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Equity, social class and widening access: a Scottish case study.

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of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

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Date: 30.11.2025

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Abstract

This thesis explores social class and equity around widening access (WA) policy within one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Scotland. It focuses on the understanding, perceptions and experiences of individuals who work or study within the HEI or within WA related roles out with the HEI. This in-depth sociological study presents the findings of an investigation of the extent to which Widening Participation (WP) policies disrupt inequality. This includes gaining an understanding of HEI mechanisms which impact upon Higher Education (HE): access, acceptance, and students' experiences.

The study investigates how the HEI responds to the Scottish Government's WA policy and related targets, such as the ways in which these are understood, implemented and enacted across its faculties, departments and courses by HEI staff in a variety of student-facing, non-student-facing and senior strategic-related roles. The experiences of students from both WA and non-WA backgrounds are also examined to ascertain the impact of WA policy upon their HE journeys. A wider picture is sought by exploring the perspectives of individuals working out with the HEI within Scottish Government WA, HEI governance or student-voice-related roles.

This empirical Critical Theory research utilises methods of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Findings establish that HEI policies, processes, mechanisms and staff enact implicit and explicit bias around social class and argues that sensitisation around the ways in which social class impacts upon HE access, experiences and outcomes is required by the HEI and to be delivered by the HEI to its staff. The thesis contributes to knowledge in the field by attending to the gap of HEIs themselves and their policies, enactments and practices being rarely researched. It is suggested that the HEI utilises sociologically informed research and practices, engages in self-examination to develop its understanding of social class consciousness and equity to avoid bias.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract.....	4
Table of Contents	5
List of Abbreviations	8
Chapter 1: Introduction	10
1.1 Thesis Context.....	10
1.2 Thesis Significance	13
1.3 Thesis Outline.....	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review	17
2.1 What's the Craic?.....	17
2.1.1 Barriers around Access to Higher Education	17
2.1.2 Terminology Considerations	37
2.1.3 Student Perspectives	38
2.1.4 HE Considerations in Scotland.....	45
2.1.5 Equity: Theory & Policy in HE.....	50
2.2. Sociological Theories and Concepts underpinning understandings of Social Class	72
2.2.1 Macro-sociological theories of Social Class.....	72
2.2.2 Micro-sociological theories of Social Class.....	74
2.2.3 A Comparison of variants of Social Capital	85
2.2.4 Academic Capital Formation (ACF) Framework.	96
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	106
3.1. Ontological and epistemological positioning of the research	106
3.1.1 Research paradigm – positioning the study	107
3.2. Methodological approach and research design	111
3.2.1 Research questions and aims	111
3.2.2 Research Setting.....	112
3.2.3 Aspects of methodologies utilised	113
3.2.4 HEI as a case study	114

3.2.5 Phases of the research	118
3.3 Methods of Data Collection	119
3.3.1 Qualitative data collection.....	119
3.3.2 HEI faculties/departments and participants.....	124
3.4 Methods of Data Analysis	126
3.4.1 Data analysis – an iterative process.....	127
3.4.2 Emerging key themes	130
3.4.3 Analysis process of HEI documents.....	131
3.5 Evaluation & Justification of Methodological Choices	134
3.5.1 Research rationale	134
3.5.2 Findings – generalisability	136
3.6 Ethics & Risk Assessment.....	137
3.7 Reflexivity	138
Chapter 4: Findings	140
4.1 Capturing the Widening Access Policy: Context of Case Studies	140
4.1.1 Scottish Government WA Policy HEI Consultation – Co-creation or Corralled?	140
4.1.2 HEI Contextual Admissions (CA): embodying policy – seeking clarity	144
4.2 HEI Admissions Processes	158
4.2.1 WA target setting.....	158
4.2.2 SIMD usage and management.....	165
4.2.3 Centralised Admissions Teams	174
4.2.4 Academic Selection vs Recruitment	179
4.3 Student Recognition and Support.....	181
4.3.1 Student Recognition.....	182
4.3.2 Student Support.....	198
4.3.3 Student Retention	210
Chapter 5: Discussion of findings	217
5.1 Interpreting institutional practice from a sociological perspective.....	217
5.1.1 Impact of HEI operating in a neoliberal context	218

5.1.2 Risks of conflating disadvantage with poverty	222
5.2 Moving institutions forward via sociologically informed practice	224
5.2.1 Understanding the HE landscape from working-class students' perspective.....	224
5.2.2 Engaging in institutional self-examination	232
5.2.3 Thinking critically about social class consciousness, implicit bias and equity	243
Chapter 6: Conclusions	247
6.1 Findings summary.....	248
6.1.1 Incognisant WA policy development.....	248
6.1.2 Experiences of implicit bias and inequitable practices.....	249
6.1.3 Lack of social class consciousness	252
6.2 Study limitations	254
6.3. Implications for further research, policy and practice	257
Bibliography.....	260
Appendices	269
Table 1: Contextual Admissions Models	30
Table 2: Markers of disadvantage	31
Table 3: Controlled subjects and student intake numbers	34
Table 4: Savage's Mountaineering Metaphor.....	78
Table 5: Situational Analysis maps	114
Table 6: Considerations of a case study	117
Table 7: Phases of Research.....	118
Table 8: Situational Map Ordered/Working Map; Social class, HE access and WA policy ..	123
Table 9: HEI Faculty Staff & Students by faculty/department	125
Table 10: HEI System Actors by job role	126
Table 11: Non-HEI participants by job role.....	126
Table 12: Qualitative data processing information	127
Table 13: Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach and levels of analysis.....	133
Table 14: Possible audiences and purposes of the research	137
Table 15: HEIs "Summary of KPIs"	152
Table 16: "Summary of KPIs" 2	156
Figure 1: Key themes infographic.....	130

List of Abbreviations

ACF - Academic Capital Formation

AIM - Action Inquiry Model

AM - Assurance Model

AP - Advanced Progression

AS - Advanced Standing

CA - Contextual Admissions

CDA - Critical Discourse Analysis

CE - Care Experienced

CELCIS - Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland

CoWA - Commission on Widening Access

CUE - Center for Urban Education

DYW - Developing the Young Workforce

FE - Further Education

GBCS - Great British Class Survey

HE - Higher Education

HEI - Higher Education Institution

HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency

HNC - Higher National Certificate

HND - Higher National Diploma

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

NAD - National Articulation Database

NUS - National Union of Students

OA - Outcome Agreements

OF - Outcome Framework

OFAM - Outcome Framework and Assurance Model

POLAR4 - Participation of Local Areas data

QAA - Quality Assurance Agency

RO - Research Organisation

SA - Situational Analysis

SAAS - Student Awards Agency Scotland

SCAPP - The Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners

SES – Socio-economic Status

SFC - Student Funding Council

SG - Scottish Government

SHEFC - Scottish Higher Education Funding Council

SIMD - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

SQA - Scottish Qualifications Authority

TA - Thematic Analysis

UCAS - Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

WA - Widening Access

WP - Widening Participation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Thesis Context

Scotland has persistent and wide differences in the attainment of students from advantaged and less-advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The gaps are evident before school and continue to widen throughout primary and secondary schooling (Sosu and Ellis, 2014). Closing this gap has been a key policy aim for the Scottish Government since 2015 when the Scottish Attainment Challenge directed funding to schools in areas of high deprivation to "raise attainment and reduce educational inequity" (Education Scotland 2025). Universities were tasked with "narrowing the participation gap in higher education" (Blackburn, Kadar-Satat, Riddell, and Weedon 2016, p. 27).

As Stewart (2025) highlights, the HE participation gap associated with socio-economic disadvantage and its root causes is a "wicked" problem with many factors playing a part (Rittel, and Webber 1973, p. 155; Reay, 2022). Some politicians suggest that there is an aspiration gap imbedded in low ambitions of young people and families from low socio-economic backgrounds (Scottish Parliament 2017 as cited in Treanor, Jamieson, and Kelly 2017, p. 1). A critical analysis view proposes this "transfers responsibility for aspirations and achievement from governments and schools to parents and children" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1). Instead Treanor et al. (2017, p. 5) suggest that practical issues such as inequities in the "know-how" about how education systems work, how to overcome barriers in schooling, and how to support a child's education offer an explanation for unequal uptake or success. Schools, teachers, and politicians require a better understanding of the "risks, causes and consequences of poverty, which are often conflated and misconstrued" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 5).

The pronouncement of low aspiration is concluded as a "myth" by Treanor et al. (2017) echoing earlier recognition by Berrington, Roberts and Tammes (2016, p. 749) who detail that "contrary to much political rhetoric, young peoples' aspirations for college/university participation remain high" and such portrayals ought to be "questioned". Abrahams (2024, p. 57) similarly concludes that "contrary to policy narratives around aspirations, young people from working-class backgrounds do have 'high aspirations'".

Some researchers argue that Scotland has a wider HE access gap than the rest of the UK which may, ironically, be partially related to Scotland's policy of free, centrally funded, university education (Scottish Government, 2022). The funding of HE is not unproblematic, said to have

upsides such as removing a form of debt, However, the policy also has downsides (Blackburn et al., 2016). Places at Scottish universities for undergraduate Scottish-domicile students are limited due to central government funding formulae caps and so competition for places increases, unlike England and Wales's system of fees paid by individual students through repayable loans (Blackburn et al., 2016). It has been suggested that for 'some universities, the cap is, in one sense, a red herring' as it masks another matter faced, that the cost of teaching outpaces the funding provided (Miller, 2024). More funding can be gained from accepting non-Scottish students which may lead to the 'financial incentive to expand provision, but not for Scottish students' (Ogden, & Thomas, 2024 cited in Miller, 2024).

Additionally, Iannelli, Smyth and Klein (2016) suggest class-based patterns of subject choice in secondary education where both the number and type of subject selections serve to disadvantage students from working class and poor backgrounds. Iannelli et al. (2016, p. 577) highlights that working class students require "clear information and support in their curriculum decisions throughout their school career". Although Scottish student debt is generally lower than the debts of students from the other UK countries, repayable maintenance loans mean that poorer students carry more debt than their richer peers whose parents cover a greater proportion of maintenance (Blackburn et al., 2016). The policy discourse in Scotland tends to focus on protecting fee-free university education and ignores reductions in non-repayable maintenance grants and the parallel rise in repayable loans (Blackburn et al., 2016).

The Scottish Government set targets to widen access (WA) in HE and ensure the student population more closely reflects the make-up of the Scottish population by 2030. To deliver this, it established the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) and a Commissioner for Fair Access to lead, prioritise and report on efforts and progress. The CoWA developed a Scottish Framework for Fair Access and made thirty-four recommendations to achieve the HE targets. These included, for example, a recommendation that universities' admissions processes embrace flexible transitions via articulation pathways to enable students on post-school courses at Further Education Colleges to easily transition to a degree course at university. Other recommendations were that universities develop contextual admissions frameworks with minimum entrance requirements for students from particular backgrounds or schools, and Outcome Agreements (OA) are linked to public funding (Scottish Government, 2016). Admissions processes are varied and complex, a range of approaches exist across institutions and courses, some are more competitive, some select applicants whilst others recruit, for example.

For clarity, Outcome Agreements have since been replaced with Outcome Framework (OF) and Assurance Model (AM) concerned with accountability and assurance following SFC (2021) recommendations. The change will be discussed further on p.63, section c. Holding HEIs to account via Outcome Framework and Assurance Model. The new terminology will be used throughout the present thesis except when quoting for outside sources, a reminder will follow.

As a devolved policy model, universities in Scotland determine admission policies and support structures for students on their courses. Many set the minimum (rather than competitive) admission requirements for students from low SIMD groups, schools with traditionally low progression rates into HE, and care experienced students. However, CoWA can do nothing about children inheriting the wealth of cultural knowledge and abilities of their parents (Bourdieu, 1984). For working-class, first-generation students with no family experience of HE inequalities are particularly acute (Wilson, Hunter and McArthur, 2018). Such students often face pressure to fulfil social and financial family commitments, earn money, and have a low sense of entitlement and support networks that are unable to prepare them for university due to limited knowledge, leading to high dropout rates (Reay, 2016). Non-traditional students are expected to "change" whilst HEIs remain "unchanged" (Roberts, 2011, p. 189).

Different social and cultural capital are possessed by students from non-traditional backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Students were aware of this, perceived as a "deficit" whereby they felt alone in "learning to play the game" following successful HE access, leading to considerations of dropping out (Roberts, 2011, p. 193). Despite the efforts of Scottish Government and CoWA, Scotland's universities are not on course to achieve their widening access targets, and social reproduction and stratification continue in HE (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024).

The present research takes a Critical Analysis perspective to explore how one HE policy may be explicitly and/or implicitly biased towards certain groups. It aims to understand how even where a guidance document specifies detailed, tangible actions, the various management tiers of the HE institution their systems, processes, and data collection/utilisation procedures shape implementation in ways that meet targets but create both positive and negative impacts on widening access. The data reported is part of a wider empirical study of how widening access measures were implemented in one HE institution. The Scottish Government's (2016) approach to ending "inequality" across education via the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) and an HEI's non-critical uptake of the above WA policy is problematised.

This thesis draws on purposively selected participant interviews (n=28) of university students from widening access and non-widening access backgrounds and HE staff working in WA roles: senior faculty/university staff responsible for strategic decisions, workforce planning staff, data strategy staff, student support and lecturing staff, as well as staff in WA organisations working with secondary school students. Data was generated via semi-structured interviews alongside field notes, staff profiles, entry route profiles, and reflective logs (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). It was analysed using aspects of situational analysis (Clarke, 2013), thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2013), and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). Related policy documents and HEI webpages around WA mechanisms and strategic goals and aims of the institution were analysed using aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough, (1992a, 1995, 2003, 2011), Chouliaraki and Fairclough, (1999) and outlined by Locke, (2004). Concepts that informed analysis included: forms of capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Mishra, 2020); "equity-mindedness model" which utilises ideas around implicit and explicit bias to examine the actions and views of leaders and practitioners (CUE, 2019); and Academic Capital Formation (ACF) which highlights class reproduction in education and how student barriers can be reduced via academic, networking and financial interventions (St. John, Hu and Fisher, 2011), (Stewart, 2025).

1.2 Thesis Significance

The present research is important because it explores the rollout, enactment, and implementation of WA policy across one HEI in Scotland. As aforementioned, a devolved policy model in Scotland has the potential for HEIs enacting WA policy in different ways. Aside from stating intended outcomes via the Outcome Framework and Assurance Model and having to achieve WA related targets, it is not very well understood how each HEI is delivering WA policy. The Scottish Governments and former First Ministers ambition is that by "2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 13). It is imperative to understand what has changed and or been put in place to ensure that such targets are met and also where there is any disruption to "socioeconomic inequality" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 3). Particularly as it was highlighted nearly ten years ago that fair access:

...could hardly be a more sophisticated, subtle problem. It is rooted in family homes and local communities, in the complex mix of factors that shape aspiration and in the cultural differences between socioeconomic groups. It is exacerbated by the systemic unfairness evident in the

admissions and selection processes of institutions, in the school attainment gap and in the efficiency of transitions between education sectors, (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 3).

It is key to learn how WA policy is being put into practice, whether those implementing WA policy and targets understand the socioeconomic or social class related aspects of attempting to enter and thrive in and beyond HE. Also essential to ascertain is whether those intended to benefit from WA policy - students from working class, socioeconomic/socially disadvantaged, poorer, WA backgrounds, are.

The present research matters to the field of sociology because it highlights the relevance of critical theory as a way of studying social class and highlights that research around social class is necessary now more than ever. An estimate by the House of Commons outlined that by 2030 two-thirds of the entire globe's wealth will be in the hands of 1% of the population (The Guardian, 2018). More recently, The Sutton Trust (2025, p.2) warns that "Britain's elite – those in the most influential roles in our country – continue to be dominated by the privately educated and graduates of the most prestigious universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge".

The top ten professions including politics, business, media, third sector and policy, Whitehall and public bodies, public servants, for example, across the UK are overwhelmingly made up of individuals from affluent backgrounds: '

"The proportion of privately educated elites has barely changed since 2019. 36% of those working in Britain's top jobs went to a private school, compared to 39% in 2019", (The Sutton Trust, 2025, p. 5).

Recommendations are policy are made, with regards to universities, the advice is clear:

Universities, particularly the most selective institutions, should extend use of contextual admissions, including reduced grade contextual offers, more extensively to open up access to students from less privileged backgrounds. Universities should place particular focus on evidence-based interventions to improve access from under-represented groups (The Sutton Trust, 2025, p. 9).

The present research explored the above to understand what is happening on the ground within one HEI and contributes to the field of sociology by exploring whether concepts such as social, cultural, academic and economic capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) continue to have currency to assist HEIs and their staff to grasp the severity of consequences of inequity across HE for students from working class backgrounds. This study has suggested use of evidence-based models to enable HEIs to achieve the above such as the "equity-mindedness model" (CUE, 2019) and

Academic Capital Formation (ACF) (St. John et al., 2011) and demonstrates that bias related to social class is not taken as seriously as it would be if regarding race, ethnicity, gender or disability.

The impact of the present study's findings is a better understanding of what is taking place within an HEI in Scotland, acting as a point of reference to begin recognising what may and may not be working i.e. achieving equitable outcomes across HE and society. It starts a mapping process of current enactments and practices around WA policy across HEIs in Scotland, moving towards social justice with empirical critical theory research furthering social good. The implications of the research findings highlight the need for action around equitable implementation of policy and treatment of those intended to benefit from it. Here lies a starting point for toolkit development which aims to develop ways for HEIs to better institutional knowledge, understanding and practices around social class and related impacts on HE access, experiences and outcomes via cognisant interactions with WA policy.

1.3 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2: Literature Review forms two parts. The first poses the question: *Whit's the Craic?* This is a Scots (and Irish) colloquial way of asking what is happening/going on/occurring for a person, the day or about a situation. The question is directed towards the situation the thesis is about to explore equity around social class and Widening Access (WA) policy within one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Scotland. Use of this language is intended to stand out from the academic nature of a PhD thesis and ground it in the everyday whilst giving a nod to the use of what may be perceived as more working-class language. It is illustrative of the ways in which differing social class groups might very well stand out within academia. The section delves into historic and current barriers around access to higher education (HE); observations around terminology usage regarding social class groups; perspectives of students within HE; consideration around HE in Scotland; and gains an understanding of equity theory and policy within HE. The second part of the literature review seeks to understand inequality in HE via differing theoretical perspectives. These include sociological theories and concepts underpinning understandings of social class; a comparison of variants of social capital; and Academic Capital Formation (ACF) framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology and methods, outlines the methodological approach taken of Critical Theory, discussing the study's ontological and epistemological foundation. The methodological approach and research design are then highlighted, identifying the type of data collections and

methods of data analysis. Following on from here is a justification for the above choices and a brief acknowledgement of the ethics and risk assessments considered. Lastly, researcher reflexivity regarding methodology and methods selected are discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings, span three parts. The first part broadly captures the findings of the policy-related document analysis regarding WA policy, contextual admissions mechanisms, and reviewing the strategic aims and goals of the HEI. The second part discusses HE admissions as related to WA target setting, SIMD usage and management, the introduction of HEI centralised admissions teams, and the impact of academic selection vs recruitment. The final part outlines findings around recognition of students from WA backgrounds, student support mechanisms, and matters related to retention.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings, discusses the findings of the present study and as related to other research in the field. Firstly, institutional practices, enactments and context is discussed, followed by sociological concepts which may shift the HEI into more practice-based thinking. Lastly terminology utilised within the present study is addressed.

Chapter 6: Conclusions is the final chapter which outlines a summary of the present study's findings as well as its limitations. The implications for further research, policy, and practice are also discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Whit's the Craic?

Part 1 of this literature review will explore the question: Whit's the Craic? Which is asked to gain an understanding of what is occurring and how are things going within Higher Education (HE) for working class students in Scotland. The areas discussed include: 2.1.1 Barriers around Access to Higher Education: investigating a range of problems and/or barriers (implicit and explicit biases) around access, attendance and excelling in HE with regards to social class; 2.1.2 Terminology Considerations: meaning, context, pitfalls and gaps around relevant terminology used in the field, outlines and justifies terminology to be used within the present study; 2.1.3 Student Perspectives: explores a range of working class students' perspectives of HE/HEIs from previous research in the field; 2.1.4 HE Considerations in Scotland regarding data on student numbers in Scottish HEIs and the Commissioner for Fair Access's warnings; and lastly, 2.1.5 Equity: Theory & Policy in HE: getting to grips with the concept of equity with regards to policy and its application across HE in Scotland.

2.1.1 Barriers around Access to Higher Education

Here, a range of problems and/or barriers (implicit and explicit biases) around accessing; attending; excelling in HE in Scotland with regards to social class will be discussed. These include: Attending to the Aspiration "Myth"; Access Gap in HE in Scotland, Widening Participation (WP) & Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD, 2009); the measure & its discontents; Widening Access: a new approach?; Funding: flexibility or financial burden?; Pathways into HE: streamlined or circumvented?; The Ad-missions; and Attendance: Hierarchies of HE – Endeavouring to End Elitism? The section will conclude and outline how the above shapes the present study before moving on to 1.2 Terminology Considerations.

2.2.1a Attending to the Aspiration "Myth"

Before delving into a range of barriers, as outlined above, it is worthwhile to firstly, but briefly, discuss barriers with regards to primary and secondary education in Scotland around social class. This will include the "poverty-related attainment gap" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 5) and the "myth" of "poverty of aspiration" (Treanor, Jamieson, & Kelly, 2017, p. 1) among students depending on their family's socio-economic status (ses).

In Scotland, there exists a gap in education outcomes between children from low and high ses

backgrounds beginning before primary school and continuing in primary school, widening throughout, and into secondary school (Sosu and Ellis, 2014). Ses has been stated as "the most important difference between individuals' alongside "Who you are in Scotland" rather than school attended with regards to "achievement differences on international tests" (OECD, 2007, p. 15 as cited in Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 8). The attainment gap has been described as a "poverty-related attainment gap" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 5) of "economically disadvantaged groups" with emphasis on ways to better "local and national working practices" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 44).

Following the understanding that local authority funding of just 5% was apportioned to areas of deprivation (Sosu and Ellis, 2014) the Scottish Attainment Challenge was created in 2015 to target funding to areas of high deprivation via local authorities and schools to abolish the attainment gap which is hoped to also impact upon "narrowing the participation gap in higher education" (Blackburn, Kadar-Satat, Riddell and Weedon, 2016, p. 27). The Scottish Attainment Challenge is supported by Curriculum for Excellence, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), National Improvement Framework, Pupil Equity Funding, Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund and Developing the Young Workforce (National Improvement Hub, 2022). The stated aim is to "raise the attainment of children and young people living in deprived areas, in order to close the equity gap" where "Equity can be achieved by ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed" embodied by the tagline "Scotland: The best place in the world to learn" (National Improvement Hub, 2022).

Some have argued that there has been emphasis placed upon the role of parents, teachers and Headteachers in closing the attainment gap, demonstrating leadership (Scottish Government, 2016; Mowat 2017; Torrance & Forde, 2017). This points to the ways in which the "poverty-related attainment gap" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 5) can be propagated by influences of economics and neo-liberal political influences where privatisation is championed, perpetuating inequity (Apple, 2013), harrowing austerity measures (Bramall, 2016) and social reproduction (Cotton et al., 2015) linking to the who of "who you are" (OECD, 2007, p. 15 cited in Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 8) in terms of level of impact, as well as by education factors.

This gap has also been noted as being debated as a gap in aspiration, on the part of children and their families from low ses backgrounds (Scottish Parliament, 2017 as cited in Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1). Dubbed the "poverty of aspiration" regarding education outcomes, which was instead renounced as a "myth" which "transfers responsibility for aspirations and achievement from governments and schools to parents and children" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1). Parents of

lower income were stated as "less likely to know what is possible or how to achieve it" and "less likely to know how to support their child's education" whilst wanting "the best for their child(ren)" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1). Concluding remarks again look to the role of schools, teachers and staff but with a nod towards the education of them to enhance their understanding of the "risks, causes and consequences of poverty, which are often conflated and misconstrued" with support of this upskilling coming from school Pupil Equity Fund (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 5).

Of interest to the present study is the use of language such as "equity" (Scottish Attainment Challenge, 2015, p. 6; National Improvement Hub, 2022) and the awareness of the impact of ses (OECD, 2007; Sosu and Ellis, 2014) with regards to primary and secondary education and whether this translates into understandings of higher education as experienced by students from low ses backgrounds, as will be discussed in section 2.1.5. Equity: Theory & Policy in HE. HEIs have been positioned as "agents of change" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 53). Recommendations include the "need for large-scale, mixed-methods research and evaluation studies that generate qualitative and quantitative data and can support the design, implementation and evaluation of new curricula programmes and interventions" with HEIs sharing how they promote evidence-based knowledge about poverty and what works for pupils from economically disadvantaged homes in pre-service and career-long professional learning programmes (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 53). A focus on "developing empirical research and evaluation studies that help educators to understand educational inequality relating to poverty in Scotland, identify effective and efficient projects and understand the active ingredients of successful "gap-busting" projects" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 53) is suggested. The present study seeks to explore to what extent any of the above may have been developed into HEI policy and implemented.

The above highlights a gap in ses on the part of remaining societal class structures and related inequities rather than as on the part of the student in their capability and indeed, aspiration for learning. The present study does not seek to perpetuate the aspiration "myth" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1) regarding any students nor their families. The focus of the present study seeks to shift from student to HEI to explore their role in addressing or maintaining inequity in participation, with students and staff via investigating their experiences of attending/working in an HEI. Two interesting and related previous practice recommendations to note are those of: "Focus on the mechanisms by which aspirations can diminish over time for young people" and "Dismantle the local and structural barriers to high aspirations" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 5). The present study extends the for young people, as above, to include students of any age and looks

to HEIs barriers to access which is inclusive of and potentially impacts upon students' aspirations. Of interest are the ways in which HEIs may potentially transfer responsibility onto students and their families rather than that responsibility residing with them and government, which they have some power to shape, particularly when of own interest and/or benefit as discussed below. The next section goes into further detail of the above, regarding the access gap in HE in Scotland.

2.1.1b Access Gap in HE in Scotland

Following outlining the "myth" of "poverty of aspiration" (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1) and acknowledging the "poverty-related attainment gap" related to "pupils from economically disadvantaged homes" (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p. 5) this section will briefly explore the access gap as related to HE, noting any parallels.

In Scotland there is inequity around social class in Higher Education (HE) recognised as "deep-rooted inequalities in educational pathways" (Iannelli et al., 2016, p. 562) and class-based patterns of students from differing social classes entering high or low tariff courses (Reay, 2016). Some researchers argue that the HE access gap is wider than elsewhere in the UK with individuals from the least advantaged areas four times less likely to go straight to university, and admissions are reliant on increasing sub-degree places at FE colleges, despite political commitments (Blackburn, Kadar-Satat, Riddell and Weedon, 2016). Political commitments here, is with reference to the Scottish Government abolishing "student tuition fees in 2000" and the "graduate endowment" fee (to be paid by students upon graduating) in 2007 (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 89). The proportion of 2015-16 HE entrants from the 20% most deprived areas saw a rise of just 0.1% (SFC, 2017).

Blackburn, Kadar-Satat, Riddell and Weedon, (2016) state that the above changes failed to raise HE participation within universities "overall" nor "by students from less advantaged backgrounds", instead increases in participation are linked to "college HN provision" where the above students are "over-represented" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 89). Also cited are "downsides" to Scotland's HE funding whereby the Scottish Governments "commitment to resource universities from recurrent public funding" leads to the capping of HEI places and "more intense" competition for places to the detriment of "non-traditional students" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 89). However, the referenced report above has been critiqued for minimising the value of the college sector in Scotland, as discussed in more detail in below.

The participation gap within HE associated with socio-economic disadvantage, and its root causes can be understood as a "wicked" problem in which many factors play a part (Rittel, and

Webber 1973, p. 155). Fifty years on, Reay (2022, p. 425) asserts that such notions endure, outlining that politicians, policymakers and the field of education continue to embody the accepted tradition to "express concern about educational inequalities whilst failing both to engage with many of the main drivers of inequality, and to grasp the complex and dynamic interplay of educational structures, processes and practices".

To increase HE participation and reduce the access gap between more and less advantaged students, fees were abolished for university places however this heightened competition for places as HEI places became capped for Scottish domicile students, continuing the disparity (Blackburn, et al., 2016). In Scotland HE provision can be accessed via FE colleges such as HNC/HND courses which are 1st and 2nd year university HE equivalents (as outlined below).

2.1.1c Widening Participation (WP) & SIMD: the measure & its discontents

This section shifts focus from a gap in access to HE to a gap in participation in HE with the discussion centred around the measure of deprivation in Scotland and issues raised around its use within HE.

Following the Dearing and Garrick Reports unease around "under-representation in higher education of certain social groups (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997a, 1997b)" (Weedon, 2015, p. 90), inequity around social class in HE in Scotland has been debated as the "participation gap" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 27). The measure advocated by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) for HEIs to utilise to account for the above under-representation of participation in education is the SIMD (2009) to be captured by HEIs reporting of "participation by different social groups" (Weedon, 2015, p. 93). The SIMD is an "area-based measure of relative deprivation" spanning "6,976 small areas (called data zones)" which can be "identified as 'deprived' as associated with 'people having a low income' and/or 'fewer resources or opportunities'" (Scottish Government, 2020). The data zones are ranked from "most deprived (ranked 1) to least deprived (ranked 6,976)" with an areas level of deprivation linked to results across "seven domains: income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing" (Scottish Government, 2020).

Researchers highlighted that the term used to describe the above Widening Participation was challenging as its "definition... is completely based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation" which was noted as "by its very nature is heavily biased towards urban areas" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 77). Similar concerns have been raised around the use of SIMD as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report highlights: "While children from the poorest households are disproportionately represented in the lowest SIMD, this area-based data is

limited as not all poor children live in poor postcodes and vice versa" (Sosu & Ellis, 2014, p. 54).

As a "neighbourhood measure of deprivation" it includes some individuals living in areas of deprivation who are not poor, the distribution of deprivation is not even across Scotland; there are high concentrations in some areas mainly urban and few in rural (Weedon, 2015, p. 93). As such, SIMD use may negatively impact more rural HEIs and their prospective students who are from "low income households" and/or "first generation" to attend HE in their family but are not accounted for due to their postcode not being regarded as within an area of high deprivation (Weedon, 2015, p. 93). This is similarly echoed for the reverse, SIMD "does not capture data on young people from poorer backgrounds who are living in more advantaged areas" calling for data to "be gathered on parental occupation and levels of education" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 5). Also noted is the figure of "54% of children in low income households in Scotland live outside SIMD20 neighbourhoods" (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015 as cited in Blackburn, et al., 2016: 23). The SIMD is argued as problematic as it is not an "individual measure of disadvantage" but a neighbourhood measure (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 75; Sosu & Ellis, 2014; Weedon, 2015).

The present study is interested in understanding the impact over the preceding twenty-five years of the awareness brought by the Dearing & Garrick report, that certain social groups are underrepresented in HE (Weedon, 2015). Understanding use of SIMD as a measure within HE is also key to ascertain how HEIs make decisions around applicants from poorer backgrounds. This is pertinent to explore as HEIs must use the SIMD (Scottish Funding Council, 2012), highlighted as problematic (Sosu & Ellis, 2014; Weedon, 2015; Blackburn et al., 2016), but can also make use of "any other measure, or set of measures, for deprivation ... to demonstrate their success in improving access" as permissible by the SFC (Scottish Funding Council, 2012, p. 4 as cited in Weedon, 2015, p. 94).

The above has led to calls for a "consistent measure" to allow tracking of progress over time (Weedon, 2015, p. 94) and highlighted the debate around participation, mainly issues around the ways in which it is measured, or not and the related negative consequences faced by students from lower ses backgrounds which such measures are intended to capture in order to support. Discussions around WP have more recently been reframed as Widening Access (WA), shifting the focus back to HEIs and their role in improving access to HE for students from lower ses and/or non-traditional backgrounds, which the next section such unpick.

Important to note before moving on, there are more recent updates around SIMD and its use. The way in which SIMD will be utilised regarding widening participation has changed significantly however, the SIMD index itself has yet to be updated, remaining the same since SIMD 2020 (version two as income domain was revised). There has been a new change in that the current Commissioner for Fair Access advocates that SIMD 20 should not be solely relied upon and would rather a move towards individual/household measures of disadvantage. There is yet to be a replacement of SIMD20 adopted across Scotland. As of 2026-27 HEIs will have their original 10% SIMD20 institutional target replaced with "stretch" commitments which are institutionally-specific. HEIs must now match their previous highest SIMD20 intake or increase it. Finally, deciles up SIMD40 shall now been reported by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) within their widening-access data, rather than up to SIMD20 only.

At the time of undertaking the present study's participant interviews, the above updates had not yet happened and so could not be discussed. The responses gathered regarding SIMD 20 remain crucial, continuing to have weight particularly as no replacement is yet in place.

2.1.1d Widening Access: a new approach?

This section will deliberate in more detail, the differences between WP and WA.

WA like WP concerns certain groups who are currently underrepresented within HE in Scotland. Attending to this, in line with thirty-four recommendations in "The Blueprint for Fairer Access" (Scottish Government, 2016), as of 2020 students "will now see two sets of entry requirements for courses at Scottish universities and colleges: standard and minimum" which both outline the grades required by a student "by the time they start at the university or college" with the "minimum entry requirements only apply to widening access students' (UCAS, 2022).

Several examples of groups who may be included are listed on the UCAS website as those who:

- "have successfully completed a pre-entry programme
- live in a target postcode area. For example, in a low participation area as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)
- attend a target school or college where attainment is typically below average
- have experience of being in care
- are estranged from their family (not supported by their family)
- have refugee status, or are an asylum seeker

- are responsible for the unpaid care and wellbeing of a dependant (e.g. a relative, partner, or friend).
- have parents who serve in the armed forces – or who have done so in the past (service children)
- are from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background"

(UCAS, Widening Access and Participation; Entry requirements in Scotland, Who is a widening access student? 2022)

However, each "university and college will have its own policy" the onus of checking and understanding each universities policy lies with the underrepresented students themselves, as they are reminded: "so it's important students check their websites to understand whether they will be considered as a widening access student" (UCAS, 2022). Scotland has 19 universities, inclusive of 15 universities, the Open University and 3 specialised institutions such as a rural college, art school and a conservatoire as well as 24 colleges across 13 regions. To navigate admissions across these would incur a laborious and time-consuming process in assessing eligibility, particularly for students with little previous knowledge of HE. Such an undertaking is described as "likely to be confusing, even off-putting" by the Commissioner for Fair Access, Sir Peter Scott (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 4), as addressed below.

Inequity around social class in Higher Education (HE) is not new or a uniquely Scottish phenomenon. Recent research often echoes past observations, where addressing this conundrum appears in the form of expanding the HE sector. HE sector expansion in France was largely of benefit to the middle and upper classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 1979 as cited in Braham, 2013). Similarly, a decade ago Iannelli (2011) concluded that whilst Scotland had, like the rest of the UK and other countries, expanded education and witnessed upward social mobility, there was little disruption to the general and historic order of education and the labour market. Individuals from "lower social classes" or working-class backgrounds may have taken-up "new places and opportunities" that historically were not accessible or afforded but these were by no means given-up by the middle classes (Iannelli, 2011, p. 261).

Equity was not achieved in this regard as all stood to benefit. The playing field was widened but not levelled, with educational reforms having "no effect in changing patterns of inequalities and of social mobility" (Iannelli, 2011, p. 261). This inequity was demonstrated across HE sector expansion in the UK benefitting the middle classes rather than "academically able working class" (Reay, 2016, p. 4). Individuals may be locked out because they have not had or are denied equitable opportunity to the means and types of preparation and progression,

experiencing "discrimination before the market" (Phelps-Brown, 1977, p. 74 as cited in Braham, 2013, p. 72). Furthermore, the continued preference or favourability of "'middleclass" characteristics" within "education system and by recruitment practices" (Iannelli, 2011, p. 261) evidences that despite working class students achieving higher qualifications necessary for job entry it is middle class peers who may get on better as bias around social class is present across both education and employment. This is reminiscent of earlier observations of social reproduction, whereby children of wealthy parents get along better within education systems as they inherit the wealth "cultural knowledge and abilities" of their parents which mirror those respected and rewarded in education systems (Bourdieu, 1984 cited in Crossley, 2014, p. 93) and employment.

As the expansion of the "service class" eases, ascending the "social class ladder can come only by displacing people from the middle class" (Iannelli, 2011, p. 261) echoing Goldthorpe and Jackson's (2007) similar observation. The service class or salariat, relates to Gesellschaft's (1953) term, espoused by Goldthorpe, which defines jobs within government, social services and/or "private economic service" which embody a "code of service" as opposed to a contract of labour (Oxford University Press, 2022). Such roles regard trust as central, jobs are secure with opportunities to progress (advancing pay) unlike many "working-class occupations" which can be less autonomous and more repetitious with structured pay (Oxford University Press, 2022).

The Scottish Government had begun stipulating increased places, reserved for students from "under-represented groups" with the aim of changing the "culture of recruitment from particular groups" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 20). The shift to reserve places for the above students began with more students entering "ancient universities" from SIMD20 regarded as the "most disadvantaged neighbourhoods" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 20). However, with budget reductions, the expectation of yearly increases has lessened (Blackburn et al., 2016). Questioned is why ancient HEIs do not engage in such expectations without SFC and Scottish Government funding and whether they will continue to fulfil reserved places expectations when funding ends (Blackburn et al., 2016).

Concern around continuing widening access practices following potential end to funding highlights the juxtaposition of some HEIs operating WA policies as convenient - when funding is available. This is at odds with equity across HE for all as such HEIs have the means to always ensure targeted widening access provision and operate without additional funding unlike other non-ancient HEIs.

This section has outlined WA with regards to the: types of students eligible for HE funding (UCAS, 2022); concerns around HEIs individualised approach to communicating WA eligibility to students (Scottish Government, 2017); recognition of little change to social class-based patterns of inequity before, during and after attending HEIs when entering the job market (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007; Iannelli, 2011; Braham, 2013; Reay, 2016; Blackburn et al., 2016), and links to social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984; Crossley, 2014). The next section will consider the financial aspect of HEI attendance for students from lower ses backgrounds.

2.1.1e Funding: flexibility or financial burden?

Scotland tuition fees are free for Scottish domicile students "considered to be the country that a person is assessed as being their permanent home" (SAAS, 2016, p. 44) or by meeting three outlined requirements. Courses are funded by the Scottish Government via the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) paid to HEIs for students (Scottish Government, 2022).

However, whilst funding of HEI courses is emphasised in policy discourse, the spotlight has shifted away from funding given to students in the form of maintenance and/or loans (Blackburn et al., 2016). There is a reduction in amount available as a non-repayable grant for both "young" and "mature" students and an increase in repayable loans as "maintenance support" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 19).

In comparison to other countries within the UK, in Scotland, whilst students debt is lower, individuals from "poorer backgrounds" leave HE with more debt than their peers from "richer backgrounds" as they are burdened with repayable loans for maintenance whereas this cost is covered by the parents of middle-class students (Blackburn et al., 2016).

Several decades on, another sentiment that remains stable: "Statistically speaking, the best advice we can give to a poor child, keen to get ahead through education, is to choose richer parents." (Connell 1995, p. 6 as cited in Thomson, 2002, p. 1).

Scotland has a wider HE accesses gap than the rest of the UK. Ironically, Scotland's policy of free, centrally funded, university education (Scottish Government 2022) may partially explain why this is so (Stewart, 2025). The central funding formulae caps university places and increases competition in ways that England and Wales's system of fees paid by individual students through re-payable loans does not (Blackburn et al., 2016).

This section briefly highlights Scottish HE funding arrangements. The fee-free system is outlined alongside the limitations and impact regarding repayable loans on students from widening access backgrounds. The next section will discuss which such students are guided

into HE and related systems which encourage HE entry, or not.

2.1.1f Pathways into HE: streamlined or circumvented?

The sub-sections below outline: 1. Secondary School Subject Selection Snub?; 2. Ad-missions Processes; and 4. Attendance: Hierarchies of HE – Endeavouring to End Elitism? With most students in Scotland attending FE college and not university (Blackburn et al., 2016), it is important to consider the articulation pathways into HE.

Secondary School Subject Selection Snub?

Findings suggest that in Scotland, subject choices made in secondary school are the "main mechanism" determining an individual's likelihood of "entering HE (in particular, in entering the most prestigious institutions)" which is heavily shaped by family background i.e. social class (Iannelli, et al., 2016, p. 576). It has been argued that the above lack of understanding around the suggested consequences of subject choice in gaining entry to HE, sees working class students diverted into less prestigious HE or to FE institutions, whilst middle-upper class peers rarely attend FE colleges (Iannelli et al., 2016).

The onus falls to those involved in early curriculum decision making; secondary schools, in giving working class students "clear information and support in their curriculum decisions throughout their school career" (Iannelli et al., 2016, p. 577) to assist HE entry. As aforementioned, parents of lower ses backgrounds want "the best for their child(ren)" but may be "less likely to know" the full possibilities and ways of supporting them (Treanor et al., 2017, p. 1).

Social class stratification and low social mobility are rooted in occupation-dependent class structures (Iannelli et al., 2016; Reay, 2016). Inequalities are particularly acute for working-class, first-generation students with no family experience of HE (Wilson, Hunter and McArthur, 2018). The choice to enter HE is more problematic with pressure to earn money, family commitments, low sense of entitlement and unpreparedness leading to high dropout rates (Reay, 2016). Therefore, whilst Scottish policy seeks to improve equity by widening HE participation and access (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 2019) without due consideration of the above factors as earlier noted by Iannelli (2011) such educational expansion may do little to challenge HE and top profession entry or education elitism in a way that markedly shifts patterns of inequalities positively impacting social mobility.

Articulation Approach

There is an approach of Articulation which has been evolving since 2007 (SCAPP, 2021)

whereby students may enter "second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate (HNC)... or into third year with a Higher National Diploma (HND)" both gained at college (SFC, 2022). Following the Commission on Widening Access's (COWA) 2016 report (Scottish Government, 2016) and the National Articulation Forum Final Report (National Articulation Forum, 2020) which "builds" on the former, emphasis was placed on improving articulation routes to widen access to HE (SFC, 2022). FE colleges and HEIs are to "develop and maintain articulation pathways and routes, working to targets that are realistic for each region and underpinned by a national 10-year strategy" with the support from the SFC and guidance of HEI articulation agreements which map related routes (SFC, 2022).

There is a National Articulation Database (NAD) which outlines articulation routes, information and describes articulation pathways as "data-generated relationships between college HE Subject groupings and university subjects" (SFC, 2019, p. 30). Here an "articulation system" has been developed which examines "examples where a combination has yielded an instance of AS or AP and then flags all instances of this combination across the database" (SFC, 2019, p. 30). An Advanced Standing (AS) whereby "a student gets full academic credit for the prior learning" (SFC, 2019, p. 5) and an Advanced Progression (AP) is where students gain a "partial academic credit" (SFC, 2019, p. 9).

The above links Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership outlining SCQF levels and corresponding qualifications (SQA, HEIs, apprenticeships & SVQ's) to support students as well as "works with every sector of education and training plus learners, parents, carers and employers" (SFC, 2022). Most recently Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) was established in 2019 to link up the above work as a practitioners' network. The recent National Articulation Database first report highlights that "40% of students in the most deprived quintile progress to university through the college HNC/HND pathway" (SFC, 2019, p. 19). As discussed, students from the least advantaged areas are four times less likely to go straight to university, and admissions reliant on increasing sub-degree places at FE colleges, (Blackburn et al., 2016) which appears to have shifted very little. SCAPP recognises that the above articulation routes and HEI agreements are not all linked with FE colleges in a way which easily outlines pathways from one to another.

In summary, secondary school subject selection has an impact and consequences in navigating articulation pathways, accessing HE and/or attending an FE first which is more common for students from working-class backgrounds (Iannelli et al., 2016).

Ad-missions Processes

This section will briefly outline the admissions process in Scottish HEIs and the trepidation in navigating this system as highlighted by Sir Peter Scott (Scottish Government, 2017) outlined above. The admissions process is under scrutiny, exploring its usefulness or ad(ds)-missions/ hoops to jump through for potential students and whether HEIs maintain or address related matters raised as concerning by COWA (Scottish Government, 2017) and others (Sosu & Ellis, 2014).

Policymakers "particularly endorsed" the "contextualised admissions approaches" whilst raising concerns regarding "a lack of detail about their use and effectiveness" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 3 & 85). Also noted was the reservation of places for "young people from disadvantaged backgrounds" where competition is "very strong" which "seems to be an effective way of increasing their representation" (Blackburn et al., 2016 p. 3 & 85).

Contextualised admissions are a system whereby:

...consideration of the context of an applicant's attainment, perhaps giving a lower offer of entry to an applicant who has achieved reasonable results in difficult circumstances in comparison to an applicant with higher grades from a more stable or affluent background (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 1)

The Discussion Paper: Contextual Admissions, outlines the following varying contextual admissions models used across Scotland as recorded in 2017, taken from "Table 1: Models of contextual admissions currently employed by Scottish HEIs" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 2):

Table 1: Contextual Admissions Models

Guaranteed offer	Guaranteed offers at a specified rate for applicants who meet contextual eligibility criteria i.e. every eligible applicant is given an offer of entry at a specified level.
Guaranteed rate of offer	Offers at a specified rate for applicants who meet contextual eligibility criteria if deemed suitable candidates —i.e. contextual applicants are in competition with others in terms of suitability and number of places, meeting eligibility criteria does not guarantee an offer, but level of offer is known.
Offer with conditions	Offer is made conditional on attendance at summer school or additional assessment.
Interview/assessment	Lower threshold for interview or additional assessment for those who meet contextual eligibility criteria.
Additional consideration	Additional consideration or lower offers are made to eligible candidates on an individual basis—i.e. each applicant is assessed individually and may or may not receive an offer, the rate is not known beforehand

It is noted that across "each of these approaches, the information known in advance to an applicant and the resulting offer may vary considerably" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 2). Differing measures of disadvantage are used to ascertain who is eligible for contextual admissions which vary across Scotland's HEIs: "Each institution employs a different set of markers of disadvantage/ under-representation for consideration within the admissions process" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 2).

The most common are listed below:

Table 2: Markers of disadvantage

1. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	7. Attended school participating in SFC Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)
2. Care experience—spent time in care/looked after	8. State-funded secondary school
3. Declared caring responsibilities	9. Percentage of school leavers progressing to HE
4. Registered refugee or asylum seeker	10. Percentage of pupils achieving specific number of Highers or specific grade combination
5. Applicant engaged in access programme such as SWAP, institution's own	11. Percentage of pupils from deprived areas (SIMD)
6. Parental education—parents do not have degree level education (as stated on UCAS form)	

(Taken from Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 2).

In light of the above differences across HEIs Contextual Admissions models (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017) warns that Contextual admissions and access thresholds must be "understood by potential applicants" if they are "to be effective" particularly important for learners that "contextual admissions processes have been designed to support" as such learners "are often the most lacking in informed support and guidance, with family and peers unfamiliar with application processes and requirements" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 4).

Reasons for variation in HEIs contextual admissions and edibility criteria are recognised as reflective of "institutional priorities, local geography and historical context" however such differences can be "difficult to understand" from potential applicants' perspective (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 4). Applications to HE are made via UCAS, each applicant has the potential to select up to five HE choices. It has been highlighted (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p.4) that this can lead to difficulties in navigating differing "eligibility criteria and processes" described as "likely to be confusing, even off-putting":

- * They might be considered for a contextual offer at one institution but not another;
- * They might be given a much reduced offer for one programme but not another;
- * A third choice may stipulate attendance at a summer school;
- * Websites might use terms such as "contextual offer", "minimum entry requirements", "adjusted offer" or "supported offer" to describe similar processes;
- * For some programmes and institutions they may be able to ascertain the offer they are

likely to receive before applying, for others they will not, (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p.4)

Also outlined is the worrying consideration of a group of potential learners who "do not" apply to HE as they may be "unaware of the existence of contextual admissions" and "do not believe their attainment or predicted attainment will be sufficient for admission when judged against standard entry criteria" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 4).

The above Contextual Admissions applies to most HEI courses including some restricted courses and are specific to the subject and HEI applied to. Three arguments are set forth for progressing the current state of play:

Fairer access to the professions, in particular high-status professions, is needed to ensure that they recruit from the widest possible pool of talent (efficiency); to avoid access being over-determined by accidents of birth and family circumstances (social justice); and to ensure professions are as representative as possible of the communities they serve (social cohesion). Professional qualification is the destination of many university courses so unequal access to professions can distort the provision of higher education especially for students from more socially deprived communities. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p.5)

The first argument regarding efficiency details that such courses like medicine intend to serve local populations, are highly regulated and the:

...objective is the same - to deliver excellence. As a result it is essential that professions recruit the most talented and most appropriate from the widest possible social pool rather than restricting access to those from more privileged social backgrounds if they wish to maintain the highest possible standards. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p. 21)

The second argument of social justice outlines the importance of securing Professional standing as it "confers significant advantages - in terms of both social status and financial rewards" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020: 21). Also highlighted is the crucial impact of accessing such courses as well as what one experiences whilst attempting to complete them:

It is no longer acceptable in a 21st-century democracy that access to these advantages is determined by the accident of birth and the unequal distribution of life chances in childhood and adolescence (in particular, school experience). Also professional standing is the natural culmination of many courses in higher education. So, if access to that standing (particularly in high-status professions such as medicine and law) is made more difficult for those from more socially deprived backgrounds, their experience of higher education - even for those fortunate enough to secure access in the first place - is likely to be diminished compared to the experience of their more advantaged peers. Their opportunities, and therefore ambitions, will be curtailed.

(Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p. 21)

Lastly, the social cohesion argument discusses the implications of having those who work in the professions all coming from one background generally more affluent and those accessing the services coming from another generally more disadvantaged background:

In a 21st-century democracy it is equally important that members of the general public when they encounter members of the professions are able to interact with their "peers" rather than a "caste" composed predominantly of the socially privileged. This is especially necessary in the case of professions such as law or social work where in the past it has sometimes appeared that different social worlds are colliding with the "clients" coming from one, more socially deprived world and the professionals coming from another, more privileged, world. Similar arguments apply to medicine where diagnosis and treatment may even be compromised if social interactions are inhibited. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p. 21)

Further criticisms around HE levelled by the former Commissioner for Fair Access are discussed below in section c. Commissioner's Warnings/Criticisms.

The present study is interested to explore whether the HEI has given due consideration to its own Contextual Admissions policy and enabled ease of understanding for applicants who it may apply to. The study also seeks to understand whether the above three arguments regarding access to the professions have been enacted alongside/via WA policy in a way which highlights the importance of positive change in light of such arguments to all HEI staff and which sees faculties/departments/courses make any necessary changes to ensure that the above cycles of unequal access to the professions are not repeated year on year.

Attendance: Hierarchies of HE – Endeavouring to End Elitism?

The section below highlights how time since creation equals prestige when it comes to HEIs hierarchy regardless of how whether students come from a cross section of society and succeed after HE, or not.

Scotland like other countries within the UK, has a historical hierarchy of HEIs (Weedon, 2015; Raffe & Croxford, 2015). This hierarchy generally relates to the age of the institution, four HEIs are considered as "ancient" as they were founded before 1600 (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 314) including: St. Andrews, 1413; Glasgow, 1451; Aberdeen, 1495 & Edinburgh, 1583. There are also four "old" HEIs which were founded before 1992 and four "new" HEIs which are post-1992 (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 314). Post-1992 relates to the "unified system" which replaced a previous "binary system" of Scottish central institutions and universities, where all are now considered HEIs under the same governance and funding (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p.

