

Making their way through the UCAS process: how
16–18 year olds navigate the pedagogic space that
supports degree choice in school

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A thesis submitted for the award of PhD
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Declaration

I, Debra Murphy confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Debra Murphy

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to family members who supported me, listened to my doubts and kept me going throughout this process. Thanks also to colleagues who took an interest in this work.

Special thanks to the staff at the three sixth form sites who gave so generously of their valuable time. And thanks, of course, to all of the young people who took part and who are now making their way through the university system and the graduate labour market. It was a pleasure talking to you.

Thank you to my supervisor, Professor Gemma Moss, for helping me to understand Bernstein's language of description, and for supporting me through to the end of this process.

To my son, thank you for your energy, amazing clarity of thought and valuable insights.

Finally, this work is dedicated to my partner, thank you for your encouragement, for your patience, for the endless conversations, and for believing in me.

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the pedagogic relations involved in school-based UCAS practices. It documents how students experience the UCAS process at three sixth form institutions with contrasting catchments and histories and which differently signal the market value of degree subjects to 16–18 year-olds. The thesis explores how a sample of students responded to this messaging, in combination with other resources that they mobilised while deliberating their possible degree subject choices. The research has the following aims:

To explore:

1. The way in which UCAS is variously practised, as a tightly bounded and recognisable process in three different school settings.
2. The terms upon which UCAS as a *pedagogic space*, positions students as ‘degree choosers’ in each setting.
3. How a sample of 16–18 year olds navigate their way through this process in these settings, and the criteria they invoke as they make their choices of the degree subjects they are considering for undergraduate study.

Drawing on insights from Basil Bernstein’s conceptual and methodological framework, the thesis argues that UCAS can be conceptualised as a distinct set of pedagogic practices with the potential to signal the market value of degree subjects and disciplinary fields to 16–18 year olds. UCAS is not a neutral process; it is shaped by the pressures and external demands made on *both* schools and students. Despite this, many of the students across the sample prioritised subjects that they believed would give them ways of being and acting in the world and in particular showed a preference for subjects with moral or self-enlightenment possibilities. The analysis developed throughout this thesis suggests that at a time when the policy focus emphasises economic undergraduate goals, there is a need for alternate insights about students’ priorities. The thesis argues that a narrow set of policy or institutional concerns such as employability, social mobility or social reproduction, cannot satisfy the full range of aspirations that were talked about by the students within this study.

Impact statement

The research fills a significant gap in the literature. To date, there is an absence of a theory of UCAS, its pedagogic practices, and how these intersect with students' judgements about different disciplinary fields. This research develops a rich conceptual language with which to capture the differences in the way that schools deliver UCAS to students, using the specialised language of the ***ideal knower discourse***.

The notion of an ***ideal knower discourse*** emerged from analysis of how students and staff spoke about personal statement writing and has been used to conceptualise how the value of degree subjects is communicated through a ***UCAS pedagogy*** that places different values on different knower dispositions.

In turn, students expressed a wider range of orientations to their futures, which they variously realised as ***knowledge careers***. This specialised language captures how students conceptualised what to do and how to think about the value of degree subjects. The thesis reports that there is not always a straight-forward cause-and-effect relationship between these two languages, and that the UCAS ***pedagogic space*** should be taken to be a dynamic boundary-crossing point between them.

Cost/benefit and social reproduction models that have previously dominated scholarly understandings of student decision making have ignored these dimensions. The insights offered from this research suggest that there is scope for thinking about UCAS differently and of designing a ***UCAS pedagogy*** that would be capable of providing students with opportunities that will allow them to fully consider what they can do and who they can be in the world, rather than simply responding to the narrow market concerns of their sixth forms and the exigencies of the prevailing policy focus.

The thesis argues that thinking about UCAS pedagogies in this way offers an alternative to the impact of credential inflation and the utilitarian principles that have come to underpin policy thinking about the role of undergraduates with the pressure to emerge from their studies as 'work ready graduates'. For some students, this has translated into a trade-off between favourite subjects and imagined employment trajectories. By redesigning the UCAS pedagogic space, educators will be in a better position to support students as they steer their way through this boundary-crossing point. Allowing students to explore the possibilities of satisfying their interests and concerns could make the difference between shutting down opportunities and opening them up.

Contents

List of Tables and Figures.....	10
Chapter 1: Focus and Rationale	11
1.0 Introduction: Vignette 1.....	11
1.1 The Study.....	11
1.2 The wider problematic for the thesis	13
1.3 The problem of subject knowledge for the sociology of education	14
1.4 Bernstein's sociology of education: a conceptual framework	15
1.5 Changing contexts, new priorities and the student role.....	18
1.6 Rationale for the study	20
1.7 The research focus and aims	23
1.8 Structure of the thesis	25
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature	28
2.0 Introduction	28
2.1 Higher education policies and the knowledge economy	28
2.2 Scholarly accounts of the market as an organising principle of higher education	33
2.3 The Sociology of choice	35
2.4 Researching conceptions of the students' role in higher education.....	37
2.5 Subject choice, social mobility and cultural capital.....	42
2.5.1 Boudon's model of rational action and its application to student subject choice and credential inflation.....	45
2.6 Degree subject choice and school-based practices	48
2.6.1 Degree subject choice	49
2.6.2 School-based UCAS practices and student destinations.....	52
2.7 The market value of a degree subject and student pedagogic identity.....	54
2.8 Conclusions.....	61
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	64
3.0 introduction.....	64
3.1 Methodological approach	66
3.1.1 A qualitative lens.....	66
3.1.2 Inductive logic.....	66
3.1.3 Ontological position.....	67
3.2 Sampling	68

3.2.1 Insider research	68
3.2.2 Staff Selection: pilot stage.....	71
3.2.3 Student Selection: the pilot stage.....	72
3.2.4 Rational for sampling and selection of additional sixth forms	73
3.2.5 Sampling additional sites	75
3.2.6 Selection of staff at additional sites	77
3.2.7 Student Sub-samples: extending the variation by sampling family experience of higher education	77
3.2.8 Sample Size and number of interviews	78
3.2.9 Access to students and research ethics	79
3.3 Research Design and Methods	80
3.3.1 Staff interviews	82
3.3.2 Student Interviews	82
3.3.3 Personal statement: documentary analysis.....	84
3.4 Coding and Analysis.....	85
3.4.1 Coding of data	85
3.4.2 Narrative analysis	87
3.5 Category Building	90
3.5.1 Bernstein's language of description	90
3.5.2 Criticisms	94
3.5.3 My use of language of description as an analytic tool	95
3.5.4 Building the categories.....	97
3.6 Summary.....	99
Chapter 4 Institutional Narratives.....	100
4.0 Introduction	100
4.0.1 Internal narrative.....	101
4.0.2 External narrative.....	101
4.0.3 Temporal orientation	102
4.0.4 Imagined typical student	102
4.1 Castle.....	103
4.1.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time.....	103
4.1.2 External narrative – the school and the policy environment.....	104
4.1.3 Summary	110
4.2. Pasteur.....	111
4.2.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time.....	111
4.2.2 External narrative – the school and the policy environment.....	113

4.2.3 Summary	119
4.3 Central	120
4.3.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time.....	120
4.3.2 External Narrative – the school and the policy environment.....	122
4.3.3 Summary	128
4.4 Orientations in time	128
4.4.1 Present time	129
4.4.2 Future time	130
4.5 Conclusion	131
Chapter 5: UCAS as a Pedagogic Process.....	135
5.0 Introduction	135
5.1 Introducing the events that make up the university application process.....	137
5.1.1 Gathering advice and information	138
5.1.2 Learning how to write and produce the personal statement	139
5.2 Emerging categories: weak and strong framing.....	141
5.2.1 Castle: advice and information/ strong framing	143
5.2.2 Castle: producing the personal statement/strong framing	144
5.2.3 Pasteur: advice and information gathering/intermediate framing.....	146
5.2.4 Pasteur: producing the personal statement/ intermediate framing.....	148
5.2.5 Central: advice and information gathering/ weak framing.....	150
5.2.6 Central: producing the personal statement/weak framing.....	151
5.3 Emerging categories: ideal knower discourses and their classification	153
5.3.1 Castle: strongly classified academic knower discourse	159
5.3.2 Pasteur: Strongly classified prospective knower discourse	161
5.3.3 Central: weakly classified ideal knower discourse.....	163
5.4 In every given context there is a range of possibilities	167
5.4.1 Castle: ‘it’s a personal reason as well’	168
5.4.2 Pasteur: ‘Geography is not really about a job; it’s more of an interest’	170
5.4.3 Central: ‘I wanted to appear like I am quite a diverse person; I’ve done lots of stuff’.....	172
5.5 Conclusion	175
Chapter 6: UCAS as a Pedagogic Space.....	178
6.0 Introduction	178
Aim and structure	178
Archer’s principles of reflexivity and staying put.....	179
6.1 Understanding degree subject priorities	180

6.1.1 Principles of ‘worth’ ‘waste’ and ‘risk’	180
6.1.2 Value in flux	183
6.1.3 Knowledge career and temporality	185
6.2 The pedagogic space and the discursive gap	190
6.2.1 The pedagogic space explained	190
6.2.2 The discursive gap explained	191
6.3 The discursive gap and the struggle to realise personal projects: the tension points in degree subject choice	193
6.3.1 Introduction	193
6.3.2 Central	193
6.3.3 Pasteur	201
6.3.4 Castle	209
6.4 Conclusions	219
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions	222
7.0 Introduction	222
7.1 Local variations and local concerns: how do schools narrate their role and responsibility towards their sixth form students within the current policy context? ..	223
7.2 UCAS as a tightly bounded and recognisable process within each site: how are students positioned as degree choosers?	227
7.3 The dialogic process and knowledge careers: what criteria do students bring to navigate their choice of degree subject?	229
7.4 The sociological significance of subject choice: what sort of knowledge terrain are students orienting towards as they make their subject choices?	232
7.5 Conclusions: research design, putting the findings to work, an agenda for future research	238
7.5.1 Research design	239
7.5.2 Contribution to knowledge: a conceptual language	242
7.5.3 An agenda for future research	243
Bibliography	246
Appendix 1: Glossary of analytic terms	260
Appendix 2: Interview schedule – Stage 1 (students)	265
Appendix 3: Interview schedule – Stage 2 (students)	266
Appendix 4: Interview schedule – Staff	267
Appendix 5: Worked example of narrative analysis	268
Appendix 6: Language of Description translation table	270
Appendix 7: Summary of school profiles	272

List of Tables and Figures

Table 3.1: Summary of data collected

Table 3.2: Timetable for data collection

Table 3.3: Summary of data collected and the main research collection stages

Figure 3.1: Translation table

Figure 6.1: Knowledge careers and their associations with time

Chapter 1: Focus and Rationale

1.0 Introduction: Vignette 1

“I am so glad no-one mentioned knowledge... knowledge is the least important thing to write about”

This statement was made to a group of students in the sixth form at the school where I teach during an introductory session designed to help them formulate their personal statement as part of a UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) university application tutorial event. The students were engaged in compiling lists of the types of qualities, skills and information that they imagine the university admissions tutors would expect to read in their personal statement. There followed feedback from the students on their general ideas of what to mention, which included good communication skills, determination, time management, motivation; the list went on. The facilitator’s response to this, (cited above) encapsulates why the topic of this thesis is so significant. How did we arrive at a point in education where knowledge is the least important thing that students should mention? What does this signal to students about the value of the degree subjects they are applying for? These concerns became the starting point for my enquiry.

1.1 The Study

This study is an investigation of the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) process at three sixth form institutions. It considers the pedagogic relations involved and the site-specific practices that are engendered

as students make their way through the UCAS process. Particular attention is paid to how the market value of various degree subjects is signalled to three sub-samples of 16–18 year-olds, and their response to this messaging. It focusses on the way in which UCAS is practised in different school settings and the terms upon which students are positioned as ‘degree choosers’ at each setting. This also takes into account how this group of students position themselves as ‘degree choosers’ and the criteria they invoke as they make their choice of degree subject.

This is addressed through exploring the UCAS process as it is practised within the current policy context. Specific attention has been paid to how the market value of the fields of study that students consider, is communicated during this process. There is a particular research focus on the way in which these 16–18 year olds are taught to produce their personal statements for their UCAS applications. The research also attends to the narratives about the value of degree subjects and the criteria that these young people form for themselves as they navigate their choices. Through conducting this research, the study also considers the sociological significance of the degree subject choice. The thesis argues that while a prevailing institutional logic provides students with discursive resources for thinking about the market value of degree subjects, this gets taken up and used by students in diverse ways. In particular, when considering the value of a degree subject, some students deferred to the intrinsic, personal and moral potential that they perceive a degree will offer them. This raises the possibility that, despite the potential for policy reforms¹ to cast the value of degree subjects in utilitarian terms, some students will defer to

¹ Recent policy reforms include changes in university funding regimes which include lifting the cap from university tuition fees and available undergraduate places (see chapter two).

the non-utilitarian value of a degree. The thesis considers how, despite social mobility and employability being presented as important undergraduate goals, students prioritise subjects that will provide them with ways of acting and being in the world. It argues that we need pedagogies that go beyond neo-liberal aspirations and that there is room for a **UCAS pedagogy** that allows 16–18 year olds to explore the possibilities of thinking about their degrees in non-utilitarian terms.

1.2 The wider problematic for the thesis

This enquiry is situated within a rapidly changing policy environment that has transformed the structure of UK higher education over the last two decades. One impact of this is that it has opened up access to more students, albeit on marketised terms. Scholars (Ainley and Allen, 2010; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Werfhorst et al., 2005) commenting on the rapid expansion of higher education have observed an associated devaluing effect of *traditional* academic qualifications and a corresponding level of *credential inflation* (Ainley and Allen, 2010). Taking these changes into account, the research literature has documented the increased influences of neo-liberal thinking on conceptualisations of knowledge as ‘knowledge capital’ and graduates as potential ‘knowledge workers’ which are legitimised by the ideological representation of the needs of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Olssen, 2005, 2016; Peters, 2003). It is the foregrounding of the economic relations of knowledge and of its implied emphasis on the links between the value of degree subjects, student employability and economic productivity that form the wider problematic of this thesis.

Although debates about the value of degree subject knowledge in these terms may be linked to other debates about the role and purpose of the university, my research interest is the UCAS process itself, and the criteria that students use for making their degree subject choices.

1.3 The problem of subject knowledge for the sociology of education

Debates regarding the value of different types of curriculum and subject knowledge (academic, standpoint, vocational or experiential knowledge), form familiar territory for the sociology of education. In past works (see, for example, Young, 1971), this field has adopted a critical stance to curriculum knowledge, considering it to be comprised of elite subject knowledge and thus its status and value has been regarded as ideological and arbitrary (Moore, 2004, 2007). By having the power to define what category or mode of subject knowledge has value; elite social groups have the power to either challenge or legitimate the status quo. From this perspective, there is a belief that the curriculum should take on an anti-authoritarian stance, thus reversing the trend of elite (disciplinary) subject knowledge to focus on workers' knowledge, experiences and standpoints. This approach came to be known as a critical pedagogy (see, for example, Giroux, 2011), which assumes that disciplinary knowledge and experience can be conflated because the knowledge that is grounded in everyday experience can be as relevant as disciplinary knowledge.

1.4 Bernstein's sociology of education: a conceptual framework

In response to these ideas, the sociologist Basil Bernstein argued that the focus of sociology should move beyond discussions about the ideological nature of knowledge content to an understanding of the way in which subjects within a school curriculum are produced and communicated and the identities that spring from this (Bernstein, 1971). Thus, in Bernstein's view, the sociology of education should attend less to content, and focus instead on the pedagogic process itself and the significance of the way that the curriculum is put together and communicated to learners (Bernstein, 1990). Hence his focus was on the way in which power relations stem from differences in the pedagogic transmission of knowledge, and the way in which it is accessed and communicated to different groups of learners. Through using these principles Bernstein (1971) wanted to demonstrate how particular pedagogic environments regulated forms of consciousness. Bernstein referred to the principle of *classification* to conceptualise the way in which the boundaries between categories, such as different academic disciplines, are insulated from each other. A second principle, *framing*, is used to conceptualise how knowledge gets transmitted, paced and communicated to learners. The strength or weakness of *classification and framing* will then restrict or enable the amount of power handed over to learners in any such learning situation. It therefore reflects the distribution of power and principles of social control.

Taken together, *classification and framing* form what Bernstein (2000) referred to as the *recognition and realisation rules* by which learners come to recognise what is required of them, enabling learners to produce an "*appropriate text*"

(ibid., p. 18). Bernstein wrote that it is “*the realisation rule*” [...that regulates...] “*how meanings are put together*” (ibid., p. 18) and if acquirers “*do not possess the appropriate realisation rule they cannot then speak the legitimate text*” (ibid., p. 17). Variance in the strength or weakness of *classification and framing*, what Bernstein later referred to as a *visible or invisible pedagogy* (1975), will determine pedagogic instruction which could affect the learner’s ability to possess these rules.

In later work, Bernstein (2000) expressed his concern over changes in the conditions of the production of knowledge. He observed that higher education has long been a site of conflict, but more recently there had been an increased domination over the *classification and framing* of knowledge by the official re-contextualising field (ORF), a field created and controlled by the state and policy makers (ibid.). Bernstein writes that up until this period of educational reform it was the pedagogic re-contextualising field (PRF), comprised of university researchers and lecturers and university gatekeepers, that had the most control over both *classification and framing* of curriculum knowledge (ibid.). This was replaced, however, by the ORF through policy reforms imposed by the New Right Conservative government of the 1980s. In England, this included a school national curriculum and newly introduced audits and measures of school improvement and effectiveness. In Bernstein’s view, these reforms were framed by a managerial discourse and market principles that would eventually reconfigure the relationship that had previously existed between knowers and knowledge across different educational fields (ibid.).

Writing about these changes over two decades ago, Bernstein considered how these conditions would re-shape education and societies relations to knowledge

more broadly. In Bernstein's view these changes signalled the beginning of a "*crisis for education itself*" (ibid., p. 86) because it "[...] *represents a fundamental break in the relationship between the knower and what is known*" (ibid., p. 86). With respect of this, Bernstein wrote that:

[...] market relevance is becoming the key orientating criterion for the selection of discourses, their relations to each other, their forms and their research. (ibid., p. 86)

In Bernstein's theory, where once learners' *pedagogic identity* was formed through their relationship with disciplinary knowledge over a long period of study, it was now framed by a neo-liberal discourse and market principles. In other words, as the official pedagogic environment now incorporates market principles, a schools pedagogic discourse (via the principles of *classification and framing*) within the classroom will change in order to project ideological views about who learners are or what they ought to become (Iverson and Duveen, 2006). This was conceptualised by Bernstein in the following way:

There is a new concept of knowledge and of its relation to those who create it and use it. Knowledge should flow like money, to wherever it can create advantage and profit. Indeed knowledge is not like money, it is money. (Bernstein, 1996, p. 147)

In this analysis of the changing relationship between knowledge and knowers, Bernstein argued that the ideology of the knowledge economy would fundamentally transform society's previous relationship to knowledge. Bernstein writes that in the enlightenment's liberal tradition the goal of education was self-realisation and an ethic of self-transcendence which was dependent on learners forming an inward relationship with knowledge. Bernstein observes, however, that:

Knowledge after nearly a thousand years is divorced from inwardness, from commitments, from personal dedication, from the deep structure of the self. (2000, p. 86)

By implication, as universities are recast as engines of industry there is an assumption that knowledge boundaries will change. Bernstein saw this as a “*new dislocation for knowledge*” (2000, p. 86) which would have the effect of disconnecting the previous inner relationship between knowledge and knowers. Bernstein warns that with this, learner identities will form around these different conditions, and their priorities will be cast in new terms. This body of work forms an important part of my own conceptual framework. It raises questions about whether and how these changing conditions get passed on to learners, the criteria they bring to navigate their degree subject choices under these conditions, and the sort of knowledge terrain that the students in my investigation are orienting towards.

1.5 Changing contexts, new priorities and the student role

Bernstein’s observations of this trend didn’t go much beyond the market reforms that he had observed affecting education and research during the early neo-liberal policy era of the late 20th century. Thinking aligned with Bernstein’s analysis can also be traced back to the writings of Gibbons and his colleagues (1994), who had begun to speculate about the changing conditions of the production of knowledge as well as the changing emphasis on types of knowledge that would be needed for global success. In his World Bank address Gibbons states that “*a new paradigm for the function of higher education has emerged*” (Gibbons, 1998, p. 14) and that “*while the role for higher education has become less clear, we can no longer say that it is about the pursuit of*

knowledge for its own sake" (ibid., p. 14). By implication, the economy requires a workforce that is able to respond to rapidly changing demands and this in turn requires a higher education system that supports this by replacing disciplinary teaching and learning with problem-oriented teaching and learning (ibid.).

The new production of knowledge literature has stimulated considerable debate and interest regarding the future disciplinary culture of the university (Barnett, 2000) and the depreciation of disciplinary knowledge (Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2007). Within the recent policy context these ideas have taken on increased significance. For example, some of the literature that I later review suggests that the changing higher education environment is designed to transform student priorities as well as their role (Brooks, 2017a, 2017b; Clegg, 2011; Kelly et al., 2017, Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2010), assuming that they will be guided by rational means/ends choices. In policy terms students have been re-cast as co-producers, stakeholders (BIS, 2011), as change agents (Kay et al., 2010.) and as consumers of higher education products (Molesworth, 2009.).

The current policy era therefore provides an important context for this study. Specifically, this is characterised by the increase in university tuition fees in English universities, where in 2012 these were increased from £3,375 to £9,000 (Browne Review, 2010). In addition the UK's Conservative-led coalition government white paper (BIS, 2011) and the more recent Conservative government legislation (BIS, 2015, 2016.) represents the latest government

expressions of the role of higher education and of student agency. I will now outline how my own thesis addresses some of these concerns.

1.6 Rationale for the study

The background to this thesis stems from my own professional experience and observations of working with young people faced with the curriculum subject choices that they will make at various branching points throughout their educational careers. In school, increasingly subjects are cast in terms of what they can be traded for, with regards to the routes into higher education and the labour market that they encounter. In consequence, I have often had to defend the space that sociology, one of the subjects that I teach, occupies within the school curriculum. My sales pitch states the following: *it will keep your options open, it will give you critical thinking skills that can help with future academic study, it can be used in your professional career and, it can be combined with any number of subjects.* The qualities of sociology as a discipline in and of itself rarely get a mention in this kind of conversation. Hence, it is my perception that some subjects are more legitimate, credible or defensible than others.

Here I present two more short vignettes from my own practice as a teacher in secondary and sixth form education, and set out the questions that formed the background for this enquiry.

A level taster day: vignette 2

This vignette revolves around an A level taster day that Year 11 students had been told to attend at the school where I teach:

The day was set up so that Year 11 students could visit various A level subjects that they had chosen from a list of A level options. My role was to provide a taster experience of a Sociology A level lesson. This involved a brief overview of the course, my usual sales pitch followed by a debate about something topical from the A level specification. This was followed by a question and answer session. After a long uncomfortable silence one student did raise their hand. The question, one that I had not fully anticipated, asked 'why sociology was not included in the Russell Group list of facilitating subjects'.

As it transpired, of the two A level subjects that I currently teach, one (Government and Politics), was classified by this list as a '*hard subject*' and the other (Sociology) as a '*soft subject*'.

Incidences like this have prompted me to consider the role that policy practices such as the Russell Group list of facilitating subjects² might have in shaping student choice and the curriculum with regards to the classification and value of these subjects. How have these changes impacted on what schools tell students, and how have students responded?

Sixth form tutor time: vignette 3

This vignette raises questions about how students negotiate the discourses about their futures that they encounter when considering their options:

² See, for instance, <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5457/informed-choices-2016.pdf>

The conversation reproduced below took place during a year 12 tutorial session that I recorded in the pilot phase of the research. All of the students involved were in year 12, the first year of their A levels. The student chatter reproduced below took place in a classroom as the students were engaged in various university and degree subject research activities. Some of the students were searching on-line for degree courses while others were browsing through various university prospectuses.

Michaela: Whatever I do it must lead to something [...] a job or onto something that will help me to get a job [...] the idea of counselling has only just come to me [...]. I don't feel that clear about it. My dad said being a counsellor or psychologist is a good job. I saw someone like that on work experience, I can see myself working with children, it looks [...] it seems like a proper job. They were wearing [...] you know [...] a white coat and I could imagine myself like that.

Talia: I'm going to drop maths and do sociology as an AS next year. I knew I shouldn't have done maths, It's my dad's fault, he said I shouldn't do too many social sciences and maths will be better for a job. [...] I'm going to drop it before the exam because they told us in assembly today that all us year 12s will have to put our AS grades on the UCAS form next year so I may as well give up maths now before I do the exam [...] if I get an E it will look bad.

Sam: With sociology you'll be able to go to Cambridge and do PPS.

Talia: I'm not a maths person; I'm more of a politics person. I'll just pick what I'm interested in studying.

Molly: You should choose what you're good at because if you haven't got a degree you won't be able to get a job. When you apply for jobs they will automatically weed out people without degrees.

Talia: Well, I'm definitely not good at maths, I want to choose something that I can relate to or that relates to me and my life.

Sonia: I'm thinking of History, I'm not sure what I want to do in life.

(From pilot study field notes taken during a year 12 tutorial session, 2012)

Given the policy discourse discussed above, and the concerns about their degree subject choices that these students expressed, I wanted to learn more about how 16–18 year olds made their degree subject choices.

1.7 The research focus and aims

The focus of this research is a consequence of my involvement with the sixth form students in the school where I teach. This presented me with an opportunity to learn more about how students think about their degree subject choices and how the sixth form is involved in framing this. Through my initial observations, I was able to formulate the main focus for the study which was to document the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process, including its signalling of the market value of degree subjects to 16–18 year-olds and whether/how this influenced their degree subject choices.

The research aims were to explore:

1. The ways in which UCAS is variously practised, as a tightly bounded and recognisable process in three different school settings.
2. The terms upon which UCAS, as a *pedagogic space*, positions students as degree choosers in each setting.
3. How a sample of 16–18 year olds navigate their way through this process in these settings, and the criteria they invoke as they make their choices of the degree subjects they are considering for undergraduate study.

This led to the following research questions:

1. How do schools narrate their role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students within the current policy context?

2. From the perspective of the school, how is the UCAS process practised and how does it position students as degree choosers?
3. From the perspective of the students, how do they position themselves in their talk about disciplinary fields and the degree subjects they are choosing, what are the criteria they bring to navigate their choices?
4. What can these findings tell us about the sort of knowledge terrain that students are orienting towards as they make their degree subject choices?

My initial research endeavour was to gain an understanding of how to document the UCAS process. The study began by conducting a single site pilot study, before extending the study to two further sites. It is for this reason that the details of the research design can be considered as emergent and typical of research conducted within an exploratory mode. Once data analysis from the pilot was complete, I questioned whether some of the observed trends were a consequence of the site's institutional culture and student composition. Thus, as my study commenced, it soon became clear that I needed to work beyond this single site, and the study would benefit from including at least one other group of students from a contrasting sixth form context. Hence I began to plan for a second and then a third site with contrasting catchments in order to maximise the variation in my sample. Through my analysis of the three sites I have been able to document how UCAS, as a distinct set of pedagogic practices, signals to students the market value of the degree subjects they are considering, and how in turn this group of young people have responded to this messaging as they consider their degree subject priorities.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is comprised of seven chapters; the purpose of this section is to outline the content of each of these. Chapter one is the introduction; it acts as the rationale of the thesis and provides an account of my decision to investigate the UCAS process in the first place. The chapter is also used to clarify some of the decisions that I have made, such as the decision to focus the study on sixth form education, my decision to take the university application process and degree subject choice as the central foci of the thesis, and the conceptual framework used throughout.

Chapter two presents a discussion of the policy environment within which this study is set. This provides an important context for both the questions that this thesis asks and seeks to answer, and the literature that I review in the subsequent sections of the chapter. The literature locates my research interests in a wider body of work, while also seeking to locate my study against current research literature about UCAS and student degree subject choice. It is also used to consider the analysis of three prominent theoretical fields which are used to consider the sociological significance of student degree subject choice.

Chapter three outlines my approach to the research process, including the methodology and research design. I also provide my rationale for decisions taken over sampling, data collection, coding and analysis. It also outlines the position I have taken regarding the ontological question of structure and agency. In addition, ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapters four, five and six are the research data chapters comprising of my researching findings and analysis.

In chapter four I introduce the three sixth forms and present my analysis of their ***institutional narratives***. This provides the context required for understanding the distinct settings within which UCAS is practised. It also introduces some principles such as the projection of each sixth forms ***imagined typical student*** and its ***temporal orientation*** which are considered along with each site's ***institutional narrative***.

In chapter five the UCAS process is analysed by using Bernstein's model of ***pedagogic discourse***. The aim of the chapter is to map out the way that UCAS is practised as a tightly bounded and recognisable process and analyse how this combines with the ***institutional narrative*** to produce a unique set of pedagogic practices at each site. My emerging analytic language is brought to the fore, where the category of ***ideal knower discourse***, is explored in the light of the ***UCAS pedagogy***, including personal statement writing.

The final data chapter, chapter six, introduces UCAS as a ***pedagogic space***. This extends the analysis to the way that different groups of students talk about the degree subjects and disciplinary fields they are considering for undergraduate study. The analysis attends to the various narratives that were used during these conversations. The chapter is used to introduce further principles from my emerging analytic vocabulary such as ***value and risk***, and ***knowledge career***. The second section of the chapter brings the ***institutional narratives*** back in and juxtaposes these against student's own defined ***knowledge careers***. This analysis points towards a more dynamic pedagogic process than was at first thought about.

Chapter seven draws some conclusions about the nature of the UCAS process as analysed in chapters four, five and six; and its role in shaping student decision making about degree subject choice. The chapter also considers what these conclusions imply for policy makers and educators in the field of sixth form and undergraduate education. By examining these findings in the light of the literature that was reviewed in chapter two, I draw some conclusions about the sociological significance of UCAS as pedagogic practice and of the degree subject priorities of students. The chapter ends by suggesting next steps and possible future directions of the study.

This chapter has introduced the thesis as a whole; in the next chapter I further explore the research literature that provides the context for this study.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literatures that have informed this enquiry. These document policy change over the last two decades, their impact on the organisation of the university (section 2.1), and their consequences for the future focus of academic identities and the role of the university (section 2.2). This is followed by works that document the tensions experienced by students, caused by an expanding higher education system and widening participation policy (section 2.3). The chapter then turns to current policy conceptions of the student's role and relationship to higher education (section 2.4), the social mobility implications of, and policy concerns over, their degree subject choice (section 2.5), and empirical studies of school-based UCAS practices and how these align with student destinations and degree subject choice (section 2.6). The final section (section 2.7) has been used to perform some additional conceptual work for the thesis. It does this through introducing the Bernsteinian concept of *pedagogic identity*. This is applied to literature that attempts to conceptualise how students might respond to the current utilitarian turn in higher education.

2.1 Higher education policies and the knowledge economy

This enquiry has been conducted against the backdrop of a changing policy landscape that has transformed the structure of UK higher education over the last two decades. Underlying these policy changes are much broader

ideological shifts away from liberalism as the dominant political doctrine to the adoption of neo-liberalism, a market-based ideology that is run on technical/rational principles (Olssen, 2006). Writing about how these ideological changes have transformed the UK's higher education system, scholars frequently refer to The Neo-liberal University (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000), The Enterprise University (Marginson, 2013), or a Marketised (Olssen, 2005, 2016) and Globalised (Peters, 2003) University system. These variations in emphasis may partly be explained by differences in the interests and concerns that these commentators adopt. Nevertheless, there is agreement among them that since the late 1990s higher education has played a pivotal role in the knowledge economy. The discourse of the knowledge economy incorporates an agenda of national wealth creation based on 'knowledge capitalism' (Peters, 2003) which is characterised by the production of intellectual goods rather than physical or symbolic goods (ibid., 2003).

Peters (2003) writes that the knowledge economy rests on a number of assumptions about the role of higher education and of the dispositions and motivations of individual learners. Regarding the former, higher education is now aligned with knowledge production in the form of academic research and knowledge transfer between universities and industry (ibid.). This is reflected today in the government's 'research impact agenda' (Francis, 2011; Olssen, 2016), but was signalled earlier by the Dearing Report's recommendations (Dearing, 1997, section 4).

There has also been a strong policy emphasis on the production of 'knowledge workers' in the form of future postgraduates (Olssen, 2006). In policy terms, this was reflected in 2001 with the New Labour government's target of 50% young

adults progressing to higher education by 2010 (23 May 2001, Blair speech). This also incorporated policy levers such as the widening participation legislation (DfES, 2003a, 2003b) and its associated Aimhigher initiative in England.³ This was an important policy moment for higher education because it had the effect of expanding student numbers and ushering in an era of mass higher education (Kelly et al., 2017).

The concept of human capital is relevant here; although not a new concept, this latest phase of knowledge capitalism and intellectual labour puts greater emphasis on the capacity of individuals to become ‘knowledge workers’ capable of producing knowledge products (Olssen, 2006). Brown and Lauder (2006) and Brown and Tannock (2009) refer critically to the *Leitch review of skills*, which they argue, mistakenly posit that skilled knowledge workers are the lever for a meritocratic and prosperous society. They refer instead to the economic realities, namely that there are a limited number of skilled knowledge workers required, and point to the inevitability of credential inflation instead.

Another landmark moment saw the replacement of the research assessment exercise (RAE) in 2014 with a more rigorous assessment tool known as the research excellence framework (REF) (Olssen, 2016). This has been written about as a key policy lever for decreasing academic autonomy over knowledge production, thus transforming academic work by placing value measures on the knowledge that they produce (ibid.). Olssen (2016) argues that this will have the

³ Aimhigher is a scheme which is associated with higher education policy in England and the UK government’s Widening Participation initiative. (see, for example, DfES 2003a, 2003b). Its goal is to extend the number of university candidates from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. Under the coalition government’s new higher education funding regime, central funding officially ended in 2011. Higher education institutions are now obliged to run and fund their own ‘fair access schemes’.

effect of making academic departments increasingly market sensitive as they are now forced to market their products to various media outputs. Collini (2010) writes that this has had the effect of narrowly defining what is considered as 'useful knowledge' (ibid.).

By 2009 the notion of a causal relationship between higher education and the health of the economy had become a deeply embedded policy discourse (Olssen, 2016). This was signalled by the white paper for higher education (BIS, 2009), which saw higher education being located within the government's brand-new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the language of the knowledge economy becoming further entrenched (BIS, 2009).

This continued through to the post-New Labour era, exemplified, for instance, by the Browne Review's recommendation of trebling university tuition fees (Browne Review, 2010). Its implementation in 2012 signalled that university had been re-positioned as an economic private good for both individuals and industry (Holmwood, 2017). This also culminated in the introduction of a student charter (BIS, 2011) which served to protect student interests in 'value-for-money' terms (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Here, Naidoo and Williams refer to the emergence of a new transactional relationship between the university and undergraduates (ibid.). The Browne Review was shortly followed by the coalition's white paper (BIS, 2011) *Students at the heart of the system*, which set out in much clearer terms the expected role for student agency (Kelly et al., 2017).

The current conservative administration's green and white papers (BIS, 2015, 2016) continue to interlink higher education with economic growth. This is

expressed through the teaching excellence framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016), which is understood to be a significant policy lever for what universities should do with students. Reading between the lines, these documents charge higher education with the responsibility of producing 'work ready' (Hefce, 2017) and economically productive graduates (Kelly et al., 2017).

Michael Apple (2010) has observed that parallel developments have taken place across the globe. This is, therefore, not just a UK phenomenon and is part of a wider move globally to align higher education with the needs of global economic markets and stakeholders. Specifically, this is reflected by the growing interest in the *Bologna Process* report (Brancaleone and O'Brien, 2011), an agreement between European countries that aims to standardise higher education qualifications across member states (ibid.). Brancaleone and O'Brien observe that this equates to an outcomes-based assessment regime that includes a combination of generic transferable, problem solving, and professional soft skills (ibid.).

The previously mentioned policies help to situate this study within the current policy environment. While this offers a context for the rapidly changing field of higher education, this literature focusses primarily on the macro level institutional changes that have caused scholars from within the academy to express their concerns about the future role of academic work and the academic identities that are likely to form around these changes.

2.2 Scholarly accounts of the market as an organising principle of higher education

Several bodies of work referencing these policy changes question what they mean for the organisation and purpose of higher education itself (Eagleton, 2010; Holmwood, 2017; Francis, 2011; Olssen, 2016; Redding, 2017; White, 2016). This literature refers to the tensions that exist between what its authors see as a market-driven higher education system (Brancaleone and O'Brien, 2011) and a traditional disciplinary culture. White (2016), for instance, argues that these are competing paradigms, and Holmwood (2017) states that the ensuing policy focus has pushed the role of the university further away from its previous commitment to social democracy and economic equality.

Others have asked what these changes may mean for the way that academic identities are produced and formed (Archer, 2008; Ball, 2012; Boden and Epstein, 2011; Clegg, 2008; Davies, 2005; Eagleton, 2010; Harris, 2005; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). Of specific concern are policy drivers such as the REF and its implication for academic activities. White (2016), for instance, contends that these conditions make engagement in original or creative thought too risky for academics. Ball (2012) refers to the neo-liberal practices that are responsible for diminishing the subjectivities of academics and replacing them with 'enterprising' and 'performative' subjectivities (ibid.)

A key concern for scholars documenting these shifts has been what they imply for the validation of academic work (Ball, 2003; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2013; Hey, 2011; Temple et al., 2016) and what should count as useful knowledge under these conditions (Francis, 2011; Olsen, 2016). In view of the way in which

research agendas form and judgements are made about what is deemed to be 'useful knowledge', Cribb and Gewirtz (2013) describe the university as 'hollowed out' of any real academic substance.

The 're-framing' of the university in knowledge economy terms has prompted others to raise questions about the effects of its changing culture on the commodification of knowledge in the form of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000). All of this seems to be leading to greater state control and industry-led concerns over academic priorities, thus valorising what is counted as useful knowledge (Temple et al., 2016).

Here I have presented an overview of the literature that explores the market as an important, organising principle of higher education. These works are primarily concerned with the future disciplinary culture of the academy and the conditions upon which academic work is produced and academic identities are formed. Thus it seeks to explain the transformation and expansion of higher education against the doctrine of neo-liberalism for those already situated within the university. The rest of this chapter considers research that has attended specifically to young people's understandings of the changing context of higher education. These include policy discourse that emphasises the significance of the student's role, the significance of increased fees for students, and the effects of this for their degree subject choices. But first I briefly turn to earlier works that have explored the tensions caused by an expanding higher education system and widening participation policy.

2.3 The Sociology of choice

One significant strand of this literature has considered the relationship that young people have with higher education. This draws on literature from the early 2000s (Ball et al., 2000; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2001a, 2001b), that document the post-16 choices made by students. These works were a response to the widening participation initiatives of the early 2000s. Taking a critical stance against this initiative, these studies rejected the central premise that an expanded higher education system, would necessarily amount to opportunity of outcome for non-traditional university applicants (Francis et al., 2017).

Building on Bourdieu and Passerson's (1990) conceptual model of *field*, *capital* and *habitus*, scholars working within the field of the sociology of education, such as Reay et al. (2001a, 2001b), have sought to make sense of the complex relationship that exists between structures and processes within educational fields and educational inequality. In these accounts, mediating factors such as education markets, competition, choice and decision making (Reay et al., 2001a), the dynamics of class, gender and ethnic identities (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Ball et al., 2000) and the role of institutional cultures (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Reay et al., 2001b) draw attention to these inequalities. The central concern for Reay and her colleagues (2001a) was that the expansion of higher education would work against the interests of working-class students and their families and instead work in favour of middle-class students (Reay, 2012). From this view, despite its meritocratic assumptions, a marketised system where all students are well-informed consumers (see, for instance, BIS, 2011), will not change anything at the privileged end of the sector. Instead, because of

cultural and structural factors the power to choose will more strongly entrench social class divisions within society.

