they showed a highly developed awareness of the social, cultural, and political context of the contemporary world. English as a degree has left the way open for them to work in a very wide range of roles and sectors.

More than just a 'proper' job – how did students decide on their career direction?

In this section, I will explore further the theme of students seeking careers which are congruent with their sense of identity, with what they feel will make them happy and fulfilled in addition to making a living, and to the ways in which English has prepared them for their next transition. I will do this by drawing elements from Rosie, Grace, Lucy, Michael, Amelia, and Lily's stories. Students reflected on their own development, their confidence and capabilities, their deepened understanding of themselves and their identities through their studies and university lives. This enabled them to move more confidently into the next major transition, into their workplaces. Their words, reflections and stories echo the staff's intentions to develop graduates who are well-rounded by their disciplinary learning and university experience. I asked my student research participants how they had represented themselves on CVs and in interviews; for the most part, they drew on their extra-curricular experiences and their part-time and vacation jobs to discuss their skills and what they could offer an employer. In Chapter 7, I will discuss the ways in which - as graduates - the student research participants bridged the perception gap and came to an understanding of the value of the skills which are developed by English Studies in their workplaces, within communities of practice and their diverse fields.

Michael: teaching English to address social inequalities

As I have outlined in Chapter 5, Michael resisted his father's concerns about the cost of a university education. Although doing a degree at Northern University opened up a wider range of possibilities in terms of careers than if he had started work immediately after school, he remained very conscious of the social inequalities he had observed in his own background. Michael decided to play a role in addressing social inequalities directly, by working in an area of social disadvantage and drawing on his own experience, firstly by

volunteering with a youth project. He did this based on his interest, although he later recognised that it had helped him build capitals and connections for the future (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Michael felt he had been inspired by his education and wanted to inspire others:

> "I enjoy working with young people. That links with teaching though, so like, alternative education, youth work and outdoor services….giving something back and wanting to help young people because it is great, like, but the people that I look up to who have helped me in the past….and to be that kind of figure for a group of young people or even just one would be fantastic."
>
> (interview, 8.10.2015)

Throughout his degree, Michael worked part-time for an upmarket retailer to make money, however, his position about his future career was to find work which would be meaningful to him beyond simply making an income. As he told me in his second year of study:

> "I've got to get something out of it, other than….in the future anyway….at the minute I have a job for financial gain but I'd love to be able to get something out of a job, because you spend so much time doing it, why do something you don't enjoy every day?"
>
> (interview, 8.10.2015)

Ultimately, Michael decided to work for Teach First, which he saw as bringing together his love of youth work (through the Riverside Youth Project and supporting Duke of Edinburgh Award students) and his interest in addressing inequality through teaching young people in an area of multiple socio-economic disadvantage (the goal of Teach First) in what he described as 'a structured and professional life' (interview, 16.9.2017). He continued to volunteer at the Riverside Youth Project three or four times a week, alongside his teaching work and professional development through study, because he felt the project was so important in supporting young people in the disadvantaged area he himself comes from.

Teach First is a charity set up in 2002 which aims to address inequalities in education and support social mobility for people from low-income backgrounds in England and Wales. Indicators of socio-economic deprivation, including eligibility for free school meals and the indices of deprivation in the wards that schools are located in, determine where Teach First becomes involved. Their work is based on evidence that young people from low-income

communities have lower life chances, will attain lower academic standards, are less likely to go to university, or get better paid jobs, than people from more affluent areas, thus, widening social inequalities (Teach First report, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2014). Teach First trains people with leadership potential to be teachers and places them in schools in areas of socio-economic deprivation, with the aim of increasing literacy and numeracy, and improving GCSE grades. It seeks to develop skills to support high levels of aspiration, increasing the numbers of students going on to further and higher education and the numbers graduating from top universities (Teach First website, 2019). The charity now provides over 20% of teachers in low-income areas of England. Teach First also has a leadership programme for its graduate trainees, which is delivered through a number of partner universities, to enable its teachers to study for a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The PGDE is a qualification which combines teaching and leadership with the aim of developing research-informed teachers able to address the key issues. Graduates commit to working for Teach First for a minimum of two years. Michael was aware that there are a number of partners who support the charity which look to recruit Teach First graduates should they wish to move out of the educational field. There is also a history of Teach First graduates moving on to management roles within schools, as heads of departments and head-teachers.

Michael was placed in an inner-city Academy in a disadvantaged area near to North City. He was teaching and being paid a salary which is one point up on the national pay scale from basic teacher's pay. Michael's training began with a five week intensive course on pedagogy before starting in the school. He attended university one or two days every six weeks to study pedagogy, teaching techniques, and leadership. After one year he would achieve Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) status and would continue studying for another year to gain his PGDE (Postgraduate Diploma in Education). In the future, Michael will have the option to submit an additional piece of work (an extended dissertation worth 30 academic credits) in order to gain an MPhil in English Education. He has continued to 'put in the graft', rising early to drive to work before the traffic builds up and continuing to volunteer and do youth work at the Riverside Youth Project. During his student years, Michael had been:

> "….dead set against leaving the North (heck, leaving North City even!) because of my family ties and a general sense of belonging here. Recently though, I think my opinion has changed somewhat. For the right job, that I felt I'd look forward to every day, with the right people around me, I think I'd live anywhere."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence March 2018)

Early in his career with Teach First, Michael came to a realisation that he was now willing to be mobile geographically as well as socially, in terms of leaving his emotional ties to home in order to take a job which would be meaningful for him. As I have discussed in Chapter 5, Michael's experience at his high school was transformational and led to changes in his habitus and his realisation that he could go to university. At university, his engagement with his disciplinary studies, work, and volunteering, and his awareness of the issues he has faced in terms of social class, background, and capitals, has brought those challenges even more clearly into his consciousness. This too has been a transformational experience (Bourdieu, 1977; Adkins, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2009).

Michael had enjoyed his disciplinary studies and in his third year told me that he remained as interested in English Studies as he had been when he had arrived at Northern University. He also came to an understanding of the increase in his cultural and symbolic capital, including the relative value of his degree from Northern University and the Russell Group in employment terms (Tomlinson, 2017). This realisation was in part an outcome of working closely with the Chairman of the Riverside Youth Project, who only recruits Russell Group graduates for his own successful manufacturing business. Similarly, Teach First only recruit from Russell Group universities. Michael's paid part-time work and volunteering, and the directorship at the Youth project, enabled him to gain social and cultural capitals beyond those which were available to him from his background. For example, access to networks and experiences, and having the confidence and knowledge to present the Riverside Project's work to councillors and funders. A greater understanding of 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99), such as the significance of work experience to prospective employers, had been opened up to him by the Chairman of the Riverside project. The project enabled him to gain work experience and situated practice within other communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) alongside his disciplinary studies. This has been valuable to Michael in understanding and validating his employability and in setting out on his career.

Rosie, Grace, and Lucy: creating careers in the Arts

Rosie, Grace, and Lucy have been able to start out in careers in the theatre and the Arts from the foundations of their degrees. All three have accepted the precarity of careers in the Arts, which have felt the impact of austerity and lack of funding, to do something they feel matters and fits with their sense of identity. They have moved into a field which is very difficult to enter. Recent reports have researched the challenges of entering the creative industries. A lack of social and cultural capital to help find internships and gain insights into the field, together with a lack of the economic capital to afford to undertake unpaid internships has resulted in barriers and limitations. This has led to a lack of diversity and social mobility in the field (Social Market Foundation, 2010; Brook *et al.*, 2018). The creative industries are marked by significant inequalities relating to issues such as social class and networks (*ibid*.). First, I will turn to Rosie who was unaware of the possibility of working in the Arts – it was not 'thinkable' in terms of her habitus (Reay, 1998, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017) until her transformational experience through the School of English.

Rosie: working in Arts administration

For Rosie, Northern University and the study of English have acted as catalysts, opening up possibilities and developing skills which are valuable, supporting personal development and progression into a career in the Arts, and providing cultural and social resources which did not exist in her own background (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990a). Rosie, in common with Catriona and Amelia, spoke of her awareness not only of needing to fit in to the new environment of university but also of her consciousness of being amongst people from different backgrounds and social classes from herself. Their stories reflect the embodiment of class, the influence of habitus, and the realisations about the new field they are moving in. As I have argued in relation to Michael, this is an awakening of consciousness which Bourdieu (1977) suggests can create heightened critical reflexivity or a social transformation. This can happen at times when there is a lack of fit between habitus and field, when dissonance or 'hysteresis' between the 'feel for the game' and the game itself is created and transforming practices can be learned (Bourdieu, 1990b:63; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b; Adkins, 2003). When Rosie arrived at Northern University, she immediately felt a lack of social fit, as if she was a fish out of water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b):

> "It was a bit overwhelming at first. There were a lot of people who had gone to some very good schools and had had a very good education and came from very nice backgrounds and it was difficult sometimes, but I found my friends and that was what mattered."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

She was asked during her first week, by another student, about her social connections and was told about people having access to internships (and other advantages) through parents and their networks. Rosie realised:

> "I don't have any connections….I don't know anybody….do I need to know anybody? I didn't think that was a big deal until I was told that….I did eventually grow to like the girl, it was just she was a product of her environment and she was just different and that's how she's been brought up and that's fine…."
>
> (interview, 2.4.2015)

She realised that those students from their 'nice backgrounds', their 'very good' and mainly independent private sector schools, had connections and expectations which she did not have from her own background and schooling (interview, 2.4.2015). Rosie reflected on this:

> "I feel like I learned a lot coming to Uni, not just about English or whatever, about just how different it is depending on where you grow up and what kind of school you go to."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

Rosie had felt hurt by this experience, however, the dissonance it created gave her new insights into the field of higher education and the social and cultural capitals which were in play. She went on to establish friendships, through her study group and people she shared accommodation with, creating a social network in which she felt at ease. She also formed a long-term relationship with her boyfriend.

Ultimately Rosie had further awakenings of consciousness about potential future careers which she had not realised existed for her. Rosie began her engagement with working in the Arts when she chose a School of English module that involved a placement during Stage 3. She saw this as an opportunity, although her friends had found it hard to understand why she would want to take a work-related module as opposed to another English Literature

module. Rosie was placed with Theatre Co, a small touring theatre company, which introduced her to social networks and the field of the Arts in North City and the region. Although she had been interested in music from being very young, she had not followed a formal musical education, such as taking grade exams; a means by which Skeggs (2004c) suggests that people enhance their cultural capital and create the exchange-value which is needed for social networking and employability. Rosie had not been aware of the Arts as a potential career path and did not have any existing connections within the field.

Through her placement, Rosie became aware of networks within the Arts and came to an understanding of the field and the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99) within it, acknowledging that the creative sector is like 'a closed world'. She had become aware of the way that networks are at play:

> "….it is a tight knit community because it is difficult to kind of break in….everyone knows each other and that is the way it is at the minute. Especially somewhere like North City where you have not got a whole wealth of companies there. You know everyone does kind of know each other in a way. I am learning some names."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

This work placement with Theatre Co led to Rosie applying to and gaining employment after her graduation with another creative business Arts Co, a contemporary drama company. Thus she succeeded in accessing a field which is difficult to enter. Rosie also volunteered with Theatre Co alongside her paid work at Arts Co. This was partly because she had come to an understanding of the value of work experience, of learning through practice in context, and of 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99) in the field of the Arts. This involved developing and sustaining her networks. However, she was also interested by Theatre Co's work and her volunteering created opportunities, for example to read her creative writing at poetry readings.

Rosie's realisation about her preferred career trajectory came through the experience of the work placement which took place as part of her learning during her studies in the School of English. I am arguing that this was a transformational experience during which she entered a new field and social world and encountered new expectations, thus, changing her sense of the possible within her habitus. Rosie's entry into this field and social world also created

capitals to help her progress in the field and to understand its practices (Bourdieu, 1990a). Rosie's immersion within particular workplaces (Theatre Co and Arts Co) enabled her to learn a feel for the game, practical mastery within the field, and the practices specific to the Arts companies she was working with (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Her employability was validated within the field and her workplace community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), enabling her to progress in her chosen field through these experiences.

Rosie's career in the Arts fitted with her sense of identity and her beliefs and values (Graeber, 2001; Skeggs, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). She had worked in what she saw as a 'proper job' in a bank during her summer vacation the previous year. Whilst Rosie knew that this was a potentially stable and well-remunerated job, and involved a level of responsibility which potential employers take notice of on a CV, she said it had been 'awful'; adding that she 'would have been scared to have to do it after university'. She could not see herself working in a bank after graduation, because it did not fit with her sense of who she was (interview, 25.9.2014). Rosie described the ways in which she felt that her work in the Arts *was* congruent with her sense of identity and involved making a difference within society. The company she was working for aimed to make the Arts accessible, reaching out to people who might feel: 'this isn't for me, for my family' (interview, 15.1.2015). Arts Co is a not-for-profit social enterprise and this fitted with Rosie's beliefs that the Arts need to be more open to all. She was particularly inspired to work with Arts Co because the organisation and its founder see the Arts as being something for everyone:

> "Her work is for everybody....her work is full of meaning, but it is more like human emotions and stuff that everyone can sort of relate to."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

Thus, Rosie's motivation was not simply to get a job, maximise her income, or seek the stability which a bank job might have offered. Instead, she wanted to have a career that she found meaningful, in a field which is tricky to break into, despite her awareness that there was precarity of employment and a loss of funding for the Arts in 'Austerity Britain' (O'Brien, 2011). She was torn when her boyfriend graduated and got a job in a different city, but decided to bear with their separation until she had more of a track record in her own job. After gaining two years' experience with Arts Co, Rosie successfully applied to a larger

national Arts company (which was based close to where her boyfriend was working) drawing on the cultural and symbolic capitals she had gained and her experience of situated practices in the Arts field (Bourdieu 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998).

Grace and Lucy: building freelance careers in the theatre

As I have discussed in Chapter 5, Grace and Lucy had a sense of vocation for careers in the theatre from before they came to Northern University. Both spoke of their sense of personal development through doing their degrees. Grace told me that she felt 'a lot older than when we first met', in an interview during her final year (interview, 8.10.2014). She acknowledged that she had experienced the way in which 'English Lit has the potential to change the way you look at the world'. Hence, Grace felt 'more equipped and confident' in her own abilities. Grace and Lucy found that a degree in English Studies enabled them to be accepted for post-graduate drama courses. After graduating, Grace went on to take an MA in drama in London. Grace had had weekend and holiday jobs (such as waitressing) to save up money for her future, however her parents were also able to support her financially by contributing to living costs in London and loaning her the money for her course fees. This enabled Grace to take a full time one-year course and then to remain in London to start building her career. In addition to her own efforts and the talent required to get into a top school for her MA, the support of her family economically enabled her to study in London, where she was aware that the networks for theatre work are strongest. Grace knew that these networks needed to be built and came to an understanding of the kinds of networks she needs to engage with. Her MA from a very prestigious drama school carries significant reputational and symbolic capital in the Arts and theatrical fields, combined with her degree from Northern University which itself carries social and cultural capital, along with her extensive extra-curricular involvements.

Grace has had some success in being cast in short films, an advert, and some theatre projects. In addition, Grace has written plays, winning an award as an emerging playwright. She has been establishing a network of contacts in the field and building social capital which are essential to gaining work in the creative sector (Granovetter, 1973; Coulson, 2012), as well as the credentials and practical experience which are recognised within her chosen field and community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Grace has been able to draw on some existing capitals but has also been very active in creating new social and

cultural capital herself, since she has been entering a field which is unfamiliar to her family (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). She has had the ability and access to economic capital to be geographically mobile and live in London, which increase her chances of success (Social Market Foundation, 2010; Brook *et al.*, 2018). Due to the precarity of employment in the theatre, Grace has had to establish a portfolio career. Alongside working as an actor and playwright, she also does freelance work as a field researcher and administrator to supplement her income. Grace's story and her sense of self includes a long history of creating and engaging with opportunities through extensive extra-curricular involvement at school and at university:

> "….Cos I used to do, like in school I used to be very much involved in student government and touring prospective parents around the school and all that sort of thing. I was Head Girl, I *was* that girl. When I came here I was like, well, I am done with that now. No more. No more of all this like, of all this administrative stress and presenting my environment as a package deal for like prospective students and stuff, but I couldn't, somehow I couldn't really help it. I just ended up in it anyway."
>
> (interview, 11.6.2015)

Thus, Grace had always sought out and taken on responsibility, had been Head Girl and involved in student government at her school and had representative roles in the School of English. Grace had attended a Performing Arts specialist school and at Northern University was very involved with the Theatre Society and a Youth Theatre. This provided some insights into practices within the field, such as the need to have an acting Curriculum Vitae (CV) to evidence a professional identity as well as a general CV (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Grace was highly motivated in her efforts to become established and achieve mobility within her field, despite the challenges this posed.