313). Two of the ancient HEIs are also Russell Group members (Glasgow & Edinburgh) which are described as "world-class, research-intensive universities" (Russell Group, 2022). Ancient and old HEIs are considered to place more emphasis on post-graduate study and research, new HEIs are described as placing less emphasis on the above and as drawing more "working-class, mature and part-time students' than their older counterparts (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 314; Gallacher, 2006). Recently the SFC (2021) outlines its group "types" of HEIs as ancient universities (four HEIs, as above), newer universities (four HEIs), post-92 universities (seven HEIs) and small specialist institutions (3 HEIs including SRUC, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow School of Art) (SFC, 2021, p. 46).

There are differences in the types of courses offered, for example dentistry and medicine can "only or mainly" be accessed in "higher-status" HEIs and have "controlled numbers" (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 315). Controlled numbers relate to "controlled subject areas" including undergraduate initial teacher education, dentistry, nursing and midwifery pre-registration and veterinary medicine courses (SFC, 2017, p. 15). They usually have stricter selection and entry processes such as the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) exam for medicine which applicants must self-fund and commit to considerable study in preparation. Reasoning to control numbers is stated as "partly to ensure that there is not excessive demand for clinical work placements" such as with dentistry and medicine (SFC, 2017, p. 21). More recently the course paramedic education is also a controlled subject (SFC, 2021, p. 25). The Scottish Government determines recruitment numbers for these professional courses to ensure that the universities produce sufficient trainees to meet demand (Stewart, 2025) and monitors WA intake numbers via the SFC. Professional qualifications offer good economic prospects and are a reasonably solid route to social mobility.

The most recent controlled subjects data available regarding student intake numbers in Scotland for the year 2023-24 (HESA, 2025), as below:

Table 3: Controlled subjects and student intake numbers

Controlled subjects	Student intake numbers
Veterinary sciences	1,015
Medicine and Dentistry	6,605
Education and teaching	12,210
Subjects allied to medicine	27,605
TOTAL	47,435

On their website, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) outlines a further breakdown of the above stats as related to sex and notes "Percentage of HE student enrolments in science subjects by personal characteristics" including sex, age group, disability status, religious belief and ethnicity (HESA, 2025). Social class is not included as a personal characteristic marker.

The above begins to build a picture of the landscape of HE in Scotland, of interest to the present study is the idea of who goes where, studies what and why. In the example of dentistry and medicine, it can be deduced that if these subjects are within ancient HEIs which do not mostly attract working-class students, then those HEIs may in effect become gatekeepers of certain subjects and the decisions around who is accepted onto them. The 1992 systems are yet to be "truly unified" (Scott, 1995 as cited in Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 314) as the dates HEIs began or became such correlates with a "status hierarchy" continuing the "former binary distinction" (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 314). Taken together, the above points to the occurrence of "patterns of differentiation and stratification" of HEIs in Scotland in that there are differences/distinctions between HEIs status and (social) stratification (arranging into different groups) whereby "traditionally elite" HEIs mainly attract "young, middle class" students with "high levels of traditional academic qualifications" and newer HEIs contrastingly attract students with little or no traditional academic qualifications, who are mainly from "socially and economically disadvantaged groups" (Gallacher, 2006, p. 350). It has been argued that this differentiation and stratification pattern is concluded to be stable over time, irrespective widening access policies (Gallacher, 2006) as well as "resistant to pressures for change from expansion, institutional restructuring or the development of market arrangements" and is "embedded in wider social and economic structures" (Raffe & Croxford, 2015, p. 323). Thus the "egalitarian" or equal HE system intended to be achieved by abolishing tuition fees for Scottish domicile students has not been realised (Raffe & Croxford, 2015; Weedon, 2015, p. 107).

Some research suggests that the historical hierarchy within HE and of HEIs, leads to a lack of justice around who gets in to top institutions and thus top professions, with private secondary schools and elite universities at the top leading to top professions (SMCP, 2015), often determining a matching income hierarchy (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Of the 850 Scottish leaders working across public life surveyed, 23% attended private schools and 63% attended an elite UK university (SMCP, 2015).

Wakeling and Savage (2015, p. 301) outline the differences in economic capital of students attending Russell Group related HEIs in England, investigating "mean household income", "mean house value" and "mean household savings". Their research found that:

...graduates from the top eight universities with highest reported household income are all in the south of England, the top ten of those with the highest house values, and the top seven of those with the highest household savings. Oxford is ranked first on all measures... (Wakeling and Savage, 2015, p. 303)

The pattern identified above is described as "largely predictable but striking even so", an example is given whereby "graduates from the top university, Oxford, reporting a 50 per cent higher household income than the University of York" (Wakeling and Savage, 2015, p. 300).

This section highlights the importance of secondary school subject selection in preparing pupils for HE attendance and the varying articulation pathways. The differing Contextual Admissions models and variety of criticisms by the Commissioner for Fair Access (2017, 2020) regarding Scotland's HE Contextual Admissions policy were introduced. Lastly, the different experiences of HE access, HE hierarchies that exist across the sector often attended according to one's family background and knowledge i.e. social class was touched upon.

The present study seeks to explore inequity, according to social group, of access to HEIs and/or courses (Gallacher, 2006) and whether "patterns of differentiation and stratification" (Gallacher, 2006, p. 350) across HEIs and HE subjects/courses and top professions continues to exist.

In summary, some of the main barriers to accessing HE for students from disadvantaged backgrounds are outlined. For example, Iannelli et al. (2016) suggests class-based patterns of subject choice in secondary education where both the number and type of subject selections serve to disadvantage students from working class and poor backgrounds. Poorer students carry more debt than their richer peers and reductions in non-repayable maintenance grants, and the parallel rise in repayable loans are ignored by policy (Blackburn et al., 2016). The Scottish Government set targets to widen access in HE and ensure the student population more closely reflects the make-up of the Scottish population by 2030. To deliver this, it established the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) and a Commissioner for Fair Access to lead, prioritise and report on efforts and progress. The CoWA developed a Scottish Framework for Fair Access and made thirty-four recommendations to achieve the HE targets. Admissions processes and pathways were highlighted alongside the hierarchical nature of HEI, HE courses and professions. The next section will outline considerations around terminology to be used within the present study.

2.1.2 Terminology Considerations

Imperative to research is clarity for the reader around the meaning of terminology utilised alongside acknowledgement of usage in the field and outlining of tensions and justifications regarding choices. Terminology is not value-free and may have unintended connotations. This section discusses the above regarding this project.

Within relevant literature there are various terms utilised to describe students from working-class backgrounds including: "non-traditional" students or learners (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008, p. 567; Evans, Rees, Taylor and Wright 2019, p. 105); "underrepresented groups" (Mishra, 2020: 110); "new" learners", "non-traditional students" (Blackburn et al. 2016, p. 83) from "non-traditional backgrounds" (Ibid, 2016, p. 84; Christie et. al, 2008, p. 567); "poorer backgrounds" and as residing in the "least advantaged areas" or "most disadvantaged neighbourhoods" (Blackburn et al. 2016, p. 2 & 21). Middle and/or upper-class students are referred to in opposing terms such as from "most advantaged areas" and "richer backgrounds" (Blackburn et al., 2016, p. 2 & 20).

It is important to describe individuals and/or groups and their experiences whilst not lessening the matter of historic inequity in HE and HEI access and career progression alongside UK-wide economic austerity measures (2008-2019). Imperative to the present study is to question who is doing the positioning and labelling and to consider any potential impact of terminology which may appear to include negative connotations and/or a deficit view of any individual and/or group. It is vital to consider how individuals and/or groups may describe themselves. It is interesting to deliberate on similar observations and/or approaches and what may be learned and/or applied in future research. For example, in discussing tensions around integrated services & disability with regards to children there are several understandings & concepts which may relate or be applied to HE students, HE staff and HEI systems. Children like HE students have "complex identities" which present "at different times & different places" depending on "who is present" (Davis, 2011, p. 112). Similarly, this may apply to students who, for example, may feel more comfortable or able to express themselves fully around different students and/or staff who may put them at ease which may make the difference in student support, translating into HE success rather than drop-out due to understanding course/career opportunities etc. The above demonstrates an understanding that there are "relationships, contradictions & tensions that exist in systems" and suggests an approach which views communities & systems as "complex & dynamic" (Davis, 2011, p. 113).

The present study seeks to avoid any "labelling/deficit models" (Davis, 2011, p. 114) which

positions working-class students as deficient in some ways or as having shortfalls located within themselves. Whilst adjectives such as poorer, low and less are applied in the context of socio-economic status (ses) they continue to have negative connotations such as below par, at the bottom of the hierarchy and as lacking. The present study involves "moving from older limiting models to more fluid, complex & dynamic understandings" (Davis, 2011, p 115) and towards "adopting a strengths-based approach" which is person-centred, recognises positive attributes that people bring, and is concerned with creating a dialogue (Davis, 2011, p. 117) between students, HEI staff and HEI systems. The above shift embodies the approach of "radical openness": "For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (hooks, 1989, p. 19).

The following section discusses aspects highlighted throughout the above sections regarding access to HE and attending HEIs from the perspective of working class students themselves. This grounds the present study with an understanding of some of the situations that students from such backgrounds have previously faced and may continue to.

2.1.3 Student Perspectives

This section will outline a range of working-class students' and some HEI staffs' experiences and perspectives around facing discrimination within HE/HEIs related to their speech and presence in these environments where they may stand out as non-traditional within such spaces.

2.1.3a The Embodiment of Social Class – Forms of Discrimination

Speech/Accent

Throughout the early part of the literature reviewing process a theme was observed regarding social class and speech across the HEI experiences of students (Loveday, 2016), HEI staff (Addison & Mountford, 2015) and HEI staff as students and/or researchers (Bourdieu as cited in Grenfell, 2014; hooks, 1994). This section will begin by considering recent student perspective research which highlights the matter of speech and accent within HE. A description of accent, speech and links to social class will be discussed and theorists own related observations from several decades ago outlined.

Joe, a working-class HEI student and participant within Loveday's (2016) research around "embodying deficiency" and the "lived experiences of social class and gender" in HE of students in England describes "contemporary discourses" as a part of the problem in their depiction of

his life and that of working-class people and/or students: "Much of his anger was directed towards contemporary discourses that represent the working classes as: "objects of sympathy at best and fucking scorn and derision at worst" (Loveday, 2016, p. 145).

In the description of Joe's actions prior to his above statement it is noted that he "became increasingly animated throughout our discussion, his voice raising" (Loveday, 2016, p. 145). This highlighting of bodily animation and loudness of speech is discussed further below with reference to hooks (1994) own experiences of the above as being linked to the working-classes in a detrimental manner. This is not to infer that Loveday (2016) is referencing Joes actions and speech negatively as a working-class student. However, there is no mention of his evident courage to call out the inequity he experiences across the contemporary narrative and discourses, where power resides with the researcher/writer, and his powerful use of the opportunity to have his voice heard, bringing this inequity of expression lived experience to light. Anger is a secondary emotion and likely a valid and valuable response to injustice. It is imperative to be cognisant of the above observation in both recognising any occurrence of the above across the literature and in seeking not to reproduce a narrative and/or discourse which objectifies working-class students and HEI staffs' experiences of HE.

The topic of accent was "frequently cited as significant by all of the types of participant" interviewed during Loveday's (2016) research, "from undergraduate student to professor" without being initiated/asked, and argued as an example of "a particular expression of classed embodiment" involving "judgement" and a "seepage" of shame" (Loveday, 2016, p. 146). Here, accent is linked back to the theory of "linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991)" where a speaker may have the "potential either to depreciate value for those who speak "out of place", or conversely to accrue "symbolic mastery" (Bourdieu, 1986)" when "the expectations of the field" and "speech is congruent" also supported by findings of Addison & Mountford (2015) (Loveday, 2016, p. 146). In their qualitative research pertaining to the experiences of "primarily white British staff and students' in HE around "fitting in and belonging" across two UK HEIs in England; a "new" post 1995 and an "old" "est. 1800s", Addison & Mountford (2015, p. 4) conclude that:

The game that we believe is being played in Higher Education is about knowing how and when to "talk the talk". Knowing how talk and accent are codified and laden with value is a vital resource in getting ahead of the pack in times of increased competition. Mobilizing whatever capital is available in order to secure one's social position is not a new concept (Skeggs 1997, Adkins 1995; McDowell 1997) but what we have suggested here is that, perhaps more than ever, talking matters, (Addison & Mountford, 2015, p. 10).

The notion of a game at play around knowledge and privilege as accessed or gate-kept by differing social groups is not new nor that of capital(s). Students from non-traditional backgrounds possess different social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Those interviewed by Roberts (2011) were aware of this, perceived as a "deficit" whereby "students" felt they were alone in "learning to play the game" even after successful HE access, leading to considerations of dropping out (Roberts, 2011, p. 193). Further exploration of the notion of capital(s) and game playing will be outlined in detail drawing upon Bourdieu, which will be explored more thoroughly with section 2.2. Understanding Inequity in HE Theoretical Perspectives.

The Sutton Trust Speaking Up report (Levon, Sharma & Ilbury, 2022) explored accent bias and linguistic discrimination with a range of participants across the UK. They describe accent as:

...one of the most recognisable signals of social background in the UK today. It can cue a listener to a speaker's ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, region, culture, or social class. For traits that are not visible, such as socio-economic status, accent is often the primary signal. (Levon et al., 2022, p. 8).

The report found that with regards to the 1029 university students surveyed across the UK when questioned around "concern their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (by home region)" and "experience that their accent has been mocked, criticised or singled out in a social setting (by home region)" 27% and 42% of Scottish students agreed respectively (Levon et al., 2022, p. 23 & 25). The report writes:

Not surprisingly, given the greater length spent at university, reported experiences of accent-based mockery or criticism also showed a statistically significant, incremental increase with every year of university. This was true for experiences within the university setting as well as within social settings (Levon et al., 2022, p. 25).

Testimonials were gathered from university student participants. Scottish students responses demonstrated repeated patterns of accent discrimination which impact upon their experience of HE and potential future career:

(Scottish) – "I feel that my accent has allowed people to more quickly judge me to be of lower class or wealth or not having attended a private school which for some people means they are no longer interested in speaking with you. I am a very sociable and friendly person but have had numerous people clearly of higher class/wealth turn their back to me in a group setting where they have clearly judged me to have been "not their sort of person". My accent is an inescapable indicator that I am "not their sort of person". (Levon et al., 2022, p. 27).

(Scottish) – "Medicine feels very elitist, and my working class Scottish accent will not fit that narrative." (Levon et al., 2022, p. 28).

(Glasgow) – "I want to become a solicitor, but the legal sector is still very elitist so there tends to be a trend in lawyers sounding "more middle class". However, I've met several solicitors who sound just like me, so maybe it is changing. I think if I wanted to become a judge however it would be a lot different." (Levon et al., 2022, p. 28).

One "elite" Scottish university is seeking to tackle accent bias whereby one of the above authors and colleagues have "delivered accent bias training to over 500 staff members and 20 different departments" with the goal raising "awareness of accent bias and linguistic discrimination at the University, as well as introduce some strategies for tackling these issues in the classroom" and to "create a University community where every voice, accent, and language is respected and valued" (Ilbury, 2025).

Patterns of speech and accent signal to listeners ones "geographical origin", "feeling" emotional and physical, "ethnicity" and "social class" and more, conveying our "social information" (Whitworth, 2021). Accents are defined as demonstrating pronunciation differences, unlike dialects which concern varying vocabulary and grammar (Derwing & Munro, 2009 as cited in Whitworth, 2021). The difference in our pronunciation and voice or "phonetic or phonological structure" are "sociophonetic" meaning they "correlate with social factors" such as the above alongside "group affiliations", "gender" and "age" (Foulkes & Docherty, 2006 as cited in Whitworth, 2021).

From a sociological perspective, the power of speech in communicating the near totality of our lived experiences can be quite astounding: "...the interweaving of socio-phonetic and linguistic information in speech is so complete that no natural human utterance can offer linguistic information without simultaneously indexing one or more social factor[s]" (Foulkes & Docherty, 2006 as cited in Whitworth, 2021).

Some argue that many of the features above may only be "controlled to a limited degree, if at all" (Whitworth, 2021). One's repertoire of "linguistic experience" may be utilised in the formation of "identity" and within social world positioning (Foulkes & Docherty, 2006 cited in Whitworth, 2021). This can include one's "social prestige" or as a means of "identifying perceived outsiders" where it is also argued that the "closely correlated" matter of "race and accent discrimination" can be "stated issues of accent intelligibility" however, it can "often used as a cover for race discrimination" (Derwing & Munro, 2009 as cited in Whitworth, 2021).

Throughout the literature reviewed, theorists who have reflected upon their own experience of

accent discrimination include Pierre Bourdieu in France (Grenfell, 2014) and bell hooks in the US (1994), demonstrating some interesting parallels.

Born in Denguin a rural village in south-west France, Bourdieu and his family spoke Béarnese, a dialect of Gascon a regional language no longer spoken, and his early family life is painted as working-class (Grenfell, 2014). Bourdieu attends primary school locally and becomes a boarder in secondary school in Pau the nearest city, eight and a half miles away. Here his "Gascon accent" is mocked by peers whilst he also stands out visually distinct to his peers as he must wear a grey smock signifying that he is a "rural border" student (Grenfell, 2014, p. 17). Bourdieu moves to Paris after passing his entry exams to attend Lycée Louis-le-Grand "one of the principle preparatory schools" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 13, original emphasis). This institution is hailed as gateway to entering exclusive training schools: "Grandes École" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 13) meaning "great school" (Britannica, 2012) traditionally reserved for the elite. His academic acumen continues with attending the elite École Normale Supérieure (ENS) graduating with a degree in Philosophy in 1955 (Grenfell, 2014). Bourdieu was mocked for his accent in his formative years however, he becomes a part of the "French intelligentsia" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 13) and one of Frances influential theorists and leading critical voices, going on to deeply interrogate social class and the ways in which individuals, groups and societies are shaped by persisting social class structures.

Physical Presence

In acknowledging that in the US, the matter of (social) "class is rarely talked about", bell hooks describes herself as "Coming from a nonmaterially privileged background, from the working poor" and as entering Stanford University "acutely aware of class" (hooks, 1994, p. 177). hooks began her HE journey "thinking that class was mainly about materiality" however in a "short while" she understood that: "...class was more than just a question of money, that it shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received" (hooks, 1994, p. 178).

On entering university hooks describes feeling "estranged from this new environment" and originally shared a similar belief of her "peers and professors" that "...those feelings were there because of differences in racial and cultural background. However, as time passed it was more evident that this estrangement was in part a reflection of class difference" (hooks, 1994, p. 181).

Furthermore, hooks' notes that not only did there exist an implicit or "tacitly assumed" agreement that "class should not be talked about" there was a gap as "there would be no critique of the bourgeois class biases shaping and informing pedagogical process (as well as social

etiquette) in the classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 178). The social etiquette discussed observes instances where "Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of classroom social order. These traits were also associated with being a member of the lower classes" (hooks, 1994, p. 178).

The above is argued by hooks as leading to assimilation of working-class students to "bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable" and within a classroom context a "barrier" is created "blocking the possibility of confrontation and conflict" (hooks, 1994, p. 178). Here some students are "silenced" and may have "fear of losing face" and/or are "deemed troublemakers" on questioning the above social order (hooks, 1994, p. 179). In the above recognition also appears to come the responsibility of awareness and challenge of maintaining one's voice and agency as a working-class student or any, in the classroom:

Those of us in the academy from working-class backgrounds are empowered when we recognise our own agency, our capacity to be active participants in the pedagogical process. This process is not simple or easy: it takes courage to embrace a vision of wholeness of being that does not reinforce the capitalist version that suggests that one must always give something up to gain another. (hooks, 1994, p. 183)

In noting the shift in addressing class in the classroom, the recommendation is one of recognition, self-reflection, and evolution on the part of HEI staff as well as students: "Yet there can be no intervention that challenges the status quo if we are not willing to interrogate the way our presentation of self as well as our pedagogical process is often shaped by middle-class norms" (hooks, 1994, p. 185).

Research which explores experiences of transitioning from Further Education (FE) HNC and diploma into an "elite"/"old" HEI outlines the hopes and fears of participants of the above Humanities and Social Science students (Christie, Cree, Hounsell, McCune, & Tett, 2006, p. 351). Firstly, the experiences of FE include more one to one support, first name basis with staff and lecturers, an understanding of coursework/home-life balance, age-related concerns (16+ year olds and mature students in same class), smaller class sizes, differences in examination processes (Christie et al., 2006). Hopes around HE include opportunities to quench thirst for knowledge, bettering career, "self-development", around folk interested in discussing coursework outside of class (Christie et al., 2006, p. 361). Whilst fears include less lecture support, amongst perceived smarter folk "five straight As", fitting in with different peer age groups and "social class differences", larger student, lecture, library and campus sizes - "feeling "lost", not living in the city/RO – travel (Christie et al., 2006, p. 362-3).

Participants also discussed motherhood and relationships, within the 35-participant sample, 15% were males with "caring responsibilities" at home whilst many of the female participants were a source of support in family home whether "lone mothers, married women with children and younger women living in the familial home" (Christie et al., 2006, p. 356). For female students with children, there were "conflicting demands of balancing" family and work life and the feeling of guilt, strained relationships and finances (Christie et al., 2006, p. 356-7). It is noted that: "Guilt about sacrifices they made came also from widely held ideological assumptions about children being best supported by a full-time mother" (Christie et al., 2006, p. 358).

A longitudinal study regarding "teaching & learning experiences of non-traditional students", who make up a low portion, within an "elite" HEI found "emotional aspects of their learning...emerged as an important theme", without being asked of "directly" (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008, p. 569). Findings following the first year propose that there are "distinctive – and class-based – understandings of what it means to fully belong to a community of practice in an elite university" which "many non-traditional students work with" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570). Undertaking the "process of becoming a competent learner" included "identity work" and being "only ever partial members" of the HEI community with "strong emotional feelings of ambivalence and dislocation" around "engagement with "proper" student life" despite their "strong emotional desire to engage in the social practices of learning" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570). The above was noted as supporting the previous research findings of Reay (2005) where such "class practices reveal the ways in which the emotional labour involved in becoming a student is actively shaping the creation of new inequalities within universities" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570). Further understanding the above is an area of interest within the present study.

A second finding within the above research regarding FE/HE pathways, is that "learning how to be a university student" as well as being an "emotionally demanding process", the "very particular nature of the pathways they had taken through higher education" or prior experience of FE, was interwoven into their current experience of HE (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570). It is argued that it is imperative to discuss the "learning experiences of students who enter different kinds of communities of practice within an institution" which points to the necessity of exploring "the nature of the relationship between the organisational context, particularly cultural characteristics, and individual and group practices" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570).

Furthermore, the above research contents that the forms of "linguistic discrimination" outlined

may result from "unconscious bias to speech patterns" where individuals may be recognised as being a part of "one or other social group" according to one's accent, and as such, "is inextricably linked to other forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, classism, etc." (Whitworth, 2021).

The present study will remain cognisant to what may come up within the present research data collection phase with participants which may not be directly asked (Loveday, 2016) such as experiences of bias around accent and emotional load of learning (Christie et al., 2008). This deliberation may promote the necessity for semi-structured interviews for example, to allow space for unanticipated findings and/or themes.

This section highlighted the embodiment of social class and forms of discrimination, namely around speech/accent and individuals/groups physical presence within HE spaces. One's speech and accent can highlight social class leading to bias as folk may assume and assign negative characteristics to individuals before and even after getting to know them. Within spaces where working class individuals and groups may be viewed as non-traditional their presence and appearance alongside their speech can lead to them standing out from the crowd. Where HEIs do not act to address the above, students impacted may be targeted, feel lost and face barriers which their peers who are classed as traditional i.e. middle class, may not. The next section highlights relevant warnings from the Commissioner for Fair Access.

2.1.4 HE Considerations in Scotland

This section will highlight some of the warnings outlined by the first Commissioner for Fair Access, Sir Peter Scott. Here several lengthy quotations are included as it is imperative to understand initial observations and communications from the first Commissioner for Fair Access and explore throughout the present research what was heeded and what was not.

2.1.4a Commissioner's Warnings

As discussed previously, use of SIMD is not without issue. The Commissioner for Fair Access set out in 2017 that SIMD should not be the only measure and "recommended that a robust set of measures should be developed to supplement SIMD" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 1).

There is evidence that HEIs were focusing on recruiting students from SIMD Q1 and Q2 as the offer rates were "over 5 percentage points higher in 2016 than in 2011, with Q1 applications just as likely to receive an offer as Q4 applications, and Q2 applications as likely to receive an

offer as Q5 applications" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 2). However, students from Q3 were less likely to receive an offer:

In 2016, Q3 applications (those from people in the 40% to 60% most deprived areas) were least likely to get an offer (Chart 2) and also less likely to get an offer than expected, given choice of subject and grades (Chart 4). These patterns provide an insight into how offer making behaviour has changed over recent years but do not necessarily predict how the system would rebalance itself if the number of SIMD Q1 applicants increased further. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 3)

Keen to be understood within the present research is what HEI-led practices are involved in "actively" recruiting more students to HE and what is the impact of balancing the system across varying quintiles, if any attempts to rebalance are made.

The Commissioner notes that there are differences across HEIs in their recruitment of students from SIMD Q1 which were: "underrepresented in the applicant pools for all institutions, in both periods, but there was considerable variation between institutions" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5). The variation is assumed to "reflect several factors including geographical location, local population demographics, entrance requirements and the amount (and effectiveness) of engagement and recruitment activity" (Ibid). Across 2013-2016 a "slight increase in overall representation" was achieved however, there was also "variation across institutions with some seeing decreases in the percentage of applicants from deprived areas" (Ibid).

The differences continue as "analysis of applications, offers and acceptances by SIMD quintile is mixed" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 6). Also, there are differences in progress depending on "age" of "full-time first-degree entrants" (Ibid). If analysed "regardless of age" then there has been progress as "14 per cent are from SIMD 20 areas (only a 2 percentage point gap)" (Ibid). However, when age is considered the picture changes as "if only entrants aged under-21" then there is less progress as "the gap is much wider (5 or 6 percentage points)" (Ibid). The Commissioner clarifies that:

...difference tends to muddy the water, and justify a range of reactions from "we are getting there" to "much more needs to be done". On balance, while the actual target covers entrants of all ages, it is probably better to opt for challenge than complacency. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 6).

Discrepancies also exist, described by the Commissioner as a "gulf", around "opportunities available to potential students who live in the most advantaged areas" who are "more than three

times as likely to apply in the first place, and their entry rate is also three times greater - despite the fact that universities have pushed up their offer rate for SIMD 20 and 40 students' (Ibid). Such applicants see a 12% "difference in the chance of their applications being translated into acceptances compared with potential students from the least disadvantaged areas" (Ibid). Therefore, the Commissioner recommends that a "step-change may be needed to achieve fair access. Incremental improvement, based on existing initiatives and interventions, is unlikely to be sufficient" (Ibid). Suggestions include a "further allocation of places for SIMD 20 (and 40?) students, although public expenditure priorities are for the Government to establish" and "more vigorous enforcement of access targets in outcome agreements" (Ibid) (Outcome Agreements now termed Outcome Framework and Assurance Model). Of interest to the present study is the inclusion of advice regarding who is responsible for spear-heading change - "the major drive must continue to come from the commitment of institutions themselves" (Ibid).

An overview is provided regarding how differing HEIs fair around WA so far whereby "analysis" "identified three institutional clusters, as judged by their circumstances and approach to fair access" (Ibid: 6). These include three clusters, the 1st cluster is described as:

...access-oriented universities which already receive applications from (and accept) large numbers of SIMD 20 students, because fair access is a core element in their missions (even their DNA) but also because they recruit rather than select students (in most but not all subjects). The risk here is that these universities will think they have done enough, and maybe focus on other strategic objectives (which are more highly rewarded in league tables). (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 6).

Highlighted above is the historic and deep-rooted approach to ensuring their institutions embody and practice fair access where students from SIMD 20 areas are sought out. Whilst such HEIs do well they cannot rest on their laurels. The following denotes the 2nd cluster:

...universities which have been less successful in attracting applications from SIMD 20 students. The reasons for this comparative lack of success are likely to be complex, reflecting perhaps subject range and also geography. It would be misleading, as well as unfair, to automatically attribute it to lack of effort or commitment. For some of these universities, however, higher entry standards may be an additional factor. This suggests that further work may be needed to demonstrate that achieving fair access and pursuing a "world-class" reputation, notably in research performance and global competitiveness, are complementary not contradictory agendas... (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 6).

The 2nd cluster represents institutions where their location and/or subject range impacts their pull on and pool of students. Importantly raised is the need to ensure that agendas around fair

access are balanced and not disregarded in favour of reputation and standing. The 3rd cluster is outlined as:

...universities that, despite having higher entry standards in general, nevertheless have been successful in increasing their offer for students from less advantaged backgrounds (and recruiting greater numbers). They are a key group which can share good practice with other institutions that have so far been less successful. Their success can also inspire confidence that the Government's targets are achievable without compromising academic quality. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 6).

The final cluster is typified as maintaining high entry standards and inclusion of students from less advantaged backgrounds demonstrating what is achievable. Other requirements or three "needs" suggested by the Commissioner include those related to Contextual Admissions policies. The first relates to "up-to-date and accessible language" with regards to the term "contextual admissions" as the term is "opaque, even obscure", the term alongside fair access related topics are to be "described in "plain English" that everyone can understand" in recognition that not all potential learners are aware of such terms meanings (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5). Terms are to be clarified for all potential learners as well as parents, guardians, teachers, education practitioners etc. particularly as the process of "contextual admissions" is deemed as a "key weapon in the fight to secure fairer access" as they reduce the entry grades required by students from "disadvantaged backgrounds" (Ibid). Has the above occurred across the HEI explored within the present study?

The second need is regarding "more transparent and consistent framework for "contextualised admissions" as HEIs "rightly – guard their independence" rationalising the "variety of factors" and "weight" given but are to also consider "needs, and potential" alongside "requirements of particular subjects and courses" of "particular groups of students' mainly disadvantaged students (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5). HEIs may view their efforts around "contextual admissions" to be as "a fine-tuned, and customised, set of adjusted offers" however to "potential applicants" it may appear as a "jungle of different offers, with different grade reductions and subject to different conditions, without apparent rhyme and reason" further described by Scott as "a system designed for universities, with the very best intentions of course, not for potential students' (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5). The present study is interested in whether, and how, the above may have shifted since 2017 e.g., is there now a "more transparent and consistent framework for "contextualised admissions" designed from the students' perspective. Lastly, the third need demands "greater clarity about the rationale, educational as well as operational, for "contextualised admissions" (Ibid).

The Commissioner set forth "Questions for HEIs" these include questions related to "Consistency":

Could a set of key principles underlying contextual admissions in general, and for each of the models, be developed by the sector? For example, in what circumstances is it appropriate to make an offer conditional on attendance at a summer school? Are there costs involved and how might these be overcome for disadvantaged learners? Might it be possible to undertake transition/preparation aspects of pre-entry or summer programmes as online modules?

Could a common terminology be agreed upon and employed by the sector to allow applicants, family and guidance staff to better understand the process and how it can facilitate entry to HE for under-represented groups and disadvantaged learners? (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5)

A few questions were put forth regarding "Transparency":

Could a sector wide statement or kite marking system be developed to signpost applicants, family and guidance staff to information on contextual admissions?

How can the sector and individual institutions ensure their contextual admissions processes are understood by prospective applicants and those supporting them?

Would it be helpful to develop an interactive eligibility map for applicants and, if so, who is best placed to take forward that project? (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5)

Finally, questions related to "Impact":

How should the sector best evaluate the impact of contextual admissions processes? How should individual institutions measure and report on impact and progress?

Are institutions clear about the rationale underpinning their eligibility criteria for contextual admissions and do these relate to their institutional targets and priorities in relation to equality?" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 5)

The present study is keen to explore whether the above questions been answered yet. SCAPP has made a start at developing HEI and FE staff and education practitioner knowledge and understanding of pathways with an interactive map.

In summary, this section outlined the first Commissioner for Fair Access's warnings. Despite the efforts of Scottish Government and CoWA, Scotland's universities may not be on course to achieve their widening access targets, and social reproduction and stratification continue in HE (Commissioner for Fair Access 2024).

2.1.5 Equity: Theory & Policy in HE

The present study seeks to explore to what extent Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may be complicit in creating inequity. Much of the legislation and/or policy refers to equality rather than equity. This section will outline definition(s) of equality and equity and related application to HE in Scotland. This includes where and how terms are defined within legislation and policy, alongside appointed roles of responsibility and how this is achieved in practice by HEIs, if at all. The outline of this section is: a. Definition(s) and Difference(s): Equity and Equality; b. Understanding Equity with regards to Higher Education Policy in Scotland.

2.1.5a Definition(s) and Difference(s): Equity and Equality

Equity

Equity is concerned with impartiality and fairness across opportunities, rewards, costs, and punishments and is linked to (social) justice and precise action (Calhoun, 2002). A general definition of equity is the "quality of being equal or fair; fairness, impartiality; even-handed dealing" or "what is fair and right; something that is fair and right" (Oxford University Press, 2021). Equity is allocating the same resources and opportunities proportionally, according to the needs of individuals or groups receiving them, leading to just outcomes.

Equity is often used interchangeably with equality however whilst both are concerned with disseminating fairness, the latter posits that everyone is to receive the same opportunities and resources regardless of need or to divide these in equal amounts across all people. Equity is to acknowledge that everyone does not begin from the same position or place in life and thus to fine-tune opportunities and resources according to individuals requirements to attend to this disparity or inequity. Equity can be applied to many contexts for example law, health, social equity and equity in education or educational equity.

Forms of Equity in Education

It is recognised that whilst equity is utilised within education policy it is not necessarily always clarified nor defined (Unterhalter, 2009). Equity's action potential as a "process of making equal and fair", is often under acknowledged, with a focus instead on "fairness in distribution, collapsing equity into aspects of equality" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 416). In summarising the first uses of the word equity in English Unterhalter (2009) concludes in viewing forms of equity as "equity from above" (p. 419), "equity from the middle" (p. 420) and "equity from below" (p. 417), these distinctions (outlined below) demonstrate processes which supplement one another in "expanding a capability set" as applied to education (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 422).

The former, "equity from above" is relates to equity as historically written as a part of law

regarding "land holding" and other legal concerns where "special courts of equity were established" to deal with such matters deemed unsuitable for "Church or the Crown" to consider and is a "form of regulating actions according to rules, guided by reason and later by ideas of rights and fairness" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 419). This view from "the top" is concerned with "rules and institutions that frame negative and positive freedoms linked to a theory of justice" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 422). With regards to the present study this links to the legislation and policy regarding fair access to HE and expectations for HEIs in their delivery of HE to students, discussed further below.

The term "equity from the middle" is equity as a "form of share or ownership, but its value is given not by intrinsic worth or a fixed rate of interest, but by the prevailing social arrangements of the market" and it is emphasised that this term is intended to expand the "sense in which social arrangements mediate flows of value in education" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 420). In education this can be "associated with the movement of ideas, time, money, skill, organization or artefacts that facilitates "investments" in the learning of children or adults and the professional development of teachers" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 421). This view from the middle is concerned with ensuring "flows of resources, a dynamic between ideas and values that is attentive to limits and judgements, but not just meagrely constrained by these assessments" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 422).

It is suggested that this form of equity could be linked to "practices that set fair limits on educational capabilities" pointing to Sen's (2008) preference of processes which rank "one set of choice above another" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 421). With regards to the present study this links to the flow of information to students and staff regarding HEI opportunities and training choices and the processes which rank these. It is of interest whether equity resources and training exist and/or are viewed as important and/or relevant within HEIs for staff and how is it ranked among differing agendas, e.g., is what takes precedent that which is a priority for HEIs and/government at the time such as gender equality, care experienced, Black, Asian and minority ethnic BAME and/or Gypsies, Travelers, Roma, Showmen and Boaters (GTRSB) communities etc. It is also imperative to understand how the above may be framed, for example: awareness of impacts of low socio-economic background on students' education (emphasis on students' background as issue) rather than the impacts of inequitable HEI practices for students of low socio-economic backgrounds on their education (emphasis on HEIs practices as issue), for example.

The latter, "equity from below" is as related to God treating "all He has created" "equally"

concerned with "a belief about peoples' access to powerful knowledge—the Bible or philosophy or nearness to God—the importance of everyday relations of respecting each other, whatever our differences" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 417). As applied to education the greatest value in the view of equity from below is "the process of establishing the considerate and fair relationships that support negotiation, questioning and discussion" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 417). This view from the bottom is concerned with "agency" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 422). With regards to the present study this links to how students from low socio-economic backgrounds are involved with discussions regarding their own education, progress and future prospects as well as opportunities for discussion and critique of HEI practices for both students and HEI staff.

Equity as Justice: The Capability Approach

The above outlines that "given human diversity" these three forms of equity are imperative "in order to expand capabilities in education and assess equality" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 421). It is not just about equal access to resources and opportunities but what we are able to do and be with access to resources and opportunities. This links to understandings of the capability approach, particularly equity from below developed by Indian philosopher and economist, Amartya Sen (1933-) (Unterhalter, 2009). The capability approach has links to earlier thinkers, as discussed below, however it has been progress by Sen and American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1947-) alongside others (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). In the main this approach contends that freedom to attain well-being consists of "what people are able to do and to be, and thus the kind of life they are effectively able to lead" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). The capability approach is described as a "conceptual framework for a range of normative exercises" which includes: "(1) the assessment of individual well-being; (2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements; and (3) the design of policies and proposals about social change in society" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020).

What is of concern is peoples "beings and doings" and the actual opportunities available to fulfil these such as developing relationships, freedom of movement and/or accessing education, viewed as objective categories which give an account of wellbeing (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). To gain a deeper understanding of this approach Sen's contributions will be discussed, followed by Nussbaum's and a brief outline of similarly related work of Rawls.

Sen sought to question how, as diverse individuals and groups, we are to come to aggregative or collective/combined judgements regarding society around areas such as "social welfare", or "the public interest" or "aggregate poverty" described as "formal object" or "central question", (Sen, 1999, p. 178 as cited in D'Amodio 2020, p. 9). This led to the development of a theory of

"justice of fairness" with origins in Aristotle's "human flourishing" (D'Amodio 2020, p. 11) and idea that wealth "is evidently not the good we are seeking"—"for it is merely useful for something else" (Sen, 2017, p. 356 as cited in D'Amodio 2020, p. 11) and Adam Smith's theory of "extended sympathy" which involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes as the "detached observer" with regards to "ethics" and "equitable judgements" in law (D'Amodio 2020, p. 5) and "appearing in public without shame" as a part of a respectful community whereby people have a "quality of life" assessed by their "functioning's (i.e., of doings and beings)" (Sen, 2017, p. 357 as cited in D'Amodio 2020, p. 11). To reach "personal flourishing" Sen purported that "economic commodities and utilities" are a "means for people" not an end (D'Amodio 2020, p. 11) these means such as access to resources are important however, he is concerned with the end: what people are able to do and be with access to resources (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020).

Sen also saw that people have "personal capabilities" that entail possible "combinations of functioning's" which is equated to an individual's "capability set" or the "actual freedom of choice a person has over the alternative lives that he or she can lead" (Sen, 2017, p. 357 as cited in D'Amodio 2020, p. 11). Here lies an important understanding of difference between ability (skill, aptitude) – what we can do, and capability (means) – about an individual's "actual freedom of choice" (D'Amodio 2020, p. 12), what choices people have open to them with regards to what they can do, for example access HE or not. The above is described as Sen's "revolutionary theory of a comparative distributive justice" in developing social choice theory (SCT) alongside Kenneth Arrow, which combines the above ideas and embodies "capabilities" and "functioning's" meaning that to attain personal flourishing individuals are to realise ones "personal capabilities into functioning's" in harmony with varying groups and "value systems", into "valued and valuable ways of being and of doing", (D'Amodio, 2020, p. 19).

It is noted that the "capabilities approach" whilst referring to the above "capability approach" within the literature, is usually regarded as relating to Nussbaum's "partial theory of justice" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). Two clusters are described within Nussbaum's "general capability approach", noted as not being "her own specific theory", which emphasise "comparative quality of life" and "theorising about justice" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). These two clusters are intended to "share focus" similarly on the above doing and being and "share a commitment to five principles: treating each person as an end; a focus on choice and freedom rather than achievements; pluralism about values; being deeply concerned with entrenched social injustices; and ascribing an urgent task to government" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). The above has been critiqued (Robeyns, 2016) as some approaches do not fit the above clusters and just the first and third principles are "essential to each and every capability theory government"

(Robeyns & Byskov, 2020).

Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach has been utilised within education research around social justice and examining questions around "what kind of society should education foster?" and what kind of structures (educational, political, social) "will best enable all members of a society to lead collective and individually fulfilling and worthwhile lives" (Walker, 2003, p. 179). Here it is recognised that "education is fundamentally a contested domain of activity" where a vital "development goal" is that of "human autonomy" (independence/ self-sufficiency), the focus is again on the educational processes that may facilitate (or limit) this, explored via the lens of the capabilities approach (Walker, 2003, p. 179). Vital here, is the acknowledgement that: "...nowhere is education an uncomplicated "good"; it produces both justice and injustice, equity and inequity and the issue is to understand why, when and how" (Walker, 2003, p.169).

Similarly of extreme importance to the present study is the awareness that education also occupies an "essential role in the process of social reproduction" and of education's state of being "simultaneously, a major source of social transformation" in its capacity of: "...providing learners with those critical and reflective forms of consciousness and understanding that will enable them to participate in the creation of an improved and more desirable form of social life than that which currently exists" (Walker, 2003, p. 169).

The ten capabilities outlined by Nussbaum (2000) maintain a focus on the "flourishing of each & every person" most "if not all...point at least in some way to education conditions & practices" with regards to HE an example is given of "drop-out" statistics which say, "nothing useful about individual experiences of HE" whilst "glossing success for the many" (Walker, 2003, p. 170). This form of capabilities approach as applied to HE can be utilised in capturing "stories of education practices" which may highlight "capability development" in the form of interruption, disruption and/or transformation and "capability deformation" in the form of reproduction (Walker, 2003, p. 170).

Sen's work is often discussed alongside or signposting American Philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) (Sosu, Smith, Santoro, & McKendry, 2018; D'Amodio, 2020; Robeyns & Byskov, 2020). Rawls (1999, 1971) theorised that for a society to be socially just, every individual must have "equal access to social, cultural, political and economic resources" (Sosu et al., 2018). Equally concerned with questioning how, as diverse individuals and groups, we are to "find a meaning of the term "justice" able to represent all the citizens politically" with reference to the notion of justice of Plato (D'Amodio, 2020, et al., p. 6). Rawls recognises the plurality of people and groups experiences and "freedom of thought" in developing "political liberalism" which is

to be articulated and protected within the "public square" (Hirschkop, 1999 as cited in D'Amodio, 2020, p. 6). Rawls theory of justice seeks to draw distinction between public and private realms as well as between "what is "right" from what is "good" (D'Amodio, 2020, p. 6).

Rawls sets forth two principles in this line of inquiry, firstly that liberty overrides other priorities as main priority no matter the form and everyone has a right to it and secondly that fairness is to be applied to eliminate inequality, justly, by ensuring more resources go to persons where they are of most benefit with consideration of the "original position" (D'Amodio, 2020, p. 7). The "original position" is described as a "hypothetical situation of "original equity" among all citizens" and "original fairness", an "abstract universal criterion for equitable political and economic choices" whereby individuals' position on selecting society's structure is from behind a "veil of ignorance" or without reference to their own "present and future distinguishing characteristics" such as religious and/or moral beliefs, ethnicity, gender, social status etc.: "no one knows his place in society, his class position, or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength and the like" (Rawls, 1999, p. 118 as cited in D'Amodio, 2020, p. 7).

Rawls also separates the "the rational", and "the reasonable" whereby "public actors" yield their own beliefs and principles, rationally on entering the "public square" (this is the neutrality of institutions) and are to bring forth that which may be "socially useful" from own beliefs etc. "into political, reasonable terms" but are to understand that this is their own complete belief which may only apply in part to society – in the view of pluralism – their beliefs may then become suitable for most if not all "political actors" (D'Amodio, 2020, p. 8). The above "paradigm of institutional neutrality" is that the undertaking of fair distribution is the purview of "institutions" as the "basic structure, which cannot follow any particular conception of the good, because their proper nature is the safeguard of all the members of a society" (D'Amodio, 2020, p. 8).

In summation, equality would ensure everyone has the same access to resources and opportunities, whilst equity would act on the differences between individuals and related specific needs to ensure access as well as the same outcome, is in fact equal.

To explore equity further, it is important to first investigate equality and lay the landscape of the differences between these terms and thus their potential impact across society and the laws and policies which aim to govern practice(s).

Equality

Writing from a sociological perspective Braham, (2013, p. 70) outlines the concept of equality

with regards to the notion that all individuals are born equal thus possess the "same rights"; under law; same living standards; politically, with voting power and notably to opportunity and resources (such as accessing HE) (Braham, 2013, p. 71). The idea that human beings are "equal in character and intelligence" was earlier described as "romantic illusion" by Tawney (1964 [1931], p. 57 as cited in Braham, 2013, p. 70). Instead, he saw it that between individuals "natural endowments differ profoundly" however, focus is to be on society with the "mark of a civilized society to aim at eliminating such inequalities" which were not located in the "individual differences" of people but in society's "own organisation" (Tawney, 1964 [1931], p. 57 as cited in Braham, 2013, p. 70). Furthermore, peoples' individual differences are viewed as a "source of social energy" which is "more likely to ripen and find expression if social inequalities are, as far as possible, diminished" (Tawney, 1964 [1931], p. 57 as cited in Braham, 2013, p. 70).

The above outlines an understanding of individuals as naturally different in intelligence and character (not as more or less intelligent/capable, or better or worse character) and that such differences are to flourish throughout society, if it is to be considered civilised, and are not to be limited by the organisation of the society in expressing such differences. Noted is that it is societal organisation which limits peoples' individual differences and locates any matters or problems with their capability to flourish within society as emanating from within themselves, within said differences. It is imperative to consider societal organisation in order to attend social inequalities and remain aware of where, or within whom, the issues around these areas are located throughout research, literature, and policy, particularly with regards to Higher Education as is of focus within the present study.

The Equality Act 2010

Within the UK, the Equality Act 2010, outlines the "desirability of reducing socio-economic inequalities" and legal requirement, generally around employment, to "increase equality of opportunity" across society (Equality Act 2010, UK Public General Acts 2010 c. 15, Introduction). Herein lies the recognition of socio-economic inequalities throughout society which leads disproportionately to opportunities for some folk and not others. It can be concluded that there is a repetitive nature or trend understood around socio-economic inequality, leading to an Act, developed by the UK government to intervene and set agreed standards of practice or at least, minimum expectations, and protection under law.

The term socio-economic relates to social and economic factors and positions of people in relation to each other and is measured as socio-economic status (ses) which seeks to "classify

individuals, families, or households in terms of indicators such as occupation, income, and education" (Scott, 2014). This measure was first initiated in 1911 in the British Registrar-General in its "social class measures" (Scott, 2014). Socio-economic inequalities are those related to the above, the relation to or the difference between individuals according to education, income, occupation and thus social position or class. Interestingly what is protected under law is individuals' characteristics including: "age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation" (Equality Act 2010) but not socio-economic inequalities specifically.

Whilst a disparity is recognised on a socio-economic level, as in the above expressed desire to reduce it (Equality Act 2010), it is not directly attended to, instead the protected characteristics of some folk who may experience low ses are recognised and these are set as identifiable criteria not to discriminate against. The Equality Act 2010 acknowledges that all people have the same rights, are to have equal opportunities and are not to be discriminated against regarding the above specific characteristics but does not address inequity around ses which enables some folk to begin or get ahead taking up opportunities whilst limiting others regardless of or alongside their characteristics. What is clear is that regardless of one's protected characteristics what appears pertinent is one's ses.

The present study is interesting in exploring how this applies to Higher Education. This is referenced within the Equality Act 2010 with regards to the responsibilities of "an institution" pertaining to discrimination around "Students: admission and treatment etc.", "Further and higher education courses", "Recreational or training facilities" and "Interpretation and exceptions" which "applies to anything done in connection with the content of the curriculum" (Equality Act 2010, UK Public General Acts 2010 c. 15, Part 6, Chapter 2: Further and Higher Education). Within education in Scotland, there are several related policies and strategy documents which go some way to define terminology and vision around equity and equality within education, as will be discussed further below.

Within the present study, the term equity is used, as above, to signify justice, fairness and impartiality and is recognition of an imbalance in socio-economic equality within society leading to differing starting points, along with other life circumstances, and so resources and opportunities are to be distributed according to need. This present study seeks to explore how one HEI in Scotland understands and implements WA policy and whether equity is practiced.

The next section will outline equity with regards to education policy in Scotland, including legislation and policy.

Understanding Equality around HE Policy in Scotland

Across education policies and strategies in Scotland aimed at achieving equality and equity within schools, define these in terms of "removal of discrimination, disadvantage, inequality and / or barriers which can affect people" as related to the aforementioned protected characteristics (Equality Act 2010) of the former, and as "treating people fairly, but not necessarily treating people the same" of the latter (Education Scotland, 2017, p. 3). As applied to education, equity is given further clarification in that "personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential" and an interest in supporting "secure wellbeing, skills for learning, life and work and the best possible post-school destination, HGIOS 4 (2016)" Education Scotland, 2017, p. 3) referencing the How good is our school? Education Scotland (2015) self-evaluation framework for schools.

To begin exploring equity around HE, the following Acts and policies which shape HE in Scotland such as: The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005; Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013; Higher Education Governance Act of 2016; Scottish Funding Council: Gender Action Plan (2016); and Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016) were explored in-depth. However, it is beyond the scope of the present study to detail each one here. Those briefly discussed next include The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 and Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016) as they contain key recommendations around equity as related to the present study.

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 appears to be the cornerstone for the following above legislation in that it is referenced in many parts and amendments added. This builds on the previous Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 and sees the merging of two separate funding councils: Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) into one: Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council or Scottish Funding Council (SFC) or the Council. This details legislation around the provision and funding of further education (FE) and HE and the Councils powers, responsibilities, and functions. Of interest to the present study are the definitions around fundable bodies (institutions) and of individuals in receipt of funding (students) and the acknowledgement of socioeconomic factors as impacting HE.

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 signifies "college of further education" and "means the governing body of a body" which provides fundable further or higher education and is not a "higher education institution" (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Part 2, Section 35). A higher education institution is defined as a "fundable post-16 education body" and "means an institution which is— (a) a university; or (b) a designated institution (within the meaning of section 44(2) of the 1992 Act);]" (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Part 2, Section 35).

As the present study is exploring equity with regards to HE, therefore the following will discuss HE only, as it is out with the focus and scope to outline further education (FE).

Funding of HE is outlined as relating to:

- (a) is a course at a higher level in preparation for a higher diploma or certificate;
- (b) is a first degree course;
- (c) is a course for the education and training of teachers;
- (d) is a course of post-graduate studies (including a higher degree course);
- (e) is a course at a higher level in preparation for a qualification from a professional body;
- (f) is a course at a higher level not referred to in any of paragraphs (a) to (e);
- (g) provides instruction for persons who are participating in a course of education referred to in this subsection and who have support needs; or
- (h) is designed predominantly to prepare a person for participation in any course of education referred to in this subsection.