Of particular interest is a study conducted by Ball and colleagues (Ball et al., 2000) who observe that choice is set against multiple interactions and negotiations around home, school and personal circumstances (ibid.). This made an important case for challenging policy assumptions about students' market-oriented strategies. Based on the findings from my own project, this is a view that I share and that I return to further on in this chapter. In common with work cited above (see Reay et al., 2001a), the focus of this work was to explore the motivations that lie behind the decision to participate (or not) in post-compulsory education.

The aim for Ball and his colleagues (2000) was to understand how choice is conditioned by the dynamics of both identity and educational processes, such as choice set within a context of de-industrialisation and the social conditions of late modernity (ibid.). One question they raise is how, within this context, the education system continues to act as an agent of social reproduction. They report that in common, these young people were often disconnected from the future, and faced with short-term decision making. Thus Ball et al. report that regardless of social class background, young people hesitate over longer term future commitments (Ball et al., 2000). This was often expressed by middle-class youth taking a gap year in order to *get on*, while working-class youth were disposed towards the present and on simply *getting by* (p. 49, ibid.). The distinction between *getting on* and *getting by*, suggested to the authors that these young people continue to operate within a framed field of reference and that students already "*know what is not possible in a world of possibilities*" (ibid.,

2000, p. In other words, both material factors and a social class logic remain significant in placing limits on the sort of future these young people imagine for themselves.

This body of work has the potential to contribute to a wider discussion about the way that degree subject choices become meaningful to different groups of students as they align themselves with appropriate knowledge trajectories, i.e. academic or work related study. In the works cited here, Bourdieu's concepts of, *capital* and *habitus* remain significant for understanding the educational trajectories that students, from different backgrounds follow. But this work was published almost two decades ago and the field of higher education has seen some significant changes, such as an expansion of student participation from all backgrounds⁴ and the subsequent expansion of tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.⁵ Hence there is a need to reconsider students' relationship with higher education within this contemporary policy context.

2.4 Researching conceptions of the students' role in higher education

An additional, but associated policy focus has been one that aligns higher education with the discourse of employability and its associated social mobility concerns. More recently, scholars (Brooks, 2017a; Clegg, 2010; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Holmwood, 2013a; Kelly et al., 2017), have attended to the

⁴ Although White ethnic groups remained the least likely to enter higher education in 2015 with an entry rate of 28%, compared to 41% for the Asian ethnic group, 37% for the Black ethnic group, 32% for the Mixed ethnic group and 58% for the Chinese ethnic group. (UCAS, 2016)

⁵ In Scotland upfront fees were removed in 2001; in Wales the cap on tuition fees was also increased to £9,000 in 2012, but the Welsh Assembly pays fee costs above £3,465 per year for Welsh students studying at any UK university. In Northern Ireland, fees were capped at £3,465 in 2012 for students from Northern Ireland. (Sá, 2014)

way in which the student's role has been conceptualised by policy makers. Some, like Holmwood (2013a) are critical of the reduction in status of higher education to employability, with postgraduate employment seen as the only desirable outcome for students.

Applying a critical discourse approach to their analysis, Kelly et al. (2017) conclude that current policy conditions have produced the *government's normative student ideal* (ibid., p. 105). This assumes students should be engaged in self-entrepreneurship, concerned with accumulating knowledge capital and espousing a utilitarian approach to degree subject choice (ibid.). Their research suggests that policy discourse places an increased emphasis on the student role of co-producing a system that privileges utilitarian degrees over academic non-utilitarian ones.

In a similar vein, Brooks (2017a, 2017b) considers the construction of the student's role from the point of view of UK policy discourse and from across the EU (European Union). According to these findings, the policy landscape represents a somewhat muddled and incoherent discursive space. While the construction of the student's role as 'empowered consumer' is present and often dominates scholarly understandings, analysis suggests that the discourse of the student role as *'future worker'* and as *'hard worker'* is more frequently used to rhetorically frame the student role. In addition students are cast in terms of their potential *'vulnerability'* because they run the risk of becoming unrealised in their role as future knowledge workers (ibid.). This body of work raises questions about the potential for policy discourse to shape the way that students imagine their role as future undergraduates.

Ball (1994), however, reminds us that policy discourse gets taken up in unexpected ways, often serving a number of different ends, and thus making outcomes difficult to predict. These works then, provide the grounds for further empirical work regarding the projection of a normative student ideal, and the ways students themselves see their role.

In their study of 'soft skills' pedagogies, Stephenson and Clegg (2011) do offer some empirically based work about how undergraduates see their role against the context of the prevailing policy discourse. They explored this through the lens of undergraduate involvement in personal development planning, and the 'possible future selves' that these students projected while participating in this process. This study revealed much greater complexity regarding student temporal orientations than those conducted previously by Ball and his colleagues (2000) (see section 2.3). From their data, Stephenson and Clegg (2011) produced a typology containing at least five different possible student projected selves. Among them, few students expressed a straight forward orientation to a future self in 'employability' terms alone, and those that did seemed to be in the minority (ibid.). By mapping undergraduate responses to different **temporal orientations**, they found that students adopted a range of alternate visions of their 'possible self' and that the narrower discourse of employability was but one of many positions adopted by the students in their study (ibid.).

Thus, while the prevailing discourse has a tendency to present normative notions of success, such as the pursuit of economic ends, this did not converge with the full range of student aspirations or imagined selves (ibid.). The authors report that while some did have well developed orientations to a career-

focussed future, not all students aspired to the narrow social mobility agenda and its associated discourse of employability. A significant proportion of working and middle-class students were strongly located in the present (ibid., p. 239), many of this group were either focussed on academic work, or on “*elaborating a strong student identity*” (ibid., p. 237). In view of the level of variability that was found among their sample, the authors warn against assumptions that all students share identical concerns over employability or upward social mobility (Clegg, 2010, 2011; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011). In this analysis, students who orientated to the present were attributed with as much ‘reflexive work’ as those whose dominant orientation was to the future.

In this work, the authors align themselves with Margret Archer’s (2003, 2007) social realist study of human reflexivity. Archer (ibid.) details many different forms of reflexivity, which do not necessarily take the same form or give rise to the same set of outcomes⁶. She points to the fact that while some of the participants in her study sought out new opportunities; others went to great lengths to *stay put*. Hence, Archer argues that producing their own lack of social mobility did not happen simply by default (Archer, 2007). This was so for participants from the same social class background and, in one instance, from the same family (Archer, 2003, 2007). Here she concludes that students’ priorities and concerns are not necessarily a condition of structural conditions and of the embodied *habitus* that springs from these (ibid.). Instead, this is central to the individual’s own desires and goals. This means that structural

⁶ Archer identified at least four different principles of reflexive deliberation. Modes of reflexivity are understood through a dynamic interplay between socio-economic contexts of continuity and discontinuity. The mode of reflexivity will respond to this context – each work in dynamic relation to each other.

conditions and human action should not be understood (or analysed) as the same thing.

As Archer puts it:

[...] there is a cost to staying put or moving on, in either case it is the agent who must weigh and evaluate these costs. (Archer, 2007, p. 191)

This means that despite the power that structural properties have on enabling or constraining our goals, individuals continue to make reflexive conscious decisions. For Archer (ibid.), it is this interplay between structure and agents' own projects that, "[...] *generates powers of constraint or enablement*", but against these it is the agents "[...] *own configuration of concerns, subjectively defined [...]*" (ibid., p135).

Therefore, it is this reflexive action (rather than habitual action) that needs to be at the centre of the researcher's enquiries. For Archer (2003), structural properties do shape our situations because they act as *enablements or constraints*, but how we act against these also depends on our own reflexive concerns.

Thus for Archer, there is a need to take the agent's project first, including both desires and strategies for achieving these. At the same time, the researcher will also seek to identify the mechanisms and tendencies that are at play. So, for instance, the introduction of tuition fees represents a mechanism that can give rise to tendencies that shape students' realisations, but its effects cannot be predicted because they are dependent upon a) the student's personal project and b) the reflexive strategies students deploy. For Archer, a) and b) are not reducible to unconscious processes or embodied dispositions.

This analysis therefore points to the significance of considering the reflexive world of undergraduates as they make their way through the university application process. Similar to Bernstein's analytic model, whose conceptual frame has been used to inform this thesis, Archer's ideas make room for agency without collapsing it into structure and for structure without conflating it with agency. In chapter seven I return to this discussion and consider the relevance of my own findings for this dynamic.

Here I have presented an overview of the literature that explores policy discourse and associated changes to the higher education environment, as an important principle for projecting the student's role within higher education. However, this literature has not explored how these new conditions get translated into the UCAS process and how the market value of degree subjects is signalled to young people as they make their degree choices. Because there is little consideration of how this changing environment may affect the perceptions and judgements made by 16–18 year olds, this constitutes a significant gap in the literature. The rest of this chapter explores how various works theorise the factors that underpin student degree subject choice, how it has been researched and can be understood.

2.5 Subject choice, social mobility and cultural capital

In this section I explore a body of work that is underpinned by the same policy changes described above, but which focusses on the nature of degree choice against the backdrop of increased tuition fees and the expansion of higher education; a consequence of the removal of the cap on the number of university places available. These works are primarily influenced by social mobility

concerns of policymakers. Many are commissioned by the government's *What Works evidence centres* (Gov.UK, 2013) such as the Sutton Trust (Jones, 2016) and Nuffield Foundation (Davies et al., 2013). These studies are designed to provide evidence about 'what works' in policy terms which is then often used to justify further policy intervention (Holmwood, 2013b). One Nuffield Foundation funded project (Davies et al., 2013), for instance, mapped out which groups of students (in terms of socio-economic and ethnic background) were more likely to link their degree preferences to a desire for high future earnings or higher status occupations. The study explored whether students were equally motivated by higher salary-related degree subjects. In this study, degree subject choice was equated with social mobility concerns that were then aligned with a cultural capital model of choice. There were significant differences across ethnic and class lines, whereby students from lower income groups selected subjects such as the humanities that would attract much lower salaries. Students from Asian and Chinese ethnic heritage groups, regardless of income, chose subjects linked to higher status or higher salaried careers. Whereas students from white middle-income families selected degree subjects that were linked to careers that would contribute to society.

Jones (2014, 2016) has specifically looked at how students' perceptions of value-for-money shaped the types of degrees that they were opting for. Unsurprisingly, at a time of highly inflated university fees, these works have turned to the issue of the effects of student debt on disadvantaged groups. Of interest for this thesis, Jones (2014, 2016) found that degree choices for high ability, working-class students were unlikely to be motivated by 'love of subject' and were instead shaped by market-oriented decisions (ibid.).

Because these studies foreground social mobility concerns this body of work restricts the analysis of degree choice to these terms only. From this perspective, choosing a 'lesser' degree or opting for non-participation may be translated as having low aspirations and associated cultural deficiency. For example, Rose et al. (2012) consider the need to understand student lack of appropriate levels of motivation and aspiration in their sample of post-16 students who do not want to participate in higher education. The headline message from this body of work was:

[There is a] need for FE colleges to support students in developing high aspirations [and] a wider framework of student aspiration for use in both research and educational practice is needed. (ibid., p. 293)

The emphasis here is on the importance of changing student behaviour and on improving their aspirations.

Spohrer (2011, 2016) describes this phenomenon as a *discourse of high aspirations*, which has its roots in deficit thinking about young people from deprived backgrounds. Her data suggests that those who do not buy into the *meritocratic promise of social mobility* (2016, p. 422), are discursively cast as culturally deficient. Spohrer's data indicates that policy-focussed research on entry to HE has become tied to the wider policy discourse of *aiming high*, part of the widening participation initiative and the government's employability agenda (Spohrer, 2011, 2016). However, the students in her study were sceptical of the notion of success that was aligned with higher educational qualifications. She writes that:

[...Students had] *at least partial insights into the contradiction between the promise of 'success' [original emphasis] for all and the economic*

reality of limited space in the upper ranks of the labour market (2016, p. 418)

There is considerable debate over whether a social mobility model, based on the logic of cultural reproduction, cultural conditioning and inherited cultural capital can account for degree subject choice. The previously mentioned work point to some of the tensions produced by the effects of increased tuitions fees, higher education expansion and credential inflation. Taken together these signal greater unpredictability of the cost/benefits that entry into higher education can bring. Therefore, there may be a need to reconsider the way in which the dynamic of student decision making can be theorised.

2.5.1 Boudon's model of rational action and its application to student subject choice and credential inflation

Boudon's (1974) theory of rational action can lend itself to thinking about the combined effects of the current condition of higher education expansion, and credential inflation. According to this model, at stake across the social classes is the wish to avoid downward social mobility and not, as assumed by cultural capital theorist's (see, for example, Davies et al., 2013, Jones, 2016) the desire for upward mobility. Hence, educational decision making will vary, depending on a combination of starting points and the context of the labour market. Boudon (1974) drew on this model to develop his theory of the primary and secondary effects of the stratification system. This refers to the primary effect of early academic achievement, which is linked to class differences of cultural inequality, and the later accumulation of secondary effects that rational action has on a person's educational goals (ibid.). Accordingly, people from different starting points will perceive different cost benefits of going further in education than others. In a system of increased educational transition points, which select

by ability, primary effects are likely to have less of an impact on the decisions taken at the higher end of educational trajectories. Instead, for Boudon it is the accumulation of secondary effects (cost benefits) that will matter the most (ibid.).

Consequently, even when similar early achievement (primary effect) is taken into account, it is the cost benefits that will impact most on later educational goals (ibid.). Secondary effects are linked to a version of rational action that is specific to the beliefs that make sense of the experiences of individuals in specific class and economic contexts (Boudon, 1998). One could speculate that against the conditions of an expanded higher education system and its associated credential inflation, the risks and costs of degree subject choice might be expected to increase for children from middle-class professional families as they seek to avoid downward mobility. In addition, as the value of subjects as credentials becomes less certain, it is possible that the disciplinary or subject route into higher education taken by earlier generations will also lose its value.

Rational action theories have been criticised for making overly simplistic claims about choice and decision making (Glaesser and Copper, 2014; Thompson, 2017). Although, noting that choice can vary according to specific circumstances, this seems to be something that Boudon was keen to avoid (1998, 2003). Indeed, he considers that a theory of primary and secondary effects takes the model beyond a classical rational action paradigm (1998).

Applying Boudon's model to degree subject choice, van de Werfhorst et al. (2003) found that children were more likely to make a transition in education, at

the same branching point as their parents, and subject choices are made relative to parent's occupation. Using measures of degree subject choice, van de Werfhorst and his colleagues (2003) observed that, compared with working-class students of similar or higher ability range, middle-class students were more likely to aspire to degrees in the higher professions such as law or medicine. This is explained by Boudon's notion of 'positional theory' (Thompson, 2016), which assumes decision making, can be aligned to the position that a person's family occupies in the stratification system (ibid.). Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003) observe, however, that given the logic of class maintenance, during times of credential inflation, intergenerational discontinuity is more likely to occur (ibid.).

Boudon's model of student decision making provides an alternative lens to the cultural capital thinking that has until recently dominated both the policy and research literatures (see, for instance, works cited in section 2.3). This work suggests that it is not simply a deficit of cultural capital or of associated aspiration that has the potential to produce unequal outcomes in education. Rather, because of the logic of class maintenance, the more educational opportunities or transition points there are, the higher the cost benefits will be, and the increased likelihood of credential inflation and an unequal system.

Returning for a moment to Spohrer's (2011, 2016) study of post-16 aspirations and notions of success, against Bourdon's model, it might be possible to make greater sense of her findings. One possible consequence of this model is that if students perceive that the value of a transition to a higher level is worth less than when their parents undertook it, they are less likely to make the transition (van de Werfhorst et al., 2003). By the same logic, higher education

qualifications are less likely to signal success to students for whom higher education was not a familiar path in the first place. This model could also make sense of what Davies et al. (2013) found from their analysis of subject choice, where degree subjects with higher earnings potential were of less concern for students from lower income families and where occupational status was of greater concern for those from higher income backgrounds.

From the point of view of this study, because this model collapses choice back into rational action concerns over downward social mobility, it doesn't consider the fuller range of possible student priorities, or indeed, other forms of capital, that might inform student choices (see, for example, Clegg, 2011). In addition, attempts at mapping out mobility trends, or student motivational levels could be useful to policymakers, but this does not consider the moral, biographical and personal motivations that inform student degree subject choices. These concerns may be more compatible with the Archerian analysis outlined above (see section 2.4) which pays less attention to the situated nature of student deliberations and more attention to their personal projects and concerns.

2.6 Degree subject choice and school-based practices

While the work in the last section attended to student degree subject choice, it is less common to find research that is directly concerned with the effects of school-based pedagogic practices against the changing context of higher education.

Among those that do, five main bodies of work, Brooks (2003), Clark et al. (2015), Donnelly (2014, 2015), Jones (2013) and Shuker (2014) have sought to

account for how students are aligned, through school-based practices including their deployment of widening participation initiatives and UCAS with their university destinations and degree subject choices.

2.6.1 Degree subject choice

Clark et al. (2015) serve to extend the previously mentioned project conducted by Ball et al. (2000), (see section 2.3). Their interests lie in the decision making strategies deployed by working-class students in the context of student debt and tuition fees. In common with Ball and his colleagues (2000), they found there was a discursive emphasis on responsibilised decision making, whereby student decisions were individualised and seen as less of a collective (familial) concern. Like Ball et al. (ibid.), they also consider that social class has remained a significant concept for understanding inequality and choice. But rather than looking at those who deferred from going to university, its focus was on high attaining students who had planned to make the transition on to higher education. This body of work aligns with my own research interests about degree subject choice and the strategies that students deploy through the decision making process.

Clark et al. (ibid.) contend that, arising from the context of reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991), processes of individualisation and uncertainty combine with policy imperatives, such as choice and tuition fees, to produce new forms of class inequality. They suggest that having been inculcated by widening participation schemes through a discourse of consumer individualism and responsibilism, working-class students will assume the burden of risk themselves and hence become increasingly engaged in risk aversion strategies. In doing so, the authors problematise widening participation

policy thinking, because it strongly aligns with the UK government's knowledge economy agenda, and normalises student expectations of debt.

Crucially, they found that this has impacted on student degree subject priorities. Clark et al. (ibid.) found that most working-class students engaged in risk aversion strategies by *fostering greater instrumentality around subject choices* (ibid., p. 19). Although students from disadvantaged backgrounds were not deterred by the prospect of debt, widening participation schemes that espoused discourses of responsibility and risk, led to acceptance of 'individual responsibility' and a 'value-for-money' approach to degree choice (ibid.). Consequently, student deliberations around degree subject choice were set against the priorities of future employment. Thus, many of the working-class students in their sample expressed an instrumentalist view of their degrees and chose degree subjects that would lead to routes into employment (ibid., p. 14). As their data appears to indicate, working-class students may experience tensions as they attempt to choose between intrinsically satisfying degree subjects and those that will satisfy their financial concerns.

Clark and her colleagues (ibid.) do not extend their project to middle-class students' degree subject choices. There is however an assumption that working-class decision making will be distinctly different from their middle-class counterparts. This assumes that due to risk aversion strategies, working-class students will connect to the ***extrinsic value*** of their degree subjects, whereas there is an assumption that middle-class students, who are less exposed to risk, will base their decision on a subject's internal content, or '*love of subject*'.

By contrast, in an earlier study, Brooks (2003) demonstrated that there was a high level of intra-class variability when it came to subject choice. The findings from this data suggested an unexpected lack of uniformity in the way her middle-class sample prioritised their choice of degree subjects. For some inter-generational continuity, where degree choices were in line with family occupations, was strongly implied. For others in the same sample set, degree choice was less in line with familial occupational roles and thus discontinuity was strongly implied (ibid.).

Brooks therefore reconsidered the cultural capital model that had originally informed her thinking (ibid.). This assumes that the presence or absence of cultural capital will align with a student's (and their family's) social mobility concerns. The students in this study were of the same socio-economic group, yet in terms of their degree subject preferences; there was a high degree of variation. Indeed, rather than reproduce their parents trajectories, most of the sample wanted to take distinctly different routes from their parents (ibid.). Brooks therefore concluded that there was a need to look beyond the sort of explanations that rely on Bourdieu's notion of the durable *habitus* and embodied *cultural capital* (ibid.). These observations could point at what Boudon (1974) referred to as secondary effects (see my discussion in section 2.3). Because Brook's analysis foregrounds student conscious actions, it pays less attention to the situated nature of student deliberations (primary effects). However, it does not go on to consider the wider ramifications of student reflexivity against the rapidly changing context of higher education and the knowledge environment.

2.6.2 School-based UCAS practices and student destinations

In the works that follow there is less of a concern with degree subject choice. Of interest, however, is the attention paid to UCAS as a potential *pedagogic space*.

Donnelly's (2014, 2015) findings are of interest because they open up the way for further explorations of the messaging systems that students encounter while at school, and their effects on student judgements and orientations. Donnelly pointed to the presence of pedagogic discourse at each of his two case study schools. This operated as a 'hidden curriculum' through which students were inculcated into thinking about different types of university. Using Bernstein's conceptual model of classification and framing (see chapter one), this work explored the effects of different pedagogic practices on directing students towards different parts of university sector.

Donnelly found that a *visible pedagogy* provided a strongly framed message about which university or course students should attend, and that a weakly framed *invisible pedagogy* was less effective for students from families who did not have the experience of higher education.

In other works, Jones (2013) and Shuker (2014) explore the way in which students are taught through personal statement writing, to signal an appropriate disposition to admissions tutors at their university destination. This literature is concerned with fair access to the elite university sector. Both studies make use of Bourdieusian conceptual tools such as *habitus* and *cultural capital* and explore how these align with pedagogies that orientate students towards various university destinations. Jones's (2013) findings, for example, point to the advantage that middle-class candidates have over working-class candidates

in being accepted into Oxbridge universities. This was found to be a consequence of the greater amounts of cultural and social capital that middle-class students had at their disposal. Middle-class students were taught to apply this to their personal statements in order to signal dispositions aligned with Oxbridge admissions tutors own dispositions (ibid.).

Of interest, Shuker's (2014) study looks at the effects of pedagogic processes on student university self-marketing practices. In this study, links were made between Bernstein's model of pedagogic discourse and Bourdieu and Passeron's conceptual tools of *habitus* and *cultural capital*. This was done by demonstrating how students' own embodied cultural resources often combined with the pedagogic code at each site with the effect of mediating student ability to *recognise* and *realise* the rules for applying to specific higher education institutions and courses (ibid.). The research also considers the way in which these factors intersect with both local sixth form and higher education markets, to effect the destination of prospective undergraduates.

Taken together, these works consider pedagogies of choice and decision making, and how these combine with pedagogic practices, class strategies, and their consequences for social class reproduction. In terms of the main focus of this thesis, theories of social reproduction such as these, offer a powerful critique of a system that privileges choice and decision making over equality of outcome. In view of my interest in the UCAS process and how it frames student decision making, these works offer some potential for informing this thesis. But the expectation is that pedagogy will always shut down alternate ways of thinking and therefore act as a mechanism of social reproduction. It therefore pays less attention to agency and the personal motivations of students,

assuming that thinking or acting 'otherwise' is a consequence of misrecognition and that this will lead to disadvantage.

2.7 The market value of a degree subject and student pedagogic identity

While this final body of work is underpinned by the same policy changes described in sections 2.1 and 2.2, its focus relates more specifically to the market as an organising principle, its implication for pedagogic practices and student pedagogic identities. It does this through introducing the Bernsteinian concept of *pedagogic identity* and the works of Bernsteinian scholars who have applied this empirically to the field of education.

Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) and Naidoo et al. (2011) refer to the consumerist turn in higher education. They posit that with consumerism and choice as key organising principles, the type of knowledge produced and taught will be dictated by economic concerns, such as industry-driven solutions or consumer-driven value-for-money concerns (Brady. 2015; Naidoo and Jamison, 2005; Naidoo et al., 2011).

It is assumed that the combination of fees and debt will shape the type of degree choices students make, as debt means that students may have to justify their studies in economic terms (Bullen et al., 2004; Callender and Jackson, 2008; Collini, 2010; Holmwood, 2013a; Naidoo et al., 2011; Patrick, 2013). One concern is that through their choices of degree, learners will become tied to economic goals and means/ends concerns (Patrick, 2013; Clark et al., 2015). Different academic disciplines are likely to become credited with different values as they are assumed to have greater value in the labour market. Incentivised by

choice and debt, it is thought that students will develop a value-for-money mentality.

Some have suggested that one possible consequence would be the development of an entitlement culture, whereby learning will be viewed as a commercial transaction in which success is seen as a right, or at least part of the terms and conditions that both parties enter into (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2010; Molesworth, 2009; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005. Works by Zindars (2010) and Whitty et al. (2015) refer to the implications of this for fair access and associated class-based inequalities. From this perspective a market-driven higher education system has created ever more forms of diversity and choice. With regards to access into elite institutions, forms of middle-class social and cultural capitals extend class-based advantages and disadvantages (ibid.).

Questions that ask about reordering the value of subject knowledge under these conditions make Bernstein's model of pedagogic discourse increasingly relevant. In chapter one I commented briefly on this conceptual framework, here I expand on this discussion further. In the 1990s, Bernstein (1996) produced a typology of *pedagogic identities* that are projected through pedagogic transmission of *classification and framing* and which has the potential to shape the identity of teachers and learners (Bernstein, 2000). Bernstein wrote that as knowledge discourses are re-ordered through pedagogic discourse, this has the effect of regulating forms of consciousness and the knower dispositions that learners develop over time. In Bernstein's view, until recently, there had been a synthesis between two faces of knowledge; the mundane, i.e. the material base of knowledge, with the immaterial, *the esoteric* (ibid., p. 29). He observed that

the line between these two classes of knowledge is relative to any given historical period (ibid.) and that until recently the synthesis between the two reflected liberal humanist values which incorporate an ethic of self-transcendence that help to connect the knower to knowledge (ibid., p. 86). Bernstein wrote that the UK's 1988 policy era brought about a '*new dislocation*' in which knowledge had become '*divorced from knowers*' (ibid., p. 86). Bernstein described these policy shifts as giving rise to dehumanising principles (Beck, 2002) because they projected instrumental goals which require a different form of pedagogic transmission and knowledge mode.

These are used, in effect, to regulate and manage change by creating a new basis for social relations. Bernstein's overall model of *pedagogic identity* relies on the distinction between four different pedagogic positions, each of which imply a time orientation because each position synthesises narratives from the past, present and future. Two of these use centralised (state) discourses that aim to bring about cultural, economic, and technical change while preserving elements of the past. This is done through selecting narrative features of the past and then re-ordering them by pedagogic discourse. The aim is to legitimise "*appropriate attitudes, dispositions and performances*" (ibid., p. 68) that are required to ensure the new political economic conditions succeed. By contrast, the remaining two decentred positions are encouraged to use local resources with the aim of generating divergence away from the state (this is a position that is aligned with neo-liberal thinking). The decentred market position fosters a market ethos and is said to orientate institutional and learner identities towards the promotion of labour market skills. Similarly, the therapeutic identity is

produced by autonomous means, and fosters non-specialised and flexible thinking (ibid., p. 68).

Crucially, the four pedagogic positions are ideal types but against a changing policy context, questions that ask about the re-ordering of knowledge have made Bernstein's conceptual tools increasingly pertinent. For example, some of the literature cited in this chapter considers how the State's influence over pedagogy and the curriculum has increased. Bernstein's work on pedagogic identities (2000) within this context has provided Bernsteinian scholars with the tools for exploring how these changes are possible (Beck, 2006). This had been applied to changing priorities of university courses and its impact on epistemic access for undergraduates (Brady, 2015), and its implications for curriculum change in terms of a growing emphasis on a new industry linked curriculum with a less stable knowledge base (Muller, 2009; Wheelahan, 2010).

Of particular relevance is Dovemark and Holm's (2017) study of the links between education markets and the institutional pedagogic identities that were adopted by Swedish upper secondary schools as they attempted to deal with market pressure. Their study attended to the ways in which schools promoted themselves through the interplay of local and central resources. In doing so, schools projected identities that aligned with Bernstein's two de-centred pedagogic positions. These signalled to prospective students, pedagogic identities that were concerned with the development of flexible selves, or the acquisition of skills required for specific areas of the labour market.

Bernsteinian scholars have also applied the idea of *pedagogic identity* to the regulation of consciousness and learner identity within classrooms (Iverson and

Duveen, 2006; McLean et al., 2017). In Ivinson and Duveen's (2006) study, the concepts of *classification and framing* were applied in order to investigate how specific pedagogic environments project ideological views about *who children are and what they ought to become* (ibid., p. 109). This draws on Bernstein's (ibid.) notion of the *imaginary subject*. Bernstein theorised that particular pedagogic environments produced forms of consciousness through the principles of *classification and framing* (these principles are outlined in chapter one and applied in chapter five). Bernstein used the term *imaginary* to express what happened to knowledge through the pedagogisation of knowledge. This is where a knowledge discourse is abstracted from its site of production to a pedagogic site. Here, Bernstein suggested that because ideology is always at play, knowledge that had been pedagogised was *imaginary*. Ivinson and Duveen (2006) later used these ideas to express what they had seen. In their study of classification and framing they argue that:

[it is] through the pedagogic process, children develop into the type of person who is legitimated by the particular form of pedagogic discourse in the classroom. (2006, p. 125)

Here, ideology is also at play because the pedagogic process expresses ideological views about *who children are and what they ought to become* (ibid., p. 109).

Others have applied these Bernsteinian concepts to undergraduate pedagogies (Crozier and Reay, 2011; McLean et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2017). Of particular relevance, McLean and her colleagues (ibid.) explored the pedagogic discourse that was used to deliver undergraduate Sociology in four different universities. The researchers were interested in learning about the type of *pedagogic*

framing that would engender a specialised disciplinary identity for undergraduates studying Sociology.

McLean et al. (2013a, 2013b) make use of the Bernsteinian concepts, *horizontal and vertical discourses* and the *discursive gap* in order to conceptualise the pedagogic process. In their analysis of what constitutes effective university pedagogy, teachers must be able to expose students to *vertical discourses* which are abstract, pedagogised theorisations of the world while at the same time making these discourses knowable and understandable to students (ibid.). This is made possible through drawing on *horizontal knowledge discourses* which are based on students' own common-sense knowledge about the world. It is through pedagogic transmission via *classification and framing* that this becomes possible (ibid.). If this is successful, for instance, throughout a student's learning career within higher education, they should be able to *recognise* and then *realise* what is required of them and they will begin to form a disciplinary identity in keeping with their degree specialism (ibid.). They found this gave students ways of making sense of the disciplinary culture and provided them with an understanding how it could be put to use in the world (ibid.).

In this sense, an *effective pedagogy* should provide students with opportunities to explore links between disciplinary content and its relationship with their lived experiences (McLean et al., 2013a). According to the authors there is a '*tricky tightrope to traverse between over- and under-specification of what is expected from students*' (2013b, p. 39). This study points to how, when used in combination, both strong and weak classification and framing can be used

effectively to support student acquisition of a specialised disciplinary identity (ibid.).

Hence this approach considers how effectively the two knowledge discourses, i.e. the specialised knowledge discourse (vertical) and students' translation of this into their own experience of the world (horizontal), are brought into relation through the pedagogic process. This highlights the need for pedagogic practices that allow students to explore the meaning of a disciplinary culture that can help make critical sense of the possibilities that lie ahead of them. In their study the researchers consider the most effective pedagogic practices are those that combined the languages of the everyday and mundane with languages of the sacred and theoretical (ibid.).

An interesting observation was that these practices were often tacit for many of the practitioners who practised this mode of pedagogy (ibid.). But by highlighting the potential of the *discursive gap* for student meaning making, and by attending to pedagogic practices that explicitly encourage this, the researchers hoped that this would influence undergraduate pedagogic practices more widely (ibid.).

Although different in focus, these studies serve as a reminder of how important it is to direct the research lens on issues over pedagogy and curriculum knowledge. It is against the context of Bernstein's body of work that my own questions about the possible links between UCAS as a pedagogic environment, the regulation of pedagogic identities, and student degree subject priorities arise.

Returning once more to Naidoo and Jamieson's (2005), their response to Bernstein's thinking had led them to hypothesise that market imperatives, that translate into means/ends thinking will shape what is considered by students to be a degree subject that is worth pursuing. They posit that degree subject knowledge could increasingly be cast in utilitarian terms and that this could have a corrosive effect on learning for students from less advantaged backgrounds (ibid.). Coming under increased economic pressure (through a combination of funding regimes and the imperatives set by the REF and TEF), less research-intensive universities will have little choice but to provide a curriculum that privileges workplace learning over intellectual skills (ibid.).

Although written about over a decade ago, given their assertions about the corrosive effects of a consumer culture on student decision making, Naidoo and Jamieson's (2005) contribution presents a useful framework for hypothesis testing. With regards to the sort of degree subject knowledge that students perceive to have value, it remains an open question as to whether students will ignore disciplinary boundaries and align with the policy discourse of means/ends or value-for-money priorities. These policy shifts may be premised on the construction of a higher education system that is driven by students' consumerist interests, but given there is nothing inevitable about policy discourse, we have yet to see whether these will be born out in the real world of student decision making.

2.8 Conclusions

The issues that this thesis addresses are set against the present policy context which emphasises the knowledge economy, and an expanded higher education

system to service it, and yet is characterised by credential inflation and tuition fees. Here I have considered how the literature voices concerns about the transformation of the university and its disciplinary culture under the impact of neo-liberalism. Looking beyond this, I have also considered what the academic literature says about the likely impact this could have for young people who are about to embark on their undergraduate studies. Specifically, I have referred to works that consider students' relationship to higher education as a site of disciplinary endeavour, the employability imperative, and the primacy it gives to *economic flourishing* (Kahn, 2017) and the pedagogic identities that could spring from these changes.

Most of this literature warns of the consequences of the utilitarian thinking that could come to dominate learners' degree subject choices. But researchers such as Stephenson and Clegg (2011) and McLean et al. (2017) also ask about the role of pedagogy in the orientations that students adopt as they embark on their undergraduate careers and how these shape the possibility of alternate ways of thinking and of fulfilling personal concerns and projects.

This thesis represents a response to a gap in the literature regarding how students are guided towards the decisions they make over their degree subjects. As stated in chapter one, a central concern for this thesis is to explore how school-based practices such as UCAS, signal the market value of degree subjects to 16–18 year-olds and how they respond to this. These are the questions that underpin chapters four, five and six.

In the next chapter I introduce the conceptual framework that I used while conducting the study. In addition, I discuss the decisions that were taken when designing and carrying out the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 introduction

This chapter discusses the research process, including my approach to the research methodology, research design, data collection and analysis that I used to document the UCAS process and answer my research questions. As outlined in chapter one, the main focus for the study is to document the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process, including its signalling of the market value of degree subjects to 16–18 year-olds and whether/how this affects their degree subject choices. In conducting this study the research questions are:

1. How do schools narrate their role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students within the current policy context?
2. From the perspective of the school, how is the UCAS process practised and how does it position students as degree choosers?
3. From the perspective of the students, how do they position themselves in their talk about disciplinary fields and the degree subjects they are choosing, what are the criteria they bring to navigate their choices?
4. What can these findings tell us about the sort of knowledge terrain that students are orienting towards as they make their degree subject choices?

The research was comprised of three phases.

- **Phase one** involved a pilot study at a single sixth form in a secondary school⁷. This allowed me to map out the UCAS process, gain an understanding of how to document that process and begin to identify salient themes and concepts. Over the course of the pilot I designed and

⁷ A large proportion of secondary schools in England now have sixth forms. Students can choose between attending a school sixth form and attending a sixth form college, which operates independently.

tested interview schedules for use with staff and students and other data collection tools.

- **Phase two** involved extending the sample frame to two further sixth form sites, with contrasting catchments and histories. Using the full range of research tools I was able to explore the influence of school culture and student composition on the UCAS process as it was experienced by the students at each site.
- In **Phase 3** I analysed the data using thematic and narrative analysis and principles for category-building developed by using Bernstein's concept of languages of description.

The first part of the chapter (section 3.1) discusses my methodological approach, including the position I have taken regarding ontological questions about structure and agency. Further on in the chapter (section 3.2), I refer to sampling decisions, and outline how I proceeded to work with a pilot institution for the first stage and why and how this was later extended to the two additional sites in the later analytic stages of the research. This section also includes the details of how I sampled my participants, and refers to issues of access and research ethics. In the following section of the chapter (section 3.3) I refer to details of the research design; this includes my approach to the field work as well as an outline of the data collection methods that I used. The final sections are dedicated to issues of coding and analysis (section 3.4) and category building (section 3.5).

3.1 Methodological approach

In this section I discuss my methodology, including where it is located and what it implies about the relations between theory and method and what it assumes about macro and micro processes.

3.1.1 A qualitative lens

The methodological approach was primarily influenced by the research problem: the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process, how this differently signals the market value of degree subject knowledge to 16–18 year-olds, whether and how this affects degree subject choice. As this research sought to explore processes, practices, explanations, meanings and interactions, a qualitative lens was considered the most suitable for both the purposes of data collection and its analysis. As Holliday (2015) states, it is through a qualitative lens that the researcher can gain access to yet-to-be-known phenomena, such as meanings, strategies and salient themes, all of which are important for the focus of this study.

3.1.2 Inductive logic

As outlined in chapter two, studies that focus on undergraduate degree choice often use this as a measure of social mobility, and make use of quantitative tools (see, for example, Davies et al., 2013). As quantitative researchers select their variables in advance, and deploy deductive reasoning, these studies may be more useful for theory testing rather than theory development. The research principles guiding my own work followed an inductive logic which was contingent upon the idea of theory building rather than testing. It is for this reason that the details of the design in its early stages were emergent and

evolving, allowing the research to be conducted in an exploratory mode. As suggested by Ensor and Hoadley (2004), inductive approaches are often associated with exploratory small-scale studies, and an attempt on the part of the researcher to capture the inner logic of the situation under investigation. This in my case was the UCAS process in an initial, pilot sixth form institution.

3.1.3 Ontological position

The absence of a theory of UCAS, its pedagogic practices, and normative understandings of the way students consider their degree subject choices (section 2.4), suggested that there was a need for further conceptual understandings of how these phenomenon work together. This required both an account of UCAS as a potential *pedagogic space* and the way in which the agency of 16–18 year olds could be conceptualised. This project explored the UCAS process at three different sixth form institutions. These were approached as *multi-dialogic spaces* (Trowler, 2001), with students operating as *reflexive agents* (Archer, 2003, 2007.) within these spaces. This required a theoretical frame that was capable of understanding the tensions between structure and agency. Archer (2003, 2007) and Bernstein (2000) have provided sociological theories that make it possible to study structure and agency as both discrete and autonomous phenomenon, yet at the same time recognising the interdependent character of their relationship. For example, Bernstein offers a dynamic theoretical account of how knowledge and pedagogy interact and how these are mediated via the *discursive gap* to produce both enabling and constraining effects for learners. There are some parallels to be drawn between this and an Archerian account of structure and agency. Archer (2003, 2007) proposes a structure and agency dualism that allows for agential power for

forming individual personal projects, which is mediated by the *reflexive inner conversation*, but also realised by the enabling and constraining power of structures (ibid.). As presented earlier, Bernstein's methodology and theoretical frame provides the conceptual underpinnings for much of this thesis (see chapters one and two). But while Bernstein's work is central to the analysis of pedagogic phenomenon and discursive structures, it does not fully conceptualise agential engagement with phenomenon. Archer's social realist account of human reflexivity (as discussed in chapters two and seven), offers an analytic model that can be used to operationalise the dynamic potential of elements of Bernstein's conceptual frame including the *discursive gap*. Thus, both of these theoretical models have helped to inform my own approach to wider ontological questions about structure and agency, and specifically have enabled me to recognise in my own study, the mediating presence of reflexivity as well as the enabling and constraining effects of structures.

3.2 Sampling

This section addresses the way in which I sampled the pilot site in order to document the UCAS process and address my research questions.