In her final year, Lucy told me that she knew she had made a significant shift from the 'naiveté of an 18 year old' and had recognised that whilst early in her university career 'getting a job was an abstract concept', ultimately, it had become a reality. Studying English had been a good foundation for going on to study drama, however, she had confidence in the capabilities she had developed and knew that if the theatre did not work out for her, she could be happy working as a researcher or teacher of English. She enjoyed academic work and she had also done some tutoring in a local school (interview, 25.9.2014). Following on from her English Literature degree, Lucy took a part-time drama course at a new drama

school in Risley - a city with a vibrant cultural scene - with a highly respected tutor who is a well-established actor. This enabled her to live with her parents, seek part-time work, and save costs. Lucy had been offered a place at a London drama school, but she had not won the scholarship she had applied for and considered that the fees combined with the costs of living in London would be prohibitive. Hence, her choices were more limited than the choices open to Grace, because she had not had the full support of her family in following a career in the theatre. However, she showed similar resourcefulness in achieving her aim to have theatrical training. Lucy told me that, despite her father's resistance to her plans to work in the theatre over many years, he had accepted it as inevitable and was happy that she was doing a part-time course so that she could also have a part-time job. She has been building appropriate networks and has had a clear understanding of the need for such social and cultural capital in her field (Bourdieu, 1984). Like Grace, she has moved into a field which is unfamiliar to her family and must therefore develop her own networks and capitals, for example through her links to those running the drama course she attended (Granovetter, 1973; Coulson, 2012). Lucy has performed in productions in Risley, writes plays, and has a presence on a key national website for actors seeking roles.

Rosie, Grace and Lucy are very hard-working people striving for the futures they seek for themselves through their own significant efforts. However, access to capitals can also be seen to affect potential outcomes and this unevenness needs to be acknowledged (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986). Rosie was unable to afford to take further qualifications (for example in funding and finance for the Arts) as part of her development and was hoping that her employer would pay for this training in the future. For Grace and Lucy, working in the Arts and creative industries involves precarity, probable self-employment across a portfolio of work, and uncertain levels of income. Yet, they are deeply committed to following their sense of vocation rather than considering a better remunerated and more stable career path. Grace and Lucy draw on their English degrees as part of their portfolio of work. Their career intentions have been informed by their sense of self, identity, and values, and their desire to make meaning in their working lives (Young and Collin, 2000; Kruger and Lincoln, 2009; Davidson, 2017). Whilst they acknowledge that they need to make a living, they are not driven by economic outcomes and financial return on investment as government policy narratives assert (DfBIS, 2016). Hence, the more complex value of the social, cultural, and symbolic capitals created by their degrees is significant (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979;

Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004c). However, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, they also came to an understanding of the value of their disciplinary skills and practices when working in the fields and communities of practice of their careers.

Elizabeth: exploring potential careers

In contrast to these stories of students who identified jobs or embarked on career trajectories which would fit their sense of self on graduation, Elizabeth explored a number of avenues before realising that she preferred having a job which would fit her sense of who she was. Elizabeth spoke to me in her final year about her ongoing passion for her subject and her recognition of its breadth and significance to the world. Her words captured some of the ways in which the discipline develops people:

> Elizabeth: "I didn't want to do a subject for the purposes of getting a specific job, but I wanted to do more kind of….just kind of cement my ideas of what I was interested in, what was worthwhile with being interested in, kind of thing. I hope that makes sense."
>
> Jane: "And do you remain passionate about English as a subject area?"
>
> Elizabeth: "Yeah. I think it's good, yeah, I think it's important as well 'cause it's a lot about kind of empathy and learning about something which is completely different to your own experience, and it's the whole historical side of it as well, I mean it almost of kind of charts a community's social thought, social process, you know, big changes in society are always kind of mentioned in literature and always….you can see how people's thinking has changed over the years, how it's still changing now, how people's philosophical ideas, you know, everything comes into literature. So that's why I've still I think enjoyed it this far and not kind of got bored with it or thought 'what's the point?'….But I think as well there's that experience of being at uni that gives you a sense of independence and a sense of needing a purpose and wanting a purpose outside of education systems that doesn't necessarily come from one degree but comes from just having that whole experience of university."
>
> (interview, 25.9.2014)

Elizabeth recognised the value of her discipline but also the wider university experience and expressed the sense of independence and purpose which can underpin her ability to make the transition into a career. After graduating, she worked in a retail shop for a few months before taking a job working with a professional services business. Elizabeth was interested by the opportunity to 'pioneer' her employer's social media and online presence, however, ultimately she did not feel that the business was right for her. She had been sharing a flat

with a new friend who worked as a freelance travel journalist who inspired Elizabeth to consider a similar career. Elizabeth was feeling dissatisfied with her job at the time and her friend made her aware of an international placement scheme, which she successfully applied for. This involved a full time internship with a company and study for a postgraduate certificate in international business. A range of placement options were available, and Elizabeth chose to work in a corporate bank (field diary, email correspondence 23.4.2018) and felt this might lead to a job in banking in the future. However, Elizabeth found that she was not interested in the work and did not see it as congruent with her identity and sense of self. The experience confirmed to her that such a career trajectory was not for her:

> "My main reason for taking the position at the investment bank was to see if I could do a job I was not interested in but which paid well. I have discovered this is more difficult than I thought – as a result I am thinking of pursuing travel journalism, or finding a job that lies within the travel industry. I've really enjoyed the process of travelling around the country in my time off over the last year. Companies like Black Tomato have inspired me to create bespoke travel experiences or to offer advice on travelling."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 19.4.2018)

She is planning to work in travel journalism, or to develop her own idea for a business creating bespoke travel experiences. This is an example of the ways in which new types of work have emerged in a digital age based on people's desires for different and unique experiences. It would draw on Elizabeth's experience in digital marketing and social media in her previous employment. It also demonstrates the flexibility and confidence to develop a self-employed career, based on understanding opportunities and audiences for emerging innovations in the travel market.

Ashley: working in books and publications

Ashley felt she had developed as a person during her time at university, changing over the three years and becoming 'more confident' and 'well-rounded'. She felt that it had been significant that English was an inter-disciplinary subject, where it was important to consider context:

> "I think University has made me, so cliché, but like just grow as a person and like a really kind of well-rounded person, and I think I never kind of, until I was doing my dissertation, I didn't realise how kind of interdisciplinary English Literature was….and [you've] got to be able to be quite well-rounded and be able to understand that history or the science behind the literature, I guess, and be able to put those readings onto the literature, rather than just you know reading a book, which a lot of people think English Literature is."
>
> (interview, 25.6.2015)

Ashley had been very involved with the student newspaper at Northern University, which led her to have an interest in the world of publishing. She had completed two short placements during vacations, with a publishing company and an educational book supplier. She had found these opportunities through family social networks. This had provided Ashley with further insights and experience. She searched for jobs that would be of interest and was successful in her application to a national retailer for a position in their publications division. She had never visited the Careers Service but had searched for jobs which would interest her on the internet. Ashley told me that she felt that her studies had 'set her up well' for working under pressure and to enable her to 'tackle stuff'. She was motivated to progress with the company, which seemed keen to provide opportunities for professional development and promotion (interview, 20.10.2015). After gaining experience of practices within the field, and coming to an understanding of the roles within the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), Ashley has since progressed within the company and been given additional responsibilities.

Lily: bringing the Humanities perspective to Artificial Intelligence

Lily realised that she was extremely interested in language and speech processing. After graduation, she worked in a university and schools liaison team for one year then studied for a masters' degree in Speech and Language, after which she worked in university professional services. However, she then decided to follow her interest in language and moved to a job with a speech technology company that designs systems for interacting at the interface of technology and language. Lily worked on technologies that she considers to be 'exciting and new' and was motivated to keep progressing with her current employer because they are the most advanced in the field. Her career involves the direct application of the knowledge from her discipline and she is motivated to bring together the all-important human dimension to the design and interfaces for communication technologies. Lily's discussion of

her role brings together technology and the Humanities in creating systems that will be user-friendly:

> "I have a strong interest in speech technology, but particularly making technology useful and accessible. I love that [my] role requires technical knowledge, but you approach tasks from a user perspective. I like looking to these systems from a public point of view – ok we can make an intelligent call system but will people want to use it? Can we make technology trustworthy and easy to interact with? How is the boom of smart assistants changing how callers interact with our systems and how are expectations changing? I want to make systems which people want to talk to and aren't a chore to go through."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 23.4.2018)

Lily is highly motivated by working in a company which is the industry leader. This enables her to be involved in advancing knowledge and applications. She told me that she finds great satisfaction in her work. She is bringing a Humanities perspective to a high tech industry, reflecting the perspectives which I have outlined in an earlier section of this chapter. Changes and developments in technologies create the need for empathy and the social perceptiveness to connect those technologies with the people who will use them (Bridgstock, 2016; Frey and Osborne, 2016; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017). I will further discuss how Lily has come to understand the value of her skills and perspectives in Chapter 7.

Fiona: working internationally in the heritage sector

Fiona was keen to work abroad after graduation, having worked in two short internships in continental Europe which she arranged herself for during her vacations, financing these through her term-time paid work. She also had a year abroad as part of her course, which included a subsidiary course in a European language. She had chosen to spend 15 months working in Germany to gain further experience rather than the required 9 months. Fiona worked throughout her studies, including a role with the Northern University Marketing team from Stage 2 onwards (6 hours per week in Stage 2, and two evenings and one afternoon per week in Stage 3, approximately 10 hours per week in total). Of my student research participants, only Fiona, Michael, and Cameron told me that they had worked throughout their studies (including in term-time). Some people did take part-time jobs from time to time and many people sought work during vacations. Fiona was able to use this role as part of a career development module to gain academic credit for her paid work and bring together earning money, gaining experience, and saving study time. Fiona felt that she was

influenced by her background and sense of self as a child of a single parent; she recognised that, although she felt that she worked because she felt she needed the money, it also created extra opportunities:

> "....due to my part time job in the second year that actually funded an unpaid internship in Berlin for a month in my Easter vacation of the second year so it was kind of like I wasn't just doing it to kind of survive, I was also doing it, it was just something that I wanted to do. I think that definitely does push me, yeah...."
>
> (interview, 9.4.2015)

Fiona took a proactive approach to developing her employability. She always read the weekly newsletter from the Careers Service, which some students, like Emily, had told me they immediately deleted and never looked at due to the high volumes of emails they received. Fiona regularly checked the University Vacancies Database for opportunities and was aware of all the Careers Service schemes. Although she did not have time to be a member of any societies, she did attend socials from time to time and took on representative roles in the School. Fiona's mother encouraged this, suggesting it was a good idea for her to network and be known to lecturers and not to be a 'blank person'; perhaps drawing on her own experience of working and studying for a degree as a mature student (interview, 27.5.2015).

Although Fiona was focused on achieving financial independence, she realised during the year abroad (which formed part of her degree) that 'careers are not everything'; she wanted a job which she would enjoy. She had worked for a national broadcaster during her year abroad and this showed her that she no longer wanted to be a journalist. Although she had had an 'amazing time', she felt that having an amazing career doesn't necessarily make you happy. Long hours, poor work-life balance, and a lot of work without enough essential resources such as sufficient staffing, meant that it was not the kind of career she wanted to pursue:

> "I don't know what it is that makes me want to like....I don't know, I try to push myself to the next level all the time, but then actually in my placement year that is when I realised that careers weren't everything, so that was a good lesson to learn."
>
> (interview, 13.11.2014)

Whilst Fiona was highly motivated to work - to be employable and independent from her family - other issues of happiness, emotion, identity, and relationships, were also involved in her decisions about careers and geographic mobility (Young and Collin, 2000; Holmes, 2010; Finn, 2017) rather than economic exchange. She had the opportunity to apply for work overseas for a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO). Even though this was something she could imagine for herself, she made the decision to move to Germany, where she would also join her boyfriend. Fiona was employed in a graduate job with a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME), working in social media marketing and organising events. However, the ethos was not one that she shared and therefore she decided to look for other jobs. After a few months, Fiona found a small heritage project which really interested her and, through building relationships and evidencing her capabilities, she successfully pitched for a job which was particularly focussed on marketing and communications. She told me the heritage project was a much better environment and was more congruent with her sense of self and what she recognised was valuable and important to her (Graeber, 2001; Skeggs, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012):

> "....I realise one thing I just love in this new environment is that there is more of a family-like atmosphere. It is quite a small team….they had a Christmas meal this week and there was about I think about 10 to 12 people, but because of the diversity of ages and sort of experiences you know, especially the older half, you know they have done more interesting and varied things in their life, but we were all sort of there together because we have got a love of language and linguistics in one form or another. It is so lovely and I think it is that kind of homely family feel that was missing in my old job…."
>
> (interview, 11.12.2015)

Fiona's experience is illustrative of her desire to find satisfaction and interest in her work, to be working in an environment she enjoys, and feeling part of what she described to me as a 'work community'. Hence, Fiona was able to balance her wishes to achieve financial independence, to work internationally, and to have a job which she found fulfilling and enjoyable.

Amelia: working for a charity

Although Amelia had originally hoped to do an MA in speech therapy, she became aware that there was a prerequisite number of years of practical experience in the field before an

NHS qualification could be studied. Therefore, she studied for an MA in English which (combined with her work experience with the university schools liaison team) helped her move forward in her career. She ultimately gained a graduate professional role working for a national charity:

> "When I was looking for jobs I knew I wanted to work for a charity but most roles were in fund-raising which didn't massively interest me. Then I came across the role I have now, which includes writing with working for a charity."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 8.5.2018)

Amelia had not used the Careers Service until Stage 3, to find out about speech therapy, but had then become aware of the role with the university's schools liaison team through visiting the Careers Service. She had found her work with the charity fulfilling and told me 'I absolutely love it'. Amelia intends to continue working in the charity sector and aims to progress to managerial roles in the future.

Other graduates I got to know during my fieldwork are now working as consultants for global consultancy firms, teaching English as a foreign language, working in university administration on widening participation and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) recruitment, working in marketing in the financial sector and an international film and media company, in a human rights charity, and in Information Technology sales and account management (please refer to Appendix B for full details). Student research participants shared with me their motivations and the ways in which they decided on their career directions, which for the most part are based on their desire for fulfilling work and congruence with their sense of identity rather than high economic returns. Making an income is important; however, the motivation to make meaning and make a difference in the world through careers have been consistent themes in my data.

Chapter conclusions

As this discussion of the data suggests, many of my research participants were not just seeking a graduate job and higher incomes. Instead, they were considering the deeper question asked by Matthew, the Head of School, about what they wanted to do with their lives and what would be meaningful to them. Their stories and experiences show that decision-making about careers is complex, and that graduate outcomes in the shape of

better jobs or salaries are not the only drivers. The student research participants' narratives provide insights into the 'stories behind the stories of their transcripts'; a need which academic staff member Mary identified. People make decisions based on a much more complex range of factors than if they were simply rational actors considering the economic exchange value of their degree and getting a job after graduation. Instead, students saw that they had developed as people through the influences of the School and the discipline, the staff, their extra-curricular involvements, their part-time work and their wider university experience. This can lead for some to some difficult negotiations of identity and may lead them to resist parental ideas about the nature of a 'proper job' and about what constitutes success. The majority of students considered the question of what they wanted to do with their lives and careers in terms of their fulfilment, personal happiness, and sense of purpose. The School and the discipline are part of the student research participants' personal growth and development, the journey through which they come to an understanding of what matters to them in terms of identity, beliefs and value, and how this can translate into a career path.

Although students and graduates recognised the realities of getting a job after their degree - and on occasions took stop-gap jobs - they were concerned with discovering what they wanted to do, understanding their employability in terms of their development and longer term careers, for which English Studies provides very strong foundations. However, as I have discussed in this and previous chapters, students can have difficulty in articulating the skills developed by their non vocational discipline – there is a perception gap. Students told me that they tended to draw on their extra-curricular and part-time work to discuss their potential employability. Given that there is a growing recognition of the value of skills developed by disciplines such as English Studies for the twenty-first century workplace, I argue that an increased awareness and ability to bridge the perception gap would be valuable for students. In Chapter 7, I will turn to this capacity for understanding, presenting, and articulating employability in context. I will discuss the ways in which the 'richness of skills' from English Studies - which academic staff members Heather, Alison and Mary spoke of – are understood and articulated as graduates narrate their employability from English Studies from within the workplace.