(Taken from Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Part 2, Section 5).

To attend to socio-economic inequality, funding with regards to Widening Access (WA) is also described. Here, the Scottish Ministers: "...may, under section 9(2), impose terms and conditions for the purposes of enabling, encouraging or increasing participation in fundable higher education by persons belonging to any socio-economic group which they reasonably consider to be under-represented in such education" (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Acts of the Scottish Parliament 2005 asp 6, Part 1, Section 9C, 1).

The Council (Scottish Government) have a "widening access agreement" with HEIs where

HEIs are to:

...take actions specified in the agreement for the purposes of enabling, encouraging or increasing participation in fundable higher education provided by the institution by persons belonging to socio-economic groups which are under-represented in fundable higher education (either generally or in such education provided by the institution). (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Acts of the Scottish Parliament 2005 asp 6, Part 1, Section 9C, 3A)

A socio-economic group is as defined or "treated as under-represented in fundable higher education if participation in such education by persons in that group is disproportionately low" with this being decided by "The Scottish Ministers, the Council and higher education institutions" who are permitted to "take into account any social or economic characteristics which they consider appropriate when determining which groups are to constitute " socio-economic groups " for the purposes of this section" (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, Acts of the Scottish Parliament 2005 asp 6, Part 1, Section 9C, 6).

Whilst the above does state "for the purposes of this section" (Part 1, Section 9C, 6) the notion that Scottish Ministers consider "any social or economic characteristics which they consider appropriate when determining which groups are to constitute " socio-economic groups " (Part 1, Section 9C, 6) as well as "persons belonging to any socio-economic group which they reasonably consider to be under-represented in such education" (Part 1, Section 9C, 1) alongside the Council and HEIs appears that there is some leeway for defining terms related to social or economic characteristics and what constitutes as a socio-economic group than around the protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010. It is not clear whether this is intentionally vague so as to assist more students, HEIs or government. It does appear contradictory.

It is clear that the power to decide what counts at any given time or situation lies, unsurprisingly, with those in or with already established power (ministers, councils and HEIs) rather than with the individuals the Act is presumably intended to support (students).

Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016)

Across The Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016) is of great interest in the present study as it outlines the Scottish Governments ambitions for Widening Access. This brings together a wide variety of input from; Call for Evidence (Scottish Government, 2015); review of "existing evidence" and "literature" regarding "barriers to fair access", consultation events, presentations of key stakeholders including "students, care leavers,

experts and practitioners" and "expert groups" from a variety of "sectors and specialisms" in order to "test and enrich our thinking as we began to shape our recommendations" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7).

Following an interim report, the Commission on WA set forward thirty-four recommendations to attend to inequal access to HE and to "achieve the goal of equal access for those from deprived backgrounds or with a care experience" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 8). Established in the interim report was that "socioeconomic inequality in higher education is a problem which spans the whole education system and beyond into wider social policy" despite this, the Commission on WA is the first "body to have undertaken a holistic, strategic review of the problem and the contributions that can be made by each part of the system to bring about its resolution" and resolves to "rebalance the focus from the perceived deficit in the individual to what more the system can do to support disadvantaged learners to succeed" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 8). The above demonstrates weighty recognition of the longstanding issues of socioeconomic inequality and the deficit view or as the issue being located within individuals rather than of the system, in HE. In December 2016, Sir Professor Peter Scott was appointed as the Commissioner for Fair Access to "drive progress" and "provide leadership, a voice for our most disadvantaged learners and a challenge – to all parts of the education system and Government – to do more and to push harder" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 8). Sir Professor Peter Scott is a British educationalist and journalist, he chaired the "widening participation strategic committee" as a board member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Scottish Government, 2021). He was educated at Merton College, University of Oxford England, studying a modern history undergraduate degree, has four honorary degrees and has worked throughout the UK and US.

The ambition set in 2014-15 was: "that every child irrespective of socioeconomic background should have equal chance of accessing higher education" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7).

The above statement appears to get to the heart of the matter of what has the greatest contributory factor in gaining access to higher education in Scotland: socioeconomic background or social class. However, on further inspection and with use of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as outlined by Locke (2004), the statement becomes problematic and open to interpretation by HEIs.

The statement highlights "every child irrespective of socioeconomic background" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7) does as outlined above, single out the main contributory factor however it is not perhaps the only factor. This statement could have included: irrespective of

age, gender, ethnicity, race, religious affiliation etc. or indeed been bold and simply stopped at "every child" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7) as a commitment of access to every child in Scotland. The inclusion of "socioeconomic background" only, points to recognition of this pertinent issue and suggests acknowledgement that people experience differences in life related to their socioeconomic background which has historically denied them the opportunity of accessing HE. This admits that there is a scale of sorts of social class in society which opens doors or enables access easier for some than others.

A note of weakness in intention could be viewed within the use of the word "should" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7) which is a deontic modality relating to endorsement "strength" (Locke, 2004: 47). This relates to intention as well as responsibility, it is unclear whose responsibility it is students, HEIs or Scottish Governments. This looks to suggest that this is to occur in theory, begging the question: what happens in practice, or rather, what should happen in practice.

Another note of confusion the sentiment of "an equal chance" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7). Firstly, the use of word equal rather than equitable undermines the previous recognition of socioeconomic background as a factor impacting on access to, HE. It appears to suggest that aware of socioeconomic background/ social class or starting point – as different – then say that opportunities are still to be equal – same for everyone regardless of need and/or starting point and not, equitable – in acknowledge of different need and/or starting point, thus according to these, on an individual basis. Similarly, an opportunity is missed to assert commitment by using the word "chance" (Scottish Government, 2016: 7) rather than certainty. Chance is akin to luck and risk, not the basis of ensuring access to HE for those recognised as not having the luxury to wait and see if luck strikes nor finances to absolve any/all related risks without consequence. The above appears more as advice than decree.

Whilst it is important that "accessing" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7) HE has been highlighted; however this could also appear limited as it is not only access to HE that may be an issue for individuals from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds but also progressing and excelling throughout HE and into relevant professions (Wilson and Hunter, 2023). This also foregoes recognition of the hierarchy that exists within Scottish HEIs whereby access to all HEIs is not equal nor equitable for all people. Nor the socioeconomic advantage that may be gained by attending one HEI over another nor access to top professions as previously discussed, which is also inequitable.

With the above in mind, it is important to situate the above within the context of the Scottish Governments outlined "Philosophy" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7):

"In our interim report, we observed that the consensus that equal access is an important objective can mask the reality that access is a divisive issue on which there exists a range of tensions and opposing viewpoints. We believe that this has hindered progress. Through this report the Commission has set out a clear national strategy for how the First Minister's vision of equal access can be achieved. We repeat again our beliefs on access:

- Equal access is fundamentally about fairness
- Equal access is a social good
- Equal access is compatible with academic excellence
- Equal access is an economic good

The inequality in higher education is unfair, damaging and unsustainable. There is therefore an undeniable case for change: Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equal access. This philosophy is the lens through which the Commission has viewed its task." (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7).

The above statement has a lot to unpack. Firstly, a closer inspection of the first sentence reveals a paradox: that the interim report demonstrated "consensus" (everyone in agreement) that "equal access" (everyone has the same access, regardless of need) "is an important objective" (is imperative factual/unbiased) "can mask the reality" (hides the real world experience) "that access is a divisive issue" (access to HE is a conflict-ridden/contentious matter) "on which there exists a range of tensions and opposing viewpoints" (with a variety of frictions and differing perspectives) (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7). Again, plainly stated: everyone within the report agrees that equal access to HE is a real-world issue that people disagree and hold differing perspectives on. It is this disagreement regarding equal access that "We" (Scottish Government) "believe" (opinion rather than evidence) "that this has hindered progress" (resulted in delayed development/advancement). Peoples differing perspectives and opinions regarding equal access to HE has delayed moving forward with improving equal access to HE in Scotland. It would be interesting to understand further who does not agree and the extent and context of such disagreements which so profoundly impact on individuals from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds opportunity to access HE equally, let alone equitably.

It is encouraging that The Commission for WA has been created and subsequent reports begin to narrow focus on WA, setting out a "clear national strategy for how the First Minister's vision of equal access can be achieved" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7). The Scottish Government also repeats its own, or "our beliefs on access" which is that "equal access" is: "fundamentally about fairness"; "a social good"; "compatible with academic excellence" and "an economic

good" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7).

The above could also be taken as positive, in recognition that equal access to HE for everyone can have benefits across the individual, society, academia and economy and that the opposite is true across these areas also, with the acknowledgement that "inequality in higher education is unfair, damaging and unsustainable" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7). Certainly there is a case to argue for a wider perspective and consideration of equity as well as equality as they are two different concepts and describe two different issues: equality in HE and access points to giving everyone the same resources and opportunities and equity goes a step further by doing as equality but also as according to need – meeting people (students) where they are, taking into consideration their individual circumstances and ensuring support throughout HE and beyond (in order to benefit society and economy) not just in accessing HE.

There are the beginnings of powerful notion and action as is expressed in the following: "There is therefore an undeniable case for change: Scotland has a moral, social and economic duty to achieve equal access. This philosophy is the lens through which the Commission has viewed its task." (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7). This could go further as above with regards to equitable access. However, it is made clear that the responsibility of achieving this is placed on Scotland's shoulders – the onus and accountability is on everyone, despite earlier repeated use of "we", meaning the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 7).

The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 and Higher Education Governance Act of 2016 include much of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005. In researching legislation within the UK Government website, when the word equity is entered within the title search section, twenty-six searches are returned. Twenty-five of these are with regards to The Personal Equity Plan: amendments and regulations which is related to income tax and the other search item is regarding housing and "Right to Equity-Sharing Lease" (UK Legislation, 2021). This indicates that whilst the above legislation (policy/guidance) with regards to HE is primarily focussed on equality and not so as bold as to include equity as the focus or title of HE legislation.

It is perhaps in the long fight for equality, recognised by the Equality Act 2010 and the protected characteristics, that what lays beneath or intersects across such protected characteristics, is socioeconomic status or social class. Whilst all social classes in effect benefit from the Equality Act 2010 and ses is discussed, those from the poorest ses backgrounds or social classes, predominantly working classes, do not benefit arguably as much as an impactful factor is not recognised in the same way as protected characteristics within equality. If bringing in equity

into the debate, this could begin to recognise the impact of sex by accounting for need and differing starting points. Therefore, the present study elects to explore equity in HE and its impact around working-class students to understand to what extent HEIs may be complicit in creating inequity.

Holding HEIs to account via Outcome Framework and Assurance Model

Initiated in 2012-13, to receive funding from the SFC, HEIs are to set out what they plan to provide in the form of Outcome Agreements (OA), which are developed by HEIs with the assistance of SFC Outcome Agreement Managers (SFC, 2020, p. 2). OA is a "joint funding commitment" reflective of each HEIs specific "regional context and specialisms" with the purpose of establishing targets or "outcomes and outputs" i.e., the ways in which an HEI is to make a "distinct contribution" to attending to the core objectives of SFC's Strategic Framework (SFC, 2019), demonstrating SFC "investment" impact and achieving National Performance Framework priorities and outcomes (Scottish Government, 2022) (SFC, 2020, p. 2-3). OAs set out the above intentions for three years at a time and are "informed by the monitoring of progress and achievements from previous years" (SFC, 2020, p. 5). OA are to be "developed and discussed with representatives of the student body and/or Students' Associations (SAs)" to meet student engagement standards (SFC, 2020, p. 6, original emphasis).

The OA process "intensified" following suggestion of Scottish Ministers to present a well-defined link between investment from the Scottish Government and the provision of "its key outcomes", predominantly "widening access; articulation; attainment and retention; equalities and inclusion; Developing the Young Workforce (DYW); research and innovation; skills and apprenticeships" (SFC, 2020, p. 3). Funding is conditional upon OAs meeting requirements of delivering impact, appropriate "outcomes and outputs" and ambitions, and engaging with external stakeholders (SFC, 2020, p. 5). In instances where there is a disparity in the delivery of OAs the SFC will deliberate the recovery of funding by considering HEIs progress regarding: "student numbers", "funded mix of provision", "performance against targets" and "deliverables related to strategic investments and/or projects" (SFC, 2020, p. 6). OAs are published as a summary for each HEI following final submission and funding allocation (SFC, 2020).

As noted earlier, OAs have further developed into the Outcomes Framework (OF) and Assurance Model (AM). The SFC "gathers evidence of each institution's contributions, impact and delivery against its Outcomes Framework through the Assurance Model" as part of the SFC Assurance model (SFC, 2026). Following recommendations from the SFC's 2021 Review of Coherence and Sustainability, the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model will introduce

the following changes (SFC, 2026):

- Make SFC's expectations of institutions clearer.
- Focus on outcomes achieved by institutions, rather than activities they plan to undertake.
- Reduce burden for institutions, by making greater use of existing data and sources of information and significantly reducing the requirement for written commentary.
- Provide SFC with an agreed framework through which it can monitor the full breadth of institutional performance.
- Take account of the nuance of individual institutions' circumstances through a continued programme of regular institutional engagement.

National Performance Framework's purpose includes creating a more successful Scotland, giving people opportunities, increasing wellbeing, creating "sustainable and inclusive growth", and reducing "inequalities and give equal importance to economic, environmental and social progress" (Scottish Government, 2022). Its outcomes which are particularly relevant to the present study centre around "help to track progress in reducing inequality" and that "people": "are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society" and "tackle poverty by sharing opportunities, wealth and power more equally" (Scottish Government, 2022). Scotland's advancement towards these outcomes is measured by the National Performance Framework using "National Indicators" including social, environmental and economic, which determine "national wellbeing" (Scottish Government, 2022).

The above outcomes highlighted are of interest to the present study alongside OAs as these begin to account for inequity in HE by establishing priorities and a process of action or "process of making equal and fair" (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 416), to hold HEIs to account in serving students by with-holding funding if SFC and National Performance Framework outcomes are not achieved. It is important to understand how stringent the SFC (2020) Outcome Agreement (OA) and NPF "National Indicators" (Scottish Government, 2022) measures are and whether HEIs can easily argue and/or justify outcomes and subsequent delivery or not.

In summary, the present study is interested in exploring the rollout and enactment of WA policy across one home HEI in Scotland. The terms students from WA backgrounds will be used throughout the thesis to refer to students who are from socially disadvantaged, poorer, and working-class backgrounds. The ways in which the HEI demonstrates an awareness of, and considers, the impact of social class within HE will be investigated.

The Scottish Government Act(s) and/or policies may be too narrow, primarily concerned with achieving equality rather than ending inequity. The sanctions may not be effective or have equal impact across all institutions (e.g., impacting "elite" HEIs funding less) and/or courses (not practical to have many sanctions against GP training/ medical professions, limiting supply for example).

Gaps and tensions exist in not viewing the complex nature of how social class can influence entry into HE and top professions via differing capital(s) (Bourdieu, 1986) for example and the preference of upper and middle class students of HEIs and employers (Iannelli, 2011) as HE is moulded by and in the image of such families, groups and individuals (hooks, 1994). There may also be gaps in HEI accountability perhaps due to policy that is not clear, distinct, or consequential enough.

"Equity-mindedness" as HE-led introspective policy in practice

A framework for exploring equity within HE has been developed by the University of Southern California (USC) Centre for Urban Education (CUE): "Five Principles for Creating Equity by Design", as adapted from the work of Witham, Malcolm-Piqueux, Dowd and Bensimon (2015). These five principles include focus on equity around HEIs use of language, measures and goals, practices and policies, disaggregating data and interrogating assumptions which are all to be endorsed "institution and system-wide" utilising the "Equity-mindedness" model (CUE, 2019). This model is of particular interest to the present study as it outlines matters which may occur across HE and identifies ways these could be moved forward via utilisation of the principles highlighted next.

The five principles are as follows (CUE, 2019, p. 1) - Bensimon, Dowd and Witham (2022, p. 2):

"Principle 1: Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices"

Bensimon, Dowd and Witham (2022, p. 2) outline that in HE equality is a "structural problem that is hidden or revealed through the use of language imbued with political and social meaning". They point to the need of clarity around the terms of equality and equity to ensure that the latter is not confounding with the former. Lastly, they recognise that clarity is important when identifying differing groups. Within their own context they are referring to racial and ethnic groups. Here it is pertinent to not aggregate such groups into either social class-blind and/or personal/family experience-blind categories as Bensimon et al. (2022, p. 3) highlight that this

"erases monumental differences in circumstances".

Clarity in goals and measures considers that not all HEI staff may be confident in digesting quantitative data and reporting and so the HEI are responsible for making the "story behind data visible, understandable and actionable for practitioners" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 2). To achieve this in the context of race, the Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESST) was developed which enable practitioners to increase their awareness of "equity gaps longitudinally" and to "know why equity gaps exist" via use of disaggregated data which can be utilised to understand what is needed to achieve HEI goals via its practitioners' (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 2).

Use of BESST data "prompted James Gray, chair of the mathematics department at the Community College of Aurora, to launch several equity-focused reforms, including changing the hiring process to ensure a diverse candidate pool; using data more purposefully to assess success patterns by race, ethnicity, and course section; and offering more intentional coaching for faculty with large equity gaps in outcomes" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 2).

"Principle 2: 'Equity-mindedness' should be the guiding paradigm for language and action"

"Equity-mindedness" posits that "individuals are aware of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices...and the impact of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3).

Four distinctive ways of being are outlined for "equity-minded individuals", the first is being "Color-conscious (as opposed to color-blind) in a critical sense" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). As applied to the Scottish HE context regarding social class, equity-minded individuals would be social class-conscious (rather than blind) "in a critical sense" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). Such consciousness of social class would, like that of race and ethnicity, entail 'noticing and questioning patterns of educational outcomes that reveal unexplainable differences in outcomes for minoritized students (Gillborn 2005); it means viewing inequalities in the context of a history of exclusion, discrimination, and educational apartheid' or separateness (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3).

Noted next is being "Aware that beliefs, expectations, and practices assumed to be neutral can have outcomes that are racially disadvantageous" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). Again, the above can be applied to outcomes which can be disadvantageous to working class students

when "unequal outcomes are attributed to students' cultural predispositions or when practices are based on stereotypical assumptions about the capacity, aspirations, or motives of minoritized populations (Bensimon 2012)" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3).

Following on from the above is being "Willing to assume responsibility for the elimination of inequality" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). Here researchers outline that inequalities are not to be viewed as a "natural catastrophe (Coats, 2025)" instead they are understood as potentially being "created or exacerbated by taken-for-granted practices and policies, inadequate knowledge, a lack of cultural know-how, or the absence of institutional support—all of which can be changed" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3).

Lastly, being "Aware that while racism is not always overt, racialized patterns nevertheless permeate policies and practices in higher education institutions" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). All policies and practices are thought through to ensure that they do not have a "disproportionate impact on students of color" (or social class in a Scottish context) as where they do they may "have the effect of maintaining racial hierarchies" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3), or social class hierarchies for the purposes of the current research.

As an Equity Scorecard participant at the University of Wisconsin stated, "Equity-mindedness asks us to turn the mirror on ourselves and accept the fact ... that we actually may play a pretty significant role in creating [inequitable outcomes]. So there are barriers that are extant but for many people very difficult to identify, [and] because they seem so normalized, people continue to work with these practices never once considering that these seemingly innocuous practices contribute to inequitable outcomes" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4).

"Principle 3: Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of student's learning—not to treat all students the same"

Bensimon and colleagues make certain that "achieving equality in outcomes does not mean—in fact cannot mean—treating all students as though they are the same" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4). HE policies and practices which are "equity-focused" are to both "recognize and accommodate differences in students' aspirations, life circumstances, ways of engaging in learning and participating in college, and identities as learners and students (Witham et al. 2015b, 31)" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4).

For example, when the director of the honors program at a University of Wisconsin campus was confronted with data showing that the program had no students of color, rather than

assuming these students just did not meet eligibility criteria, he asked a few simple questions: What are the criteria for acceptance to the honors program? In what ways might the criteria have disadvantaged students of color? When were the criteria established, and are they still relevant? He found that the criteria had been in existence for more than thirty years and depended on a single factor: ACT scores. In response to this new information, he said: "It was clear that there was a problem and it was also a very concrete thing."

With the appropriate tools, the director was able to see that the program's entry requirements systematically excluded students of color. The concreteness of the problem, along with the authority of his position, empowered him to develop a holistic admissions process. In one year, the all-white honors program became more inclusive with the addition of African American, Latino/a, and Hmong students. The program also began including courses on critical race theory and ethnic studies (Bishop 2014).

"Principle 4: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness"

As mentioned within Principle 1, the "equity-mindedness" model calls for the use of disaggregated data to understand student populations as differing groups. Principle 4 highlights the need to commit, as institution-wide practices, to learning, using disaggregated data as well as questioning the data as a continual process. Emphasised is the importance of "how practitioners interpret the data" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4). An example is given between whether inequities are interpreted by HEI staff as a "symptom of student deficiencies or as an indication of failed practices?" warning that the "interpretive lens" used to understand data is 'far more consequential than the collection of the data itself' (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4).

The work of institutional change involves the "opportunity and capacity to learn from failure; it means digging into data deeply, purposefully, and systematically" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5). Whilst the institution is to begin to understand itself, HEI staff are also to do the same. The research of Kemmis and Target (2000, p. 590) is referenced "change cannot be secured if participants do not change themselves, their understandings, their practices, or their constitution of the setting" and so "participatory action research is the preferred approach to social and educational change". Routines are questioned and "habits of equity-minded practice" are developed via HEI and HEI staff inquiry in a circular process of continuous improvement (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5).

"Principle 5: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle"

HEIs are encouraged to reorientate their thinking around equity from a "target strategy" completed via a single program or office towards enshrining their approach to equity as a "normative standard for all aspects of the institution, from resource allocation to assessment to strategic planning" and are reminded that "solutions are shaped by the way problems are defined" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5). To achieve Principle 5, HEIs and their staff are to:

- "Let go of traditional schemata that paint student success as a matter of effort, motivation, self-regulation, goal commitment, or other student characteristics" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5). The focus is to be upon "practices—influential factors that are within practitioners' control" rather than the above qualities listed. An example of how to reframe the "traditional approach" to an "equity-minded standpoint" is given as a question, HEIs and staff moving from "What does this student lack and how can he/she be remediated?" to "Why are our practices failing to produce success for students of color?" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5). Within the present Scottish context the question would move to - Why are our practices failing to produce success for students from working class and poorer/WA backgrounds?
- "Understand the difference between horizontal and vertical equity". Dowd and Bensimon (2015, p. 10–11) outline "horizontal equity" as "those with equal needs deserve equal educational resources" whilst "vertical equity" asserts that "those with greater needs should receive greater resources" although frequently disputed (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 5).
- "Learn to make the pursuit of equity a normal practice that is evident in how problems and solutions are defined, implemented, and evaluated". Such practice is achieved via "language, reasoning, and action" by all HEI staff including "leaders, administrators, staff, and trustees" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 6).

The idea of ensuring that practices of equity be made pervasive involves "sustained buy-in and ownership across an institution or system", equity as a priority requires that "equity-minded leaders should call practitioners to inquiry and action repeatedly" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 6).

2.2. Sociological Theories and Concepts underpinning understandings of Social Class

The following is a brief outline of macro (birds-eye view analysis of large social systems or groups) and micro (finer intricacies and meaning making at the ground or individual level) (Calhoun, 2002) sociological theories of social class.

2.2.1 Macro-sociological theories of Social Class

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883)

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848/1978, p. 473 cited in Edles and Appelrouth, 2005, p. 37).

Marx's life's work was in understanding Capitalism and much of it remained unfinished. For Marx, there exist "relations of exploitation and domination in production" and as such, "objectively defined interests" as well as "an interest in not being exploited and dominated" (Elster, 1986, p. 122). The above presents a social conflict between these two interests, interested parties – classes leading to class struggle (Ibid) or class conflict (Edles and Appelrouth, 2005, p. 51). Collective action is necessary to ensure those without power can understand position and attempt to overturn the odds, "real existence as organised interest groups" can be understood as class consciousness (Elster, 1986, p. 124).

Marx theorised that class "cannot be reduced to a dichotomous opposition" of the "Have's" (minority, ruling elite, powerful) and the "Have-Not's" (majority, lack power and control) (Elster, 1986, p. 124). Instead, there are capitalists: purchase "labor power", proletariats: sell "their labor power" (working or labouring class) and "the petty bourgeoisie...those who do neither" (middle class) (Elster, 1986, p. 126). Marx acknowledges other classes and their importance in class struggles in creating "class alliances" (Elster, 1986, p. 124) but believed that with time via capitalism middle-classes would eventually merge into the working-classes. He cites fifteen different groups, but as he is mainly interested in market economics where the "means of production" is controlled by individual ownership, what he counts as class is with respect to "property, exploitation, market behaviour, and domination" rather than related to income, status, and occupation which is "social stratification" (Elster, 1986, p. 125).

It is interesting to note, as mentioned above, that it is the middle classes that are to give up space and opportunities (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Iannelli, 2011) and here to merge into (Elster, 1986) the working classes. However, little noise is made of the upper classes or elite who maintain position, generational wealth and power and continue to get richer whilst all,

merging others, get poorer. Marx believed that once capitalism had become global, along with shifts in the working-classes class consciousness gaining steam then a norm social order would emerge such as socialism.

The power and control discussed by Marx is with reference to the means of production an imperative tenet in understanding how social classes are shaped. In short, those who control the means of production also control ideas and the rules of the game. This could be simplified as the Golden Rule, or as the original comic-strip joke from Wizard of Id may recall: "Whoever has the gold, makes the rules!" (Parker and Hart, 1967). The upper classes historically hold tightly the means of production; controlling what is produced, price, availability of goods and/or services, sets wages and are paid from large profit margins which continually squeeze the working or labouring classes who produce goods and/or services, paid a wage in exchange for their time/labour but lack power in negotiating any of the above as an individual.

The belief that with enough hard work and determination the working classes too can become rich or elite may be held, however this is rarely a reality. Marx termed such a belief "false-consciousness" whereby individuals or groups (most often the working classes) do not recognise that they belong to a specific social or working class. For any significant shifts to be made toward equity, groups and individuals must first be aware of their own social class and the limitations of social structures or orders imposed upon them, which may appear natural, in order to organise, challenge them and overthrow capitalism. This can be summed in his statement that "a people which subjugates another people forges its own chains" (Marx as cited in Elster, 1986, p. 131).

Max Weber (1864 – 1920)

Weber whilst viewing himself as a historian rather than a sociologist, is said to have been having a conversation with the ghost of Karl Marx. Weber theorised that individuals are subject to their class, status and party or power. Class is related to one's earnings with status concerned with how those earnings are spent and party as the degree of control or power an individual has over decision making, be it political or creative. Weber saw that an individual could possess class but not status i.e. have money but no prestige. Here lies the difference between old money and new money. He highlighted that one could become new money (new, non-generational wealth) but struggle to successfully enter established old money society/ social circles (generational wealth and prestige). Individuals could also have both class and status but not party: no power over final decision making in issues impacting their lives. Weber points to the intersections of the above for exploration of differences between each.

2.2.2 Micro-sociological theories of Social Class

Whilst Bourdieu will be explored as micro-sociological theory, he has attempted to assimilate both micro and macro sociological practice (Calhoun, 2002).

Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002)

Bourdieu is born into a working-class family in rural southern France to modestly educated parents yet becomes a part of the "French intelligentsia" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 13) and one of France's influential theorists and leading critical voices.

His Béarnese accent (a dialect of Gascon: regional language no longer spoken) is mocked by secondary school peers alongside his appearance in grey boarder uniforms (Grenfell, 2014, p. 17) both revealing his rural origins. However, this does not stop him from gaining entry to the top institutions of the day. His work observes, explores and analyses in fine detail that which shapes folks' everyday lives and that which subtly or harshly keeps folk at their station or own lane as determined by the family or rather the material and nonmaterial wealth of the family they were born into (also see similarities to bell hooks).

He is trained in philosophy, where he further develops an understanding of differing schools of thought which shape how the world and all within and out with are defined. Later, he becomes a sociologist after witnessing war and power struggles between nations (Algeria seeking independence from France) and writes of society, political forces such as the rise of neo-liberalism and all which constitutes social class disputes (Grenfell, 2014).

At the time of writing, the latter half of the twentieth century, the increasingly complex stratification of social class called for more detailed and nuanced understandings of other factors beyond economic and cultural capital which go a long way to also shape an individual's existence and place them in the "social space" (Crossley, 2014, p. 86).

2.2.2a *Understanding Social Space*

For Bourdieu, each individual exists within a specific "social space" (Crossley, 2014, p. 86). One's location/rank/position within the social space is objective and dependent on each individual's capital which constitutes economic (material wealth: financial assets) and cultural (non-material: habits; tastes; preferences) which largely depend on the social class of family one is born into (Crossley, 2014). Capital and what is deemed important or valuable is only so if it is agreed by many people i.e., it takes "social recognition" (Crossley, 2014, p. 86) and backing to evidence its value.

If this social space was imagined as a scale or graph, adding up all one's assets could determine

a net worth or value, putting individuals further up or down the scale, shifting position. Individuals can be distinguished from one another whilst being within the same social class depending on the compositions of assets across capitals (Crossley, 2014).

2.2.2b Understanding Habitus

Habitus is a concept with "a very long history dating back to Aristotle" (Reay, 2004, p. 432). It is discussed in Bourdieu's "Outline of a Theory of Practice" in 1977 (Gillespie, 2019) and developed as a means of attempting to bridge, settle or move beyond the dualistic sociological debate regarding objectivism and subjectivism (King, 2000). This debate of social theorists looks to decide whether social life is inherently deterministic: shaped by structure (structuralism) with individuals exercising little personal choice, as according to Levi-Straus (Levi-Straussian), or voluntarism: fluid individuals exercising choice or having agency (Sartre/Sartrean) (King, 2000, p. 430).

The above is said to be in "dialectical relation" with habitus, intended to "capture and encapsulate" the "dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity" (Bourdieu, 1988b, p. 782 as cited in King, 2000, p. 417). Habitus was intended to be a tool to explore the "dialectical relationship between objective structures and subjective agency" (Stahl, 2015, p. 21). It forms from Bourdieu's "theory of practice" which explores and exposes how "habitus – a matrix of dispositions" leads to individuals and/or groups to (re)produce dominance and privilege that they possess in the form of capitals (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) across varying fields (Stahl, 2015, p. 21).

Habitus is described by Bourdieu as a "durable structure but also malleable" witnessed as the "repetition of both attitudes and practices" (Bourdieu, 1987, as cited in Costa, Burke & Murphy, 2018, p. 10) and "a way of being" (Bourdieu, 1990 as cited in Costa et al., 2018, p. 5) constituting the ways in which people think and behave as well as their perception, engagement with the world and "their role in it" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 5). This can be viewed as a process which is continually evolving leading to dispositions which constitute "social action" and which reflect individuals own innate experiences as according to specific social pathways and on "lived trajectories" which then "justify their approaches to practice" (Costa et al. 2017, p. 5).

Habitus can be described in several ways, such as relating to individuals "corporal dispositions and cognitive templates" (King, 2000, p. 417) that is their physical tendencies - how they move - embodiment and ways of reasoning about the world - how they think. This dualism is intended to be overcome as Bourdieu outlines that individuals are "virtuosic" and interactions between

each other are "mutually susceptible and constraining" (King, 2000, p. 422). Bourdieu describes habitus as:

...a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world-a field-and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world, (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 81 as cited in Reay, 2004, p. 436).

Habitus connects to "the space in which individual agency meets larger social determinants (norms, rules, and/or structures" (Calhoun, 2002). It is described as "a set of 'durable and transposable dispositions' (Outline of a Theory of Practice, 1972 [1977])" (Bourdieu as cited in Calhoun, 2002) such as taste (Crossley, 2014) these act as an intermediate "between 'objective' structures of social relations" such as "class, family, and education" and "individual 'subjective' behavior of actors" (Calhoun, 2002). The helpfulness of the concept of habitus is in its suggestion that "ways of adapting to difficult conditions may outlive those conditions, such that social groups may continue to act poverty stricken even after escaping poverty" (Crossley, 2014, p. 92). With regards to class "social membership in itself...does not automatically translate into a habitus that confers symbolic capital in a uniform way for all members" (Crossley, 2014, p. 99).

Here, Bourdieu saw it that folk either express a "well-informed habitus" or not (Crossley, 2014, p. 100). The "graduation" between them: "symbolic forms of capital", are connected to the former across "any group" so that individuals may be "higher in cultural capital" for instances, whilst not all cultural capital is viewed as of equal value (Crossley, 2014, p. 100). This extra step to attempt to account for differences between individuals within the same social class as well as individuals from difference classes is imperative to the present study as this level of analysis can allow for exploration of "effects (e.g. in education) of intra-group variance and complementarities between class fractions rather than simply inter-group differences" (Crossley, 2014, p. 100) which equates to "class essentialism and reductionism" (Beck, 2007 as cited in Crossley, 2014, p. 100).

Inheritance plays a role in maintaining social class, Bourdieu included the inheritance of physical objects, land/property or savings as economic capital which parents pass on to their children (Savage, 2015, p. 49). He also describes cultural capital as another form inheritance which carries symbolic power and includes educational qualifications, which cannot be directly passed on in the form achieved, but the understanding of HE systems, how to get ahead, secure qualifications which secure better employment opportunities can be (Savage, 2015, p. 49).

Cultural capital is subtle, its "power" described as dependent on "not being recognized directly" (Savage, 2015, p. 49). Such as with the example of gift-giving, if a gift is given only to gain something in return it is no longer a gift and is instead a form of "symbolic violence", assuming and accepting the gift as a gift "we accept domination tacitly" (Savage, 2015, p. 50): "The transmission of cultural capital, however, is opaque, and is necessarily masked in a language of meritocratic achievement and hard work".

Meritocratic achievement relates to idea that where social systems, societies and indeed HEIs are meritocracies then individuals should be able to get ahead and become successful based off their own abilities and efforts – merit, rather than due to the family they are born into – inherit. Moving away from hierarchical aristocratic reproduction and nepotism, meritocracy intends to equalise individuals' chances of rising to the top, gaining related rewards, positions of power and status.

The notion of meritocratic nature of HE and the impacts across differing social classes is likened by Savage to mountaineering – climbing a mountain and reaching the summit is made easier when base camp is closest to the summit and one can "mobilize and combine every advantage possible – their economic, social and cultural capital – so that they have the most effective kit on their arduous adventure" (Savage, 2015, p. 189).

A decade ago, following the BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS) (2013) Mike Savage and colleagues suggested that the social class has shifted from the traditional three-tier model of upper, middle and working classes to a seven-tier model. The new GBCS classes model includes the following: "Elite; Established middle class; Technical middle class; New affluent workers; Traditional working class; Emergent service workers; Precariat" (Savage, 2015, p. 195).

An example is given using data from the GBCS regarding "a person's class origin as that defined by the occupation of their main parental earner when they were fourteen years old" where participants come from one of four groups (Savage, 2015, p. 192). The table below combines some of this information with the mountaineering metaphor demonstrating where individuals start their climb from (Savage, 2015, p. 192):

Table 4: Savage's Mountaineering Metaphor

Status/ Categorisation	Occupational Backgrounds	Mountain base camp
Highest-status	Senior managerial and traditional professional	"lofty mountain passes"
slightly less high-status/ short-range upwardly mobile	middle managerial and modern professional	"well up the valley sides"
mid-range upwardly mobile	intermediate and technical occupational backgrounds	"slightly above the valley bottom"
low-status/ long-range upwardly mobile	manual workers and those who have never worked	"start out from the valley floor"

Despite meritocratic ideals across HE, the family one is born into, parental occupation, types of capital(s) and Habitus inherited, all impact upon starting position in life and on the mountain climb to HE. Social reproduction continues regardless of how hard one works. Following conducting the GBCS Savage contends that "social class is now a very powerful force in the popular imagination once again. People in Britain are aware of, interested in and also upset about class" (Savage, 2015, p. 6). Important to note are the ways in which peoples' capital(s) and Habitus may play a role in obscuring or clarifying reality and their position within it:

Well-educated people feel confident in dealing with institutions, in advancing their cause and in being assertive, and hence are often better able to get the best services from schools, the health service and suchlike. Those without such educational resources may feel underqualified and or even ashamed, unable to clearly and effectively make themselves heard. They may blame themselves for their own lack of confidence. These inequalities in senses of entitlement are not just peripheral, and not simply a matter of personality, but are fully implicated in the operations of class today through being accumulated and institutionalized, (Savage, 2015, p. 51).

2.2.2c Debates around Habitus

Habitus can be utilised as both conceptual/theoretical and methodological/application tools (Costa et al., 2018) however great care and attention is needed in both theorising use of habitus and its application. The work of defining and understanding which dispositions are under investigation i.e., those in relation to a specific field is complex (Costa et al., 2018). Researchers are to focus and narrow in on what it is that is to be counted as a disposition to gain a deeper

understanding of the social world and how dispositions of historic and social origin are internalised by individuals thus shaping their actions and behaviours and (re)producing dominance of particular ideas, notions and actions which lead certain groups to maintain power.

Some researchers call for the utilisation of habitus to move beyond the theoretical and into practical to "focus on the ways in which the socially advantaged and disadvantaged play out attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority ingrained in their habitus in daily interaction" (Reay, 2004, p. 436). Habitus is intended to act as a framework to assist in organisation and capturing how it is being applied. This includes Bourdieu's emphasis on the need for reflexivity across each stage of the social research process including use of the tools utilised, research questions posed and how each participants response is considered and analysed (Costa et al., 2018). In this way both the researcher and research participants are viewed as "agents" each with their own habitus – the result of and encompassing both personal and collective history as well as possessing an "education associated with a milieu" (Bourdieu & Chartier, 2015, p. 52 as cited in Costa et al., 2018, p. 4).

2.2.2d How Habitus may be used to interpret the field of Higher Education

Habitus has been utilised within educational research in multiple ways whilst ensuring that careful consideration and caution are applied as observed in Costa, Burke & Murphy's (2018) comparison of two studies across different research settings: digital scholarship practices and graduate employment. The research questions were carefully designed to "capture" habitus as imperatively it is its "application" that is given prominence of consideration over that of "theory and method" (Costa et al., 2018). This is due to the awareness of individuals dispositions are numerable, fluid and "often conflicting" therefore are not to be taken at "face value" as a single "set of isolated dispositions" does not equate to a habitus (Costa et al., 2018, p. 6).

Both studies incorporated reflexivity which is concluded as crucial to social research around social practice (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992, p. 36 cited as in Costa et al., 2018, p. 16). Here the researchers consider their own involvement and positionality within research as well as that of potential participants and the making of meaning throughout, with an understanding of their subjective nature. Reflexivity is therefore applied throughout the research process, across tools utilised, research questions as well as participants responses (Costa et al., 2018).

The insights gained from utilising the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) to investigate habitus within research exploring graduate employment includes the classed nature of gaining employment where some working class students developed a "reformulated habitus"

(Costa et al., 2018, p. 9) and change in disposition following "out-of-environment" (Burke, 2015a, 2015b as cited in Costa et al., 2018, p. 9) experiences of interactions with "individuals or environments that radically changed their understanding of the game" thus impacting their "levels of confidence/expectations" leading to shifts in their "attitude and practice" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 9). Tools such as the BNIM have been used to observe the change in participants "personality" (Zinn, 2004 cited as in Costa et al., 2018, p. 16) throughout their life by (re)constructing their "biographical experiences" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 16). The research discussed appears to also highlight that it is students who undergo change or experience shifts when exposed to differing environments and individuals rather than HE or labour environments undergoing these changes and shifts to meet students where they are or being reflective of the society at large rather than particular groups of interest in a vacuum.

Findings within research outlined is set against a backdrop of increasing underemployment of graduates which is understood to be associated with the "role of a priori capitals" such as economic, cultural and social which are highlighted as often related to social class as discussed by Bourdieu & Boltanski (1981) (Costa et al., 2018, p. 8) rather than being related to education undertaken. Secondly, of interest is the "fuzzy" nature of the labour market" which related to the "mastery" of implicit prerequisites of the labour market and awareness of "its constantly changing needs" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 8). Here it is class which is stated as the deciding factor in graduate employment despite the propensity in the UK to claim meritocratic discourse and practices, citing Bourdieu & Boltanski (1981) and Brown & Hesketh (2004) (Costa et al., 2018, p. 8).

Imperatively habitus and related dispositions and what counts as such is decided upon when considering the research question and purposes (Costa et al., 2018). Of interest is the use practice-based narrative enquiry to uncover "what is often implied but not discussed" and observation that "individuals' practices in a given or extended moment and place" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480, as cited in Costa et al., 2018, p. 16).

The importance of Habitus with regards to social class differences in experiences of Higher education can be summarised in an allegory of "fish in water" as stated by Bourdieu (1990a, p. 108):

One of the privileges of the dominant, who move in their world as fish in water, resides in the fact that they need not engage in rational computation in order to reach the goals that best suit their interests. All they have to do is to follow their dispositions which, being adjusted to their positions, "naturally" generate practices adjusted to the situation, (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 108 as

cited in Reay, 2015, p. 171)

Above "the paradox of natural distinction" recognised by Bourdieu is exemplified within Reay's (2015) research which demonstrates Habitus' "inexplicitness" via her white middle class participants "automatic", "taken for granted", "always assumed" "non-decision" regarding attending university and that they'll only attend an old/ancient rather than new university (Reay, 2015, p. 171). The allergy intends to highlight this taken-for granted aspect of how social class impacts experiences of the social world, where one feels at ease in particular environments as though natural or the fish "is able to take the field around itself for granted" (Reay, 2021, p. 55) or not:

...social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127, as cited in Reay, 2004, p. 436)

2.2.2e Prominent Critiques of Habitus

Whilst habitus is intended for use as conceptual tool and theory as well as a method in its ability to locate "social practices" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 4) it is not infallible (King, 2015).

It is argued that within Bourdieu's "practical theory" great effort has led him to theorise away from the earlier sociological dualism of subject and object or individual and society and purport that the social world consists of "only individuals interacting with other individuals" (King, 2000, p. 422). However, King argues that the conceptualisation of habitus does regress into "objectivism, and, therefore, back into the very dualism of structure and agency" (King, 2000, p. 422). Previously "the practical and intersubjective nature of social life" is stressed, that is that there are no "set of social rules" – individuals have agency and interact unscripted however, in later writing regarding his "theory of practice" this is reversed with society portrayed as a "dialectic between practice and structure" (King, 2000, p. 422). This retreat into structure sees the individual now inextricably linked to and acting in accordance with an "objective social structure" (King, 2000, p. 423). It is this objective structure which typifies class and shapes individuals' tastes, practices and dispositions – habitus embodied (King, 2000). Individuals are said not to have control over this nor any "conscious mastery" thus producing and reproducing cultural structures (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79 as cited in King, 2000, p. 424). Here the power and significance or "objective status and agency" moves from the "virtuoso" – individuals, to "collective history, language and the economy" (King, 2000, p. 425).

2.2.2f Considerations of the use of Habitus in the present study

A person's individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of. Thus, for Bourdieu: the subject is not the instantaneous ego of a sort of singular cogito, but the individual trace of an entire collective history (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 91). (Reay, 2004, p. 434)

Habitus may be used not only to describe the dispositions of individuals or students but also of HEIs who may use habitus as a matching mechanism to ensure that prospective students habitus are aligned with their own (Pitmen, 2015). This could include exploring possible institutional habitus who often appear removed from the picture in terms of their responsibility to meet the needs of students and the onus is instead shifted onto students to meet the HEIs needs and be the right kind of candidate. Here there appears an implicit favouring of particular types of social and cultural capital as well as economic capitals. In this way there may be parallels to race and the concept of implicit bias as developed by USC, CUE and Bensimon (2015) within their "equity-mindedness" approach, discussed in detail in section 2.2.4. "Equity-mindedness" as HE Policy in Practice. This links to discussions of inequity, described as one of the "most persistent policy issues in HE" (Martin 2009 as cited in Pitmen, 2015, p. 285). Equity is not achieved across HEIs where HEIs are involved in the practice of selecting the "right" students through habitus comparison between student and HEI (Pitmen, 2015, p. 288). The acknowledgement of the above is imperative if policy related to equity are to have substantial positive impacts for disadvantaged students (Pitmen, 2015). The policy enactment needed is to come from external sources in order to disrupt "the iron rule of student selection" (Karabel, 2005 as cited in Pitmen, 2015, p. 288).

With regards to the present study, exploring Habitus regarding students from WA backgrounds experiences of HE as well as what HEIs do to understand their lived experiences and support students when they enter the institutions is a prominent concern. The need for such endeavours echoes calls from fellow researchers:

Perhaps now is the time to consider practices such as those David James argues for. He states that it is time "for more radical action in terms of admissions, drawing lessons from affirmative action policies" (James, 2014, p. 323). But it is also vital to ensure working-class students as well as ethnic and racial minority (BAME) students are adequately supported once they are at university. Widening access and participation, and the underlying meritocratic sentiments that underpin it, will never amount to more than empty rhetoric and token gestures until students from all class backgrounds feel at home in all higher education institutions, (Reay, 2021, p. 61).

Habitus will be utilised in the present study to explore the ways of being of students from poorer backgrounds and HEI staff as well as the HEI itself.

2.2.2g A brief introduction to Field and Capital(s)

Sociological theories regarding capital(s), particularly social capital, have been utilised within educational research as ways of understanding inequality in HE. These theories have gone some way in attempts to explain social class and how capital(s) may enable or inhibit the positions of individuals and/or groups within society as some types of capital(s) are more highly favoured and sought after than others. This privileging of capitals could be viewed as leading to the privileging of social classes or that social class is maintained by reproducing the privileging of certain capitals which ensures the dominance of certain groups or individuals within society who benefit from no change to the status quo as they possess or can access capital(s) which are of value. In this view some individuals or groups are thus positioned as possessing capital(s) which are not of value or privileged, as will be discussed further below.

Understanding what is afoot or indeed at play, regarding social class and capital(s) is most often likened to the metaphor of "games" by Bourdieu (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff and Virk, 2002, p. 262; Kendall and Wickham, 2011) as well as Marx (Elster, 1986) amongst others, along with the notion of the necessity in understanding the rules (Gee, 2014). Within the above allegory, where the game is played is referred to as the field: the type of arena or "terrain" i.e., a tennis match is played on a court and football on a pitch (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 262). Within the present study the field is that of Higher Education (HE). Each field is governed by its own rules leading to varying positions and related practices which each afford a variety of opportunities and strategies (Calhoun et al., 2002). The play or "action in a field" is the product of opposing ventures of "position-taking" (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 262).

As discussed further below, capital is not intended as money but can be expressed like a currency, utilised to buy or secure one's position in social space, every individual has "a portfolio of capital" (Crossley, 2014, p. 87). Capital and what is deemed important or valuable is only so if it is agreed by many people i.e., it takes "social recognition" (Crossley, 2014, p. 86) and backing to evidence its value, it also "...does not exist and function except in relation to a field" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101, as cited in Calhoun, 2002, p. 262). Everyone has a uniquely different configuration or "volume and composition" of capital(s) which are weighted differently according to how much or little capital is possessed within each area or field, thus more or less power depending on the capacity and configuration of capital (Crossley,

2014, p. 87).

The term capital is drawn upon by Bourdieu as in its "monetary exchange sense" strictly as "mercantile exchange" and imbues it to account for exchanges of a different type across much vaster fields or intricate "networks or circuits" (Moore, 2012, p. 99). There are varying forms of capital but the main two are economic and symbolic (Crossley, 2014). Economic capital is theorised as an essential capital whereby other forms of capital are "transubstantiated" (changed into something new) from this (Moore, 2012, p. 99). There are also sub-types of capital (depending on field located in) such as cultural, linguistic, scientific & literary etc. which fall in between economic and symbolic capital (Moore, 2012). These alongside social and cultural capital as well as relevant theoretical terminology will be explored in more depth below.

2.2.2h Economic and Symbolic Capital

Economic capital as related to "mercantile exchange" is conceptualised as "instrumental and self-interested nature of the exchange is transparent", "not of intrinsic value...only a means to an end (profits, interest, a wage etc.)" (Moore, 2012, p. 100). This is the same for symbolic capital however "in their distinctive ways, deny and suppress their instrumentalism by proclaiming themselves to be disinterested and of intrinsic worth." (Moore, 2012, p. 100).

Symbolic capital is (as economic capital) involved in exchanges which are visible, contributory and concerned with self-interest but not of any inherent value just "a means to an end" (Moore, 2012, p. 100). However, they present as neutral (rather than self-interested) and of having inherent value or being public-spirited; altruistic (Moore, 2012, p. 101). This is problematic as it can lead to "misrecognition" as in the above, a process described by Bourdieu whereby the fact that economic capital changes form into something new (transubstantiation), such as symbolic capital, is systematically denied (Moore, 2012, p. 101). This is a form of "symbolic violence" as some things are viewed with higher regard than others via "hierarchies of discrimination" as is reflected in the principles related to varying symbolic fields (Moore, 2012, p. 101). Symbolic violence can be understood as "the ways in which people may be harmed by the ways they are labelled or categorised socially" (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 264) recognising that "social classifications" can become "tools of domination" (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 263).

As applied to the present study there is an interest in how HEIs social classifications of students are collated, interpreted and applied in a meaningful way throughout the application, course and future prospects or not. There is an awareness and commitment of not causing harm by means of social categorisation of participations.

2.2.3 A Comparison of variants of Social Capital

2.2.3a Social Capital

This section outlines social capital, a highly contested concept, previously considered as a "panacea in curing all social and individual ills" by its proponents (Fine, 2010, p. 197) and as falling foul of numerous errors across a range of areas: definition, application, measurement and foregoing ties to variables at the centre of social theory (Baron, Field and Schuller, 2000; Fine, 2010; Claridge, 2021). Popular within social sciences and utilised with regards to "relative performance in educational achievement according to family and neighbourhood characteristics" by Coleman (1988) (Fine, 2010, p. 39) social capital gained ground within education research over the previous few decades (Friend, 2020; Mishra, 2020). Critiques of social capital are numerous, detailed and damning, it is out with the scope of the present study to address in full, see Fine (2010), however several will be explored further below.

Introduction to Social Capital

On the face of it, social capital can be conceptualised as bringing together aspects of sociology (social – relationships, communication and networks) and economics (capital – of value, producing benefit, goal achievement) (Szreter, as cited in Baron et al, 2000). Emphasis is placed on the "quality" of relationships in being trusting and "mutually respecting" of individuals within groups in advancing towards common goals (Szreter, as cited in Baron et al., 2000, p. 57). As such social capital is about what goes between and among groups rather than being distilled to a single individual and is created only when benefits extend across wider society (not just to individuals within groups) (Szreter, as cited in Baron et al., 2000, p. 58).

Social capital first appeared in research by the Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects in Housing and Social Capital, (Dube, Howes & McQueen, 1957 as cited in Baron et al., 2000). It was defined around a nation's "public physical infrastructure" including buildings housing churches, universities and schools to roads and water systems etc. (Baron et al., 2000, p. 2). The term stood to be developed differently by Bourdieu in bringing social capitals relevance to the exploration of power struggles across or among groups in society in his work "Distinction" (1984). Here he purports that capitals: economic, cultural and the newly detailed social, are "real entities" which people possess across varying degrees or in a particular "volume" these are "useable resources and powers" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114 as cited in Baron et al., 2000, p. 4). Later Bourdieu theorises that social capital is the combined or total resources, either definite or possible, each individual possesses which are connected to and furthered by

long-lasting relationships or social networks (Bourdieu, 1986 as cited in Baron et al., 2000, p. 5).