3.2.1 Insider research

I have taken the UCAS process as a lens for investigating the way that degree subject choices are made by a group of 16–18 year olds. In the first place this meant studying UCAS within the setting of my own sixth form institution. I have referred to this as its *pedagogic space*, which conceptualises the space that is invoked by the UCAS process. The space is partially characterised by the institutional narrative, which brings its own set of concerns and pedagogic

inputs to the process; it is this that comes to define how the space gets used while preparing students to apply for their varying degree courses. Other narratives are brought into the space by students who draw on additional resources. The *pedagogic space* is therefore conceptualised as a dynamic one.

The principles guiding this work follow an inductive logic that calls for a theoretical sample. As Creswell and Poth (2013) observe, this can begin with a single homogeneous group. Later, as categories emerge the researcher will then select a more varied sample (ibid.). These were, therefore, the principles that I followed in phase 1 of the research. The focus on a single site in the pilot stage was useful for gathering both contextual information about the site and gaining insights into various aspects of the UCAS process. These would later inform my understanding of the differences that underlay the logic of UCAS at each additional site further on in the analysis.

In the pilot stage, I took advantage of my own school setting as this gave me immediate access. The exploratory nature of the pilot stage called for flexibility in data gathering. But once collected and analysed, the data gave me a principled way of refining an interview schedule that I could later take to students and staff at two additional sites. I outline how these additional sites were sampled below. During the pilot phase I was able to draw on insider knowledge at my own schools' sixth form to map out the UCAS process, and its constituent parts.

As stated by Perryman (2013), insider-research can provide a unique opportunity with regards to immediate access for viewing school practices. Familiarity can aid the researcher regarding where to look, which might have been difficult to achieve in a site that I was less familiar with. I already knew, for example, that my own school was categorised as a school with higher than average deprivation indicators. This level of detail would provide insights into the logic of its institutional culture, how sixth form staff thought about the students that they served, who they imagined their sixth form students to be, as well as the aspirations they had for this group of 16–18 year olds, as reflected by its school mission.

I was already aware that students at my school's sixth form were formally inducted into learning how to apply to university. Because I was positioned on the inside, I was able to track quickly through this. For this research I sampled the calendar of UCAS events which spanned a two-year period (see section 5.1). From this I established that 'doing UCAS' could indeed be recognised as a marked-out set of events that occupied a clearly bounded space within the school calendar. These events included an introductory assembly, an open evening for advice giving to parents (various university department representatives were invited to this), a personal statement writing workshop, a UCAS website advice session, followed by weekly group tutorial sessions. In addition to this, I sampled a single observation of a UCAS workshop delivered to students by outside facilitators (see vignette 1 in chapter one), and selected tutorial sessions, where students were given the opportunity to explore

numerous course options using both UCAS, and university web sites (see, for example, vignette 3, section 1.6).

I then followed this up by interviewing staff and a group of 16–18 year old students (see appendices for interview schedules and section 3.3 for details of how these were conducted). The aim of the staff interviews was to gain insights into the *institutional narrative* and therefore allow me to attend to the inner logic that seemed to drive these events in this sixth form. They also provided me with additional contextual information about the characteristics of the setting within which UCAS was practised and that students were situated within.

I had speculated that this had the potential to combine with the UCAS process and produce the features of a site-specific *UCAS pedagogy*. I considered it likely that this could signal the value of degree subjects and post-18 choices to these students differently in different settings (see chapter five for a discussion of this). Hence, it was through talking to key staff that I was able to identify salient themes that helped shape the focus for the rest of this study. I now outline how staff and students were sampled.

3.2.2 Staff Selection: pilot stage

A total of three staff members were selected for interview, here the main criteria for selection was that they played a key strategic role in the sixth form and they were also directly involved in implementing UCAS and guiding students through the university application process as a whole. The rationale was to generate a large amount of contextual knowledge about the site. As an insider researcher I had already approached three key members of staff that were known to me. I

provided them with a brief, written summary of my research interests and they verbally agreed to being interviewed by me. The sample included the deputy head, the head of sixth form and the sixth form mentor. In this sense the sample was both purposive and opportunistic. In all three instances the interviews took place in their own office and work spaces.

3.2.3 Student Selection: the pilot stage

The students that I sampled were generated from a self-selecting, volunteer sample. Ease of access was helped by my position within the school which meant I was able to advertise for volunteers using the notice board in the student common room. As most students recognised me by sight or knew me as a teacher, volunteers were able to approach me in order to set a time and day for the interview. The school has a conference room which I booked for the interviews. I chose this as a non-teaching space that was both private and neutral.

I believed that identifying a constant, such as ability range, would help me when comparing students across the sample (later this proved invaluable for comparison with students from the two additional sites). Hence, in my choice of interviewees, I took account of where students were positioned in school in terms of the likelihood of going on to university. This information was supplied by students during the initial interview stage. Another aspect of the selection criteria was that the sample should have a gender mix of both male and female students. In order to achieve maximum variation I also attempted to select from a widest possible range of student degree subject preferences. I initially

sampled 13 students in year 12,⁸ but due to the selection criteria I had set this was eventually reduced to 7. Hence, my selection of students was both opportunistic in the sense that I was able to take advantage of my familiarity with the school and students, but it was also purposive in the sense that I had planned for both a constant, and maximum variation within this single site.

The selection process did not include sampling students on the basis of their background. I was already aware of the school's high deprivation index and that the student body were mostly represented by those whose parents had little or no experience of the higher education sector. An additional characteristic for this group was that most had enrolled in the Aimhigher schemes offered by various universities. While I did collect some data on parental experience of higher education through the course of the interviews, I focussed less on developing a robust measure of family background and focussed more on the institutional setting. I speculated that direct questions on parental background would have changed the nature and effectiveness of the interview approach that I had opted for. As I explain below (section 3.3), this took the form of a 'friendly conversation' using a mix of open ended questions with follow up prompts.

3.2.4 Rational for sampling and selection of additional sixth forms

It wasn't until I had begun to generate some of the codes that eventually formed the basis of my analytic categories that I understood where it was that I needed to focus the next stage of the research process. From the pilot stage, I had noticed that personal statement writing formed a significant part of the

⁸ The term *sixth form* describes the school years numbered 12 and 13, this numbering system was introduced in 1990-91 in England and Wales, from being called the *Lower Sixth* (L6) and *Upper Sixth* (U6).

deliberative process for students. Because the research endeavour was to attend to where the messages were being relayed to students about the value of various degree subjects, I was drawn to the significance of how students were being taught to judge and evaluate what should go into their personal statement.⁹ Jones (2013) describes a personal statement as a non-academic indicator or a free-response essay, which forms a significant part of the university application process. In addition Brown (2004) describes learning to write the personal statement as a form of disciplinary socialisation, where students are inducted into the disciplinary culture of different fields of study.

One of the salient themes emerging from this first data set was that staff had site-specific concerns about the outcomes they sought from the UCAS process and how it featured in the wider life of the institution. As I had speculated that these could have a significant bearing on how UCAS was implemented, my aim in Phase 2 was to extend the sample in order to explore this further. This meant including a more heterogeneous sub-sample of students achieved by using contrasting sites with different social class catchments. Table 3.1 summarises the final selection of sites and student numbers at each site that were interviewed in both stages of the interview process.

⁹ According to Jones 2013, these are also termed 'admissions essay', 'Autobiographical letter' 'application essay' and 'statement of purpose letter'

Table 3.1: Summary of final sample selection and number of interviews at each site

Site	Number of student Participants	Staff participants
Central	7 2 boys 5 girls	Deputy head Head of sixth form Sixth form mentor
Pasteur	6 2 boys 4 girls	Deputy head Head of upper sixth (year 13) Head of lower sixth (year 12)
Castle	6 2 boys 4 girls	Head of sixth form UCAS coordinator
Total number	19	8

3.2.5 Sampling additional sites

Rather than being a neutral, informal process, I had speculated that UCAS would be implemented differently depending upon the context within which it was being delivered. Therefore, characterising the *institutional narrative* at each locale would provide an important lens into the different values and logics at play. I had theorised that this could influence the UCAS process with the potential to differently signal the value of disciplinary fields and degree subjects to students.

My selection of additional sites was both opportunistic, in the sense that I was able to take advantage of opportunities that arose and contacts I had made while engaging in research at my initial site, but also purposive, in the sense that they offered contrasting cases with which to extend the student sample. Initially gaining access involved attending a cross-borough sixth form network meeting. As this was held during school hours, approval to attend this meeting was sought via application form from the head teacher at the school where I work. At the meeting I introduced myself and presented an outline of my research to those present and invited them to take part in my study.

I then formed a list of possible alternative sites, which were shortlisted down to four sixth forms based on the following criteria: 1) ease of access, 2) staff willing and able to support practicalities of student interviews, 3) identifying those that were not 'typical' but that instead provided me with a contrasting sample. In terms of numbers, Yin (2009) suggests that a multi-site study should hold no more than four or five sites, and Creswell and Poth (2013) state that with anything beyond this, there is a danger of diluting the level of detail. As I was not attempting to achieve statistical generalisability, I wanted to keep the number of sites to a minimum. Hence, I looked for two additional sites that would provide the necessary variation. I therefore added Pasteur and then later added Castle to my selection of sixth form institutions (see chapter four for details of these sites).

Selection was followed up with a more formal introductory email which I sent to head teachers of the sixth forms who had indicated they would be interested. Once approved officially, the details of my visits were organised directly with members of the sixth form teams. Several potential visit dates were identified which corresponded with each data collection phase as indicated in table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Timeline for data collection indicating the timings of the pilot study, stage 1 and stage 2 interviews (Jan-July students are in year 12; Sept–Feb students are in year 13)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Central	Pilot	Pilot	Pilot			S1					S2		
Pasteur							S1					S2	
Castle									S1				S2

3.2.6 Selection of staff at additional sites

Selection decisions regarding members of staff were formed opportunistically on the basis that I had come into contact with senior staff members who were directly involved in running their sixth form and who had knowledge of the students. I selected three key members of staff at each site; these included deputy heads and heads of sixth form. In addition, at two of the sites I interviewed additional staff members who were directly involved with supporting and mentoring students through the UCAS process (see table 3.1 for a summary of data collection details).

3.2.7 Student Sub-samples: extending the variation by sampling family experience of higher education

In order to achieve maximum variation, I sampled two additional schools with contrasting student catchments; these had different degrees of family experience of higher education. Pasteur's geographical location and its higher league table ranking in the field of sixth form education offered some potential to extend the variation of the sample. However, once analysed, the interview data suggested that some of the young people in this sample came from families who had little experience of the higher education sector. This was reflected in my sub-sample of students, where two out of six parents were not graduates. Staff interviews also helped to confirm this. I therefore speculated that they may have been less confident, in helping to steer their children through to higher education. In order to achieve maximum variation I cast the net even wider to a third sample at Castle, where a large proportion of students were from the selective independent sector. These parents had a much greater

experience of the elite university system and therefore helped to extend the variation of my sample.

To summarise, the sample across the three sites provided me with three distinct catchments with students from family backgrounds with varying degrees of experience of higher education. These were comprised of a mix of parents' own educational and higher education experiences. This included students whose parents had little or no experience of higher education (Central), parents whose experience and confidence with dealing with higher education choice were more varied (Pasteur), and a sample that included students who were from the selective independent sector and whose parents had experience of higher education within the elite university sector (Castle).

I continued to use the original selection criterion of student's ability range used during the pilot stage, and as with the pilot site, selection was based on a volunteer, self-selecting sample. However, I relied more heavily on staff informants at the two additional sites; the students were not previously known to me, therefore I left student selection up to staff. Their selection was based on the main criteria that I had stipulated, which was a gender mix and those students who they would consider to be at the top of the school's ability range.

3.2.8 Sample Size and number of interviews

Creswell and Poth (2013) observe that qualitative studies can vary from one or two individuals to a much larger sample. They also advise that when using ethnographic tools the emphasis is less on sample size and more on collecting

as much detail as possible from varied sources and cultural artefacts. In my case, these included a range of sources such as student personal statements, school website information, sixth form prospectuses, and field notes recording my impression of each site made from my own informal observations. A total of 19 student participants took part in the study. Because I planned for a two staged interview process, a total of 38 student interviews were conducted altogether (see table 3.2 for a summary of this timetable).

3.2.9 Access to students and research ethics

As a teacher working in secondary and sixth form education, I currently hold an up-to-date DBS certificate (enhanced criminal record certificate). I therefore did not need to seek official approval to work with young people. Ease of access at Central was helped by my position within the school; most students recognised me by sight or knew me as a teacher (on insider status, see section 3.2.1). As with my participants at the other two sites, I provided them with a written outline of my research intentions, with details of the interview process and examples of the types of questions I would ask. Although sampling was purposeful, I made it clear to students that they would be volunteers and that they were not obliged to take part if they preferred not to. At all three sites, I found that students welcomed the opportunity to talk about their higher education decisions and their personal statements. However, I am aware that issues of anonymity and confidentiality are always an issue; these seemed to be amplified at Central due to my position of insider researcher. I was also mindful of the fact that some of the topics discussed could be sensitive for some of the students. Students were told that they did not have to discuss things that they did not want to and that

they could stop the interview at any time if they wanted to. Access to students at Pasteur and Castle depended upon staff informants who had agreed to mediate the process by asking for volunteers from the sixth form body. In each case, I was aware of the need for confidentiality and anonymity; I have used pseudonyms for each school and for the individual students and staff who were interviewed.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was sought during the early stages of proposal writing. Once details were supplied by me this was handled internally by staff associated with my department at my institution. My supervisor notified me of approval during a subsequent annual review meeting.

3.3 Research Design and Methods

In this section I discuss the details of my approach to interviewing, the design features of the interviews and my rationale for the decisions that were taken.

My fieldwork comprised of two stages, each with a distinct focus. In the initial fieldwork stage my main undertaking was to gather as much contextual detail as possible from staff and to listen to the language that staff and students used to talk about the UCAS process and the degree subjects that students would apply for. For the second fieldwork stage I planned to use students' personal statements as a device to encourage them to talk about the subjects they had chosen, and their reasons for rejecting others. But from talking to staff and students in my pilot institution, I had gained additional insights into the guidance

students received about producing these. I became interested in knowing how they were being taught to frame their interest in the subjects they were thinking about studying, and whether this had any bearing on their choice of degree subject (see appendices 1–3 for interview schedules).

Throughout the research I adopted what Green and Bloome (2015) describe as the position of *ethnographer in education* (ibid., p. 191), which meant that my research stance was informed by an ethnographic perspective. In this sense, my participants' ways of seeing and their institutional practices and meanings were at the centre of my enquiry. In the initial stages, this meant I conducted an ethnographic interview, which is described by Spradely (1979) and Skinner (2012) as allowing the participant's perspective and language to emerge, thus enabling the details from the interviews to be expressed in the interviewees own terms. This worked well with the inductive logic that had guided my approach to the research design. Carrying out the interviews I used a semi-structured interview schedule for which a set of open questions with follow up prompts had been prepared (see appendices 1 and 2). These were conducted as *Friendly conversations* (Skinner, 2012); it was my participants' talk as well as my questions and prompts that guided the interview. The rationale behind this was to encourage participants to talk in the way they would to each other (ibid.). These conversations were tape recorded and then later transcribed and typed up as text. I will now explain how I addressed these insights in my implementation of staff and student interviews.

3.3.1 Staff interviews

These were designed to encourage open dialogue between myself and the member of staff. The interview lasted on average for 60 minutes, although some ran on a little longer depending on how forthcoming my participants were. The first question was designed to make staff feel at ease: this asked them to talk me through their role within the sixth form. Because of the inductive approach I had taken, I wanted to invite them to tell me about the things that mattered to them, therefore the questions were deliberately designed to be open. Each interview had a common structure, but the open nature of the questions meant that each interview was unique.

These interviews allowed me to map out the UCAS process, they gave me insights into the wider institutional concerns of the sixth form, and how this helped to inform the inner logic that underpinned the UCAS process and that gave shape to the specialised language that was used to induct students into how to apply to university and what to apply for.

3.3.2 Student Interviews

Interviews with students: stage 1

The aim of this interview was to provide a mix of factual information about the students and their backgrounds as well as providing me with insights into the deliberative process. These lasted between 20–50 minutes depending upon how responsive the young people were and the level of discussion that was generated. I used an interview schedule that contained nine open-ended questions; for reasons of reliability these were repeated and asked in the same way with each student across the three data sets. The interview design allowed

for flexibility, this could at times include further prompts or probing questions in order to elicit a more detailed account. The ethnographic stance I had adopted (see above) meant that prompting and probing questions involved repeating key points back to my participants, sometimes summarising what they told me. Following Spradly (1979), these were conducted in friendly conversational style where often I was as much guided by their answers as they were by my questions.

My question schedule began with what I considered to be a warm-up question, which asked students to tell me a little about *what they were doing at the moment*. This was designed to allow students to choose their own point of entry into the conversation. All questions, like this one, were purposely designed to be open so that students could interpret the question in any way they wanted. The main endeavour was to encourage my participants to talk as openly as possible about themselves, rather than to answer specific questions about their degree subject priorities or what they thought about the value of a disciplinary field. For this reason, the questions were designed to encourage lengthy dialogue rather than specific answers to questions.

Interviews with students: stage 2

These took place later the following year (see table 3.2 for the timetable for data collection), it was due to the early work conducted in my pilot intuition that I had identified this as a time when personal statements would be written. The aim of this second stage interview was to get students to talk more specifically about the UCAS process itself, what they felt they needed to project about themselves

as potential candidates, and to confirm or follow up any issues that had come to the fore from the stage 1 interviews. I also asked students to bring along their personal statement, which provided a focus for the interview. The questions were designed to encourage dialogue around the issue of personal statement writing and degree subject choices. Similar to the interviews conducted in the first stage of the fieldwork, I started with a warm-up question, i.e. *'how do you feel now that your personal statement has been written'*? This question was designed to open up the conversation and to help the interviewees feel at ease. I wanted to avoid making students feel that I was there to judge the quality of their personal statement. I therefore asked students to select their favourite part of the personal statement. In most instances they elected to read it out loud to me; I followed this up with a question about why they had chosen this particular part, or whether they felt under pressure to appear in a particular way. Again, the questions were deliberately open enough so as to allow students to tell me about the things that mattered to them, rather than the things that might matter to me. For this reason, these interviews took longer than the stage 1 interviews; they lasted, on average, for 40–60 minutes.

3.3.3 Personal statement: documentary analysis

As stated above, I planned to use the personal statements as a lens through which to view how UCAS is pedagogised and how students respond to the messaging that was present within the UCAS process. Students were asked to bring along their personal statements to the interview. In addition, where students had given me their personal statements to keep I was able to read them in their entirety. These were coded in much the same way as the interview transcripts which deployed a system of thematic and narrative approaches to

coding. This allowed me to disentangle the different voices that were present within the text. I have described this process in much greater detail in section 3.4 and have provided a worked example of this analysis in appendix 4. It was the analysis of this data that formed the basis of my analytic categories of both the UCAS process and of the terms upon which this group of 16–18 year old participants deliberated over the value of the degree subjects that they were considering. Table 3.3 provides a summary of all data that was collected and the main research collection stages.

Table 3.3: Summary of data collected and the main research collection stages

Site	Staff interviews	stage 1 student interviews	stage 2 student interviews	Documents (Personal Statements)
Central	Semi-structured interviews with three members of staff.	7 semi-structured interviews	7 semi-structured interviews with personal statements	7 personal statements
Pasteur	Semi-structured interviews with three members of staff.	6 semi-structured interviews	6 semi-structured interviews with personal statements	6 personal statements
Castle	Semi-structured interviews with two members of staff	6 semi-structured interviews	6 semi-structured interviews with personal statements	6 personal statements
Total number	8	19	19	19

3.4 Coding and Analysis

3.4.1 Coding of data

As an inductive researcher I opted for manual coding rather than making use of software such as NVivo. This was because rather than seeing the coding as a technical exercise, I believed it to be an integral part of the analytic process

(Basit, 2003). Hence, this stage of the analysis presented itself as an opportunity to engage directly with the data close up and to view UCAS as my participants viewed it. The codes that finally emerged were therefore part of this dynamic process, and were fundamental to the inductive approach I had adopted. In the initial stages, the coding was central to guiding the next stage of the research, which involved sampling staff and students beyond the initial sixth form site (see chapters five and six).

The main undertaking was to map out the *pedagogic space*, which included the UCAS process, to listen to the way staff narrated their role and responsibilities towards their students, and to document how students responded to this. Because I had followed an inductive logic, this meant that the endeavour was to understand the constituent parts of the process as they were expressed and understood by my participants. To do this I used thematic coding which I devised through using a line-by-line format. This involved transcribing each taped transcript, and then paying attention to the language that my participants used, identifying repeated themes, salient metaphors and motifs throughout the sections of text contained within each interview transcript. The results were entered onto a table where common themes were clustered and colour coded, thus allowing me to produce the language used by students and staff to describe the UCAS process; this included learning how to write the personal statements. The codes that emerged through the thematic approach were useful in the sense that they helped to produce a general account of how UCAS was implemented. I later used this to map how UCAS worked across the additional two selected sites (see section 3.2 for details of these).

3.4.2 Narrative analysis

Throughout the transcribing process during the pilot stage of the research, it became apparent that the transcripts contained small fragments of story or mini-narrative as well as a number of digressions and asides which were difficult to code using the thematic system of coding that I had originally devised. I found that it was the digressions and mini-stories that my participants told that enabled me to identify the things that I had not anticipated I would find. I therefore turned to a narrative approach as an additional way of gaining insights into the way that my respondents organised their experiences, and how they applied meanings to UCAS events, while deploying other narratives from their everyday lives.

While narrative analysis takes as the object of analysis the story told itself, scholars in the field have applied it in varying ways. Misia Landau (1986), for instance, describes two competing approaches to thinking about narrative. The first approaches narrative as a closed system of meaning where the aim is to identify general structural principles of the story. This approach assumes that there are a number of culturally informed roles that are repeatedly played out in the story that is being told. This is seen when a structuralist approach is applied to texts such as folk tales and myths. These seek to establish cultural themes and therefore look for similarities or identify cultural patterns across texts (ibid.). An alternative approach is to see the story as an open system where, in the spirit of hermeneutics, the emphasis is on the reader rather than on the text and therefore the focus is on how the reader constructs meaning. Thus the assumption is that there can be many ways of reading and interpreting a story

(ibid.). In taking this approach to first person accounts or personal narrative, the researcher is directed to the way the teller reads meaning into their experience against dominant cultural narratives and themes. But these provide much more than individual or relative accounts of experience, as noted by Riessman (1993 in Huberman and Miles, 2011); by paying attention to personal narrative it is possible to see how “*private constructions typically mesh with a community of life stories, “deep structures” about the nature of life itself*” (ibid., p. 4). Thus, for Riessman (ibid.), because personal narrative is a primary way we make sense of experience, paying attention to it can be fruitful because it opens up ways of understanding how respondents make sense of cultural phenomenon such as life stage transitions.

Riessman’s (ibid.) observations point to the prospect of bringing structural and hermeneutic approaches to narrative analysis into relation with each other. For instance, with respect to my own research I found that narrative opened up the possibility of listening to my respondents’ lived experience while at the same time allowing me to attend to local and familial strategies and experiences that were also being voiced. Through listening to their stories I gained the impression that they were responding to the strategies that were contained in other people’s narratives, which they then mobilised in the process of deciding on their own course of action or on what might be at stake for them.

In her account of thinking about narrative in this way, Janet Maybin (1994) draws on Bakhtin’s dialogic model in order to explore the significance of this type of talk for meaning making and conceptual understanding. Of specific

interest to these scholars was the inner dialogue that learners constructed from other people's spoken dialogue, and how these various discourses contribute to children's conceptual development. Hence, this understanding of the significance of narrative has had an important bearing on the way I approached both the transcripts and the personal statements in the early stages of the analytic process.

This approach also combined well with the inductive logic that underpinned my main research stance. Specifically, in the latter stages of analysis I found that due to its attention to language, incorporating a narrative approach had enhanced my developing language of description (see section 3.5). In addition to picking out the parts of dialogue that told mini-stories, I began to read the transcripts in their entirety as a single narrative, thus casting my respondent as narrator and where possible, taking note of the other voices they cast within the story told, and the direction that the plot had taken. This meant reading to see whether the narrative emphasised a particular sequence of events and paying attention to where my participants placed themselves in relation to the audience (me) as well as other voices that were drawn into the plot.

For example, in approaching a relatively long narrative I decided to follow Catherine Riessman's (1993) advice; she suggests that it can be useful to re-write the story by breaking it down and naming each sequence (ibid.). I broke down each long narrative sequence as follows:

1. ***The main story being told***
2. ***This is followed by some orienting detail***

3. *The complicating action*

4. *The resolution*

(I have included a worked example of this approach in appendix 4).

3.5 Category Building

In this section I explain how I developed my analytic categories; this was informed by Basil Bernstein's method of category building, which he referred to as building 'languages of description' (Bernstein, 1996, 2000).

3.5.1 Bernstein's language of description

An external language of description:

My decision to use this method of category building arose from my own inductive way of working, as well as my interest in Bernstein's conceptual and theoretical work. At its simplest, this can be described as a method which is deployed to guide analysis as well as to build conceptual understandings of the empirical world. The value of this is that it allows the researcher to map out a range of potential outcomes, which in doing so opens up the empirical to further investigation by revealing what else might be possible. It also offers an alternative to working deductively from the top down and fitting observed practice into an already established theoretical model. Instead, it allows the researcher to establish a theoretical account of empirical data that is first of all built from the bottom up using a language devised by the researcher to describe the participants' own accounts of their practices. This can, in the first instance, be likened to producing a working model of the tacit inner workings of a culture and is often strongly associated with research that uses ethnographic approaches, principles and tools (Bernstein, 1996; Moss, 2003).

In the ethnographic tradition this is done through discovering and then mapping out cultural themes and principles and accounting for social phenomenon in the way that participants have described them. As Bernstein stated:

In the classical ethnographic position the researcher has first to learn the language of the group or society and know the rules of its contextual use. From here on, the researcher is developing reading the rules (recognitions and realisation) to grasp how members construct their various texts or manage their contexts. The researcher here is modelling the member's recognition and realisation rules, or strategies of practice that these rules constrain. (2000, p. 135)

Bernstein referred to this first part of the process as developing an external language that he also termed *L2*. This is based on the researcher's own language of description. This involves recording participants' accounts and then re-describing them in a principled way. This process turns the tacit, internalised workings of everyday practices into an explicit, externalised working model. While the research focus might, in the first instance, be theoretically informed, providing a starting point for where to look, Bernstein stresses that the more abstract level of theory needs to be loosely articulated with the empirical at the early stages of the research (Bernstein, 2000). Moore and Muller (2002) have likened this to a conversation where the theoretical and empirical speak to one another. Theory and empirical data are therefore brought into a dialectical relationship with each other so that there is a tension between the two where neither the theory nor the researcher's empirical understandings take a leading role. This recognises the significance of both, in the sense that there cannot be one without the other. As noted by Bernstein:

The processes of constructing description are not discrete in time. They are going on together, Description 2 is rarely free of description 1... but I

believe we must struggle to keep L2 as free as possible.... (Bernstein, 2000, p. 135)

Thus researchers will bring some understanding of phenomenon they are investigating, but should balance their analytic endeavours between the data and their developing theory. Conversely, while there is a need to spend periods of time absorbed in the data in order to grasp what the dynamics are in their participant's world, there is a point where the researcher must pull back from the data so as to allow the emerging theoretical model to speak back to it.

Internal language of description:

Bernstein (2000) referred to the evolving theoretical model as an *internal language* because it is the researcher's language spoken from inside of the theoretical account that they have constructed through their encounter with the empirical. Bernstein argued that the empirical world can only be grasped through theory, and that our interpretations of the empirical world are always subject to our own understandings, beliefs and values, hence *ideology is always at play* (ibid.). In pulling back from the data and the external language, the researcher's next job is to construct what Bernstein refers to as a *robust grammar* (ibid.). This concerns the production of a system of coherent concepts, which requires taking the external language to a more abstract level. Bernstein's use of the term *grammar* is not meant to imply a set of fixed rules; instead, it refers to something much more dynamic and complex than this. Bernstein takes the notion of *grammar* from linguistics, where a language contains rules that can be used to generate many possible ways of speaking. Even when they conform to the grammatical rules, there are many new sentences that may be spoken that might not have been heard before. For

Bernstein (2000), a *grammar* is not fully transparent to those who use it. In practice this means the researcher must construct the *grammar* from the language that is used by participants. It must therefore be *capable of going beyond the description given by its members* (ibid., p. 135). This is why the internal and external languages must be used to inform each other.

Moss (2007) explains that this means using the external language to help steer the researcher to the *inner logic* that underlies the various enactments and observed behaviours described within the researcher's account (ibid., p. 68). The notion of the *discursive gap* was used by Bernstein to conceptualise how the two languages work together in this way. Hence this concept can be applied to the pedagogising of knowledge via the pedagogic device, and what Bernstein refers to as the process of recontextualisation (Bernstein, 2000). Here a knowledge discourse is abstracted from its site of production to a pedagogic site, where pedagogised knowledge is produced. It is at the interface between these two sites that ideology comes into play and the *discursive gap* forms (Moore and Muller, 2002; see also chapter six for a more detailed account). The concept of the *discursive gap* is thus associated with the researcher's endeavours of building a language of description (ibid.). Moore and Muller (2002) see the *discursive gap* as lying between the two languages, namely those of enactment and of explanation; although Ensor and Hoadley (2004) point out that there is some disagreement over this. Their own interpretation is closer to that of Dowling (1998), who sees it as lying between the tacit empirical world and the researcher's model, which is closer to the way it is applied in works that refer to the pedagogising of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). But from

either perspective, of significance is that it is a conceptual space where the conversation between data and theory takes place and where data can help to change or act upon theory. For Ensor and Hoadley (2004), the significance of this is that it avoids the sort of *circularity* seen in deductive research, thus extending the model beyond the conceptualisations provided by 'big theory' that also bring both macro and micro levels into relationship without necessarily conflating one into the other.

3.5.2 Criticisms

Bernstein's language of description has become increasingly popular across the intellectual fields of Education and the Sociology of Education (see, for instance, Ivinson and Duveen, 2006; Moss, 2003, 2007; Moore and Muller, 2002), and within critical and social realist paradigms (see, for instance, Young, 2007; Wheelahan, 2010; McLean et al., 2017). Despite this popularity, Bernstein is often charged with not following the convention of making explicit where his theories can be ideologically or epistemologically located (Edwards, 2002). Moore and Muller (2002), who are committed to a social realist position, have suggested that both Bernstein's languages of description and sociological realism in the *Durkheimian mode* describe a similar ontological model (ibid., p. 635). This stands apart from positivism and constructivism, offering a multi-layered ontology which admits that the world is unknown, and yet considers that through theory-building the world has the potential to become knowable to us.¹⁰

¹⁰ I have described how I have used both Bernstein and the social realism espoused by Margret Archer to inform my own ontological position in section 3.1.

Bernstein (2000) was, however, at pains to avoid an engagement with epistemological or ontological debates of this nature, dismissing them as “*epistemological botany*” (ibid., p. 92). This is a term that he applied to the act of evaluating a theory in terms of the *approach paradigm* it is associated with. In his view, this places a limitation on our reading and use of theory, reducing it to little more than an intellectual exercise and deploying external criteria to judge its validity as a theory (ibid.). Instead, Bernstein stated that theories often defy classification. He therefore turned to the notion of “*internal criteria*” (ibid., p. 92) for helping to explicate the way a theory had been developed and constructed. In addition, Bernstein recognised the importance of being “*as explicit as possible*” (ibid., p. 209) about this. Put like this, the ability of his model to defy conventional epistemological models might be seen as a strength rather than as a weakness. This allows the theory to be evaluated against a different set of criteria. These might include whether the theory’s *grammar* is robust enough to do its job and whether it has allowed the researcher to make confident claims, or the production of a hypothesis that is open to further empirical investigation (Brown, 2006).

3.5.3 My use of language of description as an analytic tool

I have used Bernstein’s model because it is compatible with my own research priorities and interests. In its conception, a language of description was designed to analyse the multi-layered nature of pedagogy and relationships to knowledge. As my own research was to focus on UCAS and its pedagogic practices, it too required a tool that was capable of unpacking the complexity of the inner and outer workings of these and understanding their consequences. It became clear in the initial stages of this project that there was a need to

understand the way that the UCAS process was carried out at each site. As stated in section 3.2, in practice, UCAS was recognised as a specially bounded set of events across all three of my sixth form institutions. My decision to focus on UCAS already assumed a multi-level approach would be required. There was, for instance, a need to pay attention to the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process and the way that degree subject choices could be framed at each sixth form institution. But this research also required me to focus on the students and the terms upon which they engaged with this process. Through applying Bernstein's model I could take the research beyond the narrative accounts that my participants had provided me with.

The advantage of this is twofold; first of all a language of description makes it possible to move from the specific to the general. That is, the data could take the form of something more conceptual with the potential for the language that was developed to be used in future research. In my case, if the language produced was considered robust enough, there was the potential to provide some productive concepts or a model that would be open to further investigation. Secondly, because this approach does not use already established theoretical accounts of student decision making, it has the potential to move away from normative conceptions of how students make their degree subject choices.

In the initial stages of the research my main undertaking was to listen to the language that my participants used to talk about the UCAS process, and then, in much the same way that a translator would work, I began the process of

turning my participants' language into something more principled in order to produce the descriptive categories that would become the external language. Despite the fact that it was my own theoretical questions that led me to the UCAS process, the main challenge at this stage was to allow the language to emerge independently of theory. Therefore, in both the early stages of research and the first stages of coding, I avoided referring to the theoretical concepts that had initially guided me to the research problem in the first place. It was important that my categories were free from theory at this stage as my aim was to build them from the ground upward.

3.5.4 Building the categories

In this section I explain how I built my categories. Although I have outlined the main principles behind this process in stages, in practice this involved moving back and forth between my transcripts, codes and developing conceptual categories. It required a process of adapting and re-defining any emerging analytic principles, analysing a small number of transcripts and then later applying these to a wider data set, checking back that these were applicable in all cases which involved coding and then re-coding the data followed by further adjustments to categories.

Stage one: After transcribing the interviews, I proceeded to use the principles of thematic coding and narrative analysis. In doing this, I identified various ways in which responses could be grouped according to whether students foregrounded one aspect of the UCAS process or another.

Stage two: This involved devising a translation grid divided into three columns.

Stage three: Into the first column I recorded the salient language that was used by participants as coded in stage one (the empirical – developed from thematic codes and narrative analysis).

Stage four: Into the second column I assigned a set of terms that describe more generally what had been included in the first column; this was my language of enactment, this was however developed in response to the students’ own language. It therefore translated their language into mine but could be recognised by my participants.

Stage five: within the third column I assigned a descriptor which took the form of a much higher level of abstraction. This is where I developed my own language to produce descriptors for the data. The naming of these descriptors helped to move the vocabulary to a more abstract and principled set of categories, providing a grammar of possible ways that students said they realised the UCAS pedagogy.

Applying Bernstein’s conceptual tools to this process allowed the initial translation of my respondents’ vocabulary to move from the empirical to a set of describable recognition rules. In the final stages of analysis, I was able to name the various discourses that were at play within each sixth form institution. While figure 3.1 provides a generic example of the translation table that was used, I have included a worked example of this in appendix 6.

Figure 3.1: Example of the translation table that was used for each of my research questions

Language used by respondents (Empirical)	Set of terms for how differences in response can be recognised by researcher and participants. The external language (L2).	Abstract descriptor of the different ways that responses are being realised. The internal language (L1)

3.6 Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the theoretical and methodological decisions that were taken whilst planning and conducting this study. In the first section I outlined my methodological framework, which explained why I had adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and why this work was guided by an inductive logic. With this in mind, it is important to note that the details of the design in the early stages of the research were emergent and evolving, allowing the research to be conducted in an exploratory mode. Here sampling was both opportunistic and purposive. Later, as sampling and data collection needs became clearer, a multi-site study was deployed involving two additional sixth form institutions. I have also outlined my position regarding the wider ontological question of structure and agency. I have stated that such questions can be addressed through a form of analytic dualism which, while recognising the interdependent nature of this relationship, gives neither structure nor agency ontological primacy. I have also outlined the reasons for my choice of data collection methods, and described my approach to interviewing and to the analysis of personal statements. I have outlined and explained my choice of analytic tools which included thematic and narrative approaches, these pay particular attention to the language used by my respondents and have formed a fundamental part of the research process itself. Of equal importance was my use of Bernstein's method of conceptual category building known as *languages of description*. Here, I have discussed my decision to use this approach, provided an outline and my rationale for using it, and then outlined how in practice it was adapted and used for this thesis.

Chapter 4 Institutional Narratives

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I analyse the site-specific *institutional narratives* within the different schools where my study was based. Establishing the range of *institutional narratives* at each site, has later allowed me to identify the various resources that students deploy as they engage with the UCAS process (see chapters five and six).

The data presented in this current chapter identify multiple logics that underpin how the UCAS process is enacted at any one site. In a similar vein, Moss (2003) identified the logics that lay behind the various *literacy events* at several different schools; this provided insights into the distinct ways in which pupils were inducted into achieving competency in reading. Moss (ibid.) used this level of analysis to demonstrate that although literacy events appear to be clearly bounded pedagogic events, they also have the *potential to be invoked differently by teachers and pupils in different institutions* (ibid., p. 81). In a similar way the logic that underpins the different sixth form sites, and informs who staff imagined their typical sixth form student to be, forms an important part of this analysis of UCAS and its pedagogic practices.

Each site is situated slightly differently within the wider field of sixth form education, which also provided a useful basis for comparison. The analysis was conducted using the narrative and thematic coding techniques described in

chapter three (sections 3.4 and 3.5). The chapter is organised around each of the three sixth forms; first I present my analysis of Castle (section 4.1), which is followed by my analysis of Pasteur (section 4.2) and Central (section 4.3). The sections are structured around the salient themes that emerged from the analysis. I first present my analysis of each sixth form's institutional logic, which is comprised of a combination of its *internal narrative* and *external narrative*. This logic consisted of principles such as its original mission, its ethos and how schools narrate their role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students. A further principle of *temporal orientation* was also identified and this is dealt with separately in section 4.4. In the remainder of this section I present some explanations for the analytic categories that were developed and that are applied throughout this chapter.

4.0.1 Internal narrative

The interviews that I collected from staff at each site demonstrated a link between the shared motifs and tropes told by staff about current institutional characteristics and priorities and the school's longer history and original mission. I have referred to this as the school's *internal narrative*, which sets out its moral purpose and institutional logic.

4.0.2 External narrative

At the same time, each *institutional narrative* also signalled how it was situated within the wider field of sixth form education, against the backdrop of the current policy environment. As discussed in chapter two, the current policy environment is dominated by a knowledge economy agenda, led by market principles and a move to consumer choice as the driver of access to university.

Within the sixth form sector in England, this has been coupled with a new post-16 funding formula,¹¹ a greater emphasis on STEM subjects (see, for instance, BIS, 2016), expansion of the number of places available to prospective undergraduates and the associated increases in university tuition fees. Each sixth form orientated towards these changes in the external environment in different ways, positioning itself within the local market for sixth form students.

4.0.3 Temporal orientation

As part of its *institutional narrative* each site could be heard aligning with different *temporal orientations* that more strongly anchored current concerns in either the future or present. This helps to form its institutional logic (see section 4.4).

4.0.4 Imagined typical student

As outlined in chapter two, Bernstein's concept of the *imaginary subject* (2000, p. 33) has been used by Ivinson and Duveen (2006) to convey the way in which different pedagogic environments both reflect and legitimise pupils as *imaginary subjects* within the classroom. I have used this idea to express how the *institutional narrative* at each of the three sites projected a different type of imaginary subject, what I have referred to here as its *imagined typical student*. This was built from my language of description in order to conceptualise how, as a reflection of its *institutional narrative*, staff at each site projected ideological representations of their students, which inform what they assume about their students goals and their needs.

¹¹ Key changes include parity of funds across all post-16 centres, which meant a budget decrease for sixth form centres such as the three in this study. In addition schools must now account for their levels of retention to the end of the A level rather than on recruitment at the start of the course. Education and Skills funding agency (Gov.UK, 2015) downloaded from <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-how-it-works>, September 2015.