Chapter 7. Bridging the perception gap

Introduction

The general melee and excited buzz of hundreds of people taking their seats in the Great Hall was clearly seen and heard over the video link to the lecture theatre, where I had joined additional guests to watch the graduation ceremonies of some of my research participants. I knew, from informal conversations and emails I had received, that individual students were experiencing a sense of anticipation, pride in their achievements, and pleasure in celebrating this moment with family and friends. Yet, at the same time, this was the end of a significant three or four years at university, at a key time in their lives. Some students had expressed their trepidation to me at the thought of their next transition, into the world of work. The congregation symbolized this rite of passage, as graduands were conferred with their degrees and became graduates of Northern University. The graduands, mainly from English but including some from Philosophy, rose as the university officials and academics wearing their colourful academic robes processed through the Hall and took their places on the dais, to the sound of traditional music of the region. In his speech of welcome, the Chancellor, who did not come from a Humanities discipline himself, spoke of what he considered to be his own 'narrow background' which he contrasted with the breadth of the Humanities. Although he was aware that the Humanities were currently less valued than Medicine or the sciences, he saw them as being equally important. He spoke of the 'hugely valuable skills in analysis, communication, argument and research' which were gained through the study of Humanities disciplines. In addition, he considered that the Humanities were significant because of 'the power of words to inspire, motivate and comfort'. Furthermore, the Chancellor recognized the importance of story-telling in everyday life: 'Stories are an important and powerful way of transferring knowledge, passions, moving minds and enhancing and enriching the human condition'.

The Chancellor expressed his confidence that, beyond the intellectual stimulation of studying Humanities subjects, the graduates would make a strong contribution to society and achieve highly in a wide range of fields. The Student Orator, an English graduate, spoke with passion on behalf of her peers; about their time at Northern University, the way she had developed as a person, the pride she felt as she reached the end of this chapter in her life, and her sense of the achievements that would follow. She invoked the words of the taxi

driver which encapsulate the dispiriting discourses that I have outlined in Chapter 5: 'What are you going to do with a degree in that?' and contrasted the imagined English student 'bookish, up in the clouds, away from reality' with the people that they had become, who 'have skill, insight and temerity'. The Student Orator was confident that her peers would create 'an exceptional legacy' (field diary, dates withheld in the interests of anonymity).

Sitting in the lecture theatre, I too felt pride in the graduates' achievements and the privilege of having shared in some of their journeys. Whilst I recognized that the Chancellor would focus on the positives for each disciplinary cohort, I was heartened by his acknowledgement of the importance of the Humanities in his speech. As I have discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, STEM subjects have gained greater prominence. Yet a plethora of research articles and reports, (Barnett, 2004; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2014, 2017; Autor, 2015; Soffel, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; Bridgstock, 2016, 2017; EPSC, 2016; UUK, 2016, 2018; Davidson, 2017; Deming 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017; Taylor, 2017; Diamond, 2018; McKeon, 2018; Moro, 2018) evidence that it is the so-called softer skills, which are developed through studying the Humanities, that are needed in a fast-moving, disruptive world. These include communication, insight into other's values and perspectives, empathy, well developed critical-thinking skills, problem-solving, the ability to create connections across complex ideas, and 'an ability to see the whole picture' (Moro, 2018:1). Yet despite this, it has been identified that the Humanities 'have fallen from the nest of subjects considered most worth studying' (*ibid.*).

Contrary to this latter view, I argue that these skills - which are identified as key to what is needed for employability in twenty-first century workplaces - are developed through the disciplinary learning and pedagogies of English Studies. Employability thus is embedded in the discipline. However, although many academic staff members spoke about their own awareness that the skills from English Studies (developed through curricula and pedagogies) are highly valued in the workplace, many students struggled to articulate their skills and especially in ways that resonate with employers. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, articulating skills and developing coherent narratives are crucial to evidencing potential employability. I have outlined in preceding chapters that in this thesis I am not conceptualising employability in terms of sets of de-contextualised generic skills but in terms

of skilful and reflexive practices within social worlds. The term skills itself is used as a heuristic device, with recognition of its imprecision as a language but also of its use by employers. Therefore it must figure in the translation of capability and narration of employability. As I have argued in Chapter 2, skills are not objects which can be easily quantified or measured. Understanding capability comes through engaging in situated practice, which provides self-realisation for the individual and enables an employer to understand the individual's capabilities and, thus, their employability (Holmes, 2001, 2013a, 2013b; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2010, 2012, 2017; Bridgstock, 2017).

In this thesis I argue that it is when the abstract knowledge of skills - which may be known, for example, from reading a module handbook - becomes real, embodied, and owned that students and graduates come to a clearer understanding of the value of the skills they have developed through studying English. This happens when they have entered the world of work, but it may also begin whilst they are still at university. Such knowledge may also be foreshadowed in modules with a more experiential content, or part-time jobs and extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. To make my argument about the process through which skills and capabilities come to be known, owned, and valued, and the ways in which students and graduates are able to create coherent narratives of employability, in this chapter I will follow some of my student research participants after their transition into the social worlds and the communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) of their workplaces and careers. In those workplaces, they apply their skills in context over time, and gain confidence in their workplace identities. Their experiences demonstrate the ways in which English Studies prepares graduates for the demands of the twenty-first century workplace, reflecting their personal growth and abilities as critical, reflective, independent learners (Harvey, 2003, 2004). These capabilities are developed through the pedagogical traditions of their discipline, including structured independent learning and research, purposeful close reading, critical thinking, and placing texts, people and events in their social, political and cultural contexts. Their testimonies provide evidence to support the Student Orator and the Chancellor's views about the value of the skills developed by the Humanities for individuals, organisations, and society. The Chancellor also highlighted the significance of narratives in 'transferring knowledge, moving minds and….enriching the human condition' and, as this chapter will argue, narratives are important not only for

understanding, articulating, and evidencing, individual employability but also for telling the wider story of employability from English Studies.

Translations: staff perspectives on the articulation of employability from English Studies

A theme that emerged in the course of my research is the struggle students can have with articulating their skills in order to present to an employer what they could contribute to a job and a workplace. Staff members recognised that students did not find the articulation of the skills from English Studies easy, even though the fundamental traditions and values of the discipline develop skills which are highly valuable to workplaces and society. In the twenty-first century, these include a critical engagement with the world (Barnett, 1997), independent learning, reflexivity, communication, analysis, empathy, taking a 'deep approach' to learning (Haggis, 2006:524), and 'questioning and creating knowledge…as well as exploring what is already known' (*ibid.*: 528). Whilst I am arguing that valuable skills are developed by the discipline and its pedagogical approaches, they do need to be revealed, articulated, translated, and framed in terms which can be related to the workplace. Claims of employability must be validated by potential employers through the framing of work-related experience and the practical application of skills in context in CVs, job applications and interviews. The extensive use of competency-based interviews by employers - which call for examples of how skills have been applied - mean this is ever more significant (DfBIS, 2015; Gilworth, 2017a).

Staff member Heather provided an example of the ways in which students are gaining valuable skills for employment through the curriculum, when she described modules to me during which students are considering plays as live performance on the stage rather than literature on the page, and translating literature to space, place, and practice. Heather outlined the ways in which this develops skills; such as dealing with risk, negotiation, and team-work. The experiences of the module, including making a short presentation or performance, were valuable in building confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Students also write a commentary on their performance, which develops skills of critical thinking, self-evaluation, and analysis. Heather was aware that being able to present confidently or to put forward a case convincingly were 'hugely valuable to anyone. Anyone, whatever job they are doing…' (interview, 13.7.2015). These skills flowed from the pedagogical methods and the learning experience of the students.

However, despite this recognition of the valuable skills and capabilities being developed, an academic staff member had shared with me her sense that students 'did not see how they were progressing as individuals with skills' due to their learning being 'episodic' within modular degree structures (field diary, 23.4.2012). This meant that it was more difficult for students to 'join up' their learning and understand their skills and abilities more holistically. Indeed, the benefits and challenges of modular degrees, which may tend to fragment the educational experience rather than enabling students to connect different aspects of their learning, have been highlighted through research (French, 2015). The benefits of ensuring there is a reflexive, meta-cognitive dimension to learning is well-recognised (Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Biggs and Tang, 2011; French, 2015). In this thesis, I am defining meta-cognition as an awareness of what one knows and how one learns more (Marzano, 1998; Knight and Yorke, 2004). Although meta-cognition can be seen as a 'fuzzy concept' (Hacker *et al.*, 1998), Rogers (1969) has provided a useful analysis of its main dimensions. It encompasses learning how to learn, confidence in the capability to learn, and that the experience of learning can be meaningful beyond didacticism, to be transformative, changing the student's conception of herself and her view of the world (Rogers, 1969; deBlaquiere *et al.,* 2019). I am arguing that meta-cognition helps students 'join up' their learning through processes of reflection on experience and practices. I will discuss in a later section some of the ways which this occurs for students, when they apply their knowledge and skills in context.

These observations about the more episodic nature of students' learning were echoed by staff member Isabella, who felt that the gradual personal development of students and their skills and abilities over the three years of their degree meant that students did not perceive it happening, which makes it harder for them to articulate reflexively what they can offer:

> "….everything I do is based on the principle of asking students what do you think, you as an individual, and that is really hard for first years, because that is not how A-Levels work. They have difficulty structuring their own arguments and setting their own tasks and thinking as independent people and that is what Universities do, that is what the English Literature degree and Language and Linguistic degrees are doing. And because that happens over three years it seems to happen un-perceptively. I think that that process isn't recognised, but it is not an un-perceptual process and neither is it an accidental one. The essays and the presentations and the dissertations in third year and all the work that they do throughout, all the conversations that they have, all the reports they write, everything is shaping them towards this."
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

Isabella felt that it was important to encourage students to 'realise what they were doing in the degree' and to 'help them recognise what they have already achieved', to reflect on the skills which come from being able to think independently and the 'skills that gives you for work, for relationships, for being a parent'. Students may not yet be appreciating the value of their practice as English students, which Isabella outlined in detail:

> "So basic things that they are always doing that they might not realise it are things like reading, paying attention to detail, proof reading, spotting errors, all the formal things about good control of language. That, again, are very useful in any job afterwards. To be able to write a correct sentence is difficult, to express yourself correctly and coherently is a very important skill in everyday life….that sense of control over your own words and your own language, that sense of authority over a voice is really important and it is something that I try to explain to students. That is something that they are aiming for in seminar discussion, in presentations, and of course in writing. Writing is a different matter then because any career that they are involved in in which they have to write then they need to be able to produce accurate documents. They need to understand the complexity and the subtlety of language in order to, again, control it, whether they work in public policy or writing something for a charity, writing a website, copy for websites, it is all about the accuracy of the language and the understanding of how it is working with them or against them, so again essay writing, attention to detail, learning to edit their own work….and they become quite sceptical of it….will help them?"
>
> (interview, 11.11.2015)

Isabella highlighted the ways in which she is aware that the discipline is developing valuable skills over time, including sophisticated abilities with language and communication, but also recognised the uncertainty of the students about whether they are developing valuable skills. This supports my argument that, although those skills are being developed, the meta-cognitive reflective process of recognising and articulating them is more difficult to achieve.

Staff member Mary often helped students with Post Graduate Certificate in Education applications. She found that students wrote about their passion for the subject, rather than framing their skills in terms of their value for their future work in ways which would be meaningful for employers. Where students did speak of the application of skills they tended to draw on their work experience or on the university's centrally-provided career development modules, even though the skills which they have practiced and developed through disciplinary learning and teaching are also valuable and relevant:

> "So they tend to often talk about passion, passion for teaching, passion for the subject, particularly those who are going into secondary teaching so they are obviously going into teaching English. 'Since my earliest years I have been passionate about books and reading' and they often are able to talk about the idea that you know they know about literature, but what I very rarely see is them being able to say things like I have developed strong written communications, I have thought about how different audiences might encounter text, I have learnt different ways of approaching texts, I have had the opportunity to practice speaking to groups and presenting my ideas and when they do say those things it is often through other kinds of experience they have had, so through the career development module, or through work experience that they have done. They seem not to focus on or perhaps to recognise that lots of those are skills that they will have been developing through seminars."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2015)

Mary reflected on the way in which the employability discourse had focused attention on specific 'employability skills' and on particular jobs, rather than the broader preparation that a discipline such as English Studies provides. Mary had observed what my research also shows, and about which I provide evidence from the students' perspective in the next section of this chapter; students often do not recognise or understand the value of the intellectual and critical skills they have developed from English Studies in employment terms. Instead, they draw on other types of experience outside the discipline. A theme which recurred in my conversations and interviews with staff related to the discourses of employability which have come to dominate and to over-power; creating what Isabella termed 'the wrong conversation' and provoking Peter to wish that the conversation could be framed in a different way. Mary identified that to address this it would be helpful to model how the skills from the discipline functioned effectively in the 'real world' of jobs and careers:

> "I think, I mean my view is that students who are able to grapple with that intellectual challenge will be students that have skills that are valuable to them in many different contexts and I think there is a degree to which they, sort of art for art's sake kind of strategy, is part of what we should be achieving. One of the problems with employability is the tendency to break it down into something that is really specific. Like I have done this degree so I will be able to do this job and the more that you are articulating that narrative the easier it is I think for students to slip into that, whereas really what we would like them to recognise, is that they have intellectual skills that might be useful to them in lots of ways, but the difficulty is that they do need a certain amount of modelling about how those intellectual skills actually do function in the real world…."
>
> (interview, 25.11.2015)

Mary and other staff members felt that it was important to help students recognise and reflect on their skills in order to address this 'perception gap', which I argue relates to a need for reflective meta-cognitive learning to 'join up' their experiences. Staff member Sylvia acknowledged that, in her view, 'we need to do a better job of making our students aware of what they can do' (interview, 29.6.2015) and Heather felt that 'It is our job to give them the language to communicate the skills from their degree' (interview, 13.7.2015). Isla also felt that it was important to enable people to make more explicit which skills and qualities are being developed through the discipline and what those skills and qualities enable people to do in their lives and careers. To do this, Isla felt that the profession needed to be reflexive about the value created by the discipline and to recognise that learning to learn, becoming a lifelong learner, was a crucial aspect of students' disciplinary skills which were highly significant as a preparation for the world of work:

> "I think as a profession we should be more critically reflective about the value of what we do….If we live in a culture that values money and employability and skills then we have to think about what we do that's valuable, but in the wider sense of value that is not about money, it is about life. We are asking people to learn how to learn. That is what we are doing. Learn how to learn and carry that out for the rest of your life."
>
> (interview, 3.11.2015)

This is an important insight, firstly, into the philosophy and pedagogies of English Studies and, secondly, Isla's aim to enable and support students to become lifelong learners, which is echoed by other staff members in this and the preceding chapter. This is recognised as a key aspect of being and remaining employable in a rapidly changing world (Harvey, 2003, 2004; Barnett, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2013a, 2013b; Davidson, 2017). Isla

also provided an insight into a potential way of moving forward; by recognising and raising awareness of the value created by the philosophy and pedagogies of English Studies in relation to employability and skills. This was something which she felt required greater critical reflection on the part of the profession.

Alison, a member of creative writing staff, felt that in part students didn't understand the richness and high value of their skills and abilities because they had not yet entered the world of work and applied those skills in practice. This again supports my argument that skills are understood through situated practice, contextualised in social worlds (Holmes, 2001, 2013a, 2013b; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2010, 2012, 2017; Bridgstock, 2017):

> "I think we have to look at the transferable skills that this teaching and training gives students and make them aware of what they know because they don't know how much they know, again because they haven't been in the working world. They don't know the richness of what they have learnt because they are too narrowly focussed on the idea that I want to be a writer, I want to be a critic, I want to go into publishing. They don't necessarily understand that their critical thinking skills, their capacity to really analyse written documents, to imagine scenarios to think about how people behave, these are all fantastically valuable…."
>
> (interview, 19.11.2015)

Staff members Alison, Heather, Isla, and Mary, along with a number of their colleagues, recognised the difficulties students experienced with understanding and articulating skills. Their reflections on the issues suggested some ways in which more episodic modular learning, the gradual development of students through time, and application of disciplinary skills, might be 'joined up' for students. They saw this might be achieved through reflection on the valuable skills which were being practised. However, they also expressed concern that pressures of time meant that there were fewer opportunities than they wanted for this dimension of students' learning within modules. Their insights suggest that a way of addressing the issues for students might be to make the pedagogies and learning from the discipline more explicit, a view which research by Haggis (2006) has also identified as potentially very significant for Humanities subjects. Haggis (*ibid.*:531) has highlighted the way in which subjects in the Arts and Humanities are aligned with more traditional ideas of the purpose of higher education, of 'providing a challenge to students' values, assumptions and habits of thought' (*ibid*.:531). This supports the development of people who are critical

independent learners who can learn throughout life in response to the demands of twenty-first century work.