Similarly, Savage outlines that social capital is "the range and nature of peoples' social networks, which can affect peoples' life chances. Here again, contacts can accumulate over time, and may be a resource which can be mobilized to gain information about jobs, accommodation, exciting opportunities and so forth" (Savage, 2015, p. 26). An interesting finding within Savage's research is that across the seven-tier GBCS class model, as forementioned, people tend to know those from their own and similar occupations and not those at the other ends of the model:

Our social networks are differentiated by class. If you know people in some professional and managerial occupations – such as that of scientist or finance manager – you are likely to know others in these sorts of occupations, and fewer working class ones. The inverse also operates. If you know a machine operator, you might also know a factory worker and a security guard, but you are much less likely to know an aristocrat, (Savage, 2015, p. 142).

What this means is that in "all kinds of subtle ways, our networks are socially differentiated and convey different kinds of advantages" (Savage, 2015, p.143). Some of the advantages gained and exercised can be summarised in the adage - it's not what you know but who you know:

It is the elite occupations which are most socially exclusive. So there are clear differences in the connections people have across the income spectrum. People who are financially well-off know fewer people in working class jobs than do people who are less well-off. Poorer people know far fewer people in high-status jobs than do their better-off neighbours. This matters because since it is high-status people who are likely to have useful contacts, their advice will be socially exclusive – even though they may personally think that they talk to everyone and are not being preferential, (Savage, 2015, p. 145).

Whilst our "social networks are patterned, but not closed" and so folks know people from "across the social hierarchy" there are distinct ways to get ahead depending on one's starting point (Savage, 2015, p. 149). The "useful contacts" and "advice" (Savage, 2015, p. 145) aspects of this type of social advantage can play out with regards to HE entry, securing internships and employment prospects. There is a knock-on effect whereby "affluent and better-educated people are considerably more likely to know people in elite occupations, and those who are in the bottom income bracket and have no qualifications know fewer people from any other social group" (Savage, 2015, p. 149). The above matters because it influences where we have access to and who we can come into contact within different spaces:

Hence, growing up in a better-off family might be associated with having a more extensive elite social network. Of course, it may not be that people from professional and managerial families get to know a higher number of aristocrats or chief executives because of their families; but maybe their family backgrounds help them go to university and to get jobs and have leisure activities in which they are more likely to meet CEOs and aristocrats, (Savage, 2015, p. 152).

Household income matters less when a person comes "from a better-off background" as they are "considerably more likely to know more CEOs and aristocrats than people whose parental income-earners are in the intermediate or bottom categories" (Savage, 2015, p. 154). As will be discussed later, education policies which seek to equate disadvantage with poverty (lack of income) and believe supplying more money will solve inequity and social reproduction within HE may miss the mark in being truly transformative. Social capital impacts upon peoples' lives in profound ways including how they view themselves, others and where they fit into the social fabric of their societies as well as whether they feel they have any influence upon these aspects:

Your social background shapes whom you socialize with, and whom you socialize with in turn shapes your opportunities to maintain or improve your social position. Social capital also matters, not just for your own life outcomes, but also influences how you think about your class position, and the political power you feel you have, (Savage, 2015, p. 158).

Whilst economic capital is theorised as the source of all capitals and can be transformed, alongside cultural capital, into social capital which in turn has the potential to compound economic and cultural capital, social capital cannot be abated to other forms of capital and is reliant upon them (Baron et al., 2000). New forms of capital such as academic are introduced in "Distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984) and "Homo Academicus" (Bourdieu, 1988) however the "inner-relationships" between all forms of capital are not sufficiently clarified (Schuller, Baron & Field in Baron et al, 2000). Following shifts of influence of "both neo-liberalism and a rational choice methodology, especially in US sociology and political theory", Bourdieu, alongside his theorisation of social capital, are "abandoned" in favour of rational choice viewpoint linked with James Coleman (Fine, 2010, p. 37).

Social capital is of particular interest to the present study as it has been frequently utilised across research within the field of education (Friend, 2020; Mishra, 2020). There are competing theories regarding this concept which may have gone some way to muddy the waters around social capitals potential in addressing inequity in HE (Fine, 2010; Claridge, 2015). The main contributors to the theory of social capital and its variations, Bourdieu (1984), Coleman (1988) and later Putnam (1998), will be discussed below followed by ideas around how social capital

may be used to interpret the field of HE and more specifically WA, if at all.

Outline of Differing Variants of Social Capital

Three major contributors to the concept of social capital are Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, as aforementioned.

Interested in class, power and social reproduction, Bourdieu utilises social capital to explore "class, elites, power, hierarchy, conflict and how these are reproduced" (Fine, 2010, p. 85). In this approach, social capital is one among numerous capitals (economic, symbolic, cultural) and derives from structures (economic, cultural, social) which enable some people to further the power and status available to them (Fine, 2010). Social capital is not held equally by all people but linked with forms of stratification and class and so is reflective of a person's social networks and the potential of these social networks for advancement. In this way the size of an individual's social network is not so important but the capacity for furthering oneself via the high status or position of power of the individuals within a social network is. Social capital is viewed as a resource which can be gained by groups or individuals through having "more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119 as cited in Claridge, 2015). In order to examine differing capitals: economic, cultural and social etc. Bourdieu devises habitus and field to explore "context-specific" aspects of society (Fine, 2010, p. 39).

Sociologist James Coleman (1988) sought to link sociological and economic theory, that is the social actions of people, a functionalist view, and rational action; that people are concerned with their own self-interest and pursue goals in this respect (Baron et al., 2000). Here social capital is more about the relationships between individuals and groups and their social structures, viewed as an asset of the group or collective. The rational action or theory of rationality dictates that people will only pursue and better their relationships, social interactions and networks for as long as they gain some benefit, and this is what shapes how people act as well as the development of social organisations. Rather than being viewed as an individual trait, as Bourdieu saw it, Coleman asserts that social capital is a private and public good, a collective trait – benefitting everyone and not just group members. For Coleman social capital is "universally productive" with results being realised which would have otherwise failed without it (Coleman, 1988 as cited in Claridge, 2015). It has been highlighted that Coleman may have plagiarised an essay by a follow member of the "Public Choice Society" Buchanan, (1981) "rational choice origins for social capital in the work of James Buchanan, the Nobel Prize

winner in economics for public choice theory" with "Putnam to follow Coleman" (Fine, 2010, p. 40).

In a recent live webinar Putnam (2021) attested to leaning into Coleman's assertions on social capital and added the concept into his writing at a late stage in his own work without first spotting any potential flaws. The notion of social capital as a public good is continued on from Coleman along with the notion of social capital as a collective property which moves on from Bourdieu's individual trait understanding and Coleman's interest of social structure of relationships and now is levelled up by Putnam to include large populations. In Putnam's research, cities and countries can be compared, with a focus on "trust" or more importantly trustiness, and the quantity available across modern society, viewed as the prominent substance typifying "political culture" (Claridge, 2015). Here, social capital concerns "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 35 in Claridge, 2015).

In this way, Putnam like Coleman purported that social capital is a public good, where the actions undertaken by individuals benefit all. However, Bourdieu did not view social capital as a "universal resource" because it is not equally accessible to all people but instead entrenched in other forms of capital which are themselves taken for granted norms which benefit those with already established economic and cultural capital, where certain groups (who have power and status) dictate what is or is not normative and of value (Claridge, 2015). Some critics argue that Putnam's work around social capital excludes the variables of social theory such as "power, conflict, class, gender, race and so on" which were hitherto linked to "civil society itself but also with the state and the economy (understood as capitalism)" (Fine, 2010, p. 49).

Within HE debates around social capital with regards to education, specifically Widening Access, the role of bridging and bonding ties (Lin, 2000; Mishra, 2020; Friend 2020) is often discussed. Bridging (or linking) ties relates to building links between "heterogenous groups" which maybe more insubstantial but may also "foster inclusion" and bonding ties which refers to "links between like-minded folk" where homogeneity is strengthened (Baron et al., 2000, p. 10).

In exploring the academic experiences of underrepresented students and the role of social capital, networks and support, Mishra (2020) found that bonding ties formed the personal network including family, parents and communities (e.g. religious/ ethnic) with the main form of social capital being social support. Bridging or weaker ties were linked to personal and

institutional networks consisting of learning communities, same race faculty and successful community members with information as the main form of social capital (Mishra, 2020). Underrepresented students may achieve greater academic success where ties are developed outside of usual network (bridging), this may also reduce drop-out as peers share information and resources as social capital is boosted positively impact academic persistence (Mishra, 2020). Similarly, whilst bonding with like-minded or culturally similar peers may be imperative it can also negatively impact students as it can lead to clustering in same groups which hinders the disruption of barriers which tend to reproduce middle- and upper-class social privilege (Lin, 2000). This will be discussed further below.

How Social Capital is used to interpret the field of Higher Education

Social capital may be used within the field of HE to reflect on how individuals come to choose to attend HE, what course they may prefer or gain entry onto, what HEI they may select and/or be accepted onto, how well they might do during their studies, the networks they may develop across friendship groups, academic staff and institution affiliations and industry contacts and how successful they may be in their chosen field.

As discussed above regarding bridging and bonding, social capital has been utilised when exploring "under-represented student groups", a systematic review of 136 studies outlines the role of networks- both personal (family, parents, communities such as ethnic or religious etc.) and institutional (faculty, learning opportunities, classmates etc.) and how these may map onto HE success (Shweta, 2020). Here personal networks can assist in informing and supporting attitudes towards HE, which can be stronger when parents have experiences of HE themselves, alongside family values around HE and relevant interpersonal relationships. Developing institutional networks is linked to HE success in having someone to study with, share information, ideas and resources, this alongside developing relationships with faculty members was shown to lessen HE drop-out rates with differences in social support identified across majority and minority ethnic groups (Shweta, 2020).

In the above study, social capital is separated into two forms: social support and information, the former relates to personal social network consists of family, community and same race peers while the latter is concerned with personal and institutional networks including successful community members, learning communities and same race faculty members (Shweta, 2020). These are described as bonding ties (former) and bridging ties (latter), concluding that counselling services, faculty mentorship and tutoring programs would further support under-

represented students in bettering relationships with peers, mentors and faculty staff and becoming a part of HE. This does appear to place the onus of developing relationships, integrating into the HE system upon the shoulders of under-represented students rather than those working within and across HEIs themselves taking on this role. Here it appears that the HE system itself is not checked nor held accountable for the reproduction of power amongst certain groups, instead under-represented students are required to adapt and cross the imposed systematic divide.

The present study will explore how HEIs position the responsibility of developing relationships and building social networks among students and between students and staff this will address the gap which exists in the literature of the extent to which HEIs may potentially be complicit in reproducing or creating inequality.

Social Capitals application within Widening Access and Participation

The above criticism of misplaced responsibility of recognition and adaption of and to difference among students in HEIs can be seen in the early work of Bourdieu who posited that HE was a structure perfect at replicating social inequality, recognising the impact of social capital in this regard (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 493 as cited in Friend, 2020, p. 2). This recognition has continued to be the reality experienced by students, as highlighted above with onus to develop relationships and social capital on under-represented students (individuals) rather than universities (institutions) (Friend, 2020) which is increasingly set out under the guise of Widening Access (WA) and/or Widening Participation (WP). This student-initiated responsibility has been described as the "burden of becoming respectable" (Friend, 2020, p. 16) where under-represented students learn the accepted ways of being of middle- and upper-class students to fit in with HEI community and thus gain a sense of belonging. Again, this responsibility rests with students rather than "the university community learning from their practices" (Friend, 2020, p. 16). This can be framed as a positive i.e. increased support equals academic success and therefore the integration of underrepresented students then become "a part" of HE system and services (Shweta, 2020, p. 13). However, the examples given are stated as required so that the students may better their relationships with HEI staff & peers rather than steps that the HEIs could take to better their understanding of and relationships with underrepresented students (Shweta, 2020).

Part of the problem with the above has been identified as being a product of a "neoliberal agenda of creating a university ranking system fuelled by subjective criteria...reproducing economic

and social disadvantage" (Friend, 2020, p. 3). Some research concludes that social capital actually "multiplied the effects of economic and cultural capital and continues to be a mechanism used by middle classes to retain power and advantage" (Friend, 2020, p. 15) as recognised by Bourdieu several decades earlier (Bourdieu, 1986). Of note was the observation that bonding ties with people from similar backgrounds whilst significant, can be limiting as barriers between social classes where advantage and privilege is reproduced go unchecked leading to under-represented students not gaining the same "social advancement from attending elite universities" (Lin, 2000 as cited in Friend 2020) as their more represented counterparts. It is imperative to understand the extent to which HEIs are aware of the above social advancement gained by some students over others in terms of the types of relationships developed with students from a mix of socioeconomic or class backgrounds and matters regarding the rank of HEI attended and in which ways, if any, HEIs may attempt to stop the reproduction of inequity.

There is also a distinction in the knowledge accessible across differing social class groups described as first-hand or hot knowledge and second-hand or cold knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998 as cited in Friend, 2020, p. 11). The former is "reserved for middle-class university educated parents" who pass this onto their children thus advancing social mobility and upholding social advantage described as being "bound to social networks" (Friend, 2020, p. 11). The latter infers that for working class students there is a reliance on "others for experiential advice" this is generally accessed via school or forms a part of league table information i.e., common knowledge "available to everyone providing little or no social advantage" (Friend, 2020, p. 11). It is important to explore how the gaps in accessing first-hand hot knowledge may be overcome to ensure that the information needed to access HE is not reliant on knowing the right person or people nor that it is guarded in a way which leads to social advancement for a select few, in the know. The types of knowledge which lend themselves to create the first-hand or hot knowledge and second-hand or cold knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998 as cited in Friend, 2020, p. 11) dichotomy is also of interest, what are the knowledge(s), experiences and/or rules that are shared with some students and not others.

There is a further narrowness of some WA approaches and policy enactments. HEIs have developed a view of students of interest as: young, first time and full-time degree students and not adult or mature students who access part-time courses or post-graduates (Evans, Rees, Taylor and Wright, 2019). This can lead to physical marginalisation and relational differences and separation of students, whilst appealing to an ethos of WA to produce an attractive public image and gain a higher status across league tables (Evan et al., 2019). WA approaches are

positioned as "raising aspirations" of "high-attaining but non-traditional young people" (Evan et al., 2019, p., 106). However, many of the taster and access courses are in fact aimed at "non-traditional" adult learners, these are carried out in WA centres rather than as a part of "wider curricular" (Evan, et al., 2019, p., 105). Here WA policy enactment contributes to "(re)production and self-perpetuation of a hierarchically structured HE system in Wales and UK more generally and of social inequalities more widely" (Ball et al., 2001; Croxford and Raffae, 2015; Forsyth & Furlong 2000 as cited in Evan et al., 2019, p., 113). The above considerations have led to HEIs and government policy makers being asked to deliberate "whether WA approaches are compatible with the aim of social justice" (Evan et al., 2019, p., 113). There also continues to be some rhetoric around certain students as lacking aspiration (Friend, 2020, p. 3).

The notion above that HEIs have specific students in mind according to age, relationship to HE (traditional/non-traditional) and separate students physically/spatially on campus, timetabling and may lack integration is of note within the present study.

Prominent Critiques of Social Capital

As alluded to above, a debate continues around the conceptualisation of social capital: for Bourdieu it is a trait belonging to individuals, whilst Coleman and Putnam view this as more of a collective property. There are several criticisms and limitations of social capital and how it has been applied within research. With these come notes on non-consensus, which argue that whilst it has its flaws, social capital can continue to be of conceptual value when epistemological rigour and caution of application are applied (Baron et al., 2000; Claridge, 2015).

Critiques of social capital include that it has diverse definitions, operationalisation, and "over-versatility" in application (Baron et al. 2000, p. 24) utilised across many differing social matters and contexts (Portes, 1998) in a one-size fits all fashion. This has led to calls for the conceptual metaphors derived from the term "capital" and indeed the term social capital itself to be abandoned as they negate that individuals may build social networks without any economic gain in mind (Arrow, 2000, p. 4 as cited in Baron et al., 2000, p. 25).

Limitations involve how the concept is measured, including its use in quantitative studies where methods are used which the data does not support (Baron et al., 2000; Fine, 2010). Another is how social capital is aggregated to include a range of social unit levels such as an individual

through to a nation even accounting for "the global system" without standardisation like that present in the concept of human and/or physical capital (Baron et al., 2000, p. 28; Fine, 2010). Circularity has also been raised as a problem for the concept of social capital as it can be presented as both the cause and effect and as a descriptor of certain phenomena and an explanatory variable (Portes 1998 as cited in Baron et al. 2000, p. 29).

This is similar to the recognition of social capital as being tautological – as true due to its "logical form", neither Bourdieu, Coleman nor Putnam's theories have been cleared of this conundrum (Gearin, 2017 p. 613 as cited in Claridge, 2015). Despite his recent admission of error of applying Coleman's theorisation without evaluation, it is Putnam who some critics outline as the most prolific offender of the above as his work has been most cited in the field (Baron et al., 2000). Others argue that the definition and measurement of social capital are not its main issues and instead "why and how" this is the case is reflective of the "legion analytical deficiencies that it displays in practice" as well as its propensity to "preclude the presence of power, oppression and violence other than as an afterthought" (Fine, 2010, p. 205).

The above limitations along with several others has led to social capital being described as having "wicked problems" (Claridge, 2021) meaning that there are numerable issues when applied to social matters. As such when utilising social capital researchers must deeply consider matters of unravelling what social capital is from what it does - identifying whether it is an action or whether it leads to actions (including discussion of norms) and unpicking its ontology as economics and sociology differ (Woolcock 1998; Fine 2001, 2002, 2008, 2010; Fine and Green, 2000 as cited in Claridge, 2021).

Social capital has been described as falling foul of "hack academia" (Fine 2010 as cited in Claridge, 2021) where some researchers may cherry pick what is and is not included in its utilisation particularly in when it comes to the "transcendental nature social experience" and the background presuppositions of the "tangible (networks/rules) and intangible (trust/norms/shared understanding)" which are a part of social experience (Claridge, 2021). This can be seen in the lack of use of Bourdieu's habitus as it "conflicts with methodological individualism", it can be under-utilised or cherry-picked and used within quantitative research which was not as Bourdieu originally intended (Claridge, 2021).

Social capital can go both ways, producing positive and negative outcomes simultaneously (Portes, 1998, p. 16 as cited in Claridge, 2021). This can lead to social capital as a "utopian in its vision of individuals, communities and politics" (Fine, 2010, p. 200) and may become a

"mechanism" for maintaining positions of privilege where what counts as valuable is dictated by privileged groups thus multiplying the influence of cultural and economic capital (Friend, 2020).

The use of social capital in research endeavours is a matter of context, it does have potentiality but is not a certain, value-free, "win-win" concept with an easy universalising nature as this is too simplistic and not reflective of social worlds complexity such as the impact of gender, race and power imbalances at play when trying to get ahead in society (DeFilippis, 2001, p. 800 as cited in Claridge, 2015). To assume its universality negates that individuals and groups may hold different values which are not the same for everyone and that struggles of power exist (Graham, 2016 as cited in Claridge 2021). Without acknowledging this social capital may lose its explanatory power, with the importance and relation of trust becoming simplified. The above is characterised within the concepts of bridging and bonding, criticisms conclude that "underlying political, economic, and social systems that shape and reproduce inequality" are often avoided or omitted in research endeavours (Schafft & Brown, 2003, as cited in Claridge, 2021) and are "insufficient and ambiguous in their effects unless account is taken of the broader internal and external conditions" such as was observed within Flint and Kearns (2006) housing, neighbourhood renewal and social capital study finding tension "between the emphasis on social cohesion and community empowerment at neighbourhood level and a neo-liberal economic focus on competitiveness and entrepreneurialism at city and national levels" (Fine, 2010, p. 202).

Social capital has been likened to a prism which "filters out more light than it lets through" (Fine, 2010, p. 30) and to a hydra – a many headed dog (Claridge, 2021). In this way the use of social capital without due consideration of the above concerns in educational research could lead to a stunted understanding and lessen the development of new ideas. However, some argue that social capital is to be "critically addressed" and made superfluous afterwards "if social theory is to flourish, it is a necessity" as Fine concludes (Fine, 2010, p. 207).

Consideration of the use of Social Capitals in the present study

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital appears to allow for further exploration of the structural facets and limitations in accessing social capital. The recognition that social capital is not available to everyone equally all of the time enables closer inspection of when, where and particularly who is able to access social capital and how it may be used to extend other forms of capital. The focus on its relationship to power and status is also enlightening as it

highlights where it is or may be reproduced and transformed and who stands to benefit, whilst also taking into consideration that normative notions are in fact laid down by those in power and are taken for granted across society as they appear inherent and natural and not created to benefit the few.

Across the present study, social capital as theorised by Bourdieu could be utilised to explore whether students and staff have any knowledge of the concept and how they feel it may apply to their experiences of HE in Scotland. Social capital could also be utilised in investigating the extent to which HEIs are in the know, whether it is a consideration during application or something they strive to attend to throughout students HE journeys. In short are HEIs aware of their potential role in social reproduction, what steps do they take to mitigate this, if any, how are students' environments organised: on campus, classrooms, canteen and off campus in halls of residence for example.

2.2.4 Academic Capital Formation (ACF) Framework.

2.2.4a Academic Capital

As outlined above, Bourdieu has developed several concepts such as social, cultural and economic capitals and detailed their overarching relationships to account for how individuals' preferences such as taste, the ways of being such as habitus can be largely shaped by social class. In this sense he could be likened to an old school or traditional grand theorist in developing a group of concepts and their relationships to each other (Given, 2008).

It could be argued that St. John and colleagues (St. John, Hu & Fisher, 2011; St. John, 2013) have sought to apply Bourdieu's theory and concepts of social reproduction, habitus, field, academic capital and social capital within the framework of ACF along with other related theories, as outlined further below, within HE in the US, in an attempt to demonstrate how academic capital can be utilised functionally as an investigative tool to explore and understand "social processes related to educational attainment" among students from "low-ses families" (St. John et al., 2011, p. 13).

This section delves deeper into the concept of Academic Capital, first introduced by Bourdieu (1984, 1988) and describes its later development by St. John and colleagues into the Academic Capital Formation (ACF) framework (St. John et al., 2011; St. John, 2013). A critique of AFC will follow alongside considerations for its application within the present study.

The following references of the works of St. John and colleagues are from a US context describing students experiences attending two-year and four-year colleges which reflects FE college two-year courses and university, four-year degrees in a UK setting (FE and HE pathways may also overlap/transfer) for example "college knowledge" (St. John, 2013, p. 45) is university knowledge. For clarity, throughout the present study, the term university of Higher Education Institution (HEI) will be used reflecting the UK equivalent above as the research is being conducted in Scotland, UK.

2.2.4b What is Academic Capital?

Academic capital is a concept developed by Bourdieu (1984, 1988) which pertains to the duration of schooling or length of time in education, and the prestige associated with the quality of the education accessed as determined by the reputation of the school and/or institution attended. Academic capital is theorised to be inextricably linked to cultural capital and the amount possessed by individuals as "inherited directly from the family" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 15). In this way, families (regarded as) possessing high cultural capital may send their offspring to (what is considered as) the most prestigious education institutions which are also (observed as) steeped in cultural capital. These factors combined may lead to high academic capital alongside a longer time spent in education which is presumed to equate to higher qualifications which may be leveraged in society to develop yet more cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Lavender, 2020).

Higher education's "academic" related "dispositions and competencies" and practices as well as qualifications are equated as an "exchange value" as academic capital, with the potential to boost an individual's upward social mobility (Lavender, 2020, p. 14-5). This includes an understanding of HE and career options, processes, expectations and routes which is asserted to be fostered by family knowledge and social practices (St. John, Hu & Fisher, 2011 in Winkler & Sriram, 2015). To some writer's, academic capital is theorised as the culmination of "social and educational navigation skills of students and their families" (St. John, 2013, p. 43). Proponents of academic capital argue that it has the potential to assist families and individuals with little experience of HE and who may be generally underrepresented within HE in understanding and navigating the HE landscape, breaking the historic HE access barrier (St. John et al., 2011).

2.2.4c Applying Academic Capital Theory in HE: Academic Capital Formation (AFC) Framework

Understanding academic capital and its impacts across experience of HE may lead to growth in student inclusion and diversity in such environments (Winkle-Wagner and Locks, 2014 as cited

in Winkler & Sriram, 2015). This is important within the present study as the ACF framework (St. John et al., 2011; St. John, 2013) could be utilised as a lens with which to explore the experiences of HE and HEIs of underrepresented students and utilise this knowledge to understand the ways in which HEIs may produce barriers to access and attainment of underrepresented students and develop ways in which HEIs can remove potential barriers and provide and/or improve support.

Developing Academic Capital Formation (ACF)

The development of the ACF framework is the culmination of education research in the US utilising a critical-empirical approach seeking to "build a new theory of academic capital formation" (St. John et al., 2011, p. 8). In recognising that "middle-class parents" engage in activities that enhance their children's prospects of attending HE, beginning with early reading to school subject selection, mapping on to HEI and career options and providing "support navigating" these systems using their own academic capital and HEI knowledge, St. John et al., (2011) argue that this "cross-generation support-academic capital transmitted across generations" can lead to "a replicating pattern in many low-income families" by being "forces that reproduce the elite and middle classes in society" (St. John et al., 2011, p. 1). It is acknowledged that access to the above types of knowledge should not be depend on whether an individual's parents have experienced and accessed HE previously in order to pass on such guarded knowledge and that gaining the above at support and information at "critical points along the way can empower children and their parents to acquire academic capital" and attend HE (St. John et al., 2011, p. 1).

The AFC was constructed via a mixed methods approach including a "critical-empirical approach to framing research (St. John, 2007, 2009b)" to test propositions using qualitative and quantitative data regarding students in "successful programs" of Washington State Achievers (WSA), Twenty-first Century Scholars (TFCS) and Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS), a "balanced access model (St. John, 2003 2006a)" to examine "critical transitions-outcomes important in policy research" and exploring social processes using "concepts and theories of human capital, social capital, and social class reproduction" around "preparation", university "transition" and "engagement" throughout university utilising qualitative analysis to "conceptualize, test and build new" theory of ACF (St. John et al., 2011, p. 8).

Academic Capital Formation (ACF) – Reconstructing Concepts

ACF identifies six social processes overserved as "integral to academic capital formation" following a review of the works of Bourdieu (1972) – social reproduction, Becker (1964/1975)

– human capital theory and Coleman (1988) - social capital theory (St. John et al., 2011, p. 13).

The six social processes include: concerns about college cost (human capital), supportive networks, navigation of systems, trustworthy information (social capital) and college knowledge and family uplift (overcoming social reproduction) (St. John et al., 2011). The following outlines ACF's reconstructed concepts further.

Social Reproduction, Bourdieu (1980/1990)

Concepts reconstructed from social reproduction include cultural capital: links between families and education systems which are a part of the patterns of economic production and the "system of producing the producers" (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 124 as cited in St. John, 2013, p. 45), which becomes "college knowledge" whereby families and students educational involvement leads to "preparation and navigation of college systems" (St. John, 2013, p. 45).

Habitus (ways of behaving, being, route-taking: Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 53) becomes "cross-generational uplift" as first-generation students who have been through HE then return benefits to previous generation whilst also "pulling up younger peers" (St. John, 2013, p. 45). Lastly, Bourdieu's (1980/1990, p. 66) field, understanding the nature of the site and action postulates that there is a predictability to the above when considering the "counter between habitus and field and objectified history and incorporated history" is reconstructed into ACF transitions as sites and "social processes" of many transitions across the academic journey and course levels from high school or secondary school, college, university and career including levels of engagement and support from family and/or community and within society (St. John, 2013, p. 45).

Social Capital, Coleman (1988)

Concepts reconstructed include networks, social capital as "norms within social networks" (Coleman, 1988, S115), when such become normative this can lead to positive outcomes, thus expanded to become "social networks" to illustrate the importance of support people and services in assisting in developing the college knowledge and "social navigation skills" of first-generation students (St. John, 2013, p. 46).

Secondly, information, understood as being "costly" (Coleman, 1988, S104) for families with little or no previous experience of HE to obtain, particularly where social networks which encourage HE attendance is absent, is deepened to trustworthy information to highlight that confidence in HE attendance can be derived from "social networks and personal experience" alongside on-site visits with family and opportunities to visualise oneself on site (St. John, 2013, p. 46). Here it is also emphasised that "financial and social pressures" from students' families

can act as a pull factor, pulling them away from attending HE (St. John, 2013, p. 46).

The final concept of trust, created in social circumstances but includes "obligation" (Coleman, 1988, S102), is developed into "navigation skills" in recognition that first-generation students will accrue navigation skills when they trust the people e.g. mentors who take the time in assisting them acclimatise to their new environment aiding successful education transition (St. John, 2013, p 46).

Human Capital, Becker (1964)

Lastly, the concept reconstructed from theories of human capital is that of "decisions to invest in higher education" related to both family and individual decision making as including "analysis of expected returns, monetary and nonmonetary" for the former and considerations of spending and future benefits for the latter. This is concluded as concerns about cost – which was found to be present across "all ACF" with the receipt of "guaranteed aid through comprehensive interventions" as imperative in lessening HE cost concerns and instead allowing individuals to concentrate on "preparation and the academic aspects of college" (St. John, 2013, p. 47) as is the principle point in attending.

2.2.4d ACF for Students and HE Professionals

According to the ACF framework, underrepresented students must overcome concerns about costs as a process related to human capital theory. Such students must also build supportive networks, navigate social and educational systems, and acquire trustworthy information in order to build social capital (i.e., to obtain access to the resources that result from membership in particular networks and relationships). Furthermore, underrepresented students are to build college knowledge as a means of overcoming social reproduction of underrepresentation and achieving family uplift in higher education (St. John et al., 2011).

As well as academic capital being encouraged as a way for first-generation students to "pull up" the next generation and give back to society (St. John et al., 2011). It is also suggested that ACF be utilised by the professional HE workforce (St. John, 2009b) as "knowledge to inform reform" to tackle "social inequalities", St. John noting that this was once considered important (St. John, 2013, p. 48). In promoting equity in HE it is proposed to apply caution when "rational building" and conducting social research with the explicit aim of developing policy and to instead encourage that researchers work together with differing advocates and practitioners as "thought partners" (St. John, 2013, p. 51).

Advice is given as to how this may proceed, this includes a readiness to trial assertions, of practitioners and selves, around "links between interventions and outcomes", with regards to

evaluating relevant policy the call is to be mindful of equity around access as well as quality measures and develop research to investigate ways of achieving this whilst deliberating how to finance reforms particularly in times of economic recessions and diminishing public funding which negatively impact progress (St. John, 2013, p. 50). This is with the awareness that previous educational and social policies were created during periods of "social and economic progress" whereas currently we are in a period of economic growth however inequality is also on the rise particularly with regards to "access to quality education and social services" (St. John, 2013, p. 55). This has led to strengthened calls for practitioners and researchers to work in partnership to trial innovations and reinvest their own academic capital into HE to encourage cross-generational uplift and promote fairness (St. John, 2013). The advice to researchers is in working with thought partners to critically engaging with interventions and practices in a way which challenges the status quo whilst also providing constructive feedback of where improvements could be applied across theory and practice (St. John, 2013).

With regards to the present study, ACF framework could be adopted to explore the experiences of HE of working-class students to gain an understanding of where they are as related to knowledge, support and navigation of HEI systems and practices and where HEIs currently stand in comprehending and attending to the needs of students from underrepresented backgrounds. ACF could also be applied to examine HEI staff understanding of where working-class students stand in terms of receiving knowledge, support and navigation of HEI systems and practices – what level of these do they receive and when (before applying/critical moments during etc.). This will be explored further below, following a critique of ACF. The next section will briefly outline where ACF has been adopted within research to understand students experiences of HE.

Example of a Scale Developed to Measure Academic Capital

Researchers Winkler & Sriram, (2015) have developed a 30-item Academic Capital Scale questionnaire which utilises a 6-point Likert scale response. This is a "psychometric instrument that measures academic capital in college students" (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 577) with an "intended for use by institutions to restructure their current offerings of support programs to better meet the needs of the student population as a whole" (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 580). Usage is with regards to "high-risk" students who are defined as having "a greater likelihood of withdrawal from higher education" as according to Pizzolato (2003) (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 570). This was deployed to two institutions which differed in years of study and size of student population and produced a large difference in response rate (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 573).

Within the above study, academic capital is viewed as an "empirically supported construct" (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 584). This scale utilised the six reconstructed concepts developed (as above) by St. John et al., (2011). Following conducting their analysis two additional concepts were added: overcoming barriers and familial expectations (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 574). Overcoming barriers is intended to imitate the "cognitive motivational system" of hope (Snyder et al., 1991) similar to the concept of grit (U.S. Department of Education) which can contribute to achieving goals and staying the distance throughout challenges to succeed in HE (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 579). This scale is not intended for use in a deficit approach, such as highlighting potentially low academic capital of individual students, but instead it is suggested that this scale be used by HE institutions to identify how the "structure of institutional programs" may not sufficiently assist underrepresented students and so lead to social reproduction (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 580). It is envisioned that employment of such scales may move beyond the "remedial education" approaches which are used to ensure that students considered as high-risk can remain and succeed in HE but which often lack efficacy (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 580).

Remedial education in the US relates to improving core competencies in mathematics and literacy as well as study skills and other subjects, in a Scottish education system context, which is determined at the national level, this would refer to attending to areas of knowledge required to progress onto HE courses such as engaging summer schools or developmental courses.

This is an interesting aspect in relation to this study as it is concerned with extra or top-up education which enables students to move into a certain academic level. It may be pertinent to explore to what extent working-class students are expected or considered in need of attending remedial education, why gaps exist, when and where learning is expected to take place, associated costs and/or reimbursements and access to creche for example. This also hints at another linked point of curiosity, that of unintended and/or hidden curriculum.

It is unclear whether and/or how widely Academic Capital Scale has been adopted within HEIs. Interestingly there is a call upon future research to utilise an "asset-based framework to exploring academic capital" which may ascertain further skills, dispositions and knowledges developed by high-risk students more so than their peers (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 583). Examples given are derived from previous research endeavours of Yosso (2005) who found that other forms of capital are often possessed but "unrecognised by both scholars and practitioners" such as aspirational, navigational and linguistic capitals as well as "pluriversal cultural wealth" "determination, ethnic consciousness" and "spirituality/faith" as cited by

Rendon, Nora and Kanagala (2014) (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 583). This demonstrates the potential to uncover an abundance of potential tools and ways of being of underrepresented students which assist them throughout the HE process and experience.

It is clearly demonstrated that it is not enough to simply admit more underrepresented students, instead outcomes must also be considered and measured such as academic success and retention as well as completing courses to graduation therefore focus must also lie on the "institutional programs and services provided" themselves (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 566). Here research which seeks to make visible the underlying impacts of inequity can begin to address the above as access does not seamlessly equate to success (see Bensimon, 2005; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004; Harris & Bensimon, 2007 in Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 565).

The nature of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1972) asserts that often within educational settings the reproduction of social norms, values, occupations etc. can be unintentional. Similarly, academic capital is less likely to be produced within families who have little or no previous experience of higher education (St. John et al., 2011 in Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 569) which can also be unintentional. It is imperative to conduct meaningful research which does not present underrepresented students as lacking and in need of changing to fit the HE system in order to be accepted and/or succeed in HE and HEIs. This contributes to the argument for applying the work of Bensimon (as above, outlined further below) – exploring equity which may not be present across HE institutions processes and outcomes, perhaps – unintentionally (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 565) and St. John et al., (2011; 2013) on academic capital formation. This combines the notions that HEIs may be unaware of their hand in social reproduction, how this may negatively impact underrepresented students and how such students may require a different approach of support which is not strictly with regards to academic knowledges and skills but instead those of social, cultural and human capital as well as how institutions are to shift structures and practices in order to meet the needs of such students (Winkler & Sriram, 2015, p. 569).

Critiques of ACF

The following outlines varying critiques of ACF around emphasis on families and cross-generational uplift and in utilising Coleman's (1988) conception of social capital rather than Bourdieu's (1986).

Emphasis on Families: Problematic or Pertinent?

If considered via a social inclusion lens whereby children and young people are viewed as agentic, having a voice, valuable perspectives and ideas, capable of engaging and participating

in decision-making processes about their own lives and education (Setting the Agenda: Social Inclusion, Children and Young People, 2004; Davis, 2011) the above construction of, and emphasis on the family could be challenged and argued as problematic as it may appear rigid and reductionist, seeming to suggest that young people lack individual agency or that agency is gained from or produced by adults, thus becoming more concerned with the parents than children, or in this instance parent/family than individual/student.

In consideration of this point; that the family is important but not entirely responsible for causing agency in children and young people and instead, children and young people are to be viewed as agentic and act the central focus of debates regarding their own lives, will also be the intention within the present study which seeks to study the experiences of HE students who may also be young people. Whilst participants family background, history and values may be of interest with regards to the ways in which this may influence students experiences of accessing and progressing through HE, the students themselves are viewed as having agency.

The present study will explore students own experiences of HEI and how HEIs shape such experiences alongside staff experiences of HEI processes.

Cross-generational Uplift – Weighted or Welcome?

The endeavour to build university knowledge for students and families and so increase the likelihood of being prepared, attending and excelling in HE and beyond is established. Such efforts may uplift ones family and avoid social class reproduction. Under-represented students are expected to engage in cross-generational uplift, aiding those older and younger than themselves with the knowledge they have gathered. This is a commendable notion and one which students may engage in willingly however it appears that they carry this pressure where non-unrepresented students may not – if a family history of HE, then less expectation to pass on knowledge and networks. In this sense there remains a lot of continued work on the part of unrepresented students that their traditional HE-attending peers may not need to engage in and put their energy towards, instead they are free to focus on their studies. Underrepresented students may relish the opportunity to do this and indeed seek further knowledge around specific groups and communities within the HEI, this could form a part of students interests in attending HE. The consideration and focus is to be on the students experience and what more HEIs can do to end social class reproduction, this does not solely rest on the shoulders of students. This is of interest to the present study, ACF framework may enable an opportunity to explore the six reconstructed concepts and how they relate to underrepresented students.

2.2.4f Considerations and Application of ACF in the Present Study

The present study will utilise ACF framework as a lens as part of its methodology to assist in framing the semi-structured interviews, thematically around the six core reconstructed concepts – social processes, as outlined above, with students and staff of one HEI in Scotland from one/two faculties to understand experiences of HE and to what extent are HEIs complicit in creating inequity.

Previous research within Scotland has sought to attend to similar areas of exploration around under-represented or non-traditional students' experiences of HE such as students experiences of attending an "elite" university straight from FE college via "alternative" qualifications such as HNC and HND (Hounsell, Christie, Cree, McCune & Tett, 2008). Throughout the longitudinal study students completed a standardised questionnaire and accompanying questions following each semester to explore the entirety of the learning environment. Topics included teaching-learning environment, transition between FE and HE methods, role of group work in learning and how peers may help confidence building and the feeling of fitting in (Hounsell et al., 2008). These are similar topic areas however; the present study will not explore an elite HEI and will question use of such terms as related to HEIs and its impact on students' experiences. Whilst the present study will not be longitudinal due to bounded time constraints, it will share the same aim of exploring non-traditional students' voices on the matter of navigating and entering HE in Scotland.

The above studies have collected participant data around age and gender (Hounsell et al., 2008). The present study seeks to explore the HE experiences of working-class students across all representations of identity: age, gender, race, ethnicity etc., and capability. It is imperative to gain an understanding of why radical shifts have yet to been seen the in betterment of such experiences across the previous decade. Further research reveals the emotional process of students in entering HE or "coming to know" a new community of practice" in feeling displacement and loss as well as excitement (Christie et al., 2008, p. 567).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter will discuss the epistemological positioning of the present research. Next, the research methods and strategy utilised to answer the research questions and meet research aims as forementioned above will be outlined. Lastly, the ethical considerations, limitations as well as opportunities of employing the approach taken within this study will be deliberated. The chapter sections are as follows: 3.1. Ontological and epistemological positioning of the research; 3.2. Methodological approach and research design; 3.3. Methods of Data Collection; 3.4. Methods of Data Analysis; 3.5. Evaluation & Justification of Methodological Choices; 3.6. Ethics and Risk Assessment; and 3.7. Reflexivity.

3.1. Ontological and epistemological positioning of the research

Scientific research and researchers themselves, do not exist in a vacuum. Each scientific tradition is grounded in its own historical and contemporary debates governed by differing schools of thought around what is knowledge, how it can be known, using what tools and by whom (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gray 2014; James, 2015). Varying approaches to scientific endeavours also shape researchers' choices. These can include differences between the: conceptualisation of the nature of reality and "set of ideas" (ontology/theory) which impacts the research approach; viewpoint of knowledge, determining ways of engaging in studying social phenomena and a related "set of questions" (epistemology); research design and analysis (methodology); and the data collection tools/approaches (methods); participants studied and style of reporting of findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11; Crotty, 1998; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Gray, 2022).

It is imperative to note that the "practice of making sense of one's findings" is argued as being "interpretive" as well as "both artistic and political" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15) and research choices taken by the researcher(s) are not entirely "value-free" (Lincoln, 1999 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 8; Greenbank, 2003, p. 791) as will be discussed further below. Whilst this view may be debated within quantitative research, it could be seen as a stance taken across qualitative research, aligning with the position taken within in the present research, by the researcher in agreement that: "There is no single interpretive truth... there are multiple interpretive communities, each having its own criteria for evaluating an interpretation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15).

The justification for the above approach to the present research will be deliberated shortly. The following sections will briefly discuss paradigms, epistemology and ontology, and debates around differing approaches to scientific research and those taken in the present study.

3.1.1 Research paradigm – positioning the study

The above ways of thinking of research practice represents an "interpretive framework" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 13) or paradigm. Paradigms or worldviews were defined by Thomas Kuhn (1962) as a body of knowledge or set of guiding principles (Cohen Manion and Morrison, 2011) or similarly described as "basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990a: 17 cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 13). Each element outlined above: paradigm – ontology – epistemology – methodology and methods, must be considered by the researcher who makes each step of the process known, including own positioning, as discussed further below, by recognising that:

Methodological pronouncements are usually only roughly thought out: they contain seemingly random citations of sometimes incompatible philosophical positions; there is usually an implicit political agenda which is carefully hidden by a veneer of scientific objectivity; almost always the point is to direct the reader to embrace a particular theory; and there is often a specific opponent in mind as well as fellow travellers, but they are seldom explicitly identified, (Caldwell, 1989, p. 44 as cited in Webber, 2021, p. 78).

There are four types of paradigms: positivist, interpretivist, constructivist and critical theory. Each paradigm has differing elements across those outlined above, leading to differing types and styles of research. Briefly, positivism purports to examine social realities via scientific rigour, commonly applied within natural sciences, as it views knowledge as objective therefore knowable (Bryman 2012, Gray 2014) and "value-free" (Bryman, 2012, p. 28). This paradigm utilises quantitative approaches as a part of "empirical enquiry" (Gray, 2022, p. 21). The position of researcher does not reflect the stance that knowledge is objective, as outlined above the researcher agrees that knowledge is not "value-free" (Lincoln, 1999 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5-8; Greenbank, 2003, p. 791). A positivist paradigm was not selected due to the above and the reliance of quantitative methods including statistics and large sample sizes. Nuances occurring across HEI systems, processes and policy enactment as well as between HEI staff, students and WA organisations may be missed if only HEI statistics are analysed and large sample sizes sought.

An interpretivist paradigm could have been selected as unlike positivism, the belief is that social realities ought to be interpreted by exploring the meaning-making between societies, groups

and individuals as knowledge is unique and unquantifiable (Bryman, 2012). Here reality is subjective and researchers are involved in the act of interpretation, leading to "double interpretation going on" (Bryman, 2012, p. 31). Similarly, constructivism views reality as subjective, a construct of individuals mind, developed from their experiences and related reflections. The above two paradigms understanding of knowledge as subjective and related focuses on meaning-making and importance of experiences of individuals and groups could be appropriate for the present study as the researcher acknowledges that such acts and exchanges do occur. However, a paradigm was required which moved away from solely focusing on people and including scrutiny of systems which people are a part of and for some, control.

The present research seeks a Critical perspective and so compasses a Critical Theory paradigm (Fromm 1941; Freire 1970, 1974; Gray 2014; Bolton and Delderfield 2018). Critical Theory is utilised as it ascertains that knowledge cannot be completely value-free and objective. It is emancipatory and instead seeks to understand the political and social patterns in society to enact social change. Critical analysis identifies normative assumptions and power structures which may knowingly and unknowingly determine how social phenomena are presented and investigated (Gray 2014). The researcher selected this paradigm as it aligns with their own experience and worldview that power relations ensure that social interactions and institutions serve the interests of dominant groups to the detriment of marginalised groups. The introduction of a WA policy in some ways attempts to disrupt the above by including such groups – working class and disadvantaged, who are considered non-traditional within HE spaces, into HE to end social reproduction and attain an equitable society. The present research explores HEI systems, processes and mechanisms around WA policy enactment and knowledge of students from WA backgrounds by those working within the education system of an HEI. A Critical Theory paradigm enables questioning of such policies and knowledge and the ways power is utilised within such systems.

3.1.1a Ontological and Epistemological underpinnings

Considerations around research and ways in which knowledge is justified is guided by two main tributaries of philosophy: ontology and epistemology. Ontology is interested in the relations and "nature of existence" and "what kind of entities can exist" (Abercrombie, Turner & Hill, 2006, p. 276). Ontology is derived from the Greek word *ontos*, meaning to be/being, viewing the world as being e.g., permanence, stable and static, as discussed by Parmenides's c.515-c445bc (Gray, 2022). Ontology explores; what is, regarding the nature or principal quality of social phenomena and/or reality (Cohen, et al. 2011) and the individual (James, 2015) and questions how entities are to be explained and classified. Ontology asks what is reality? It

denotes what is to be explored e.g., the social phenomena and/or object of investigation. Epistemology, investigates how knowledge is known, communicated and circulated (Cohen, et al. 2011; Bryman, 2016).

Being ontology has maintained ascendancy across Western thinking (Gray, 2022). The primary three epistemological stances of being ontology include; constructivism, whereby individuals knowledge is considered as being formed internally, each individual (and researcher) ascribing their own significance of/within the world via their interactions and relations, in contrast to: positivism, which argues that reality and each object within it are external to individuals (and thus researchers) therefore scientific rigour may be utilised in a similar manner as with: objectivism, which holds that there can be objective observations and facts uncovered as reality is considered again as external to individuals and impartial to human consciousness (Gray, 2022). Realism is opposed to positivism, and purports that "(real) underlying and often unobservable mechanisms that connect phenomena causally" exist and can be explored and explained via social and natural science (Abercrombie et al., 2006, p. 320, see Keat & Urry, 1975). Objects and/or phenomena are considered to exist autonomously or independent of individuals perceiving and/or thinking about the object and/or phenomena (see Keat & Urry, 1975). Being ontology is argued as in contrast to the ontology of becoming where the world is viewed as in flux, as argued by Heraclitus c.535-c.475bc (Gray, 2022). The ontological positioning of Critical Theory is that cultural, economic, political and historical elements shape the nature of reality which exists.

Epistemology is described as the "theory of knowledge" or "theory of how it is" that individuals discover knowledge of the world around them (Abercrombie et al., 2006, p. 133). Within sociological research, epistemology may also denote methods utilised to gain knowledge which may differ according to the sociological founding such as positivism or realism (Abercrombie et al., 2006) as discussed briefly above and further below. The epistemological stance within Critical Theory is subjectivist, the researcher cannot be separated from the social reality they are researching and so is interpretivist, with knowledge being co-created via subjectivity and participant engagement.

3.1.1b Debates around methodology

When considering methodology, there are debates around what can and cannot be measured. US philosopher Richard Rorty developed ideas around pragmatism and ethics. He theorised that objectivity of research and/or researchers is perceived to be carried out unbiasedly within quantitative research of traditional sciences. Such an approach is often championed over

qualitative approaches within humanities research which can be viewed as subjective or falling foul of researcher bias. In this way, what can be measured objectively is given higher value as it is deemed as reflective of reality while subjectivity is considered as unreflective of reality and not as significant.

When evaluating the effectiveness of qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, the need of quantifiable measurement only for its own sake, can lead to missed opportunities of furthering understanding of varying research topics and the lived experiences of individuals. It is key that researchers consider the research questions and the most appropriate ways to gather information on the topic without being swayed by personal and/or academic/discipline biases around methodology and methods: "...evoke imaginative experience and reveal new meanings – and this core quality is not easily captured by check-list criteria", (Yardley, 2008, p. 239 as cited in Breakwell, Smith, & Wright, 2012, p. 335). Whilst those conducting research and those utilising research findings may have preferences around data capture and reporting, use of the most suitable methodology and method to answer the research questions ought to have credence and priority.

As outlined above and in line with Critical Theory, the researcher acknowledges subjectivism, in that they are connected to the social reality under exploration.

The methodology adopted within the present research is a Critical Methodology which is an appropriate strategy because the WA policy to be explored, intends to support students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds, groups who often experience marginalisation, which perpetuates unequal underlying power structures within and across society (Gray 2014). A critical theory lens allows an unpicking of structures that have traditionally been viewed as just the way the world works - the status quo - and recognises that all institutions are shaped by dominant peoples and groups and are designed to serve their interests (Gray 2014 as cited in Stewart, 2025).

The present research is a qualitative study. Within qualitative research process "three interconnected, generic activities" are distinguished, termed "theory, method, and analysis; or ontology, epistemology, and methodology" which are attended to "under five headings or phases": "...the researcher and the researched as multicultural subjects, major paradigms and interpretive perspectives, research strategies, methods of collecting and analyzing empirical materials, and the art of interpretation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11).

As alluded to above, essential to qualitative, as well as all research endeavours, is the acknowledgement and understanding of the impact that "behind" the above terms and "within

each of these phases stands the biographically situated researcher" an individual "who speaks from a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11). The researchers own biographical situation will be addressed below in the reflexivity section.

The paradigm of Critical Theory and analysis will be utilised throughout the present study as it is well placed in exploration of underlying power structures which can shape social reality including theories and sense making which seeks to justify how things are – the status quo and makes such structures visible (Gray, 2022). The ontological (world as static or in flux) and epistemological (how knowledge is known and disseminated) positions signal that social reality and knowledge can be understood as being carved via "power relations" by dominant groups and institutions to maintain power within society (Gray, 2022, p27). The methods selected for the present study include semi-structured interviews as part of a case study research design which will now be discussed in further detail.

3.2. Methodological approach and research design

3.2.1 Research questions and aims

Following becoming familiar with the current landscape and discourses around social class and inequalities across HE access in Scotland (literature review) research questions were developed and refined to guide the methodological approach:

- **Research Question 1:** What is role of Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in contributing to inequity? (processes)
- **Research Question 2:** What are the HEI mechanisms which impact upon Higher Education (HE): access, acceptance, and students experiences in Scotland? (policies in practice)
- **Research Question 3:** What sociological theories help us to understand the mechanisms of inequity across HE and HEIs?

To reiterate, the aim of the present research is to understand:

- how HEIs nurture inclusive and equitable systems/processes/data collection and utilisation across HE access and learner journey: what HEIs systems/processes/data do and/or do not do to attend to Widening Access (WA);

- HEI students experiences and explore what may be missed across secondary schools and HEI approaches;
- existing sociological theories and approaches which explore the mechanisms of inequity across HE and HEI and progress these.

3.2.2 Research Setting

This topic is institutionally sensitive therefore the study will focus on the staff and student experiences of one supportive home higher education institution, building on: strong existing relationships; trust; and institutional buy-in to understand the use, usefulness, limitations and potential of data systems, student and system actor experiences.