4.1 Castle

4.1.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time

In keeping with its original mission, the staff that I interviewed described the aims of the school as providing opportunities to widen student horizons by helping them to develop their individual talents. The extract below helps to exemplify the presence of a prevailing ethos of laissez-faire combined with an ethic of individualism.

There is quite a live and let live attitude. If you want to be into your Manga or if you want to be into your Goth or if you are gay or whatever, there's not a prevailing [...] it's quite a liberal ethos. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

The stress on individual fulfilment and a liberal ethos were often-repeated themes that members of staff used when describing the institution and its character:

I think it's a high achieving ethos but it's supportive, it's a very thoughtful and discursive ethos. We spend a lot of time with students in tutor time and assembly doing current affairs. Not just things in the news but current issues, like freedom of speech, feminism, and democracy. So that's definitely part of the fabric of the school, it's not just your academic programme; it's about these things as well. (Sixth form tutor, Castle)

Taken together with my observations and the institution's original mission set out in the public domain, these extracts confirmed my impression of the school's prevailing stance.

Extra curricula activities as part of the school's unique selling point

The stress placed on the sixth form's extra curricula programme provided an additional lens with which to consider its cultural logic. At Castle, staff reported that students took the lead on extra curricula activities; the programme included

the performing arts, and various societies and clubs. This statement seemed to align with some of the sentiments of its original mission, quoted in the sixth form prospectus.

We take extra curricula very seriously, through extra curricula activities our students gain a real sense of self-worth and gain self-development beyond the curriculum. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

The salient trope in this next piece of narrative, “*we respond to what they want*”, also stood out as a way of expressing the sixth form’s priorities.

We respond to what they want, we encourage students to lead on clubs and extra curricula, whether it’s the feminist society or the debating society, we tend to find they are more likely to succeed when they initiate it themselves. (Sixth form tutor, Castle)

Extra curricula activities had an important place at Castle; with its varied programme of clubs, societies and master classes it aimed to provide a “*stimulating intellectual environment beyond the classroom*” and helped to reinforce its ethos of *independence of mind, self-worth and self-development* (tropes taken from interview with the Head of Sixth Form).

4.1.2 External narrative – the school and the policy environment

Castle had established a strong position in the local sixth form sector, offering its students a programme of academic A levels. The sixth form is unusual in that 60% of its pupils are from the local state sector and 40% are drawn from the local and out-of-borough independent and selective sectors. The head of sixth form explained that the school’s popularity with the independent sector was a consequence of their “*high achieving culture*”, as well as their success in helping their students to enter the elite university sector. Of the three sixth forms, Castle invested most heavily in preparing its students for the university

application process; two salaried members of staff were employed specifically for this purpose. This level of investment suggested that their *imagined typical student* was comprised of those who have the potential to attract offers from the elite university sector. The first two extracts have been included here because they confirm that this is indeed how the sixth form team interpreted this situation:

We get a lot of people coming from the private sector; we do get a lot moving from private to state for their A levels. The results at Castle stand up, don't they, partly because of our relatively high entry requirements. It's a nice site, with nice gardens and the art rooms are nice, but I don't think it's our facilities, it's about our results, reputation and ethos. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

The often-repeated theme about the sixth form's popularity among students from the independent sector allowed it to position itself among its competitors in the independent sector. This next piece of narrative helps to explain the significance of attending a sixth form from the state sector for students from the independent sector.

One thing is definitely true and that is GCSE results are looked at in the context of the school you went to. And I think the kids definitely know that so, for example, if you got 6 GCSE A but you went to [named independent sector school], and we do get quite a few from there, that's not going to look as good as if you got them from here and I think the kids know that as well. The kids often come to see me and say "I am at a state school now, miss, but I wasn't before, will they know that?"* (UCAS Coordinator, Castle)

The narrative features within the interview transcripts that I collected suggest that Castle's popularity could be explained by its relationship with the elite higher education sector. Accompanying this was a strong sense of responsibility to get its students into an Oxbridge university. It is tempting to speculate that

current change to university funding regimes could put the elite university sector under even greater pressure to increase its state sector intake (see Clark et al., 2015; Whitty et al., 2015; Zindars, 2010). If this is true, it is likely that these changes to the policy environment will continue to impact on the popularity of Castle and the ability of its sixth form to fill this niche.

Staff thought about Castle's position within the wider sixth form environment. In this next extract staff can be heard discussing an ex-pupil who had returned to their sixth form from another sixth form at a neighbouring newly-opened academy.

One of our students came back to us, she had a terrible year at [X academy] because of all the chaos and no staff retention and she is very grateful to be back to something stable. I don't think hardly any kids passed their A levels. So they completely kind of manipulated their figures, it's really bad, and when you know the story [...]. (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

Staff were very aware that neighbouring schools acted as their competitors but also that other institutions might be less well placed than their own to deliver on their promises, as the rest of the narrative from the conversation taking place between the head of sixth form and the UCAS coordinator demonstrates:

P: Have you seen what they are doing? They've got huge banners [laughs] "Congratulations to our first A level students, 80% go to Russell Group". (Head of sixth form, Castle)

N: I mean the whole thing of calling it the [X] academy.....[laughs], it's in a prime position and it is a brilliant building, I don't think they know what they are doing, it's nothing without our kind of ethos (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

P: That's what I was saying before, people don't come here for our state of the art facilities [laughter] (Head of sixth form, Castle)

The exchange highlights that this academy was regarded as making empty claims about their success, with the joke that despite its famous brand name, the academy had to be more market sensitive than they were in order to succeed in the field of sixth form education.

There was much more uneasiness in the narrative described below where staff talk turned to their competitors within the private and selective sectors. This next episode is reproduced in order to illustrate the significance of Oxbridge as a destination for the school's sixth form recruitment drive.

And then we hear rumours of how different universities see our school, I mean Oxford said to one of my mock interviewees that we are not a proper state school. But she told them that she knows girls at XXX [named selective state competitor school] who get 12 mock interviews before their interview....which is masses, and at Castle they only get one. So they need to adjust that assumption and there are all of these rumours flying around all over the place. (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

The impression given is that staff were concerned about maintaining the positional advantage they are able to provide for their students from the independent sector.

Interviews with staff confirmed that Castle occupies a distinct position in the sixth form sector by virtue of the fact that it recruits from the independent sector. It is not entirely clear when this trend began, but the impression given is that its appeal to families who see Oxbridge as an important part of their child's educational trajectory plays a role in how it promotes itself in the education market (see also Shuker, 2014). An understanding of what is required to help their students gain entry into the elite university system has become a significant part of their '**external narrative**'. Despite enjoying some relative market security, anxiety expressed around the number of mock Oxbridge

interviews offered by their competitors within the independent sector was quite telling. Castle's *imagined typical student* had become an important part of its *external narrative* and therefore key to its success.

The sixth form curriculum

When describing its sixth form curriculum, the head of sixth form referred to the curriculum as 'typical of a sixth form curriculum':

We have around 24 A levels; they are typical A levels that you could do anywhere if you know what I mean, the 3 sciences, History, Geography, Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, Psychology etc. (Head of sixth form, Castle).

In addition to these subjects they also offered Classical Civilisations, History of Art, Latin, and Music. While these subjects may not seem 'typical' of a curriculum offer in a state sector comprehensive they do typify the curriculum in the private and selective state sector, the part of the market that Castle's sixth form currently operates in. Hence its curriculum of *typical* A level subjects may have served to signal that the sixth form at Castle is competing with the private sector in this market.

Despite its strong position in the sixth form sector, the next set of extracts illustrate that policy drivers had a significant impact on their curriculum offer. When discussing the need to cut back on subjects due to budget cuts, staff reported that it was the career-related and applied subjects that were removed from the sixth form curriculum. This implied a hierarchical ordering of what may have been considered to be credible subjects.

Post 2010, we've had a budget cut year on year on year. So tough decisions have to be made, and it is about which subjects to keep. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

In this next extract, the UCAS coordinator listed some of the subjects that are no longer offered, such as Design technology (DT), which is considered to be one of newer subjects introduced during the last administration together with Media Studies. In an already overcrowded curriculum these less traditional subjects (see Bernstein, 2000, and Muller, 2009), were the least likely to survive at Castle.

DT has suffered here, that's textiles and resistant materials, we don't offer that any more. That's a shame. IT also has suffered and then we used to offer Media Studies and we stopped offering it 3 or 4 years ago because it got completely slagged off, and I don't think it was able to survive here. (UCAS Coordinator, Castle)

These sentiments were often repeated by staff. In the episode below, the head of sixth form could be heard using salient tropes such as “Oxbridge winners” and “Mickey Mouse subjects” as she distinguished between the different A levels on offer.

There are a couple of subjects that are small but stable and regarded well academically, for example, we teach Classics, Latin, Music and History of Art, and it is quite small numbers who do these but they are never on the Mickey Mouse A level list. They are Oxbridge winners. It's a very different thing to a small number of students doing Media Studies. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

In terms of the metaphors that are repeated throughout, this piece of narrative is quite telling; we see this logic being extended to the decision to keep subjects that are *regarded well academically* these are the *stable subjects*. Powerful motifs such as “Mickey Mouse subjects” and “Oxbridge winners”, suggest that in response to the financial pressure that policy change has brought about, it is the *new* subjects that no longer have credibility.

Here then, the **external narrative** that the head of sixth form used to discuss the curriculum told of the importance of the school's Oxbridge credentials. The curriculum here represents quite a complex mix of signals; on one hand we hear how the school's past is being invoked because, despite the *budget squeeze*, Art and Music will survive. These are the subjects that appear to align with the sixth form's **internal narrative** and underlying liberal logic. We also hear staff keeping a close eye on what gets rejected and what some subjects, like Latin and the Classics, can be traded for.

4.1.3 Summary

By attending to Castle's **institutional narrative** it is possible to observe how ideas about the value of subject knowledge are produced and established over time. The curriculum was being structured through both its institutional story and the policy drivers that were at play. For instance, today it was the value of 'Oxbridge winners' that shaped Castle's sixth form curriculum offer. In this respect, one could argue that its curriculum had been reworked to meet the expectations of its private sector intake. Nevertheless, it still retained its original orientation to liberal values such as individualism that also had an appeal for this group of students and their families. As this data appears to indicate, there may be some resonance between these observations and Dovemark and Holm's (2017) analysis of pedagogic identities adopted by Swedish upper secondary schools as they attempted to deal with market pressure as discussed in chapter two.

4.2. Pasteur

4.2.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time

School mission

Staff at Pasteur spoke about the importance of *student responsibility to themselves* and *service to the community*. Its shared narrative of collective and individual responsibility helped to realise its Christian ethos. This could be heard in the way staff described its sixth form students; the extract below exemplifies this.

I think it is the academic but also the ethos and contributing to the wider community. The pupils feel they are part of something [...] they like the sense of community. (Head of year 12, Pasteur)

In the extract that follows, this often-used theme was repeated in both what the deputy head and head of year 13 said about the students.

They are positive, hardworking and they gel very well together. They are very, very caring to each other. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

Salient tropes and motifs, such as “*being part of something*” and being “*very caring to each other*”, were consistent with its original mission of promoting service to the community. These sentiments were repeated again in what the head of year 13 spoke about:

You wouldn't know who is new to the school and who isn't. I mean there were a few students who you met this morning who came to us at 16. You wouldn't necessarily, I suspect, tell who has and who hasn't come. And so I think as a unit they work incredibly well together. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

The themes in this last extract about the level of integration and fit for students who only join the school in the sixth form, all point to the strength of their ethos

and the significance of community and shared responsibilities to others as well as “ourselves” as integral to their internal logic.

Extra curricula activities and the school’s unique selling point

The impression given at Pasteur was that opportunities for extra curricula were designed to enhance students’ collective responsibility and to help students to realise the school’s mission of service to the community.

There is a very strong community service programme, most students in the lower sixth are expected to do some charity work, Age Concern, working in primary school or mentoring in the lower school such as running a homework club. So they are expected to contribute something, they all have a collective responsibility. (Head of year 13, Pasteur).

This perspective was also confirmed by this next sequence, which suggests that beyond the explicit expectation of signing up for a formal voluntary programme, there was a powerful expectation embedded in its internal culture.

Just now, in assembly, I was asking for volunteers for a pensioners’ tea dance, and when I came down, there was a queue of them outside my office. So whatever I ask of them they will do with good grace. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

As these extracts suggest, extra curricula has an important role at the school; the deputy head spoke about her expectation that each student should keep a community service log and that prizes were awarded to students who had made an outstanding contribution to the school and community. But many of these activities, such as volunteering placements within the community, also provided experiences that helped to widen their horizons, providing experiences far beyond the school.

4.2.2 External narrative – the school and the policy environment

This next data set attends to the way that Pasteur narrated their role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students in the context of the changing policy context. Taken together, the sections of narrative cited below help to convey the sixth forms projected *imagined typical student* (see Ivinson and Duveen, 2006, and Bernstein, 2000). The extracts show that, in common with Castle, the *external narrative* at Pasteur was focussed on how it managed its students' engagement with the higher education sector (Donnelly, 2014). These first two transcript extracts have narrative features that suggest progression to the sixth form is highly selective in a number of ways. Less academic students were often cast as unsuitable for progress into the sixth form, as shown here:

What I am doing at the moment is organising interventions for those who are in danger of becoming NEETS¹². Children that the sixth form is just not appropriate for, we try to find alternatives for them. (Head of year 12, Pasteur)

A highly visible example of this could be heard in this next piece of narrative

We don't have to really encourage students to stay because if they don't we have however many places that we can offer to external candidates, so sixth form is over subscribed. [...] We don't have to do anything about selling the school. I mean sometimes it's more the opposite, that some pupils know that the sixth form is not for them and they would struggle and we try to persuade them not to come to the sixth form and consider more alternatives that are more suitable for them. (Head of sixth form, Pasteur)

Students who were considered suitable were those that met the criteria of the school's projected *imagined typical student*, those who were able to realise the schools inner narrative. For example, often-repeated tropes such as “*hard work*” and “*serving the community*” suggested a convergence between its

¹² NEET an acronym used to refer to students who are not in education, employment or training.

internal narrative and **external narrative**. I also gained the impression that the **external narrative** had developed in response to concerns about the changing university sector (see, for example, Molesworth; 2009, Naidoo and Jameison, 2005; Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2010). These concerns are implied below in the way that the deputy head accounts for her students. In the first part of this extract the school's **internal narrative** is clearly visible.

I think it is academic but also the ethos; we want them to achieve the best that they can academically, and also contributing to the wider school community. The pupils feel they are part of something, instead of going to a sixth form college or FE where you are just going in and out, where you don't meet anyone or build up a relationship, they like the sense of community and they all get on very well, too well sometimes. The constant round of 18th birthday parties where literally the whole sixth form will go. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

Towards the end of the next extract we hear how the emphasis shifts to the changing higher education sector and the popularity of European universities, and then back again; with salient tropes such as 'community', and 'continuity' with the schools ethos, the school's inner logic is being invoked once more and is brought in line with the changing field of higher education.

What is interesting is that we have an increasing number of pupils applying to the European universities where the fees are more reasonable. But they are applying to those universities that are similar to here, so small universities where there is a strong ethos and sense of community, they like that continuity. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

This next mini-narrative is another example of how the **internal and external narratives** converged:

There is a work ethic and there is also a support system. They know the people who are struggling and they will go out of their way to help them. So I was on the phone last night to a lower sixth parent and her son wasn't one of our best students in Y11 but he has really responded well

to the challenge of the sixth form and one of his friends, who was better qualified than him, had not been able to make the transition very well so he had been staying in the mezzanine to encourage him to work, staying each night to support him. So his mother was ringing to check that was actually happening which it was. But then they have a collective responsibility. That's the essence, that's what makes them special and, without them realising, that's what will get them to where they want to be in the future. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

In this narrative, salient tropes such as “*collective responsibility*”, “*getting to where they want to be in the future*”, and ‘work ethic’ signal the logic that make up its **internal narrative** as well as those that point to its **external narrative** of getting its students to their future. In this next episode one can hear more clearly the logic that underpins its **external narrative**. Tropes like “*it's a buyer's market*”, “*debt*”, “*economically aware*” and “*going for the vocations*” provide highly visible examples of staff priorities for their students.

It's a buyers' market in some respects and they are, yes in some respects the students are going for vocations and on the other hand they are saying 'look I am going to saddle myself with debt so I am going to get something out of it'. And umm, the majority of our pupils don't come from affluent backgrounds, in fact the vast majority, so you know economically they are quite aware. So the challenge is to make sure they are choosing wisely. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

This theme was repeated again in the interview with the head of year 13:

I think to a degree it's coming from home, linked with money and their economic background. There has been quite a big campaign for the higher level apprenticeships and we are taking part in quite a lot of that and its feeding through so they're very interested in it. Right from Year 11, so we've found that we have apprenticeship days and some of the real high achievers in Y11 are going to those now which wouldn't have been the case a few years ago. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

The tendency here was for staff to describe change in the context of their students' futures and change within the higher education sector. I noted that these often-repeated themes, such as the necessity for students to be

“economically aware” and of “choosing wisely”, sat alongside the school’s **internal narrative** and their notion of the **Imagined typical student** as being “economically disadvantaged” yet “academically successful”, “responsible”, “hardworking”, and “serving their community”.

Behind these explicit expectations there were the unspoken assumptions about the continuity of traditional pedagogic values. These were made highly visible when seen in the prominent display of the school honours board, which had pride of place in school’s main entrance. Yet the sixth form was also oriented towards the future and a changing higher education sector, reflected in its talk about value-for-money degrees, higher apprenticeships and professional degree subjects (see, for example, Clark et al., 2015).

The sixth form curriculum

The curriculum at Pasteur reflected the school’s preferred academic image, and was promoted as a *traditional curriculum* (from website). For the staff, the school’s **internal** and **external narratives** appeared to produce a coherent **institutional narrative** about the sixth form.

We have all the traditional subjects, Geography, History, Latin, Art, English, Maths, Science, which would feed in from what they have done at GCSE. Yes, the curriculum is very stable in the sixth form, subjects that we offer are all popular, we start off with very big groups. I think we had 27 in our English group and the same in History, so it’s pretty stable really. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

Often-repeated tropes that were used when discussing the curriculum, such as “stable” or “traditional” and “pretty stable really”, implied that there had been few changes over time. Yet, the data from the interview transcripts signalled that Pasteur had responded to change in the form of more recent pressure from a

changing higher education sector. The next extract illustrates that the introduction of tuition fees and the demands made by university departments have impacted on how staff spoke about what they thought the students' subject priorities should be.

It's sort of the outside influences, there is more of an emphasis on Further Maths, the groups have got much bigger. Just last term, one student from the upper sixth was panicking because he had decided he wanted to apply for Computer Science, umm, they're asking for an AS in Further Maths, so he had to pick that up this year. Or, one of our girls in the lower sixth wants to do Engineering at Imperial and they're asking for an A level in Further Maths which is new, it's been creeping in over the last few years. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

In the next extract the deputy head spoke about the degree subject priorities of students at Pasteur compared with a neighbouring independent sector school.

Medicine is traditionally our biggest subject; they often make choices that lead to destinations. At sixth form open evening they often ask us 'which subjects can help you with Medicine?' or 'what will help me with Law?' But especially for our students, and statistically I think it is proven that applications from the state sector will be more Law and Medicine and again slightly more vocational, whereas the more abstract or pure degrees will be taken from elsewhere. History of Art will be typical of degree choice of schools like [names independent school]. (Deputy Head, Pasteur)

The emphasis on future careers is repeated again in the transcript extracts below, where student A level choices are paired with future careers.

There's quite a lot of companies that are working with universities now so Google is a perfect example; they've paired with Nottingham, which means not only are they guaranteed a job afterwards, these are growing in popularity with some of our students, they are getting a degree and they are getting a professional qualification but also they are guaranteed employment whilst they are at university. Once upon a time, no matter what their background they would all be going to do traditional university degrees but now, whatever their background that's not happening anymore (Head of year 13 Pasteur)

This last comment “*Once upon a time, no matter what their background they would all be going to do traditional university degrees but, whatever their background that’s not happening anymore*” was particularly salient. It helped to confirm my impression that at Pasteur, students were prioritising degree subjects that would make them more employable in the future. In this respect there were significant differences between Castle’s and Pasteur’s students.

This next episode, from the head of year 13, certainly confirms that both the students and the sixth form are responding to change.

The students are shopping around quite a bit. And the other thing that we’ve had a lot of interest in is the apprenticeships, the higher level apprenticeships, particularly with the higher professions like Accountancy where you come out with a degree and also a professional qualification. So I think that times are changing as far as degree choices are concerned. (Head of year, 13 Pasteur)

The salient themes in this part of the narrative are the repeated references to “shopping around” and “changing times”, suggesting a need to modify their curriculum offer in the light of the market (see Naidoo and Jameison, 2005). The **external narrative** that staff used to discuss knowledge often told of the significance of professional degrees and of an alternative higher education future which was distinct from the traditional degree of the past. Its **internal narrative** and moral purpose, which once sat comfortably with traditional disciplinary degrees, had now been paired with economic success. As mentioned previously, this new pairing allowed staff to re-imagine the school and its students around a different kind of future but in keeping with the same set of moral imperatives, i.e. being responsible, hardworking, and serving the community. One might also ask about the possibility of disjuncture as well as

coherence in this conjoining of the two narratives (Beck, 2006). This is a question that I explore further whilst considering the students' narratives in the next chapter.

4.2.3 Summary

At Pasteur it was important to help students to realise their moral purpose. However, some of the decisions taken by staff appeared to be a direct response to the changes in the university sector. The school's *internal narrative*, which emphasised moral purpose and belonging to a Christian community, allowed staff to imagine continuity with its past, the present and future. Its *external narrative* gave primacy to professional degree programmes. This was seen through the encouragement that staff gave their students in applying for this particular type of higher education experience. In many respects this narrative reflects what Muller (2009) and Brady (2015) refer to as increasing shifts towards regionalisation in higher education. Muller (2009) observes that it is useful to think of *regions* in two distinct ways, traditional professions such as those listed above and those linked to newer industries such as Business Studies, Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism.

Muller (ibid.) makes the distinction between *traditional regions* that have a strong professional identity and those that Muller refers to as *new regions*. These are less likely to be underpinned by a strong professional identity and therefore have a less stable knowledge base (ibid.). It is interesting to note that at Pasteur there continued to be an emphasis on high academic standards and achievement which was generally symbolised through a curriculum of disciplinary *singulars* (Bernstein, 2000). But, when it came to thinking beyond

their A levels, students were often directed towards *regions* with a strong professional identity or alternative qualifications such as apprenticeships. This may suggest an orientation away from the value of disciplinary subjects, with an emphasis on the acquisition of employability skills rather than of a subject's internal content (ibid.).

Certainly, the sixth form at Pasteur was oriented towards the future. It had an orientation towards degree subjects that were outwardly responsive towards the changing field of higher education and the possibilities for employment represented by the new higher apprenticeships talked about by staff. The needs of the school's *imagined typical students* were thought about in these terms and its *institutional narrative* appears to represent what Peters (2003), Brancaleone and O'Brien (2011) and Patrick (2013) refer to as the growing primacy of knowledge economy thinking. As Brooks (2017a), Holmwood (2017), and Kelly (2017) suggest, this is part of the discursive re-framing of the student role within higher education.

4.3 Central

4.3.1 Internal narrative – continuity over time

School mission

Central's distinctive Christian mission emphasised pastoral care and nurture which, when voiced by staff, gave the impression that its main concern was keeping its students safe.

I think for those who stay from year 11 that's why they stay. Dealing with them individually and looking after them kind of, I suppose falls under our ethos. But we do it without thinking about it, it's just part of the school. Making sure we are looking after each student, that they meet their full potential, that's really important. (Deputy Head, Central)

This perspective was confirmed by the next sequence in the deputy head's narrative:

There is this thing about we know you and you know us, we know your strengths and your weaknesses we know how to support you and how you need nurturing, we know what your needs are and therefore because we know them we are more able to address them. (Deputy Head, Central).

The salient tropes here, with their emphasis on 'care' and 'nurture', are aligned with its ethos. The term 'nurture', in particular, was an often-repeated trope, especially when describing the relationship that the school has with its students in the sixth form. These themes are repeated again in the extract below.

I don't think that the quality of teaching is particularly different to other sixth forms, but I do know that the extent to which teachers care and go out of their way to help and support students I think is exceptional. The big sixth form centres don't know their children well, so unless they are resilient they are left to just sink or swim, so I think in many ways that the value of staying here is that we know and care about them. (Head of sixth form, Central).

It was expectations such as these, expressed by all staff that I interviewed, that helped characterise the sixth form's logic and ***internal institutional narrative***.

Extra curricula and the school's unique selling point

Extra curricula activity was less visibly significant at Central than at the other two sites, and in contrast to Castle, staff reported that there wasn't a strong tradition of extra curricula at the sixth form.

We encourage most of them to get involved in the fund-raising side of things, but there might be 5 students who will go to anything that you ask them to go to and the rest of them will sign up for things and not follow it through. They start something and then they do not appreciate the opportunities that they have available to them, which is a shame. (Head of sixth form, Central)

The impression given was that this was not integral to the sixth form's inner logic. This was confirmed in the next sequence, where staff mostly spoke of extra curricula as something that could support learning rather than extend student horizons.

We offer a programme of academic booster writing classes at KS5. And those kids are identified and they are invited in to do a 10-week programme that has been written by English, umm, and then they do it in small work groups throughout the year that are being led by academic tutors. (Deputy Head, Central)

In addition to the literacy programme, provision also included after-school sessions to support academic progress in A level subject areas. I noted that a mentoring scheme, where volunteer mentors from private companies supported students with their study skills, also provided students with some exposure to the corporate world. A work experience programme also offered a wide variety of summer work placements at the end of year 12. Staff comments about extra-curricular provision and their school mission reflect how each sixth form characterised their students and thought about its responsibility to them. That Central offered a programme designed to provide academic support may also be a response to the wider ability range of students accepted into its sixth form as well as continuity with the values of care and nurture that are part of the institutional story told by staff today.

4.3.2 External Narrative – the school and the policy environment

The interviews with staff helped to convey how Central was adapting to recent policy imperatives that had created a local market for sixth form students (See Dovemark and Holm, 2017). Staff noted that this had fundamentally changed

how they think about their recruitment policy and their *imagined typical student*. A key narrative feature to emerge within the data was *institutional survival*. This was made visible through a shared narrative about the future success and identity of the sixth form which involved changing its intake and retaining the more able year 11 students. Often-repeated tropes, such as “*raising the bar*” and performing a “*rescue*’ operation”, occurred repeatedly throughout the interview transcripts. This perspective was confirmed by this next sequence:

It’s my role to identify the problem and put a specific action in place; we’ve raised the bar and therefore our entry requirements at A level have to reflect that. So instead of saying 5 A-C passes it might be 5 A/B passes and English and Maths have to be an A/B. You know, that kind of entry requirement. (Deputy Head, Central).

This was confirmed by what the head of sixth form told me about the expanding sixth form curriculum.

Now we’re going to be expanding with Philosophy and Economics, Latin [...] and really upping our game to get our own students to stay first of all. (Head of sixth form, Central)

Here, one can hear the occurrence of repeated motifs such as “*raising the bar*” and “*upping our game*”. Much of the talk across the staff interviews at Central was in keeping with the theme of changing the intake in order to survive the market. This also means changing the type of the students they currently recruit to the sixth form, along with their role and responsibilities toward them (see Dovemark and Holm, 2017). These sentiments are expressed in the quote below:

Before, they came to us because we took repeats on, so they would come to Central as a last resort. You know, we’re trying to change that

culture, you're asking questions about the sixth form and it's really a difficult time because we were about to change it. So from September this year we're not taking any repeat year 12s. (Head of sixth form, Central)

Salient themes in the next extract, such as “*moving away from a bums on seats for funding approach*”, reveal the significance of the impact that government policy drivers can have for sixth forms like Central.

We've got children on the wrong courses; the students who are repeating are not succeeding. We've moved away from that kind of bums on seats for funding, into what is more appropriate because we were taking children onto courses that are not 'fit for purpose'. (Deputy Head, Central)

These salient themes are repeated in the quote below; they provide a highly visible example of the dilemma that the sixth form faces. It has had to respond to the effects of policy drivers, such as the expansion of the academies programme and a changing funding regime, by prioritising their higher ability students. I have played out the complete extract below, in order to capture the full weight of the predicament that the sixth form now faces.

The single biggest thing for the sixth form is to decide what kind of sixth form it wants to be. Are we going to be a sixth form that is going to be really quite academic and selective and rigorous and is going to accept that for a long period of time we are going to have fewer students, a higher entry criteria and better grades? And yes, actually, from a school management view run at a loss during that period? Or are we going to say that the sixth form should run as it does at the moment with a broader range of courses, some more vocational like health and social care and some more academic students coming in with much lower grades and that reflecting in their outcomes eventually? So, until the school sort of makes that decision, resolves that tension, I can't see how it's going to work. (Sixth form academic mentor, Central)

A consequence of the funding contingencies outlined above (see section 4.0.3) is that the sixth form will have to change its intake in order to survive, and thus it

no longer offers places to students repeating year 12 or to less able students. These were the students who the school struggled to retain, leading to its poor retention record; a pertinent issue in the light of the new funding formula, which requires schools to account for their levels of retention to the end of the A level rather than on recruitment at the start of the course.

The narrative features of the interview data that I collected from Central suggested that in the light of this, staff were struggling to realise its original mission. In this next extract the emphasis is on strategic change, a reworking of its **external narrative**, whilst seeking to maintain convergence with the school's internal logic.

We have launched our rescue mission; the development plan has been re-written so that whatever the issues are, for instance, recruitment and retention of our more able [...] the school values will go on top, and they are [...], because we've always got those values on top you're always meeting the school values as well. You keep your core values alive that way. (Deputy Head, Central)

The twice-repeated motif that the school's core values will "go on to", implied that there was now a less than comfortable fit between the school's **internal** and **external narrative**. There may now be less coherence between its original mission and its strategic response to the policy environment. Central's **imagined typical student** appeared to have also changed to those more able to realise this **external narrative**.

The sixth form curriculum

The major concern of its *institutional survival* continues through to this next section of analysis. Similar to other comprehensives in its position, the school had adopted successive changes of curriculum and school policy over a number of years in response to changes in government policy thinking. In the

past, the New Labour administration had introduced a widening participation agenda, which included a push towards non-academic A levels.¹³ Staff spoke about these changes in terms of the introduction of level 2 and 3 BTECs in Art and Design, Business, Health and Social Care, and Jewellery Making. This had the effect of broadening the ability range of students in the sixth form. Reading between the lines, this may have also helped to fulfil the school's inclusive ethos but it was also a response to competitive pressure within the sector. But the sixth form was now in the process of changing its curriculum offer, with plans to offer a wider range of traditional academic subjects in its bid to recruit higher ability students. This would in effect narrow the current offer along with narrowing the ability range of the sixth form. I have reproduced some of the more salient parts of this narrative below. Tropes such as “*expanding our offer*” combined with the sentiments of “*really upping our game*” provide a highly visible example of how staff thought about these changes:

So we asked the Year 11s what they wanted and hopefully it would have worked. And to encourage more able students to come to see our sixth form to see that were improving it and upping our standards. We're going to be expanding our offer with Philosophy and Economics, Latin and really upping our game. (Head of sixth form, Central)

Other salient features include the discussion around the value of subjects; in her interview the deputy head alludes to her belief that the “*vocational subjects have lost their value*”. It is noteworthy that in this bit of talk we hear that a subject's value is defined by what it can do for the sixth form rather than for its students. This perspective is confirmed by this next sequence:

¹³ This was expressed in the policy ‘Curriculum 2000’ which introduced a modular A level <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmeduski/153/15306.htm>

We are not offering BTEC anymore, we're doing Economics instead. So my problem is that I think for all sorts of reasons we are becoming more academically, umm what can I call it? As opposed to the vocational subjects that have lost their value. (Deputy Head, Central)

With repeated motifs across the data set, such as those of “*raising the bar*” and “*upping our standards*”, there was a very strong shared narrative over the future success and identity of the sixth form which involved changing its intake and retaining the more able year 11 pupils.

The problem with it is that we've allowed these new subjects to come about because of our current year 11s. If they don't stay, then we've put in a lot of time and INSET training for our staff to meet these new needs and actually if our year 11s don't stay then it's been a real waste. I mean, when I did an audit with them they said yes, they are definitely staying particularly the higher achieving students who are staying for Philosophy and Economics and things like that, but once they see they've been accepted into [New academy] and they go there instead [...] then it's all been a waste of time really, that is a worry. (Sixth form academic mentor, Central)

One of the more salient features of this last piece of narrative is the idea that the new subjects would have been a “*waste of time*” or “*all been for nothing*” if they do not have their desired effect of recruiting the top of the ability range.

For the very able we weren't offering the combination of subject that they wanted. We've had the same combination of subjects for years. That's now changed and we will have a transition year where we have to recruit our more able. When we've asked them the combination they want to do we have to rearrange our blocks. The risk we take is that they won't come and we have rearranged our blocks and it would all have been for nothing. (Deputy Head, Central)

The curriculum, once designed to meet the needs of a vulnerable, mostly migrant and refugee intake, has been redesigned so that it will appeal to the needs of its newly ***imagined typical student*** (see Ivinson and Duveen, 2006).

Hence, how both its students and the sixth form curriculum were thought about had been recontextualised against the logic of the policy environment and economic necessity (see Dovemark and Holm, 2017, for similar findings).

4.3.3 Summary

With its concerns about dwindling numbers and maintaining its position in the field of sixth form education, Central was the most vulnerable of the three sixth form sites. A key narrative feature to emerge within the data from Central was *institutional survival*. There was a shared narrative among staff over the future success and future identity of the sixth form, this involved changing its intake and retaining the more able year 11 students in order to avoid closure. Staff appeared to visibly struggle to bring the logic of its inclusive *internal narrative* in line with this *external narrative*, a consequence perhaps of these changes. Thus the *institutional narrative* at Central had the least coherence of the three sites. According to Bernstein's (2000) analysis, the pedagogic environment at Central could be described as engendering a de-centred market position (see, for example, my earlier discussion of Bernstein's analysis of *pedagogic identity* and the four pedagogic positions in chapters one and two).

In the remaining section I take the analysis further in order to explore the full extent of the institutional identities that have formed at each site.

4.4 Orientations in time

Whilst coding the data, several contrasts regarding each site's *temporal orientation* became evident. Bernstein (2000) refers to principles of time that discursively frame the past, present and future, and are used to produce

different pedagogic positions. Of significance for this study is that a *pedagogic identity* is made up of different pedagogic positions, each associated with a time related discourse. In looking at the way each site has dealt with the changing educational environment, a time sensitive analysis can help to distinguish between those sites that strategically considered the future and those who mostly looked to the present or the past when strategic thinking was required. Analysis of the narratives told by staff indicated that they were voicing ***institutional narratives*** that linked back to the school's past as well as to its present and future. In applying Bernstein's model I have been able to conceptualise the way that each of the sixth forms adapted to changes in the wider field of sixth form education and to the changing policy environment. Below, I have produced brief conclusions of how I have categorised the sixth forms and their orientations in time.

4.4.1 Present time

Central

At Central, talk about changing the sixth form intake and the sixth form's survival foregrounded any talk about higher education and student futures. So, while the past was strongly implied within its ***internal narrative***, there was a weaker sense of this within its ***external narrative***. Rather than orienting to the future, the school's main preoccupation was with its *institutional survival*, which it would achieve through changing its intake and reinventing its projected identity. As discussed above, this was narrativised in multiple ways throughout the interviews: "*we are trying to change that culture [...] our selling point is the small classes*" (Head of sixth form, Central); "*it needs to decide what kind of sixth form it wants to be*" (Sixth form mentor, Central). This meant that rather

than strategically orienting students to the future they were thought about in the present, as part of the school brand. Its projected identity was therefore oriented to the present rather than strategically considering their students' future. This seems to exemplify some of Dovemark and Holm's (2017) findings and specifically, their interpretation of Bernstein's (2000) de-centred market position.

Castle

Castle's *internal narrative* also appeared oriented to the present rather than to the past. Its *external narrative* aligned itself and its students with its emphasis on progressive educational. This narrative was expressed in numerous ways throughout interviews with staff, perhaps most tellingly in this quote: "*students make their own contribution to the ethos and management of the school*" (Head of sixth form, Castle). The school's liberal ethos produced a narrative that expressed the development of the person, an ethic of personal self-realisation coupled with a theory of progressive and flexible development which could be realised in the short term. (Bernstein, 2000) This also seems to capture Dovemark and Holm's (2017) interpretation of Bernstein's (2000) *de-centred therapeutic position*, in their example, the schools unique selling point was the realisation of students as *unique personalities* (ibid., p. 526).

4.4.2 Future time

Pasteur

By juxtaposing the first set of *internal narratives* against the *external narratives*, it was possible to see how change and the future at Pasteur had become a defining characteristic of its *institutional narrative*. The findings suggest that staff had come to reimagine their students in the future, as seen in much-repeated tropes such as "*times are changing*", "*they are very focussed*

on their careers”, and reference to the fact that students were “*increasingly moving away from traditional disciplines in their choice of degree*”. The impression given, then, is that the **external narrative** had become strongly orientated to the future and aligned with perceived changes taking place within the higher education sector (Beck, 2006).

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavoured to unpack the underlying logic of each site’s **institutional narrative**. As I intend to demonstrate further on in chapter five, the principle of the **imagined typical student** helped to inform my understanding of the influence of the **institutional narrative** and its bearing on the pedagogic environment, as well as the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process (see Donnelly, 2014, 2015, and Ivinson and Duveen, 2006).

In my analysis of each school I found it useful to distinguish between the **internal** and **external narratives** that interviewees voiced. The **internal narrative** was grounded in each institution’s past and provided insight into its principled inner logic. This could then be brought into relation with each site’s **external narrative**, a response to policy exigencies such as the competitive field of sixth form education and the new higher education policy environment. Conjoining the two narratives helped highlight potential tension points. This may exemplify Dovemark and Holm’s (2017) findings which analysed how new *pedagogic identities* can be formed against the increasing complexity of the market in sixth form education and the growing complexity of the field of higher education.

Bernstein (2000) suggests that this interplay between local and official concerns engenders *de-centred identities* generating schools that are focussed on creating products (both curricula and human), with exchange value in the new education markets they participate in. In this analysis I found that some sixth forms were more successful at achieving this than others.

I have characterised Pasteur as having a strongly coherent ***institutional narrative*** with an orientation to the future. There was no pressure at Pasteur to change its intake or its curriculum; its ***external narrative*** had successfully incorporated the changing official rhetoric of the knowledge economy. Its ***external narrative*** had, therefore, retold the way it accounted for its responsibility to its students. Rather than encouraging them to follow disciplinary routes into higher education as they once had, staff had re-imagined their students' needs. In doing so it had aligned its students with their future by prioritising the value of employability over the traditional disciplinary values of a degree (Kelly, 2017).

Castle, while oriented to the present also had a coherent ***institutional narrative*** where there was little in the way of conflict between its liberal past and projected *de-centred therapeutic position* (Bernstein 2000). Castle seemed to appeal to parents of high achieving children from both the private and state sector, whose ambition was to see their child attend one of the Oxbridge universities. Hence, staff had opted to prioritise an A level curriculum that contained "*Oxbridge winners*" in order to align with the needs of their ***imagined typical student*** and with the field of elite higher education. As discussed in chapter two, a consequence of the new higher education funding regime implies a strong financial motivation for the elite sector to draw students from this part

of the state sector. This gave the sixth form at Castle its competitive edge in the field of sixth form education, and, despite the budget squeeze, there was no need for it to reinvent the sixth form. The convergence between its *internal* and *external narratives* may have been helped by its middle-class liberal ethos of *laissez-faire*, which seemed to appeal to this group of parents.