However, this perspective can be at odds with the consumer model of higher education, in which uncomfortable challenges are avoided. Rather than 'dumbing down' these disciplines, discussion of the discourses and practices of disciplines can be used to emphasise the value of educational experiences, (including more challenging experiences) to be understood and articulated in employment terms. Ultimately, students need to be able to draw on examples which inter-weave their studies, interests, and work experience in paid and voluntary work, into a coherent narrative of employability which enables employers to understand and validate what they, as a graduate, can offer (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). In a subsequent section, I will share the experiences of students and graduates as they develop their narratives. These are not fictional stories but are related to meaning-making (Polkinghorne 1988; Lawler, 2014) and the expression of the value they understand they can create, contextualised in experience and situated practice. However, first, in the following section, I will discuss the students' perceptions of their ability to articulate their skills and employability.

Translations: students' perspectives on articulating employability from English Studies

Staff perceptions of the issues that students experience in articulating the skills developed by the discipline and understanding their employability are echoed and confirmed by the students themselves. A student-led survey (carried out by the Staff-Student Committee within the School (SSC) in 2015) highlighted that, whilst 28% of respondents felt they would be able to articulate the transferable skills from their degree well to a future employer, the majority of respondents felt they would struggle to describe skills that are specific to an English degree, due to their broad nature. Student Fiona reflected on this, observing that people had struggled to express themselves in the survey questionnaire. She herself appreciated the difficulties, even though (as I have discussed in Chapter 6) she had been focused on ensuring her employability throughout her degree:

> "I thought it was quite interesting that one thing that came up was how….they'd struggled to describe skills that are specific to an English degree, not just doing a degree at Uni, which I feel like I can completely relate to, because I feel like, 'oh, team player, concise essay writing' but then I think if I really nit-picked it, I'd get better things coming out, because there was some good skills that were, yeah, like the students said, close analysis of text, public speaking, working to deadlines, critical thinking….I just feel like I don't, even now, I don't really know what aspects of my degree, I mean I know what I'm interested in and I know that I absolutely loved my studies with Linguistics and I think from a personal point speaking a second language….I feel like I've learnt so many things that would be useful for real life as well, which is cool, but expressing that on a CV I don't know, I still think I'd find that difficult."
>
> (interview, 9.4.2015)

This reflects not only my own research, but also previous research into perceptions of skills gained through studying English (Martin and Gawthrope, 2004) and more general research across all disciplines (Bryant, 2005; HEA Student Satisfaction survey, 2015; Confederation of British Industry and Pearson, 2016; UUK, 2016). This indicates that many students find it difficult to identify and articulate skills they have developed through their higher education which are relevant to their employability, although being able to do this is critical to labour market success (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017).

Student Catriona described articulating the skills from her studies in English Literature to be like 'break[ing] the code' and she did not feel that she had achieved this even in her final year. When asked during our first interview (10.12.2014) about skills from English that might be applied in employment, she mentioned that English has a 'creative edge' which enables people to find meaning and put patterns together, and requires independence and organization to read books and prepare for lectures. In subsequent interviews in her second year she told me she was not 'sure how to think about the whole skill thing' (interview, 9.12.2015) and was uncertain how to articulate the skills from her degree (interview, 22.2.2016). Catriona recognised that some skills come simply from living independently, from going to university itself, living in a different city and meeting new people, organising time, responsibility, and 'confidence in speaking up in lessons…. achieving a decent level of academic writing'. She felt that English as a discipline gave a better vocabulary, a more creative mind, helped with expressing points of view clearly. It gave an understanding of how to listen and respect other people's point of view and to appreciate that there are many ways to interpret things (interview, 8.10.2015). Catriona also felt that English might develop

skills such as close reading, which helped with seeing more depth and gaining different understandings (interview, 9.12.2015). When we met the following year, Catriona still wished that she could speak more clearly about her skills:

> "I wish I could give you a really good list….simple, one worded, in alphabetical order and perfect…."
>
> (interview, 22.2.2016)

However, she took part in an extra-curricular drama project organised by the School of English. In relation to that experience, she was able to talk fluently about specifics and the application of her skills; including her planning of sessions which would engage the children, being to the point, communicating clearly, teaching a text and how to break down that text in order to teach it effectively (interview, 22.2.2016).

Michael, too, was unsure of the skills from an English degree. In his first year he relied on having been told that 'you learn a higher degree of analysis' (interview, 25.11.2014) though by his second year he recognised that:

> "English, by the very nature of the subject, teaches you to digest and understand large volumes of information. Analysis skills, be it texts or anything like that, are all very valuable. Research….there is a lot of research….to be able to do effective research is definitely a valuable skill…."
>
> (interview, 8.10.2015)

However, when discussing skills during our interviews, Michael turned more often to his voluntary work at the Riverside Youth Project rather than to his university studies; contextualising his skills in his work and creating narratives which drew on those resources and experiences.

In the Autumn term of her final year, Amelia also told me that she found it difficult to articulate her skills. Whilst she recognised that presentations and group work which she had been involved in helped with communicating effectively and building confidence, she found it problematic to articulate her employability in an interview or application:

> "The thing I personally find difficult is if I am applying for a job or….I am currently applying to volunteer somewhere at the minute, and I find it difficult to talk about myself, because I think it is hard to figure out what you have learned that makes you sort of employable."
>
> (interview, 8.12.2014)

But at the end of her undergraduate degree, when we spoke again, she discussed the way that the challenges of writing a dissertation required a range of skills, although she still found it difficult to express and how to translate this in job applications and on her CV:

> Jane: "Overall, you mentioned some things there like time management and academic reading, research, coping with stress and that kind of thing from the dissertation. In general do you feel that you have got particular skills that are going to be useful to you in terms of the future?"
>
> Amelia: "It's hard that one. I think we have, but I don't think we know how to say what we have gained, if that makes sense. Like I have been to the Careers Service a couple of times and I have said I am applying for this or I need to update my CV and I personally don't know how to make it sound like I have got all of these skills. Like I know that I have gained skills from being at University, but I don't really know what they are, if that makes sense."
>
> (interview, 8.6.2015)

Many student research participants spoke of the value they had found in talking about skills in their interviews with me, which was a process of reflection leading to greater understanding. This can be seen as a form of meta-cognition, of joining up experiences and learning to support the understanding and articulation of skills and employability. Michael reflected at the end of an interview during his second year:

> "It is interesting because even in this meeting as I have been talking, like you don't think about the different things that make me employable until you have to globalise it or write a CV. It is quite interesting to reflect on and think about retrospectively."
>
> (interview, 8.10.2015)

He emphasised this again after he had graduated, telling me that he found the reflection 'therapeutic' (field diary, 6.3.2018). As I have discussed in Chapter 4, Grace also told me that she found the opportunity for reflection helpful (field diary, 6.3.2018). Michael and Grace saw that the process of reflection, which I am arguing provides a meta-cognitive dimension

to their learning and experience, had been valuable. During my fieldwork I have observed that, whilst students can find it difficult to articulate the skills from their discipline or to frame their skills in terms which would resonate with employers, actually, where students *can* draw on other experiences, they have narrative resources to draw on. Those experiences might come from more experiential forms of learning through modules and projects, part-time work or volunteering which enable them to speak about what they can offer, through discussing examples of their situated practices. In the following section, I will discuss how this relates to the nature of workplaces as communities of practice.

Bridging the perception gap: workplace contexts

As my research with staff and students has shown there is a perception gap between students' understanding of the skills they are developing through their studies in English and the nature and value of those skills in the context of employment. I am arguing that this gap can be bridged when students and graduates apply their skills in context, which enables them to better understand, take ownership of, and narrate their skills and employability. Within organisations and workplaces, the application of skills is highly contextualised (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Bridgstock, 2017). Tacit knowledge, which is an awareness of cultural and operational expectations and the skills and tasks required, is learned in-situ within organisational and workplace social worlds and cultures (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Sternberg *et al.*, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2004). Further to this, Bridgstock's (2016, 2017) research has evidenced the importance of contextualisation to developing knowledge and skills in a rapidly changing, technologically disruptive era, when relational and networked aspects of learning become crucial. Navigating a field and a workplace community is complex. It involves social and cultural capitals, the development of workplace identities, and the capacity for ongoing, lifelong learning, including acquiring the tacit knowledge and embodied aspects of a working life which enable people to fit in to organisational cultures (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Reay, 2004; English and Bolton, 2016). Employability, the capacity to fit in, to work and continue learning in the workplace, are validated by employers in these contexts (Holmes, 2001, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017). Similarly, graduates entering workplaces will come to an understanding of their employability through the interaction of the knowledge and skills from their degrees and their practical application in

the context of the world of work over time. This also enables them to develop narrative resources to evidence their employability.

Student research participant Emma's story provides an example of the processes of integration, learning, language acquisition, and narrative formation which have been key to her acceptance as a member of her workplace community. She became familiar with the shared repertoires of resources which were valued and applied within that social world. In Chapter 3, I have shown how the theoretical concept of a workplace community of practice is useful in gaining analytical purchase on a workplace as a social world. In those social worlds, there are cultures and sub-cultures within which action, interaction, learning, and enskillment are occurring and in which workplace identities are being developed (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Each organisational or workplace social world has its own practices, stories, narratives, ways of articulating what is significant and valued and what is required for a participant to be regarded as being employable. Thus, whilst studying, students tended to discuss their skills in terms of essay writing and dissertation projects, which are valued and well-understood within the discipline and the School of English. However, the realisation of the nature and wider value of the skills and capabilities from English Studies comes through graduates such as Emma applying their skills within their workplaces. However, as I will discuss in the following section, this may also occur through students applying skills and capabilities in other contexts during their studies, for example in their part-time work, modules which involve work-related content, or extra-curricular experiences. I first met Emma during her final year and have followed her progress over during the first three years of her career, which she has described to me at different points during that time.

Emma: contextualising skills from English Studies in the Tech Co community of practice

After graduating, Emma gained a job working in marketing and communications with Tech Co, a globally renowned technology company which has a particular culture that people need to fit into, known as the 'Tech Co way':

> "Yeah I mean in the interview no one mentioned there is a Tech Co way. They obviously were thinking that assessing it from the inside and then you get there and you quickly adapt. It's the same as Uni you just realise that there is a certain way of doing things. This is how it runs and you pick up on that."
>
> (interview, 24.6.2015)

Reflecting back after her first year at Tech Co in an interview, Emma realised that she had become part of the team and had learned the processes, language, and expectations that demonstrated this and validated her employability in the Tech Co workplace. She had completed her probationary year and had been given roles and tasks, including writing articles for the national press and media and developing social media campaigns, which indicated the trust placed in her and the perception of value that the company had of her skills. Emma recognised that the skills she was drawing on (for example, writing articles, social media content, and marketing materials) had been developed by her discipline, including her ability for sophisticated communication, use of language, and understanding audience expectations:

> Jane: "….do you think that your background in English plus your experience in marketing and stuff is that, you know….you are drawing the contrast there between having the focus on tech at Tech Co, but not necessarily connecting to the consumer. I mean do you feel that you are kind of, all your disciplinary kind of learning and stuff that you did helps you with seeing that kind of thing?"
>
> Emma: "Yeah very much so. I always think words have such a power and the way that you construct a sentence or formulate a kind of a context through has the power to make, the language has the power to make it be interpreted in one way or another so I think whilst we have a Tech Co tone, it is the way that you apply that in different methods, so I do think my appreciation for that does stem from my subject, my studies."
>
> (interview, 24.6.2015)

Emma had become confident in her workplace role as a Communications Executive because she and her colleagues recognised her level of capability, as shown in her work. She had come to the realisation that, ultimately, a work environment called for adaptation and learning. Although Northern University and her study of English had provided appropriate knowledge and skills, and the symbolic and cultural capital which she told me had been a factor in her selection for the job, she had needed to adapt to the individual expectations

and practices of the Tech Co workplace. This included forms of tacit and embodied knowledge which she had learned through situated practice:

> "….I think that something that Uni can't prepare you for actually, just the nature of business itself, like the actual….you can learn it all in theory and you can develop the skills that will mean you get on in the environment but the actual, I'm not sure what the word is, but the actual environment itself is just something I think you have to adapt to."
>
> (interview, 24.6.2015)

Emma had become part of the distinctive Tech Co organisational culture and community of practice, in which she had been a reflective learner and shown her ability to adapt to the environment. Her position did not include induction training and required people to fit in through building relationships within the team and learning through experience. Drawing on her critical and analytical abilities, Emma had been able to contribute to the company's requirement for 'positive disruption,' that is, challenging the status quo and developing ideas for addressing issues. She had shown this in her willingness to critique Tech Co's social media and her efforts to enhance it. It is through immersion in that context that Emma had been able to apply and reflect on the application of her skills. This is an important insight about understanding employability. Since employability is validated through performance of skills in repertoires of skilful practices (Wenger, 1998; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017), being embedded in a workplace can be seen as essential to being recognised as being employable. However, as Emma suggested, people can learn valuable skills, orientations, and dispositions such as adaptability and knowledge at university, which can enable them to 'get on' although the specifics of what is required in a particular workplace will be learned in a situated, practice based way (Sternberg *et al.*, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Emma was aware that her skills in communication were highly valued in her workplace. She recognised that her knowledge of language, her ability to use it effectively and persuasively, and her insight into different kinds of underlying assumptions, came from her deep understanding of language from English Studies. Although Emma learned a great deal in her time with the company, and recognised that she had experienced 'personal growth [which was] rapid' (interview, 24.6.2015), she was not offered the opportunity for more formal

professional development due to the company culture and approach. Ultimately, this meant she felt less valued. This was a contributory factor in her decision to leave after two years with Tech Co. The impact of power structures in organisational and workplace communities of practice can be significant, and, as Fuller *et al.* (2005) have argued, there can be situations where power relations affect the otherwise benign sounding idea of a community. Opportunities for learning and participation may not be made available to all members of a workplace community, which may be affected by organisational culture or the social, economic, and political context; structural constraints and power issues need to be recognised. However, Emma was aware of the global reputation of Tech Co and that capturing experience and developing narratives to draw on in the future was important:

> "It is always in the back of my mind that I should be keeping a note of what I am doing, especially now at Tech Co, kind of the adventures that it entails just so when I do go for another job I can prove it and especially with this work I am trying to keep like a coverage book of my own work so be it from like papers or just like an ongoing list I suppose….and then refining that for my CV."
>
> (interview, 24.6.2015)

These narratives of employability which Emma has been developing, and the examples she can provide of the application of her skills in context, have been important in her successful job applications since leaving Tech Co. Emma has been travelling internationally and working as a way of considering what will be the meaningful work she wishes to pursue as a future career. She gained a job with a company which had been impressed by her achievements in her previous employment. She has developed an ownership of her skills and an appreciation of the value her employers placed on the skills gained from her discipline, which helps to equip her for her future career. Emma's story illustrates the way in which she has come to an appreciation of skills and capabilities gained through her learning and experiences, which she has come to understand more clearly through practice in context, over time. The perception gap has been bridged through this process and Emma can fluently narrate and evidence her employability. For some student research participants, however, it was their engagement in part-time work, School of English projects and opportunities, modules with an experiential or work-related content, or extra-curricular activities which led to this process of recognition beginning during and alongside their studies. In the following section, I will discuss some of those particular learning opportunities which student research

participants shared with me. This further underlines the way in which the application of skilful practices in context are key to the realisation of their value and the development of fluent narratives of employability.