The identity of the case study institution explored as well as all participants involved will remain anonymous. To situate the HEI and specifically, this study, in its wider context the quantitative data that is available via the Report on Widening Access will be briefly outlined.

The COWA Key Indicators include data regarding entrants and retention (SFC, 2025). Entrant data for full-time first-degree courses (rounded to the nearest whole number) for the year 2023-24, the total entrants are around 33,000, those entrants from MD20 are just under 5,500 accounting for just over 16.5%. The proportion of MD20 Scottish-domiciled UG entrants to Higher Education in Scotland by sector, institution and 20% most deprived for 2023-24 as averaged across 19 HEI's % (including the Open University) is 14.9%. The case study institution proportion of MD20 is above this at 19.6% accounting for 805 individuals (SFC, 2025).

The proportion of MD20 Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants at Scottish HEIs by institution and 20% most deprived in 2023-24 as averaged across 18 HEI's is 15.39%. The case study institution proportion of MD20 is also above this at 20.5% accounting for 610 individuals (SFC, 2025).

The overall retention rates for Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants at university returning to study in year 2, by 20% most deprived Areas (SIMD0-20) in 2023-24 was 89.5% (SFC, 2025). Retention for MD20 was slightly lower at 86.1% accounting for 5,255 individuals. The case study institution had the same retention rate of 89.5%. The retention for MD20 was slightly lower than the overall percentage at 85.5% with 600 individuals (SFC, 2025).

3.2.3 Aspects of methodologies utilised

To undertake the above, aspects of Situational Analysis (SA) (Clarke, 2003) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021) have been interpreted and utilised, sitting alongside a case study. The case study is of an institution (HEI) and is a descriptive term rather than research design. The strands adopted from SA helped to gain an understanding of the varying layers or levels within the situation or topic of inquiry when exploring the role of Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in creating inequity. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021) provide guidelines to data collection and analysis which encourage that research phases are not linear nor neat but flexible and iterative, as mentioned in more detail below. The Action Inquiry Model (AIM) which is underpinned by a "critical-empirical approach" (St. John, 2013, p. 217) discusses research specifically around HEIs. This methodological model also helped to form the research process in guiding understanding and avoiding assumptions, as discussed further below.

SA offers a holistic approach and framework of "grounded theorising" (Clarke, 2003, p. 559) which focuses on aspects of research which are "individual-centred" such as "voice" alongside the interpretations of the researcher (Clarke, 2003, p. 556). In this way, SA is argued as a postmodern approach rather than attempting to "generalise" universal truths across societies as with modernism (Clarke, 2003, p. 555). To advance Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory methodology by adapting to the post-modern ontological turn, Clarke (2005) developed the situational analysis approach which draws on Foucault's (1980) theories of knowledge/power.

The "social worlds/arenas/negotiations framework" of Strauss are extended with "three main cartographic approaches" (Clarke, 2003, p. 554) or mapping methods are proposed:

Table 5: Situational Analysis maps

	Approaches	Depiction
1	Situational maps	"lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive and other elements in the research situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them"
2	Social worlds/arenas maps	"lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse within which they are engaged in ongoing negotiations---meso level interpretations of the situation"
3	Positional maps	"lay out the major positions taken, and not taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular axes of difference, concern, and controversy around issues in the situation"

(Adapted from Clarke, 2003, p. 554).

The Situational map was conducted within the present study, see Table 8 below. These approaches can be considered iterative or repeating processes or "analytical exercises" (Clarke, 2003, p. 554) which build understanding of specific areas or arenas within the topic providing in-depth consideration and overviews. Clarke (2003, p. 553) recommends utilising methodologies underpinned by interactionist and pragmatist philosophy which take "key human and nonhuman elements" and their relations as well as related discourses into account by shifting to situations as focal unit of analysis via a cartographic approach. Other researchers also offer "flexible guidelines" which helped to shape the research process, such as developing "methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz 2017)", tolerating ambiguity, gathering rich data, utilising an iterative process between data collection, coding and category building (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021).

3.2.4 HEI as a case study

Research within an educational setting is argued as being "heavily quantitatively bias" which began to shift in 1970-80's in the US and UK, leading the way for more qualitative research (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 5). The gold standard within quantitative research is use of randomised control trials (RCT) which intends to evidence effect/impact of intervention/experiment as significant as participants take part in a conditions - controlled study, and have been randomly assigned based on meeting pre-determined criteria. Whilst RCTs look

to reduce bias, overreliance on their use can itself be a form of bias. Concern around the use of quantitative methods such as RCTs for example within educational research comes as it: "ignores the complexity of education settings and the significance of the diverse individuals and organisations that enhance that complexity" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 5).

Here is where the use of a qualitative case study attempts to overcome the above narrow view of what is deemed as best/most valued within research methods and to capture the complexity, intra- and interdependence which occurs within such settings amongst people, organisations, policies and practices. This process can be achieved via use of SA and a case study research design. Two main forms of case study research, as proposed by Stake (1995) are that of: intrinsic (or holistic) where a case is portrayed in its entirety for the purpose of gaining a rounded understanding of those involved e.g., "people, department or institution"; and instrumental (or delimited) which "focuses on an aspect, concern or issue of the case" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 11). Other forms of case exist out-with the aforementioned. The latter, instrumental is the form which the present research case study will embody, with the focus of the research centred around widening access as the aspect/concern.

A methodological model of interest within the present study is that of the Action Inquiry Model (AIM) (St. John, 2013, p. 84). Here there are three main considerations around challenges, organisation and working collaboratively along with varying forms of evaluation to elicit change: "core processes: assessing critical challenges, organising to address these challenges, and using action inquiry in working groups (or communities of practice) to address the challenges" (St. John, 2013, p. 84).

The second consideration of importance discussed by St. John is that of the "critical-empirical approach" (St. John, 2013, p. 217). Here rather than proclaiming a one-size fits all approach to HEI improvement or reform it is instead recognised that approaches are often in need of adaption based on the school or HEI etc. individually. The researcher is charged with "critically examining change processes" including analysing "claims from theories, frameworks and/or models that can be tested", producing "evidence from reviews, quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and/or action projects to test claims" and "reconstructing new understandings into strategies that can be tested in action" (St. John, 2013, p. 217).

AIM utilises the above critical-empirical approach to explore "professional practice" and "organisational change and learning" (St. John, 2013, p. 218). Key to the present research was understanding how any critical challenges brought about by the introduction, enactment and implementation of WA policy were dealt with by the HEI and the subsequent impact of the

HEIs approach. The above aspects of St. Johns work enabled the researcher to critically consider to what was being explored and discussed within data collection and to reflect upon whether any critical challenges of WA policy were being addressed during data analysis.

As aforementioned, the case study will explore one Scottish HEI as the case, investigating Widening Access policy enactment. The aim is to gain an understanding of the processes; experiences; perspectives and practices around the implementation of WA policy and WA targets from those involved such as HEI staff and students.

To engage with the research process ahead Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier (2013) outline considerations the researcher can think about to begin with such as:

What/who could provide data?

- Key Informants – System Actors responsible for policy enactment across the HEI
- HEI faculty/departmental staff: teaching/lecturing & admissions/policy – responses to WA policy and impact on practice
- Students experiences and reflections
- WA related organisations
- Organisations related to supporting HEIs and/or HEI students

Some core interview questions for staff & adapted for students are:

- Do you know the WA ambitions of the uni./dept.?
- How is WA approached within this department?
- Can you briefly outline the application process specific to your course/department?
- What kinds of support is offered by the university to students such as academic/study equipment/financial?
- What are your observations of different students?
- In terms of admissions into your faculty – do you think the system is fair?
- In your experience, in which ways could the university improve its application and student support related data/systems/processes to better students' outcomes?

Examples of the semi-structured interview questions for each participant group can be found within the appendices, (Appendix 1).

Further to the above decisions around case study types, the design utilised within the present study is sociological, as outlined by Merriam (1998), which seeks to attend to the "larger social

structure and its effects on individuals" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 7). The objective of the case study is descriptive (Merriam, 1998) and exploratory (Yin, 2018).

Table 6: Considerations of a case study

Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Genre	Method
Critical/constructivism	Sociological	Case study	Interviews Field notes: HEI ethos Staff Profiles (HEI website) Entry route Profiles (HEI website) Researcher reflective logs Strategic Planning Documents

(As adapted from Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 28, Table 2.3)

3.2.5 Phases of the research

The research phases were as follows:

Table 7: Phases of Research

Phases	Phase 1: Exploratory/Scoping	Phase 2: Research Design Implementation	Phase 3: Consolidation accounts of WA HE entry & student support
Aim/Purpose	Understanding of the HEIs WA approach Identifying potential participants	Understanding experiences of WA policy enactment and implementation across HEI staff, students and WA organisation staff	Understanding WA HE entry in practice across two faculties and for one HEI Student from WA background
Data Collection methods/Activities	Desk-based research Consulting online HEI staff directory to identify System Actors Researching faculties and their WA entry routes across Identifying organisations involved with HEI governance, student support and WA HE entry Conducted mock interviews with thesis supervisors	Interviews HEI WA policy – strategic aims documents	Interviews Meeting with Former Professor who acted as a mentor/ tutor to HEI Student from WA background 1 Participant observation
Data Gathered	Field notes Understanding of HEI faculties/departments/courses, histories and WA routes List of organisations related to the topic Interview transcripts	Field notes In-depth interview transcripts Researcher reflective logs	Field notes In-depth interview transcripts Transcript of interview preparation meeting Transcripts of email/text correspondence with Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1 Researcher reflective log

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

3.3.1 Qualitative data collection

The types of data required to achieve the research aims as above include primary and secondary data collection, utilising qualitative methods. The primary qualitative data was gathered through conducting semi-structured interviews and secondary data relates to information generated from research of the HEIs WA policy and strategic planning documents and entry pathways as available via the HEIs website. The interview participants included HEI Staff and HEI Students (from WA and non-WA backgrounds) and Widening Access (WA) Staff. Participants contact details and communications were recorded in a table to highlight job role, note when they were contacted and how many times and whether a interview had been scheduled or not, including time/date/method (in-person or online) for each. This process ensured that no one potential participant was contacted to request participation more than three times, (see Appendix 2). All participants were sent via email or in-person a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form to read and sign (see Appendix 3).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the main method of data collection because they allow for fluidity and flexibility across the questions being asked and across differing participants (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, Futing, 2004). Asking the same structured, rigid questions across every interview and participant group would not allow for nuance and gaining further understanding about specific situations and/or aspects which arise organically within interviews. Structured interviews are more applicable to surveys for example, which attempt to gain many responses to the same questions, and which can provide at times, a more quantitative comparison across responses. The present study's use of semi-structured questions enabled similar questions around similar topics/situations/experiences across differing participant groups allowing a qualitative comparison and picture building: "The relatively open, flexible, and interactive approach to interview structure is generally intended to generate interviewees' accounts of their own perspectives, perceptions, experiences, understandings, interpretations, and interactions", (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, Futing, 2004, p. 1021).

This method is more aligned to constructivist and interpretivist ontologies and epistemologies where the researcher and participant are co-creating data via interacting rather than the researcher forcing their own meaning upon the data (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Semi-structured interviews were useful and key in the present study to explore differences in understanding, enactment, perceptions and experiences of WA policy within the HEI between individuals

across a variety of roles within the HEI and WA organisations or those related to HEI governance or student representation as well as students themselves.

Other methods utilised include field notes, reviewing of any related documents received from or suggested by participants and researcher reflective logs. Field note data via desk-based research included HEI ethos; participants profile: HEI staff profiles (HEI website); third party organisation/academic staff profile (online); HEI entry route profiles (HEI website); records of "physical setting, events and activities" and interviewer reactions collated as "structured - researcher driven" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 102). The reflective logs were used to capture the researcher's thoughts/observations/reactions immediately following each participant interview, (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Reflective logs were around 500-1000 words in length. They identify main themes coming through each interview; participants pertinent viewpoints and/or concerns; any gaps in understanding/knowledge around WA policy or the lives of students from WA backgrounds; aspects of WA policy and/or practice.

The reflective logs were written/typed on researchers' laptop in a separate Microsoft Word document immediately following each interview and reread throughout the data analysis process to gain a deeper understanding of the interview and participant. The time; date; location/method (in-person or online, include the software used – Zoom or Microsoft Teams); participants job titles were recorded within the reflective logs and interview transcripts. The specific job titles were generalised to provide anonymity and given a number to act as each participants pseudonym. Different names were assigned a pseudonym however due to the number of faculties, departments and roles it kept individual participants perspectives clearer and built clarity across the data set once the above way was adopted which highlighted their roles/positions as staff/student etc.

In order achieve the research aims and gain an in depth understanding of differences across roles and perspectives, participants were allocated to one of the following four participant groups (n= number of participants):

Three groups of participants, all currently working or studying within one Scottish (home) HEI:

- **HEI System Actors:** Senior/Strategic Faculty level role; Widening Access (WA); Workforce Planning; Data Strategy; Student Support, (n=6)
- **HEI Staff:** department/faculty, (n=10)
- **HEI Students:** from WA and non-WA backgrounds, (n=4)

And

One group of participants all currently working within WA roles within or out with the HEI:

- **WA System Actors:** within Scottish HEIs; secondary schools; WA organisations working with secondary school students, (n=8)

The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour in duration, conducted online via Zoom or in-person on HEI premises or a public setting in a quiet/private meeting room or over the telephone, as according to each participant's preferences.

Interviews conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams were recorded and transcribed using each software packages transcription functions. Where interviews take place face to face, the audio was uploaded onto the researchers HEI Outlook online storage and transcribed within this software package via Microsoft Word.

All participants were asked for their written consent to participate in the study including being recorded before arranging the interview. The researcher asked for participants verbal consent to being recorded before beginning the interview.

All participants were selected using purposeful selection, snow-ball sampling and pragmatic approaches such as exploring the HEIs and/or third-party organisation(s) website such as online profiles, the HEIs separate tab "University Leaders" and staff telephone directory. The researcher contacted (through professional networks) all participants via email to request their voluntary participation for a semi-structured interview. Some individuals were contacted and did not respond and/or take part. Their mention here is to note that their perspectives and insights were of interest to the present study, such as several members of the HEIs Student Union and the HEI Principle. Other individuals offered the names of HEI staff and/or students which they felt maybe better suited/informed to take part. Participation invitation emails and subsequent responses were recorded, ensuring that individuals were contacted no more than three times (request and/or reminder) and to keep track of the: number of participants; participant groups/perspectives; reply type (yes/no response/suggestion of other potential participants); correspondence and/or interview timeframes (date/time/mode – online or in-person).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 3 phases between October 2022 – August 2023. Of the 28 participants, 27 were interviewed and 1, a former HEI Professor, met with a current HEI student from a WA background (who had been interviewed) to assist the student in preparing for their third attempt to become accepted onto a competitive course at the HEI.

Phase 1: Exploratory/ Scoping

During Phase 1 participants, HEI & WA related System Actors, were purposefully selected for semi-structured Key Informant interviews according to their senior faculty/ strategic level role within the HEI. These included policy, admissions, student lifecycles, data and technology systems and WA. Participants were sought as involved in HE access such as: secondary schools; WA organisations working with secondary school pupils (potential HEI students); organisations representing staff and students within HEIs. Information around HEI policies and planning, WA related organisations and individuals was gathered where offered by participants and/or available online via HEI/organisation websites during desk-based research. Reflective logs were recorded after each interview.

This initial group of Key Informant participants were contacted to illuminate current HEI practices, values, networks, awareness, and priorities. Data gathered throughout these interviews highlighted the intricacies of policy practice(s) across different faculties and departments and led to snowball sampling. This phase enabled decision making around which faculties and departments may be of interest to explore in depth.

To build a picture of the topics emerging data and the human and non-human actors/actants within the situation, an Abstract Situational Map: Ordered/Working (Clarke, 2005) was created regarding social class, HE access and WA policy:

Table 8: Situational Map Ordered/Working Map; Social class, HE access and WA policy

Individual Human Elements/Actors	Nonhuman Elements Actors/Actants
HEI system actors/ faculty, department, course staff/ support staff/ WA staff; Third party WA organisation workers; Scottish Government workers; Student Union representatives; HEI Governance representatives; Headteachers/ teachers/ support staff	HEI infrastructure; HEI systems, processes, mechanisms; HEI databases; WA policy; schools/colleges; knowledge of courses/professions/employment; SAAS funding
Collective Human Elements/Actors	Implicated/Silent Actors/Actants
HEI; Scottish Government/ Policy team; Education system; Third party WA organisations; Media; public perception	Applicants and students from working class/disadvantaged/poorer backgrounds, young people, parents, families and communities; middle class advantage/ knowledge
Discursive Constructions of Individual and/or Collective Human Actors	Discursive Constructions of Nonhuman Actants
Working class/ poorer/ socially disadvantaged/ non-traditional/ first in family/ under-represented/ WA, (within HE) groups	Social class; advantage/ disadvantage
Political/Economic Elements	Sociocultural/Symbolic Elements
Scottish Government economic/ political, WA policy strategies, HE access, professions access, HE funding – HEIs/students	Social class; nationality; social, cultural, economic, academic capitals; age; class/family/community related traditional industries/ employment
Temporal Elements	Spatial Elements
HE courses/ employment market competition; historic patterns of courses/professions accessed across particular social class; HEI status – national/ international performance rankings – top/bottom; History of specific social groups entering HE (elite/ middle class)	SIMD postcode areas; HEI location; living at home as near HEI or on city-central campus; differing localities of social class groups
Major Issues/Debates (Usually Contested)	Related Discourses (Historical, Narrative, and/or Visual)
Improving pupil/student attainment; Widening access to HE; lack of opportunity framed as lack of ability	Social networks; knowledge of HE systems and professions; meritocratic education system and society

(Headings taken from Figure 3.2 Abstract Situational Map: Ordered/Working Version, Clarke, 2005, p. 90).

Phase 2: Research Design Implementation

The second phase involved exploration of faculties/departments and included purposeful selection and snowball sampling of HEI staff members working face to face with students, such as course leaders, lecturers and support staff as well as administrators. HEI student participants

from WA and non-WA backgrounds, studying within the department/faculties/courses selected were also contacted and/or interviewed.

Phase 3: Consolidation accounts of WA HE entry and student support

HEI student participants from WA and non-WA backgrounds, studying within the department/faculties/courses continued to be contacted. During this phase the HEI Former Professor, met with a current HEI student from a WA background (who had been interviewed previously) to assist the student (as offered by researcher and Former Professor and agreed to by the student) in preparing for their third attempt to become accepted on a competitive course at the HEI. The meeting lasted approximately two hours. The researcher was present and recorded meeting audio and took hand-written and typed (using Microsoft Word) notes with verbal consent from both participants.

3.3.2 HEI faculties/departments and participants

Participants across four faculties and four departments were interviewed with two faculties explored at more depth, signified case study ID 1 and 2. Other faculties and departments were involved in the study to provide wider understanding of the ways in which WA policy cascades across the HEI and is enacted within differing faculties and departments. The approach led to multiple HEI staff perspectives of WA policy and students from working class/WA backgrounds being shared across a range of job roles both student facing and non-student facing. Several students from non-working class and working-class backgrounds were contacted for interview, four students agreed to participate in total. Both faculties have WA routes into HE and also work with WA organisations to enable entry onto specific courses for students from WA backgrounds. Whilst information such as the history of each faculty was gathered, due to ensuring anonymity of the HEI, this cannot be discussed as it would highlight which HEI was explored, potentially making some participants easier to recognise, breaching confidentiality.

The HEI faculty/department staff members and students situated within each faculty and department are as follows:

Table 9: HEI Faculty Staff & Students by faculty/department

Faculty	Depart.	Staff member: Role & Pseudonym	Student: Background & Pseudonym	Case Study ID
A	A	Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2 Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1		1
	B	Faculty A, Department B, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1		1
	C		Faculty A, Department C, student from non-WA background	1
	D	Faculty A, Department D, Apprenticeships Leader		1
B	A	Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector WA Mentoring Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3 Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor	Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1 Faculty B, Department A, Previous HEI Student from WA background 2	2
	B	Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1		2
	C	Faculty B, Department C, Clinic Supervisor	Faculty B, Department C, Student Adviser & EDI Officer, HEI Student from WA background 3	2
	D	Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager		2
C	A	Faculty C, Department A, Course Leader/Lecturer 6		2
D	A	Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2		2
		n=14	n=4	

Table 10: HEI System Actors by job role

Job Role Area	Role & Pseudonym
WA Team & Organisation	• Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager • WA Organisation 1, Director • WA Organisation 1, Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager • WA Organisation 2, Director, Non-direct Entry Route (Case Study 2)
Admissions & Student Lifecycle	• Admissions & Student Lifecycle, Data Administrator 1
Strategy & Planning	• Strategy and Planning, Senior Policy Officer
	n=6

Table 11: Non-HEI participants by job role

Job Role Area	Role & Pseudonym
National Students Union	• Student Union Officer
National HEI Organisation	• National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator
Scottish Government	• Scottish Government Representative
Secondary School Headteacher	• Former Secondary School Headteacher, Current 5th/6th year Mentor
	n=4

3.4 Methods of Data Analysis

Whilst conducting research and writing the literature review, the researcher continually questioned what was being discussed across theories and policies read. The questions posed by the researcher were written onto strips of paper and totalled ninety-seven questions. These were then organised into categories/themes and sub-themes, grouped together and stapled onto large sheets of paper. These became a stimulus around which to develop semi-structured interview questions. This began as a deductive process moving from general literature within the field to specific observations or questions to ask participants regarding what they were experiencing in practice. The process then shifted towards inductive research conducting interviews with

specific focus to move towards understandings of the reality of WA policy enactment and experiences across HE. For examples of the ninety-seven questions and their categories see appendices (Appendix 4).

3.4.1 Data analysis – an iterative process

The semi-structured interviews were analysed utilising thematic analysis (TA). Proponents of thematic analysis outline several stages to moving through this approach. Most regularly cited are Braun and Clarke (2013) who suggest the following stages of data analysis: 1. familiarization with data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, and 6. writing the report. This approach provides structure in the steps outlined whilst allowing flexibility across the data analysis.

Miles & Huberman (1994) outline the iterative process as "data collection, reduction, display, conclusion drawing and verification" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 140) which is the data analysis process conducted within the present study. Verification was achieved via "working independently with another research" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 141) whereby transcripts were coded according to categories and subcategories and cross-checked for similarity of coding process and accuracy of coding application.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in-person and recorded via Dictaphone or online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams (as per participant preference). To keep a record of each interview and its related stage of processing, information was collated in a Microsoft Word document in the following table:

Table 12: Qualitative data processing information

No.	Name	Role	Group	Signed Consent	Audio saved	Notes following interview	Transcription saved + cleaned	Follow-up q's + answers	Reports/ People suggested + read/interviewed	Pseudonym
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The above table helped to keep track of a variety of pieces of information for each participant, the table was kept in a separate folder within OneDrive to maintain participants data protection. The researcher reflective logs were also uploaded onto OneDrive in a separate folder of their own.

To make the audio data readable (following gaining written and verbal consent from each participant), interviews conducted online were transcribed within the Zoom or Microsoft Teams software and where interviews were conducted face to face, audio was uploaded to Microsoft Word within OneDrive (university secure cloud) which has a dictate from audio function which creates a transcript. Transcripts were then checked for accuracy amended verbatim where necessary manually whilst listening to audio of the interview, which aided familiarisation. Transcriptions were given line by line number indication and interview time; date; place; job role and participant pseudonym information added for clarity and ease of later reference. These were uploaded online to OneDrive within a separate folder. The coding of the data began with initial colour coding whilst transcribing, highlighting interesting; relevant; key pieces of information. Further in-depth coding was conducted within each transcripts Microsoft Word document. This reflects stage one of TA – familiarisation with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

NVivo software is as a way of assisting in data coding and related quote retrieval. Use of this process was attempted twice as it is a software package where all pieces of information can be accessed in one place e.g. transcript; codes; relevant quotes, and where further analysis can be conducted such as exploring the data set to search for certain words; phrases or terms, how many times these were used and by whom. However, use of NVivo was cumbersome, the software instructions suggest keeping codes short in word length and description. In attempting this, the codes themselves begin to lose the context that they are grounded in. The process appears to become more of a code-type-counting approach which is reminiscent of more quantitative, positivist type research which the present research project is not. NVivo, as was helpfully reminded by supervisory team, is an aid of analysis, it does not do the analysis for the researcher, this occurs within one's own head. Another issue with the use of NVivo was that following analysing two interviews, on returning and opening the software, an update to the software was signalled, on proceeding with the request and no option to ignore a new version was installed and previous data and analysis was lost. Despite being saved within and out with the software and gaining support from university IT team, the data was not recovered. The time and labour lost by the software update; communicating back and forth with university staff and the above issue around research perspective and the use of such software led to the decision to analyse and code within Microsoft Word where all pieces of information could be accessed and stored depending on what works best the present study's data set of twenty-eight interviews.

The next stage was to generate initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Within Microsoft word each transcription was coded using the comments function, including context-related coding

with short descriptor. A table was created: Interview Coding and Quotes: Participant *pseudonym with the following headings: Interview Codes and Interview Code related Quotes for each participant. Each code was copy and pasted from the transcription document into the Interview Code section and related quotes which provide further context and examples of code meaning were included under the Interview Code related Quotes section, entered into the table in the order they were mentioned by the participant. Following completing the above process on one transcript another table was created: Analysis Codebook, and included Participant, Code and Theme columns.

The codes were recorded, without the descriptor, as reference for the rest of the transcription coding process. Codes which applied across transcripts could be captured to avoid having many codes of similar content written in slightly different ways and producing more codes than necessary. The codes were added by going through each transcript from start to finish and grouping related codes together therefore not arranged in order mention by participant. Participant pseudonym was added to each code alongside number of times mentioned, enabling a view of which participants were discussing the same topics/situations and the frequency of how many times the mentioned these, giving some indicate of how much the topic/situation may be experienced within specific job roles.

As the Analysis Codebook was being developed, moving between transcription; codes, descriptors and quotes; and the codebook, codes were amended to ensure that they made sense in a standalone manner and gave context to what was being communicated despite being short codes. For example, the code "SIMD & WA" was amended to "SIMD & WA – perceived postcode power" to signal that the code is concerned with how postcodes are perceived around admissions such as contextual admissions whereby applicants will be offered a place dependant on their postcode. For example, a participant suggested that not all students might agree with the power assigned to their postcode and might rather that their grades etc. The larger context to the code is captured within the brief descriptor, however this code was then more easily understandable whilst moving through the coding process and exploring whether other participants discuss the same topic/situation and linking these together.

Such a reviewing in-between process also enabled checking for accuracy of codes for example the code "HEI faculties reluctant to bring applicants onto campus" was amended to "HEI "some faculties" reluctant to bring applicants onto campus" which directly quotes and more accurately reflects the participants words and meaning and ensures the code is representative and not misleading as not all faculties are included just "some" as indicated. This process also ensured

accuracy within theme development as a part of processes 3. searching for themes and 4. reviewing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

3.4.2 Emerging key themes

Following gathering all codes, searching for and reviewing themes, the fifth stage suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013) is to define and name themes:

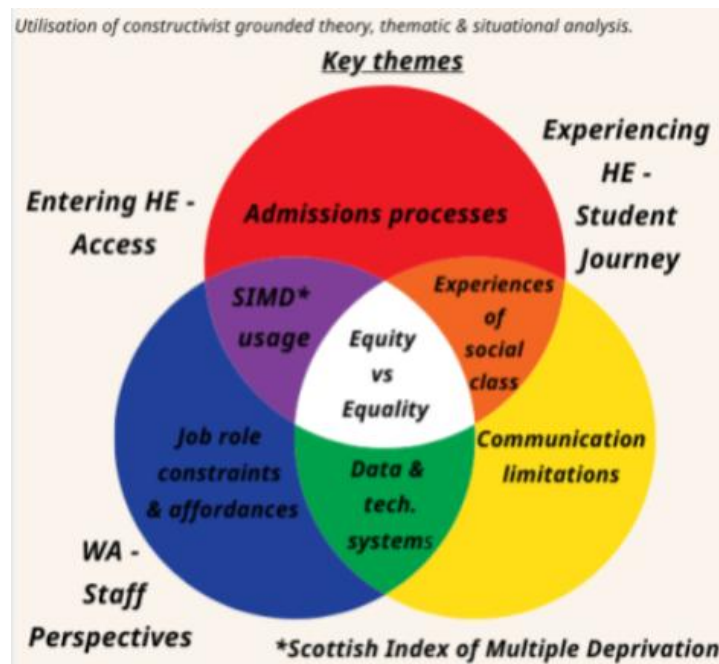


Figure 1: Key themes infographic

The key themes are captured within the Venn diagram above. The Key themes and sub-themes table is too large to include here, see appendices (Appendix 5). Following the above processes the Key themes and sub-themes table had columns added on to record the codes, related quotes and brief research comments. Four of these new tables were created, one per participant group. This allowed for board comparison of themes and sub-themes across participant groups alongside fine detail. Each table is around 100 pages in length as created in Microsoft word documents. These are not included as the data within may reveal the HEI and/or HEI staff. The quotations used within the current study are direct quotes from participants which have been selected as they articulate what is represented within the above participant group table's themes

and subthemes. It is understood that not every member of HEI staff was interviewed nor does every member of staff interviewed have the same views and experiences. However, from the analysis process described, quotes were utilised to give voice to matters raised in some cases by many participants or those individuals. In short, the findings are drawn from multiple perspectives and examples of quotes given are derived from a larger body of data analysis. The quotes selected highlight similar/reoccurring sentiments from across the data set.

By interviewing participants, analysing the data immediately, adding to each of the above tables via an iterative process and following the data collection and analysis guidelines of SA (Clarke, 2003; 2005) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) and TA (Braun & Clarke, 2013) each iteration of the process informed the next participant interview, adding or adapting semi-structured interview questions and suggesting new participants/job role perspectives to gather, building a complex understanding of the situation.

3.4.3 Analysis process of HEI documents

HEI strategic goals and WA related policy documents were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough, (1992a, 1995, 2003, 2011), Chouliaraki and Fairclough, (1999) and as outlined by Locke, (2004). CDA enables cognisance of the relationships between "social structures" and "social practices" which underpin a "social event", the documents analysed in this case, (Fairclough, 2003, p. 23). The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning-making and complex social networks, practices and events which may shape the documents, (Fairclough 1995: 2003: 2011, van Dijk 1993, Jbirgensen and Phillips 2002, Locke 2004, Hyatt 2013, O'Regan and Betzel 2016). This aspect was a supplementary part of the research therefore analysis of the documents is less exhaustive than the interview analysis.

A "three-dimensional framework" is proposed within Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach which aims to; "map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution) and consumption analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice", (Fairclough, 1995: 2).

This approach utilises "Bakhtinian theory of genre" via "analysis of discourse practice" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). Bakhtinian was theoretical thinker and literary critic who "connects language and society" (Locke, 2004, p. 16): "Utterances and their types, that is speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language", (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 65 as cited in Locke, 2004, p. 16).

Gramsci's "theory of hegemony" offers the development of "analysis of sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2), works as aforementioned. Works of Hasan and Halliday, (1985) are also adapted by Fairclough, (1992a) across the "three metafunctions of language" including; "ideational" ("experiential" and "logical"), "interpersonal" and "textual", (Locke, 2004, p. 45). Halliday's, (1978) systemic functional linguistics (SFL), alongside Bhaskar's "explanatory critique" are also referenced by Chouliaraki and Fairclough, (1999). Utilised across CDA approaches, the above embodies "critical linguistics" in an age of "late modernity" (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 3).

For Fairclough discourses are "semiosis" "(words, pictures, symbols, design, colour, gesture)" as a mode of "social practice", (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2011, p. 357). Language forms part of a "semiotic system" of meaning-making whereby "social reality is mediated and comprehended", (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 5). The "relations of interdiscursivity" (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 5) (inter-relatedness of various discourses) "are what connect the analysis of the text with an analysis of social structures", (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 4) via "order of discourses" as borrowed from Foucault.

The "orders of discourse" are the "totality of discursive practices of an institution, and relations between them", (Fairclough, 1995, p. 135). Which is linked to "intertextuality" (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 5) "a question of which genres, discourses and styles it draws upon, and how it works them into particular articulations", (Fairclough, 2011, p. 5). Lastly, "interdiscursivity" outlines "the way in which a text appears to subscribe to one or more discourses" and an "intertextual chain" where text is "transformed into other text-types", (Locke, 2004, p. 43). Fairclough's CDA dialectical-relational approach is considered as a "methodology and not just a method", (O'Regan and Betzel, 2016, p. 5): "CDA's concern is with the opacity of texts and utterances – the discursive constructions or stories that are embedded in texts as information that is less readily available to consciousness. Analysis is a method of dealing with this opacity.", (Locke, 2004, p. 40).

The table below outlines Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach and levels of analysis as outlined above and discussed by Locke, (2004) as utilised within the present study;

Table 13: Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach and levels of analysis

Level of Analysis	Focus of Analysis	Dimensions of Analysis, (Locke, 2004, p. 42)	Elements applied within the present study
1. Sociocultural practice	"the immediate situation that has given rise to its production and the various sociocultural practices and discursive conditions at both institutional and societal levels that provide a wider contextual relevance", (Locke, 2004, p. 42)	Explanation (social analysis)	Orders of discourse; interdiscursivity,
2. Discourse practice	"the way in which the text has been produced, including its relationship with similar texts, its mode of dissemination and the way in which it is received, read, interpreted and used by human subjects", (Locke, 2004, p. 42)	Interpretation (processing analysis) Explanation (social analysis)	Interdiscursivity Intertextuality Intertextual chain
3. Text	"the text to ascertain ways in which it discursively positions readers via what Janks and Ivanic (1992) term its "preferred reading", (Locke, 2004, p. 43)	Description (Text analysis) Interpretation (processing analysis)	Word meaning Wording Modality Interactional control Reader disposition

The Blueprint for Fairness's (Scottish Government, 2016) consultation as part of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) was read through to familiarise the researcher with what the expectations and aims of WA policy included. However, the main focus as according to the present studies research questions is around the HEIs role in creating inequity. Therefore, three HEI documents and one HEI webpage were included in the analysis:

- a. HEI document outlining "underlying principles" as part of a Contextual Admission policy review

- b. Communicating HEIs Contextual Admissions policy to potential applicants via HEI webpage
- c. HEI Goals and Strategic Aims (i) 2020-2025 & (ii) 2025-2030

The above texts were downloaded and/or copied from HEIs website and converted from a PDF file into a Microsoft Word document. These were printed creating hard copies to conduct initial (pre-analysis) read-through; writing comments, considerations and questions. Comment boxes were added highlighting specific sections of the text and words. Each text was read through once for familiarisation. Then each was read again to ascertain what changes and/or supports were being discussed and/or introduced related to WA policy. A third reading assisted in developing an understanding of what was proposed in writing and comparing it to what was discussed by participants as happening in practice. Further explanations of CDA such as Fairclough's CDA dialectical-relational approach; levels of analysis as outlined by Locke, (2004) and "Fairclough text analysis" as adapted from Locke, (2004, p. 46-51) can be found within the appendices (Appendix 6).

3.5 Evaluation & Justification of Methodological Choices

3.5.1 Research rationale

The rationale underpinning the present empirical sociological research methodology and assumptions around the critical theoretical approach utilised is that, to make visible any underlying power dynamic or ways in which such phenomena exist and are perpetuated, an approach of critical questioning is necessary (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Such an approach explores the ways in which values, beliefs, judgements, and assumptions may be shaped by social and political powers (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018, p. 21). Therefore, adopting a critical theoretical approach and utilising the aforementioned methods of data collection and analysis were appropriate to answer the research questions.

Situational analysis (Clarke, 2013) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021) offer iterative research approaches and ways of exploring participant selection considerations, processes & potential insights. As outlined above, the documents and online webpages could be analysed in further depth. Due to the time scale available for the research project, the other forms of analysis required across twenty-eight interviews and the occurrence of some documents being recommended for observation at later stages of the data collection period, the analysis conducted was not exhaustive. Proponents of CDA point out that: "...there is no fixed procedure for the production of material or for analysis: the research design

should be tailored to match the special characteristics of the project", (Jbirgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 17).

The table above outlines the levels of analysis and elements applied, selected in line with the research questions to explore how the text(s) – documents and webpages are produced and disseminated through analysis of the discourse practice. Of note to understand was how text(s) were linked to other texts and how readers interpret these. Lastly, keen to ascertain whether students from working class/disadvantaged/poorer - WA backgrounds voice(s) are given adequate representation within the development and consultation phases and how the text may impact such communities at the level of sociocultural practice.

With the key research aim: to gain an understanding of the processes; experiences; perspectives and practices around the implementation of WA policy & targets, of HEI staff and students, utilising a case study approach allowed an exploration of the above in further detail as occurs within one HEI. Two HEI faculties and two departments, then provided illustrative and practical examples of the ways in which WA policy is employed similarly and/or differently across the HEI.

Deliberations around case study use include those regarding "fitness for purpose" of methods which require pragmatic justification (Elliott & Lukeš, 2008, p. 88 as cited in Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 58). It is implored that researchers consider matters around: "time; financial constraints/budgeting constraints; existing research capacity & training needs; issues of access/ethics" when deciding on whether there is justification for use of a case study (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 58). Each consideration will be briefly outlined in turn: time – the duration of the entire funded project is three years with one year dedicated to data collection. Interviews were conducted in person in the location where the HEI and researcher resides (reducing travel time), or online (including staff/entry route profiles gathered) via Zoom or Microsoft Teams (incurring no travel time) due to homeworking arrangements following the Covid 19 pandemic or for participant ease. A Covid mitigation plan was developed during the early stages of the research to allow for non-in-person data collection methods. Use of an online platform also aided the time taken to transcribe as such platforms had their own transcription software leading to a swifter read through and redraft for accuracy.

With regards to financial constraints/budgeting constraints, the project funding covered costs related to researcher travel and related materials such as relevant books/printing needs. The researcher completed an MSc Applied Educational & Social Research which goes into depth around research methods within the above fields, further research around the use of case studies

was undertaken alongside the guidance of research supervisors all of whom have previous experience of utilising such methods. These met the existing research capacity & training needs and build upon foundations laid during the researchers BSc (Hons) Psychology degree research design and analysis training. Finally, issues of access/ethics, were considered during the proposal and early project stages with the researcher utilising existing relationships and networks with HEI staff which enabled purposeful and snowball participant selection processes whilst also aiding in the recruitment of HEI students and some third sector participants. All other ethical related deliberations are discussed below.

3.5.2 Findings – generalisability

Quantitative research is usually concerned with its ability to be generalised to the wider population and/or social context. However, qualitative research side-steps this concern to remain focused on the perspectives and experiences of individuals/groups etc. as important and representative of reality. With regards to case study research within education several researchers have attempted to overcome the matter including: Pollard (2011) by recognising "resonance" as experienced among individuals/groups "in similar contexts and situations"; Bassey (1999) "fuzzy generalization" whereby singularities may or may not be found across similar situations studied; and Stake (1997, p. 5): "Seldom is an entirely new understanding reached but refinement of understanding is" as related to "modified generalization", (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 145).

Other HEIs in Scotland may or may not experience similarities as identified within the present research. The research conducted here can act as a starting point to begin work which seeks to understand WA policy in practice across Scotland and perhaps highlight examples of good practice which can be shared across all institutions, as discussed further below in Chapter 6: Conclusions.

The present research project could be of interest to several possible audiences as it has several purposes, as outlined in Table 14 below, adapted from Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, (2013, p. 45, Table 3.5):

Table 14: Possible audiences and purposes of the research

Possible Audiences	Possible purposes
HEI System Actors	Develop/adapt: HEI; government; LA & funders processes; practices; mechanisms around WA to enable understanding of impact of social class and related capital(s) on students' lives & experiences of HE
HEI Course Leaders	
HEI Staff	
Pupils/students	
Parents	
Scottish Government	Better Head teachers; pupils; students; parents' understandings of HEI; government; LA & funders processes; practices; mechanisms around WA
Policy makers	
Scottish Funding Council	
Funders	
Local Authorities	
Academics	
Head teachers	

3.6 Ethics & Risk Assessment

This research adheres to the Code of Practice and Research Ethics of the ESRC and University of Strathclyde. This includes health and safety, secure data-storage, participant confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and right to withdraw and reflexivity to identify implicit bias (methodology or results). Time constraints ensure the project is bounded, achievable and useful.

As the HEI under study is the research organisation (RO) of the researcher as a student it is best that the data collection remains the rights of the researcher – due to sensitivity of data and anonymity of participants and HEI – latter to be identified as: one home HEI. This intention and option was signalled in a research related prerequisite on online RO system.

3.7 Reflexivity

A crucial aspect of any research endeavour is the researcher's own reflexion of position, approach, analysis, findings, alternative perspectives and limitations, including within critical theory approaches such as CDA, (Chouliarakis and Fairclough 1999, Locke 2004). Reflexivity encourages that researchers are to recognise that in conducting any study and exploring, interpreting and concluding, a discourse(s) is/are also being produced, (Nonhoff, 2017). Researchers ought to engage in critical reflection of their position as the researcher as well as the research process undertaken (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013).

As a researcher I am aware of my own experiences in shaping and being shaped by academia/critical thinking, structures, processes, ways of thinking, doing and being. One's own education and training can impact research related open-mindedness or rigidity. I recognise influences of and upon my own identity as a woman, Scottish Heritage Traveller, from a working-poor background upon the research I have conducted. I have several insider positions (Gallais, 2008 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013) in being from a working-class family and so what WA policy considers as a student from a WA background. As a PhD researcher I am considered a student and have also been a student and a salaried staff member in the HEI explored within the present study. My being an insider assisted in the networking necessary to approach participants for interview, both staff and students. However, I did not know any of the student participants nor many of the HEI staff before interviewing them.

I also held outsider positions (Gallais, 2008 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013) in interviewing participants from middle-class backgrounds and who are HEI staff members compared to my being a student. There were power dynamics to consider which is a helpful part of critical theory approaches as these are at the forefront of what a researcher must confront. The above awareness of self as a part of the research outlines my personal reflexivity (Wilkinson, 1988 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 37). These are societal/political/academic constructions of my life and identity, but they do not accurately depict all my experiences, knowledges, skills and abilities nor all of who I am.

Functional reflexivity (Wilkinson, 1988 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 37) requires that I consider the research tools and processes influence upon my research. I have conducted qualitative research before using thematic analysis and CDA as a part of critical theory paradigms. Such a framework produces an established way of exploring topics and identifying data for collection. Critical theory comes with a bit of bite in moving social justice forward, which as an individual with the identity I have is very important as I live without safety-nets

experienced by other social classes and ethnicities. In Scottish society, there is a history of discrimination around my Traveller side of the family, and some recent. I could not have been a student without taking a student loan for my BSc and MSc and securing a scholarship for the present research thesis. Despite my continued hard work, grit, over fifty jobs working since primary school, across many industries and roles, without HE and the paper certificate with my name on it I have struggled and would continue to struggle to move up the ladder and secure positions I know I can make a positive difference in.

Developing social, cultural and academic capital has improved my networks and someday may benefit my economic capital but I do not undertake the above arduous life paths for money and meritocracy has not enabled my progression. The people I have met within HE, both staff and students, have been incredibly impactful. My grandfather and generations before him lived on the road as part of Traveller culture. Many were illiterate and uneducated by the state in schools. He taught himself to read and write and encouraged me to read the newspapers to him as a child. Two generations later I am completing a PhD the first in my family and one of a handful of Scottish Travellers to do so. Advancing social good so others need not suffer as I have, including my own children, is imperative to bettering Scottish society for all those within it. The pursuit of equity across education is a powerful way to ensure all benefit.

To keep awareness that my insider and outsider positions did not impact upon my research findings, I considered any biases of my own and understand that other staff and students' experiences may be very different. I wrote researcher reflective logs to capture my thoughts, considerations, questions and understandings of each participant interview. These also acted as a reflection of what I as a researcher a part of the situation and meaning-making process was paying attention to and interpreting. I returned to the logs whilst analysing the participant interviews to cross-reference and check that my understanding of what was discussed was as communicated by the participant and in context.

Similarly, such awareness was applied to research questions and responses within participant interviews, ensuring they are not skewed in any particular way as a result of my own positionality within the research (Coolican, 2009). I sought to balance understanding such as in instances when asking about the differences HEI staff observed between student from WA and non-WA backgrounds. What is reported across the findings chapter is examples of both positive and negative responses. The methodological approach, data collection and analysis methods outline the need for such reflexive practice, a responsibility taken seriously by myself, the researcher.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Capturing the Widening Access Policy: Context of Case Studies

The following section will outline WA policy as set forth by the Scottish Government and interpreted and enacted by the present HEI as well as review institutional policy developed by the HEI. The sub-sections descriptively illustrate how the present HEI has actioned the demands of the Scottish government regarding WA policy: 4.1.1 Scottish Government WA Policy HEI Consultation – Co-creation or Corralled?; 4.1.2 HEI Contextual Admissions (CA): embodying policy – seeking clarity evidenced with participant responses.

4.1.1 Scottish Government WA Policy HEI Consultation – Co-creation or Corralled?

To develop and provide consultation on WA policy the Scottish Government interacted with several bodies which represent and work alongside HEIs and students. These included Universities Scotland, National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland, various student unions, Who Cares? Scotland and the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS). Government agencies such as the SFC, SAAS and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) a practitioner network, The Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) were also involved.

It appears that during WA policy development that a spirit of co-creation may have been adopted by the Scottish Government in some respects with some external groups, as outlined (Scottish Government, 2016). however, direct liaison with the present HEIs WA team was absent. Here, an opportunity to exact a depth of understanding around students from WA backgrounds lived experiences within this HEI which may be different to other HEI student populations is missed. There may be a nuanced interplay around HEI, students from WA backgrounds and impacts on HE outcomes, necessary to establish in order to implement a cognisant policy which will deliver for all those intended throughout all contexts and circumstances across a significant period. It is unclear whether staff consultation within the HEI was undertaken institution-wide to discuss WA policy implementation and possible knowledge/practice sharing. When asked during their interview the Inclusion, Access, Equality

Manager stated that direct liaison with their team and the Scottish Government had not taken place, WA policy was adopted by the HEI as is.

Above I have used the term students from WA backgrounds to refer to working class students. However, Widening Access policy does not make direction mention of the students intended to benefit as coming from such specific social class backgrounds. Within the WA policy care experienced students are included for example who may not be from working class families. The measure used to classify a student as WA is the SIMD an area-based measure, as discussed in further depth below, there is no indication of social class. As the present research is concerned with exploring social class, it is those students and their experiences who are of interest and explored. The distinction around this area was blurred with HEI staff as well as other participants such as from the Scottish Government. Not specifically identifying the students intended according to social class may lead to confusion and a weakened understanding of what the policy aims to achieve and for whom.

During the Scottish Government Representative's interview, it was unclear whether the Scottish Government made direct contact with all HEIs to understand the lives, experiences and needs of students from working class backgrounds. What was described was a generally utilised process whereby teams of policy analysts gather data and, in some instances, associated stakeholder representatives may be approached for input. Pieces of work are undertaken such as student surveys or communication with country-wide student union representatives and policy is developed. The Scottish government is responsible for setting country wide HE WA policy and related targets with the SFC enforcing the targets.

The Blueprint for Fairness (Scottish Government, 2016) consultation as part of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) outlines that:

"Approach to the Task"

In developing our recommendations the Commission gathered evidence from a wide range of sources. To inform our interim report we issued a Call for Evidence in June 2015, reviewed existing evidence and commissioned a literature review on barriers to fair access. We also held a series of consultation events and meetings across Scotland and took presentations from key stakeholders at Commission meetings including: students, care leavers, experts and practitioners. In the second half of our work, we held a series of expert groups, bringing together practitioners and professionals from a range of sectors and specialisms, to test and enrich our thinking as we began to shape our recommendations. (Scottish Government, 2016, Blueprint for Fairness: Executive Summary)

The above statement outlines a lengthy process however, throughout an interview and subsequent follow-up questions with a HEI System Actor within the present HEIs WA team, it was expressed that there was no dialogue between the HEIs WA team and the Scottish Government regarding the co-creation/development of current WA policy. The consultation process as described by the Scottish Government, with several bodies within the HE sector, could be viewed as forming some sort of government – HE dialogue. However, there is a lack of clarity around its undertaking, and depth of understanding gained and/or implemented.

The above description does not go into detail about all those included within the "evidence" gathering process. It is unclear to what extent and which HEIs and/or related HEI staff (expertise/experience or not) were involved. Its mention here of "students" does not denote whether the students were from working class/disadvantaged backgrounds in the same manner as it is clearly noted that some students were "care leavers". It is difficult to ascertain the depth and detail of feedback received from the consultation and what sorts of evidence/advice/suggestions may have been put forth, included, disregarded, or missed.

It is also worth highlighting that the CoWA was created to advise Scottish Government Ministers "on how to meet this ambition" (SFC, Fair Access, 2023) not specifically HEIs. The absence of direct dialogue with all HEIs or development of a report for HEIs themselves may point to gaps in opportunity for ongoing feedback, understanding of implementation and consistency of application across all HEIs and/or all department/faculties/staff within each HEI. There are many recommendations to multiple parties, but no guidelines of how the WA policy and targets are to be enacted by HEIs to ensure "fairness" (Scottish Government, 2016).

The CoWA recommendations related to the role of HEIs and of interest to the current research are too numerous to discuss at present. However, to provide a contextual backdrop to the findings of the present research, it is important to note that several imperative observations were made early in the development of WA policy regarding socio economic status and relatedly, social class. Within the Commissioner for Fair Access, Annual Report (2017) the main tools suggested to enable "fairer access" to HE are that of SIMD, Contextual Admissions as well as Articulation pathways. Outlined is recognition that: SIMD as being heavily critiqued a decade ago by Weedon (2015); Contextual Admissions policy was noted by Boliver, Gorard, Powell, and Moreira, (2017) as requiring consistency and clarity around access processes and "more radical action". The terminology used to describe the target group of students of WA policy is as "disadvantaged or under-represented" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 34). Such terms, whilst stated in the negative, hold more weight than Widening Access which is broad

and unspecific. The above terms arguably force, or at least create space for pause to consider how/in what ways are such students disadvantaged or underrepresented and why.

Interestingly, several sentiments stand out as key understandings which appear lost in translation across current policy ideas and practices, particularly on reflection of the present study's findings. These include the awareness and warning of institutional favourability of middle-class ways of being:

Also care needs to be taken that attainment is not simply measured in terms of too narrowly conceived benchmarks; the optimal learner pathway, in terms of stages and formal achievements, is still determined by reference to traditional middle-class patterns. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 22)

Above, social class is clearly stated as linked to differences across educational success. Below, social class is also plainly recognised as imperative but undervalued in its potential discriminatory impact:

Socioeconomic deprivation remains the most significant and intractable form of disadvantage. Too often there has been a reluctance to admit the importance of social class, and to focus on other forms of discrimination such as age, gender and ethnicity. (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 35)

Where is the recognition of the importance of social class within WA policy and across HEIs understandings and practices?

Lastly, is the forthright acknowledgement of the importance of fair access to HE as a basic right. Society is intending to profit from a highly educated workforce, made more robust when a variety of social class perspectives are represented, sitting together at the table: "Fair access is a human right as well as an economic necessity." (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 46).