Central was also oriented to the present, but its *internal* and *external narratives* were brought into conflict with each other, producing a less coherent narrative. This weaker coherence can be explained by looking more closely at the inner logic that characterises each of its two narratives. In imagining change, the staff at Central had also to imagine a new convergence between past values and the present (Beck, 2006). But salient themes such as its *imagined typical student* and curriculum change did not easily converge with the school's inner logic. With its broad curriculum of applied qualifications, Central had invested heavily in the previous government's widening participation agenda, which their inclusive ethos had allowed them to align with more easily. Current policy initiatives, such as a return to the traditional A level and devaluing of applied credentials (DfE, 2010), had meant that for the sixth form to survive and succeed, the school would need to change its intake. This would require them to be less inclusive and more selective, thus contradicting the school's inner logic.

The policy environment has several kinds of effects and not a singular impact (Ball, 1994). Each sixth form had responded to the policy logic within a context that was specific to its own *institutional narrative*. Curriculum subjects and degree subject priorities were accounted for in different ways at each of the three sites; their underpinning logics, together with the policy drivers, had a

significant bearing on how these were prioritised. It is this that provides the context against which I describe how the university application process was pedagogised at each locale.

Using a time lens as a unit of analysis has become a useful additional resource for helping to describe each site's *institutional narrative* and its associated logic. I return to this in chapter five, where I consider how an institutions *temporal orientation* can contribute to the *UCAS pedagogy* at each site. I also consider whether, and how, this can contribute to the criteria students invoke in making their choices of degree subject.

Chapter 5: UCAS as a Pedagogic Process

5.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the three sixth forms and how they are all situated slightly differently from one another within the field of sixth form education. This allowed me to characterise each site in terms of its own inner logic, comprised of both *internal* and *external narratives* that oriented it in time to the past, present and future.

One aim of this chapter is to describe the way in which the UCAS process combines with each site's *institutional narrative* to produce a *pedagogic discourse* (Bernstein, 2000) that is unique to each site. Through examining the UCAS process I have conceptualised how its pedagogic practices reflect conceptions of each sites *imagined typical student*. Taking a Bernsteinian lens to the analysis has allowed me to examine how this *imagined typical student* is projected through the seemingly informal space of the UCAS process. According to Bernstein's model, *pedagogic discourse* helps to regulate the social identities that are thought to be desirable or that are required of learners by the prevailing policy discourse (see, for example, Ivinson and Duveen, 2006, as discussed in chapter four).

In this chapter I argue that the UCAS process, as a set of pedagogic practices, framed how my respondents were being taught to think about their suitability as ideal university candidates for their degree subject choices. I suggest that this

process has the potential to foster in students a specific subject identity which might also have the potential to influence students' judgments about their degree subject priorities (Brown 2004, Kelly, 2017; Reay et al., 2001, 2005).

Brown (2004) describes the process by which students learn to produce a suitable personal statement as a form of *disciplinary socialisation*, where students are inculcated into the disciplinary culture of various fields of study. Taking these insights into account, I use students' personal statements as a lens through which to view how UCAS is pedagogised within each site and the messages that this conveys about the value of degree subjects. I also attend to how students are taught to project the right kind of university candidate for the courses they apply to, what I later refer to as an *ideal knower discourse*. This has also meant analysing the language that students use to discuss how they produced their personal statements (see section 3.4 and 3.5 for details of this process).

Structure of chapter

In this chapter, first I explore the UCAS pedagogic discourse through the narrative accounts provided by staff about how UCAS is practised, as a clearly marked out and recognisable set of events at each of the three sites (section 5.1). Then section 5.2 is organised around emerging analytic categories. Here, I consider differences in how the pedagogic practices that make up these events are communicated to students. This brings to the fore Bernstein's concept of *pedagogic discourse* and the significance of *framing* as an analytic category. In section 5.3, I account for the analytic category of the *ideal knower discourse*; this was characterised in the varied ways that students spoke about what they

had been taught they should project about themselves when writing their personal statement.

Finally, in section 5.4 I explore how students' personal concerns combine with the pedagogic discourse espoused at each site. In these cases, students could be heard re-working the *institutional narrative* as they deployed additional resources within their lives.

5.1 Introducing the events that make up the university application process

This section identifies and names the different events that make up the university application process. The data collected across each of the three sites indicates that between year 12 and year 13 students had been taught about applying to university via a distinct pedagogy. As a thematic approach was used in the early stages of coding, a UCAS theme was clearly evident across all of the talk associated with staff and students. My aim in analysing this process is to characterise the *UCAS pedagogy* and to explore the bearing that each site's *institutional narrative* may have had on this.

UCAS events at each locale were tied to a tightly organised schedule of dates and deadlines which operate according to the UCAS calendar. The impression given is that the university application process has a strongly bounded and framed pedagogy where the boundaries and punctuations of time and space are clearly marked out for participants to recognise and realise through its delineated trajectory of stages. I now map out the *UCAS pedagogy* in terms of the main events that were referred to in the staff and student interviews. These briefly follow the UCAS calendar of events in which I identified the following set

of events: 1) gathering advice and information, 2) learning how to write and produce the personal statement and 3) producing the personal statement.

5.1.1 Gathering advice and information

Thematic and narrative coding across the three sixth forms suggested that at the initial stages, gathering information was a common activity for student's at all three sites. In reviewing how students and staff spoke about this, I was able to establish a number of commonalities. These included easily recognisable university application events, such as the *university fair* which is organised annually by UCAS early on in the autumn term. This was well attended by students across the sample. In the extract below Alex (Pasteur) told me about this event.

Umm, I started checking the VLE and found a UCAS convention at Olympia which has pretty much every university there and we collected loads of prospectuses. Umm, and that started me off looking at their websites. (Alex year 13, Pasteur)

In addition, each site had a programme in place that was designed to encourage students to fully explore their possible university and degree options:

We start with a very general introduction in an assembly and then followed by registering with UCAS. We do encourage them to start looking quite early to get it all in using the UCAS website to use various searches and pin down the courses they are interested in. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

Castle students were also given a test that was designed to help them match their interests with the various courses; this was supplemented with sessions provided by representatives from various university departments.

Most take the Centigrade test¹⁴, which is supposed to help match their interests to various HE courses. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

Students at Central also spoke about various open days and input from university departments. Melody (Central) told me, for example, that:

I went to a university open day, at UCL, at the Anthropology building, and I spoke to this lecturer called XXX and he was telling me basically that you don't have to pick subjects that are all the same, but that you should pick challenging subjects because it's really competitive. (Melody year 12 student, Central)

In addition, staff at Central outlined the process of holding workshop events in the early part of the autumn term when students start year12.

At the beginning of year 12 in September we invite their parents to a sixth form open evening to provide information to parents. We also give out flyers and answer questions. In February, they [students] register with UCAS and we run a session on how to look for courses on different university websites. I show them Uni Stats and Which? (Head of sixth form, Central)

The quotes used above establish that when it comes to information gathering, students from across the sample receive significant amounts of school input. This forms the basis of their formal instruction about how to exploit the available information and recognise an appropriate course.

5.1.2 Learning how to write and produce the personal statement

The data collected across each of the three sites indicated that a key part of **UCAS pedagogy** involved students learning to write and produce their personal statements. This is a complex pedagogic process involving the successful transmission and relaying of signals between the university department

¹⁴ The centigrade test is an online test which is designed to help higher education candidates match their interests with various higher education courses. <https://www.centigradeonline.co.uk>

admissions tutors, the school and students (Jones, 2013). The data I collected indicates that all three of my student subsets had received specific instruction regarding this. Further on in the chapter I analyse this process (see sections 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4), but for now the aim is to establish how this was characterised and recognised as an established UCAS activity. The extract below from the Castle UCAS coordinator provides some insight into the importance of getting this right for students:

We have huge cohorts who want to go to Oxford and Cambridge; trying to prepare them is a full time job because they need all sorts of extra stuff. They need extra help early on for advice and personal statements, they're preparing for tests and then for interviews [...]. (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

Castle had invested a significant amount in providing a dedicated team whose expertise and insider knowledge could be used to support students with their applications and deliberations over courses. This is something that I return to further on in the analysis (section 5.3). The head of sixth form at Pasteur also spoke about the significance of personal statement writing.

They are given quite a lot of help from tutors on how to write it at the end of year 12. They are told to write a draft over the summer, and then year 13 will be working with their tutors on the first draft with their personal statement when they come back. This is all to meet the early Oxbridge and Medicine deadlines; they have to be in much earlier. (Head of sixth form coordinator, Pasteur)

These sessions were fitted in around the calendar of events in line with Medicine and early Oxbridge deadlines. As with Castle, personal statement writing was talked about by staff as an important part of the process and writing support was provided by dedicated sixth form staff and tutors. Similarly, I found

that at Central personal statement writing also formed a significant part of the pedagogic process. This was discussed in the following way by staff at Central:

We provide a programme where the first day we interview the sixth form to make sure they're making realistic choices and applying for courses that they will get offers for. The second day is the personal statement; we have a company who deliver personal statement writing workshops, and then later on some of the universities offer us days when they can go in and get advice. (Head of sixth form, Central)

Staff at the three sites discussed the significance of personal statement writing with me and a significant amount of time and expertise was dedicated to supporting students with this. There were, however, some clear differences between the schools which form the basis of my analysis. This is discussed in the next section.

5.2 Emerging categories: weak and strong framing

Despite commonalities it was clear that there were differences in the way that UCAS events were marked out, paced and communicated to students at each site. Of particular interest, there was a strong relationship between the *institutional narrative* and the *UCAS pedagogy* that this gave rise to. Further on in the analysis I demonstrate how these also align with the *ideal knower discourses* that these produced (section 5.3). But first I turn to my analysis of the *framing* of each event.

Bernstein theorised that *pedagogic discourse* is comprised of *classification and framing* (see chapter one). In Bernstein's terms *classification* refers to how the categories that are at play are insulated from each other in other words, what gets put together or kept apart. *Framing* on the other hand refers to how they

are made available to acquirers, how access is paced and communicated. In subsequent writings these ideas were extended and applied to Bernstein's theory of *pedagogic identity*, where the focus was on the effects of *pedagogic discourse* on shaping consciousness and learner identity (1999, 2000). This has significance for this thesis because it conceptualises the processes through which an institution's *pedagogic identity* is constructed and how, when projected, it orientates learners towards the type of knowledge and skills they 'ought to' adopt (see, for example, Iverson and Duveen, 2006, and Dovemark and Holm, 2017, for empirical works that also draw on these ideas).

The concept of *pedagogic identity* has been frequently used by Bernsteinian scholars to explore both institutional cultures and the learner identities that spring from these. For instance, McLean et al. (2013a) state that pedagogic discourse shapes *who people think they are*, what they think they can do and be (p. 274). In this thesis I focus on how the students at my three sites were taught to produce their personal statement, through the UCAS process, linking this to an interest in how, through the **UCAS pedagogy**, students were being taught how to successfully project the ideal university candidate. These events were analysed as pedagogic discourse, and could be characterised as having varying strengths of *classification and framing* (Bernstein, 2000).

In paying attention to the strength of its *framing* at the three sites, it was found that site variation rested with the differences of each site's **institutional narrative**. *Framing* could be characterised by one of the three categories below; these are heuristic that help to conceptualise the differences between each site's **UCAS pedagogy**.

- 1) Castle - Strong framing
- 2) Pasteur – Intermediate framing
- 3) Central – Weak framing

In the following sections I illustrate the differences between the three school sites.

5.2.1 Castle: advice and information/ strong framing

Castle's university application pedagogy was more strongly framed than the other two sixth forms; this could be seen by the frequency with which UCAS events were referred to by both staff and students. This next quote has salience because it suggests that students at Castle were exposed fairly early on to advice that would direct them to the elite university sector.

The Oxbridge candidates are like the vanguard, so the first event is where we get people from the different Oxbridge colleges to stage a Q and A session which is all in the second term of year 12. We get started pretty early on this. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

The suggestion that Oxbridge candidates were the vanguard has salience; it suggests that pedagogic practices would be clearly marked and tailored to this group of students. As the UCAS coordinator described her job to me, it was possible to hear the extent of her own expertise and confidence in directing students to what was required of them by the elite university sector.

Yes, I think the support we give to students is really, really good. I think that when we had our last OFSTED inspection that it was above outstanding for the individual support we give. I think it does help them, they feel supported and they really do trust us. (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

Again, here it is possible to read the extent of the insider knowledge and expertise that the staff possessed, and how this was passed on to the students.

We provide a lot of the input from the master classes and enrichment such as 'history of ideas'; we want to encourage them to have opportunities to think about things to broaden their thinking. Things like D of E¹⁵[...]. Oxbridge don't really want to see that anymore, although Durham for some reason do, they love D of E. (Head of sixth form, Castle)

In addition, salient themes such as “*providing opportunities to broaden their thinking*” and “*greater enrichment*” offered through a *history of ideas* course, suggested a distinct pedagogy that would enable students to acquire the specialised academic disposition and strong subject identity that Oxbridge candidates were expected to demonstrate. Pedagogic practices at Castle offer clear instruction about where and how to apply. Next I turn to how this is realised by students as they produce their personal statements.

5.2.2 Castle: producing the personal statement/strong framing

This section attends to the way that Castle students talked about producing the personal statement. Extracts from statements written by two students have been used to illustrate how Castle's *pedagogic discourse* was translated and how they were able to respond appropriately by producing a *legitimate text* (Bernstein, 2000). The first of these was produced by Adam, whose narrative has been included in order to demonstrate his recognition and realisation of the student characteristics that would be valued the most.

Adam, reading from his personal statement:

¹⁵ D of E refers to the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.

A: I am currently doing an EPQ on the Hindu Caste System, which is enabling me to combine my interest in Hinduism and the study of Hindu societies. I was fascinated to learn that in many senses Hinduism is more a collection of different religions with some common features rather than a single religion. (Personal statement, Adam year 13 Theology candidate, Castle)

DM. Why did you choose this section?

A: Well, I wanted it to appear that Theology is central to my life. It was really interesting to do my EPQ, umm, and I really enjoyed it so I like the way I have brought that in here. The other stuff is just there because it's what they expect to see. Of course, I was quite interested to read Srila Prabhupanda's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita but actually I am stretching the truth if I say it was really intriguing because it was not. It was quite dry; being an atheist with a Jewish father. I am more interested in the interaction between religion and society, rather than the really dry side of Theology, that's not why I do Theology, that's not my passion, but they won't want to read about that. (Adam, year 13, Theology candidate, Castle)

By juxtaposing Adam's commentary against the selected parts of the statement, one can read that there were some contradictions and tensions, but the narrative suggests that he was both able and willing to produce a text that corresponds to his sixth form's perspective of an Oxbridge candidate.

Ava's text and narrative has also been reproduced below; taken together it demonstrates that Ava, too, had a clear sense of how to signal to the Oxbridge admissions tutor that she was the right kind of candidate.

Ava, reading from her personal statement:

I am interested in the portrayal of women in literature. I first encountered feminist literary criticism when studying Frankenstein last year. This was fascinating because for all the horrors in the novel, what Frankenstein really seems to find terrifying is female sexuality, which he wants to control and even destroy [...] it's been fascinating to read Tess of the d'Urbervilles where the narrative revolves around a beautiful women, who is a victim of sexual double standard in the 19th century.

DM: Why did you choose this section?

M: The main advice from Ms. [X] was to 'keep it concise', you don't have a very big word space and I don't think they really care about your waffle, they just want to know the facts. I feel happy with the way I have managed to keep it concise while also demonstrating I can write in an academic style; I didn't want to make it sound too personal. (Personal statement, Ava, English candidate Oxbridge)

The impression from the narratives in both extracts is that there was some discomfort around referring to their personal likes and dislikes. Both candidates felt the need to withhold their engagement with this in order to foreground a strong subject identity. This was consistent with Castle's *institutional narrative* and the message transmitted via its *UCAS pedagogy*. What this shows is that both students were in little doubt over what was required of them in order to produce their personal statement. This was communicated through their sixth forms *UCAS pedagogy*, which provided a strongly framed message about what a legitimate personal statement would look like.

5.2.3 Pasteur: advice and information gathering/intermediate framing

Staff at Pasteur also talked about providing guidance and advice; in chapter four it was reported that there was an emphasis on “*students choosing wisely*”. As such, students were often guided towards courses and universities that were perceived to provide the best “*value-for-money*”. Salient tropes in the extract below, such as “*looking further afield*”, “*choosing wisely*” and references to “*cheaper options*”, suggest a pedagogy that is distinct from the *Oxbridge pedagogy* described at Castle.

The Irish..... universities, we're getting applicants for them as well and, um, the year before last we had Lithuania and Holland. In Holland they tend to lecture in English, so there were quite a few in Holland that they liked the look of and they were cheap, offering better value for money. So

we encourage the students to look further afield. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

Compared to Castle, I found that some of the school's pedagogic practices were less clearly marked. Weaker framing was seen, in that students had more control over when they had to complete their personal statements. There was also a sense that they should be able to identify for themselves the relevance of the different events and workshops on offer via the school's VLE.¹⁶

In the extract below it is evident that the approach taken is that students are left to independently explore, select and organise some of this content for themselves. The VLE blurs the boundaries between university summer schools, apprenticeships, university open days, internships and work experience. I have reproduced the next extract in order to exemplify the significance of the VLE at Pasteur.

We have a UCAS evening here for the parents to introduce them to the whole process and I spoke to them about the higher apprenticeships. And I have 3 pupils currently applying for one. Umm, and we advertise everything on the VLE so this is where the students access it. There are apprenticeships on there and all the summer schools and conferences. So everything goes on there and it is updated on a daily basis. The students are told to look at that every single day. We put the university open days on it. Lots of our pupils apply for internships for summer schools, at the LSE, for example, [...]. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

The next extract shows that this was frequently referred to by students, who talked about the different events and seminars they had attended. James's narrative gives the impression that, while staff provided the impetus, there was a greater emphasis on students finding their own way through the process.

¹⁶ Virtual learning environment.

[...] looking at the VLE, umm uni open days, they talk about admissions and stuff, there are lots of courses and lecture dates that you can attend and they give you advice, so I pretty much knew the things they were looking for generally. But also on the courses' websites for the university they have a lot of information, so you can bounce off of that which is quite useful if you're struggling with what you want to do. (James, year 13, Pasteur)

5.2.4 Pasteur: producing the personal statement/ intermediate framing

Phoebe at Pasteur had few problems with recognising the school's key message, with its emphasis on the professions and strongly future-oriented temporality. The challenge, however, was being able to select from the range of experiences on offer. This next episode from her narrative is salient because it expresses these concerns.

I did loads of things in year 12 which they said "do this, it would look great on your personal statement". But you can't include everything, so the final paragraph is like just shoving everything in it's confusing, everyone says the D of E is so good for your personal statement, but I don't know anyone who has actually included that because it is so commonplace, Nobody mentions D of E anymore. (Phoebe, year 13 student, Pasteur)

Phoebe's account suggests that a more weakly framed pedagogy was practised at Pasteur. By offering the opportunity to take advantage of a wider range of activities the pedagogy was slightly less certain than at Castle, with its narrower offer of academic master classes and Oxbridge talks. Phoebe had taken advantage of this wider range of activities on offer, by applying to a company which she found on the school's VLE.

XXX [name of company], the company I did my summer internship with, were so good, that was on the VLE [...] It's so hard to get work experience in a hospital, umm, so that was really important. I am completely breaking with tradition but I am really happy with the choice. (Phoebe, year 13, Pasteur)

Below, I have included three short segments from Phoebe's personal statement which demonstrates her attempts at producing a legitimate text. This first segment is used to project a prospective knowledge discourse:

Immersed in the hospital environment, I was provided with endless experience to satisfy my curiosity and enhance my knowledge. Performing the minor surgical procedure of male circumcision, and observing many caesareans and related operations in the obstetrics department allowed me to get a close-up encounter with tissues and organs rarely exposed, and I was talked through the surgical process in order to enhance my practical skills. (Personal statement, year 13 Phoebe, Pasteur)

By contrast, the next segment is more personal thus conveying qualities of humility and sensitivity.

I was given the opportunity first-hand to see victims of HIV and the suffering it entailed. A particular consultation with a mother and child infected with the virus affected me greatly. (Personal statement, year 13 Phoebe, Pasteur)

Finally, here she manages to convey the employability skills that will help to signal her suitability in the wider field of medicine:

[...] developing my communication and interpersonal skills with all ages. My experiences overall have enhanced my practical and analytical skills and prepared me for the commitment and diligence required to take my interests to a whole new level applicable to the outside world. (Personal statement, year 13 Phoebe, Pasteur).

What was most at stake for Phoebe was her ability to select from the range of experiences on offer in order to signal her suitability for studying medicine. Nonetheless, it seemed as though the pedagogic discourse at Pasteur was consistent with this; its inner logic engendered a pedagogy that was future-oriented while allowing students like Phoebe to judge the moral and

professional sensibilities that were required by the career oriented degree subjects they were choosing. This may provide an example of what McLean et al. (2013b) refer to as '*well informed and thoughtful pedagogic framing*' (p. 139) that may enable students to explore what they can do and who they can be in the world.

5.2.5 Central: advice and information gathering/ weak framing

At Central, most of the investment and expertise came from external agencies. It was often the case that when seeking advice about university applications or degree courses staff and students deferred to Aimhigher related initiatives, various summer and Saturday schools, and the significance of a mentoring programme offered by volunteers from a private consultancy firm. Most of the students I spoke to at Central had been exposed directly to a university experience and this had served as a significant part of the pedagogic experience. Samia's narrative below helps to demonstrate this.

I have had to think for myself, but someone who has really helped me is this women called XXX, she is my mentor and she has really helped me. That's through XXXX [company name] and I am really thankful for it, because she has sat down with me and talked about the types of things that I would be interested in doing. (Samia, year 12, Central)

In addition, Yasmin's narrative below implies that external agents have had an important role in her decision making. These experiences helped to form the basis of her knowledge about the type of courses available to her, while student ambassadors were available to offer advice. This contrasted, again, with the pedagogy at Castle, which had had little in the way of this type of exposure.

Last year I went to UCL to do Biology workshops and spoke to the student ambassadors, there was this one guy who did Psychology and

he spoke to me about it. I now want to do Psychology at university, and I was thinking of combining Biology. I didn't even know what Psychology was or that you can study it with Biology until then. (Yasmin, year 13 student, Central)

Katy's experience, reproduced below, was also typical of what Central students told me. The impression given was that widening participation and university access schemes had become integral to their pedagogic practices.

I went to a university open day at SOAS when I was in Year 10; we had a talk from some of the students and one of the lecturers and that was how I knew that I wanted to go to university. (Katy, year 12 student, Central)

These extracts are interesting; they show the influence of the people students come into contact with in the course of the UCAS process beyond the sixth form environment. One reason for the prominence of these schemes at Central is the background of its students, most coming from less affluent migrant and refugee backgrounds and therefore qualifying for these schemes. But this also served to compensate for the comparatively weaker framed **UCAS pedagogy** delivered by the school, which was less dependent on clear instruction and more dependent on students' ability to engage with these external agencies. These distinctions are made far more explicit in the following two sections, which explore the process of learning to write and produce the personal statement. In this respect, the students at Central appear to resemble the students that were sampled by Clark et al. (2015) in their study.

5.2.6 Central: producing the personal statement/weak framing

The extracts below were taken from a sample of Central students talking about how they learned to write their personal statement. They provide an insight into how students were taught to signal their suitability as knowers and the

resources that students mobilised through the process of writing their personal statements. In Dunni's narrative below we hear again that the pedagogy is weakly framed.

Yeah, I was told to read other people's personal statements [...] it didn't really help. Umm, I don't know, you can read other people's personal statements but it's hard to know what should go in it. I'm not really sure of the content that's supposed to be in it. I would just say there needs to be more guidance as to what I'm supposed to be writing. (Dunni, Central)

In the following extract, Katy described her exposure to two contrasting experiences. The first refers to a workshop she attended at UCL, one of the Russell group universities that she was considering applying to. The second quote refers to her experience of the **UCAS pedagogy** during a workshop at her sixth form.

*Instead of saying I like History I was told by [student ambassador] that I should say which part I liked, to get that across and exactly how it influenced how I see things, not just to say it happened but to explain how it happened. Not just the academic side, although it is still academic but it's more about me **in** the academic. (Katy, year 13 History candidate, Central)*

And then at the UCAS day we had [facilitator] [who] advised me to keep it away from my studies and keep it so that I seem more down to earth which was. I think it made more sense? They could get to know other things about me like my interests, and skills, rather than just talking about my knowledge of History and talking about my grades. (Katy, year 13 History candidate, Central).

This is salient because it illustrates the wide range of advice that students at Central received. In chapter four I described Central's **institutional narrative** as being expressed in terms of concern over its *institutional survival*; its solution was to run more academic A level courses and recruit more academic students into the sixth form. During interview, I was told that lower contextual offers from

elite universities and inclusion in university widening participation schemes were often used to promote the sixth form to these students. Thus, its pedagogy often incorporated a strongly framed message about applying to university and yet, because it relied on outside expertise, it could amount to contradictory advice and uncertainty in some cases.

5.3 Emerging categories: ideal knower discourses and their classification

Bernstein (2000) refers to the notion of *classification* in order to conceptualise the spatial boundaries between categories. He considers *strong and weak classification* in terms of its level of insulation from other categories. In later works these have contributed to Bernstein's analysis of *pedagogic discourse* and the regulation of consciousness in learners which he conceptualised as *pedagogic identity*. I have proposed that an ***ideal knower discourse***, produced at each site was a consequence of this process, and therefore a consequence of either *strong or weak classification*. While coding the data I paid close attention to the language that was used by staff and students when discussing the personal statements. I noticed that these expressed various discursive principles which clustered around different characteristics of a university candidate. I used these to generate some analytic categories, which I later referred to as an ***ideal knower discourse*** (see section 3.5).

An ***ideal knower discourse*** conceptualises how the institutional narrative and the UCAS process intersect at each site to signal to students who they ought to be and what they can aspire to achieve as their future selves, (McClean et al., 2013a). Through learning to write their personal statement, students are taught

to *recognise* and then *realise* the kind of *selves* that different disciplines engender and that are required by prospective candidates. This signalling helps to convey the value of different disciplinary fields to students from different perspectives. These were found to variously focus on developing a strong subject identity and the opportunities that this could open up, or a commitment to future employability and a professional career.

This is therefore, a principle that corresponds with each site's *imagined typical student* (see chapter four, and Ivinson and Duveen, 2006). In this sense, I have taken knowledge and knower discourses to be two opposite sides of the same coin. This idea is borrowed from Bernstein (2000), where the *pedagogising of knowledge* is re-contextualised (and thus pedagogised) from its original source via *classification and framing*. This produces a *pedagogic code* which then has the effect of regulating forms of consciousness, thus producing the knower dispositions that learners develop over time (ibid. 2000).

Maton (2006) also draws on the *knowledge/knower distinction*, but in contrast to Bernstein, in this model the knower structure is foregrounded, instead of the knowledge structure. Maton's contention is that within the field of knowledge production there is also a *knower shadow structure* (ibid., p. 45). Accordingly, the objective for disciplinary fields like science is to produce *trained knowers* who interpret the material world. For others, such as the humanities, the objective is to cultivate a *social gaze*, producing a specialised knower disposition. For instance, it is thought that the objective of learning the humanities is to acquire a *humane and cultivated disposition* (ibid.).

The knower categories identified in my study broadly follow this use of the conceptualisation of knower. Through coding my data I found that three ***ideal knower discourses*** were used by students and staff to communicate or express how students should project the ideal university candidate. These were differently mobilised by students and staff at each site when discussing personal statement writing. It is possible to show where these were used more consistently by staff and students and how these align with each sixth form's ***institutional narrative*** and its associated ***imagined typical student***.

The data collected across each of the three sites indicates that students had been taught about applying to university via the distinct pedagogy that I have begun to describe above. The personal statement offers an additional lens with which to examine this pedagogy. It is through learning how to write the personal statement, that students were learning to interpret and project the knower dispositions which signal their suitability for different types of courses. In Bernstein's (2000) terms, it is the *pedagogic discourse* that is capable of shaping consciousness. For Ivinson and Duveen (2006) the *pedagogic discourse* forms the pedagogic environment, projecting ideological representations about "*who children are and what they ought to become*" (p109, *Ibid*). Similarly, my analysis allowed me to see that the ***UCAS pedagogy*** at each site communicated the knower characteristics that would project the *imaginary subject*, the ideal university candidate for a corresponding degree subject. In doing so, this process may also indicate to students a hierarchical ordering of subject knowledge (Brown, 2004).

In what follows, I focus on the dominant elements that contributed to each ***ideal knower discourse***, thus making distinct ***knower discourses*** identifiable in the

following ways: ***academic knower discourse, prospective knower discourse and introspective knower discourse***. I now outline how these discourses are characterised and can be recognised.

- 1) The ***academic knower discourse*** is characterised by an orientation to the present and deploys a specialist subject vocabulary; when using this discourse, students referred to external markers such as the importance of sounding academic and refer to key academic texts. As these sentiments were also expressed in how staff spoke about the ***UCAS pedagogy***, I have selected episodes from both staff and students that provide examples of the language that was taken as an expression of this discourse:

Ms. Nichols: *Oxbridge are only interested in the academic. The students are often told, do this or that because it will look good on your personal statement but we tell them that Oxbridge don't want that, but they do have to mention at least 3 books.* (UCAS coordinator, Castle)

Florence: *They don't care about your waffle, you've got to show that you directly relate to your subject outside of the classroom as well as in your A levels.* (Student, Castle)

To an extent, this discourse was present in what all students had told me about their personal statements, but it was particularly strong at Castle. In addition, this seemed to project a present time orientation in the sense that it invoked ideas about the here-and-now or the short-term future of getting a place at a Russell Group or Oxbridge university.

- 2) ***Prospective knower discourse***: this is characterised by an orientation to the future through career trajectories including the professions. In realising this discourse, students often defer to 'technical knowhow' and

the value of possessing a specific skill set. This was strongly associated with the **UCAS pedagogy** at Pasteur, but was also used frequently by students at Central. The following extracts from Najih (Central), Phoebe (Pasteur) and staff discussions from Pasteur about the advice they give students, help to exemplify the language that was taken as an expression of this discourse.

Najih: I talk about when I went to a law firm and gained work experience and how I experienced working life and how people express themselves in the work environment, because it's different to how they express themselves at school. (Central)

Rob: I wrote about this because I want them to see that I am creative and that I can think outside of the box, someone who's involved in different things, who leaves things wide open, not just focussing on one thing. (Pasteur)

Mrs. Watson: I'm a great advocate of higher apprenticeships and professional degrees and qualifications like Economics and Accountancy. I tell them, in the personal statement 'you don't just want to narrow things down'. (Head of year 13, Pasteur)

- 3) '**Introspective knower discourse**': Similar to the **academic knower discourse**, this was also used to convey subject identity; nevertheless, it is distinct from the **academic knower discourse** because rather than mobilising external subject markers, this was realised through a discourse of the self. It used internal markers such as self-enlightenment and personal fit. It was characterised as an orientation to a combination of past experiences and a disciplinary present. Although frequently used by students when talking or writing about how they identified with their choice of degree subject, this discourse was not explicitly communicated

through the **UCAS pedagogy** at any of the three sites. It is included here because it was an identity that the students themselves often expressed when talking about the type of person they hoped to project in their personal statement. The following quotes are used to demonstrate the language that typified this category of knower:

Dunni: Mine is all about me, not about the academic, I want them to see that I think with my heart and not just my head because it's something that is inside of me. (Student, Central)

Deirdre: I wanted to tell them about the person I am first, and how I relate to History second, not just about History as an academic subject. (Student, Pasteur)

Samia: I needed to put that point across because I feel like with this subject I can link it to things that have happened in my real life, and in that way I can really identify myself with it, so I just wanted to put this across. And I like theory as well [...] 'I like applying theory to society so that I can change things'. (Student, Central)

Despite not being voiced by staff, this was present to a lesser or greater extent at each site. Its presence was most visible, however, in the personal statements produced by Central students. At Castle, its presence was marked by more ambivalence, with staff and some pupils rejecting this approach as 'waffle' or as being 'cringey'.

In producing a personal statement students were involved quite explicitly in learning to mobilise different **ideal knower discourses**. These reflect different ways in which knowledge and knowers are conceived and valued (Bernstein, 2000). In looking across the sites, it is possible to identify where one discourse may have been used more frequently than at another and in this sense clarify the dominant **ideal knower discourse** associated with each site.

5.3.1 Castle: strongly classified academic knower discourse

The students at Castle were being taught about the importance of having a strong subject identity. Admissions tutors from the different Oxbridge colleges were frequently invited into school to provide specifically tailored personal statement writing workshops, which helped to reinforce this message. In these next few extracts, students discuss what they had learned through these taught sessions.

The advice was different for different unis; what they said for Oxbridge is, if you have 20 or 25% of your statement on your other non-academic achievements that's fine. But actually they don't really care, whereas other universities are more likely to take notice of that sort of thing, it's a 60/40 split. For Oxbridge, they don't mind having it in there but they don't really take any notice of it. I tailored it to Cambridge because that was my highest one, if I was tailoring it to Cambridge which I thought at least the other universities would think I was serious about my subject, hopefully it paid off. (Adam year 13, Theology Cambridge candidate, Castle).

The salience of Adam's quote is that we hear that students were learning about the ordering of knowledge and skills in the form of academic versus non-academic achievements. Because it advocates the principle that the academic and non-academic should be kept apart, this can be identified as strong classification. This carries a message about the ideal knower who is "*serious about their subject*". I have used part of Ben's narrative below because it, too, contains a reference to "*sounding serious about your subject*", a much repeated sentiment among this group of students.

[...] it is not about 'are you a well-rounded person?' They really don't care is what Ms. XXX said. And everyone I spoke to at Oxford said, we really don't care if you are queen of the badminton team or whatever, it's just can you think and how interesting and serious are you about thinking. So my personal statement is entirely about what I have been thinking about and only then linking that to what I have done. If I hadn't applied to Oxford then I would have probably focussed more on like how I have

helped my community and the volunteer work I have done.... (Ben, Oxford Candidate, Castle).

Ben's rejection of the personal, moral, and of the extra curricula was repeatedly stated by students in this subset, which is also suggestive of a strongly classified **academic knower discourse**, where sounding academic was more important than having an intrinsic connection with the subject itself. Again, this message is further reinforced by Gabby:

When I was at the talks with the Oxford tutors, they were like [...] "we really, really don't care about your extra-curricular", they said "we don't care if you never left your local library", which I didn't realise because previously I thought you had to include all the extra curricula stuff like being head girl. They just don't care. That is specific to Oxford and Cambridge. (Gabby, year 13, English and History Candidate, Castle)

Here, then, students had been taught to recognise the value of a strong subject identity and in the quotes above it is possible to hear how students weighed up the value of presenting themselves as being familiar with the disciplinary discourse of their subject against 'sounding too extra curricula', or else not sounding *"too personal"*.

The pedagogy at Castle was strongly framed and classified; students were given a clear set of instructions which left them in little doubt about the significance of academic knowledge and the importance of having a strong subject identity. On occasion, boundaries between knower discourses were tested but, in the main, students were able to navigate their way back to the **academic knower discourse**, where disciplinary subject knowledge has the most value (see Clark et al., 2015; Shuker, 2014, and see Brook, 2003 for an alternate interpretation). This does not mean that the process was without conflict; this will be more fully explored in the final section of this chapter.

5.3.2 Pasteur: Strongly classified prospective knower discourse

Students at Pasteur voiced several discourses used in combination with each other. However, their talk about extra-curricular voluntary work and work experience stood out in the student narrative. The analysis in chapter four showed that Pasteur projects a strong **internal narrative** that is linked to its mission of “*giving something back to the community*”, “*a strong work ethic*” and making sure students “*choose wisely*”. Staff narratives (see chapter four) suggest that students are encouraged to enter into professions that may enhance their own position within society, while also working within professions that are socially or morally worthwhile. There is, therefore, a strong coherence between the sixth form’s internal and **external narratives** and the **UCAS pedagogy**. Hence, it was not surprising to find such a preoccupation with volunteer work and work experience when students talked about the advice they had been given (see also Shuker, 2014). I have reproduced some of the interview data below in order to illustrate its significance for the **UCAS pedagogy** at Pasteur. In the first extract, Deirdre can be heard repeating some of the *realisation rules* that she had been taught.

Umm well....they said it's important to get across an overview of yourself in the first bit just to put yourself out there. Well, I wanted to show my interest in other things and not go straight into my studies. I wanted to show how it's not just about academic studies, I like this section about my voluntary work, I did Age UK, I helped a retired journalist and I helped her with computer skills [...].(Deirdre year 13, Pasteur)

The emphasis here seems to be on using a discourse that signals breadth of experience and personal qualities. The centrality of voluntary work continues through into what Jess had told me about producing her personal statement.

A lot of people do D of E, because they think 'oh I could put it on my personal statement'. And those things do really help, I mean I know most people do volunteering and in lower sixth we have a community service log, so any community service we do for the school or anywhere else you can log that in and you can get awards for it and that is something which the school organise. You can say that you've done X number of hours and that's always a good thing, the more you do the more good things you'll be able to put in. (Jess, year 13 student, Pasteur)

James's narrative illustrates that this is a much-repeated theme; based on this, it is possible to claim that the ***ideal knower discourse*** is distinct from the one espoused at Castle.

So things like, umm I volunteered to teach the elderly how to use the computer and which is all great stuff. But it makes this hard to write because I have crammed everything in. (James, year 13, Pasteur)

In addition, there was quite a unified response when it came to the deployment of resources where, for example, students talked about mobilising career trajectories over strong subject identities. I found this next bit of narrative interesting; Alex (year 13 student) had been following the advice given about including work experience, but she was warned against mentioning a book.

Everyone says don't mention a book. I am just annoyed that I mentioned it because even though it is relevant. I mean it is only a brief mention, which I did read quite a long time ago but it was the introduction, not the introduction but the first part which is the autobiographical part. It's not a huge mistake but if I had written it again I probably wouldn't have mentioned it (Alex, year 13, Pasteur)

This advice contrasted sharply to the three books that students at Castle were advised to write about. I have included this next extract from Phoebe's narrative because it also emphasises the importance of writing about the non-academic in the form of work experience.

I wrote about my work experience, because that's quite a unique selling point for me. I had worked in a hospital in Tanzania and I could talk about that for hours. So it was easy to get that in there [...] I've been asked to do an assembly for lower sixth to get them to do it, it's a good thing to do over the summer basically. (Phoebe, year 13 student, Pasteur)

Here then, students were taught to recognise the value of work experience linked to professional careers (see Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Naidoo and Jaimeison, 2005; Shuker, 2014). In the quotes above it is possible to hear how students weigh up the value of presenting themselves as being familiar with a professional discourse as against mentioning a book. Students at Pasteur did talk about the academic as well, but the non-academic was always in the foreground. I have taken this to illustrate the prominence of a **prospective knower discourse** within the pedagogic stance, which is also consistent with the school's future-oriented **institutional narrative** (see Dovemark and Holm, 2017).

5.3.3 Central: weakly classified ideal knower discourse

Previously, I established that despite a weakly framed **UCAS pedagogy** at Central, it nevertheless incorporates a strongly framed message about the value of going to university. Students often signalled this using the language of introspection which drew on internal subject markers and their link to notions of the self rather than external subject markers such as skills. I have reproduced a part of what Samia told me she wrote because it characterises the **introspective knower discourse**.

Samia reading from her personal statement:

S: I am passionate about exploring cultural differences and am fascinated by the theme of migration theoretically and its implications for

identity and society at large, especially as I often find myself navigating between two cultures, finding something acceptable about my own Eritrean culture while living in my English one. Through completing an EPQ I had the opportunity to conduct research which involved [...]. (Personal statement extract, Lea, year 13 Sociology candidate, Central)

DM: Did you feel under pressure to appear a particular way?

S: I'd say that mine is about me rather than anything it felt easier to write about me. I wanted to show that Sociology is within me, in an ideal world I'd like to be able to have a conversation with the admissions tutor and tell them about myself and why I want to study Sociology and maybe just have a more human conversation. (Samia, year 13 Sociology candidate, Central)

I have also included Dumni's narrative as it too uses an **introspective knower discourse**. The extract below reproduces Dumni reading the part of the statement that she said she felt the most proud of.