Bridging the perception gap: during higher education

A number of learning experiences and opportunities are available within the Northern University School of English curriculum and its wider projects which enable students to apply their skills in settings. To varying extents, these opportunities mirror the social worlds of workplaces. An example within the curriculum is the module which Rosie took, during which students are placed with an employer. Subsequently, Rosie reflected on her experience and considered the skills she had applied. Michael, Cameron, and Fiona took a language and literacy acquisition module which involved working with migrants and refugees, by teaching them English and producing books. There have been community drama and other engagement projects including the one that Catriona and Lucy had participated in. In recent years, there has been an annual employability event for the whole of Stage 2 involving a 'real world' challenge. Students are also offered longer-term, paid opportunities to assist at events and open days; roles which students like Fiona and Grace took up, seeing it as valuable experience. More recently, a student-led café has been set up, offering opportunities for volunteering. There is a student-led career blog. Centrally provided career development modules are offered by the Careers Service, which some research participants studied, including Fiona who took this option in order to gain academic credit for her part-time job.

These learning experiences have provided individual students with narrative resources to evidence the application of their skills and thus their potential employability. For example, as I have discussed in Chapter 6, Rosie gained experience in working in the Arts which helped her go on to successfully apply for a job in that field following her placement. Such experiential modules and projects (like the extra-curricular drama project) provide opportunities for situated, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Bridgstock, 2017). They enable students to gain experience which can be used to validate employability. This is achieved by applying and reflecting on their skills and practices and crossing over the boundaries of academia into other organisations, where they can learn by participating in different social contexts (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bridgstock, 2017). The employability

event, which students attend in Stage 2, enables students to confront a 'real world' issue and apply their skills to finding solutions, modelling skills and working alongside an external organisation and School of English alumni. Student feedback has been positive (as evidenced by an internal evaluation report). Academic staff member Mary told me that she felt it was useful to have the opportunity to consider the skills gained from English Studies during events of this type. In my conversations and interviews following the event, students Michael, Cameron, Zoe, and Olivia, suggested potential improvements, telling me that the events had been fast-paced, giving little opportunity or reflection on the skills applied at the time. Michael felt it had been a good experience which he had enjoyed, and that further reflection on those skills would be helpful to making the day have a more lasting impact.

During the English language acquisition and literacy module, Michael had helped to redesign the website for a project and had worked with learners in a language school in Southtown, a large industrial town to the South of Northern University. Michael felt 'it was nice to feel part of something' and that hearing people's stories, including those of refugees, had been 'really eye opening.' This was 'academic stuff that was real….I am glad I took that module'. It had been longer and 'more multi-layered' than other modules and had made him think more consciously about how he was applying his skills (field diary, 16.9.2017). Fiona also found the module helpful in terms of gaining hands-on volunteering experience, although she knew that some people saw such modules as a risk:

> "….[the module leader] was saying that she thinks that a lot of students are actually scared to take the module because it's different. The same way that people are sometimes scared to take an outside one like a career development module because they don't want to take the risk of it being in their final year and messing it up. People are wary sometimes of this kind of practical or different element, but it's been my favourite module for that very reason."
>
> (interview, 27.5.2015)

I argue that the wariness which Fiona identified relates to the potential disjunctures which occur when crossing the boundaries into other fields and workplace communities of practice, where people, experiences, and expectations may be unfamiliar (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bourdieu, 2005a; Reay, 2004). However, Fiona saw that entering a different setting provided her with valuable opportunities to apply her skills. Cameron, reflecting back on the module soon after graduating, described it as a 'real world' module in

which he felt he had applied a lot of skills. These included how to work with people, teaching people to read, communication skills, hearing moving stories (such as working with someone who was unable to write his name in his own language), and facilitating the production of books which were published. Cameron saw that this module had given him narrative resources which he could use in job applications and interviews: 'I would talk about that module' (interview, 26.7.2017).

Fiona found it helpful to put theory into action through the language acquisition module, finding that such active engagement 'hammered home' her learning, thus describing in graphic terms the impact of the learning experience:

> "So this module was really cool having this practical element and going out to the centres and we sort of studied the theories in class then we'd go to the centre and you would see it in action, so I think there should be lots more modules like that in the School of English….I think it was learning the theory and then seeing it, which obviously in terms of learning a theory makes it hammer home because you've not only learnt it by listening to someone here, you've seen it as well, so from a learning perspective that was really, really useful and it kind of makes it seem more valid, doesn't it, more valuable."
>
> (interview, 27.5.2015)

Fiona's learning experience, captured by the metaphor of 'hammering home', highlights the value of an experiential approach to learning which is confirmed by scholarship (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Gibbs, 1988; Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018). Participants who work with and apply knowledge can achieve new levels of understanding, reflecting on and evaluating outcomes, re-conceptualizing their knowledge, and seeing it in a new light (Angelo, 1993; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Such active, reflective learning is emphasized as a means of achieving deeper learning and the performance of understanding (*ibid.*), for example through working with knowledge towards solving novel problems (Davidson, 2017). Problem-Based Learning, a form of experiential learning, has scope to support employability and to enable graduates to more rapidly and smoothly transition into professional practice (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Modules, such as the module involving a work placement, along with the Language Acquisition module and the extra-curricular drama project, offer these opportunities for applying knowledge and skills in different contexts. Michael, Fiona, Catriona, and Cameron came to new understandings and a more confident ownership of their skills as a result.

Although these modules and projects offer experiential learning and opportunities for reflection, they are not available to or taken by large numbers of students. Indeed, my research has shown that many students prefer to take as many subject-related modules as possible whilst they have the opportunity. However, I propose that in addition to these more experiential learning opportunities, reflection on the pedagogies of English Studies and the skills which it develops through the core curriculum could help students gain a deeper appreciation of what they are gaining through their degree. For example, the value of independent study, of critical thinking skills, and the softer skills which graduate Jonny (working as a business consultant) illustrated as having come from his degree. Jonny highlighted skills such as communication, listening, empathy, and analysis; all of which he was applying in a client-facing role with a global consultancy company. Furthermore, I suggest that English Studies provides a valuable preparation for employment, due to its pedagogies, its focus on personal development, and creating the ability for lifelong learning. These pedagogies, such as independent study, can themselves be woven into the narratives that students create. One example of this is reflected in the findings of a study by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (2017), which has identified that a high level of independent learning, of 20 hours per week, increases learning gain. English Studies involves considerable independent study, which I am arguing develops the capacity for self-motivation, time-management, independence and initiative. These are skills and capabilities which are valued by employers. In the following section, I will outline further testimonies from graduates working in a wide range of careers, who have come to understand that they have valuable skills for the twenty-first century workplace, in order to demonstrate the value of the skills from English Studies in employability terms.

Narratives of employability: understanding, owning and articulating the skills from English Studies

The ability to narrate employability - to place the skills from the discipline in context and to frame and articulate skills in terms that employers can relate to - is important in achieving success in finding the meaningful work which students are seeking. In this section, I will draw on the experiences of Rosie, Emily, Amelia, Grace, Ashley, and Lily, whom I have introduced in the preceding chapters. These student research participants have come to an understanding of the value of their disciplinary skills in their work; including communication, presentation and writing skills, independent learning and research capabilities, the ability to

cope with ongoing learning, and to adapt within their workplace. A number of students described these disciplinary skills as helping them to cope with 'steep learning curves'. Such skills have added value in workplace communities of practice in a range of sectors, from charities, schools and the Arts, to retail and technology businesses. The stories the student research participants have shared with me reveal the ways in which they were ultimately able to value their skills and take ownership of them, an understanding which I am arguing comes through situated practice in the social worlds of workplaces. Students are able to narrate their employability, using the narrative resources they have gained, by applying their skills in a number of contexts. I alert the reader that some of the following quotations in this section, from student research participants, are lengthy. However the fluency and length of the research participants' narratives is indicative of their growing ownership and appreciation of their skills.

Rosie – Communications Officer

As I have outlined in Chapters 5 and 6, Rosie had a transformational experience as a result of her studies in the School, coming to the realisation that she wanted to work in the Arts field following a placement module. This experience created cultural and social capital which Rosie did not have from her family background, which helped her to gain a job with a local Arts company after graduating. Rosie reflected at length, in an interview after almost nine months of working with Arts Co. This revealed the process of understanding and valuing her skills and competences through reflecting on the way she applied those skills in her workplace. Shortly before our interview, she had had an appraisal which had helped her to contextualise and narrate her skills, with her supervisor Caroline helping her to highlight this through a process of reflection. Rosie was also able to relate the skills she was applying in the workplace to her disciplinary learning and her degree course. This shows that Rosie was able to consider her skills, such as writing and appreciation of the significance of tone and context, problem-solving, balancing priorities, juggling commitments, having a capacity to work as an individual and as a member of a team, close reading and the ability to interpret complex documents. Rosie was able to narrate her employability, speaking sometimes tentatively but with growing ownership. She spoke of the way those skills have been valuable to herself and her employer in the social context of her work, in which her employability is being validated and in which she was developing confidence in her workplace identity:

> "Well, I think it is having my appraisal has made me think about it more, because we talked about like the writing side of it, because the majority of what I do is writing, whether it is writing emails....what I have been doing for the past week is writing emails to people asking them if they will take flyers for our performances and it is knowing the tone for certain things and that is a big part of what I do and that is why I got the job, basically, that is what has been inferred, so....but also for my appraisal Caroline said things like prioritising work, which I hadn't really thought about, but actually doing a degree like English where it is very independent and I can work in a team. I can work in a team but I can also work as an individual and I do often prefer to just do it myself and just get it done. I hadn't really thought about prioritising at all, but actually that does stem from juggling however many modules and it all being kind of off your own back, your own time, putting in x amount of hours a week towards the Uni work and deciding which essay should you know take precedence over another and which you know all that sort of stuff was really valuable. I am trying to think what else. Problem-solving, apparently, in my appraisal, but I guess that comes down to unpicking questions and seeing the best ways to answer them, that side of it as well. But what I am really interested in is fund-raising applications and I think I would quite like to get a bit more experience in that area. Part of that is just like from what I have seen is it is just understanding what they want from you. So, for example, this pot of money that we didn't get, it just wasn't what we were looking for. Without going into too much detail, it just wasn't what that particular, what they wanted. They didn't give away that much about what they wanted. I think it is about close reading and it is about yes, that side of it is really important, you know to see what they actually want from you in answering questions and things."
>
> (interview, 15.1.2015)

Rosie's narrative unpacks the ways in which English Studies has developed the skills which she was applying in her work at Arts Co and in doing so, showed her understanding of their value in context. This had given her the confidence to identify a new area of interest, fundraising, where she could see the ways that the skills of close reading, interpretation, communication and argument - which studying English developed - would enable her to help the company improve its funding bids.

I interviewed Rosie again one year later when she had been working for almost two years. She spoke of the way she was building on her experience, not only in her marketing work and using her skills in writing and proof-reading, but also doing research and working with numbers and figures in the context of funding and budgets. She was continuing to learn and, following her identification of fundraising as an area where she could add value, she had been on a course about funding in the creative sector. Rosie felt that Arts Co was failing to articulate well enough what they were doing and she had agreed with her supervisor that she could work more closely with their freelance fundraiser in the future. By making this

analysis and taking the initiative, Rosie was showing her capacity for critical analysis and the ability to make a creative response, for example in developing her knowledge in this area in order to be able to contribute more fully. She was aware that she had developed a reputation within the company for being a good writer and she was producing a very wide range of communications for a wide range of audiences. Rosie's work included producing print media, press releases, social media, packs for venues, arranging photo-calls, creating website content, as well as liaising with venues, schools, libraries, Higher Education Institutions, and major national Arts companies. She has been able to handle the challenges of being short staffed at busy times and was able to cope with the additional workload. Rosie felt that she now 'knew the ropes' and had gained tacit knowledge within her organisational community of practice (such as images never being available until two weeks before a production) so she was aware of how to plan around the rhythms of the work. This knowledge and ability led to Rosie being given greater responsibility. She was trusted to run the office when other staff members were away whilst touring a production. Thus, Rosie had become recognised as an active and capable participant in the community of practice of her workplace, within the field of the Arts (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Sternberg *et al.*, 2000; Harvey, 2003, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004).

Rosie showed knowledge of and an immersion in issues specific to the field and sector she was working in. She was able to speak knowledgeably about the challenges of Arts funding, contextualising this in the wider political and cultural landscape of economic austerity. She was aware, for instance the ways in which infrastructure and new buildings seemed easier to attract funding for than productions (so that there was something concrete to show for tax-payers' money) whilst theatre companies struggled to be able to tour due to the cost. Rosie made a creative response to the challenges of the current funding regime, by initiating a crowd-funding scheme which funded the involvement of children with an Arts Co production. This action was in line with Rosie and her employers' aims of making the Arts accessible. The initiative had been successful and had been appreciated within the company. A significant sum had been raised which not only enabled the project to proceed but had also created a positive PR story. In addition, Rosie told me she also intended to develop a Friends Scheme. Her experience with Arts Co and, during her earlier placement, with Theatre Co developed her confidence in her workplace identity and subsequently enabled her to make a successful job application to a major national Arts company. Rosie now works in the

marketing team, drawing on her experience, in Bourdieu's (1984) terms her practical mastery. She understands the value of her skills in the context of her chosen field.

Emily – University-Schools Coordinator

Emily told me very firmly, when she was an undergraduate, that she did not feel the skills from her discipline would transfer to her future career. She thought that the more general skills of living independently would make her employable. However, over time and from the vantage point of the workplace, she came to understand and articulate the value of her disciplinary skills more clearly. Her story is also clearly illustrative of the need to learn the embodied and tacit skills for fitting in and being employable within a culture and a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004; English and Bolton, 2016).

Emily took a one year post with a students' representative organisation immediately after graduating. She described how she had acquired extensive tacit knowledge; learning to act appropriately in new and challenging situations, such as attending meetings with the top management team and the Vice Chancellor. Emily saw it as taking on a new identity, going from being a student to a more professional situation, and representing the interests of students (interview, 10.1.2014). This fitted with her dispositions and sense of identity as someone who had always been willing to speak out, as she had been at school and in representative roles during her university studies. She valued the learning and experience which she had gained (Interview, 10.1.2014), seeing it as 'the best experience I could have gained at this age' (interview, 10.1.2014). This involved training in and practical work in a number of areas, including marketing, democracy, student advice, and governance. She had also learned how to fit into the culture and the organisational structures and gained an understanding of how to negotiate appropriately to achieve things. This had contributed to her growing practical mastery (Bourdieu, 1984) in the field of university administration. Emily had had the flexibility and capacity to learn, which had enabled her to adapt to the expectations, the routines and the languages of a community of practice which was new to her:

> "Seeing how kind of essentially a business that big runs and learning how you are supposed to act in those situations and what is appropriate, what is socially appropriate in those situations….How you would act in a [student] meeting is very different to how you would act in a university meeting. And how to negotiate things with the university so you kind of get your way, but also how to build trust with them so they know that you won't ask for anything that is not reasonable. I have learnt a lot this year, definitely."
>
> (interview, 23.6.2014)

She had a sense of the embodied nature of some of the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992b:99). She understood that modes of dress and ways of comporting herself were signifiers of fitting in to a social world (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004; English and Bolton, 2016), and that these rules and regularities vary between types of meetings in terms of expectations, dress, and behaviours. Emily clearly knew how to comport herself and to fit into these different situations. She was aware that the social and cultural capital and tacit knowledge created through her experiences would be very helpful to her. She had learned the expectations of the community of practice she was working in (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and was able to narrate her employability drawing on her experience.

Emily went on to get a job in professional services at Southern University. During a phone interview with me soon after she had started work there, she reflected on the importance of putting skills into some kind of active context. It was important to understand how to approach job applications and interviews with specific examples because 'a degree is not a golden ticket'. Emily saw her role at Southern University as a project management job, which she had been able to apply for because of her past education, skills, and experience. She felt the discipline of English had given her good communication and analytical skills which she was finding useful in her work in outreach and marketing, working with a diverse group of people:

> "….in terms of my degree it is kind of a confidence thing and confidence in ability to write well and analyse things, because Linguistics has a lot of analysing, a lot of analytical work involved in it and that is useful definitely."
>
> (interview, 26.11.2015)

Emily's disciplinary studies and her previous work experience had helped her to build confidence and her ability to make presentations; part of her work in that role had been

'marketing in disguise' (interview, 26.11.2015). She was writing a marketing strategy for her Faculty, which she recognised was structured like an essay and recognised that this skill had been developed through English Studies. Thus, she was able to contextualise the skills she had developed and applied and was able to narrate this through specific examples. Emily's contract with Southern University was extended beyond the initial two years. However, she was planning to look for opportunities in a charity working in the human rights field and was hoping to work in outreach and with young people in the future; to help her achieve this she had been volunteering with a local charity. Although she volunteered because she enjoyed doing so, she was also aware that these experiences would help her narrate her skills in an appropriate context when she wanted to move into a different field. Emily has since moved to a job with a charity.