The present study has found that such early cautionary observations as above, have not been heeded and attended to by one home HEI in Scotland, particularly those related to social class. With recognition of the multi-layered ways in which social class may impact upon an individual's and/or groups education journey it would seem reasonable that such potential influences would be at the top of the Scottish Government and HEIs agenda. Here, attempts to understand and effect positive change across experiences of social class may ensure lasting transformation of education opportunities and societal patterns of social reproduction. The social class awareness or consciousness recognised by the first CoWA does not filter through Scottish Government WA policy nor the HEIs.

The remainder of section 6.1 will briefly explore the present HEIs approach to WA policy, outlining a variety of relevant participant experiences and viewpoints.

4.1.2 HEI Contextual Admissions (CA): embodying policy – seeking clarity

The HEI follows suit from the Scottish Government regarding the tools of measurement such as SIMD and methods i.e., Contextual Admissions and Articulation Pathways used across WA policy, despite receiving criticism. The HEI may have little choice in some respects as these are the enforced aspects of WA policy and form part of the targets set. The following four HEI documents listed below highlight attempts at clarity for HEI and potential applicants around use of the above measures and tools. The first two documents (a & b) relate to their contextual admissions policy and the latter two (c & d) are regarding the HEIs strategic aims across a 10-year period separated by a 5-year interval.

4.1.2a HEI document outlining "underlying principles" as part of a Contextual Admission policy review

Firstly, it appears that the HEIs WA team sought consultation with HEIs Admission Management Committee, submitting a review of the Contextual Admissions policy's underlying principles to gain clarity as they were not provided by Scottish Government nor HEI.

Within the opening introduction to the above document, it is stated that "contextual data in admissions is a powerful tool to widen participation but it is one of many such tools". Such data is intended to "address one particular barrier to participation – disadvantage during formal education leading to lower attainment for particular groups in comparison to others" therefore it is not intended to "address all barriers for many disadvantaged groups". It is described as "not a blunt tool" and as "ineffective if the barrier is not related to prior attainment" which will be discussed further below.

The four HEI principles to be satisfied to apply contextual admissions are outlined as follows:

1. There is a body of evidence demonstrating an attainment gap between this group and the general population, or sustained negative impact on performance during secondary education;
2. There is evidence of under-representation of this group within the current higher education population in Scotland and at *HEI;
3. There is robust data available to enable the identification of applicants who meet the criteria;
4. The criteria can be clearly explained to applicants and those advising them.

Briefly, important to note for now is that social class itself is not mentioned/specified nor links to it made clear. Also, what the "robust data" is, nor where it comes from is outlined, issues may arise if relying on SIMD for example, such as not including all students/individuals intended and vice versa. The discussion chapter will elaborate on the above considerations alongside that of ensuring that "criteria" is explainable by HEI staff to applicants.

4.1.2b Communicating HEIs Contextual Admissions policy to potential applicants via HEI webpage

One way the HEI communicates with potential students regarding contextual admissions is online via their website. The webpage states the HEIs intentions around CA policy and outlines student applicability.

Contextual admissions information shared includes the "four pieces of contextual data" the HEI will use to determine eligibility for inclusion in CA policy, four categories or pieces are as follows:

1. "Home postcode" as applies to Scotland, a brief overview of SIMD is given describing the SIMD "Quintiles" and their corresponding percentage value e.g. Quintiles 1 equates to "bottom 20%...most deprived area in Scotland" and so an offer will be made "on the basis of Minimum Entry requirements" if "application is considered suitable" as with Quintile 2. Applicants are informed that "SIMD look-up is provided by the Scottish Government" and updates are "outside *HEIs control" therefore, applicants must check eligibility before submitting application. A search box is available for checking own postcode and the subsequent SIMD Quintile classification is given.

This section also notes information for applicants from "Rest of UK" meaning England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Here, applicants home postcode is looked at using Participation of Local Areas data (POLAR4). Similarly, if the postcode is as Quintiles and "application is considered suitable for an offer" applicants receive a "one-grade concession in a non-essential subject from our minimum range of published A level entry requirements". An online weblink is given for the Office for Students website where postcodes can be checked via downloading an Excel spreadsheet.

2. "Attendance at a target school" also a brief section which highlights list of target schools where it has been "identified that few school leavers immediately progress to university". If an applicant's school is listed and again their application is "deemed suitable for an offer" an offer will be made "on the basis of the Minimum Entry Requirements". There is a PDF link to view the list of target schools regarding

enrolment for September 2024, and the WA team email address given should applicants wish to check the list for the previous year.

Contact details including the HEIs WA team's phone number and email address are given on the webpage. A prompt is given to encourage applicants to contact the WA team to discuss "any queries about your eligibility" however no mention is made regarding questioning the meaning of CA measures and related terminology. In a short section titled: "How do I let you know if I'm eligible" applicants are informed that "You don't need to contact us directly" as the HEI will use UCAS data submitted by the applicant within their application to "determine whether you're eligible". A "named contact" is given for students who are carers to contact if they have not included their status as a carer within their UCAS application.

3. "Time spent in care" is the largest information section on the webpage. When it comes to communicating HEIs intentions for care experienced (CE) applicants the tone becomes more positive and proactive:

HEI* "is fully committed to supporting care experienced applicants and has implemented a "Guaranteed Offer" process for suitably qualified care-experienced applicants." (Contextual Admissions webpage on HEI website)

Criteria include stipulating within the UCAS application that time has been spent in "local authority care" as well as meeting Minimum Entry Requirements or "studying qualifications which potentially allow them to meet" these when applying. Such circumstances lead the HEI to "guarantee that we'll make you an offer" as well as "follow up with individual feedback and advice about alternative routes to study" with the HEI in instances where an offer "can't" be made.

Furthermore, adjustments are made for particular "professional requirements" courses "such as Social Work or Primary Education". These differ from the above courses in that where an applicant:

...has either met the Minimum Entry Requirements or is currently studying qualifications which could potentially allow them to meet the Minimum Entry Requirements, then we guarantee that their application will be progressed to the next stage of selection (e.g. invitation to interview; or invitation to fill out an additional information pack which is mandatory for Social Work applicants who pass the academic side of the application process). (Contextual Admissions webpage on HEI website)

Applicants will "be given an offer for an alternative course" where they meet academic requirements, but who are "unsuccessful" at the above stage.

4. "Caring responsibilities" similarly is indicated by the applicant on their UCAS form, and "verification" is then required to confirm (acceptable types are outlined) which is to be emailed to a named contact - a HEI staff member (email address given).

The rest of the webpage gives links for applicants to explore the contextual entry requirements (Excel spreadsheet link). A further section is included around "Eligibility" which outlines which whilst applicants may meet the criteria listed above, this does not guarantee an offer. Where an applicant's "personal statement and references provides evidence that the applicant is not suitable" despite Minimum Entry Requirements no offer will be given. Furthermore, offers are linked to Scottish Government funding and so come with caveats:

"...offers from *HEI can only be made in line with any constraints placed by the Scottish Funding Council on numbers of funded places, and in the context of overall demand."
(Contextual Admissions webpage on HEI website).

Lastly to mention is information given regarding a WA related charity which supports secondary school pupils into HE via a programme which boosts pupils understanding of and capability in essay-writing, planning, note-taking and independent learning, etc. The programme is recognised by the HEI who will make an offer reduction "by one grade in a non-named subject" and "one-grade further" if Minimum Entry Requirements are also applied. These offers are "conditional" where applicants gain a "profile of BBB or above" within the programme which is to be indicated on their UCAS application (link to programme website provided).

4.1.2c HEI Goals and Strategic Aims (i) 2020-2025 & (ii) 2025-2030

Only the goals and strategic aims related to the present research, those concerned with WA, will be briefly outlined within the following sections. The HEI has articulated its goals and subsequent strategic aims as part of their strategic plan across a ten-year timespan of (i) 2020-2025 & (ii) 2025-2030. The documents differ in goals and strategic aims across (i) to (ii) which may signify a refocusing on aspects of goals from document (i) being fine-tuned within document (ii) or perhaps as a result of shifts in HEI and/or Scottish Government policy emphasis. Reasoning for changes are not stated within either document.

Inclusion of goals and strategic aims here, enables a contextual overview of where the HEI would like to get to within the timeframes articulated. All goals and strategic aims set forth by the HEI are worthwhile and important. What is of interest to the present study is whether they are understood in principle and applied in practice now.

(i) 2020-2025

"Goal 1. Outstanding education and student experience" p14.

Here, the HEI position's itself as "socially progressive", interested in "enabling access to education by people from widest range of backgrounds" and identifies "tailored personalised support" and "fostering onward success" as included in this goal.

"Strategic aim 1.1 We have a diverse and vibrant student population" p16.

To achieve the above goal the HEI intends to ensure the following actions regarding HEI entry:

"...enhancing our commitment to widening access and inclusion across the University, selecting, developing and supporting excellent students based on merit, potential and ability to benefit from the education we offer..."

and what is to take place whilst studying:

"...delivering seamless learner journeys for students with a wide range of prior educational experience and qualifications, working in close partnership with schools, colleges and employers..."

HEI entry aims also comprises of offering "advanced standing" and other professional development and work-based opportunities once enrolled. Lastly the HEI links these stated aims as linked to:

"...ensuring our processes, policies and teaching approaches are inclusive and where necessary adapted to meet the needs of particular groups of students, notably those from under-represented or vulnerable groups, recognising intersectionality."

The above creates a picture of an HEI aware of its position within society and local community, taking ownership of its ideal of being a part of social progression. There appears to be institutional recognition of groups and individuals who may benefit from the shifts in traditional patterns of HEI access, particularly around social class, that such a socially conscious HEI can enact. However, the tenuous mention of "merit" repeated similarly within b. Communicating HEIs Contextual Admissions policy to potential applicants via HEI webpage is critiqued within the discussion section.

Strategic aim 1.1 goes on to outline the HEIs commitment and pride in attending to WA:

"We are committed to widening access to university, and proud to have achieved our 2020 target of recruiting 1,000 students from the 40% most deprived postcodes three years early – this Plan

sets out our ambitions as we strive to ensure our population is representative of society and that we address under-representation in all parts of our University." p17

"Strategic aim 1.2 Our students have a co-created outstanding and distinctive student experience with high-quality student support throughout the learner journey" p18.

The above strategic aim description also raises questions regarding further information required to understand how aims are achieved in principle and whether current practices are as yet universally aligned with the HEIs goals:

"...where needed, improving current levels of student retention, progression, attainment and satisfaction, including identifying, understanding and closing "attainment gaps" where these are identified for particular groups of students..."

It is unclear how aware HEI staff are of the HEIs goals and aims and how they are to achieve and evidence these in practice as well as what provisions are made to enable their achievement such as resources, HEI staff time, funding etc. This consideration also applies to the next strategic aim:

"Strategic aim 1.3 Our students are taught by inspiring staff, using innovative approaches underpinned by high-quality infrastructure, and develop the knowledge, skills, aptitudes, attributes, experience and confidence to be successful and responsible lifelong global citizens" p20.

"Key Performance Indicators" p21.

"We will demonstrate our success by achieving, by 2025:

1. Over 1,300 entrants per annum from the 40% most deprived areas in Scotland, with an even distribution across the deciles 93%
2. Undergraduate retention rates from year 1 to year 2 of over 93%
3. Student satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey in the upper quartile for Overall Satisfaction and the upper or second quartile for other question sections
4. Graduates securing graduate-level employment or going on to further study at rates which are above our externally-determined benchmark figure."

Key Performance Indicator (KPI) 1 outlines an "even distribution across deciles" related SIMD but not that such students should also be able to be equally distributed across all departments and facilities.

"Goal 4. Global engagement" p44

"Strategic aim 4.2 Our international outlook is reflected in our diverse community of staff and students'

The HEI states that it is:

"...expanding opportunities for students to gain an international experience including study abroad, work placement and short exchange programmes, and ensuring barriers to participation for underrepresented groups are overcome"

It is of interest to the present study to understand how aims are put into practice across the HEI, if such opportunities are taken up by students from WA access backgrounds and whether funding and related support is available.

When asked are there any challenges for students from disadvantaged backgrounds when they attend the related department/school, a departmental staff member, Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2 discussed one of the courses as having an "international" "compulsory exchange element" which is unfunded:

...so we give them the information right from the start. We know it might be more difficult to afford to go on exchange, but we do find that with a lot of our home students anyway, because they stay at home, their parents aren't having to pay for them to live... you know, in accommodation...But yeah, when they get here, we do try and treat them all equally and fairly...But again, it's difficult cause we can't treat students differently, in my opinion, in that sense. Yeah, we will give more support to who needs it, but someone who's not in one of those backgrounds might be having equally as challenging or not, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

The above provides a snapshot of the predicament that such students may face. The HEI has a goal enabled via a strategic aim which seeks to include "underrepresented" students in particular opportunities. However, what is demonstrated is that HEI staff, departments and courses make several assumptions about under-represented students, which include those from working class thus widening access backgrounds, lives: living situation – with their parents; parents pay for their accommodation as at home; thus, can afford an international exchange. There is recognition that achieving the HEI goal and important exchange opportunity "might be more difficult" for such students but no remedy in the form of financial support is offered by the HEI. Instead, the notion that with plenty of time – "information right from the start", students can meet this "compulsory" "element" of their course is asserted. Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2's statement lacks understanding and is explicitly biased in its

assumptions of students and families' individual circumstances and what they can and cannot afford to do and where they live, as will be addressed further in the discussion chapter.

The last goal to highlight is:

"Goal 5. Operational excellence" p46

"Our people and the community they create are, without question, our greatest asset and what make our University what it is. Through our provision of a supportive, people-oriented and rewarding working environment, staff benefit from opportunities for development, a shared set of common aims, clear lines of communication and a commitment to equality and inclusivity."

The above is a worthy goal however, across a large institution however, is it applied in practice particularly when policy around WA may not be communicated effectively to all staff nor related training made compulsory to complete/attend.

The present research findings suggest that not all staff sing from the same hymn sheet regarding inclusivity related to WA access policy in practice.

Similar concerns are reflected in the final significant strategic aim 5.1, see below, which addresses comparable themes.

"Strategic aim 5.1 In embracing our socially progressive ethos, our community of staff and students feel valued and are effective, engaged and values-led" p48

"using our values and our socially progressive ethos to guide our decision-making and actions"
"improving diversity, enabling inclusion, and promoting equality"

As above, it is positive that the HEI recognises the need for being "socially progressive" and attentive to equality, diversity and inclusion. The HEI is a little light on the outlining the practice of these goals and strategic aims and in identifying whether it intends to understand the lives of students from WA backgrounds to a similar degree as students across race and ethnic minority, care experienced, and/or disability groups.

There is a focus on ensuring equality within the above goal, however not moving towards practicing equity, arguably more attuned to enacting social progression, may do a disservice when related to WA students or indeed HEI staff. Here there is confusion around the differences between equality and equity, practicing either one has significant differences:

I think that's why we put a lot of focus on, you know, that, to make sure everyone can receive the same treatment and it's equitable through it, (equity definition) ...it's having everyone the

same...we'd give them the same level of support, we'll do what we can...we'll do that for every student, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

The HEI focus on equality may lead to confusion around WA policy practice, aims and ethos as well as skew the work required to ensure equity for students from WA backgrounds. For the HEI to espouse and seek to achieve "shared set of common aims, clear lines of communication and a commitment to equality and inclusivity" will affect all HEI goals listed here (across both HEI documents i. and ii.) as well as alter the experiences of HE for students from working-class backgrounds. Some HEI staff members did demonstrate acknowledgement of differences between equality and equity and its impact for such students:

It's making sure students know that when they need help, they know where to get it, (Strategy and Planning, Senior Policy Officer)

...identify people and reach out to them as well...getting people to ask for help...might be a bit of concern about asking or a shame...*department school this year did an initiative where I provided them with a list of all offer holders that were SIMD and they were buddying people up. They were giving different tutors a group of students to track and to speak to and to support, (Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager)

You know, in terms of widening access we all like to say "we've got widening access", but do we really know, we've got to question...because have we really thought about the student that we're trying to bring up you know?...You question – have we really removed all the barriers? And we're not quite there yet, you know, we like to think we are but we're not... If they're really positive about breaking down barriers they need to put in those support services from the onset and they need to have sufficient people, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

The following "Summary of KPIs" (p., 56) captured in the table below, outlines the HEIs goals across the stated five-year period 2020-2025. Included is each KPI, it's Baseline and corresponding beginning year and 2025 Target of what is intended to be achieved. Only the KPIs relevant to the present study were incorporated.

Table 15: HEIs "Summary of KPIs"

KPI	Baseline (year)	2025 Target
1 SIMD 0-40 entrants	1,209 headcount (2019/20)	1,300 headcount evenly distributed by decile (and by Faculty)
2 Undergraduate retention	91.0% (2018/19)	>93%
12 International student FTE	2,856 FTE (2018/19)	4,500 FTE

Within KPI 1 there is a difference of 91 students that the HEI is aiming to enrol across the five-year time span. It is understood that this group of students are home-Scottish, coming from SIMD 0-40, and therefore funded by the Scottish Government who have capped overall Scottish student numbers across all HEIs. An increase of 91 students does not appear to be a lot in number nor in potential resources. It is worthy to note that the most recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for 2024-25 show that the number of students entering HE from the 20% most deprived areas is now 17.4% up from the previous year's 16.7%, the highest percentage yet (Scottish Government, 2026).

As earlier highlighted the HEI states above that the SIMD student numbers are to be "evenly distributed by decile (and by Faculty)", as will be discussed in more depth shortly. Currently whilst the notion of even student distribution across faculties is a stated goal, it is yet to be achieved. Instead, the unequal distribution causes tensions for some department and faculty staff which is not helped by how such figures are reported, or not. In comparison to the student intake numbers hoped for regarding international students for KPI 12, a difference of 1644 students understood as international, generally self-funded, paying upwards of 3x the fees of home students.

Lastly, KPI 2 with regards to undergraduate retention, a difference of 2% is anticipated over five-years. It is not specified for any specific cohort e.g. SIMD 0-40 nor which year of student they are to be retained until for example year 1 to 2 compared to year 1 to 4. The latter would demonstrate more commitment to students completing courses rather than simply surviving year 1.

(ii.) 2025-2030

As we move towards the most recent document: HEI Goals and Strategic Aims 2025-2030 there are some positive shifts in wording and presumed focus of stated goals and aims which begin to lean into recognition of Widening Access and Participation:

"Goal 1. Outstanding education and student experience" p12.

"As a socially progressive and inclusive institution, we welcome students from a diverse range of backgrounds, recognising the barriers that exist for many, and we support our students to successfully overcome these. We remain committed to widening access and offering high-quality support to our students to ensure their successes. Building on our commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion and participation, we are dedicated to being an anti-racist institution; one that actively opposes racism."

Across the above two documents (i) & (ii) is no change in title of Goal 1, but shifts occur across HEIs positioning and terminology towards inclusivity around ethos and practices. The HEI describes itself initially as a (i) "socially progressive institution" p14, and then as (ii) "socially progressive and inclusive institution" p12. The HEI is "recognising the barriers that exist" that obstacles to access and participation are a reality and pledging to "support our students' as an institution, which is doubled down upon in that: "we remain committed to widening access and offering high-quality support to our students to ensure their successes". The successes ensured are not specified nor is what offering high-quality support means and entails. This could be around: conducting research inhouse to understand students' lives and HE experiences; providing HEI staff with training to also appreciate students' perspectives thus ensuring understanding of what stands in the way of successes and so ensuring particular types of support and/or funding; retention to a certain point; and/or engaging employers to promote some transitions and entry into professional employment.

There is a noticeable shift in terminology from (i) "equality" p46 & p48, to (ii) "equity" p12. This shift could suggest a future whereby across the entirety of the HEIs principles, policies and practices a more nuanced approach is sought to be achieved by 2030. The analysis of responses gained from case study institution staff within the current study highlights that staff understanding and attitudes around widening access students is not yet fully aligned as expressed above. The perspectives of those interviewed note inconsistencies across institution-wide staff understanding of who students from WA backgrounds are, what types of support they may require, recognition of barriers and how to overcome these. The related aim outlined next almost begins to specify how the goal will be achieved, however it brushes over providing any granular detail and instead speaks in general, bureaucratic terms and examples:

"Aim 1.2 Widening access and participation" p18.

"We are committed to boosting our support of widening access, participation, inclusion and diversity, being sector leading amongst research-intensive universities. We do this by developing and supporting our students from all backgrounds to realise their potential through the education and student experience we provide across all levels of study."

"We will achieve this by: further enhancing our commitment to widening participation and inclusion across the University, selecting, developing and supporting students based on merit, potential and ability to benefit from the education we offer, and ensuring that our portfolio and approach remains innovative and socially progressive. We ensure a wider group can access our learning community through offering flexible opportunities in a range of different formats and using a variety of different tools, methods and approaches."

The above statements carry similar sentiments as aforementioned in terms commitments of support, inclusivity without getting into the specifics of how this will be achieved. Again, whilst there is an aim rebranding specifically related to "Widening Access and participation" there remains use of the term merit "...selecting, developing and supporting students based on merit, potential and ability to benefit from the education we offer". As previously noted, use of term merit (2.2 Understanding Inequality in HE Theoretical Perspectives) can undermine understandings around social class and social and cultural capital which could illuminate that merit is intended to reward an individual for their own personal determination. However, one's own effort can be scuppered based on external factors out with their control, leading to circumstances not in their favour. In opposite terms those who appear to not have achieved similar to their peers, may be perceived as personally responsible as though due to their individual characteristics, behaviours and/or actions. Merit may not be intended cause potential misunderstanding, however, is not a neutral, value-free term. Its usage could benefit from clarification and context setting. HEIs can make known their recognition of factors, such as social class, which impact upon merit to avoid misunderstandings of individuals education journeys and outcomes. The notion of supporting students to be able to "realise their potential" via "education" and "experiences" that the HEI will "provide across all levels of study" is at odds with HEI staffs ways of thinking about these matters, as will be discussed in depth below.

The above would appear counterintuitive to the stated intention that:

"...wider group can access our learning community through offering flexible opportunities in a range of different formats and using a variety of different tools, methods and approaches..."

There is no mention of what the "different tools, methods and approaches" are.

"...working in close partnership with schools, colleges and employers to promote access for a diverse range of learners to benefit from the life changing opportunity of a *HEI education. Our Young *HEI programme exemplifies this approach, offering practical educational opportunities and inspiring both primary and secondary school age pupils to want to undertake university study with us."

The above statement outlines the HEIs outreach actions. When outreach was discussed with HEI staff during present research responses pointed to such work as viewed by the HEI as a part of staffs' role as part of ensuring student intake numbers across courses, departments and/or faculties. It was expressed by several HEI staff members that there is no extra consideration around additional time required to plan, organise and conduct outreach work across schools and/or colleges. The same was expressed about funding for such activities but viewed as

necessary to meet SIMD targets with the implementation of the approach as relying on staffs' "goodwill", as discussed further below.

Again, repeatedly reiterated is the HEIs commitment to the following aspects:

"...ensuring our processes, policies and approaches to teaching and student welfare are inclusive and responsive to the needs of our students, notably those from under-represented or vulnerable groups, recognising the intersection of multiple factors. We are committed to challenging and deconstructing racism and all forms of discrimination."

The present study has found that above aim of being "inclusive and responsive" across the HEIs "processes, policies and approaches" is not yet universally rolled out in practice. Small pockets of HEI staff understanding of students from WA backgrounds lives do occur and considered adaptations are made, these appear linked to individual staffs' experiences, understanding and efforts rather than institutionally guided. If anything, some staff work tirelessly despite HEI making some aspects tricky such as shrinking lab space only to require it later causing timetabling and learning space issues or changing class start and finish time due to understanding the student cohorts needs and ensuring feeder colleges follow suit to provide continuity.

Table 16: "Summary of KPIs" 2

KPI	Baseline (year)	2030 Target
1. Widening access	Removed from table	1300 entrants from SIMD 0 to 40 with an even distribution across the deciles
2. Retention	Removed from table	In or exceeding the range of 90% to 95% undergraduate retention from Year 1 to Year 2
11. International Student Population	Removed from table	In or exceeding the range of 5000 to 7000 full-time equivalent population.

The latest KPIs (p. 21) set for 2025-2030 state only the target for 2030 presumably as the results are not in for the baseline year which will be next year in 2025. As earlier noted, KPI 1 also has a terminology shift from "SIMD 0-40 entrants" to "Widening Access" where students appear as an entity of their own now under a WA umbrella. There is no change to the target number of students of 1300 across 2025 & 2030. This may be due to Scottish Government funding and

student number capping as previously mentioned. However, the Scottish Government (2016) stipulates "by 2030, 20% of students entering university will be from Scotland's 20% most deprived background". Therefore, does this mean that as the total student population numbers increase then the number of students from widening access backgrounds must also increase to keep at 20% of those entering HE? How will this play out with Scottish Government funding caps? As can be seen from KPI 1, the number of international students is anticipated to increase by 500 to 2500 across the same timeframe as KPI 1.

Lastly to note, KPI 2 retention percentage given a range "90% to 95%" which drops from 93% aim for 2025, down 3% to 90% or can increase from 93% by 2%. What is the clear goal here? Why is a range now given? Which groups of students are okay to drop off?

The HEI documents outlined above appear to move towards recognition of students from WA backgrounds. In some respects, the HEI provides much information but also elicits many questions due to lack of finer detail. Perhaps the granular level of data sought is held elsewhere. Imperatively, it remains unclear as to any HEI intentions to research; learn about; understand the lives, experiences and perspectives of students from WA backgrounds and to synthesise insights gained, for all HEI staff to draw from and act upon. It is difficult to draw out definitive differences enacted to encourage students from WA backgrounds into HE and to remain in HE that are unique from the general student body and/or other recognised groups such as care experienced for example who appear to have received focused consideration. It is understood that across both documents (i. and ii.) a journey will be had to achieve stated goals by 2030. The present research finds that there is a way to go to guarantee such goals are achieved on time and suggests sensitised ways of working towards these.

In summary, initially the research findings leaned towards an understanding of WA policy as being appeased by the HEI. However, that may suggest that the HEI had some other/different ideas but went along with what the government suggested anyway. On closer analysis it seems that there was no debate nor opposition. This remiss consideration could be more indicative of middle-class discomfort around discussing social class thus the notion of WA, or indeed that the HEI does not think differently about policy. On enquiring about whether a back and forth took place between the HEI and government it was suggested that this could have been carried out via the CoWA consultation. The lack of definitive answer instead suggests that key HEI staff who would have been integral to communicating students' experiences were not included. The WA policy and targets appear to be entirely accepted, wholesale without protest, by the HEI. At the very least there appears to have been no critical engagement, challenge nor

resistance. The HEI follows WA policy unproblematically, going along with it, thus acquiescence.

The HEIs WA related team has taken steps to develop its own consultation with the HEI to gain clarity around Contextual Admissions as not already provided by Scottish Government nor HEI. The HEIs strategic aims and goals (i. and ii.) includes language which may perpetuate poor understandings of students' experiences and impacts on their education whilst not going far enough to enable institution-wide understandings such as working-class students lived experiences; WA policy; differences between equality and equity. Awareness of social class and related impacts across HE recognised by first CoWA do not filter through the current WA policy nor institution-wide HEI approach.

4.2 HEI Admissions Processes

A major theme emerging from the data was regarding the HEI's Admissions processes. Variation of views and approaches around enacting WA policy across different faculties/departments/course were expressed. As outlined further below, the HEI introduced new admissions processes by way of creating centralised admissions teams. Staff within these teams who were responsible for admitting applicants were neither departmental nor academic staff as was previously the case. The move was led by WA policy SIMD-related targets, to ensure their achievement across the HEI. Consequences of the shift include a loss of personal contact between HEI faculty/department course/module staff and students. However, the faculty staff responsible expressed pressure at end of the admissions window to admit students and hesitancy around professional competency of the centralised admissions team staff in selecting new students. The present section will discuss findings data related to the following: 4.2.1 WA target setting; 4.2.2 SIMD usage and management; 4.2.3 Centralised Admissions Teams; and 4.2.4 Academic Selection vs Recruitment. After which, 4.3 Student Recognition and Support will be explored.

4.2.1 WA target setting

4.2.1a Inequitable distribution of targets across faculties/departments/courses

The HEIs strategy to achieve WA targets, appears to be fragmented, with differing impacts on faculties, departments, courses, staff and students from WA backgrounds:

...differences between the faculties in terms of each has their own sort of SIMD recruitment targets...and then some faculties are higher than others, but as a uni. they've been achieving it, but we've still challenges to achieve it...in [faculty name] ...the way that they manage the WA targets in the faculty is they subdivide that into different departments, so each department has their own respective widening access targets, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator)

Each faculty is given its own WA target regarding accepting a certain number of students from SIMD quintiles 1 and 2 which is then sub-divided across each department. The WA targets are not said to be tailored according to courses/professions which historically have a lower intake of students from WA backgrounds. By not applying targets in a sensitised data-driven way then there is no way to monitor changes to course/profession social class make-up. Therefore, there can be no interruption and/or end social class related social reproduction which is an aim of the WA Policy framework (Scottish Government, 2016).

...we can recruit SIMD a lot easier than other departments, so we tend to take a lot more than our targets... I'm just not sure the balance is quite right...so when faculty get to that point, really they know they're not gonna hit the SIMD target it's just: Can you please take some more? Um, and we are then very quickly getting close to being like a 50/50 split, providing widening access and non-widening access, which, it's not really fair for this department, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

Some departments recruit higher numbers of students from WA backgrounds because it is easier for them than other departments. When it becomes difficult for some departments to hit targets on time, pressure is put upon department staff to accept more students overall than their courses/modules/environments are intended to cope with. The "balance" is viewed as not "quite right" and "not really fair". Here, are examples of meeting the WA targets for target achievement's sake rather than attending to the main and/or underlying problem(s) that such SIMD targets and WA policy are supposed to address.

...we're dealing with very different populations...I think it serves the faculty a purpose that we can take more because it gives them the overall 40%...Back in about 2015, we maybe had about 17% students coming from SIMD 0 to 40 and now last year we had 48% so that is a big expansion, that doesn't mean that's a good for our program, our course, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Again, as demonstrated above, some departments have large increases in student numbers, viewed as not best for courses and thus all students attending those courses. HEI WA targets are spread across all faculties. It is unclear how the percentage split is decided. Year on year

numbers are increased within specific departments/courses with generally high intake numbers and/or backfilled last minute upon HEI request to meet overall faculty numbers and ensure the HEIs WA target has been achieved.

4.2.1b Taking places from one group of students to give to another

There are knock-on impacts which department staff report as negative for their respective departments and courses as well as the ways in which students from WA are viewed:

For us, we only look at SIMD applicants widening access with only SIMD because that's the only thing we have a target for, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

With the WA target narrowly focused on achieving a specific amount of SIMD applicants within each department/faculty, no other metrics nor mechanisms are looked at by department/course staff. There is no mention of understanding the meaning behind introducing such targets by some departmental staff.

...No, as I say the only the only issue we [the department] have with it is the fact that the number is going up all the time and non-SIMD is coming down. It's just, if it was the other way about, there would be, I think a lot of bad feeling about it. I feel like it's discriminating against those who don't come from a poor background, that they're getting less of an opportunity to go to a decent university because the places are getting taken up. It's that, it sounds like I don't want the SIMD students to have a place, of course I do. But I think we need to be just be realistic about it and we need to stop taking the places off non-SIMD, but then maybe that means that we have to take more students. Don't tell [Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2] I said that, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

With a lack of cognisance around the reasoning for WA policy and related targets, those nontraditional students which the new measures seek to include and increase within HE, are viewed as problematic – taking up space from traditional non-SIMD students. The Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1 reports the potential for a lot of "bad feeling" about the increase of students from WA backgrounds to the detriment of non-WA students, rather than "bad feeling" about the way the HEI has chosen to impose the WA targets across the faculties/departments. They continue:

I think because it seems quite blatant, you know that SIMD, it seems like SIMD are getting priority on the places. It should be equal but it's not, and OK, maybe it wasn't equal years ago when people from poorer areas didn't have the same chances to come because the schools didn't give them the same opportunities, and I understand that. But now it just seems it's still not equal, but it's the other way, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

There is recognition that historically, individuals from poorer areas have received differing "chances", with "schools" not offering the "same opportunities" of accessing HE. However, the problem is located within being from a "poorer area" or postcode as according to SIMD quintile, rather than a working class background, regardless of where one lives as well as the level of opportunity afforded by school attended. Another issue stated is that the current rollout of WA targets and increase of SIMD student numbers is viewed as unequal, suggesting instead that these should be the same for all students. However, it is HE access which is unequal and is to be recognised as to do with achieving equity as related to individual circumstances, as discussed further below. The WA policy is highlighted as not working to benefit all students. Whilst it aims to give a more equal opportunity to students from WA backgrounds to access HE it may now leave out other non-SIMD students "it's still not equal, but it's the other way". The above member of staff views students from WA backgrounds as getting "priority" (rather than an equal chance) whilst the problem of some groups of students not getting access to HE now occurs in an opposite way/group than previously. Systemically nothing has changed of HE itself, many capable students are not afforded an opportunity to progress into HE. Again, the lack of places due to a lack of funding and so a cap on student numbers is not discussed. The matter is pitched as one group taking from another, with groups being reversed. The role of the HEI in WA policy enactment is also not mentioned.

One HEI staff member views the above situation quite differently. Moving away from which students are taking spaces, towards why some groups of students may select certain courses and professions over others. The Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager challenges the patterns of and suggested reasoning for students' choices:

Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager: ...And I've had conversations with Head Teachers and I've kind of never massively confronted it but people saying: "But our kids just won't want these sorts of programs because of the postcodes their from" and you're like: how can a postcode dictate what somebody is capable of or what they would want beyond saying that that's the case, beyond looking at past patterns and then saying there's some innate reason in those young people for that rather than it being their circumstances.

Interviewer: Yeah, you won't know if you don't have it, it's not in front of you in a way.

Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager: Yeah, yeah and I do understand about flexibility and wanting people to go with what they want and what they're good at. But it just strikes me as well: Why is it always kids from these areas, what they want and what they're good at ends up

paying less than is deemed less valuable by society than those kids there? It just can't be that can it? Well that's my view, anyway.

The Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager encounters education professionals in strategic positions who look to pupils' postcodes as the main determinant for which courses and professions the pupils will choose rather than their "circumstances". There is recognition of a pattern of one group of pupils from poorer postcode areas appearing to select professions which pay less and viewed as "less valuable by society" whilst other groups of pupils make different choices.

Such differences in choice are explained further:

Yeah, I've spoken to people with about medicine in particular as well. The amount of work that's expected to get onto the course, then during your course, and then in those early years, most people think that that's an insane choice. That so, actually it tends to be that medical families understand and have normalised that level of you know: the number of hours that I put in, and so to everybody else on the outside, it just seems ludicrous. So that kind of stops people going.

I also think you can always think about it as Sosu's and Ellis's research, that if it was, you know, there's an assumption that families where there isn't a high level of education, or that they're not being set-up to go to university don't want their young people to go there or that they have lower ambition for them, and Sosu and Ellis's research, it's like, it's not that at all. Everybody's got really high aspiration, they [parents] just don't know how to help, they can't navigate that path for them or that maybe their experience is less. I think this is what I've seen in my own sort of life, (Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager)

The Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager outlines other patterns of what can be normalised within families such as undertaking medical professions which include many years of intensive study and long hours. This may be off-putting to individuals with little experience of what is expected and seem "insane" or "ludicrous". However, within "medical families" where there are many examples of the above in practice, then such commitment is the norm. The research of "Sosu's and Ellis's" (2014) is drawn upon to highlight other factors impacting HE study/profession choices. Whilst parents have "high aspiration" for their children they be "less experienced" in navigating HE and professional pathways and simply "don't know how to help".

As mentioned earlier with regards to HE access, achieving equity across HE via WA policy would require that the HEI deepens its understanding of the differing circumstances of students as outlined across the above quotes. The National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator outlines social capital theory as a way of utilising a "widening access lens":

Yeah, in terms of that widening access, with the widening access lens on, you know, it's that social capital, which there's a whole basket of things or a whole load of things that go into that basket such as: access to networks; access to advocacy; access to opportunities and so on. In the main, students from backgrounds that qualify as widening access backgrounds, do not have a basket that is full and so you know they're already coming with that disadvantage when they are looking at admissions and therefore the language has to be open, understandable and not confusing because they don't have a network that can help them, sit with them to do that application, to prepare for interview if there is an interview, or to write that personal statement. They rely on schools and, you know and other things. So, it's understanding that whole education landscape when we are talking about widening access and the social capital of particular groups of students, (National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator)

Here, is an awareness of the importance of a "whole education landscape" understanding of the differences in the "social capital of particular groups of students". Recognising that there is a "whole basket of things" necessary to access HE, which require consideration by HEIs, can enable a strategic equitable approach around HE admissions in pointing to areas where HEIs must act to support students from WA backgrounds entry into HE.

4.2.1c WA Policy survives via HEI staffs' "goodwill"

Other department staff understand the capability of students from WA backgrounds and recognise that there is a lack of support from the HEI to ensure such students succeed. Some HEI staff work to overcome the HEI's potential deficits in these areas to ensure students from WA backgrounds are nurtured:

The university will say: Oh we're widening access, we're doing that, we're doing that. But then they'll sit back, and it's left to the goodwill of the staff. Now if I didn't have such a good team students would just disappear...it's not about giving students the answers or making it easier...it's about making sure they have the support and the barriers and the gates are opened and they can see the path, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

Highlighted above is the circumstance that HEI Course Leaders and their departmental colleagues fill the HEI's gaps in achieving WA in tangible ways. If not for staffs' "goodwill" and being a part of a "good team" the students from WA backgrounds would "just disappear". The notion of HEI reliance on HEI staffs' "goodwill" was a recurring theme across the data

which will be discussed further in section 6.3 Student Recognition and Support. Crucially a distinction is made that bettering HE access for such students is to do with the HEI opening their "barriers and the gates" allowing students to "see the path" via a level playing field rather than viewing students as needing a hand up due to perceived deficit(s) on their side.

With the introduction of WA policy and targets came a shift in who reviews applicant applications and is responsible for their numbers and achieving target. Where HEI department/faculty academic staff previously held this role it has switched to centralised admissions/recruitment team of non-academic staff who may possess differing understanding of what is required by potential students to complete courses. Described below are HEI entry practices that have developed following WA target arrival, including potential negative consequences:

...so what we don't want is a race to the bottom in terms of...people are undercutting people in terms of the entry tariff...we are four B's, now we're taking that down to down to one B and three C's or they're (admissions/ recruitment team) accepting somebody at the last minute because they need to hit their target...so unfortunately when you have a target it does change behaviour...if we're not hitting target, we are getting pressure from the recruitment team saying: Can you accept a student with a B and three C's?, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

In some instances, as the WA target deadline approaches admissions/ recruitment team staff request a drop in the entry requirements to allow in individuals with lower grades so that the department therefore faculty and HEI can meet WA target. This change in behaviour may allow entry to applicants who may struggle on the course if knowledge and experience is not at the required level, which they may personalise and drop out rather than understanding that they should have been allowed more time to reach the intended level before HE entry. Where the HEI hits their target, students potentially lose out.

To ensure balance it is important to note that other staff perspectives exist as not all staff involved in the matters discussed here were interviewed. For example, what is not highlighted by participants are potential benefits to having a centralised admissions team such as avoiding selection/recruitment bias in instances where a faculty/department/course might be used to accepting particular groups of students. Future research could include related clarifying and/or follow-up questions.

To summarise, the above section has outlined some HEI faculty/department staffs' unease around the new WA targets. The rollout of WA target across the HEI has been actioned with little consideration as to the impacts for faculties/departments/courses, HEI staff and

importantly students from WA backgrounds. Changes to the application review process including the introduction of new centralised admissions teams means that HEI staff without faculty/department/course/professional standards knowledge and experience are now responsible for student selection/recruitment. Those previously responsible for admissions now have little idea of the ways/metrics in which applicants are now chosen. Personal contact between students and the staff they will learn from are reduced from the start of the process leading to stunted relationship building where this once flourished.

Unequal rollout of WA targets across the HEI and its faculties/departments/course alongside a lack of explanation for the HEIs approach to WA, has seen related staff at odds with the increased numbers of students from WA backgrounds, often viewing such students as undercutting their non-WA counterparts. Staff face pressure to accept students late on in the admissions process as deadlines draw nearer and fear such knee-jerk reactions may lead to a race to the bottom when grades and/or requirements are lowered. Some HEI staff reflect that the HEI says that as an institution they're doing well, on track and hitting targets. However, it is the goodwill of HEI staff who pick up the slack and go the extra mile to bridge systemic gaps and ensure that students' needs are met and that they succeed. The next section will more closely explore the impact of the use of the WA target metric SIMD.

4.2.2 SIMD usage and management

The present section will more closely examine the role and utility of tools and measures utilised to achieve Scottish Government (2016) targets around widening access. Several matters will be outlined including use of SIMD as a measure as applied to WA policy and how students are deemed as applicable for entry according to where they reside.

4.2.2a SIMD as a measure is "blunt", "crude" and "flawed"

The following quotes demonstrate how the participants across the HEI Faculty/Department group repeatedly described SIMD:

...SIMD is also quite blunt in a way, but you don't really know about the individuals...you have these crude measures, SIMD, etc..., (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

...that's a very crude thing...it's quite a crude measurement...missing that richness..., (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

... blunt tool for doing quite important work, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3)

...just an address..., (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

SIMD as a measure is referred to as "blunt" and "crude" as it refers to "just an address". WA System Actors whose perspectives spoke from their experiences working in secondary school & HE, representing HEI's and students expressed opinions of SIMD:

I think the whole SIMD thing is flawed...it's a broad brush, but you need to dig deeper, (Former Secondary School Headteacher, Current 5th/6th year Mentor)

I'd like to add my personal view that SIMD 20 is only one measure...quite a blunt instrument in some ways...we are in danger of missing out...In England, free school meals is used very well...it seems a little more complex to be able to use that here... We need another small...number of other measures to be able to put into this basket of measures, (National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator)

SIMD is about you know where you where you live and actually you could have someone who's from a really affluent background living in a significant less affluent area and would be counted as widening access student. And likewise, you could have someone from a really disadvantaged background who's living in an affluent area and would not be counted as such...I don't necessarily know what the answers are here, but I know that it's something the Universities Scotland, for instance, looking quite intensely at and that we will support them in that work to sort of move away from just SIMD measurements and more towards something that's a little bit more cohesive and more reflective of an actual individual student circumstances rather than sort of a generalised: this is what your postcode is, therefore, you must be either rich or poor and sort of sort of thing, (Student Union Officer)

SIMD as a measure is also described as "flawed" and "broad-brush". Other measures are called for to be included in a "basket of measures" such as "free school meals" similar to England to capture the "richness" of students' individual circumstances rather than having a "generalised" view where one's area-based postcode is assumed to be indicative of families personal affluence. The idea that individuals/groups can be classified together via their postcode was viewed as problematic and unhelpful.

The notion that SIMD may not be an adequate tool was echoed across all participant groups, including the representative of the Scottish Government who had heard similar, or the same critiques. Many participants expressed that the SIMD is an unfit and/or unrepresentative measure. Irrespective of the predominantly negative feedback around SIMDs use, it continues to be utilised as a main measure within WA policy.

Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager expressed unsureness of how "viable" SIMD is as a measure and whether the individuals/groups intended to be positively impacted, are:

I've worked with as SIMD in different sectors as well and I sometimes question, some of the index itself, so maybe where kind of like in a broader sense: how viable some of the indicators are and are we actually reaching the most deprived people? So, more probably from that kind of looking in at it, I think, the way we operate and the way we identify and the way that we do - our offers, is what it is and I think it works well for what we're asked to do, (Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager)

There is a sense that SIMD meets the need according to what is requested by the HEI whilst its viability and reach are questioned. The statement that the way the HEI operates, identifies students from WA backgrounds and makes offers "is what it is" suggests a level of acceptance, that there is nothing that can be done about the situation, which is not the case.

Further reflected on, by the same staff member, is whether the measure is any good at identifying those most in need and how the boundary lines across SIMD quintiles are drawn:

But I guess my kind of broader theory or thoughts on it are really around about the index itself and how good it is at identifying people that are really in need.

... it may be a bit political but if you're in the 21 to 40 [quintile range] group, how big a difference is there if you're in postcode 39 to post code 41 for example, you know the areas, I do kind of wonder about that as well, because obviously there's a boundary that's been set. But how disparate is the either side of that boundary?

Because that person that's been classed as not one of our widening access categories, you know how, how different are they from somebody that's...do you know? And then there's is that truly fair? I don't know, so I do have my kind of doubts about some of that, but I don't obviously let that impact on my work, and I still deliver what we're asked to deliver, but I suppose I'd get more questions around about that than how we actually do it, (Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager)

There is a clear lack of confidence in SIMD as a measure and its ability to assist HEIs in ascertaining which students are from WA backgrounds and require related support into HE and which do not. Repeated is the recognition that some are included who ought not to be whilst those in need are left out. The Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager does not let this "impact" on their work and does not identify any way of raising their concerns with the HEI.

Whether SIMD as a measure is the right tool to use is examined by another member of HEI staff in a crucial role:

I think it is the difficulties about whether we're using the right measures, and whether we need to be a bit more sophisticated because we've got a mixture of...well, most of them are, we've got an area based measure which I'm quite confident with SIMD I'm really comfortable that if you live in an SIMD20 area you are, there are things from your background, and your circumstances that will negatively affect your opportunity to go to university. So even if you are from a relatively affluent household income, that that culture in that environment isn't necessarily one that would be heading towards Higher Education. So, I'm comfortable that we use SIMD but that misses out all of the disadvantaged individuals who live in more affluent areas. And so, as an area-based measure, it's not that great. It's a proxy for disadvantage, not an actual measure of disadvantage, (Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager)

Noted are the challenges of using SIMD as measure and the need for it to be "a bit more sophisticated". There is feeling of being "comfortable" that should a student reside in certain postcode areas outlined within the measure such as SIMD 20 (most deprived) then they are likely to experience difficulties in accessing HE. However, as it is "area-based" it misses those living out with the specified area. Also, it is identified as "a proxy for disadvantage, not an actual measure of disadvantage", representative but not accurate.

Discussion with the Scottish Government Representative highlighted that SIMD has previously been cited as a blunt tool with several limitations during stakeholder feedback, mirroring the above observations.

The following sub-sections will outline data gathered around SIMD and its inadequacies in more detail.

4.2.2b SIMD is not representative of all students intended

Further to the above critiques around SIMD not capturing all students who may be applicable, the example given below outlines that mature students who would have been classed as WA may lose out due to changing their life circumstances as well as address:

I think it's a really crude measurement, the postcode. So, for instance, I'll give you an example. When we look at the [non-direct entry route program], we don't insist on it just being on SIMD. It's actually if anybody wants to come through that route and they're a mature student, we considered it because it's they've left school with no qualifications. OK, they often have a lot to bring to the course. They might be bringing in diversity. They're coming from an ethnic minority background. Many people as well are, some of our students that I can think of may have been SIMD when they left school 20 years ago, but they've been working for 15 years. They've maybe

ran their own business, they've they're married. They have now purchased their own property, you know, maybe just outside the boundary of where they grew up, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

The above demonstrates that WA is being stretched to include those of diverse and/or ethnic minority backgrounds as it is not strictly understood as to do with social class but an address. Those from ethnic minority backgrounds can be supported into HE via Equality, Inclusion and Diversity practices and are recognised in law, students from working class backgrounds are not afforded the above hence the implementation of WA policies.

Also reiterated is that not all those who live poor and/or affluent postcodes are themselves poor and/or affluent. This links to ideas around urban postcodes vs rural and assumptions that can be made of them:

So, I mean, there could be hidden poverty in rural areas. That's not really understood or doesn't maybe come out in the same way you know you might be a farmer that has owned your farm for 140 years, but you've not got a penny to your name. These are kind of big issues that we don't really ever unpick. So, I think it's great for the minority, but for these maybe one-off cases it's not, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

The measure does not highlight the circumstances faced by individuals. Many aspects of the ways in which SIMD might not perform well for those intended are never unpicked.

In other examples given, some areas are not classed as SIMD 0-40 but students coming from such areas may bring the same types of considerations as those from areas which are classified as such. SIMD areas are not as wide as they need to be therefore many folks are missed out as explained further in an example given by a Former Secondary School Headteacher, Current 5th/6th year Mentor, drawing from her experience of students with differing individual circumstances:

I think the whole SIMD thing is flawed because even within that you would get, I can see the girl, I knew her mom and dad. So, she didn't go to university but went to work in the housing, local homes, good job, her mom and dad would be solid citizens, you know, nice house, do you know what I mean?

So, you get that and then you get somebody who's from a fairly chaotic background all within the same school, but they'd all be SIMD 8, 9 or 10. So that's, you know, it almost needs to be more individualised than that. Well other markers you think a lot of people say like, you know, free school meals could be a marker, but it's just financial, cause people can have school meals. I mean I was handling people at school meals, but their mother might have gone to Cambridge,

she would just fall on hard times, (Former Secondary School Headteacher, Current 5th/6th year Mentor)

The above quote suggests that within the SIMD quintile postcode areas there is a vast range of lived experiences which are not touch upon by the measure. Including Free School Meals (FSM) as measure is suggested but with caution as whilst it may be an indicator of a family's financial standing, a monetary shortfall could be a temporary. There are real differences between families who momentarily "fall on hard times" but can bounce back due to parental education and/or opportunities and those whose situation is permanent. Knowing a students' SIMD area is not the same as knowing their socio-economic background or social class and the ways in which social class differences can impact upon a students' education journey.

The Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager highlights that there are some patterns associated with a postcode area-related view of potential applicants:

I mean, I do understand about flexibility and wanting people to go with what they want and what they're good at. But it just strikes me as well: Why is it always kids from these areas what they want and what they're good at ends up paying less than is deemed less valuable by society than those kids there? It just, it just can't be that can it? Well, that's my view, anyway, (Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager)

Below, examples are given by participants as to the ways in which use of SIMD can enable some families with more resources and less need of WA policy, gaming the system to their benefit.

4.2.2c SIMD can lead to gaming the system

As expressed earlier, there is concern across participant groups around used of an area-based rather than individual-based measure to ensure opportunities of HE entry are going to those intended.

We know lots of people who set their kids up in a flat and move to the [SIMD 0-40 area of the city] or rent a property in the [SIMD 0-40 area of the city] or an area like that, that comes under SIMD, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

By renting or buying homes in SIMD 0-40 postcodes the applicants of affluent parents will appear as eligible for consideration of HE entry under WA policy when they are not in acute need of such affordances.

...there's probably an element of gaming the system... I think it's a probably a blunt tool for doing quite important work...I've heard, just anecdotally, I've heard some people say, you know,

it's actually people might move, they move, just give other addresses and that always happens as soon as you set up the system, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3)

This aspect is described as "gaming the system" which is considered inevitable "as soon as you set up the system". As the measure is linked to postcode rather than family circumstance it is easy for those who can afford it to acquire a property in the right postcode and enter HE with more guarantees as presumed to be a student from a WA background.

So, I think we often have to be careful that we're not making huge assumptions across the board, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Some HEI staff are aware of the missteps that can be made if "assumptions" are made regarding students' backgrounds when solely based on SIMD. Another participant outlines that it is "middle class" family's awareness of the education system which continues to assist them in helping their children get ahead:

...probably now people, more middle class people like SIMD top quintile areas are also aware of it [WA policy & use of SIMD as an HE entry measure] because they're now seeing that...there's a priority to the SIMD applicants...it's equalisation of the playing field...they're probably also more aware of it because of the way that the Scottish government funds our education system, places are limited and we're trying to rebalance that distribution.