Dumni, reading from her personal statement:

It is sport that makes me the person I am and will become; whilst clearly fascinated by sport and its variations I have always been keen to explore the role it plays in personal development and the bonds between people. For me, sport is not just about sport alone, it is something deeper that I wish to explore and discover; Sport is nurturing and instinctive and is relevant to the body, the external environment and the mind. (Dumni, year 13, Central)

In common with Castle students, Dumni and Samia signalled strong subject identities, a characteristic of both the **academic knower discourse** and **introspective knower discourse**. However, Dumni's and Samia's written texts also convey a strong personal and inner connection to the subject. The salient parts of Dumni's personal statement were, "*it's sport that makes me the person I am and will become*". She also positioned her relationship to her subject in terms of its role in her *personal development*. This **knower discourse** was

distinct from the one signalled by Castle students, which drew on external markers such as books that had been read, or references to lectures and “*sounding academic*” as demonstrated by their familiarity with key academics and their works.

Melody’s experience of the application process also helps to further illustrate the way that *ideal knower discourses* are used in Central’s pedagogy. Melody had been encouraged to apply for a place at Cambridge University to study Anthropology, which necessitated the use of an external tutor from a local independent school who worked with her on her personal statement. In doing so, she became aware of the differences in the *knower discourses* evoked through the two distinct pedagogic experiences:

M: The strange thing was with the first draft in year 12 I would say I came across as trying to sell myself [...] who I am as a person because that was what I was instructed to do by various teachers. In this workshop we had, we were told to talk about ourselves, our skills and experiences, and it was in the language that was used. So my first draft is considerably different to how it is now. And then [...] I was told by one of the teachers who prepared me for my Oxford interview that the format in order to study Anthropology at Oxford, the format of my personal statement was incorrect, she said that the percentage for the academic, she told me it was 70% academic and 30% extra curricula. Whereas the teacher who helped me last year said it was the other way round. (Melody, year 13 Central)

DM: What impression do you think the admissions tutor will have of you now?

M: I think that now I seem to be someone who reads a lot, umm, someone who thinks quite seriously about Anthropology as a subject, the first paragraph here and this is telling them, and here I am showing them this because I am applying my knowledge to Anthropology. (Melody, year 13, Central)

Melody had been exposed to two very different pedagogic experiences where an ***ideal knower discourse***, which foregrounds the personal and non-academic, was initially evoked through talking about personal skills and experiences. Yet, the salient motifs used by Melody to describe the second pedagogy, such as its higher academic content, suggested “*someone who thinks quite seriously about Anthropology*”, “*someone who reads a lot*”. These imply a strong subject identity and therefore evoked an ***academic knower discourse*** similar to the one used at Castle. (See Donnelly, 2014, 2015, for analysis of different pedagogic codes that operate at different sites.)

The ***ideal knower discourse*** at Central is weakly classified, especially when compared with the other two sites. This may be a reflection of Central’s evolving *pedagogic identity*, a consequence of its response to external contingencies and the principle of institutional survival (see Dovemark and Holm, 2017). This group of students were not always exposed to a *strongly framed pedagogy* of how to apply to university or the strong *classification* of an ***ideal knower discourse***. As a consequence, student talk can be characterised as framed by an ***introspective knower discourse***, this is one that draws on the self and students’ personal concerns and projects. (On *classification* and *framing*, see Bernstein 2000, see also Donnelly, 2014, 2015 and Shuker, 2014; for student priorities and projects, see Archer, 2003, 2007, and Clegg, 2010).

By contrast, the pedagogy at Castle projects an ***academic knower discourse*** that emphasises subject identity (see Maton, 2006). This is oriented to the present, in the sense that it projects a knower who is connected to the content of the subject itself. Students used this discourse to express their relationship with the knowledge content of the degree that they were applying for.

The *ideal knower discourse* at Pasteur is more clearly oriented to the future; here termed a *prospective knower discourse*. The *UCAS pedagogy* seemed to also correspond with the hierarchy of degree subjects recognised as embodying routes into professional occupations. At this stage in the analysis it appeared that students mobilised an *ideal knower discourse* that was a projection of each site's *UCAS pedagogy*. This begs the question of whether the pedagogy at each site had a direct bearing on students' degree subject choices whilst they were in the sixth form.

5.4 In every given context there is a range of possibilities

The analysis so far has mapped out the *UCAS pedagogy* at each of the three research sites. By listening to what students said about how UCAS is practised, I have also attended to the ways that each subset of students learned to write and produce their personal statement. The objective has been to describe the pedagogic processes that selectively attempt to create each site's *ideal knower* (see Maton, 2006); what I have referred to as its *ideal knower discourse*. This has enabled me to establish the context within which students invoked their criteria for making their choice of degree subject. But, as suggested by Bernstein (2000), there are many ways of speaking a grammar (see my discussion in section 3.5). The aim of building a conceptual language is to map out the range of possible outcomes, thus revealing to the researcher what else might be possible within participants' empirical world (Moss, 2017). This encouraged me to take the analysis further by attending to those students who did not fully conform to their sixth form's *ideal knower discourse* and did not fully realise its legitimate text. The point here is that students do not always

conform to the pedagogic discourse espoused at each site, because the sixth form provides but one of a number of resources and strategies that students draw from. The aim of this last part of analysis is to attend to those moments when the prevailing ***ideal knower discourse*** is tested in some way by what students wrote or how they expressed themselves.

5.4.1 Castle: 'it's a personal reason as well'

Castle's strongly framed *Oxbridge pedagogy* was clearly visible to the students I spoke to, and their personal statements reflected its dominant ***academic knower discourse***. In keeping with this ***knower discourse***, when it came to writing their personal statements, Castle students had a lot to say about the value of academic disciplines. But I have reproduced below part of Florence's mini-narrative to illustrate those moments when tensions did emerge and the possibility of disrupting the prevailing discourse became apparent in her narrative:

My dad helped me think of something I could say that was more about me; when I was younger, we did a family trip to Peru and Ecuador, but I don't know, it kind of comes across as a bit cheesy and I don't really feel comfortable with it. It's quite a personal thing to include. I didn't think they'd want to hear about that, it's too personal. (Florence, Spanish and Portuguese candidate, year 13, Castle)

Florence was uncomfortable with her dad's suggestion that she use a personal narrative; he was encouraging her to signal a more self-realising relationship between herself and the disciplinary discourse. This provides a good example of how conflicts could arise around the different resources that were called upon from the perspective of school or family. In addition, I have reproduced part of Rachel's narrative below, because rather than simply demonstrating her

Oxbridge credentials it uses an *introspective knower discourse*, where degree subject priorities are strongly connected to the personal and familial.

Rachel, reading from her personal statement:

R: Every Christmas Eve I sit singing German carols with my Barbadian Protestant, German Jewish, Sikh Punjabi, Italian Catholic family'. (Personal statement, Rachel, year 13, Anthropology candidate, Castle)

R: I think it was kind of, I think it's because it is actually the reason why I do want to peruse Anthropology. I think it was quite nice because it is a personal reason as well, to the extent that I have grown up in this amazingly diverse family; there is different cultures within it and similarities and like I think that because my mum is also an anthropologist it just opened my eyes and that's why I started it like that, it shows that it really does affect me.

DM: Did you feel under pressure to appear in a particular way?

R: I didn't think I should write about me after that, it's just that I wanted to get in my desire to study Anthropology because I am linked to it in some way.

Towards the end of the narrative, Rachel expresses the need to withhold her engagement with the personal and familial and foreground a strong subject identity instead. Yet by juxtaposing her commentary against the selected parts of the statement, one can read off the contradictions and tensions involved in conforming to the school's Oxbridge bias and *academic knower discourse*.

I have used Ben in this final example because his personal statement and commentary help to exemplify the way in which a wide range of discursive resources were called upon by some of the sample of Castle students.

Ben, reading from his personal statement:

B: I have relished examining different political systems such as the Rainbow Travellers' itinerant anarchism, the collectivism of [the] Spanish

pueblo Marinaleda and the communism of More's Utopia and the Communist Manifesto. Tony Judt's Ill Fares the Land inspired me with its inclusion of philosophical values into the political and economic argument. (Personal statement, Ben, year 13, Castle)

DM: Did you feel under any pressure to appear in a particular way?

B: Because its Oxford, you have to mention books, you have to show that you have read books, and you have to think of the interview so you have to write a personal statement that every single line you can talk about. [...] It's not about the subject content, it's more about, each line is a thing I can talk about. (Ben year 13, Castle)

One can hear from the commentary that Ben had no problem with recognising, or indeed realising, the appropriate discourse taught through the **UCAS pedagogy**. Yet, he told me that his priorities lay elsewhere. He had planned to take a gap year in order to take part in an overseas volunteer programme that he had worked with the previous summer. This meant he would have to turn down his place at his chosen university, as they would not accept a deferment. My impression was that by mobilising additional resources, Ben seemed to be oriented beyond the degree. Thus, although he appears to be mobilising an **academic knower discourse** for the purpose of his application, with one eye on the future he also deploys resources that take him away from an Oxbridge trajectory.

5.4.2 Pasteur: 'Geography is not really about a job; it's more of an interest'

The pedagogy at Pasteur was clearly visible to the students I spoke to, and their personal statements reflected the dominance of a **prospective knower discourse**. Because of this, students at Pasteur had a lot to say about the value of work experience and the extra-curricular. Its **institutional narrative**

espoused a relationship with disciplinary fields that had moral purpose and that connected students to the world.

James, on the other hand was one of the few that mobilised an **academic knower discourse**; this foregrounded a strong subject identity and was therefore less in line with a **prospective knower discourse** that dominated at Pasteur. I have reproduced the section of his personal statement that he selected to read during the interview, along with his response to the follow-up question that was asked.

James, reading from his personal statement:

J: Globalisation has facilitated the increased interconnectedness of societies across the globe and, as Manfred Steger argues in his book Globalisms: The Great Ideological Struggle of the Twenty-first Century, the rise of a homogenised popular culture. Many have considered this culture one with a Western dominance, this is similar to Ritzer, who coined the term 'McDonaldization' to describe the inexorable process by which the ideologies of the fast-food restaurant have come to dominate increasing areas of society and an erosion of cultures around the world. (James, year 13 Pasteur)

DM: Did you feel any pressure to appear in a particular way?

J: Umm, I just wanted to get as many books in as I possibly could, I wanted it to sound academic that I think about things. Geography is not really about a job, it's more an interest, my sister did Geography at uni last year and, I mean it will be nice to have a degree just to have a degree, I want to go for the rite of passage [...]. (James, year 13, Pasteur)

The narrative that runs through James's personal statement seemed to embody the strong subject identity that students at Castle had described in section 5.2.1. Salient tropes and motifs used in the discussion that followed, such as “*wanting to sound like I think about things*”, “*sounding academic*” and “*getting in as many*

books”, point to the strong subject identity that is associated with the **academic knower discourse**. He also referred to the degree as being a “*rite of passage*”, and “*doing a degree for the sake of doing a degree*”, which is distinctly different from the school’s inner logic which saw students “*choosing wisely*”. In the rest of his narrative he makes frequent reference to his sister, who had also attended the sixth form, and her experience of studying Geography at Durham. Despite the strong framing at Pasteur, James draws on a logic that is taken from the familial and experiential instead. Thus in his personal statement James has realised an **academic knower discourse** rather than his sixth form’s prevailing **prospective knower discourse**.

5.4.3 Central: ‘I wanted to appear like I am quite a diverse person; I’ve done lots of stuff’

Central’s **institutional narrative** had less clarity than the other sites. While reflecting on its **internal narrative** of nurture and care, which took account of its more vulnerable refugee intake, it was also, strongly influenced by its narrative of *institutional survival*. The weakly framed pedagogy at Central produced a contingency discourse which projected an **academic knower discourse**, and a strongly framed message about attending university. Both of which may be expressions of its evolving *pedagogic identity*. But students often used an **introspective knower discourse** which combined an **academic knower discourse** with intrinsic markers of the *self* and the possibility of having an intrinsic connection with the knowledge content of their degree subject (see, for example, section 5.3.3).

The two extracts reproduced here illustrate further variation within this subset of students. In Yasmin’s extract it is possible to hear a much greater emphasis on

her commitment to a career trajectory and the skills required to successfully complete a degree.

Yasmin, reading from her personal statement:

Y: My interest in Psychology led me to focus on it as part of my EPQ¹⁷. I am considering the question: To what extent are the treatments for depression effective in the UK? The EPQ allows me to demonstrate and develop my research, writing and analytical skills. Completing the EPQ will take commitment and organisational skills and will present an intellectual and exciting challenge. I believe that it will prepare me to take on any further challenges as an undergraduate. (Personal statement extract, Yasmin, year 13 Psychology candidate, Central)

DM: Did you feel pressure to appear in a particular way?

Y: I wanted to appear like I am quite a diverse person, I've done lots of stuff outside of school like taekwondo, I've done reading within the subject that I am interested in umm, I am quite committed to a career in psychology. And [...] I have done good work experience so they will probably think that I've got lots of relevant skills. (Yasmin, year 13 Psychology candidate, Central)

The narrative here voices many of the **prospective knower discourse** characteristics, thus emphasising the significance of external markers such as training and skills, and is oriented to future professions.

I have used Najih's personal statement next because he too *realises* a **prospective knower discourse** which deviates from Central's preferred **academic knower discourse**. The narrative that follows is also salient because it tells of the significance of his father's own narrative. The discourse shifts between sentiments such as following subjects that are "*your passion*" to wanting to make his father proud by realising a future in Finance. In doing so his

¹⁷ The EPQ is an extended project qualification. It requires students to conduct their own independent research and write it up as a dissertation. It is marked and graded by an exam board, but is not part of a taught course and does not get awarded UCAS points. The EPQ has become increasingly popular among students who want to signal their skills or aptitude for degree level study.

talk suggests the criteria he invokes for his subject choice is linked to both personal and familial concerns.

Najih reading from his personal statement:

N: I am confident, very logical and can work well with numbers; these can be applied to the skills required in a working environment. I was privileged enough to do an internship with [XXX] where I worked in the financial operations department where my tasks involved managing finances, keeping records and creating invoices. (Personal statement extract, Finance candidate, Central)

DM: Did you feel under pressure to appear in a particular way?

N: Just that I wanted to show that I am creative and that I can think outside of the box, someone who has work skills. I think those qualities are important. I know finance is not really the most exciting subject but if I did it I would be in a good position whereas if I did my passion [Psychology] I don't know what sort of job I would get. I think it will widen my options but I'm still not sure if I should take this route or the other

DM: When you say this route or the other, what do you mean?

N: One that is more work related and the other that is more academic.

DM: What will help you decide?

N: My dad would want me to go into economics or finance or something like that. I just want to make him proud first of all before I do the degree I want to do. (Najih, Finance candidate, Central).

In deciding against applying for a Psychology degree and opting for a professional degree in Finance, Clark et al. (2015) may well analyse Najih's choice as a consequence of a growing *discourse of responsabilism*, where young people take personal responsibility for their decisions in steering through financial uncertainty. Najih presented an interesting case because he was one of the A level *re-takers* that, in the future, would no longer be welcome at Central (see chapter four). In choosing Finance over Psychology, he appears to

have rejected Central's own ideological representation of its *imagined typical student*. These are students who are academically able, and likely to follow disciplinary routes into higher education. Rather than realising an *academic knower discourse* within his personal statement, Najih can be heard using language that projects a *prospective knower discourse* instead.

The impression given is that some of these students deploy resources other than the *UCAS pedagogy* at their sixth form. Salient comments about family background in the extracts suggest that familial narratives offer additional logics to those operating at the school. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most divergence could be heard at Central. But what I have also shown is that there is a mix of discourses available across and within all three of the sixth form sites. Their deployment was often combined with the resources that students mobilised at this stage in the process. In this respect the UCAS process has been conceptualised here as a dynamic rather than stable *pedagogic space* (see appendix 6).

5.5 Conclusion

I now summarise my findings and draw some conclusions about what has been observed regarding the *UCAS pedagogy* and how it was variously practised at each sixth form institution. I have shown that UCAS is a dynamic pedagogic process with the potential to signal the market value of degree subjects to students. I have also shown how these differed from site to site because each sixth form has a distinct *pedagogic discourse*. This is a consequence of its *institutional narrative* and how each site narrates its role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students in response to the current policy context. It is

through the way these different logics work together that the *ideal knower discourse* is produced.

Through analysing this process, I have also found that each site's pedagogic practices vary in strength. Therefore, how knowledge about applying to university is framed and the way students are given access to it and the way students are shown what counts as an *ideal knower*, also vary from site to site. For example, the prevailing degree subject choice at Castle centred on humanities and arts subjects. It may have been that the sixth form's emphasis on A levels that are "*Oxbridge winners*" helped to give these subjects their credibility.

Furthermore, there may be some merit in applying Boudon's (1974) theory of rational action here. Despite one exception, Castle students were the group most oriented to the present, because most spoke of coming from "*Oxbridge families*", their ambitions to gain entrance to Oxbridge would also keep them in the same place as their parents regardless of degree subject choice and in spite of current credential inflation (Ainley and Allan, 2010; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; van de Werfhorst, 2003, 2007). This makes sense of the fact that despite being associated with much lower income occupations (Davies et al., 2013), this subset had opted for humanities subjects.

Because one of my research questions asks about how students are positioned and how they position themselves as degree subject choosers this is an important observation to have made. It means that I have shown that students' thinking about the value of a degree subject is to an extent realised through the *UCAS pedagogy* specific to each sixth form. The personal statement writing

process, where it could be seen that students were being taught the criteria of a *legitimate text* (Bernstein, 2000), was a useful lens for observing this. This also adds to the findings of previous research such as Donnelly's (2014), whose study explored how, in their applications to university, students were being directed via a *hidden curriculum* towards applying to Oxbridge.

But, it is significant that I have also paid attention to those occasions when the strength of the school's pedagogy, and thus the influence of its *ideal knower discourse* was tested by the strategies that students brought to the UCAS process. These moments helped to highlight the conflicts and competing narratives that underpinned the process. They show where the strategies deployed by the school, and used to categorise students as one or other type of *ideal knower*, might have come into conflict with other resources in students' lives. It is precisely this testing out of the boundaries that has helped to point at the process underpinning how students learn to make judgements about the knower characteristics that have the most value. This also conveyed to students the value of the different disciplinary fields that they were considering.

In the next chapter I take the analysis further to explore how the resources that students bring to the process, together with the pedagogy at each site, impacts on the sorts of decisions that they make about the type of subject that would have the most value. This allows me to identify a fuller range of possibilities that exist for students at each site.

Chapter 6: UCAS as a Pedagogic Space

6.0 Introduction

The aim of the previous chapter was to analyse the *UCAS pedagogy* at each of the three sites. The personal statement writing process proved to be a useful tool for exploring how site-specific *institutional narratives* contributed to this. A key finding was that for each of the sixth forms, its *institutional narrative* provided an underlying logic that helped to shape the *UCAS pedagogy*. This could be seen reflected in the type of *ideal knower discourse* that was projected by staff and students at each locale. Yet, I was also able to show that when talking about constructing the personal statement, there were times when the institutional and the *student narratives* did not converge. This led me to conclude that the *institutional narratives* were fragile and incomplete. While they may have provided orientations in terms of each sites' projected *ideal knower discourse*, they do not precisely tell students how to prioritise degree subject choice.

Aim and structure

One of the aims of this chapter is to attend to the way that the *UCAS pedagogy* was taken up by my sample of 16–18 year olds, and the resources that they brought to this process. This involved listening to how they spoke about the degree subjects that they were choosing and the criteria they invoked through doing so. Hence, in this final data chapter I want to extend the analysis beyond

the schools' **UCAS pedagogy** by taking it to the **narratives** students were using to discuss their degree subject decisions in the interview.

As stated in chapter three, these **narratives** were constructed from the stories that students told me about their personal concerns and goals. Often these centred on the familial as a resource, and how they said they decided on the value of the degree subjects they were considering, (see also appendix 4 for a worked example).

Archer's principles of reflexivity and staying put

The application of Archer's (2003, 2007) central principle of *reflexivity* has helped to capture the meaning of what has been observed here. A general account of Archer's theory of reflexivity as an emergent personal property is outlined in chapter two, and a further discussion of its application within this work can be read in chapter seven. In order to understand student decision making practices, I have drawn on some of Archer's language, specifically her reference to the option of students who *reflexively* decide to *stay put* (ibid.). Archer uses this term to refer to what might appear to be the *social immobility* of an actor (ibid.). But for Archer, this is not something that happens by default (ibid.). Instead, "*staying put has to be worked on*" (2007, p. 158): in other words social reproduction is an active task; it is a voluntary action, chosen by the individual in order to achieve or help define their own *personal goals and projects*. These ideas are used later in the chapter (section 6.3) when I analyse how some of the students in my sample worked *reflexively*.

The rest of this chapter falls into two main parts: the first, section 6.1 attends to the student language and the different ways that they expressed their degree subject priorities. This relies on analysis of illustrative quotes from the student interviews. These are included here in order to exemplify the principles that were derived from my participants' language and that were derived using Bernstein's (2000) analytic tools. This involved the same process of category building that I described in chapter three. I am aware that by isolating the student talk away from the site and the narrative sequence, there is a danger of losing sight of the context that they are situated within, which could have a bearing on the way this data gets read.

This is resolved in the second part of the chapter, sections 6.2 and 6.3, where student accounts of the deliberative process are considered in the context of the different institutional, familial and personal narratives that are told. It is by paying attention to the differences between students' accounts, the resources they deploy, and how the principles underpinning these combine or pull apart, that I am able to illustrate how the *pedagogic space* can be thought of as a dynamic one that calls for student reflexivity.

6.1 Understanding degree subject priorities

6.1.1 Principles of 'worth' 'waste' and 'risk'

Students commonly referred directly to "*worth*" and "*waste*" when expressing their uncertainty over which degree subject to study. Because the principles of "*worth*" and "*waste*" were contained directly in the language that my participants used I was able to assign them analytic codes and from these I abstracted further categories, such as *risk*, and meta-categories, such as *collective* or

individualised risk. **Collective risk** was most commonly associated with **student narratives** in which broader familial issues were at stake. This was expressed in a variety of ways,

This first set of quotes helps to exemplify how **collective risk** was expressed:

Najih: [...] *Family is important to me; they want me to succeed in this, obviously I am the first person to go to uni in my family. [...] the way my Dad looks at me sometimes, he feels disappointed, I tell him Dad it's not your fault I know you have tried your best. He works countless hours to do his best for me, my brother and my sister, so I am really proud of him for everything he does for us. My parents are supportive whatever I do, but they would prefer me to do something related to work, financial or economics. [...].* (Central)

Samia: *It's not a well-known enough discipline [...] you know, we're not extremely rich or extremely poor but at the same time my mum's come over here and we're all learning to adjust and we want a different life.* (Central)

Ava: *I think in terms of the Oxbridge thing, both my parents went to Oxford and so there is a lot of pressure because there is an expectation that I will go [...].* (Castle)

Unlike the expressions of responsabilised risk taking, captured by Clark and her colleagues (2015), or the responsabilised consumer, hypothesised by other researchers (see, for example, Molesworth et al., 2009; Naidoo et al., 2011, 2015; Nixon et al., 2010), the 16–18 year olds sampled here frequently deferred to their families' concerns. This data set also has much in common with Ball et al. (2000) who found that most young people operate within a 'framed field of reference' (ibid., p. 91).

Individualised risk, where a student's own self-interest and wellbeing might be at stake, was expressed in a number of ways. In common with the study conducted by Clark and her colleagues (2015), students were frequently heard

deferring their decision making to the self. This group of 16–18 year olds were more prominent in the Pasteur sub-set. Thus, unlike Clark et al. (ibid.), this category of risk is not necessarily associated with non-traditional or working-class students alone. The quotes included here help to exemplify the language students used when expressing this type of risk and exemplify the way in which the values of specific subjects were being weighed against the logic of risk.

Melody: If I choose Edinburgh, the Anthropology is Social Anthropology [...] but you have to pick two other things with it, like Archaeology, but I'm undecided because I could pick Politics, or I could end up with leaving with Forensic Anthropology, but then at LSE its more pure Social Anthropology, but it didn't seem right for me [...]. (Central)

Jess: Like I wasn't sure about what to choose between Biomedicine or Medicine [...] but yeah, at the end of the day it's up to me, they'd be happy with whatever I decide to do. (Pasteur)

Adam: [T]hey [parents] don't have any specific mission, they're supportive, but the onus is on me as to whether I apply to Oxford. As long as I have some sort of plan, they don't mind. (Castle)

Despite the distinctions between these two categories of risk, all students seemed to engage reflexively with the decision making process. In this way student deliberations can be thought of as **dialogic**. This refers to the multiple narratives including students' own personal concerns and priorities that they invoked throughout the UCAS process. These are exemplified further in sections 6.2 and 6.3.

What has been observed may represent what Archer (2003, 2007) described as a *reflexive inner conversation*. For Archer (ibid.), reflexivity replaces the role of structure in determining action. She refers to this as the *reflexive imperative* (ibid.), a consequence of the unpredictability in late modern society. However while supporting some of these assertions, my analysis demonstrates that the

significance of exterior processes, such as familial and *institutional narratives*, also form part of this inner dialogue for the students in this study. I return to discuss the relevance of this for the thesis in section 6.4.

6.1.2 Value in flux

The instances described above are a good example of how my analytic vocabulary was evolving. I had noticed that when used together “*worth*” and “*waste*” also inferred a measure of value as well as an implied risk. It was from taking notice of how this language was being used that I began to pay attention to the principles of *value and risk*. Through attending to the language contained in my participants’ speech in this way, I was able to take the language further to the meta-categories of *intrinsic and extrinsic value*, which were also reflected within the language that students used. Unlike risk, the principle of value was rarely static or fixed within the narrative. When talking about the value of a degree subject, the discourse of *risk* was also called into play, this invoked resources that were relevant in students’ lives.

A consequence is that through the different narrative sequences it is possible to hear the criteria that students bring to this process being expressed through a *dialogic process*. Their dialogue therefore, often moves back and forth between the value of connecting to a subject’s *internal* content and its capacity to connect students to something beyond this, to its *external* markers and what it can do for them in the world.

This observation resembles what Bernstein (2000) describes as the two faces of knowledge, the inner and outer (p. 83). These are synthesised through a process of recontextualisation by the pedagogic field of recontextualisation. For

Bernstein (2000) it is the learner's engagement with this synthesis that is now under threat. For many of the previously mentioned literatures in chapter two, these changes are visible in the restructuring of the university (Eagleton, 2010; Holmwood, 2017; Francis, 2011; Olssen, 2016; Redding, 2017; White, 2016), the re-framing of academic identities and work (Archer, 2008; Ball, 2012; Boden and Epstein, 2011; Clegg, 2008; Davies, 2005; Eagleton, 2010; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2013; Harris, 2005; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010) and the recasting of the student's role in employability terms (Brooks, 2017b; Holmwood, 2017; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Kelly et al., 2017). The data I have considered here show that students are committed to the inner and outer faces of knowledge.

The following quotes collected from students in each of the three sites, illustrate how they voice the *intrinsic value* of particular subjects:

Melody: I just enjoy researching and finding stuff by myself as well. I do like the idea of doing field work, like I don't know, there is something about finding out about new things. I think it's about developing intellectually; it's not all about money. (Central)

James: Well my degree is not really about a job, Geography is more of an interest. (Pasteur)

Ben: I want to be part of a movement that tries to make the world better, that sounds really embarrassing. It is really hard to find a degree that does that. That's why I would be willing to study Politics. (Castle)

The following quotes help to exemplify the language that was used to characterise *extrinsic value*:

Yasmin: The priority is that what I study will take me into a job at the end of it. (Central)

Alex: I've decided to study Chemistry, the main reason is because of the jobs after university rather than the actual university course itself. (Pasteur)

Gabby: I didn't apply for History, which would have been my first choice, but it only has a 7% acceptance rate, so, umm, I applied for straight English instead which has a higher acceptance rate for Oxford. (Castle)

Through listening to the way that **value and risk** intersected, my attention was drawn to the interplay between site-specific projections of the **ideal knower discourse** against students' own personal and collective concerns.

6.1.3 Knowledge career and temporality

The more abstract category of a **knowledge career** emerged from considering the way that students talked about the value of their degree subject choice regarding its potential to connect them to both its **intrinsic and extrinsic** possibilities. While deliberating over their degree subject choices, students were also strategically orientating themselves in time to the past, present and future as the basis for their decision making. This was a consequence of the different resources that students drew upon, such as the specialised **ideal knower discourse**, as well as those from their everyday lives including their familial narrative.

A **knowledge career** therefore conceptualises how students themselves decide what to do, and how to think about the value of various degree subjects and disciplinary fields. The UCAS process provides a boundary-crossing point where specialised and everyday languages about the value of different degree subjects come into dialogue. In their attempts at producing a coherent narrative about the value of degree subjects, these languages were recontextualised by

students to produce the **knowledge careers** that they were orienting towards. Thus, as they endeavoured to *realise* their sixth form's prevailing **ideal knower discourse**, students oriented towards a **knowledge career** that was produced through *dialogue* with this, and the various resources that they drew upon.

The application of Clegg's (2010) conceptualisation of a time-scape is useful here. Clegg (ibid.) writes that a time-scape represents a powerful way "to disrupt dominant assumptions about [...] higher education in terms of individual social mobility" (p. 347). She suggests that a time sensitive analysis such as this can reveal that students' orientations to the future are far more complex than implied by the prevailing policy discourse. She uses this to challenge the limited view of the future that is so often presented by the policy discourse of employability (ibid.).

Clegg (ibid.) makes the point that if using a time-scape as an analytic tool, researchers need not be restricted by western conceptions of linear time. She therefore builds her time-scape around different conceptualisations of time, including circulatory time, which borrowing from Hughes (2002), she refers to as *nomadic time* (Clegg, p. 347). For Clegg, this provides a powerful way of challenging the either/or thinking that is present within the prevailing policy discourse. Clegg (ibid.) writes that a time sensitive analysis which includes *nomadic time* allows for students who "return and revisit, rather than simply move on" (p. 347) to future employability. My reading of this theoretical work has influenced my analysis of the different **knowledge career** categories found throughout my data.

Drawing on my analysis of *student narratives*, it was possible to combine their talk about the *value* and *risk* of choosing particular degree subjects with an associated *temporal orientation*. This is represented diagrammatically in figure 6.1 as the four *knowledge careers* that these associations formed.

Figure 6.1: Knowledge careers and their association with time

	Future	Present
Extrinsic	Professional	Disciplinary
Intrinsic	Real world	Nomadic
		Past

1) **Disciplinary knowledge careers:** temporally, this was characteristically oriented towards the present or short-term future provided by the space offered by being at university. In this case, some students expressed a connection to the knowledge content itself, while others valued the subject because it provided them with a way of postponing thinking longer term. The following extracts from Ava's and James's narratives provide examples of this category:

Ava: I'm quite interested in environmentalism, but I chose English, partly because I don't have any definite plans yet; it's flexible enough to help me find what I want to do, if that makes sense? (Castle)

*James: I want the rite of passage,
It's like the middle ground between adult life and school life, studying Geography will give me that. (Pasteur)*

2) **Professional knowledge careers:** temporally, this had a much clearer orientation towards a future stretching out beyond the university to what would happen next, taking into account their various personal goals and future concerns focussed on the possibilities of employment. The following quotes demonstrate this principle:

Phoebe: I think it's always worth it, especially as I plan to go into a career with my degree. (Pasteur)

Alex: With History there is no specific job, it is not something that I could get a career from, but with Chemistry it's more about a career. (Pasteur)

Yasmin: I want to do Psychology [...] whatever subject I choose, it needs to be something that I can do in the future with an actual job that could go with it. (Central)

3) **Real world knowledge careers:** temporally, this was also oriented to the future but in contrast to the **professional knowledge career** outlined above, students imagined a non-credentialised route to getting there. These students perceived a relationship with knowledge that exists in the real world, making links between their A level experiences, personal projects and notions of their future selves.

Dunni: [...] but then, personal training was something I thought I'd enjoy. I still think that I'd enjoy doing it, working at the XXX [name of organisation] they said I could finish my level 1 gym instructor training next year. (Dunni, Central)

Rob: So if you only get mediocre grades you're wasting £40-50,000, if I don't get the grades it would be a waste. I would then be better suited to an apprenticeship. (Rob, Pasteur)

Although small in number, this alternative way of expressing a **knowledge career** could be found across the data set as a whole, though precisely how it was voiced depended upon students' own circumstances.

4) **Nomadic knowledge careers:** temporally, this was oriented towards a longer sweep of time, including the past, present and future, with the past often linked to a familial or personal narrative. The imagined present and future was informed by returning to a familial or personal past. It was this that made it

distinct from the **disciplinary knowledge career**. The following extracts from Samia's, Rachel's and Nathan's narratives demonstrate this **knowledge career**.

Samia: I really aspire to being a journalist. But I don't want to do a degree in journalism, I want to learn about society and politics and the way things are first. Because I've seen things in my life that I don't really like and I see the way the media portray conflict, and I don't want to create a divided society, I don't want to be like that. I think it should be about bringing people back together. (Sociology candidate, Central)

Rachel: I mean all of our family and friends are all Anthropologists. It became something that I knew about [...]. (Anthropology candidate, Castle)

Nathan: [M]y dad's always been down the science route because he comes from Zambia and, him and four of his friends got a scholarship to come to England to study and that has really influenced me. (Psychology candidate, Central)

During the interview, it was evident from the commitment these students expressed about their respective subjects that they had chosen disciplinary fields that could connect them in time to the future through revisiting the past and also gaining self-enlightenment in the present.

These four different categories of **knowledge career** have been produced in order to capture the criteria these young people invoked in making their degree subject choices. The concept of a **knowledge career** is an outcome of the **UCAS process**, of considering what might be at stake between **value and risk** and their attempts at constructing a coherent narrative about their degree subject priorities.

Summary

On analysing how students talked about their decisions about what to study at university I noticed the talk often turned to issues of “worth”, “waste” and “risk”. From this, I was able to abstract meta-categories such as *intrinsic* and *extrinsic value* and *collective and individual risk*. My analysis has highlighted how the principle of *time* was differently voiced in each site’s *institutional narrative* (see chapter four) and within each site’s projection of an *ideal knower discourse* (see chapter five). The principle of time also helped shape the different ways in which students expressed their degree subject priorities which I have here analysed by using the concept of *knowledge careers*. This has extended my analysis of what Bernstein calls the *grammar of possibilities* (Bernstein, 2000) that exist at the three sites. Although the *UCAS pedagogy* may lead to the projection of a site-specific *ideal knower discourse* with the potential to frame the decisions that students face, the application of a theory of time (Clegg, 2010) has made it possible to see that the site-specific *ideal knower discourse* can also be realised differently by students. I have conceptualised this as student’s variously projected *knowledge careers*.

6.2 The pedagogic space and the discursive gap

6.2.1 The pedagogic space explained

The aim of this section is to show the criteria by which students formed their subject priorities, and the link between this and the *pedagogic space* within which they are situated. *The pedagogic space* conceptualises the space that is invoked by the UCAS process. The space is partially defined by the *institutional narrative*, which brings its own set of concerns and pedagogic inputs to the process. Other narratives are brought into the space by students

who draw on additional resources. It is where these intersect that comes to define how the space gets used while preparing students to apply for their varying degree courses.

6.2.2 The discursive gap explained

The concept of a *discursive gap* is invoked in different ways throughout Bernstein's analysis of *pedagogic discourse* (Bernstein, 2000). The concept is described in chapter three (see section 3.5), which discusses how the notion of a *discursive gap* is significant for the method used by Bernstein for theory building (see also Moore and Muller, 2002). It was initially used by Bernstein to explain the space between what is known to us about the world through experience and what we learn about the world through pedagogised knowledge, i.e. knowledge taken from its source and recontextualised through ideas or theory. This dichotomy is informed by Emile Durkheim's account of the social world and the division between the profane and the sacred (Moore and Muller, 2002). In essence, this describes two types of knowledge forms, which Bernstein later referred to as *horizontal* and *vertical knowledge discourses* (Bernstein, 2000).

According to his model, *horizontal* and *vertical knowledge discourses* sit in relation to each other but are also held in tension against each other. Bringing these two knowledge discourses together requires translation by *someone* and this invites ideology to play at their interface (see also McLean et al., 2013a, 2013b). When Bernstein (2000) talks about such spaces he speaks of a potential space for change. Bernstein writes that

[...] I want to suggest that this gap or space can become (not always) a site for alternative possibilities, for alternative realisations of the relationship between the material and immaterial world. (Bernstein, 2000, p. 30)

For Bernstein, this isn't a complete break or *dislocation of meaning* (ibid.); instead, it is a conceptual gap or space that appears at the interface between two different types of knowledge discourse (the sacred and the mundane). These stand in tension to one another and in doing so have the potential to produce new knowledge. As Bernstein writes:

This potential gap or space I will suggest is the site for the unthinkable, the site of the impossible and this site can clearly be both beneficial and dangerous at the same time. This gap is the meeting point of order and disorder, of coherence and incoherence. It is the crucial site of the yet to be thought. (2000, p. 30)

Although Bernstein was not always optimistic about the chances of this happening, in my study I have used this concept to demonstrate that for the students, it means that there are always a range of possibilities for realising a ***knowledge career***.

Borrowing from Basil Bernstein (2000), it is my intention to use this conception of the ***discursive gap*** in order to extend the analysis of the ***UCAS pedagogy***. ***The discursive gap*** is used here to conceptualise the ***UCAS pedagogy*** and my account of students acting through it at each site. Through UCAS practices, students mobilise every day and specialised knowledge about the ***value*** and ***risk*** of choosing various degree subjects. The interplay between these and what students do with them in order to construct a coherent narrative, invokes the ***discursive gap***.

This is not dissimilar to Trowler's (2001) concept of a *critical juncture*. In both conceptualisations individuals face boundary crossing points, where they must steer through the tensions created by competing sets of ideas. This helps to establish my conceptualisation of UCAS as being a critical boundary crossing point in a young person's life. I demonstrate how this produces a more dynamic pedagogy that can have the potential to allow students to imagine new possibilities (McLean et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2017).

6.3 The discursive gap and the struggle to realise personal projects: the tension points in degree subject choice

6.3.1 Introduction

In this section I turn to the students' narratives and the stories they tell about their choices throughout the interview. I consider the tension points that exist for these students as they navigate the *pedagogic space* invoked by the UCAS process in each site, the strategies that these students deploy, and how they bring these into context with each other in their endeavours to realise their personal projects.

6.3.2 Central

In responding to the market logic it found itself subject to, Central had developed an evolving *pedagogic identity* of short and medium-term goals that were designed to aid its own survival. Its UCAS pedagogy was characterised as being weakly framed, a consequence of its uncertainty over the sort of sixth form it wanted to be and, therefore, the type of student that it wanted to serve. Perhaps precisely because it had a weakly framed pedagogy it was difficult to identify students who fully conformed to its prevailing *ideal knower discourse*.

By first referring to my analysis of the personal statements, and then following the analysis through to how I had come to characterise Central's ***ideal knower discourse*** (section 5.3), I identified Katy as one of two students who had profiles that came closest to this. Katy therefore offers an example of someone who has been steered by the ***UCAS pedagogy*** at her sixth form towards adopting its ***ideal knower discourse***. That is, one whose sense of self is oriented to their subject and who is temporally oriented to the present.

Katy: navigating a *disciplinary knowledge career* at Central

In this section I present how Katy talked about her developing sense of the value of a degree in history.

When I first interviewed Katy she was in year 12; she was one of many students in this sub-sample whose family had little direct experience of university. The extracts below demonstrate how she was navigating the resources available to her within the ***pedagogic space***.