Amelia – Charity Communications Developer

As I have outlined in a previous chapter, even during her final year, Amelia lacked confidence in her ability to articulate the skills from her degree and express her employability. However, from the perspective of her career working in information development for a national charity, she was clearly able to perceive, discuss and describe her skills and their value through placing them in the context of her work:

> "The skills gained from my English degree that are directly relevant include writing skills (the basis of my job is to write), communication skills gained from various seminars, group work and room discussions, and presentation skills helped me feel and come across as confident in my interview. I think the skills are definitely valued in my workplace as they are directly relevant to my role and the team I work in. My skills as a proof-reader are benefitting other members of the team as well, as we all help each other out with checking each other's work."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 8.5.2018)

Amelia had also come to appreciate other key aspects of employability, such as being personable and honest. She shared with me that at interview she had been asked whether she had experience of a particular type of work, she answered honestly that she did not but told the panel 'I am a quick learner' which had been well received. This also underlines her flexibility and disposition for continued learning within the workplace.

Grace – Self-employed Actor, Playwright, Freelance Researcher/Research Administrator

Grace has been able to sustain a self-employed and freelance career as an Actor, Playwright, and Research Administrator. She understands her roles in terms of her professional identity and personal development and understands how the study of English has equipped her, supporting her employability within the field she has chosen:

> "….it's definitely the case that studying English and the skills I gained doing so have helped me to reach my current level of work and are also helping me in my current roles. It's almost difficult to pinpoint where and how, because the skills I have developed are an integral part of how I understand myself as a professional in a broader sense. As a researcher and in administrative work, my skills in communication and time management are definitely relevant and textual analysis is a skill that is really sought after in research too; being able to analyse text has allowed me to step out of receptionist/front of house duties and facilitate workshops and analyse qualitative data, which is better paid work and more rewarding. As an actor my understanding and interpretation of text is absolutely essential and English has fed these skills more than anything else could….obviously as a playwright my literary background is key too. A thorough and sound understanding of the literary canon has been brilliant but I am also grateful for the critical skills I garnered at university and the ability to view things through different political lenses…."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 16.4.2018)

Grace has been able to follow her hopes and ambitions to work in the theatre, because she has the flexibility and capability to develop and sustain a portfolio of work which draws on her disciplinary skills. Her summary evidences the way in which the ethos and philosophy of the discipline have enabled her to develop in ways which support her ability to develop a career and her employability. She acknowledges she has come to understand this differently and in a more nuanced way from when I first met her, when she saw employablility as 'a high status degree from a high status university':

> "My understanding of employability has changed a lot over time. There seems to be a growing trend amongst my peers that none of us are traditionally employed by a single company. We don't have pensions, or job security, or HR departments to take care of our sick leave and taxes. Now it seems that freelance work is the new way of doing things as a young creative. We all have to balance the most bankable skills we have with our longer term goals; my life is constantly split between the work that sustains my bank account and the work that sustains me personally. In that sense, skills such as organisation, reliability, multi-tasking, administrative experience, communication, work ethic and attitude are always essential. When you don't know where the next month's rent is coming from, you have to be on your toes at work."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 16.4.2018)

English Studies has provided a preparation for Grace's chosen field and for the flexible forms of working it entails. Whilst that precarity is far from ideal, Grace has accepted this is the way in which the creative sector works; however, her valued skills and capabilities do enable her to earn a living. Her capacity for critical thinking, communication, understanding contexts, textual analysis, and interpretation, have become part of her approach to the world. This is enabling her to progress in fields in which she is building her own social and cultural capitals based on her talents, hard work, and abilities. Grace's value to the company she is working with on a freelance basis is evidenced by the continuity of the work they offer her:

> "The company I'm working with is in social research primarily, specialising in both consultation and engagement, with a small arm of the business that works in organisational development.…It's a small company, with a permanent staff of about 40, and a rotating pool of temporary flexible staff which I fall into, though I've been there pretty much uninterrupted for a year now!"
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 7.11.2018)

Grace can clearly narrate her employability and recognises that the skills from English Studies have not only enabled her to be employable but have become 'an integral part of how I understand myself as professional in a broader sense' (field diary, email correspondence 16.4.2018).

Ashley – Books and Publications Assistant

Ashley was successful in getting a job as a Books and Publications Assistant with a large national company. When she described her interview, which was competency based and called for specific examples, she told me that she had largely drawn on her extra-curricular role with the student newspaper and on her vacation internships. However, she also reflected in our discussions on how she felt studying English had been valuable:

> "Certainly in the interview process and stuff like employers are after like, confidence. I think employability, having like, being able to adapt quickly to new and different situations and kind of fast thinking and that kind of thing which I think English Literature does set you up for and being able to work to tight deadlines."
>
> (interview, 25.6.2015)

We spoke again a few months later, when Ashley had settled into her new role. She described the organisational culture and the expectations of the community of practice, in which the skills from the Humanities were valued. People were encouraged to think of their professional development. She was establishing positive relationships and was already thinking about her progression with the company. Describing her work, Ashley reflected on the way that English Studies had prepared her for the type of work she was doing, which was very different to her studies:

> "….[It involves]….a lot of signing reports and documents to check kind of the English of it….but as to the actual role and the duties itself I'm not really analysing or I'm not really doing….yeah I guess it's not really that linked to my degree, but I think the overall skills of the person that it's given me you know like communication skills you know, yeah….I don't, I'm definitely not reading books now, analysing books and writing essays like, I've done none of that. I am doing a lot of work with numbers and figures and data which seems quite far away from my degree I guess but I think the fundamental characteristics of the person that relate to my degree have set me up for kind of being able to tackle stuff. Like the pressure that my degree had on when we had to do our dissertation alongside exams and all that, like I'm juggling my time and yes, all kind of the basic skills I think my degree has provided are definitely useful."
>
> (interview, 20.10.2015)

Ashley understood that her studies have helped her develop the capacity for being adaptable, learning new types of work, and managing a workload, which have enabled her to make a successful transition into her workplace. She also found that her communication skills were highly valued and respected. Colleagues were coming to her for advice when dealing with potentially difficult communications, thus, recognising her abilities and complimenting her: '….how I word things, how I structure things, yeah, communicate things which potentially those things could blow up into a very contentious issue….it is second nature to me because of my degree.' Ashley values and articulates those skills in narratives which evidence her employability.

Lily – Speech Technology Systems Designer

In Chapter 6, I have discussed Lily's role in an artificial intelligence company, where she brings a Humanities perspective to automated systems; creating technology applications which people are happy to engage with. Lily saw her job as a Systems Designer as a bridge

between clients and technology teams, creating value for both. Two years after graduation, she could fluently narrate the way her disciplinary skills are being applied:

> "In terms of softer skills, English Language gave me experience in managing my own workload, writing detailed reports and presenting. As I present at many client meetings, this skill is very valuable and I know from feedback it is something my colleagues were impressed with at interview stage."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 23.4.2018)

Lily recognises that she needs to have motivation, resilience, enthusiasm, a willingness 'to get stuck in', and a strong interest in the field she is working in. She uses a balance of both the softer skills and the technical skills developed by her disciplinary studies in her work. Lily recognises that she brings the Humanities perspective to a highly technical field, by ensuring that systems are people friendly. She is willing and able to continue learning in the context of an industry which is producing ongoing, rapid, technological change:

> "As someone who likes presenting and being customer-facing, this role is an ideal mix of working with different customers, speech scientists, developers, all whilst using my own technical knowledge. I think the fact I like this balance so much keeps me motivated on a day-to-day basis, as well as keeping me motivated to work hard and improve my skills so I can work on bigger and more complex projects with different clients."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence, 23.4.2018)

Lily recognises she is part of a culture, of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and has a nuanced understanding of employability as a relative concept:

> "[Employability] relates to your work ethic, soft skills, desire to learn and develop, interests….do your views align with a company's goals? Do you fit well in to the team they already have? Are both yours and the employer's expectations aligned in respect of responsibilities, progression, commitment? It is these things which make you employable rather than just qualified."
>
> (field diary, email correspondence 23.4.2018)

Lily recognises, with insight gained through her experiences in the workplace, that employability is more than being qualified; employability actually encompasses a wide range of softer skills, relationships, situated practices, continued learning, identity, values, beliefs, motivations, interactions, and experiences. Employability is an ongoing process of lifelong

learning within a social context. This evidence presents a more nuanced account of employability that goes beyond policy narratives.

To further consider the way student and graduate research participants draw on their situated practices and narrative resources, I have mapped a range of skills identified as significant for employability in twenty-first century workplaces (distilled from reports, articles and research: Barnett, 1997; Harvey, 2004; Barnett, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Haggis, 2006; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Autor, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; Bridgstock, 2016; EPSC, 2016; UUK, 2016, 2018; Davidson, 2017; Deming 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017; Bakhshi *et al.*, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Diamond, 2018; McKeon, 2018; Moro, 2018); the graduate skills from English Studies identified in the Benchmark Statement (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2015), which was informed by employers' feedback; and the narrative resources drawn on by the research participants when discussing the skills from their discipline, from the vantage point of their careers. They had established an ownership of their skills through contextualising them in experience and their embodiment in communities of practice (I present two examples of this in Appendix C). In presenting the research data in this way I am not seeking to reduce the research participants to neat boxes, but to provide a resource for the reader of this thesis which qualitatively maps the heuristics of the skills under consideration to the graduates' narrative resources.

Chapter conclusions

When academic staff member Phil told me 'English Literature is a doing degree, not just a reading degree with some practical stuff at the margins' (interview, 4.3.2015), denoting the application and commitment which disciplinary studies require, he also spoke of key questions which he felt those within the discipline - both staff and students - should be (and were) concerned with. He posed the questions, 'What is it that we do? What is it that we believe in?' (interview, 4.3.2015). I am arguing that this thinking and questioning relates to the traditions of the discipline, the philosophy of personal growth, the understanding of the value of the discipline in creating citizens of the future, and the contribution this makes to society and the world. This perspective reflects what Ransome (2011:207) has identified as 'a view of higher education learning as a person-changing experience focused on the development of general, often critical, intellectual appetites and capabilities' which involves

pedagogies which represent and achieve personal development, rather than a more instrumental approach of teaching for employability. As I have discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, there is a false dichotomy between academic learning and employability; there is a need to make explicit the ways in which the higher education study of English can develop critical, reflexive, lifelong learners, who as a result are employable graduates (Harvey, 2003, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Rust and Froud, 2011). In this context, there is an argument for meaningfully unpacking and articulating the pedagogies, valuable skills, and capacities which are deeply embedded in the discipline and which shape students throughout their studies. For instance, as Heather did with her analysis of how a performance-based module creates the skills for employability, and Isabella's account of the valuable workplace skills being developed by the pedagogical approaches of the core curriculum. My ethnographic study of the School and the lives of the research participants has created a more nuanced understanding of how students become employable, involving the personal development of the whole person through their academic studies and their other interests, involvements, work, volunteering, and engagement with the world. Graduates' understanding, ownership, and appreciation of the value of the skills which are developed by their discipline were brought into sharper focus from the perspective of their jobs and careers. This finding carries implications for future pedagogies and approaches to employability and English Studies. It raises the question of how students might come to an understanding of their skills earlier, a question which I am suggesting requires consideration.

The wide range of careers which the students who participated in this research project have gone into evidences that English Studies provides a broad and relevant preparation for many work roles. There is a strong narrative from many of the research participants about their self-reliance and their ability to cope with the challenges of their workplaces, because they have not been 'spoon-fed' during their degrees. They have been used to working independently, but also to working collaboratively with others. The student research participants have developed communication skills, along with critical analytical and research skills which can support lifelong learning. Their studies have shaped them and this enables them to make the transition into work, to apply the 'skill, insight and temerity' - which the Student Orator referred to in her speech - and to be valued contributors in their workplaces, organisations, and businesses.

The student and graduate research participants recognise their own personal growth and development through their studies, university experience, interests, work, and volunteering. They have chosen their career paths to be congruent with their sense of identity, their values and beliefs. English Studies has provided the broad skills which prepare people for a wide range of fields, as the Chancellor had asserted in his graduation day speech. The student research participants' discussions with me show they are making a strong contribution in their organisations or, as in Grace's case, they are effectively managing a freelance portfolio career. They are still at early stages in their careers. This study has focused on staff, undergraduates, and recent graduates of the School, who are embedded in and are responding to contemporary issues and concerns, in order to focus this research on the issues for the discipline in the current cultural moment. However, as academic staff member Lena told me, 'English graduates permeate major UK Institutions' and English Studies are 'absolutely vital in contemporary life' (interview, 25.11.2015). I acknowledge that Alumni of the School who are further advanced in their careers, also provide evidence of the value of the skills and abilities developed by English Studies. They have, for example, gone on to lead major global companies, to work with government, to start businesses, to work with top publishing, TV, film and media companies.

Staff insights, such as those from Isla (interview, 3.11.2015), suggest that further reflection to create meta-cognitive joining-up of learning can contribute to revealing the ways in which employability is embedded in English Studies. This is true of the core curriculum as well as more specific careers-related or experiential modules, initiatives, and projects. Unpacking the skills gained through studying English and linking this to the research which has shown that the skills developed by English and the Humanities are sought after and essential in a fast changing, disruptive environment, may encourage students to value their skills and frame them in ways which are more related to the workplace. Creating the narratives and providing the language to discuss this might provide a different way of 'having the conversation'. It might provide a way of changing the conversation about employability from English Studies, based on the recognition that the public policy discourses around employability are a poor fit for the disciplinary traditions and philosophy of personal growth. In the conclusion to this thesis, I will discuss the key findings from my research project and the potential for future research.

Chapter 8. Conclusions: narrating employability from English Studies

Challenging government policy assumptions: defining success and value more broadly

My study, which has focused on English Studies at Northern University, has challenged government policy characterizations of students as consumers making informed choices based on maximizing their economic return on investment in their education. The student research participants I worked with chose English Studies out of love and interest for the discipline rather than for future employability. They went on to find their career paths based on their sense of identity, beliefs, values and interests, rather than basing decisions on the greatest economic returns (Graeber, 2001; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Skeggs, 2011). The students defined success and value more broadly than in terms of economic value, seeking fulfillment and meaning in their choice of discipline and career, whilst acknowledging that they needed to make an income to live. As Bauman (2007) argues, government market-based narratives reduce people to the sum of their Human Capital, yet as student research participant Catriona told me 'people are marvellous and strange' (interview, 9.12.2015). The students who took part in this study did not make choices as rational actors; they are diverse and complex individuals, embedded in webs of social relationships and interacting within their social worlds, with a complex range of motivations. The student research participants did not make decisions in the way that neoliberal market-based policy thinking assumes they would.

Though they chose a subject which - judged by government metrics such as the Longitudinal Economic Outcomes data (DfE, 2018) - does not provide the best returns on investment in terms of income immediately after graduation, the 25 students I got to know most closely have been able to progress to careers which interest and motivate them across a wide range of sectors. Some have gone on to further learning to support their future careers, both through study and through taking up opportunities for gaining experience (see Appendix B). They recognize that their discipline enabled them to consider a broad range of careers because it is not narrowly vocational, but develops skills and practices which are valuable in many contexts. The student research participants were able to think in terms of their longer term potential, rather than immediate economic outcomes. Indeed, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, recent research and reports have shown that despite English graduates being likely to command lower salaries on graduation, by five years after graduation they are

achieving high levels of sustained employment (Belfield *et al.*, 2018; DfE, 2018) and are earning close to the median salary for all graduates (Boyd and Kernohan, 2018). However, a more meaningful way of judging the value of their degree in English is the individual narratives of the student research participants. They spoke of their personal growth through studying English, the meaning they had found through the jobs they had had taken, and the value of their skills and practices in their workplaces. In some cases this has included the confidence and self-awareness to move jobs to find greater meaning and more opportunity for development congruent with their sense of identity.

Their stories evidence that they are making a valuable contribution within their social worlds and workplaces as citizens, employees, volunteers, creatives, and freelancers. They understand their employability not as a product created by an economic investment in higher education, but as an ongoing process of learning (Harvey, 2000, 2004). A key finding of my research is that their narratives and stories help to make sense of employability as a lived reality rather than an abstract idea; this might be used to evidence '*the field of the possibles'* (Bourdieu, 1984:110, emphasis in original) from English Studies, as a counter-narrative to narrow, economically-framed, government accounts of employability.