[...] well History is what I am thinking about; History is a priority for me. I've chosen it as one of my A levels and I enjoy it. It's an interesting subject, umm, the things you have to learn, the way you have to answer questions as well. It's interesting because I don't really know what I want to do, so I should probably go with the subject that I enjoy. (Katy, year 12, Central)

The salient tropes used here are “*History is a priority*”, “*a subject I enjoy*” and “*it's an interesting subject*”; what we hear is Katy using a logic where the degree subject's value is linked to its content and personal interest. This, therefore, invokes the principle of ***intrinsic value***. But in addition, History is also a subject you can study when you “*don't really know what you want to do*”. For Katy, the value of a degree in History was linked to both its internal subject

content, and her developing sense of self, as someone learning in the present rather than planning for the future. In this regard, Katy appears to exemplify a person who is working at ‘*staying put*’, as conceptualised by Archer (2003, 2007) and observed by Stephenson and Clegg (2011).

In the next sequence, it is possible to hear the way that **value and risk** were weighed up to help reinforce her decision while remaining consistent with the school’s narrative. I have used the following extract to demonstrate this:

I’m not sure about jobs yet. Umm, Mr C mentioned that, well, I know with a History degree you can obviously go into teaching, and Mr C is going to give me some work experience helping him teach History to year 7. [...] my mum’s like, ‘it’s your choice if you want to do it, but if you don’t go to university what else are you going to do?’ [...] neither of them [parents] have been to university. (Katy, year 12, Central)

Katy comments that her family have had little experience of higher education. In this respect Katy may resemble one of the non-traditional students sampled by Clark et al. (2015). It is evident that Katy deployed the **ideal knower discourse** of her sixth form, but in what follows, the discourse of widening participation and the exposure she has had to various Aimhigher initiatives also come into play:

...I was applying to XXX [name of Russell Group university], everyone expected me to. I went to their summer school, so could have got my offer reduced for History to BBB when they wanted AAA, but I just didn’t want to go. It seems that there is a lot of expectation if you do History there. It feels quite competitive and pressurised. My friend, he’s studying History at XXX [name of post-92 university] and I went down to visit him, so he talked more about what a degree in History would be like there and he’s enjoying it. (Katy, year 13, Central)

What comes across strongly is that Katy had been exposed to two contrasting discourses about studying for a degree in History. One seemingly more

pressurised and goal-oriented (perhaps typical of the enterprise university, see, for example, works by Marginson, 2013) and the other more focussed on the experience of learning within the present. At stake for Katy was the risk of having to orientate to the future when the future was, for her, too remote. This implies that in choosing her degree, Katy was exposed to the temporalities that different university departments also project. Katy already had a sense of being a particular type of person with a particular set of goals, these helped to define her developing sense of the ***disciplinary knowledge career*** that she was orienting towards.

In deciding against applying to the more competitive, goal-focussed university, Reay et al. (2001) might well analyse Katy's choice as a consequence of the sixth form's *institutional habitus* and the student's *cultural capital* (ibid.). If using Boudon's analytic approach, one might argue that Katy's present time orientation can be understood against the rational action of class maintenance (Boudon, 1974). Katy, may well have little to lose, as her parents were not graduates, and a less intensive university that focussed on teaching rather than research, may well have presented a desirable outcome. By contrast, Archer (2003, 2007) might analyse this as a consequence of *reflexive deliberation* which replaces the role of structures in determining action and fulfilling individual personal projects. Clark et al. (2015) suggest this is a symptom of a growing *discourse of responsbilism*, where working-class young people, in particular, take personal responsibility for their ability to steer around market uncertainties. Katy was subjected to multiple discourses about the value of a degree in History. The tensions between these exposed her to the possibility of contrasting connections in time (the present and the future). But evidently, Katy

also had a strongly developed sense of herself in the present which converged with her developing interest in History, and the **UCAS pedagogy** at her sixth form. In the final sequence of talk presented above, one can also hear the **dialogic process** at work, where Katy mobilised the narrative of a friend and her teacher, to help define the sort of **knowledge career** she was orienting towards. This is one that positions her with disciplinary study, rather than towards one that will prepare her more directly for the graduate labour market.

Dunni: navigating a real world knowledge career at Central

In contrast to Katy, Dunni was strongly oriented to the long-term future. When she joined the sixth form in year 12, Dunni had considered a Nursing degree because, she said, it would attract a bursary and she wouldn't have to pay fees. As she considers these issues, Dunni can be heard deploying a wide range of discursive resources which pull against both her **familial narrative** and Central's **ideal knower discourse** (see section 5.3). The extract below, which comes from the first round of interviews, shows Dunni deploying her dad's narrative in her developing sense of the value of a **knowledge career that is oriented toward the world**.

I initially thought yeah, I could study Nursing because it's free and then it's not my money I'm wasting. But my dad says he'll pay for it, because I said I'm not going to take out a loan so he says... 'yeah, yeah, I'll pay for it', my dad...he's involved in mental health, and Nursing is kind of. There's always a demand for that kind of work so they'll always be, you'll always be needed but then, it's not worth it if I'm not going to enjoy it. (Dunni, year 12, Central)

It was tempting to interpret this as an ends/means discourse about value-for-money as conceptualised by scholars such as Clark et al. (2015) or Naidoo and Jameison (2005). Dunni was one of two students in my Central sub-sample

whose family had first-hand experience of higher education. Dunni's dad was a graduate and worked in the mental health sector. In this sense her father's own career trajectory could have provided her with a familiar route into higher education and a **knowledge career** that would lead to a health care profession.

However, the **familial narrative** is reworked in the example below as she decides what her priorities are. In contrast to Katy, she can be heard rejecting those emphasised in the **pedagogic space** of Central's sixth form.

My dad says now everyone has degrees, so if you don't have that, how can you get further than other people [...] But just because I'm doing English now. I don't know how to explain it, yeah, yeah there won't be a high demand for me in terms of a job. I could become a writer, umm, a journalist and it's like... it's rare, so there might be 10 jobs for a journalist whereas for a health care worker there could be 100 jobs. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

At this stage in the narrative Dunni's strategy seemed to be consistent with the instrumentalism which is often referred to in scholarly and policy texts (see my discussion of this in chapter two; for example, Brooks, 2017a, 2017b; Clegg 2011; Kay et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2017; Molesworth, 2009; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Nixon et al., 2010). However, Dunni's long-term employment goals were not fully consistent with the pedagogic discourse at Central, which projected an **academic knower discourse**. In the next sequence, Dunni can be heard reworking her dad's narrative.

[...] I'm in two minds about going to uni now because everyone goes to uni and it doesn't mean anything. To me it doesn't mean anything because everybody does it. It's seen as the right thing to do, a bit like a marriage, but it's not necessarily the right thing to do. It's not for everybody. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

This reflexive inner dialogue that she had constructed for herself resurfaces later in the interview.

Yeah, when talking to parents yeah, if you don't say that your child has gone to uni people will think that they haven't made it because they could be in a better paid job than your child. But then lots of people who have made it and they haven't gone to uni. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

Towards the end of this sequence she can be heard pulling away, drawing on other people's voices which helped to confirm her developing sense of orientation towards a **knowledge career** that sees the value of subject knowledge as being grounded within the **real world**. In the next sequence Dunni explores another way of reconciling the tension between the *pedagogic discourse* that she was exposed to throughout the UCAS process and her own personal project and goal.

Sport is what I love doing and it's not just a subject, it's what I actually enjoy, what I love doing, it's who I am and what makes me as a person. Recently I've been looking at Sport Science, and then thinking about teaching PE, so I am thinking about Loughborough. I know that if you say you have a degree then people would say they want you to train them (Dunni, year 13, Central)

Here the narrative emphasis changes quite significantly; it is also consistent with the **introspective knower discourse** that she adopted when talking about her personal statement (see section 5.2.1). But in the next episode Dunni deploys another set of resources which directly compete with both the **familial** and **institutional narratives** that were deployed in the sequence above.

[...] but then umm, personal training was something I thought I'd enjoy. I still think that I'd enjoy doing it, working at the XXX [name of organisation] they said I could finish my level 1 gym instructor training next year. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

In some respects this resonates with Boudon's (1974) rational choice model, as against her dad's advice, she can be heard doubting the value and worth of a degree in Sport Science. This is demonstrated by the following two extracts:

My dad says now everyone has degrees, so if you don't have that, how can you get further than other people. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

Further on in the narrative she argued:

[but] if everyone goes to uni it doesn't mean anything because everybody does it. (Dunni, year 13, Central)

Boudon certainly argues that if students perceive that the value of a transition to a higher level is worth less than when their parents undertook it, they are less likely to make the transition (see also van de Werfhorst et al., 2003). But in analysing the interview as a single narrative it is possible to hear the '**dialogic process**' at work. Dunni seemed to be responding to the strategies that were contained within other people's narratives, and these formed the basis of her own internal dialogue. In this way, various resources were deployed, each with their own underlying logic. As she attempted to produce a coherent narrative about the different opportunities that studying Sport Science can bring, one can hear her manoeuvring between the various discourses that were available to her. And here, Dunni's concerns around degree subject choice are expressed through the discourse of **value and risk**. Thus the value of choosing Sport Science gets played out against the risks of having a degree that doesn't mean anything "*because everyone has one*" (see van de Werfhorst et al., 2003, 2007; Boudon, 1974).

Extrinsic value and **intrinsic value** are both in play. They converge with Dunni's developing interest in a working future in sport and the sense that she has of herself in the **real world**. Because Sport is something that she "loves and that makes her a person", this can connect her to the future. For Archer (2003, 2007), these are examples of voluntary and *reflexive courses of action*. It is this reflexive work that mediates between structure and agency. The UCAS process provides both a set of pedagogic practices and a boundary crossing point at which both structure and agency come into play.

Dunni is positioned at the interface where different discourses meet. Her stance certainly problematises the view that higher education credentials have become normalised as the main measure of success for most young people. On the contrary, she seems to recognise the potential implications of the very credential inflation which some commentators see as an inevitable consequence of the recent expansion of higher education (Ainsley and Allan, 2010; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown and Tannock, 2009).

6.3.3 Pasteur

While curriculum knowledge within the sixth form curriculum had remained traditional and stable, staff had adopted new priorities in response to the structural changes that had taken place within the university sector. Its **UCAS pedagogy** was fairly strongly framed, its' **imagined typical student**, both community minded and oriented to the professions. Looking across the data, it was not difficult to find students whose profiles were consistent with Pasteur's **intuitional narrative**. Its logic was underpinned by an extrinsic orientation to

degree subject knowledge, and a projected **prospective knower discourse** which was focussed on the future.

Alex: navigating a professional knowledge career

The following sequences from Alex's narrative demonstrate how differently the same subject, History, can be positioned at different sites. Both Katy at Central and Alex at Pasteur are examples of students who confirmed their sixth form's respective **institutional narrative** (see chapter four). For Katy (Central), the value of a subject's content was expressed using the principle of **intrinsic value**, a present time location and a projected **disciplinary knowledge career**. For Alex on the other hand, the value of the content of a subject like History was less clear, and it might be that she had a less strongly developed sense of herself within the present or the future. Reading through the narrative sequences, Alex can be heard moving back and forth between the **intrinsic value** of a degree in History, that connected her to the value of a learning experience for its own sake, and the **extrinsic value** of a subject such as Chemistry which had the potential to connect her to a more certain future. In this sense Alex was in the process of orienting towards a **professional knowledge career**. It is the latter **knowledge career** that helps to confirm her sixth forms' **institutional narrative**.

I knew it was going to be History or Chemistry [...] even though History is my favourite subject I've decided to study Chemistry the main reason is because of the jobs after university rather than the actual university course itself, it just seems a lot more worth it. (Alex, year 13, Pasteur)

This raises the question; if History was her favourite subject, why wasn't the relationship she had with it enough to steer the choice? In the next sequence

Alex can be heard reconsidering her choice as she orientates to its subject content.

But I do think that having a degree in History would be cool, it's interesting because I do really like learning about people, I like social history rather than political history for that reason. (Alex, year 13 Pasteur)

But then she weighs the risks attached to that choice, and this devalues History as a potential degree subject.

But then I talked to Mr X [school careers mentor], mostly what he said about getting a career, that with History there is no specific job, you could work in a library, which isn't that interesting, or you could work in the archives which would be more interesting but I don't think it is the thing that I could have a career from. (Alex, year 13 Pasteur)

In the next sequence, this **dialogic process** becomes more audible and seems to connect her to the **extrinsic value** of a degree subject and an orientation towards a future beyond the university.

[.....] at Nottingham, the lecturer I met, I emailed him before I went because I was asking him about the course and he was really helpful over email. And then I spoke to him on the admissions day and he was like 'oh yeah I remember you' and then he was really friendly and then he remembered my name, and then he said with Chemistry, well yeah[...]'you're guaranteed a job at the end of it, which could be anything from nuclear weapons, working for the government, sustainability or working for industry'. There is so much you could do with it. (Alex, year 13 Pasteur)

In the next sequence Alex seems to have moved away from the stance she had adopted earlier and orientates toward the **intrinsic value** of History in terms of the possible 'enjoyment' she will gain from studying it.

But I really liked the campus at Southampton, because I've been there twice now, I went for the open day and the admissions talk. And the

second time I went there we were given a tour by a student [...]. So the second time I got a bit more of a view into what students thought of doing History and they really enjoyed it, and then that made me think, I would really like to do it [History]. (Alex, year 13 Pasteur)

As the narrative unfolds various resources are applied; their underpinning logics are expressed as **value and risk**, which pull Alex back and forth between a **disciplinary knowledge career**, that orientates her to the knowledge content and to the present, as opposed to a **professional knowledge career** that can connect her to a future beyond the university. In the next sequence Alex can be heard mobilising a **familial narrative**:

But then, I think it is more of a hobby and, or you could write History books which would be more interesting but I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be able to make a living from it. That's one thing my dad keeps saying is that with History, if I didn't study it, it is much easier to keep as a hobby than Chemistry. I just think that Chemistry will be a lot more worth it in the long run, that was mainly what made me choose Chemistry. (Alex, year 13 Pasteur)

The familial voice (her dad's) is mobilised at the end of the sequence to help reinforce the decision that she seems to have arrived at.

What can be heard here is that the value of a disciplinary field such as History pushes and pulls in different directions. In terms similar to Katy's (Central), Alex talks about History as her favourite subject thus she too is oriented to its subject content. Yet we also hear Alex working at constructing a narrative that will justify her subject choices in terms of their potential to connect with a longer term future. This is also consistent with how degree subjects were situated by the **institutional narrative** at her sixth form. Whereas for Katy, the value of a degree in History was strongly linked to its content, she also saw History as a

subject that offered her a learning experience that would anchor her to the present. In Archer's (2003, 2007) terms, this, too, was a narrative that had to be produced, and therefore implied that some reflexive work was involved in being able to achieve this position. Reading on further through Alex's narrative it is possible to hear her invoke criteria around **value and risk**, which help to reinforce her decision while also being consistent with the schools **institutional narrative** and its sixth form's UCAS pedagogic discourse.

Deirdre, another student at Pasteur, also considered whether she should study History but in different terms to Alex. In the extract below, like Katy at Central, at stake was the risk of having to orientate to the future when the future was at this point in her life, far too remote to contemplate. Instead Deirdre orientates to the present, and the **intrinsic value** of the subject content.

As I told you last time, I was thinking definitely Chemistry but it's completely different now. I know with Chemistry there are obvious careers you could get out of it. When I originally chose, I was thinking of going the Science route, but then it just seemed obvious that History was definitely a subject that I really enjoyed. (Deirdre, year 13 Pasteur)

In common with Katy, Deirdre valued the disciplinary culture and present time orientation that her degree choice promised, rather than the longer term career possibilities it might have opened up.

I think a History degree is the sort of degree people take when they're not sure what route they want to go down. I think that for me, I don't have a specific career plan, I don't have an exact idea. So obviously later on History will open a lot of doors, but it also gives me a deeper understanding of things in the world. (Deirdre, year 13 Pasteur)

In Deirdre's narrative a degree in History was linked to the growing sense that she had of herself in the present rather than in the future. In choosing to study History over Chemistry, Deirdre rejected her school's future oriented logic, *and the prospective knower discourse* espoused via her sixth form's **UCAS pedagogy** (see section 5.3). Instead, her developing sense of self has oriented her towards a **disciplinary knowledge career**. This is a position arrived at *reflexively*, deferring to internal as well as external dialogue with others (Archer, 2003, 2007). In the next sequence she can be heard using resources that pulled away from the **UCAS pedagogy** of her sixth form.

My aunt, who is a lecturer at one of universities, she talked to me about my choices and she got me to rethink the Chemistry idea [...]. (Deirdre, year 13 Pasteur)

Some useful contrasts emerge from focussing on how different individuals in different **pedagogic spaces** are engaged in rewriting the value of the same subject. They also reinforce Brook's (2003) argument that there is a need to look beyond the Bourdieusian frame, of *habitus, field and capital* when seeking to understand the high degree of intra-site variation, such as that found within my sample as whole.

Rob: Real world knowledge career

I now turn to Rob's narrative; he was one of two students in this sub-sample whose family had little direct experience of university. Like Deirdre, Rob can also be heard re-writing the dominant **institutional narrative** at his sixth form. This helps to point to the wider range of realisations that are possible within Pasteur **pedagogic space** (see Moss, 2017, 2003).

Yeah, all my choices are linked to what I am thinking of doing later on which is Economics, I've got one offer from Leeds. It's not my first choice though [...]. (Rob, Economics and finance candidate, year 13 Pasteur).

Rob's narrative contained a strong ends/means discourse that weighed a degree in the disciplinary field of economics against 'value-for-money' criteria. This was consistent with Pasteur's ***institutional narrative***, and in his narrative he connected his degree choice to the type of employment he imagined for himself in the longer-term future (see Clark et al., 2015). The next sequence, however, demonstrates that he also deployed personal and familial reference points as a resource for helping to consider some of the choices he was making.

But I've done some research and was thinking about going to America and compared to the prices there, I've looked at the University of Southern California and that costs around \$67,000 all in. My friend, last year applied to Notre Dame University in Indiana, it costs around the same as here, there are a lots of apprenticeship opportunities there than here, America might be a better option. (Rob, year 13, Pasteur)

Here he weighs the comparative financial cost of studying in the UK and abroad in terms that are close to the findings from debt aversion research (Jones, 2014, 2016; and Jones et al., 2016). The next sequence in the narrative continues to demonstrate how Rob engaged in weighing ***risk and value***.

University has always been on the cards. But then I question the validity of it all. I have lots of friends who do not have degrees, they have apprenticeships and jobs. (Rob, year 13 Pasteur)

Here it is possible to hear the ***dialogic process*** as Rob draws on his ***familial narrative***, with its emphasis on a degree in a disciplinary field such as Economics. Using the phrase "*university has always been on the cards*", he positions this against that of his friends' narratives, which provide an alternative

way of imagining the future. In his attempts at producing a coherent narrative, and sorting through his options, he states that he “*questions the validity of it all*”; even though university was “*always on the cards*”, there are no certainties over which direction he should go in.

I'm just thinking what's a degree worth? If you get a really good job at the end because you went to a good uni, it would be easier to pay it back. So if you only get mediocre grades your wasting £40-50,000 on a mediocre degree, if I don't get the grades it would be a waste. I would then be better suited to an apprenticeship. (Rob, year 13 Pasteur)

At stake for Rob is the risk of not getting the grades that he needs to get into the best university that would make an economics degree “*worth it*”. In the next sequence Rob can be heard considering the additional risk of putting off employment until later, which was weighed against the value of studying for an Economics degree in the present.

What comes across is that Rob was subjected to multiple discourses about the value of a degree in Economics. Rob's degree choices are informed by his sixth forms ***institutional narrative***, which through its ***UCAS pedagogy*** projects a ***prospective knower discourse***. But with his sights set on the experience of living and perhaps studying or working in the United States, Rob had a strongly developed sense of himself within a future beyond the university. This converged with a developing interest in Economics and Finance within the ***real world***. In the final sequence, he can be heard orienting towards the ***real world knowledge career***.

Getting a degree, it's about getting a job, that is extremely important right? But going to America, it will be an amazing experience, but that will be about networking as well. I think it's important to have a plan, that's extremely important as well. (Rob, year 13 Pasteur)

What stands out about Rob's narrative is his deployment of friends' experiences, which had become a significant strategy amongst the wide range of formal and informal resources he drew upon and which brought everyday experiences to the fore (McLean et al., 2013a). Rob's orientation to the future led him towards the prospect of work and possible study in the US. In this respect he may resemble the future- and career-oriented middle-class students among Stephenson and Clegg's (2011) sample of undergraduates. In this interview, Rob was also engaged in bringing the different discourses he had been subject to together, thus constructing a more coherent narrative for himself. Bernstein's (2000) concept of the *discursive gap* is useful here. Pasteur's strong orientation to the future, its specialised knowledge about non-academic routes and of non-UK-based universities may have enabled Rob to recognise other possibilities in the light of his own concerns which were helping to define the sort of *knowledge career* that he appeared to be orienting towards. This is one that will position him more specifically within the real world of the graduate labour market.

6.3.4 Castle

Castle is characterised as having a strong pedagogic discourse, which I referred to as an 'Oxbridge pedagogy' (see chapter five), a strategy adopted in order to serve its unusually high population of privately educated, middle-class sixth formers whose aim it was to study at an Oxbridge university. Despite their seemingly unchanging character, universities at the elite end of the sector must also respond to changing circumstances. For instance, the new higher education funding regime (Browne, 2010), carried with it an expectation that

elite universities would extend their quota of state educated candidates (BIS, 2011; see also Clark et al., 2015; Whitty et al., 2015, and Zindars, 2010). Castle appeared to be in a good position to meet this demand. In keeping with the Oxbridge admissions criteria, its *imagined typical student* was high achieving and oriented to the demands of academic study. Unsurprisingly, with its strong pedagogic code and seemingly strong convergence between their students' familial and the *institutional narrative*, a high proportion of its students conformed to the sixth forms *imagined typical student*.

Yet at Castle, I found that despite their privileges students from affluent, middle-class families are still calculating 'worth', 'risk' and 'value'. Some students certainly prioritised degree subjects in terms of their disciplinary value, specifically those that are well regarded academically by Oxbridge. However, as shown in chapter five, this group of students had also been coached via UCAS pedagogic practices, to express a strong subject identity. But some students were also subject to a *familial narrative* that presented them with a different logic and that did not directly converge with the sixth forms' *institutional narrative*, this led to different types of value/risk calculation. The cases that I present here have been selected because they represent two such examples.

Rachel: navigating a Nomadic knowledge career at Castle

Rachel is a year 13 student who came to Castle at the beginning of year 12 from the independent sector. In many ways, her narrative was typical of the majority of this sample set and is consistent with the sixth forms *academic knower discourse*, characterised as having a present time orientation and strong subject identity. Yet, when it came to her choice of degree subject content she prioritised Anthropology, a subject that drew on her *familial*

narrative, which gave her a strongly developed sense of herself as part of this familial past within the present. In interview she weighed this against the idea of studying Geography, a degree subject that had the potential to orientate her more certainly towards the future, but which would represent a break in the **familial narrative**.

The following sequence shows how Rachel placed her decision making in the context of family members and friends. These provided important resources from which she was able to imagine studying Anthropology within the elite university sector. Because she wasn't offered a place at her preferred elite sector university, she was encouraged to reconsider her options. Because her reflexive deliberations are neither linear nor static, Rachel provides a good example of someone whose sense of future self, aligns with the category of a **nomadic knowledge career**.

Well, I just didn't get into XXX [names elite sector university], umm...the expectations of my family and all my family friends was that I would go and then I didn't actually get in. I was going to do Anthropology and I am now not sure what I want to study, it's just that everybody kinda assumed I was going to study Anthropology and now I need to re think things.
(Rachel, year 13 Castle)

Her dilemma was whether or not she should break with the family tradition of studying Anthropology now that her application had been turned down. Salient tropes, such as “*expectation of my family*” and “*everybody kinda assumed I was going*”, gave the impression that at stake was the risk of pulling away from this **familial narrative**. In this respect, Rachel's story provides an example of Archer's (2003, 2007) notion of *contextual incongruity*, where an interruption in social circumstances may prompt alternative causes of action (ibid.). For

Archer, increased unpredictability and uncertainty in the world has meant that individuals no longer automatically act within a framed field of reference. Instead, it is the *reflexive inner conversation* that mediates between structure and agency (ibid.). In the next episode one can hear how her strategies were, in part, consistent with the **familial narrative** and the resources that she deployed from other people's lives:

"My nan went to XXX [names elite sector university] to study Anthropology and my mum went to XXX [names elite sector university] and then research at XXX [names elite sector university] doing Anthropology [...laughs] and then all our friends are anthropologists. (Rachel, year 13 Castle)

In this last sequence it was possible to hear the **dialogic process**; other people's experiences, such as her mother's, nan's and family friends', form part of this inner dialogue about the value of a degree in the field of Anthropology and the risk of turning away from this strategy. In this respect, Rachel's narrative appears to challenge some of the assertions made by scholars such as Ball et al. (2000) where choice is now bound up with decisions that are disconnected from the past (see also Clark et al., 2015).

The next episode has salience because it announces the presence of additional tensions.

[...] Because of the expectations from my family, because we're an Oxbridge family I wanted to study Anthropology at XXX [names elite sector university] but then I felt relieved because I didn't actually want it. Umm, yeah they are pressuring me to do a gap year before reapplying again next year but I don't want to do that either. (Rachel, year 13 Castle)

Rachel was responding to an interrupted discourse, where studying Anthropology at an elite university was seen as the logical next step. Now that she has been left to reconsider her options, in the next sequence she can also be heard pulling away from this narrative, borrowing from other voices with a logic that takes her away from the traditional familial route of studying Anthropology at an elite university.

I spoke to my cousin's friend who did Geography, so I am thinking of changing to Leeds and to Geography I think Geography is probably a bit more employable and Leeds just really appeals yeah, I think it's good because I think it's going to actually lead to where I want to go rather than where I should, where I was expected to go. (Rachel, year 13 Castle)

The salient parts of this extract are the phrases “*where I want to go*”, “*where I was expected to go*” and “*a bit more employable*”, which suggest that once the logic that underpinned the familial narrative had been interrupted the potential value of the field of Anthropology had also come into question. Rachel can also be heard deploying additional resources to help steer her through the dilemma she faced. A degree in Geography was valued for its potential to help her construct a more coherent narrative for herself. It also helped to connect her with an alternate set of goals which could take her to something new or different in the world. At stake is whether or not she was willing to break with the ***familial narrative*** and adopt a different disciplinary route.

Between the different sequences Rachel can be heard voicing other people's strategies which helped her to reposition and thus reimagine different possible ***knowledge careers***; these shifted between the reflexive work involved in *staying put*, which anchored her to the past via the ***familial narrative***, and an

alternative, that oriented her to a possible future project that she imagined Geography might enable her to pursue. I have used this last sequence, towards the end of the narrative, to illustrate how she eventually resolved the tension reflexively.

Actually it's alright, it's [Geography] probably got a bit more to it than Anthropology, I quite like the idea of doing Geography now [...]. (Rachel, year 13 Castle)

Salient phrases, such as “*it's probably got a bit more to it*”, give the impression that through a **dialogic process**, Rachel had arrived at a newly defined sense of herself in the present and of the future, where the value of a degree in Anthropology has been repositioned against the value of one in Geography.

For students at Castle, the **familial** and **institutional discourses** often converged to confirm and reinforce the sixth form's **institutional narrative** about applying to an elite sector university. In Bourdieusian terms this reflects the way institutional and embodied cultural capital can be mutually reinforcing (Reay et al., 2001a, 2001b, see also Shuker, 2014). But because Rachel had not been offered a place at an Oxbridge university she had questioned the value of study within the field of Anthropology altogether. Returning to the concept of the **discursive gap**, one could argue that this had caused her to disconnect from her sixth form's narrative of an Oxbridge trajectory. This may have encouraged her to deploy additional resources. In Bernstein's terms, it is at the interface between the different discourses at play that new or alternative possibilities emerge. At stake for Rachel was the **collective risk** of moving away from Anthropology. In Archer's (2003, 2007) terms, Rachel initially expressed a strong desire to *stay put*. But then, once the **familial narrative** had

also been interrupted the 'worth' of a degree in Geography at Leeds, and its potential to connect her to something new, encouraged her to consider pulling away from the task of *staying put*. In Archer's terms, critical moments in a person's life such as this can act back on reflexivity. Archer categorises this as a *fractured reflexivity* (2003, 2007). A consequence of this for Rachel was that she turned to alternate networks, in order to think beyond her situation and develop or define a new project for herself. In terms of the categories that I have developed and used throughout this chapter this can be likened to my conceptualisation of a student's projected **knowledge career**, which for Rachel included acting on the past, present and future.

Ben: Navigating real-world knowledge careers at Castle

In his calculations of risk and worth, Ben has much in common with both Danni at Central and Rob at Pasteur. At stake for all three students was whether or not university was the best option. Ben's narrative seemed to embody the strong subject identity that is associated with the projection of an **academic knower discourse** and the **disciplinary knowledge career** associated with the Oxbridge pedagogy that was typical at Castle. Yet, Ben's story also tells of a competing discourse that pulled him away from his Oxbridge offer. I will explore the way in which **value and risk** came into play for Ben and allowed him to construct a discourse about the value of degree subject knowledge that was distinct from the rest of the Castle subset of students.

Ben told me that he had been accepted by Oxford for the following academic year. However, because he was set on taking a gap year and the offer was a conditional one, Ben's request to defer his place was rejected. Ben decided that he would decline the offer and risk taking the gap year. According to Ball et al.

(2000), this could represent a disconnection from the future, which points to short-term decision making that is typical of middle-class youth in the current era of reflexive modernity (ibid.). However, in the narrative sequences that follow, Ben's decision making appeared to be based on an inner dialogue through which he defined and clarified his beliefs, attitudes and goals. It was against this that he expressed his main concerns and future courses of action (see, for example, Archer, 2003, 2007). The first sequence of the narrative demonstrates the way that institutional discourses from across his pedagogic career aligned to produce an expectation that disciplinary study would have been the next logical step.

Ms X [UCAS coordinator at Castle] was really good, but it does feel like I've been thinking about it for quite a long time. I think that's the thing when you're in that middle-class bubble, you feel you've always known about Oxbridge because people have been talking about it for so long. I went to XXX [selective independent school] and it definitely felt that I was thinking about which uni course I wanted to apply for in year 10. Not because I was some crazy child, but because it would be kind of exciting and you'd be looking at the websites and thinking 'what uni shall I go to?'
(Ben , year 13 Castle)

The sequence illustrates that, for Ben, academic study within the elite university sector was a given and not a risk and thus his decision to walk away from his offer appears even more puzzling. Further on, the narrative turned more specifically to his plans. In the next sequence he voiced a logic that pushed against that of Castle's specialised **UCAS pedagogy**, and towards the logic of experience and everyday practices (see, for example, McLean et al., 2013a, 2013b):

... through my dad I've got this offer of an internship in New York, well it's like work experience with this consultancy company. So, half way

through September I am going to New York and that's until February.
(Ben, year 13 Castle)

Through mobilising informal resources, such as people who were part of his family network, Ben oriented beyond the degree at Oxford University. As Ball et al. (2000) have also observed, it may be that Ben's wealth of social and cultural capital has extended his *horizons for action* (ibid., p.116) which incorporate external opportunities as well as the dispositions of *habitus*. In the next sequence he can be heard describing the rest of his plans:

When I get back I am going to go travelling with friends to south east Asia, which is the typical embarrassing thing to do, 'I am going to Thailand' and last year because I did an internship with XXX [name of organisation] based in the Philippines, so the people there were really nice, they said come back this year for our challenge, they had 1.7 million people signed up for volunteering, I think it's the biggest volunteering centre ever. So I can go there from May and stay out there until the end of the summer. (Ben, year 13 Castle)

This has salience because it suggests that voluntary work abroad provided an experience that gave him insight into an alternate discourse, thus allowing him to imagine a future for himself beyond the temporary future of time spent at university. Ben presented a case that strongly contrasted with the students across the rest of the data set at this school. While **risk** and **value** came into play, the risks were more closely associated with a category of risk that I had named **individualised risk** and not the **collective familial risks** that were expressed by some of the other students at Castle, such as Rachel. This becomes clearer in the next sequence:

[...] I spoke to some family friends who are in the voluntary sector and one of them, who works for the XXX bank [...] So when she came round

to dinner, that's when I thought to ask her about getting some work out there. (Ben, year 13 Castle)

In this sequence he draws on resources from his wider family networks. In the next sequence Ben tells of the significance of his experience while away in the Philippines, and the change that this brought about in thinking about what he would do after his A levels.

I flew to the island and it was just after the typhoon so it was quite crazy. I went to a village where everywhere on that island had been hit by the typhoons. It wasn't really an internship, it was volunteering helping them build houses. So the people there were really nice, they said come back this year which is what I have decided to do. So on going to the Philippines last year I realised that whatever offer I get, I am definitely going to take a gap year and then see what happens [...] (Ben, year 13 Castle)

This last episode has salience because it suggests that for Ben, the value of the gap year was not just about taking time off, delaying the future (Ball et al, 2000) or banking up experiences for his CV. Rather, Ben mobilised resources from the experiential and the everyday to pull away from his sixth form's prevailing **academic knower discourse**. In doing so Ben connected to an alternative kind of future, as the next sequence shows:

[...] like when I got back, some of my close friends this year are really into politics and, it's like, 'who shall we campaign for?' and leafleting and stuff. But then going to the Philippines you realise that there is so much else to be concerned about, but at an international scale. It is much harder to know what to do like, do you want to do something that makes a real difference work for the UN? So then I thought, well the least I could do is something that makes a real difference. (Ben, year 13 Castle)

Unlike the majority of the Castle sub-sample, Ben had a strongly developed sense of himself beyond Oxford. This incorporated his personal concerns, moral

choices and beliefs, aligning him with a *real world* rather than the imaginary (Bernstein, 2000), *disciplinary knowledge career* adopted by his counterparts.

6.4 Conclusions

Students across the three sites experienced tensions as they attempted to choose between intrinsically satisfying degrees and those that satisfied a combination of, financial, familial, or institutional concerns. The majority of students voiced these dilemmas around the potential for their degree subject to connect them to the past, present, or future and as the basis for moral purpose, employment or for change. An important finding was that student subject priorities did not completely rely on the pedagogic discourse at each site. Rather, their view of a subject's value can be understood as shaped by the successive meanings and associations students make throughout the UCAS pedagogic process (see Donnelly, 2014, 2015, and Shuker, 2014).

A multi-dialogic process, the discursive gap and knowledge career

The pedagogic process that I have described here is a multi-dialogic one; many voices contribute to the *pedagogic space* that the UCAS process invokes. While students are in this space they are engaged with selecting the available resources that have the most salience for them. How students account for their subject priorities is not necessarily directly linked to the policy discourse, or to the pedagogy at any one site. The strengths of the pedagogy and the institutional identity of each site are relevant, but these alone cannot explain the different ways that students in this sample form their degree subject priorities.

The strategies deployed are different for each student, and to an extent they may seem to be linked to differences in the available material and social

resources. As noted above, Ben (Castle) in particular, expressed the confidence of someone who has a depth of material and social resources which allowed him to take the risk that he had. It may also appear that students are over-reliant on family members who either do or do not have an abundance of social or cultural capital and that this is the crucial factor in the decisions they make.

However, scholars have argued for a need to move away from deficit constructions like this of non-traditional students (Spohrer, 2011, 2016). They are also critical of the normative assumptions often made about students who may imagine something 'otherwise' beyond social mobility or employability concerns (Archer, 2003, 2007; Clegg, 2010; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Kahn, 2017). In line with this thinking, in my analysis I have brought out where the tension points are for students from the different school catchments, and the criteria that they themselves use to navigate their choice of degree subject.

Regarding this, because its value was expressed in several different ways, History became a significant case in point. By taking a single subject like History it was possible to see that students within the same *pedagogic spaces* and with similar family histories (i.e. those with similar experiences of higher education), were engaged in producing their own coherent narrative about the value of degree subjects within the same disciplinary field (see also Brooks, 2003). But, it also became apparent that, regardless of background or family experience of higher education, there was an element of similarity for some students across school catchments. This became evident when seen through the lens of individual cases analysed in this chapter. Although differently connected both materially and socially, in pursuing their goals Danni (Central), Rob (Pasteur) and Ben (Castle), were similarly positioned at the interface of two

different types of knowledge discourse. These were the specialised disciplinary languages of university degree subjects and the languages that refer to subjects within the real world; the experiential and mundane (see also McLean et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2017). Here, dialogue between various resources within these students' lives also came into play, allowing other possible *realisations* in line with their own goals, interests and concerns.

At this level of in-depth analysis it is possible to reveal what else may be thinkable within the pedagogic environment (Moss, 2003, 2017). The outcome of this process has been conceptualised using the analytic category of the ***knowledge career***, which attempts to capture the criteria these young people invoke as they make their choice of degree subject. In the examples cited above, students rejected their respective sixth forms' pedagogic discourse, and defined a subject's value differently, thus drawing on criteria that lie outside of their sixth forms' specialised discourse and the projected ideological view that they had of their students (see Ivinson and Duveen, 2006).

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

7.0 Introduction

The thesis has investigated the way in which UCAS is practised in three different school settings and the terms upon which students were positioned as degree choosers at each setting. This also took into account how this group of students positioned themselves as degree choosers and the criteria they invoked as they made their choice of degree subject. Attention was paid to how the market value of the fields of study that students consider, was communicated during this process. The research aims were to explore:

1. The ways in which UCAS is variously practised, as a tightly bounded and recognisable process in three different school settings.
2. The terms upon which UCAS as a *pedagogic space*, positions students as 'degree choosers' in each setting.
3. How a sample of 16–18 year olds navigate their way through this process in these settings, and the criteria they invoke as they make their choices of the degree subjects they are considering for undergraduate study.

To meet these aims the thesis sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do schools narrate their role and responsibilities towards their sixth form students within the current policy context?
2. From the perspective of the school, how is the UCAS process practised and how does it position students as degree choosers?
3. From the perspective of the students, how do they position themselves in their talk about disciplinary fields and the degree subjects they are choosing, what are the criteria they bring to navigate their choices?

4. What can these findings tell us about the sort of knowledge terrain that students are orienting towards as they make their degree subject choices?

In this chapter I draw some conclusions about the nature of the UCAS process and its role in shaping student decision making about their degree subject choices (sections 7.1 to 7.3). This focusses on: how schools narrated their role and responsibilities toward their sixth form students within the current policy context, how UCAS is practised and how it positioned students as degree choosers and the criteria that students brought to this process. I then return to reconsider the theoretical accounts of degree subject choice offered throughout chapter two, their relevance for understanding these criteria and the knowledge terrain that students seemed to be orienting towards (section 7.4). Finally, I suggest next steps and possible future directions of the study (section 7.5).

7.1 Local variations and local concerns: how do schools narrate their role and responsibility towards their sixth form students within the current policy context?

To answer this research question, I initially sought to characterise the *institutional narrative* at each site. I found that this brought its own set of concerns and pedagogic inputs to the UCAS process. It is this that has helped to define how UCAS as a pedagogic space was used while preparing students to apply for their varying degree courses.

I drew on Bernstein's model of *pedagogic discourse* and his concept of *pedagogic identity* (1996 and 2000) in my analysis. In Bernstein's (1996, 2000) model, official *pedagogic identity* is shaped through policy discourse, which is formed from narratives of the past and projections of the present and the future.

Accordingly, these regulate consciousness, shaping in students' and teachers' ways of thinking about what is possible or thinkable (ibid.).

But *pedagogic identity* is also formed through an institution's local concerns; hence, institutional pedagogic identities will also develop in response to local contingencies and institutional priorities (Dovemark and Holm, 2017). Bernstein (2000) writes that the policy arena is a site for struggle over curriculum and identity, but at the institutional level *pedagogic identity* is formed from both official and local exigencies (Bernstein, 1996). Hence, institutions will respond to policy in various ways. Indeed, it was possible to see a combination of various time related strategies adopted at each of the three case study sites.

These insights, gained from Bernstein's model of *pedagogic discourse* and *pedagogic identity*, helped to establish that each sixth form adopted a distinct ***temporal orientation***. Of the three sites, only Pasteur responded strongly to the prevailing policy discourse about employability in the UCAS process, which strategically oriented it and its students to the future. My analysis established how this combined with its own historical context to project a future temporality and form an identity that resembled Bernstein's *re-centred prospective position*. By contrast, Central's *present time orientation* in the UCAS process was driven by contingencies of *institutional survival* and a market-oriented identity. I suggested that through the UCAS process, Central formed a *de-centred market identity*, focussed on creating 'products' with exchange value in the field of sixth form education. This had short-term external rather than internal goals in an institution with an unstable, evolving *pedagogic identity*.

By contrast, the present time orientation of Castle in the UCAS process was established in Bernstein's terms as a *de-centred therapeutic identify*. This could be understood against its specific historical and local educational goals which included combining a liberal ethos, concerned with the development of the person, and with the institutional priority of getting students into Oxbridge. My analysis thus highlighted the significance of a school's institutional past and how it combined with current market concerns to inform its present day ***institutional narrative*** and ideological view of who their ***imagined typical student*** are (see Ivinson and Duveen, 2006).

Bernstein's model of *pedagogic identity* and the language he uses to capture key differences in education in the 1990s played an important role in this part of the analysis. But in exploring their precise fit in each site I also found differences. For example, I had assigned Pasteur to the *re-centred prospective position*. But, in Bernstein's model this is one that is reflected through the State's (and not the individual institution's) re-ordering of discursive resources, allowing it to bring about economic, technical and social change (Bernstein, 2000). In describing her own attempts to organise data from 300 biographies into Bernstein's typology of *pedagogic identity*, Power (2010) has commented on the difficulties of matching data with this theoretical model. In fact, the findings from my study support Bernstein's (2000) assertion that identities are not static or fixed and that several pedagogic positions can often co-exist in a single institution (Bernstein, 2000). His four pedagogic positions can best be understood as representing ideal types. Attempts to transport them wholesale

into empirical work would be problematic if a study did not allow for deviation from, as well as wholesale conformity to, such ideal types.

In chapter four I referred to Ivinson and Duveen's (2006) use of Bernstein's notion of an *imaginary subject*, to demonstrate the potential for pedagogic environments to regulate forms of consciousness. In particular, Ivinson and Duveen (2006) extend Bernstein's use of the term *imaginary* (2000, p. 33) to explore how classroom practices reflect ideological views about learners (ibid.). My study confirms the significance of their insights. In each of my three sites, I identified a projected *imaginary subject*, what I referred to as each sixth forms' ***imagined typical student***, invoked through the way that staff talked about students. Also significant were the positioning of extra-curricular activities that might contribute to students' personal statements, and the choices that staff had made about the appropriate A level curriculum to support the UCAS process in the face of a new funding formula and budget cuts.

In Bernstein's terms, mapping and naming these resources helped to bring out each site's underlying logic, together with its 'grammar of possibilities' (Moss, 2017, p. 5). It was this that helped to inform my understanding of the way the UCAS process invoked a unique ***pedagogic space*** at each of the three sixth form sites. This was significant because it highlighted the underlying logics that helped to determine the value of different degree subjects, and the tensions this produced for students as they made their way through the UCAS process. Identifying what else may be possible for students as they engage with their

sixth form's **UCAS pedagogy**, has the potential to problematise the process and suggest new ways of handling existing practices.

7.2 UCAS as a tightly bounded and recognisable process within each site: how are students positioned as degree choosers?

At each of my three sites, the UCAS process involved a similar sequence of events. Taken together these events formed a specialist discourse of how to successfully apply to university which I have referred to as **UCAS pedagogy**, and which was analysed as a *pedagogic discourse* (Bernstein, 2000). By drawing on the concepts of *classification and framing* (ibid.) my analysis highlighted some significant differences between each sites' **UCAS pedagogy** in terms of the advice given to students, including personal statement writing. This was understood as expressions of *strong or weak classification and framing*.

Once these characteristics were recognised and the differences between them named, they could be analysed through the more abstract category of the **ideal knower discourse**. This was evident at each site in the dispositions students were taught to project within their personal statements. This concept expressed how the **institutional narrative**, including its **imagined typical student** and the UCAS process combined to signal to students who they ought to be and what they can aspire to achieve as their future selves. This signalling conveyed the market value of different disciplinary fields to students from different perspectives, variously focussed on developing a strong subject identity and the opportunities that this would open up, or a commitment to future employability and a professional career.

The **UCAS pedagogy** at Castle was strongly *classified and framed*. This oriented student to the possibility of success, expressed through choosing humanities and arts subjects. These were seen as subjects that would help them to gain access to the elite university sector. At Central the **UCAS pedagogy** was *weakly classified and framed*, a possible consequence of its evolving *pedagogic identity*. While students did receive a strongly framed message about applying to university via, for instance, the frequent Aimhigher initiatives they were exposed to, it was less clear what this might really lead to in terms what would be gained from study, or longer term careers. This was often expressed in personal statements through a discourse of the self, which drew on the idea of disciplinary commitment as a potential transformative experience.

By contrast, at Pasteur the *strongly classified ideal knower discourse* combined with *weaker framing* of the **UCAS pedagogy** directed students towards applying for professional degree subjects. Students recognised the significance of a professional degree but had relative autonomy over how this would be realised. I concluded that this *weaker framing* may have been a consequence of the requirements of the **professional knower discourse** espoused at Pasteur. Here, students were expected to signal a combination of relevant skills, experiences and dispositions in their personal statement in order to convey the professional qualities of the specific profession they were applying to study.

My analysis highlights differences in the pedagogic practices within each site's UCAS process, and specifically what this assumes about the goals and needs of its students, a reflection of its *imagined typical student*. When projected as an *ideal knower discourse* (the language used to project an ideal university candidate through the UCAS process), this has the potential to orientate its learners towards the type of knowledge and skills that they ought to adopt in the future (Bernstein, 2000; Ivinson and Duveen, 2006). Paying attention to the UCAS process and the type of *pedagogic framing* (McLean et al., 2017) that this involved, demonstrated the variation in how students were being supported in their deliberations over the disciplinary fields that would have the most value for them.

In particular, although all students were given a strongly framed message about attending university, the opportunity to explore what different degree subjects might offer them in terms of fulfilling their personal projects, or to think critically about the judgments they were being encouraged to make have been missed. This may be a condition of the prevailing widening participation discourse that some students were uncritically exposed to and could resemble what Clark et al. (2015) refer to as the normalisation of higher education and debt. These institutional positions did not however reflect the concerns of all students and were at times a source of tension.

7.3 The dialogic process and knowledge careers: what criteria do students bring to navigate their choice of degree subject?

Analysing the *institutional narratives* and the *ideal knower discourse* proved useful in helping to conceptualise the way that the value of various disciplinary

fields and subjects had been communicated to students. From my analysis it is clear that UCAS is not a neutral process. Analytically it needs to be set apart from students' own priorities and concerns, including their own personal goals. By focussing on these in chapter six I showed that students arrived at their decisions through an inner dialogue, with reference to various discursive resources.

My analysis presents a challenge to the idea that student priorities are a direct consequence of a *hidden curriculum* or of an institutional culture (Donnelly, 2014, 2015; Ivinson and Duveen, 2006; Shuker, 2014). Rather, through deploying Bernstein's (2000) concept of the *discursive gap*, I was able to conceptualise student talk about disciplinary fields and degree choice as a more dynamic *dialogic process*.

Certainly, the **UCAS pedagogy** at each site had implications for students' pedagogic experiences. Yet, despite the prevailing site-specific narrative and *ideal knower discourse*, students mobilised the available resources in diverse ways, which involved combining resources from other contexts. These included their personal and moral concerns and goals, and narratives associated with family members, and people who were part of their informal network. This had the effect of producing a wide range of possible realisations within a single site.

In keeping with Bernstein's model (2000), a prevailing structural logic will provide learners with a *grammar of possibilities* (Moss, 2017, p. 5) that exist within the wider institutional context. But, as learners are also agents, this gets taken up by them, and used in varying ways, giving rise to a number of '*creative possibilities*' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 26). This idea allows for *agential reflexive*

deliberation (Archer, 2003, 2007) and therefore meaning making outside of the prevailing structure, where there is potential for a range of possible outcomes.

From this point of view, it is significant that the ***student narratives*** I analysed voiced a much wider range of priorities than the ***ideal knower discourse*** projected at each locale. This was analysed through using the concept of the ***knowledge career***. This was apparent in the way that students appeared to be constructing their own coherent narrative about the value of degree subjects, as they recalled their own decision making as it combined with their developing sense of self and role within higher education. Specifically, students' expressions of the value of their chosen degree invoked a combination of a degree subjects, temporal, personal, social, moral and economic dimensions. It was around these projections that criteria for the value of a degree subject were being formed. Thus, rather than a single prevailing discourse of future employability (see Clegg, 2010, 2011; Kahn, 2017; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Spohrer, 2011, 2016), student degree subject priorities were being formed around various goals that connected them to a variety of different ***temporal orientations***. This highlights the usefulness of a time sensitive analysis (Clegg, 2010; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011), which helped to capture the nuanced ways that students deliberated about their degree subject options.

The principle of time that formed part of each site's underlying logic often came into conflict with the ***temporal orientations*** expressed by students through the narratives they produced. I concluded that temporality, in particular, was a significant source of conflict over which expressions of ***value and risk*** would get played out in the decision making process. It was the different categories of ***value and risk*** developed through building a *language of enactment* (Bernstein,

2000) that helped to draw attention to these tensions while the notion of a time-scape (Clegg, 2010, Stephenson and Clegg, 2011.), helped to conceptualise more clearly the nature of these competing logics.

To summarise, my study suggests that the relationship between the UCAS pedagogic discourse and students' orientation towards a *knowledge career* is far from straightforward. Through the UCAS process, sixth form institutions project an *ideal knower discourse*. Students in turn, imagine how their own courses of action would play out against this. In the process of building a language of description I conceptualised this as a *knowledge career*. This marked out how students' own personal concerns were voiced, and the significance of this for UCAS as a *pedagogic space*. Such student deliberations were expressed *dialogically* through an inner dialogue constructed of multiple narratives and resources, thus invoking various criteria regarding the market value of degree subjects.

7.4 The sociological significance of subject choice: what sort of knowledge terrain are students orienting towards as they make their subject choices?

I now turn to the significance of these conclusions for the sociology of education. In doing so I return to reconsider the theoretical accounts of degree subject choice offered in chapter two and to my analysis of the criteria that students invoke in making their choices.

A question often asked in the literature is whether all students choose degrees that will bring them the benefits of social mobility (Brooks, 2003, 2017a, 2017b; Clark et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Jones,

2016; Kahn, 2009; Thompson, 2016; Thompson and Simmons, 2013; van de Werfhorst et al., 2003). As seen in the research literature (Davies, 2013, and Jones, 2016), degree subject choice is often positioned by policymakers as a central concern because it represents a way of maximising skills and earnings potential and thus draws on ideas of meritocracy and social justice (Ainsley and Allan, 2010; Spohrer, 2011; van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). But a point made in chapter two was that scholars have become increasingly sceptical of policy discourse that assumes that social mobility should take precedence over other concerns when it comes to the decisions that young people make over their future selves (Archer, 2007; Kahn, 2017; Mclean et al., 2017, Sporher, 2011; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011).

There are many problems with making social mobility and its associated discourse of employability the central concern of student degree choice. One, in particular, is the normative assumption that employability and social mobility are key educational goals (Holmwood, 2013a). This also assumes that those who do not attempt to maximise their potential are lacking in aspiration and the cultural resources required for making the 'right' decision (Sporher, 2011, 2016). In chapter two I discussed some of the literatures, such as the Nuffield Foundation social mobility study (Davies et al., 2013), that are aligned with this thinking.

As described in the literature review, policy shifts reflect a change in the way that the university and students are conceptualised today. There is, for instance, an increased emphasis on student employability (Brooks, 2017b; Clegg, 2010; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Kelly et al., 2017), which is described by Kelly and his colleagues '*as premised on a normative student ideal*' (ibid., p. 105).

This is one that assumes that students will make a series of rational means/ends calculations around their degree subject choices, premised on the notion of social mobility (see, for instance, Davies et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Kahn, 2009). Others, (Clark et al., 2015; Naidoo et al., 2011; Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Molesworth et al., 2009; Morrison, 2017) report an increased emphasis on the discourse of the responsibilised student consumer and an associated value-for-money stance. However, despite their awareness of this growing complexity, few students in the study had adopted a clear-cut instrumental notion of their degree subject choices.

Instead my analysis pointed to the fact that 16–18 year olds continue to prioritise subjects that will give them ways of being and acting in the world. Thus on entering higher education, it could be argued that most students have the capacity and desire to engage with subjects in ways that will provide them with a transformative or meaningful pedagogic experience. In Bernstein's terms, engagement with disciplinary knowledge has the capacity to open up numerous possibilities for learners; it is however the type of pedagogic practice, that learners are exposed to that can close these possibilities down. On the basis of my analysis, it is therefore crucial that students' expectations continue to be met as they make their way through to higher education.

Scholarship in critical realism (Kahn, 2017) has highlighted the significance of such insights for recommendations that students whose priorities might be something other than 'economic flourishing' are not considered in deficit terms. There is a policy assumption that all students either do or should aspire to the same set of economic goals. There is, therefore, a danger that this could leave many young people feeling that higher education is not relevant to their non-

economic concerns. This research has served to widen this understanding, thus suggesting that for many of these young people, choosing a subject was not just about wanting a degree, for purely instrumental reasons. Many of the young people in this study believed that it was the degree subject that mattered and that would make a difference to them in terms of the myriad possibilities it offered.

Elsewhere in the literature, explanations for differences in student disposition towards choice and decision making has been understood against a social and cultural reproduction framework which deploys Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) model of institutional forms of *social and cultural capital* how these intersect with the *familial habitus* (that which is embodied and that has a structuring effect on orientations and choices). As written about in chapter two, this is often deployed in works that consider choice as something that is constrained or enabled by the absence or presence of these symbolic resources (Reay et al., 2001a, 2001b). But this model has been criticised for its deterministic view of culture (Clegg, 2011), of reducing individual agency to social structure (Archer, 2003, 2007; Brooks, 2003; Stephenson and Clegg, 2011; Kahn, 2017), and for providing explanations that are compatible with stable social environments, but of not being able to account for rapidly changing social circumstances¹⁸ (Archer, 2003, 2007.).

Indeed, within my own enquiry, a cultural capital framework proved to have some limitations because it did not account for the reflexive rather than unconscious decisions that students were making. It could of course be argued

¹⁸ Including the rapidly expanding field of higher education coupled with credential inflation, and its associated transformation of the graduate labour market.

that a cultural capital approach can complement this analysis. Some students occupied very different materially, culturally and socially networked positions than others. In some instances, this led to a much stronger convergence between students' familial resources and a sixth forms institutional narrative, thus positioning students very differently where this did not happen.¹⁹

Yet, a cultural capital theory of degree subject choice and social reproduction, seemed inadequate when I needed it to account for the differences between individual students from within the same school catchment or from families with similar experiences of higher education.

With regard to theoretical accounts of student choice, Boudon's (1974, 1998, 2003) model of rational action theory (as outlined in chapter two) was applied heuristically in chapters five (section 5.5) and six (section 6.3), in order to explore the possible effects of credential inflation on student decision making. At times of credential inflation, the risk of downward mobility for most middle-class groups is likely to be enhanced. These conditions are well documented in works produced by Ainley and Allan (2010), Brown and Hesketh (2004) and Brown and Tannock (2009), who refer to the realities of the graduate labour market, the consequences of the massification of higher education and its links to credential inflation. Certainly, this may have impacted on the value that students accredited to different degree subjects and their associated courses of action. However, as Boudon's (1974, 1998, 2003) model takes the logic of class maintenance as its central premise, I have used these insights guardedly as

¹⁹ See Shuker (2014), who makes a strong case for the existence of this type of convergence throughout her study.

other factors in student's lives, such as those I have explored throughout this thesis may have otherwise remained hidden.

Turning to additional models of student decision making, Archer's (2003, 2007) critical realist theory of the *reflexive inner conversation* (ibid.), can offer an additional set of insights for understanding the process of degree subject choice. In common with Boudon, Archer's approach considers the significance of agency and conscious deliberation. But in contrast, these works pay less attention to the situated nature of student decision making. Instead, this model considers that agents and structures have independent powers, and that agents arrive at answers to their questions through a series of reflexive deliberations, which do not produce set unified, class-related outcomes (Archer, 2003, 2007).

A point made in chapter two is that for Archer, a structural logic has its own causal power which remains dormant until an agential project has activated it (2007). This is not dissimilar to Bernstein's notion of a 'grammar', a metaphor used to point to both the enabling and constraining possibilities of structures (1996, 2000). In my study, it was through attending to how my participants engaged with the **UCAS pedagogy** that brought to light the interplay between competing logics within the **pedagogic space**.

Despite Archer's theoretical assertion that external conditions are *real*, these works can be criticised as being too much in favour of agency (Burk 2017). Regarding Archer's empirical work, she has been charged with maximising the causal powers of agents at the expense of the causal power of structures, and therefore criticised for paying less attention to the effects of the interplay between the two (Caetano, 2015).

I have however used Archer's work to compliment my analysis, and my use of a Bernsteinian framework. This is because it considers the capacity of individuals to make the variety of commitments and choices that were seen being made by students within my own study. A Bernsteinian model of pedagogic discourse and transmission helped to inform and extend the *language of explanation* developed through this thesis. However, insights gained from Archer's framework, with its focus on individual reflexivity and the inner conversation has provided some additional conceptual tools. These have the potential to further an understanding of the principles at play, such as reflexivity as a key mediating factor, and thus the dynamics of the pedagogic environment under investigation.

One of the significant findings from my enquiry was the **dialogic** nature of student decision making. The **dialogic process**, which was documented throughout chapter six, implies that students were acting as reflexive agents, deploying a wide range of strategies and discursive resources. By using Bernstein's model of *pedagogic discourse*, I came to see the UCAS process as a unique **pedagogic space**, not dissimilar to the **discursive gap** that Bernstein describes in his work. The *pedagogic discourse* that I analysed was described as having an inner logic and orientation in time. But my account of students acting within each site also concurs with some of Archer's observations.

7.5 Conclusions: research design, putting the findings to work, an agenda for future research.

In this section I consider the limitations of the study (section 7.6.1) and its implications for practice within the field of sixth form education (section 7.6.2). I

also reflect on the potential next steps and future direction of this research (section 7.6.3).

7.5.1 Research design

I should stress that the research has primarily been concerned with questions about the way that UCAS is practised at three sixth form sites. By attending to this, the aim has been to analyse the terms upon which UCAS as a *pedagogic space* positions students as degree choosers, thus how the value of degree subjects is signalled to 16–18 year-olds, and the criteria that these students invoke, in their endeavours to navigate their way through this process.

What this research did not do was investigate the relationship between student orientations and their social identities (in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or disability). Because I chose to focus my study on the effects of the institutional logic at each site as it intersected with the policy context and UCAS process across these contrasting catchments, I focussed less on developing a robust measure of these social identities. While I did gather data on parental familiarity with the higher education system, a more systematic class analysis with further refinements of gender, ethnicity and race may have allowed for a more multi-dimensional study.

For example, there are further questions that could have been asked about the relevance of selecting certain disciplinary fields from the perspective of gender. Certainly, bringing gender to bear, would add another significant dimension to questions about school-focussed UCAS practices, how schools narrate their roles and responsibilities towards their male and female students and how these students position themselves in response.

With regards to my reasons for not attending more closely to different social groupings, my experience of designing and then carrying out this research is that there are trade-offs for the choices that one makes as a researcher. With regards to sampling, an important decision was that for ethical reasons, a self-selecting volunteer sample was used. In addition, for reasons influenced by validity concerns, I had decided to prioritise students who were high achievers and who had already decided to go to university. These criteria placed restrictions on the gender ratio of the sample that I eventually ended up with, thus any analysis that implied gender differences may have been highly speculative and incomplete.

With regards to a more robust class analysis, a further trade-off was linked to the quality of my interview data due to my approach, against collecting specific facts that would indeed have helped to establish a more robust measure of social class background. Because, I had prioritised the ethnographic interview techniques described in chapter three, the trade-off was that any background data I collected was not as systematic as might have been required for a finely grained class analysis.

In addition, there were time constraints which placed restrictions on the period available for fieldwork. This meant that compromises had to be made such as the variation and size of the sample. As part of this compromise I was required to rely on informants at two of the sites, who worked on my behalf asking for volunteers to take part in the study. I had, however, sought to achieve maximum variation through selecting three contrasting sites. This also allowed me to investigate the effects of attending specific sixth forms, with strikingly different

socio-economic catchments, on the way students were thinking about the value of degree subjects.

An additional trade-off was linked to my decision to follow an inductive rather than deductive logic. This was to avoid falling into the trap of being guided by, and then confirming already existing theory (as may have been the case if I had begun by using a cultural capital, or rational choice framework). My belief is that this would be circulatory, in the sense that there are risks of merely confirming already existing theory. That said, conceptual understandings of pedagogy, and my own professional understandings and concerns about how students think about their future degree subject choices had clearly informed both my topic selection and the way I approached the analytic process. It was not until the language of description had been built, and the writing up process had begun, that I returned once more to the theory that had, early on in the process informed some of my research questions and concerns. This is a real test of one's resolve and can, when returning to form a dialogue with existing literature in the writing up stages, seem counter-intuitive.

Building a language of description does necessitate inductive reasoning. However, the realities of knowing how long to stay with the data and knowing when to return to the theory and add insights derived from the different stages of analysis and growing conceptual understandings is far from straightforward. The trade-off is a language or a theoretical model that can be used or built upon in later research. But, the test of this is whether indeed the categories that were developed were strongly or weakly articulated (Brown, 2006). This is a matter that I turn to next.

7.5.2 Contribution to knowledge: a conceptual language

What has been developed in this research is a conceptual language with which to describe the pedagogic relations involved in the UCAS process. Without a specialised language, the **UCAS pedagogy** might simply have appeared as a mundane or bureaucratic process and not a dynamic pedagogic one. By mapping and naming its various characteristics and principles it was possible to see the different ways that UCAS was practised at each site.

To capture differences in the way that schools communicate the UCAS process to students I have used the concept of an **ideal knower discourse**. This emerged from my analysis of how students and staff talked about personal statement writing and was then used to conceptualise how the value of degree subjects and disciplinary fields, were communicated through the **UCAS pedagogy**. A difference in values was associated with the projection of different **ideal knower discourses**; those that emphasise a strong subject identity, commitment to self-enlightenment, or a commitment to future employability.

The concept of a **knowledge career** emerged as the analysis made clear that there was a need to account for the range of *realisations* of the **ideal knower discourse** found at each site. The language of the **knowledge career** helped to conceptualise how students themselves decided what to do, and how to think about the value of various degree subjects and disciplinary fields. Because there is not always a straight forward cause and effect relationship between these two languages, **ideal knower discourse** and **knowledge careers**, the UCAS **pedagogic space** can be considered to be a dynamic one. It provides a boundary-crossing point where specialised and everyday languages about the

value of different degree subjects come into dialogue and are recontextualised to produce the **knowledge careers** that students were orienting towards.

Through this language, this research contributes to the literature that seeks to explain the differences in student decision making. The thesis finds that in attempting to understand the values and meanings that students attach to their degree subject choices, there is a need to go beyond cost/benefit models that are premised on social mobility concerns. Further insights suggest that student priorities can be considered as reflexive and voluntary rather than being determined by structural conditions and unconscious processes. As identified in section 7.3, these are important insights, because they have implications for widening the pedagogic focus of UCAS, as well as fair access schemes and those that work under the umbrella of widening participation.

7.5.3 An agenda for future research

Moss (2017) suggests that it is the job of the researcher to bring out the underlying logic of the pedagogic environment, and therefore to map out the range of potential possibilities it holds. By revealing what else is possible researchers can point towards alternative models or approaches, thus encouraging policymakers and educators to act on these insights (ibid.). As made clearer below, this is a view that I share and that I have endeavoured to address in the final analysis, including suggestions for possible future research projects.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that, due to the growing complexity of higher education, it has become much harder for students to imagine pursuing a disciplinary degree where the sole purpose is to acquire a

disciplinary identity (McLean et al., 2017), or *to pursue knowledge for its own sake* (Gibbons, 1998). One could speculate, therefore, that what has been observed here documents how 16–18 year olds' deliberations between **value and risk** are a response to the accumulative effect of the policy context, including university fees, the associated expansion of higher education and subsequent credential inflation.

A key question is whether, in the context of the UCAS process, students are given opportunities to fully exploit UCAS as a pedagogic experience that will allow them to consider what they can do and who they can be in the world. From the insights offered within this thesis, there is scope for thinking about UCAS differently. This would involve designing a **UCAS pedagogy** that is capable of providing students with the opportunity of addressing their own personal projects, concerns and aspirations, rather than the narrower concerns of the school and the exigencies of the prevailing policy focus. Taking the insights from this thesis, there is good reason for educators to reconsider their UCAS pedagogic practices.

McLean et al. (2017), report that the most effective undergraduate pedagogies are those that allow students to make links between their everyday experiences, and those of the specialised academic discourse. Whilst the students in my project appeared to be doing something similar to the undergraduates in that study, more often than not, students experienced this process as conflictual and as a source of tension. In keeping with Bernstein's theory, tension points are an important way of learning about what can be done with the gaps between boundaries. Few students were given opportunities by staff to fully exploit UCAS as a pedagogic experience that could allow them to consider the

significance of these spaces. This has led me to believe that UCAS is something of a missed opportunity. As the analysis from this thesis suggests, a policy-focussed pedagogy cannot possibly satisfy the full range of student interests and aspirations. It is important therefore that as educators, we establish pedagogies that will take students beyond the external contingencies of their sixth forms and the policy focus of social mobility and its associated discourse of employability. This will involve allowing students to do something different with the gaps between the everyday and the specialised discourses that they encounter.

Thinking about UCAS *pedagogy* in this way is essential for addressing the wider concerns of this project; these are the utilitarian principles that underpin policy thinking about the students' role, and the sort of knowledge terrain that this orientates them towards. For some students, where there is pressure to trade-off between favourite subjects and imagined employment trajectories, a *pedagogic space* such as this can make the difference between shutting down opportunities and opening them up. A next step then would be to use the insights from this study to inform UCAS pedagogic practices, which could encourage students to consider their priorities beyond the increasingly narrow policy focus described here in this thesis.

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Appendix 1: Glossary of analytic terms

Discursive gap (Bernstein)

Originates from Bernstein's conceptualisation of the space between what is known about the world through experience and what is learned through pedagogised knowledge. It is used throughout the thesis in two ways; first it is associated with the researcher's endeavours of building a language of description. It is later used to conceptualise the UCAS pedagogic process and my account of students acting within it at each site. Through UCAS practices, students mobilised both every day and specialised knowledge in their deliberations over degree subjects. The interplay between these and what students do with them in order to construct a coherent narrative, invokes the discursive gap.

Dialogic process

This originates from my reading of Maybin's (1994) work, drawing on Bakhtin's dialogic model in order to explore meaning making for young literacy learners. As an analytic category it is used here to conceptualise student talk about disciplines and degree choice as a dynamic ***dialogic process***. It is used to convey the inner dialogue that students in the study constructed from other people's spoken dialogue, and how these various stories and ideas contributed to how they came to conceptualise the ***knowledge careers*** that they are orienting towards.

Grammar of possibilities (Bernstein)

The notion of a *grammar* is used by Bernstein as a metaphor to point to both the enabling and constraining possibilities of structure. A prevailing structural logic will provide learners with a *grammar* for recognising and then realising a legitimate text. This assumes that there is always a range of possible outcomes or realisations, depending on how they have been taken up and used by learners. This precise meaning is applied throughout the thesis.

Ideal knower discourse

This concept expressed how the institutional narrative and the UCAS process intersected to signal to students who they ought to be and what they can aspire to achieve as their future selves. Through learning to write their personal statement, students were taught to *recognise and then realise* the kind of *selves* that different disciplines engender and that are required by prospective candidates. This signalling conveyed the value of different disciplinary fields to students from different perspectives, variously focussed on developing a strong subject identity and the opportunities that this would open up, or a commitment

to future employability and a professional career. Three ideal knower discourses were identified.

Ideal knower discourse (academic)

Characterised by an orientation to the present through projecting a strong subject identity, in realising this discourse students were taught to use external markers such as a specialist subject vocabulary and refer to key academic texts.

Ideal knower discourse (prospective)

This was characterised by an orientation to the future through career trajectories including the professions. In realising this discourse, students were taught to project a self that has ‘technical knowhow’ and the value of possessing a specific set of skills.

Ideal knower discourse (introspective)

This was realised in the personal statement through a discourse of the self; it used internal markers such as self-enlightenment and personal fit. It was characterised as an orientation to a combination of past experiences and a disciplinary present.

Imagined typical student

This conceptualises how, as a condition of its institutional narrative, staff at each site projected ideological representations of their students including their assumptions about students’ goals and needs.

Knowledge career

The language of the ***knowledge career*** conceptualises how students themselves decide what to do, and how to think about the value of various degree subjects and disciplinary fields. The UCAS process provides a boundary-crossing point where specialised and everyday languages about the value of different degree subjects come into dialogue. In their attempts at producing a coherent narrative about the value of degree subjects, these languages are recontextualised by students to produce the ***knowledge careers*** that they are orienting towards.

Knowledge career (disciplinary)

This was characteristically oriented towards the present or short-term future provided by the space offered by being at university. In this case, some students expressed a connection to the knowledge content itself; for others the degree subject was imagined as a way to develop their role as a student.

Knowledge career (professional)

This was characterised as orientated towards a future stretching out beyond the university to what would happen next, also taking into account various personal goals and future concerns focused on the possibilities of employment.

Knowledge career (real world)

Oriented to the future where students imagined a non-credentialised route to getting there. These students perceived a relationship with knowledge that exists in the real world, making links between their A level experiences, personal projects and their imagined future selves.

Knowledge career (nomadic)

Analytic category that is used to conceptualise students who were oriented towards a longer sweep of time, including the past, present and future, with the past often linked to a familial or personal narrative. The imagined present and future was informed by returning to a familial or personal past.

Narrative

Conceptualised as an open-ended story told by individuals or shared by members of an institution and which is revisited in order to perform its role such as adapting to change or a rationale for decision making.

Narrative (familial)

During interview respondents used stories and fragments of story or mini-narrative in the form of digressions in order to convey their concerns about the *value* and *risk* involved in choosing the subjects they were thinking of studying at university. Often these revolved around stories that featured family members and close family friends.

Narrative (student)

Used throughout the thesis to conceptualise the stories that students used during interview to tell of their priorities and how they were dealing with the tensions they experienced in having to choose between different degree subjects. These often aligned with the familial, personal and everyday as a resource.

Narrative (institutional)

Analytic category used to conceptualise the stories shared by staff that reflected an institution's underlying logic: comprised of internal and external narratives. The shared narrative performed a role for the sixth form as it encapsulated and reinforced its purpose or mission, what it does, how it achieves this and how it adapts to change.

Narrative (institutional internal)

Analytic category used to conceptualise institutional characteristics and priorities that relate to the school's longer history and original mission.

Narrative (institutional external)

Each sixth form orientated towards external pressures that originated from the policy environment. These narratives told of the different ways that the sixth forms were positioned within the wider field of sixth form education and how it adapted to change.

Pedagogic space

The pedagogic space conceptualises the space that is invoked by the UCAS process. The space is partially defined by the institutional narrative, which brings its own set of concerns and pedagogic inputs to the process. Other narratives are brought into the space by students who draw on additional resources. It is this that comes to define how the space gets used while preparing students to apply for their varying degree courses.

Risk (collective)

Analytic category was most commonly associated with ***student narratives*** in which broader familial issues were at stake.

Risk (individual)

This is used to conceptualise where a student's own self-interest and wellbeing might be felt to be at stake.

Temporal orientation

The principle of time that formed part of each sixth form's underlying logic and oriented it towards different temporal positions; in some cases these anchored current concerns in either the future or the present. For students, their ***temporal orientation*** linked them to the present and future or a combination of past, present and future (see ***nomadic knowledge career***).

UCAS pedagogy

This conceptualises the events that form each site's specialist instruction of how to successfully apply to university. The UCAS process followed a calendar of events: 1) gathering advice and information, 2) learning how to write and produce the personal statement, and 3) producing the personal statement. These events were analysed as pedagogic discourse, and could be characterised as having varying strengths of classification and framing.

Value (extrinsic)

The value of connecting to a subject's capacity to connect students to something beyond the subject content itself often linked to what it can do for them in the world.

Value (intrinsic)

The value of connecting to a subject's internal content and to the experience of being and learning in the present. Students also look to the capacity of a subject to connect them to a subject's self-enlightenment possibility.

Appendix 2: Interview schedule – Stage 1 (students)

Q1: What are you doing at the moment?

Q2: Can you tell me about your degree choices?

Prompt if needed:

- How would you rank them if you had to put them into rank order?
- Could you say something about how you went about selecting your degree?

Q3: What are your thoughts about the future?

Q4: Which universities are you thinking of?

Q5: What do your parents think?

Prompt if needed:

- What would your parents say if you were to tell them you did not want to go to uni?

Q6: Could you tell me how you're finding the UCAS process itself?

Prompt if needed:

- Are there any challenges or difficulties?
- Where do you get help and advice?
- Is there any one thing that has helped the most?

Q7: What are your thoughts about paying tuition fees?

Appendix 3: Interview schedule – Stage 2 (students)

Personal statements (PS)

Q1: How did it feel looking at your PS again?

Q2: Can you talk me through it?

- Why did you start it this way?

Q3: Did you have any problems producing the statement?

- Was there any advice that you followed?

Q4: Would you mind selecting a part to read that you feel the most proud of?

- Why did you select that part in particular?
- Did you feel any pressure to appear in a particular way?

Q5: Is there anything you don't like about it?

- Can you explain why?
- Are there any parts of the statement that you would change?

Q6: Which bits reflect you the most?

- In what way?

Q7: On a Scale of 1-10 how would you rate your personal statement?

- Why?

University

Q1: Have you had any offers?

Q2: Could you remind me of your degree subject choices?

- Which degree subject are you expecting to study?

Q3: How will you decide what you will accept?

Q4: What do your parents think?

Q5: What are you looking forward to the most?

- What do you think it will be like?

Appendix 4: Interview schedule – Staff

Q1: Can I first ask you about your role and what you do?

Q2: What would you say are the main challenges of your role?

Prompt if needed:

- Recruitment?
- Retention?
- Supporting students?
- Advising students?
- Budget?
- Curriculum?

Q3: Why do you think students choose to come to this sixth form?

Prompt if needed:

- What do you say to students if they want to leave?
- What do you say to them to encourage them to stay on here?

Q4: How would you describe your typical A level student?

Q5: How would you describe the school ethos?

Q6: What are your priorities?

Prompt if needed:

- For the school?
- The curriculum?
- The sixth form?
- The students?

Q7: Can you talk me through the support for UCAS?

Prompt if needed:

- Where do students get help and advice from?
- Do students attend Aimhigher events or schemes?

Q8: How long have you been in your current role?

Q9: Have you noticed many changes?

Prompt if needed:

- Type of student
- Type of student destination
- Degree subject choices
- Curriculum changes

Appendix 5: Worked example of narrative analysis

The narrative I have chosen to use offers a particularly clear example, as it has a visibly bounded plot, with a beginning, middle and end and includes lead characters. This was not always the case, as often I picked out much smaller fragments of story. But even so, these proved to be an invaluable source allowing me to identify salient themes and discursive tensions. This specific narrative developed as Rachel (year 13, Castle) talked me through her personal statement. This also provides a good example of how I used **student narratives** to analyse the personal statements as well as helping to navigate my way around the pedagogic process at each site.

So my cousin, she has just finished Leeds and like and my other cousin has just started Cambridge and we were discussing it the other day and my older cousin who just finished Leeds said she did so much stuff, she was head girl, she took a gap year, she travelled, did fund-raising, she worked at Oxfam all the way through school, and like, her extra curriculum shows that she would be a massive contribution to the university. My other cousin, she was really a party person and didn't really do anything but she is Oxbridge material with straight A stars and like, my other cousin got straight A stars, but I think if my other cousin could have expressed that she could do all of that and get really good grades, like, it's a bit unfair. But, the other cousin, the one who has gone to Cambridge, has not really contributed to university life other than clubbing, the one who went to Leeds, loved Leeds, she's now doing law, but she contributed so much to university life. So for Oxbridge you don't want to sound too extra-curricular or talk about it in the wrong way. (Rachel, year 13 Anthropology candidate, Castle).

In approaching a relatively long narrative such as this I opted to follow Catherine Riessman's (1993) advice; she suggests that it can be useful to re-

write the story by breaking it down and naming each sequence (ibid.). So, in Rachel's narrative above I had broken it down as follows:

1. **The main story being told** = how people fail to get into Oxbridge
2. **This is followed by some orienting detail** = So, my cousin, she has just finished Leeds and like/ my other cousin has just started Cambridge.....
3. **The complicating action** = her extra curricula shows that she would be a massive contribution to any university, my other cousin, she was really a party animal [...]
4. **The resolution** = (there were two here) a) the one who went to Leeds loved it, she's now doing law b) don't sound too extra curricula in your personal statement or talk about it in the wrong way.

I found that I could read this narrative on different levels; a face-value reading provided me with insight into the way that Rachel had been taught about applying for Oxbridge; *not sounding too extra curricula* was also a salient theme that went right across this particular data set. But my attention was also drawn to some of the discursive tensions that were present in her narrative. Rachel was coming to terms with not getting into Oxford, and despite not featuring herself in this story she uses her two cousins' experiences to play out the discursive tensions that she had encountered throughout the **UCAS process**. This is also a good example of how I was able to identify the range of resources that were being mobilised by students within the **pedagogic space**. Because I saw a tension between competing discourses at play here I looked for them elsewhere in other students' narratives; once found, I named them and included them in the conceptual language that I had begun to build.

Appendix 6: Language of Description translation table

Language used by students to describe how they had been taught to project a specific knower discourse across the sites.

Language used by respondents (Empirical)	Set of terms for how differences in response are recognised by my participants.	Abstract descriptor of the different ways that responses can be realised
<p>'Well, mine is not very personal, mine is directly related to the subject '</p> <p>'They don't want to hear about your waffle'</p> <p>'They want to see someone who is quite inquisitive'.</p> <p>'Someone who reads a lot'</p> <p>'You have to be able to talk about every line, you have to show how you think about the subject'</p> <p>'How you are connected to the subject'</p>	<p>Subject identity</p> <p>External markers linking student to subject content</p>	<p>Academic ideal knower discourse</p>
<p>'Don't talk about your A levels'</p> <p>'Don't mention a book'</p> <p>To see that I am creative and that I can think outside of the box.</p> <p>They are looking for personality,</p>	<p>Professional identity</p> <p>External markers linking subject content to the future, such as volunteer work or skills.</p>	<p>Professional ideal knower discourse</p>

<p>like manners and team work.</p> <p>I was told to talk about when I went to a law firm and gained work experience and how I experienced working life</p> <p>I did loads of things from Y7-Y11 which they said “do this it would look great on your personal statement”</p>		
<p>‘It’s more than just a subject’</p> <p>I said here ‘my interest in the subject has been nurtured through my interest in history and not just academic study’. I wanted to make it clear that history is something that is inside of me.</p> <p>‘I’d say it’s that mine is about me rather than the academic’</p> <p>‘Show how my interest in the subject is not just about academic studies, it’s about who I am’</p>	<p>Subject identity with internal markers linking self to subject content.</p>	<p>Introspective ideal knower discourse</p>

Appendix 7: Summary of school profiles

School	UCAS pedagogy – pedagogic code	Ideal knower discourse	Temporal orientation	Dominant student knowledge career	Institutional narrative
Central	UCAS pedagogy/ Knower classification - /-	Academic	Present	Undergraduate/ Introspective	'Institutional survival'
Pasteur	UCAS Pedagogy/ knower classification - /+	Professional	Future	Undergraduate/ professional	'Students choosing wisely'
Castle	UCAS pedagogy/knower classification +/+	Academic	Present	Undergraduate/ disciplinary	'Getting its students into Oxbridge'