Challenging government policy assumptions: considering employability for twenty-first century citizens, workplaces, society, and the economy

In Chapter 2, I highlighted the way in which government policy has not kept up with a fast changing world (Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017; Leach, 2019) and is based on assumptions and theories which provide a limited view. These theories and assumptions include Human Capital (Becker, 1975) and Rational Actor theories (Scott, 2000), and ideas associated with neoliberalism, such as individual freedom of choice to invest in education. Government policy envisions meritocratic access to higher education in a 'classless society', which requires the provision of information on which students can base their informed choices. This is seen as enabling students to become employable and socially mobile (DfBIS, 2016). There is a need for debate and to challenge such approaches, based on research and evidence. As I have argued in Chapter 2, the most recent government review - the Augar Review of Post-18 Education (DfE, 2019) - makes proposals about re-introducing grants for eligible students, which may help address issues of access. However, the Augar Review (*ibid.*) remains rooted in the economically-framed and market-based logic of the government

policy documents which have preceded it. The Augar Review (*ibid.*) considers that too many people are studying the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences – an 'over-supply' which it suggests should be reduced in order to engineer students' choices towards 'higher value' subjects, which are likely to result in the more reliable repayment of student loans. Yet, other government narratives (Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), 2018) extol the massive growth of the creative sector as a great success story for the British economy. This contradicts the view that these subject areas should be curtailed, since the skills required to support and expand the creative industries can be fostered through higher education. From my student research participants, 24% have taken up jobs in the creative industries – higher than the average of 1 job in 11 in the British economy (*ibid.*; Last, 2019). Other student research participants are contributing to a wide range of sectors as graduates (see Appendix B), including bringing the Humanities perspective to technology, Artificial Intelligence and computing businesses, international consulting firms, schools and charities.

Furthermore, research into the future of work predicts that the skills and capabilities developed by subject areas such as the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences are precisely those which are needed at a time of rapid, disruptive change. New types of work are emerging and many routine jobs are likely to be automated – whilst jobs which require high levels of empathy, insight, social perceptiveness, critical capabilities, a capacity to filter and synthesize information, creativity and emotional intelligence are predicted to continue in the future (Frey and Osborne, 2014, 2017; Deloitte, 2015; Bridgstock, 2016; Deming, 2017; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017). The Augar Review (DfE, 2019), if developed into policy, could be very damaging to individuals, society, and the economy, through its proposals to curtail the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. I suggest that much which has been explored in this thesis has significance for the Humanities and Social Science non-vocational disciplines more widely. There is a need to stimulate further policy debate and for continuing research which evidences their significant value in employability terms for individuals, for society, and for the economy.

Supporting agency: opening up the '*field of the possibles*'

My research has also evidenced that, whilst government policy emphasises the agency of the 'student-consumer' in making informed decisions and sees higher education as a

meritocratic way of achieving social mobility, the impact of social structures (such as social class) affect people's perceptions of their choices, of what is possible or 'thinkable' for them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979; Reay, 1998, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2012; English and Bolton, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2017). Michael's high school education was a transformational experience, which opened up the '*field of the possibles*' (Bourdieu, 1984:110*,* emphasis in original) for him and enabled him to see a university education as 'thinkable'. Rosie had not considered Northern University was 'thinkable' for her, but was influenced by her teacher and her mother to apply. Once at Northern University and studying English, further transformational experiences have influenced their thinking about future careers. In Rosie's case, her studies enabled her to see that a career in the Arts existed as a possibility, and her placement module provided her with the social and cultural capitals to progress in the field (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986). Other students, like Catriona, Michael, and Fiona were able to gain social and cultural capital and narrative resources through experiential modules and extra-curricular projects. A key finding of my research is the way in which a higher education in English Studies at Northern University can provide such resources and capitals, including where they did not already exist in a student's background. Gaining further understanding of these processes through research could help support the agency of students in making future choices in terms of their careers.

Narrating employability from English Studies: cracking the code

In one of our interviews during her final year of studies, Catriona defined employability as a relative concept; she did not see it as an automatic outcome of a degree. As she saw it, the key question was not just 'Am I employable?' but 'Employable for what?' Ultimately, Catriona came to the conclusion - through her experiences of having worked in a number of part-time roles and both paid work and extra-curricular project-based activities during her studies - that employability must be placed in the context of the field and community of practice of a workplace (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). She saw that it involved knowing how to present herself, the ability to fit into the working environment, the attitude towards the work itself, all of which involve learning, the application of skills, and becoming familiar with tacit knowledge and the nature of the work within the social world:

> "I think that your employability firstly relies on your ability to be able to go into an interview, be confident, look like and sound like you are somebody that they would want around. You know, present yourself as responsible, responsive to them, you know, and overall be confident and comfortable in yourself. That's the first part of the hurdle being employable. Self-expression and, you know, being trustworthy. And the second part of the hurdle is being in a working environment knowing the responsibility that you have in that working environment to be part of the team and do your job and be proactive. Know your job well enough to be proactive in that job and do it."
>
> (interview, 22.2.2016).

I have discussed Catriona's story in Chapter 6. This evidences the way in which her values, sense of identity, and desire to do meaningful work which would make a difference and which she would enjoy, were at the heart of her career decision-making rather than getting the 'killer job'. Catriona was reflecting the more nuanced and complex view of employability which I have sought to present in this thesis. I have argued that developing employability involves the application, embodiment and ownership of skilful and situated practices in the context of social worlds, over time. I have argued that the ability to provide coherent narratives which can evidence employability and enable students to present themselves in CVs and interviews is highly significant (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007, 2017, Holmes, 2015).

However, as my research has also shown, there is a perception gap and students have difficulty articulating their skills and capabilities in employment terms; Catriona described this as a struggle to 'crack the code'. Given the highly contextualised nature of work, the creation of narratives is ultimately linked to learning and situated practices in the workplace community of practice, within the overarching field (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bridgstock, 2016). In Catriona's case, as I have discussed in Chapter 6, whilst she struggled to 'crack the code' in terms of the skills from English Studies, her experiences during extra-curricular projects enabled her to apply her skills in the context of working with young people and narrate them fluently. This provided her with the insight and narrative resources to decide on her career intentions. In her correspondence with me since she graduated, Catriona has fluently narrated the work she has been doing as a Graduate Adviser at a high school and the wide range of responsibilities she has been able to take on, requiring the application of a wide range of skills. The high school encouraged Catriona to consider training as an English teacher, and she made a successful application to do so. Catriona told

me that she had been 'offered so much responsibility and it has been such a boost of confidence for me at the start of my professional life' (field diary, email correspondence 31.7.2018).

A key finding of this research is that the provision of opportunities to gain such resources is significant for supporting students' employability and progression to careers. Such opportunities enable students to 'join up' learning and 'crack the code', exploring their potential and creating evidence for CVs and interviews. Experiential learning, as I have argued in Chapter 7, is shown by pedagogical and practitioner research to be a form of learning which is effective (Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Biggs and Tang, 2011; deBlaquiere *et al.*, 2019). As Fiona described it, participation in an experiential learning module 'hammered home' her learning by applying skills and reflecting on the processes involved. At a time when the life of knowledge has been shortened, for example by fast-changing developments in technology, it is important to combine strong knowledge content with robust skills for continued learning. Kirschner and Stoyanov (2018:3) define this as 'the ability to learn in a stable and enduring way in a rapidly changing world'. Their research has shown that this requires critical, reflective, and meta-cognitive skills, enabling people to reflect on their own learning processes and their progress towards their goals (Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018:3). This is an important basis for learning for as yet non-existent professions and lifelong learning for as yet unknown futures (Barnett, 2004; Davidson, 2017; Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018). Therefore, it is valuable to have forms of learning which support meta-cognition, the 'joining up' of learning, through more opportunities for situated, experiential learning, involving real issues and working across different domains to practice skills (Barnett, 2004; Davidson, 2017; Kirschner and Stoyanov, 2018; deBlaquiere *et al.,* 2019). This approach would help to address the issues with the 'episodic' nature of learning within modular degree structures, in terms of joining up learning and bringing the skills which are being developed into consciousness sooner. I argue that further research within English Studies, into the provision of experiential learning opportunities, within and alongside the curriculum, would be valuable.

Having the conversation in a different way: employability is embedded in English Studies

During my research, academic staff member Isla suggested that there should be greater reflexivity within the discipline about the skills that are developed which equip students for

their futures, a view which was echoed by other members of academic staff who recognised the value of the skills which students were developing. In Chapter 7, I argued that the pedagogies of English Studies embed employability in the discipline, and that making the value of the pedagogies and principles from the discipline more explicit (Haggis, 2006) might be articulated in terms of employability; for example, the need to apply critical skills, adopting a questioning approach, learning how to learn and to work independently, are all valuable for employment. Rather than seeing 'employability skills' as a separate package, these might be articulated in terms of the skills developed by the pedagogies and traditions of the discipline, which are highly valued in the workplace. Research into this area could ultimately be fed back into the discipline as a way of reflexively bridging this gap at an earlier stage, making the value of skills, practices, and pedagogies of English Studies explicit. Narrative resources could be provided to evidence employability, placed in the context of the changing demands of twenty-first century workplaces.

Within the social constructionist epistemology which I have adopted in this study, I have had an understanding that language defines the world (Gergen, 2015). Research into a shared language, framed in terms of personal growth, could create the resources to bridge the gap in communication and perception, which the contested language of employability and skills can leave unbridged. Further research could be carried out into whether the language of personal growth and development might be used as a more congruent language to understand the impact the study of English can have; helping to articulate how this enables graduates to contribute to the workplace and society. Staff member Peter voiced this desire 'to have the conversation [about employability] in a different way'. Research could be carried out into whether the philosophy of Personal Growth (Dixon, 1967) could be rearticulated as a means of conceptualising the ways in which employability is embedded in the discipline. This would create an understanding of the ways in which the social mission of English develops the whole person rather than developing sets of skills, thus shaping employability and preparing English graduates for life and lifelong learning: Growth from English for the 21st Century, 50 years on from the Dartmouth Seminar (*ibid.*). This may provide a way of telling the story of employability from English differently.

Telling the compelling stories of employability from English Studies

I argue that it is important to tell the story of employability from English Studies at a time of some turbulence politically and within the discipline itself. English A level take up has been decreasing, which is thought to be an outcome of the revisions to the GCSE syllabus and form of assessment (Bleiman, 2018). The retention of high school English teachers has given rise to concerns (Goodwyn, 2018). As my research has shown, English teachers have a significant impact on students' choices of discipline and a lack of specialist teachers in the profession may create issues for future recruitment. The effects of the current demographic dip of 18 year olds are being felt by Higher Education Institutions. The earlier expansion of English Studies in the higher education sector has come into question as numbers of students have not continued to increase at all institutions (although as I have discussed, English Studies at Northern University has seen some growth and has maintained stability in numbers). However, growth in numbers is forecast to steadily increase up to 2029, creating the highest numbers of 18 year olds since 1990, which will be likely to increase numbers within higher education (HEPI, 2014). It is important to have the research evidence to support the value of English Studies and the employability which it develops. As I have argued in this thesis, employability is embedded in English Studies. The skills and practices it develops are both valuable for individual employability and are valued in the workplaces of the twenty-first century. I have argued this is rooted in the emancipatory vision of Personal Growth and the traditions of the discipline, which prepare students for their futures. Matthew asked students the key question – 'What do you want to do with your life?' – I argue, drawing on the evidence from my study, that English Studies has a strong and compelling story to tell.

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Appendix A. List of research participants (pseudonyms) and roles

Academic staff members

Alison

Barbara

Caroline

David

Isabella

Isla

Jacob

Joanna

Kathryn

Leah

Lena

Lisa

Luke

Mark

Mary

Matthew (Head of School)

Melissa

Paul

Peter

Phil

Poppy

Sienna

Sylvia

Zak

Support Staff

Becky

Chrissie

Rebecca

Veronica

Student and graduate research participants

Abigail

Amelia

Anna

Ashley

Audrey

Cameron

Catriona

Elizabeth

Ella

Ellie

Emily

Emma

Fiona

Grace

Jessica

Jonny

Lily

Lucy

Maria

Megan

Michael

Mollie

Morgan

Oliver

Olivia

Rosie

Ruby

Zoe

Graduates and postgraduates

Caitlin

Chantal

Carol

Catherine

Daniel

Ethan

Jack

Janine

Jonathan

Mia

Thomas

William

Careers Service

Ava

June

Tom

Will

National higher education support organizations

Tabitha

Philippa

Appendix B.

Chart showing main student participants and their career destinations

Name (Pseud-onym)	Age when first met	M/F	Degree Studied	Self-identified social class	School: private/ state	Previous family experience of Higher Education	Study-ing near to home or away	Further study	Career Within 6 months after graduation	1 year after graduation	2 years after graduation	3 years after graduation
Anna	18	F	Literature	Middle	Private	Yes	Away	MA 2015-2016	Working in hospitality during job search	Sales Customer Account Manager Progressing to Senior Account Manager IT Sector		
Emily	20	F	Linguistics	Middle	Private	Yes	Away		University Administration	Language teaching	University professional services	
Maria	18	F	Literature	Working	EU International School	Father went to University but left after 2 years.	Away		Language learning overseas		9 month Internship with an NGO in EU. Seeking University Administration roles.	
Ruby	20	F	Language	Middle	State	Yes	Away		Financial Services Marketing			
Emma	20	F	Language	Middle	State	No	Away		Marketing Executive with global tech and innovation company			Social media work, 6 months whilst travelling
Grace	18	F	Literature	Upper Middle	State	Yes	Away	MA 2016-17	Actor, playwright, researcher			
Audrey	18	F	Literature and foreign language	Lower Middle	State	Yes	Away		Published creative writer			
Lily	21	F	Language	Middle	Voluntary Aided, non fee paying		Away	MSc 2015-16	Working with University Schools Liaison team	Studying for MSc	University Prof Services	AI Speech Tech Designer
Elizabeth	19	F	Literature	Middle	State School, previously a Grammar School	Yes	Away		Worked in a retail shop during job search	Working with professional services business including on social media	One Year internship with Investment Bank, taking a certificate in inter-national business	Travelling and developing ideas for a travel consultancy.

Name (Pseud-onym)	Age when first met	M/F	Degree studied	Self-identified social class	School: private/state	Previous family experience of Higher Education	Study-ing near to home or away	Further Study	Career: Within 6 months of graduation	1 year after graduation	2 years after graduation	3 years after graduation
Lucy	20	F	Literature	Middle	State	Yes	Away	Drama course part time	Actor and writer			
Rosie	21	F	Literature	Lower Middle	Voluntary aided Faith School. Non fee paying	Yes	Away		Arts Administration with regional arts company		Marketing in a national Arts company	
Abigail	20	F	Literature with Creative Writing	Middle	State - EU	Yes	Away	2 year MA in Literary studies from 2016-2018	Set up freelance business	Marketing Content Creator		
Ellie	22	F	Literature with sociology	Middle	State	Yes	Away		Accounts technician Returned to university after 3 years out to get a degree in order to progress as an accountant. Took up employment in accounts after graduating. Considering training as an FE teacher in future.			
Mollie	21	F	Literature	Middle	Specialist Academy, then 6th Form Independent fee paying school	Yes	Away		Teaching – training on the job		Arts and education business	Marketing in a global film and media company
Cameron	19	M	Literature and Language	Middle	Faith Academy, non fee paying	No	Home		Graduate scheme with fast food chain; writing and marketing work in family business			
Fiona	20	F	Linguistics and foreign language	Middle	State, Grammar School	Mother did a degree as a mature student	Away		Working in a Business Advisory Service	Working at Heritage Project in a management role		
Olivia	18	F	Literature and Language	Middle	Private	Yes	Away		Teaching English to children in a European country	Graduate Teaching Assistant		

Name (pseudo-onym)	Age when first met	M/F	Degree Studied	Self-identified social class	School: private/state	Previous family experience of Higher Education	Study-ing near to home or away	Further Study	Career: Within 6 months of graduation	1 year after graduation	2 years after graduation	3 years after graduation
Michael	19	M	Language	Working	Faith Academy, non fee paying	No	Home	Teach First	Teaching in a school in an area of high multiple deprivation			
Zoe	18	F	Literature	Middle	Faith Grammar School, non fee paying	Yes	Away	Course for teaching English to Adults (CELTA)	Travelling	Teaching in summer camps in European country		
Amelia	21	F	Language and literature	Working	State	No	Away	MA 2015-16	Working with university schools liaison team	Working for national charity		
Catriona	20	F	Literature	Working but acknow-ledges her family is now more affluent	State	No	Away		Paid graduate role as an HE Adviser in a High School	Training as a teacher with a High School		
Jonny	22	M	Literature and Business Studies	Middle	Faith School, independent, non fee paying	No	Home	MSc 2015-17	Consultancy work with global firm			
Ashley	21	F	Literature	Middle	State	Yes	Away		Working in books and publications with national retail chain			
Jonathan	24 (met soon after graduation)	M	Linguistics and foreign language	Middle but not affluent	State and FE College	Yes	Away		Working with a major international consumer goods company in business development	Consultancy work with global firm		
Megan	20	F	Language	Lower Middle	State	Yes	Away	MA 2016-17	Working in learning advocacy in an international childrens' charity	Working in advocacy and human rights		

Where the graduate has not yet been working for two or three years, the boxes have been greyed out to indicate that this time has not yet elapsed.

Appendix C.

Narrative resources: examples of mapping the English Benchmark Statement; skills which are identified as important for twenty-first century workplaces and the research participants' narratives – (a) Emma (b) Rosie.

English Studies Benchmark Statement QAA 2015 p7-8 Graduate Skills	Skills employability in 21st Century workplaces (distilled from reports, research, literature referenced below *)	Individual Graduate data of application of skills and situated practices in context, developing narrative resources to evidence employability
Advanced Communication:		**(a) Emma – Communications Executive**
Concise, accurate and persuasive communication orally and in writing	Communication skills, fluency of ideas	Writing press releases and articles for the national press, social media content, marketing and PR, appreciation of differing audiences' expectations, tone
Develop working relationships, team working, constructive dialogue. Sensitivity to cultural contexts when working with others	Interpersonal skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, insight into others' values and perspectives	Working effectively as a member of a small team. Critical appreciation of organisational culture. Understanding of different audiences' expectations, tone, creating connections, empathy for end users
Understand the role of narrative and emotion in decision making	Recognise, understand and act on interconnections between society's complex infrastructures and human behaviours. Emotional intelligence and empathy	Understanding the disjoint at Tech Co between designers' and engineers' priorities and perspectives and the humanities perspective, need for connection, empathy, emotion, considering end user perspectives in marketing and communications.
Versatile Researchers		
Discover and synthesize complex information and diverse evidence	Creating connections across complex ideas, seeing the whole picture, research skills	Working to bridge the disjoint at Tech Co between designers' and engineers' priorities and perspectives and the humanities perspective, need for connection, empathy, emotion, considering end user perspectives in marketing and communications.
Creative and imaginative responses to tasks	Creativity, creative problem-solving	Critical analysis of social media led to addressing the issues in her work
Initiate projects	Independent working, self-motivation	Was able to adapt and fit into a challenging culture without formal induction where she needed to be self-motivated and independent
Present information in wider contexts	Seeing the whole picture, communication skills	Writing press releases and articles for the national press, social media content, marketing and PR, appreciation of differing audiences' expectations, tone, need for connection, empathy, emotion, considering end user perspectives in marketing and communications.

Test, interpret, analyse information and evidence independently and critically and produce cogent arguments and decisive judgements	Critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, decision-making. questioning and creating knowledge as well as what is already known	Understanding the disjoint at Tech Co between designers' and engineers' priorities and perspectives and the humanities perspective, need for connection, empathy, emotion, end user perspectives in marketing and communications. Taking initiative in her work.
Plan organise and report to deadline	Self-motivation, time-management and prioritization	Press articles, social media, product launches require timely work to deadlines, juggling priorities.
Active, Lifelong Learning		
Adapt to different demands and tasks. Initiate and take responsibility for their own work.	Flexibility, adaptability, lifelong learning, independence and initiative	Adaptability and flexibility to adapt and fit into a challenging culture without formal induction where she needed to be self-motivated and independent. Learning the requirements and expectations, gaining tacit knowledge. Seeking to bring fresh ideas. Took on responsibility beyond what she felt was usual for someone who had been with the business for one year.
Appreciate benefit of giving and receiving feedback. Evaluate and reflect on their own practices and assumptions	Reflexivity, social and interpersonal skills, empathy, communication, evaluation, critical analysis, life-long learning	Working effectively as a member of a small team. Critical appreciation of organisational culture and reflexivity about how to thrive within it, and where the issues make it more difficult to thrive, such as the lack of further personal development and training opportunities.
Look beyond immediate task to wider context, social and commercial effects of their work	Critical engagement with the world, seeing the whole picture, insight, creating connections across complex ideas	Understanding the disjoint at Tech Co between designers' and engineers' priorities and perspectives and the humanities perspective, need for connection, empathy, emotion, considering end user perspectives in marketing and communications.

*(Barnett, 2004; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2014, 2017; Autor, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; Soffel, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; Bridgstock, 2016, 2017; EPSC, 2016; UUK, 2016, 2018; Davidson, 2017; Deming 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017; Taylor, 2017; Diamond, 2018; McKeon, 2018; Moro, 2018)

English Studies Benchmark Statement QAA 2015 p7-8 Graduate Skills	Skills for employability in 21st Century workplaces (distilled from reports, research, literature referenced below*)	Individual Graduate data of application of skills and situated practices in context, developing narrative resources to evidence employability
Advanced Communication:		**(b) Rosie – Communications Officer**
Concise, accurate and persuasive communication orally and in writing	Communication skills, fluency of ideas	Writing skills – creating effective marketing materials, social media, writing for different audiences, appreciation of tone; presenting a case for funding. Has a reputation within Arts Co as a good writer.
Develop working relationships, team working, constructive dialogue; Sensitivity to cultural contexts when working with others	Interpersonal skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, insight into others' values and perspectives	Working as a member of a team on all aspects of marketing the company's productions. Empathy for aims of the company and its founder to make the arts accessible not elite and out of reach. Developing networks and relationships in the arts field.
Understand the role of narrative and emotion in decision making	Recognise, understand and act on interconnections between society's complex infrastructures and human behaviours; Emotional intelligence and empathy	Understanding the importance of how the company reaches out to its differing audiences, those who will attend productions and those who will fund them.
Versatile Researchers		
Discover and synthesize complex information and diverse evidence	Creating connections across complex ideas; seeing the whole picture; developing argument	Understanding of the arts ecosystem and the political context and the implications of austerity for funding and for her own organisation. Taking initiative with crowd-funding, further training in funding.
Creative and imaginative responses to tasks	Creativity, creative problem-solving	Developing a crowd-funded campaign to fund the involvement of children with the company's productions
Initiate projects	Independent working, self-motivation	Initiated successful crowd-funding campaign
Present information in wider contexts	Seeing the whole picture; critical engagement with the world; communication skills	Understanding of the arts ecosystem and the political context and the need to develop and present more effective funding bids. Able to critique the status quo positively to propose action, drawing on critical skills, ability for close reading.
Test, interpret, analyse information and evidence independently and critically and produce cogent arguments and decisive judgements	Critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, decision-making; questioning and creating knowledge as well as what is already known	Analysis of funding bid requirements using close reading and work done to shape bids to be more effective drawing on evidence and developing cogent arguments for funding.
Plan, organise and report to deadline	Independence, self-motivation, time-management and prioritization	Able to juggle competing priorities and work to deadlines

Active, Lifelong Learning		
Adapt to different demands and tasks	Flexibility, adaptability, lifelong learning, independence and initiative	Has been flexible in learning all aspects of the office work, gaining the tacit knowledge and understanding of the rhythms of the work enabling her to run the office when other staff members are away touring productions. Learning about arts funding and bid writing, learning beyond her current knowledge and skills.
Appreciate benefit of giving and receiving feedback	Reflexivity, social and interpersonal skills, empathy, communication	Reflecting through developmental activity such as appraisals, making honest assessments of the effectiveness of bid writing in the past and positively communicating ways forward.
Evaluate and reflect on their own practices and assumptions	Reflexivity, flexibility, adaptability, lifelong learning, evaluation, analysis, critical thinking	Evaluating effectiveness and seeking ways to develop herself such as taking a qualification in bid-writing and fund raising. Continued learning, flexibility, adaptability and ability to question the status quo and propose positive responses.
Look beyond immediate task to wider context, social and commercial effects of their work	Critical engagement with the world; seeing the whole picture; insight; creating connections across complex ideas	Empathy for aims of the company and its founder to make the arts accessible not elite and out of reach. Understanding of the arts ecosystem and the political context and the implications of austerity for funding and for her own organisation. Developing new forms of funding to support outreach through a crowd-funding campaign.
Initiate and take responsibility for their own work	Flexibility, adaptability, self-motivation, independence and initiative	Has been flexible and learned all aspects of the office work, gaining the tacit knowledge and understanding of the rhythms of the work enabling her to run the office when other staff members are away touring productions. Developed and initiated crowd-funding campaign. Develops and disseminates effective marketing and other communications for a range of audiences.

*(Barnett, 2004; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2014, 2017; Autor, 2015; Deloitte, 2015; Soffel, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017; Bridgstock, 2016, 2017; EPSC, 2016; UUK, 2016, 2018; Davidson, 2017; Deming 2017; Lyonette *et al.*, 2017; Bakhshi *et al.,* 2017; Taylor, 2017; Diamond, 2018; McKeon, 2018; Moro, 2018).

Appendix D. Summary of themes which emerged from the coding of the data

Influences on choices – Love of subject as main reason for choosing to study English Parents Teachers – providing inspiration and supporting love of the subject Education/schooling Peer group Past family experience of HE Perceptions – what seems appropriate/fits with sense of identity/background Employability discourse begins in school ('Employability haunts the youth of today') HE seen as a natural progression for many, but not for all – and choices of institution affected by a range of influences. Complexity, interweaving issues of agency and structure such as social class – unlike instrumental government policy characterisations of choices of HE institution and subject. Webs of relationships.
Dispiriting discourses (taxi drivers, friends and family, popular media) – 'What will you earn from your useless degree' (The Tab), 'What are you going to do with that?' Students' positive counter-narratives – recognising that 'English leaves the door open' to many careers and is a good 'springboard' Significance of stories and metaphors.
Transitions – School to Uni Changing perspectives, new insights 'eye opening experiences' Experience of unfamiliar social worlds, sometimes leading to feeling like a fish out of water, feelings of disjuncture.
Explorations of identity – Who I am and who I am not. Leading to some changes of disciplinary study eg from business and law (chosen with employability in mind) to English Studies to study something which the students would enjoy. Leading to choices of career congruent with identity and desire to find meaningful work.

Values, beliefs, emotions – hopes, love, anxieties Love and anxiety have emerged both in staff and student voices. Love of the subject and discipline – basis of the choices to study at university, to teach in HE, to carry out research to take knowledge forward Love of students, caring for them Love of the city and the School – a comfortable and welcoming place of learning Love of extra-curricular interests Anxieties about not doing well – getting less than a First or 2:1- 'mopping up tears' Anxieties about the competitiveness of the jobs market when there are many people with degrees Anxieties about the world beyond the University after the 'university bubble' Anxieties about not getting what you hoped for as a career Anxieties about not fitting in – at Uni and at home Staff anxieties about the marketization of HE, the TEF, metrics, the marginalisation of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, fears about the future of HE and the discipline
Playing the game and learning the rules – students learning how to fit into their new social worlds, gaining new insights and enabling some students to explore broader possibilities in terms of their future careers.
Pressure for some students to work whilst studying, 'I need to look after my pocket' - which have an impact in the ability to participate in university social life. But which interweave experiences of the working world with study and can build social capital.
Ethos of the school – welcoming, caring and supportive for staff and students Ethos of a liberal arts approach to higher education – developing rounded twenty-first century citizens who are life-long learners and employable people. Linking to personal growth and the social mission of English. Sense of value of Humanities and of English for individuals, society and for a wide range of careers. Link to research and reports in predicted skills needed for twenty-first century workplaces in time of rapid, disruptive change.
Pressures experienced in relation to 'standing out from the crowd' given the higher numbers of graduates. Understanding of the hierarchy of universities and the relative cultural and symbolic

capital, and the social capital associated with certain activities. 'Work experience, five societies, social media, writing a blog, IT literacy, all the extras – and a first helps!'
Translations -issues with understanding and articulating skills and capabilities for employment gained from studying English. Difficulties with 'cracking the code'. Recognised as an issue by staff and students. Yet staff recognised that the skills and capabilities created by curricula and pedagogies of English Studies were developing students as employable citizens, even though students seemed to struggle to articulate this – there is a perception gap.
Complexity of motivations towards career trajectories – recognition that an income is needed to live on however, rather than instrumental motivations to gain high salaries as suggested by government policy, students talked about their strong intrinsic motivations, seeking meaningful and fulfilling work, aiming to make a difference in the world. A small number of people have a sense of vocation and were already becoming part of communities of practice during their studies – but the majority did not have a clear sense of career direction until nearer the end of their studies.
Experiential learning – 'hammering home', helping to bridge the perception gap. Impact of modules in which skills and capabilities are applied and reflected on. Placements creating new insights, knowledge, social and cultural capital,opening up the '*field of the possibles*' (Bourdieu, 1984, emphasis in original). Projects engaging students and enabling them to practice skills and capabilities and gain understanding of their capabilities in context. Developing narrative resources for evidencing employability. Tacit, contextualised, embodied knowledge – fitting in/belonging to communities of practice.
Wide range of careers from English – some emergent careers eg digital and social media marketing, Artificial Intelligence From the workplace, recognition of immersion in cultures and communities, applying skills and capabilities in context and coming to a deeper understanding of their value in workplace terms. Validation of their value by others within the community of practice. Tacit knowledge, understanding of contextualised nature of workplaces, of cultural nuances. Recognition of significance of disciplinary training – 'able to cope with steep learning curves', able to do things 'off my own back'. Ability to create fluent narratives of employability from perspective of graduates' working lives - bridging the perception gap.

Appendix E.

Informed Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet (reduced size)

Informed Consent Form

Logo removed re anonimity

Employability, Enterprise, Transferable Skills and Attributes

[Employability Research Project, School of English, Northern University]

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Participant Information Sheet dated 31/10/2012 updated 24/2/2015	☐
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation	☐
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	☐
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	☐
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	☐
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	☐
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	☐
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	☐
9.	Select only **one** of the following: • I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised. • I do not want my name used in this project.	☐ ☐
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	☐

Participant:

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Contact details : Jane Nolan [email address and mobile number provided]
Supervisor: [name, email address and phone number provided]
School of English: [address provided]

[Northern University] Employability Research Project –

Participant Information Sheet

Jane Nolan (Newcastle University Post Graduate Researcher)

You are being invited to take part in a research study through a focus group or an interview. I may also ask if you are willing to share documents such as CVs and blogs but it is entirely fine if you prefer not to. You may withdraw from the study at any point.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is interested in how English students and staff perceive employability as a concept and their views about skills and attributes for employability which come from immersion in the discipline. I am also exploring enterprise, as many people go on to be freelance and self employed in the creative arts, journalism and so on.

The background to this study is some national research, which has shown that there is a need for Schools of English to articulate more clearly the way that the education they offer prepares people for a wide range of different careers and emphasize the value of English studies in employment terms. My PhD project aims to work with students and staff to explore this acknowledged problem and uses a number of strands of activity and research methods to explore the issues, including focus groups and interviews.

My study will explore the concept of employability with both staff and students in the School of English at [Northern University] and explore ways of articulating and making visible transferable skills. Can a shared language be established? By exploring these questions, research data and an evidence base will be created to underpin possible future developments in embedding awareness of employability and enterprise skills and attributes being developed through the curriculum.

Who am I?

I am a PhD candidate at Newcastle University. I am an English graduate with a first degree in English Language and Literature and a Masters degree in Literature. I have been a business owner and an employer for many years. I am now working as an enterprise educator with Newcastle University and also supporting the work of Newcastle University Careers Service.

What do I need to do to participate?

You will need to devote up to 2 hours of time for a focus group and 1 hour for an interview. I will make arrangements for a room and for appropriate refreshments. Please keep this information sheet and I will also ask you to sign a consent form. This is a simple form where you give us permission to use the information that you share for the analysis of this study.

What will happen with my information?

Your personal details and any information shared with me during the interview will be kept strictly confidential. I may use some direct quotes from focus groups and interviews, and may discuss or quote from CVs and other documents such as blogs in my thesis, in academic papers and presentations, but this will be anonymised, pseudonyms will be used instead of your name and I will always seek to protect your identity.

Contact for further information:

Jane Nolan, [University address, email address and mobile phone number provided here].

31st October 2012, Updated 24th February 2015