So, they also...perceive maybe less chance getting the offer or not because of the area they're in. I've also heard of people, I think it was at [name of University], heard this story where the parents had bought flat in an SIMD area specifically to do the university application form and that was found out that the, you know, the person didn't live there, it was just to use this, they might be even renting out a flat to someone, but they use that address to do the application just to get into nursing, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

The ability to game the system is widely recognised as mentioned by HEI staff across differing departments. Without other measures included within "a basket of measures" HEI staff have no way of knowing whether applicants they admit into HE via WA policies are those who the WA policy intends to benefit and support.

HEI staff reflect that previously folks goals were to be educated, reside in a "nice area" and send their children to a "good" school:

We talk about that quite often in here actually, because a lot of us remember back when your goal was to move to nice area, get kids in a good school, get them in a good university...I know some people in here who [say]: Well, I'm just going to get a flat, buy a flat in a SIMD area, you

know, and my son can register from there and they'll get in, you know, and I think a lot of people are thinking like that now, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

The above staff perspective suggests a potential concern that some traditionally working-class families may be penalised for doing well, achieving some success and becoming more affluent, moving from SIMD 0-40 postcodes to non-SIMD 0-40 postcodes. Such folks may be viewed as breaking patterns of social reproduction for their families only to find their children then disadvantaged as they are not applicable for HE entry via WA policy due to the shift in postcode. If such families can afford to, they may also buy or rent in SIMD 0-40 postcodes to ensure their children do not miss out on what may be viewed as easier and/or guaranteed access to HE.

A different concern arose regarding non-direct entry route 1 which is advertised online, via the HEI faculty webpage, as a WA initiative. However, anyone can apply.

...another tension is because our entry requirements are lower, we don't want this to be a back door entry route for non-SIMD applicants, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

From the faculty staff perspective, they are aware that the entry route may become a "back door" for students from non-WA backgrounds as it may be seen as a softer start and easier entry into HE.

4.2.2d SIMD can equate disadvantage and poverty

Some HEI staff may equate disadvantage and poverty when discussing whether students from WA or working-class backgrounds have access to and utilise support upon gaining entry into HE.

So, they're not actually, they're not falling behind in class due to, you know, that they've maybe had the reduced offer, in that sense, it might just be more the...I mean, we don't actually get lots of people coming in saying that they're struggling, you know. Everyone sort of can struggle financially, that's fine. It's not typically at this sort of group that we find it could just be anyone, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

The notion of students who do or do not "struggle" is expressed as related to finances and applicable to all students. There is no mention of struggling as related to disadvantage due to social class which impacts only certain students such as not being aware of support available and/or comfortable asking and/or accessing it, for example.

WA related National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator from outside of the HEI illuminates how disadvantage is understood across the HE landscape:

Just because the metric is there, SIMD metric, and I think because that's one of the dangers of using just one. You know one thing like that, that everyone thinks it's about SIMD, that it is about poverty and therefore you, you miss out on a whole range and that's what I think we are doing. We are probably missing out on some special interest groups who should be, you know who should have access to the support and other things that universities have, who don't know about it.

That was such a good question of yours around that understanding whether SG [Scottish Government] or universities are thinking that widening access is about poverty. I think that's such a good question because the Scottish Government target is around SIMD 20, it's actually placed to that, (National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator)

The general perception of SIMD is that it is to do with poverty. SIMD is "actually placed to that" as measure that is what it intends to identify – level of deprivation, of which income is a contributory factor. HEIs also equate WA policies, which utilise SIMD, as to do with poverty rather than social class related disadvantage. Opportunities for HEIs to understand students from WA background's lives and experiences, and the types of support which may be required are missed.

A lack of clarity was observed from the Scottish Government representative regarding how disadvantage is understood. The term disadvantaged was said to be linked by some to the deficit model and folks who experience barriers. The term was stated as being narrowly based on income and sometimes on postcode. It was not known whether the Scottish Government took the time to consider what might result in someone being disadvantaged.

To conclude, the present section has discussed participants observations of SIMD and its utility regarding WA policies as which it forms a crucial part. SIMD gives a generic view of students' postcode area rather than a specific understanding of students' individual circumstances which may impact upon HE access and success. As it is the only measure used it obscures rather than informs, a collection of measures are considered to be more useful. The measure is not representative of all students intended to benefit from WA policies as it is area-based rather than individual-based. It is skewed towards those living in urban areas and neglects a thorough understanding of those living rurally. Students can live very different family experiences, requiring attuned levels of support all of which is not captured across a blanket postcode area. Crucially, SIMD as a quantifiable measure distracts from any discussion of social class as important. None of the respondents mention social class even though they are critical of the SIMD usage.

Several members of HEI staff across different departments discuss instances of gaming the system whereby affluent, middle-class families buy and/or rent properties within more disadvantaged postcodes to access HE more readily. This follows an understanding of Scottish Government changes to HE access and inclusion of new WA policy. Those in the know and who can afford it, surpass the guardrails intended to ensure equality. Finally, use of SIMD only without explanation of social class differences leads to HEI staff equating WA and disadvantage to poverty. Opportunities of offerings support to those in need are missed. The next sub-section will address HEI-wide changes around faculty/department admissions processes following the introduction of WA policy.

4.2.3 Centralised Admissions Teams

4.2.3a In faculty/department admissions and centralised admissions

Rather than HEI staff from within each faculty/department being responsible for admissions as previous, centralised admissions teams were created by the HEI for each faculty. Each team are tasked with admitting all students and ensuring that WA targets related to SIMD are met across the faculty:

Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1: ...But we used to have like 80-90 students coming in every Wednesday afternoon [for an induction event] and we would send them out like folders and information, and they would all be coming in and holding on to them and yeah, it just it just worked.

Interviewer: Do you still send them out folders and things?

Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1: No. So, I don't have any contact, and again, we're in a very strong position in that we don't have to sell ourselves. We like chase them away with a stick, so you don't really have to do anything.

Interviewer: Do you know what the justification was for changing it to centralisation?

Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1: I think it was to do the SIMD. I think it is to try and manage that as a whole... Because some departments just were not successful at that point.

Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1 describes the process before WA policy was introduced. HEI department staff liaised directly with students who would receive information ahead of an on-campus event. Courses within their department were sought after, little work was needed to gain student cohorts each year, which is not the same for every HEI department.

The HEIs approach to WA policy related admissions is to treat it as "a whole", institution-wide, rather than developing a nuanced rollout which accounts for student from WA backgrounds numbers across differing faculties/departments/courses/professions and ensures balance across them.

The acknowledgement that each department/faculty has a different admissions process was reiterated by the HEI Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager:

...certainly at [HEI name] you'll maybe hear this from other people, it's the faculties kind of do their own thing. So, they're in charge of what happens, they have their own targets. So, we've got to help them to ensure that there's uniformity, because the policies are right across the institution. So, it's kind of making sure that what is in policy is actually implemented in an effective way. And so that's my role is less about having kind of individual conversations with selectors although I have been brought in to do that on the occasion to actually say: You're not doing what we're supposed to be doing and that's going to get us in trouble.

It's more about effective mechanisms, so that we can actually check things, or making sure that people, the selectors know the policy that their sufficiently trained, you understand the importance of it and doing it that way, but I think, with the people that you're going to speak to, to take [WA Support Officer/Manager] for example, he goes to faculty and selection or recruitment committees, and talks through those things with them, and will help them make those... not decisions about individual students, but maybe decisions about what a minimum entry offer could be, (Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager)

Whilst WA policies are institution-wide, faculties are understood to be responsible for hitting WA targets within their own faculty and have different approaches when compared to each other. Both the Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager and WA Support Officer/Manager work to support admissions decisions in the form of training and/or conversation around contextual admissions processes. However, other than HEI staff looking at applications and trying to achieve their WA target by taking on more students from WA backgrounds, there is very little sense of nurturing applicants or making adjustments to current practices which is not problem responsive. Students from WA backgrounds cannot get close to HE until other things are addressed and in place.

4.2.3b Inconsistency of admissions approaches

Creating a centralised admissions team seeks to solve one problem, however, it may have created others. HEI department/faculty staff are not sure of how the central admissions teams process applications, nor what types/depth of training they receive, if any:

The admissions team read a personal statement. Let's see, I assume you [the centralised admissions team] read the personal statement. That's what they're meant to be doing. I assume they do. I dunno how long they spend on that. If you consider how many applications or some come in and the size of the team but I don't know, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

The Faculty A, Department B, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1 expresses assumptions around the centralised admissions teams process and cannot definitively say what happens.

I do think that's problematic because the people who are selecting for the [specific qualification] are not from the profession, have no experience of working with the students in placement, have no real overview of I suppose what was required in the profession. So yeah, I think that that is a problem, and they probably have limited even knowledge or experience or understanding of the [particular profession] related Standards and so on, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Here the Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector who is responsible for interviewing applicants selected by the faculty's central admissions team, highlights that the admissions process must require knowledge of the professional standards for the profession when selecting potential students. There is a lack of confidence in level of experience of such prerequisites of central admissions team staff, viewed as problematic by some course/module staff. Some academic staff expressed that the central admissions team staff may not select the right candidates from any social group:

It creates the grades of the gatekeeper – if you don't have the grades, you won't be considered for anything else...They [faculty's central admissions team] would probably say that they're trained to kind of do all of this, and they are in some ways but can you imagine if you've got 100 applicants, you're going to go with the highest grades, that's what it boils down to, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

The Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager above discusses implementing WA policy across the HEI and that selectors are to be adequately trained. However, different faculties staff members express uncertainty of the training received, and processes utilised by the faculty's central admissions team, including hesitancy regarding whether the training is faculty/course/profession specific. Concern is echoed regarding lining up the expectations of department/faculty staff and central admissions team staff of what a successful applicant looks like. There is a knowledge/experience/professional expectations gap between the above staff groups which impacts admissions processes.

The previous approach is preferred by some department/course staff whereby they met with applicants on-campus to get a sense of who they are/suitability beyond reading their applications:

I think that was better in a way because you weren't just looking at the personal statement, you weren't just looking at their grades. We would then fill out a little form to the department and say: Yeah, they were very confident, they were articulate, they would look me in the eye when I was speaking to them...I think then you've got a better feel for the individual and I think in a way, you know, that's a bit fairer than just looking at their UCAS application, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

A department/course staff involved person-to-person approach is favoured during the application process rather than not knowing who is entering and what metrics are utilised to make those decisions. They do however note the importance of direct eye-contact which may be more easy and a social norm for middle class students. Whilst it is presented as a way to value everyone it may actually be discriminatory.

Some faculty staff had an understanding that better grades may come from more opportunities to study rather than indicating better course/profession aptitude:

...not everybody has the same opportunity at school or to achieve the A's etc. that were required for some of our [faculty name] degree programs and it was also recognised that just because someone's academically good at getting grades and exams doesn't mean that they're going to be necessarily a good [profession] and someone that's maybe more practically minded could also be a good [profession], but they're not getting the sort of same grades, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

The above differences across admissions decision-making processes ultimately affect the likelihood of being selected as a student from a WA background.

4.2.3c Balancing personalisation vs mechanisation

HEI department/faculty staff may not know any staff within their own faculty's central admissions team:

I don't know who I am sending it to [email], I am sending it to a team...there's no personal communication really at all...open days are probably the only opportunity that we have to actually have a conversation when they're on the stall, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Whilst other HEI faculty/department staff are less involved and not responsible for the admissions processes taken, altering interaction with applicants and/or future students leads to removal of personal contact:

I think the main thing that all of us see is the lack of personal contact. I think because it's like a machine - faculty admissions. It's very much just data processing. Um, they don't know anything about the students, whereas when it was managed within the department...some students have a backstory so you would get to know them and sometimes get to know some of their families, parents and stuff and have a lot more interaction with them. It's very much just numbers driven, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

My biggest complaint is not spending enough time with students...because of twice as many students and half the number of staff...if you were to come here 10 years ago, our 1st year intake was 120-130, its 237 at the moment with no change in staff. Ok right, so something has to give and the time with the student has to give...

So, I would say the system, I don't want to call it the industrialisation of higher education, but it is. That we are...we've got a sausage machine, we're a process now. You come in, you do stuff, you get a degree, you move on. That is very much the way across the sector, not just [HEI name] but the sector as well. We've fallen victim to that. So, we don't get to know people as well, we can't know them, empathise with them as much because we don't get the time. That's a system issue, not a departmental one.

You lose track of people, so we just get what we're given at the end of that process...we haven't really had our relationship beforehand, whereas we might have gone to schools, we might have had interviews. We've never seen your interview, you know that t-shirt and that hoodie, that type of thing and you have fun in those open days. That's all gone. So, the short answer is from a business perspective, cause the university is a business, it's more economical, it's more consistent, but the relational piece has been lost I think, (Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2)

The admissions process has become mechanised, with relationship building between academic/support staff and students no longer occurring, with course/module staff unable to get to know, empathise nor enjoy time with students. Increases in students without increases in staff nor allocated time with students leaves staff unable to foster the types of relational aspects of the HE journey as they once did.

To summarise, following the introduction of WA policy changes were made across faculties whereby faculty/department/course-related staff shifted from being responsible for student admissions and instead separate admissions teams were created. The new centralised

admissions team staff have little experience nor understanding of the faculties/departments/courses they are now recruiting for/admitting students into. The previous admissions staff (working within faculties/departments) are unaware of how students are now being selected, what sorts of training has been provided to support this shift, if any, nor who the new admissions staff are. These changes alongside increased student numbers with no increases in staff not student time allocation has led to the drop-off of "relational" aspects between faculty/department/course staff and the students they are responsible for which is now "lost". Such staff report that the HEI has shifted to a "sausage machine, we're a process now" as the HEI is positioned as a "business, it's more economical" which may be beneficial for the HEI but not its staff nor students. The following sub-section outlines differences found between admissions processes depending on faculty/department/course demands including whether students are sought out via recruitment or chosen from via selection.

4.2.4 Academic Selection vs Recruitment

Some departments/courses must actively recruit students whilst others can select from hundreds of applicants as they are over-subscribed. Despite Contextual Admissions policy which states the minimum grades needed to apply being advertised, there are differences reported between department staff views of selection vs recruitment:

Although the prospectus might say, you know: three A's and a B, if you're not five A's and potentially two or three A's at Advanced Highers, you're well down the list, so they can, uh, effectively if you like, just skim the, the cream, uh, off the top, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Some departments/courses can be highly selective as capable of attracting students with the sought after Higher and/or Advanced Higher grades. Some department/course staff attitudes have yet to shift towards understanding why WA and Contextual Admissions policies are in place and why students without the top grades must also be considered:

Well, it's departmental in terms of a departmental policy, but where it comes from I don't know, in terms of maybe the history or is it that they [department/course staff] just don't need to or they don't want to, cause they have so many applicants from, you know, the Highers or whatever, they choose not to...

So yeah, there's, there's selectivity and then there's also sort of recruitment. But in terms of equity, should department be allowed to say: No, we're not taking someone with an alternative entry qualification? (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Some students from WA backgrounds may apply to HE after attending a FE college and gaining HNC/D qualifications. The above statements highlight that it is not only those students without a certain amount/level of Highers/Advanced Highers which some department/course staff may take issue with, but also those with "alternative entry qualifications". There is disharmony around the implementation of WA policy within faculties/departments and attitudes among related staff.

Department/course staff also face top-down HEI pressure to rank highly on league tables whilst undertaking WA policy:

We get upset if we're not the top five in the country. We are probably setting about [ranking] just now. Not good enough, but that's it. It depends how you measure it. So, there are several league tables that we look at, so Times Higher Education, the Guardian and something called the Complete University Guide. They published the stats for all universities. So if we're in the Complete University Guide, if we're not in the top ten, that's the [department/course staff] backside kicked and then they measure things like student satisfaction, student requirements, graduate settlement, how many people leave your program and get a graduate job within six months and your research quality, that's to do with the funding and number of papers that you publish, (Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2)

Tensions exist encircling: WA policy; demands of department/course staffs' role; and esteem of faculties/departments, the latter of which maybe a more pressing priority for stretched staff. The work of widening access is pushed down and only SIMD target achievement is sought usually made up by over-subscribed courses with large student numbers. Assumptions are made about recruitment vs selection and the suitability of students from WA backgrounds with alternative entry qualifications or lower/fewer Highers/Advanced Highers and the effort needed to ensure high league table rankings.

For another department, the admissions process is "probably not" fair. There is a worry from Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3 that the recruitment processes lead to students from traditional non-WA backgrounds being accepted "repeatedly" and that "we're not really making a difference" in attracting students from "diverse backgrounds":

Is it fair? Probably not, but it's just that I got feeling as though we're clearly because of the cohorts of students that we're repeatedly getting and we're not really making a difference, I think there needs to be something done about being much more proactive in recruiting from diverse backgrounds and then will we need to do some work in our own staff body to really examine what do we understand because it comes back to this thing...have we got a clear agreement about what we mean by inclusion and what we might, what we might be putting up as barriers? (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3)

Suggested above is the need for the staff/department/HEI to come together and agree on what is meant by "inclusion" and what "barriers" exist for students from WA backgrounds to provide clarity and improve recruitment processes.

The barriers discussed include how students are perceived regarding speaking, writing and dressing in the "right way" and that HEI staff are to "check" themselves and "unlearn" such biases:

And it might be things like students don't speak in the right way, they don't write in the right way, they don't dress in the right way. I just think some of it starts in school, you know, and I've been in schools and I know that it actually happens in very kind of- people don't even know they're doing it, because I didn't know I was doing it. And I didn't know I was doing it when I started at the university and I had to kind of unlearn some things and then go check myself. Check what you're doing here because you begin to see more and more, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3)

To review, there are different entry routes, admissions processes, and HEI staff beliefs and biases around HE access across the HEIs faculties/departments/courses. Not all of these are aligned with the goals of WA policy and may even undermine it. From some staff across different faculties there was a reoccurring focus on the impact of HEI staff members thoughts and practices regarding which applicants ought to be successful and admitted into the HEI. HEI staff members individual as well as HEI-wide introspection was suggested. As it stands, the current admissions processes were stated as "probably not" fair.

Next, matters related to 4.3 Student Recognition and Support will be discussed.

4.3 Student Recognition and Support

Once students from WA backgrounds are accepted into the HEI the next aspect of interest to the present study is whether they receive any support, where needed/necessary, throughout their education journey, or not.

The current section will outline themes which emerged relating to the HEI's means of identifying students from WA backgrounds and how this information is shared with HEI staff and students involved; the ways in which student support is understood and/or given; and what is known regarding the retention of students from WA backgrounds. The above will be discussed across three sub-sections: 6.3.1. Student Recognition, 6.3.2. Student Support, and 6.3.3. Student Retention

4.3.1 Student Recognition

The present section outlines findings related to whether students from WA backgrounds are recognised as such, including whether information related to their status is kept, where it is stored and who has access to it: a. HEIs data and technology systems leave HEI staff flying blind. Also highlighted is the HEI, and subsequent HEI staff, approach of informing HEI staff and students from WA backgrounds of WA policy/status: b. No consensus around disclosure of student WA status. Lastly, the ways in which HEI staff can tell which students are from WA backgrounds and which are not identified: c. Differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds.

4.3.1a HEIs data and technology systems leave HEI staff flying blind

Across interviews with HEI System Actors and HEI faculty/department/course staff it became clear that most HEI staff are unaware of which students are from WA backgrounds and which are not. Whilst the WA policy metric of SIMD will denote how many students have been accepted into each faculty/department, these numbers are not utilised in any tangible way which recognises nor leads to support mechanisms for individual students:

...but I would not know necessarily which one is WA student or not, because I never really go into the student record and look at that flag...we'd have to go back to admissions cause I don't think SIMD is not even a flag in the [data system] student record. I don't think it is and so yeah, once they're in, I don't know, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Only the HEI faculty/department/course staff who were had previous admissions related roles prior to admissions centralisation can access a system which has a "flag" identifying whether a student is from a WA background or not. Aside from these few previously admissions-involved staff members, all other HEI staff do not know who is and is not from a WA background within their faculty/department/courses/classes:

...a lot of academics, you know, they'll have their class list, they don't know who's who, on the class list of what their background is. So, there isn't something necessarily any extra support for anybody from that sort of different background. And we have talked about, you know, should there be, you know, specific small group tutorial sessions for sort of widening access student? Uh, and some people believe, yes, it would be good to put that in place and other people believe no, we should treat all students equally once they're in the university and, and no difference. So, lots of different opinions. That's part of the challenge of getting anything done in an academic department. There's so many, so many opinions, and all good rationale and all good reasoning and all good arguments, etc., (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

The lack of unity around an HEI-wide approach to WA policy disclosure of students WA status to students from WA backgrounds and HEI staff leads to differences in HEI staff opinions about whether and what support could be in place and whether equity or equality is embodied once students enter the HEI. Achieving any change within specific departments is viewed as a "challenge" as there are "so many opinions" rather than shared vision of what is to be enacted. The reactions concerning student support options or lack therefore will be highlighted further in section 6.3.2. Student Support, below.

The student data system is highlighted as a barrier to recognising students backgrounds:

The barrier is definitely the systems. It would be better if we could pull when they get onto [student data system] if we could see easily have a flag and it doesn't have to be everyone, but it could be certain people in each faculty could have a flag and then we would have an idea. Again, I'm not sure how we would treat them different in the sense of, because we want to make sure its inclusive for all, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

For the staff who can access the specific information on the student data system, they can view information for each student but not as a class for example, there is no running list:

Again, because when they come in to see us, we don't know necessarily, again, because I can't see it on the [student data system] I would need to go through every student who comes to see me, I need to go through their admissions, file and see if they're widening access. So, it's not something necessarily that they come in, we directly discuss. We do try and keep a track, you know, if people come in and we will keep, we always keep our notes and stuff and we can look back at these things, it's stuff we have thought about, but it's, it's such a man- given our system, it's such a manual process. It's something until it's going, until we see it as a massive issue in the sense of, yeah, all of these students are coming from the same background... obviously we are trying to target more schools in different areas and get people supply. So, if we do, if our numbers continue to increase it's something we want to look at, we're just maybe not at that

stage as of yet, cause we don't have a: Oh, I've seen 10 today and 5 have been widening access, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

The current student data system's limitations lead to a "manual process" of HEI staff having to create and collate WA information separately, if they choose to at all. When students do seek staff support, notes are taken however it is unclear where these are contained and who can access them. HEI staff are aware that students with differing levels of experience are entering the HEI as the HEI is actively targeting "more schools in different areas". Students already seek support from HEI staff and on occasion their backgrounds will be looked up manually. However, HEI staff have no idea how many students who seek support are from WA backgrounds. The staff member below, states that until it becomes a "massive issue" nothing will change:

Interviewer: Yeah. So, is that something that would be checked? You know, if you came in, so your 10 students, like how would you know that 5 were or weren't [students from WA backgrounds] unless you checked?

Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2: That's something, so I wouldn't.

Interviewer: So, you wouldn't check?

Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2: No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2: No, we don't have, unfortunately don't have the capacity where there's only two of us as advisors with over 2000 students.

The lack of an adequate student data system coupled with a manual process of checking students' status can lead to staff not checking whether a student is from a WA background as they are under staffed and students too numerous.

Even in instances where HEI staff can view a students' WA status, due to this being linked with SIMD which, as aforementioned is describing a postcode areas' level of deprivation not an individual's circumstances, this knowledge does not translate to actionable support as HEI staff can assume no support is required as not all those who reside in such areas require it:

No, I mean because we wouldn't know because they would register from a SIMD address... I'm just not sure that's the best way to do it. I mean, I, I stay in a 20-40 postcode, and I wouldn't say that every where's deprived, if you like, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

Other HEI staff view it as "unfair" to know:

Because we can't really that would be unfair to keep that in the records once that, you know, it's helped to get them into university, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

The above disparities across HEI staff responses signal a lack of a clear over-arching WA policy ethos which considers what data is gathered and how it is to be used to understand students from WA backgrounds experiences upon entering the HEI. Viewing knowing as "unfair" suggests that if staff are aware of who is classed as being from a WA background, then this may lead to being treated differently (either favourably or unfavourably) and so produce bias rather than benefit via equity – treated differently as according to need. The above view is unlikely to be reached if to do with a student from an ethnic minority background or who experiences disability, for example.

The data and technology systems used by the HEIs do not afford a disaggregated data overview which would enable HEI staff, within strategic system actor or academic/ student support roles, to see the spread of students from WA backgrounds across differing faculties/departments/courses:

But when I've come here, it seems to be: Oh, we've got a spreadsheet. I'm sorry? Um, it seems to be lots of spreadsheets. There's no student information system, so we have no knowledge of what the faculties are doing, departments are doing, nothing is held, nothing's contained, (Admissions & Student Lifecycle, Data Administrator 1)

HEI staff are unable to identify students backgrounds due to lack of access to a data system unless access was included within previous job responsibilities. They cannot see if students are from SIMD areas/ WA backgrounds and are flying blind in terms of understanding their student cohorts and what adaptations ought to be considered/enacted. Opportunities to gather data regarding what supports and/or adaptations may impact and/or benefit such students are missed. Those in strategic system actor roles also have no clear overview of what faculties and departments are doing including what approaches are taken regarding WA policy enactments and students from WA backgrounds.

4.3.1b No consensus around disclosure of students WA status

Regardless of whether HEI staff have access to the admissions data and technology systems which enable them to view a students' WA status, there is no HEI-wide consensus around

whether or not the HEI is to inform all HEI staff nor whether HEI staff are to tell students, who is and who is not classed as WA. No conversations are expected and/or encouraged to occur between HEI academic staff and students from WA backgrounds highlighting the existence of WA policy, types of support available, and how to access it:

We do see students to come through, and then maybe speak to us. Difficult in a sense that a lot of the students don't know their widening access as such. It's only if, you know, some of them do know that they've come, they've got an offer because they've come from quintile 1, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

Some students from WA backgrounds do seek out HEI staff for support. However, the students themselves may not know that they are classed as WA. Some students are aware as they know they've entered HE via Contextual Admissions policy however they may not know what other support(s) are available such as a "grant scheme":

I would never tell a student when they came in: Oh, you got an offer because you're widening access. So, no...they are getting a bit savvy to it now as well, which is good. I'm glad people are sort of understanding you're gonna get an offer, you know, reduced offer cause our requirements are really tough. Um, so it's more when they get here you can see the differences maybe in, you know for example, I've had someone come in and say: Oh, when do I get my laptop cause I can't afford to get one? I was like: Well, we don't give out laptops. It's not a... so it's things like that. So obviously we've got the, um, grant scheme, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

Above, the member of HEI staff emphatically states that they "would never tell a student" who came to speak with them that they are identified as a student from a WA background. What is recognised as "really tough" is the HEIs entry "requirements" not that a student has requested a laptop, an essential coursework tool, as they "can't afford to get one".

We don't wanna invite them and say: You're the 94 students, you know, that we've got for this group, you know, we are seeing you as widening access who need additional support, and half of them [students from WA backgrounds] are going: I don't need that, I've got five A's, why do I need the extra support? (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

There is also reluctance around inviting students from WA backgrounds to come together as a group and learn about WA policy, their status and potential supports such as the aforementioned grants scheme similar approaches taken with BAME and/or care experienced students. Hesitancy appears in relation to discussions of support framed as "additional" rather than simply as available. An assumption is made that "half of them" may not "need" support as they have

high grade however one circumstance does not infer the other. The above statement also ignores the other half of students who may require some support but are not informed as to where to receive it nor that they have entitlement to it.

Other concerns with disclosure of WA policy to students include when comparisons are made between students by students particularly regarding HE entry and why one person may get a place whilst another does not. HEI staff have to ask for students' postcodes in a non-direct way so as not to alert the student to the fact that they may be entitled to apply as a student from a WA background. Staff would check students' postcodes on the SIMD website then give advice accordingly all without the students' knowledge of such checks and affordances:

I don't know. I don't know. I've often thought about that because when I was doing admissions, somebody phoned up asking about getting a place - you had to try to understand SIMD and you had to just say things like: Oh maybe you could drop me an e-mail with your name and full postal address. You know so that you could then check the SIMD before you went back to him.

And I think it's still like that because nobody just comes out and says it because I think it would cause chaos. I mean if that person saw that e-mail... I think there would be, they certainly wouldn't let it go ... And may have come up against it previously where some decide an offer because of SIMD and a pal then sitting in the class, he stays in the SIMD postcode and he doesn't, and they're literally maybe two streets away from each other. But he's got an offer and he didn't, and they're sitting in the same grades, that's a difficult one, (Faculty A, Department A, Operations Manager 1)

Students could have the same grades but because they live "two streets away" from each other, one could have a successful HE applicant and other not due to the postcode area-based measure of SIMD. There is complexity around WA policy enactment whereby HEI staff must navigate applicant rejections delicately so as not to cause disarray. As there is no established top-down directive regarding how such situations are to be handled, HEI staff do not discuss circumstances with students: "nobody just comes out and says it because I think it would cause chaos". HEI staff are on the frontline of WA policy enactment without a HEI-wide consensus around how WA policy is to be addressed. Some HEI staff raise concerns around discussing WA policy with all students, both those from WA and non-WA backgrounds, particularly with regards to HE access and applicant decision-making processes.

4.3.1c Differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds

Despite not having access to the admissions systems, any related information being available on the student data system nor a class list outlining WA status, some HEI staff report that they can tell which students are and are not students from WA backgrounds. Presumably they are not making a guess of a students' postcode. Below, some of the differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds that HEI staff did recognise are outlined.

When HEI staff were asked whether there were any differences between students from WA backgrounds and those who are not, a mixture of responses followed. Some academic staff noted that public speaking, general knowledge and social interaction skills were insufficient:

A complete inability to speak publicly to answer questions in class...I think a lot of the exam system is very functional on preparing them to answer set questions or set things, the wider knowledge general knowledge is shocking...this is across the board, it's not just contextual data, it's across the board, but it's really noticeable...impossible to get a word out of the students...or get them discussing, it takes a long time to get any kind of discussion...social interaction it's really poor, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Students from WA backgrounds were reported as requiring "a lot more support". The increase in numbers of students from WA backgrounds was viewed as adding more weight to a "great" but already overloaded HEI support service:

Some of the tensions are a lot of the students are coming need a lot more support and we'd always have that extra support to provide that they need at the time. It's a great, I don't mean a drain, but the support service and the university are struggling as they are. So, with added numbers, and we see, and I don't - I couldn't give you the figures for the retention - but we definitely have a lot of students who really struggle. What they've applied for, what their future is not really maybe thought through. And I think a lot of teachers, quite often are saying to students at school, they need a destination for every pupil: Oh, you'd make a good [profession], without really thinking through, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Many students from WA backgrounds are said to "really struggle". The reasoning suggested for these difficulties include entering the wrong HE study/profession following misguided advice. Schoolteachers, who are responsible for meeting other policies and ensuring that "every pupil" has a "destination", commend pupils' aptitude for specific professions "without thinking it through". The presumed result is oversubscribed professions which applicants are not suited to despite schoolteachers' observations and encouragement.

But I think the majority of students that you do see that have complex problems probably are SIMD 0 to 20, yeah probably, but we've never really got anything that has analysed it like that and I don't think it would be fair to do either, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Those students within "SIMD 0 to 20" postcode areas are highlighted as having "complex problems". However, there is no means of gathering data to understand whether only such students struggle, in which ways and to what extent nor how the HEI responds to mitigate problems and provide support, if at all - "we've never really got anything that has analysed it".

Some examples of differences between students include their "dialects and grammar":

...the main thing we are aware of...when you're teaching and dealing with peoples' dialects and grammar because they need to be able to stand up and give a presentation...it's pretty across the board...really poor diction or really poor grammar...they need to overcome in terms of that and that can be quite sensitive and tricky to do, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Other staff within the same faculty/department/course view an HEI staff focus on students' speech as contributing to students from WA backgrounds feeling like "they're not in the right place":

I guess this is just something that I've experienced first-hand. I know students have been picked up for the way they're speaking. They speak in a particular way, which is, you know, very [city name] or they'll be, want to modify that and I'm like we absolutely should not be doing that. I know a student who was out in placement, who was in an East End school from the East End. Who was picked up for the way they were speaking. I was really upset for that student. Student was upset, you know, so it's like those kinds of micro examples of making somebody feel that, you know they're not in the right place, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 3)

Such "first-hand" experience of "micro-examples" led to "upset" for the student concerned and the HEI staff member on learning about the situation. Students from WA backgrounds may "want to modify" or change themselves to avoid being "picked up for the way they're speaking". The particular HEI staff member above reinforces that fellow staff members "absolutely should not be doing that". There is a suggestion that if some students are picked up for not speaking in a certain way and so feel out of place then other students are not picked up as they speak in the way expected and so do feel that they fit in. Here differences between students about their personal characteristics are portrayed as problematic rather than reflective of a diverse society.

Another member of HEI staff discusses that within the specific profession where "speech" and "grammar and punctuation" is modelled and tested, it is appropriate to correct students on these areas:

You'll still get quite a few people coming in who can't write a sentence accurately in terms of grammar and punctuation, and so on. I have, we regularly have to correct peoples' speech while on placement visits because they're using the wrong verb tense and you know, as role models...we've got to watch these things. To be honest, I think that's really, really commonplace. It's widespread across Scotland and I don't think it necessarily reflects not just Scotland, but you know, I say that in Ireland too, I don't think it really necessarily reflects particularly the family or the community that they come from. I think it's just young people need to be told that there is an appropriate way speaking, appropriate grammar and stuff, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Here these sorts of corrections are seen as "commonplace" across society regarding "young people" rather than reflective of "family or the community". Other aspects noted include navigating "professional relationships" and several "commitments":

Relationships is another thing that can really be problematic, and I suppose it's about knowing how to navigate professional relationships. How to I suppose, how to develop respectful professional relationships with [profession specific groups of people]. It's about being able to regulate emotions as well. I think that's that can be very challenging for some of our students, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Students from WA backgrounds are said to find it "very challenging" to "regulate emotions" whilst learning how to "develop professional relationships".

In terms of the tensions or challenges that that some of our students may face, I suppose one thing that I have come across is just being able to manage commitments and to be able to focus on their academic, you know, just all that placement requires, it's hugely time draining, energy and time. I have had quite a few students who've had to leave placement at ten past three because they're their part time job at 4:00 o'clock, and yet they still have to plan all their lessons for the next day. They might not finish work till 10pm and you know then they're staying up till one or two in the morning, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Some tensions exist around students from WA backgrounds need to work part-time whilst studying as well as complete on the job placements all of which take "energy and time". Finding an equilibrium across these areas was also discussed by HEI staff across other faculties:

I always say to students, it's often like, you know, like project management is like three things, isn't it? It is money, time, and resource. And I often see these students, it's kind of similar triangle,

but it's study, finance or part-time work and socialisation. And it's easy if you get all those three balanced, then you know you'll be fine. But too much socialization, not good, too much part-time work, some of them will be doing 20-30 hours a week or something and it's getting crazy because you need that and equally you could see too much work, at the detriment of socialization and things is also bad, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Here it is recognised that students from WA backgrounds are attempting to juggle their academic "study, finance or part-time work and socialisation" which can be challenging for the students themselves as well as HEI staff:

So, trying to keep on that balance, but hearing sometimes how much they have to work, and then we have an expectation as academics that it's a full-time degree program you are expected to be available Monday to Friday, say nine to five, yet, you know, you organise a session and some can't make it cause: I'm working, and that's where you sometimes feel conflicted in that well actually you [students] should be available because it's immediately after that class and you should be on campus attending university: Oh but I've only got one class that day, so I don't come, I do a shift. So yeah, it's like: Yeah, okay, but I can't tell them not to do the shift, you know, they have to make that decision themselves. But yeah, it's not easy, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

The HEI staff member reflects that they feel "conflicted" when students go to work instead of attending university as this does not match the institutions "expectation" of full-time study therefore they "should be available". Students from WA backgrounds are forced to "make that decision for themselves" as to how to utilise their time.

HEI staff within other faculty's/departments outline that it is the "expectations" of students from WA backgrounds which are "a little bit limited":

I mean, what we obviously look for is people who understand a little bit more about how the world works. And I mean that just in the sense of nous, and you find that in all economic areas. But I would certainly say that apart from some clear, very strong individuals from SIMD 20-40, you know, they would succeed anywhere, there are some whose expectations are perhaps a little bit limited, (Faculty C, Department A, Course Leader/Lecturer 6)

Other differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds are reported as to do with students' personal living situations:

And then we've got our contextual admissions. So that's our minimum entry requirements and it's really to take into account the academic achievement based in the context that you've achieved it within. So, for example, we know within the SIMD group that there's maybe limitations and things like they might share a bedroom, and they might have less support, less

access to support and different things as well, so it's to try and say you've still achieved to a similar attainment to people that are within those brackets or don't have those complications.

So, I would say that's the kind of main difference that there's a contextual entry requirement there. That's maybe a point, less or slightly less than what our standard entry requirements are, so hopefully it kind of takes into account their circumstances, and so that's probably the main difference. But I would say that we're quite we're maybe slightly more lenient as well with those groups as well, because we can, we've got targets to meet essentially so we can go slightly below if we have to, (Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager)

There is recognition that living arrangements and "access to support" can impact upon HE success and so policies like Contextual Admissions have been introduced to provide equivalent opportunities despite differences in circumstances beyond students' control.

The differences between some students are discussed as levels of "confidence" across their HE journey, demonstrating an "inferiority sort of complex: I'm not good enough", worries around initial grades upon HE entry and coping with new environments:

...confidence, the confidence the department has had to deal with that...there is a problem in a way in that, when they talk to each other, once they get into second year together or whatever: Oh, five A's at Higher and three A's at Advanced Higher, and they're thinking: oh, I've come through the [non-direct entry route], my three B's in a C and then they have this inferiority sort of complex: I'm not good enough. I shouldn't be here...typically, the coordinator does have to have a sort of more pastoral support chat with them.

They can have a bit of a wobble in that, that first few weeks as they come in and everything's new and: Oh my God, I'm not gonna cope, I can't do this. And there's a bit of stress and anxiety and then it's: Just settle down and, you know, get through it and just having that chat with them saying yes...people have done it before you, ahead of you. It's achievable. You just engage, work hard, you know, and then you, you'll get through sort of thing, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

If students are not aware of WA policies such as Contextual Admissions, they can personalise differences in grades when compared with fellow peers rather than view them as circumstantial. Students from WA backgrounds may struggle with new HE surroundings and expectations but can be reassured with HEI staff guidance and understanding.

Other factors mentioned include "networking":

I would say probably, certainly in terms of, you know, network is probably one that there is probably a big difference in terms of peoples' backgrounds. So, you know, if you have parents

who are just actively social, whether that's golf club, bridge club, squash club, whatever it might be. But that's a form of networking...versus, uh, you know, your dad appeared to do a 12 hour shift, come home, you know - eat, sleep, repeat, and don't have that same, or the kids don't see that and then they don't see the friends or whatever, then they probably wouldn't do that type of behaviour...

I could see networking as being one that, you know, somebody that does that say: right kids, it's not about what you know, it's who you know. And if they mentor their kids in that attitude and the kids are, you know, making sure that they, they kind of be building networks as they go and they, they maintain them, then that can have probably quite an influential effect on their success, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Differences between students extend to differences between students' parents including their hobbies, social life, "attitude" and "behaviour" regarding "networking". These can be mirrored from parents by students and impact aspects of HE success.

Ideas around the importance of parents having an awareness of HE and its impact on their children success was reiterated across system actor WA organisational staff who work within the HE with secondary school pupils around applying and transitioning into HE:

I think it's, it, the probably the difference, this is just like a broad-brush stroke, right, am being very general, I'm generalising wildly here, but I think the difference between our student group as a whole and non-widening access students is that, they have more, there's more understanding at home of how to support, they're, the young people into those routes, and if they're not, at schools which in the past would have just been labelled low progression schools, then those schools have a culture of more people going into those routes. And as a matter of course are better placed to support them. Teachers with the best will in the world, you know like and some of our schools, there's a lot of time, spent working with social services and you know other bodies that just doesn't allow that bandwidth to be able to really, you know, drive the academic focus. So yeah, I think it, I think we just need to, I guess that's what our job is. We need to provide the support that is not naturally occurring for other people, (WA Organisation 1 Director)

The HE does have a student recruitment team who reach out to parents and provide assistance in understanding the HE application process. However, this student recruitment team does not "reach" all parents, particularly those parents who require guidance the most:

Yeah, I think the university's student recruitment team does go out to parents evening to speak about the university application process. So, they are separate from widening access, but we have a very close relationship with them. So, they are up to date on things such as contextual

missions and support of the university. So, when they go out to do the parents evenings, they can pass that information across. But again, the downside of parent evenings is by and large you're already speaking to the parents who are engaged, you know, the ones who aren't engaged don't come in there and it's really them that we want to reach, (WA Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager)

Other differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds include the types of courses and degrees that students are "being drawn towards":

As well just like a general lack of awareness because what you can quite often see as well as certain types of widening access students being drawn towards certain degrees. So, I mentioned for example of social work earlier, the rate at which care experience students apply for that and it's like what and why is that? It's like it's because it's a profession that they know exists. But what if their interests were actually better aligned with something else that they just don't know exists? And also, quite often we'll see widening access students go on to do teaching again, become teachers, you know, because that's something they know exists. So I think there's a lot of work to be done around that and it was part of what we do in the S3 stage of things, just demystifying and being like, you know: University isn't a carbon copy of school and there are more jobs out there than social workers and teachers. You know, just trying to get them to see, it's like: Well, what are your interests? What would you really enjoy doing? What would you be good at?, (WA Organisation 1 Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager)

A lack of exposure to and experience of a range of professions and related degrees leads young people from WA backgrounds to select a smaller range of courses to study. Generally, students select what they know of.

Similarly, some of the challenges faced by students from WA backgrounds is their understanding of the profession they are entering, the ways that HE works and what is important to enable them to thrive:

One of the ones I would say is that they [student from WA backgrounds], they're not aware of the bigger picture. So they're not aware that like a degree might be a ticket somewhere and what I've seen is that they just like, you know, like bust their ass basically to try and get these high 2:1's or 1st, but it's at the expense of not really engaging like as fully in student life as they could, (WA Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department B, Lecturer)

Students from WA backgrounds may focus on getting high grades assuming that achieving a 2.1 or a 1st is what will guarantee employment rather than experiencing everything that HE life

may have to offer such as socialising leading to networking as aforementioned. An example is given of extracurricular activities run by the faculty/department which provide access to profession-related experiences and people which students from WA backgrounds may not "see the value of":

And so, if you take like the Law department, they have like a Law clinic, they've got a journal that the undergrads can write for. You know, a lot of the students wouldn't, that might take them away from their studies and work, you know, a lot of them will be employed and so they wouldn't be able to fit these activities in and also might not see the value of them, (WA Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department B, Lecturer)

Students from WA backgrounds may focus on parttime employment that they require to continue to study rather than have the time to take part in the above opportunities. Such examples demonstrate the differences between WA and non-WA students understanding and experience of HE and varying professions leading some to get ahead over others. Supporting students from WA backgrounds involves illuminating the ways HE and professions work:

And so I think what's happening is if you take a subject like law, some students are coming out like with this whole understanding of what law - the whole world of law looks like, and the girl that I supported has not really got any clue. You know, she's gone, got her 2:1, she's worked hard for her assignments, but she's not got this kinda understanding about how the profession works, (WA Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department B, Lecturer)

The faculty discussed within the above quotes offers a clinic for students to join, gaining invaluable voluntary job experience working with real clients and cases. A student from a WA background who has joined the clinic and works as an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Officer and Student Advisor within the department describes which students they felt might benefit most from such an opportunity:

I think those who you know who come from a bit more disadvantage backgrounds or those who might be first generation [subject name] students. I think we both know how hard it would be for someone to go and seek out formal [work-related] experience at a traineeship when they come from those backgrounds anyway. But I think the opportunity then, to build that skill set from the ground up alongside your learning to show that you are able to demonstrate that personal, professional, and academic capacity to apply yourself to real world situations. I think it gives someone quite a lot of good tools in their arsenal. Didn't go to affirm and say, listen

what I might be lacking around my background or whatever else I more than made up for with my work ethic - apply myself to this and so many other things as well. I've known a few people who said openly you know that they are first generation [profession] students who are first in their family to come here after coming from a more disadvantaged background and have more than thrived in what they've done and how they've applied themselves. And a few of them, I know, have got [profession] traineeships from that as well. Quite coveted ones as well, (Faculty B, Department C, Student Adviser & EDI Officer, HEI Student from WA background 3)

Students from "disadvantaged backgrounds" and those who are "first generation", in short WA backgrounds, may gain a great deal from becoming involved in the department-run clinic. Previously students from WA backgrounds have "more than thrived" and gone on to secure "coveted" "traineeships".

The clinic itself is a "selling point" for the HEI as there is "big interest in it" during HEI open days:

But I think when you know they [HEI department] have like open days and people come to express an interest or see what our university's all about, we have a stand there, which apparently we usually have two students who volunteer, clinic students, to do that. [colleague name], our director who did it last year, she said everyone was coming up to the [department/subject] clinic stand. So, like there was a big interest in it. And I think the [department] school do use it as well as a kind of selling point because they know there is a kind of appetite to get experience like experiential learning. So, I think a lot of students come to [HEI name] and this is what we hear in the interviews as well, because they want to get involved in the [department/subject] clinic, (Faculty B, Department C, Clinic Supervisor)

Students choose to attend this HEI "because they want to get involved in the [department/subject] clinic". However, the clinic is unable to accommodate all the students who apply:

And then it's just unfortunate that we can't take on everybody because obviously it's subject to capacity, what we can supervise... So, there's kind of lots of opportunities, but you'll always get some people that maybe just don't think, it's confidence or maybe it's just bad luck, but don't get, involved as much as maybe they'd hoped.

But yeah, I do think it's probably confidence and then probably maybe there's, because all the people change all the time, there's always this perception of all these [students] are the clique.

These are the ones that get all the cases. But actually, that changes every year. But I think from the people outside who are not getting involved, maybe they think that there's this group of people who, you know, they feel maybe intimidated, but it's like anybody can join... So, the last couple of years at least, it's been about 40-45 students, (Faculty B, Department C, Clinic Supervisor)

Clinic/supervisory "capacity" is first cited by the Clinic Supervisor as a reason the clinic cannot take on all applicants as there are only "40-45" spaces each year. However, students' "confidence" "bad luck" and "perception" that there exists a "clique" of students within the clinic who "get all the cases" and might leave others feeling "intimidated" are then given as other possibilities.

Different reasons are given by the Faculty B, Department C, Student Adviser & EDI Officer, HEI Student from WA background 3, including the timing of student "recruitment" which occurs during "fresher's week" leaving little time for all students to "know what to expect":

But I think because we open our recruitment around the time of fresher's week. So, these folk are just in the door, and they don't really know what to expect. They might not fully grasp some of the issues that we're talking about and asking them to talk about. So even pushing it back by a couple of weeks, I think, would buy people a bit of time to understand it a bit more, and get involved and do their homework on it, and then apply with a bit more reasonable confidence that then proves more successful with that application, (Faculty B, Department C, Student Adviser & EDI Officer, HEI Student from WA background 3)

Extending the application time further into the first semester is suggested to enable students with less experience of HE and/or the profession/department/clinic to "understand a bit more" gaining "reasonable confidence" to become "successful with that application".

In summary, HEI staff from across the institution outline some of the differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds which can be challenging and lead to tensions. These relate to requiring "a lot more support" as they "really struggle" presenting "complex problems" despite the HEI having "never really got anything that has analysed it". Their "dialects and grammar" are picked up on leading some students to feel that "they're not in the right place". Some HEI staff describe that such students find it "very challenging" to "regulate emotions" whilst learning how to "develop professional relationships".

Other staff comment that many students from WA backgrounds are balancing "study, finance or part-time work and socialisation" and may have limited "expectations" of HE and "access to support". Students are noted as lacking in "confidence" embodying an "inferiority sort of complex: I'm not good enough" and not have developed the "attitude" and "behaviour" of "networking".

Some parents from WA backgrounds may be harder to "reach" reducing the exposure to and understanding of HE and the benefits of attending. Students from WA backgrounds who attend "low progression schools" may also have a limited scope of potential degrees to choose from as they have less knowledge and experience of a wide range of possible professions when compared to their peers from non-WA backgrounds. Lastly some students from WA backgrounds may not have the same level of understanding around how HE and professions work and the ways to get ahead, as their peers and may prioritise grades and parttime employment rather than future profession-related HE-led extracurricular activities that enrich their learning, knowledge, skills, experiences and networks. The next subsection will outline the present study's data which demonstrates the ways the HEI attempts to positively impact some of the above aspects, or does not.

4.3.2 Student Support

Following highlighting some of the HEI staff identified differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds, as above, the present section explores the types of support available to such students. Differences in approaches across faculties/departments/courses and HEI staff will be demonstrated.

4.3.2a Different ideas around how students from WA backgrounds should be treated

Some staff do not view students from WA backgrounds as requiring consideration and/or enactments which differ from other students and are unaware of which ways such students would be treated:

I'm not sure how we would treat them different in the sense of, because we want to make sure its inclusive for all, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

For some HEI staff, once students from WA backgrounds enter HE, the equitable practices which enabled their entry are to stop and equality for all students begins:

For me it's having everyone the same. It's not treating, again, yes, some of these students from widening access might need additional support, which we're more than happy to give. However, like I said, if another student came in who was in quintile 5, but still needed some support cause they're having personal issues, we'd give them the same level of support, we'll do what we can, whether it be: I email them every week and ask how they're doing, or if it's, you know, you need an extension: So rather than you [the student] go and contacting five departments, I'll do it for you, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

It is recognised that some students from WA backgrounds "might need additional support" however should non-WA students also require it, they would receive "the same level of support". As outlined in the previous section (4.2.3. Centralised Admissions Teams) with regards to admissions, the HEI has set forth its WA policy with system actor staff in place to ensure that all faculties/departments are adhering to the HEIs vision "we've got to help them to ensure that there's uniformity, because the policies are right across the institution" (Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager). However, levels of support available once applicants enter the institution are highly variable across faculties/departments/courses. There is no consistent overarching HEI approach to what support mechanisms are to be in place across the board. Despite outlining differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds, as above, for some faculties/departments/courses there is no "extra support" put in place to bridge any gaps that may exist when students from WA backgrounds directly enter HE in year one:

...to my knowledge, departments don't put any extra support in for widening access students that do go directly into department in year one you know, everybody in year one is all just treated exactly the same no matter what their background was when they came into university, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

For the National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator there are to be discussions around the importance of treating students according to their need:

Yeah, they can't be treated the same, you know, and I've heard this you know: We have to treat them all the same because that's being equal, everyone's equal. And I have to explain that treating people the same is actually not equity, you have to teach people, you have to treat people differently to be able to give everybody fairness, you know, and that is still an ongoing debate in some areas...Equality is like putting some measure in place. Equity is just removing the barrier, (National HEI Organisation Admissions Policy Coordinator)

Outlined above is a clear understanding of the differences between treating all students the same (equality) and treating students differently (equity) to achieve "fairness". The recognition of the differing concepts and their consequential impact need to be learned "you have to teach people".

The ideas and enactments are not readily understood and practiced, noted as an "ongoing debate in some areas".

In one department, for a specific course/profession, applicants from WA backgrounds are asked to draw more on their own experiences within interviews:

They [current HEI] like a story you know, if you've got a good story to tell in terms of how you're coming from a difficult background and that's a good student to kind have one on board...You've gotta have a big story behind it as well, be able to articulate that story, which for a person who's coming back to education, that's just their life. And they're not, that's not necessarily an interesting story for them. That's just the background that they've lived, but being able to articulate that story of doing well for yourself, being a hard worker coming from a difficult background, but overcoming those difficulties is the next story that some universities really like coming, WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route

Interviewer: Do students from what's perceived as more middle-class backgrounds have that?

WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route: They don't have to do that.

Interviewer: It's quite sort of sensationalised or performative?

WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route: Yeah, it's kind of hole in the shoe, if you're someone with hole in your shoe, that's great.

If you are from a "difficult background" you are considered as a "good student to kind have one on board". However, to be selected you must have "a big story" and to be successful you must "be able to articulate" your story. Students from non-WA backgrounds are not requested to discuss their personal lives in the same way.

Interviewer: Do you find the interview process itself is kind of more, you know, you're saying if it's more middle-class attributes that you're having to adopt to get through that process is it as well as when you're on the course?

WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route: Yeah, I think more competitive degrees we see this more acutely...So, I suppose we are more acutely aware of equipping those students [from WA backgrounds] with what's required during the application selection process. When you are competing with students who are coming with a different set of attributes and trying to make sure that our guys are competing well, so that's kind of class dynamics as well.

Students from WA backgrounds are to adopt more middle-class attributes to do well across HE selection, particularly for competitive degrees. There is an awareness that such students are "competing with students who are coming with a different set of attributes" as a part of "class

dynamics" and so "equipping" students from WA backgrounds is necessary to attempt application success.

An example of the above adaptation in action was witnessed within the present research. A mature student from a WA background discussed their experiences of applying for a competitive course via the non-direct entry route, as described above.

The WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route describes the selection process as including an in-person interview with themselves and the HEI departmental/course Academic Selector which is beneficial for applicants to learn from regardless of whether they are successful:

It allows them an opportunity to articulate their thoughts. It allows an opportunity for those that aren't successful to get kind of feedback from myself in terms of what they need to do to develop up to the required level that they need. That's not the most enjoyable part of the job, but it is kind of part of getting them to see that selection processes as part of the learning and what they can learn from that and how they can develop, (WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route)

However, the feedback given is from the WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route and not the HEI departmental/course Academic Selector. The feedback did not provide anything constructive to work from and stated that the candidate was "one of the nicest":

We got, I got feedback just basically, I don't think I got the point, but I didn't get my feedback from [HEI]. I got feedback from [WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route] who was in the interview as well, which was a bit weird. Basically, they said I was one of the nicest candidates they'd ever interviewed, which was nice, but I obviously didn't get the point, and I don't know. It was fine, (Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1)

The student was not made aware beforehand that the WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route would also be interviewing them finding the situation "a bit weird". The non-direct entry route-led interview preparation did not make clear what would be asked as the student reflected that they "obviously didn't get the point". Regarding this particular applicants' interview, the WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route recalled the following:

...not really early years, she found it difficult to kind of navigate that way through or talk about professional attributes of the (profession role) and not being able to articulate that or draw on those examples would be really difficult for her to do at interview, and that's a challenge for us to kind of get to that, that really good experience that you have in early years, (WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route)

The above quote outlines clear differences between the participants actual experiences which are relevant to the course applied for and the recollection of the applicant's suitability. Whilst noting that they had not articulated themselves well there is no mention of practicing interview questions in preparation during the non-direct entry route course in order to succeed.

After several failed attempts at entering the HEI for the competitive course the student from a WA background was advised to do another course and reapply when they had their degree. Their profession-relevant, longstanding employer was perplexed at the continued HEI rejections:

My [employer] said: What do they [HEI] want? What do they actually want? I said: I don't know, not me. So that's fine, but I'm not very good at interviews, so that's fine. You'll find that (laughs) you'll find that out when you try and pick through what I've said. Um, so yeah, so I failed at that interview, but obviously I wasn't perturbed (Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1)

Whilst the student states that they were not "perturbed" they did appear to personalise the repeated HEI rejections when asked "What do they want?" as they replied, "I don't know, not me" and that they "failed at that interview".

The above student from a WA background discussed that they would continuing applying for the competitive course until they got on it and had another interview coming up in a few months' time. Later in the study they were offered the opportunity to take part in interview preparation with a Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor as arranged by the interviewer as part of the present research, they accepted, their experiences of the student will be further discussed within the next sub-section.

4.3.2b. Understanding the need for equity in policy and practice

Some faculties/departments demonstrated an acute understanding of the need to provide a scaffold for students from WA backgrounds to enable successful transition into HE particularly where students are the first in their family to attend:

We know that we can now navigate through the world if somebody's went before us, or somebody's behind us to show us the way. But when you're getting brought in an environment where you don't have support to navigate this sort of, you know the rules, procedures you know the way, the language whatever, you know what I mean. Then you can struggle and the team on this course actually acted as that mediator to break that down, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

As within the above example, some courses and faculties supported students well via early preplanned preparation. Therefore, before day one students could get a feel for what is to come including knowing where they are going, where important things are, and knowing some familiar faces:

We have...in June, May or June a transition day...where we bring all our new cohorts together. The three colleges as it stands just now bring them all together, have a couple of days. We also arranged like the library services and [librarian's name] and the library takes some round introduces themselves, shows them, you know all of these preparation things before they actually get there so they have a familiar face. They know where they're going. We'd do a walk...they do that in freshers weeks across the university, university wide. But there's nothing better than bringing your own cohort up. And you're doing it with them, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

Students' timetables were given to students ahead of time to aid their own planning:

We'll get their timetable out to them in June so that they can plan. That's really important when you're dealing with students from widening access, that they have this, they know what they're doing, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

The considerations were extended to teaching practices and environments. Classes start and finish times were altered to match students comfort levels and needs, and seminar groups were kept at smaller sizes. Efforts were made to work together with feeder colleges to ensure consistency of expectations across transitions:

...our seminar groups are smaller, so we maybe have no more than 20 in a seminar group...and even at that so that students have that environment where they're comfortable, you know. And because don't forget they're coming from a background where they're at college, they would maybe have like 25 in a class...or maybe 100 in a lecture. So, as I say, these are the things that you got to think about, you know in terms of the environment that you're bringing them into as well as the start time. We don't start from lectures until 10:00 o'clock because we know a lot of them will get their children, go to school and we finish at 3:00 o'clock because we know...these are all the things that make the difference when you're bringing students from the widening access.

Because they say most of ours fit that age range, you know that either young mums or dads you know that still have parents and responsibilities, and that's going to be taken into account...we don't start till 10:00 o'clock and we asked the colleges when they're doing the HNC and their diploma, to follow that same procedure. You know that most colleges start at 9:00 o'clock...we

say no, for this course you've got to start at 10 and finish it 3, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

A clear understanding that students shouldn't just be left to figure everything out for themselves was highlighted alongside nurture being viewed as necessary and impactful:

It's about enjoying it, it shouldn't be a chore for them...supporting them through it. It's not just about bringing them on and leaving them to it, it's about nurturing them...it's absolutely amazing when you see how they came in at the beginning and when they leave at the end, the confidence, there's a marked difference, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

Other faculties/departments/courses were less aware of the kinds of support required:

They don't know who's who on the class list and what their background is. Uh, so there isn't something necessarily any extra support for anybody from that sort of different background. And we have talked about, you know, should there be, you know, specific small group tutorial sessions for sort of widening access student? Uh, and some people believe, yes, it would be good to put that in place and other people believe no, we should treat all students equally once they're in the university and have no difference, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Some HEI staff actively reject the notion that there should be equitable treatment of student groups and that staff are to "treat all students equally". However, unsensitised approaches can lead some students from WA backgrounds to "struggle":

I found it was a big jump saying just, I did find it hard...full hated it, and then I had to catch up, but I left and then I decided to come back. But... I wasn't as brave as a lot of kids. I wasn't the same, as smart as them and I was a bit immature.

A lot of them kids...were a lot more academically smart. I was book smart with somethings, but I just felt it like going over my head some of that. I did think there was no support for help or guidance. I used to go to [previous secondary school mentor] all the time...I did struggle with it, (Faculty B, Department A, Previous HEI Student from WA background 2)

Students from WA backgrounds may encounter vast changes when transitioning from secondary school and/or FE colleagues to HE. For some, this is experienced as a "big jump" who, without adequate familiarisation can end up finding it "hard...full hated it". They may also view themselves negatively when comparing to other students from non-SIMD/WA backgrounds, personalising a lack of "guidance" as well as "support" as deficits of self rather than the HE environment: "I wasn't as brave as a lot of kids. I wasn't the same, as smart as them and I was a bit immature".

As aforementioned in the previous section, the "goodwill" of HEI staff is often relied upon to ensure that students from WA backgrounds support needs are met:

So we know that when our student contacts us, they need something you know, and it's about that relationship and that time, and that's maybe something that the school could do better on for us [HEI staff] because say for instance you're teaching on [course name] and you're given so many sectorial hours within your workload. So, say it's 10 hours throughout the year. I could spend most 10 hours over 2 weeks with the one student. So, you're relying on the goodwill of staff to overlook that and say: Well, I'm gonna meet you on a weekly basis, check in with me, and things like that, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

Above it is noted that providing more "time" and opportunities for "relationship" building to get to know students is something that the faculty "could do better for us" HEI staff and subsequently students from WA backgrounds. The time given by the HEI faculty to staff for working with students across a year could be utilised within a few weeks leading "relying on the goodwill of the staff to overlook" these gaps and to close them themselves.

It is also recognised that the efforts made by staff to develop supportive student-centred relationships within this faculty/department may be different to others across the HEI:

How much tutorial we give them as well in terms of personal tutorial means one to one getting to know [students from WA backgrounds] so the relationship that we have with the students is very different to what you would normally have within, you know another programme you know and I'm not saying they don't have that, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

The course leader across the above examples has an employment background which enables a deeper understanding of different types of experiences:

I'm a mental health expert, a counsellor, a financial expert, so big team within the programme have got to have all these skills up and above their skilled knowledge, (Faculty B, Department B, Course Leader/Lecturer 1)

These skills and knowledges are developed across the staff body within the department to be of benefit to students from WA backgrounds should they require it.

The strains regarding staff workloads and allotted time for working with students are echoed across the HEI. Another example is that they do not accommodate adequate opportunities for quality feedback "throughout" the year:

I do think there's definitely room to develop more kind of intermittent assessment and feedback. But I think the workloads of tutors don't really allow for that because you're allocated a particular amount of assessment time on for each module on your workload and that tends to be used up by the summative assessment rather than being able to do it throughout, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 4, Academic Selector)

Some departments use both formative (throughout the year) and summative (at the end of the year) assessments. However, due to a lack of time staff are unable to give students feedback throughout the year in the form of formative assessments for the students to understand areas requiring more focus and improvement as they progress through the year. Instead, the time is absorbed by summative assessments at the end of the year leaving little opportunity for students to attend to feedback throughout their HE journeys.

The need for different types of support to be available to students from WA backgrounds is reflective of an uneven playing field:

That's not a level playing field and it can't be a level playing. And I don't know how you compensate for the fact that from the age of naught somebody's been reading to you, I don't know how you compensate for the fact that, you know, during lockdown, granny's got the learning intentions up in the wall, mother's got the, do you know what I mean? I dunno that linguistic thing, you know? It doesn't mean that everybody was perfect, it doesn't mean that people weren't behind, but they could catch up.

When people talk about it being [a level playing field], how can it be a level playing when you're born into different background? And how can you compensate? You can do your best and not convince you. Do you know what I mean? I think it's quite, it's not impossible. I don't mean it's impossible, otherwise I wouldn't have done what I did. But I think you've got to recognise that start is everything and even, I don't mean its money, it's not, it's not just to do with stability and ambition.

So, yeah you could want your child to do well at school cause you know the school system and it's, you know, as I said before, if I know somebody who wants to be a musician, I can help somebody become, I don't need to know, but I can point somebody in that direction, so going back to that sort of network, (Former Secondary School Headteacher, Current 5th/6th year Mentor)

Folks have different family backgrounds, understandings of the school system and networks to draw upon, all of which can impact experiences of education from school into HE. A sensitised grasp of these factors can hugely influence students from WA backgrounds trajectories when entering HE and throughout as well as into their careers.

As aforementioned, the Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1 agreed to meet with the Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor to prepare and practice for their next competitive HE course interview.

In short, over the course of two hours the Former Professor asked about the students' experiences, skills and knowledges across their employment (inclusive of fifteen years working in the area/similar role they wish to study) education and hobbies. On hearing of the students' wealth of interesting, relevant and long-standing experiences, skills and knowledges the Former Professor gave a lot of confidence-building praise:

Your job has given you a really good insight into inclusion... It's giving you a good insight into literacy and numeracy teaching, (Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor)

Together they went through each interview question, for two different HEI's applied for, and selected which aspects of the above to discuss in response. The question-and-answer style was modelled giving the student a feel for what was expected. Advice was shared regarding delivery, such as: prepping responses as three direct sentences answering each question followed by an illustrative example using the Situation-Task-Action-Result-Reflection (STARR) method; speak slowly and succinctly then remain quiet to allow interviewers to process their answer; ask if any aspect of their response required elaboration and/or refer interviewers to their CV.

Brilliant! Your answers are so good, but you're doing what a lot of people have who've gotten loads of experience do, not sort of getting directly to the question quick enough, (Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor)

The Former Professor recognised that the student had lots to bring to the course applied for and future professional role and needed guidance to discuss this in a way that highlighted the most important aspects. The student previously stated "I'm not very good at interviews" however in having assistance with interview preparation and practice it became clear they benefitted from guidance and experience rather than personally not being good at interviews.

The student had stated within their interview their thoughts about themselves as a learner and entering HE:

I'm not really an academic person...I was terrified. I was really worried. I was worried that it was gonna be too hard that I couldn't do the work. That was my first worry. And then when I

actually realised I can do the work that, that, you know, and your [their own] marks are really decent. And I just think: Well actually I am doing this. And then it just becomes practice, doesn't it? And so, it's easy to do, (Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1)

The student went from feeling "terrified" to understanding that they were more than capable and just needed "practice" of what HE/course work/assignments/expectations required. Following practice of the interviewing process and related expectations, they were successful at their next interviews for both HEIs applied to.

A year later they shared the news of their graduation:

That's me completed my studies and placements on the [course name] course – starting my probationary year in August in [place name]. Thank you so much, wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't agreed to do that interview, (Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1)

As much as it is entirely rewarding to have been a part of the students' journey, it is alarming that a chance encounter as a research participant led to them receiving the support they required to progress in their education and employment. Particularly when considering how much concentrated input students from more middle-class backgrounds may receive.

From those interviewed, as above, there exists a mix of responses with regards to perceived differences between students from WA and non-WA backgrounds and a variety of practices around student support.

HEI staff participants were asked whether they had been offered and/or attended any training related to WA policy/practices and/or students from WA backgrounds:

Um I've not received any. I don't think, not that I can recall anyway, (Faculty B, Department C, Clinic Supervisor)

Some HEI staff report not receiving any training. Other HEI staff would seek out learning for themselves but one notes that this would not be a part of their role in running their course:

I would have to go and research it myself, but I guess part of that is it's not a KPI for my course, (Faculty A, Department D, Apprenticeships Leader)

What I'm wanting to do now is read up a bit more on it to understand: What does that actually mean for those people coming from that postcode, what you know, what does it look like and why is it different from the SIMD? So that was kind of glossed over quite because it was a briefing session as opposed to something more in-depth. So, I'm quite keen to get the more detail on it just from my own personal point of view, so I know what am talking about, but yeah, that

we do get regular updates, which is helpful, (Faculty B, Marketing and Communication Manager)

Some training is "pulled together" but is not specifically related to WA:

[Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager name] pulled together a lot of things that they were doing in the university there's, there's no widening access training that I'm aware of. I mean, we have unconscious bias training, and we have equality, diversity and inclusion training. I'm not aware of anything specific to, to sort of widening access, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

Some utilise knowledge gained from a variety of activities attending "seminars, workshops...committees" and share what they have learned with their team. However, there is no training directly regarding WA:

There's probably not much training in a sense of, I think a lot of us have done the job for so long and we've all sort of, when, when I first started doing admissions, we didn't really focus on this.

So, we've sort of learned about it. So, we've went sort of different seminars, working groups', we're all in these sorts of different committees and then I passed my knowledge onto the team in that sense. So yeah, we get a lot of guidance, especially from widening access team. We work closely with them. But I wouldn't say there's training on it in that sense, (Faculty D, Department A, Student Lifecycle Administrator 2)

The HEIs Senior Policy Officer across strategy and planning had also not received any WA training nor any discussing equitable practices following the roll-out of WA policy:

Interviewer: Have you been involved in any sort of initiatives or interventions or sort of research that's looking at promoting equity across higher education?

Strategy and Planning, Senior Policy Officer: No.

Conversations around social class as being at the heart of the matter regarding WA policy are few and far between. The few staff who did discuss social class impacts upon HE, openly described themselves as working class. They described their own life experiences, HE journeys and difficulties, empathising with working class students. One staff member described their mother becoming a single parent, working three jobs "to get to keep the house" following the death of their father during their teens, (Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2). They decided to enter HE as their older brother had and following much teacher encouragement. However, this was not the done thing within their friend group: "All my friends went and took apprenticeships, except me, and they all thought it was weird" (Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2). Like many students from WA backgrounds some HEI staff were also first in their family to enter HE: "I

was the first to go to university" (Faculty A, Department B, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1). Another staff member recalls the impact of being in new surroundings:

I can recall as first year student not really understanding how the world worked even though I had some good Highers from school, just being utterly puzzled by the newness of it all and being really thrown off balance when I was in a situation where I didn't have some grasp of the ground rules or the expectations (Faculty C, Department A, Course Leader/Lecturer 6)

Such staff, as outlined throughout the findings demonstrated an appreciation that guidance, support and being approachable goes a long way to assist students from working class backgrounds feel more comfortable entering and progressing through HE.

To conclude, with regards to WA policy related student support, there are a mix of HEI staff understandings, attitudes, and responses across HEI faculties and departments. Some departments/faculties/courses run by HEI staff do attend to WA. Examples above show consideration given to timing of information released to students about the HEI including their timetables, campus visits, meeting library staff, ensuring appropriate class start and finish times within the HEI and feeder FE colleges. There are also examples of those who do not give any sensitised deliberation to providing student support as according to general differences between non-traditional (WA) vs traditional (WA) student cohorts nor individual differences.

There are disparities across HEI staff decision-making processes with regards to whether/the ways that students from WA backgrounds are to be treated differently or not compared with students from non-WA backgrounds. There is no HEI-wide WA policy and practice(s) specific training for all HEI staff nor consensus on whether equality or equity is to be embodied and utilised across all the above aspects.

The sub-section which follows outlines matters regarding adequately tracking students' progress HEI-wide and its impacts.

4.3.3 Student Retention

4.3.3a No tracking, no telling

Currently an understanding of support mechanisms as well as retention rates according to differing entry routes and student groups is not available:

I haven't looked at retention rate, specifically at widening access compared to the other [non-direct entry route]...it's hard to know what the data is for a department...there's no real mechanism, (Faculty A, Department A, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1)

At present there is nothing in place within this faculty/department in terms of staff being able to track/compare retention rates nor student support mechanisms and the ways these may impact each other. Faculty A, Department B, Academic Director/WA Administrator 1 guessed that the rate may be at around 60-61% for students from WA backgrounds. Whilst SIMD targets may be hit on entry into HE, it is unclear how students from WA backgrounds fair during their courses, whether they complete them and enter into relevant professions nor which professions they enter.

As already quoted above:

I couldn't give you the figures for the retention, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Some HEI staff have asked HEI system actors for better student admissions data related technology to enable progress/journey tracking from acceptance to completion, as far back as thirteen years ago:

My wish list is that [student data system] would be replaced. Cause at a certain point of my Excel spreadsheets just become you know, I can repopulate them every so often just to follow the fate of individual applicants. But it's not something I can do on my own in any meaningful way.

So having as far back as 2012 suggested to our Lords and Masters how [student data system] could be improved for admissions in particularly tying admissions data to the students as they go through, so we could actually, you know, follow: we made offer X and this is associated with success and another offer might not be but..., (Faculty C, Department A, Course Leader/Lecturer 6)

Such data systems updates may allow for student retention tracking in a "meaningful way" which current departmental Excel spreadsheet updating cannot capture. Currently, Excel spreadsheets are created by HEI staff themselves and not necessarily shared with other staff within the department/faculty/course/HEI. There is no knowledge sharing amongst staff nor student related support teams regarding students' admissions pathway, progress, support requirements nor potential struggles and retention rates.

The WA organisation working alongside the HEI and five others advising secondary school pupils about their prospects such as attending HE, suggests that more funding would ensure that "people were better prepared pre-entry" improving retention rates:

Yeah, I think the only thing I would add is that, if we are looking at retention as a measure of the success of people getting into and getting through university and leaving with a good degree, that would be, yeah, if there was more, if we had more money to make sure that people were better prepared, do you know what I mean? Like, [WA Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager] already talked about how difficult it is to get people to put their hands up, once they're here, because why would you want to?

You know, unless you specifically needed financial support and you'd go to finance, right? What, like, why would you want to put your hand up and say: I'm different from everybody else, once you've made it into university. But if people were better prepared pre-entry, then retention might be improved. Not that, not that it's terrible, (WA Organisation 1, Director)

Student retention is a good indicator of HE "success". Being able to support students "pre-entry" may help retention as those from WA backgrounds could learn which supports were available to them such, as finance for example. Students from WA backgrounds may not seek out finance and other supports once in HE as they are highlighting that they are "different from everybody else".

Some faculties/departments are aware of which students are from WA backgrounds if the student has entered the HEI via a non-direct entry route and been interviewed. Despite staff knowing who these students are, their progress is not tracked:

We know who the [non-direct entry route] students are...it was accidental that it happened, it was the student who got back in touch with me, said: I'm so delighted [HEI staff name] I can't believe I'm actually leaving university with my first-class degree. And I suddenly thought: Oh I wonder how many other people there are?...

So that was quite an important thing to kind of discover, even though it was accidental, don't set out to find that out it's just someone happened to email me and saying how pleased he was. And then I thought: Oh. So sometimes things like that just start to build up, you know? And that's all about our kind of understanding but doesn't mean it happens every year. You know, and also this student dropout rate as well. So, we are aware that you know there's a bit of a dropout rate from experience and from [non-direct entry route] students so I just think just have to accept that, that happens, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

The understanding that five students from WA backgrounds entering HE via non-direct entry routes had received firsts for their degrees was "quite an important thing to kind of discover".

However, it was "accidental" following a student emailing the staff member to share their good news and the staff member retrospectively searching for other known students from WA backgrounds results. This group of students usually experience "a bit of a dropout rate" which staff "just have to accept that, that happens".

The staff member goes on to explain that the awareness of non-direct entry students from WA backgrounds are doing well academically was something to be shared with the staff team to dispel negative beliefs about such students:

You know, and [HEI staff colleague] said that: We need to get this out there at the next staff meeting and then we squash all that. Because that becomes a bit of a thing where you know they [departmental HEI staff members] all go: That program is a nightmare. It just gives us so many problems. I'm like: Really? Give me an example. They might pick one student that's had a lot of problems, but yeah, you could pick that from anyone and so it was good evidence for us to just shut everybody [departmental HEI staff members] up and realise actually, you know, we get a really rich team of students...that's a positive outcome...its changed because you never ever hear any mutterings now from people about the [non-direct entry route] program, (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector)

Some HEI staff view non-direct entry route programs generally aimed at assisting students from WA backgrounds and/or mature students into HE as "a nightmare", which gives staff "so many problems" without providing adequate examples of why. Conversely, when students from WA backgrounds do well it is shown as "evidence" that such students are not problematic but a "rich team of students".

An example of the types of support needed for students from WA backgrounds are related to broadening their understanding of the ways that HE works as well as the profession they intend on entering. Gaining good grades in HE is important but not the only factor which impacts career success. When students from WA backgrounds are not guided to recognise such factors they may experience difficulties. If HEI staff are not aware of the above, they may provide advice to such students which is not only unhelpful but potentially life-changing:

Another student we had in the [HEI department name] she was about to leave and there's quite a lot of advice that if you leave within a certain period of time, you don't have to pay back SAAS. So within like October or something, so she was advised to leave and then she wouldn't have to

pay the SAAS money, (WA Mentoring Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department B, Lecturer)

The student from a WA background above, was mentored by a WA Mentoring Organisation within secondary school which focuses on assisting pupils into HE. The students' mentor both WA Mentoring Organisation CEOs and another mentor with experience of the subject/department/profession worked together to help understand what was happening to cause a potential dropout situation:

So, we had a phone call from the mentor who said, you know, she basically had three days before this form [SAAS/dropout form] had to be handed in to turn this girl around. And so, we met with her and got one of the mentors who used to work in the [HEI department name] and we sat down and just, you know, for hours and like talked about what was going on and it turned out she was like doing too much work.

So, she, everything in the [HEI department name] was group work, I think they did it in one of the subjects and then all the subjects started doing it. So, it was like get into groups and do a group project and she was like taking the lead in every single group project cause she was so aware of her timetable and what she had to do that she was trying to get everything done because she also had to work and not a lot of the other kids/pupils/students didn't have to work, (WA Mentoring Organisation CEO and Faculty A, Department B, Lecturer)

Here the student was taking the lead on too many group projects whilst also working part-time.

So, our advice was, uh, don't, don't take the lead in everything. Take a step, you know, take a step back, let other, let the group do it, and, you know, she finished with a distinction, and she's graduated with it. She didn't have to do her exams because she did so well in her first year.

She got a 1st and her mentor has got lots of contacts abroad and has got her work experience and stuff there and now she's working for like some hotshot company and everything, but you know, according to the advice of the people at [HEI name]: "Yeah you should leave", you know, that was what she was told, (WA Mentoring Organisation CEO and Faculty B, Department B, Lecturer)

Rather than questioning further what was occurring for this particular student and provide suggestions/solutions which enabled her to remain in HE, HEI staff advised her to just leave before her SAAS payment kicked in to avoid repayments. However, the student had mentors who understood that her WA background can impact her HE experiences and took the time to listen to her. The result is that she did so well in year one she was not required to do some of her exams and finished her degree with a Distinction. Her mentor scaffolded networking, introducing her to international contacts where she gained employment experience and has a

successful career. The situation caused a lot of distress for the student, who was encouraged by her mother to get her (secondary school) mentor involved with her HE experiences to help her:

So, she would've left thinking she's not good, and she was crying at home every night to her mom, and her mom was just like: "Go and speak to, you know, get [mentor name] involved and speak to your mentor", (WA Mentoring Organisation CEO and Faculty A, Department B, Lecturer)

Many students from WA backgrounds who have not received such sensitised support might dropout and may blame themselves. As noted above there are "no real mechanisms" for tracking retention and the types of experiences outlined above. The above student would have counted towards the HEIs WA target due to entering HE. However, the advice she received when struggling, subsequent journey enabled by her mentors and avoidance of dropout is not captured and used to inform practices across the HEI.

The students' union officer was aware that across all of Scotland's HEIs, students from WA backgrounds may require support to "reach their full potential":

The problem is, is that if those students then aren't being given the support that they need to stay at uni. or you know to be able to reach their full potential to actually succeed, then that's quite a different metric, I suppose, for us to measure that that accessibility against, (Student Union Officer)

Noted here is that the WA target related to access numbers alone presents a "problem" as it does not detail whether students from WA backgrounds are indeed given "support" throughout their education journey to attain and remain in HE. An attempt to understand student support mechanisms would lead to a "different metric" to then measure "accessibility against". As it stands, only a portion of the story is told, that which is related to HEI access, funding and displays of success is considered and demonstratable, whilst students from WA backgrounds experiences of and progression through HE is not.

In summary, retention rates across differing HE entry routes and/or student groups are not measured in a consistent way across the HEI. The lack of student tracking from entry to completion means that information regarding the experiences of students from WA backgrounds is not gathered and known. Where some HEI staff have created and maintained support mechanisms which are successful, practices are not being recognised and shared across the institution. For other HEI staff, knowledge gathered regarding students from WA backgrounds success, is learned via happenstance rather than purposefully tracked and attended to across students' HE journeys. Retention rates are described as having "no real mechanism"

to collate and report from, "couldn't" be shared as unknown, to staff having to "accept that, that happens" without their being able to positively influence them via understanding why students' dropout and proposing practices to avoid it.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

The following chapter will discuss the HEIs current WA policy and practices and appraise these in line with the tools suggested for utilisation by the HEI within the present research.

Section one discusses institutional practice, exploring the ways in which this can be explained by thinking about the neoliberal context in which universities act. It considers ideas of the ways in which social class is understood and with that, aspects of social cultural capital for example. It concludes that the above creates space for social class bias via implicit and explicit bias, which can be supported by the emphasis of poverty rather than differences in individuals' capital(s).

Section two takes us forward in bridging between sociological concepts and the world of reality and practice in an institution. It draws on the ideas of St. John and colleagues (2011) with the ACF model as an example of how institutions can start to think more sociologically as this model is a translation of ideas around academic, social, cultural and economic capital, into more practice-based thinking. The "Equity-mindedness" model (CUE, 2019) similarly is also considered as it exemplifies the necessity of cognisant institution-wide understandings and enactments via institutional self-examination and supporting staff to do them same to better policies, practices and education outcomes. Both tools complement each other and have influenced thinking as the present research progressed. Finally, terminology utilised within the present study is discussed including social class consciousness, implicit bias and equity alongside ideas around their continued development which may be useful when thinking through ways of moving forward via sociologically informed practice.

The conclusion chapter will follow, summarising key findings and next steps.

5.1 Interpreting institutional practice from a sociological perspective

The findings chapter outlines the HEIs current approach to WA policy and related practices including its goals and aims, admissions processes, how it regards students from WA backgrounds and the support that is provided as well as opportunities missed. To move the HEI forward across the above it is imperative to consider the context in which it is situated and

related impacts as will be addressed throughout sub-sections: 5.1.1 Impact of HEI operating in a neoliberal context and 5.1.2 Risks of conflating disadvantage with poverty.

5.1.1 Impact of HEI operating in a neoliberal context

Drawing from the findings of the present study, this sub-section will establish that the HEI works and acts in a certain way which can be explained by the neoliberal-managerial context it operates within. There is an absence of social class related understanding and consciousness. The mechanisms of social class, the constituent parts to that such as social capital are not acknowledged. Without such awareness social class bias via implicit and explicit bias can be found.

The research findings illustrate that the HEI operates in a neoliberal-managerial manner. HEI staff report that the focus lies on the HEI operating as a business rather than being student-focused whereby students' needs are central. Being situated in a neoliberal context and adopting such approaches may lead to the HEI behaving in particular ways. The current study found that the impact of such a context resulted in the exclusion of an awareness of the ways social class impacts upon HE, which does not permeate any social class consciousness across the HEI aside from instances of a few individual staff members.

To outline briefly, the political economic practices which constitute neoliberalism favour "individual property rights, the rule of law" (to protect freedoms and private properties) and "institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005). In this economic system, there is a guarantee of "personal and individual freedom in the marketplace", a reduction of state led welfare provision across education, health and social services and emphasis on one's success or failure as a "personal responsibility" (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism was on the rise during Bourdieu's time working in Algeria where he witnesses its contribution to social class disputes (Grenfell, 2014). He later theorises that social capital can be impacted by HE structures which replicate inequality which can work to benefit middle class students (Bourdieu, 1986).

The HEI operates as an institutional marketplace, concerned with HEIs ranking systems which embody "subjective criteria" and reproduce "economic and social disadvantage" for students from WA backgrounds (Friend, 2020, p. 3–16). Such students are also handed the "burden of becoming respectable" via developing their social capital rather than the HEI being responsible for such growth (Friend, 2020, p. 3–16). Friend's (2020) conclusions support Bourdieu's (1986)

decades later in that, social capital actually "multiplied the effects of economic and cultural capital and continues to be a mechanism used by middle classes to retain power and advantage" (Friend, 2020, p. 15).

Whilst it is beyond the scope of the present research to provide a deep dive into neoliberal-managerialism, other researchers outline that throughout the previous five decades, HEI's across the UK and westernised, predominantly English-speaking countries such the US and Australia, have adopted neoliberal managerial principles, values, approaches and environments (Troiani & Dutson, 2021; Gasser, 2024).

Gasser (2024, p. 1066) outlines key changes regarding the "nature of higher education" following the introduction of neoliberalism:

One major shift was the marketisation of education, where students came to be viewed as consumers and universities increasingly focused on branding and marketing strategies [1]. In this model, performance metrics, such as student satisfaction and employability rates, became indicators of success. Universities started competing in global rankings, with research output and student outcomes driving funding decisions [5–7], Gasser (2024, p. 1066).

Troiani and Dutson (2021, p. 10) pull on Pier Vittorio Aureli's description of the "edufactory" which likens academic/HEI spaces to managed factory/shop floors which are "appeaseable to demands for constantly increasing academic outputs of student graduates, research and revenue generation". The above HEI model places "demands on the body of the university worker – educator and student – who suffers from time pressures and energy depletion" (Troiani and Dutson, 2021, p. 10). Moreover, it is noted that such neoliberal universities now have "large marketing and recruitment teams, and detailed marketing strategies and pipelines aimed at ensuring a continuous supply of students, sieved from local, national and international markets", (Troiani and Dutson, 2021, p. 12).

With regards to improving HE access and understanding the impact of differing students starting points and progress as according to social class, gaps are ever present:

...concrete changes to broadening access and continued progression through Higher Education seem to lag or even decline... The asymmetry of financialized education draws stark oppositions between wealthy and poorer students where those who do not need to work part-time to support their studies can be advantaged from the outset. As real-estate gives over more space to nomadic exploration of "learning landscapes" those with the skills and former training to navigate and participate such informal infrastructures have the capacity to potentially proceed further, (Troiani and Dutson, 2021, p. 13).

The notions above are evidenced across the previous throughout the findings of the present study. For example, across findings 4.1, whilst there are references to having diversity across staff and students, several HEI goals and strategic aims focus on "student experience" and "operational excellence", aspects which embody neoliberal managerial concerns which may in fact fall short of achieving equitable widening access, as demonstrated below. Within findings 4.2.4., Faculty A, Department A, Lecturer 2 outlines the ways in which the HEI has transformed into a process-driven "sausage machine". They also reference the importance placed by the HEI of ranking highly on league tables, with the metrics measured resembling those mentioned above such as student satisfaction and employment or graduate settlement. HEI staff face pressure to achieve high rankings in an environment where the doubling of student numbers is not matched with increases in staff numbers. Changes to admissions processes such as the introduction of centralised admissions teams mean departmental staff can no longer build relationships with applicants during inquiries, open days nor interviews. This systemic matter continues across teaching with reductions in time taken getting to know students leading some staff to report losing track of the students.

A business-focused machine-like model of HE could negatively impact students from WA backgrounds. Such students may require time to familiarise themselves with the HEI environment, processes and expectations, guided along by available staff. There is a risk of students getting lost within admissions systems as they enter HE and traverse courses, something that the previous Commissioner for Fair Access (Scottish Government, 2017) warned against. Of those interviewed, departmental staff previously in charge of admissions are now not sure what the centralised admissions teams do during applicant selection processes. Some departmental staff presumed that the centralised admissions team staff may have little experience of the courses/professions which they are selecting students for which could be problematic. Departmental staff are unsure of the level and depth of training that the centralised admissions team staff receive and the ways in which they select students. There is concern that students with the highest grades will be chosen due to high applicant numbers and ease of process. Some departmental staff voice concern that the lack of training and/or relationships fostered between centralised admissions teams and departmental staff may influence which students are being selected, by which metrics and potentially leaving some students to get left behind once they enter the HEI. Important to note is that no admissions team staff were interviewed within the present study, future research could include their views. The perspectives outlined here are representative of several staff members experiences, however these could differ from other staff.

Some of the responses to WA policy captured as well as having to count students from WA backgrounds using crude metrics such as SIMD to achieve WA targets and guarantee funding, could be highly problematic. When considering a student-focused approach which understands the mechanisms of social class, implementing WA policy in its current form within this market/economically-driven approach, is concerning. Few attempts appear to have been made to deepen HEI-wide awareness of the impact of social class on HE via understanding the lived experiences of the students intended to benefit from WA. The data suggests that there is little HEI-wide strategic effort to develop staff knowledge of WA policy and the lives of the students included. The current process may maintain inequality and fail to disrupt the situation. The expectation of WA policy delivery appears to occur in stressed under-staffed, under-trained environments pitched against other competing priorities such as achieving high rankings.

The HEI could be meeting its WA target however there remains a lot going on under the surface, social reproduction may not significantly change. Students from WA backgrounds may be accepted but have narrow faculty/department/course options. Such students are thought of in a certain way by the HEI and some staff such as being problematic via taking up space from traditional non-SIMD students leading to "bad feeling" around students from WA backgrounds rather than around the HEI's method of implementing WA policy and targets. Some "tensions" identified by HEI staff include students from WA backgrounds "need a lot more support" within a HEI support service which is already "struggling".

There is also an impact on staff operating within this. The pupils from WA backgrounds are the same pool of pupils which all HEI's and even departments within each HEI are recruiting or selecting from. There is little evidence of a sensitised HEI-wide focus on increasing the size of this pool. There are examples of HEI departmental staff going into primary and secondary schools to drive interest and intake however this is often voluntary or seen as a part of staff fulfilling their role requirements/ HEI expectations, in that they must achieve the WA target and so do what is necessary. The notion repeated by several HEI staff in relation to WA policy, was that implementation is dependent on HEI staffs' reporting no positive push or extra consideration by the HEI in terms of allocated time, resources and/or funding or remuneration. Often outreach roles are to discuss the HEI as a whole rather than broadening pupils' knowledge of what may be on offer within and/or inspirational about engaging with differing faculties/departments/courses and professions.

Across the findings chapter and the examples reiterated above, implicit and explicit bias around social class is present. Without acknowledgement of aspects of social class such as differing

capitals and their impact in HE settings, HEI staff may not realise their biases nor HEI theirs. In a neoliberal-managerial context all that may appear to be going well is that targets are hit. It is interesting to consider whether this would be less possible if the matter was regarding race or gender rather than social class. Some understanding of these issues is needed and would not be acceptable if absent – the same needs to be in place for social class. Here there is great usefulness of utilising sociological theory to drive change. The tools discussed in section two below are both a practical means to deliver such equitable change.

5.1.2 Risks of conflating disadvantage with poverty

The idea of poverty rather than disadvantage via the impact of social class and associated capital(s) as the main determinant for HE outcomes may mask ways forward to better understand and support students from working class backgrounds via WA policy. The consequences of the HEI acting as it currently does, for example utilising SIMD as the main measure, may lead to the view that all is well for all students and WA policy is working without fault.

Understanding could be developed around not equating disadvantage with poverty. Students from WA backgrounds may come from families who are comfortably wealthy or not. Level of wealth can be on a spectrum, fortunes may change. Families supporting one child compared to three children through HE may be very different. The present study argues that economic disadvantage is not the only nor main disadvantage. Whilst it is exaggerated by SIMD emphasis, it is not only level of wealth which impacts HE experiences, one's social class has great influence. A student could come from a wealthy working class family and not possess the same types of social, cultural and academic capital as a middle-class student and their family, potentially leading to very different HE outcomes.

A student from a working-class background may not have any parents, siblings or relatives who have attended HE and so have fewer trusted individuals who can help map out the landscape and expectations (academic capital). They may not have access to differing social networks with people who are in professional jobs who can be called upon to support work experience opportunities, answer questions or recommend another contact who can help (social capital). They may not have folk around who can demonstrate ways of presenting oneself, behaving, what types of knowledge and skills are valued across HE and professional settings (cultural capital).

The above reality is captured by Wilson and Hunter (2022) in the example of Hannah (pseudonym) a secondary school student who is first in her family to apply to HE and first in her school to apply to study medicine in ten years. Hannah accesses and develops the above capitals via her mentor, a retired physician, and continually applies herself to the task of entering medicine but not without "deep personal and emotional cost" (Wilson and Hunter, 2023, p. 213). Researchers argue that such a situation, whilst common, is not readily understood nor accounted for within widening participation policy as earlier noted by the Sutton Trust in that "such capital is more difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to acquire than academic qualifications" (The Sutton Trust, 2016, p. 43 as cited in Wilson and Hunter, 2023, p. 212).

As the aforementioned examples demonstrate within the present study, students from WA backgrounds may: not have the finances readily available despite living at home; be missing out on developing the above types of capital due to living at home perhaps having less time to mix with fellow students and get involved in extracurricular activities on and off campus; have to work part-time to cover costs despite also receiving SAAS funding. Any tendency to equate disadvantage with poverty, may assume that students who are disadvantaged must all come from families experiencing poverty. Such assumptions lead to missed opportunities to improve HE outcomes via cognisant understanding of what shapes HE application and attendance experiences for students from working class, WA backgrounds.

Some families could be wealthy however, students may face other types of disadvantage related to their social class, particularly working classes, who are considered non-traditional within HE environments. Education policies which seek to equate disadvantage with poverty (lack of income) and believe supplying more money will solve inequity and social reproduction within HE may miss the mark in being truly transformative. As highlighted by Wilson and Hunter (2023) often funding is targeted around HE access and then maintenance whilst in HE, however little is directed appropriately towards assisting pupils to application stage:

There is a temptation to assume that current outreach provision is in place to adequately support pupils from first generation/lower-income backgrounds in overcoming barriers which prevent participation in elite courses such as medicine. This is reflected in continued funding for interventions that maintain a focus on the individual without a more adequate understanding of the difficulties applicants face in navigating towards key milestones, (Wilson and Hunter, 2023, p. 211).

As Savage highlights parents pass on more than their economic capital to their offspring, they also pass on their social and cultural capital too, the latter of which is described as opaque

(Savage, 2015, p. 50). It is key for HEIs consider such social processes and train HEI staff accordingly so that students from working class – WA backgrounds are not left to climb the HE mountain, as illustrated by Savage (2015), at their peril whereby any hurdles encountered may be wrongly equated as their individual deficit rather than the HE systems.

Integrating use of frameworks like ACF may help to eradicate the notion of shame around instances where students from WA backgrounds may require support but are reluctant to raise their hand and ask in a public setting as was stated by a WA Organisation 1, Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager. It may also shift the notion that more money alone can shift the needle in retention as indicated by the above participant, as it could benefit outreach activities and better applicants' awareness of HEI options. Such benefits may unfold however, the present research argues that a focus upon HEI, WA as well as secondary school staff knowledge and understandings of the ways which social class and capital(s) impact HE is to be undertaken to enable long-lasting, system-wide, positive change. Tools such as ACF offer a starting point for such endeavours as discussed next.

5.2 Moving institutions forward via sociologically informed practice

Neoliberalism is not neutral; it is aggressive in the way it acts and requires disruption. Engaging in a process of understanding the HE landscape from the perspective of the students the HEI serves as well as the HEI examining itself, may begin to unpick neoliberal-managerial mechanisms. The research-based tools outlined can begin these processes as discussed in sub-sections: 5.2.1 Understanding the HE landscape from working-class students' perspective, 5.2.2 Engaging in institutional self-examination and 5.2.3 Thinking critically about social class consciousness, implicit bias and equity.

5.2.1 Understanding the HE landscape from working-class students' perspective

Key theoretical work by St. John and colleagues (2011), ACF model, establishes practical challenges for institutions that are based on more sociological thinking but provides a type of toolkit to enable deliberations around ways the HEI could move forward. It provides a considered approach to addressing inequality by explaining the ways that first-generation and

low-income students in the US, typically students from working class backgrounds in the UK, overcome barriers around HE access and achievement. It offers ideas around developing ways the HEI can incorporate ideas of social class and related capital(s) within and across its policies and practices with particular interest on preparing for HE, understanding funding options and enabling trust via outreach opportunities.

To recruit students from WA backgrounds and not provide thoughtful support may do harm. Research by St. John and colleagues (2011) demonstrates that such students benefit from different kinds of support. The ACF model is a practical research-based tool concerned with what HEIs can do to understand the impact of social class and suggests ways to support working class students within HE. As previously noted, the ACF model identifies six social processes observed as "integral to academic capital formation" as developed following a review of the works of Bourdieu (1972) – social reproduction, Becker (1964/1975) – human capital theory, and Coleman (1988) - social capital theory (St. John et al. 2011, p. 13). These social processes include *Concerns about cost; Networking; Trust; Information; Cultural Capital; and Habitual patterns* (St. John et al., 2011, p. 113 & 172). The current study HEI will now be appraised in relation to each social process, outlining potential student choice processes.

Concerns about cost – attending university

The first social process outlined by St. John and colleagues (2011) is "Concerns about cost" of attending college (equivalent to university/HEI which will now be used instead of college for clarity) including monetary and non-monetary. Highlighted is that concerns around investment in HE as well as the gains from graduation may limit choices, options and careers.

Monetary costs

Throughout data collection, discussions around financial costs of attending and thriving within HE was varied. Whilst not reported in the findings chapter, regarding the capability of covering the cost of tuition fees, Faculty B, Department A, HEI Student from WA background 1 stated "There's no bones about it. I wouldn't be doing it [attending HE] if my tuition fees weren't paid for". Having access to HE funding can be essential for participation for students from working class and WA backgrounds. Once accepted into HE there may be extra-curricular activities such as compulsory international placements that students must pay for as reported within the findings chapter. Some students may arrive without the necessary equipment and go seeking support from the HEI such as a laptop. In some instances, there might be funds/loans available which are course/department/faculty specific. To take care of living costs students from WA

backgrounds may need to work part-time as the SAAS loan may not be sufficient to cover all overheads.

Key here is ensuring that all students, particularly those from WA backgrounds, and all HEI staff encountering such students, are aware of all funding streams available across the HEI. Such information could be disseminated amongst students and communicated during outreach programs within secondary schools and across the community. As noted above, these may include external funding for tuition fees, grants and/or loans for maintenance whilst studying from SAAS as well as other financial support such as a laptop loan from the HEI itself. In practice, tensions were noted around the impact of part-time employment on academic studies, socialising, wellbeing and engaging with work placements. As earlier noted, assumptions were made around what students should be able to afford based on where and with who they live with. HEI staff are to possess up to date working knowledge of students funding concerns and potential living situations which is imperative to give appropriate advice around support(s) on offer and in understanding students from WA backgrounds need to work alongside studying. Assumptions which lead to implicit and/or explicit bias can be avoided and instead staff and the HEI as an institution can explore ways to support students from WA backgrounds in ways which genuinely contribute to achieving positive education outcomes and life experiences from attending HE.

Non-monetary costs

Non-monetary costs of attending HE were discussed by the Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager regarding awareness that students from differing social class backgrounds may choose different courses and careers depending on family familiarity around these. For example, families with history of working within medicine or "medical families", understand the non-monetary cost many consecutive years of intensive study and placements. However, they also recognise the benefit of such choices and investment as related careers enable good quality of life and social standing. Students from families without such experiences might view such endeavours less favourably as they may appear intense with little return.

Here, other social processes outlined by St. John (2011) such as information, cultural capital and habitual patterns begin to overlap. They demonstrate why an understanding of the variety of social processes related to social class differences as well as actionable practices are necessary to get to the root of and alleviate students HE concerns around access, participation and related advantages. Training could be provided by the HEI to all staff which highlights the impact of concerns about monetary and non-monetary costs of attending HE. Workshops

developed and delivered with students from WA backgrounds could form part of such training similar to what is already in place within the HEI via the WA team regarding building awareness of students from care experienced backgrounds perspectives. A range of students from WA backgrounds could become involved to demonstrate that there is not one archetypal student from a WA background and matters faced vary.

Networking

St. John (2011) notes that learning of education and career options comes via networks, supportive networks are necessary to widen education and employment options and navigate systems and so the HEI is to develop opportunities to cultivate develop networks.

There are examples of some courses/departments/faculties/staff running employment related networking opportunities such as the law clinic. Whilst advertised publicly and a selling point for the HE, in practice there are not enough spaces available to meet the demand. For students from WA backgrounds, understanding the benefit of applying and participating in such opportunities comes too late as the application deadline is around Freshers week when students may not yet be aware of it nor its advantages.

Some HEI staff, for example Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector (findings 4.3.1), recognise that students whose parents have an active social life and prioritise networking across a variety of settings can model this "behaviour" and its benefits for their children. They relate that possessing an active network-building "attitude" is likely to have an "influential effect" on students' success. Here, knowing individuals who can assist with scaffolding HE related experiences such as interview preparation, as with within the present study between a student from a WA background and a Former Professor, exemplifies the types of networks, knowledge and access benefits that middle-class non-WA students can take advantage of often when known via their parents. Regardless of WA policy there remains an element of its not what you know but who you know with regards to getting ahead within education and professional employment.

The opportunity to meet with Faculty B, Department A, Former Professor, who had access to the interview questions which helped to shape and prioritise information and construct responses accordingly, was arranged through undertaking the present research. The researcher interviewed the student as a participant, then organised a meeting between the above two individuals. The coaching provided via this network supported the student from a WA background and bettered their confidence. As aforementioned, the student was successful at

their next interview, progressed through their HE course and onto their one-year placement. The students' outcome could have been very different if not for these chance meetings.

The theory and practice at play across such interactions reflects the importance that Bourdieu (1986) placed on one's social capital and access to networks, knowing the right people to link up with and gain the right information or indeed, knowing someone who knows someone. Savage's (2015) research highlights that according to one's social class, or social category, now seven available, people know folks just above or below their own social category. The higher up the social category ladder the more access to influential people who can assist education or career progression. Such practices are understood and utilised without challenge by middle class families and groups but may not be by working classes.

Institutional change cannot be achieved based off a few staff members previous work experience and expertise. Sporadic isolated support cannot enable positive change, at scale for all students from WA backgrounds in the same manner as a more strategic method. An institution-wide research-evidence-based approach such as the ACF (St. John et al., 2011) and "equity-mindedness" models (CUE, 2019) is necessary. Such would involve all HEI staff across all faculties and departments as well as all WA organisation staff, underpinned by clear WA policy aims, processes and intended impacts/outcomes. Careers Advisers or "Coaches, teachers and outreach professionals provide expanded network of trusted advisors" regarding HEI choices. The HEI can ensure that there plenty of opportunities for campus visits by parents and their children to begin to develop links and networks and to be given "additional actionable information".

Trust

The next social process is concerned with "trust networks formed through neighbourhood and family; local knowledge valued over formal information (which may not be trustworthy)" (St. John, 2011).

As highlighted above, there is great value across outreach opportunities in speaking to applicants, parents, schools and FE colleges to develop understanding and knowledge sharing from trusted HEI and HEI staff sources. At present the findings of the current research suggest that the value placed on opportunities to develop trust with students from WA backgrounds via outreach initiatives is mixed. Some HEI staff alongside WA Organisation staff do see the need and benefit of the above but find institutional backing lacking. For example, some HEI staff reported the HEIs expectation that staff partake in Outreach opportunities as part of their role and without extra time, funding, resource considerations. Such a practice appears as an effort

to continue meeting WA entry targets year on year but does not seek to understand students from WA backgrounds knowledge of HE and potential courses and employment routes of which there is a great variety.

The WA Organisation which linked pupils to retired mentors does understand the value and difference of the above. The opportunities to work with a mentor within secondary school builds pupils' networks, HE knowledge and trust as the mentor can be relied upon to provide support. As St. John suggests for students from working class backgrounds those most close to them in their families and neighbourhoods are the most trusted sources of information around HE. Therefore, the HEI must become apart of this community fabric to also begin to be trusted, outreach is only one way to do this, other methods ought to be considered and developed such as "Coaches [Careers Advisers], teachers, and mentors can become an expanded network of trust and obligation" which can broaden HE and career related understanding and uptake of related opportunities.

Information

Similarly, as discussed within the social process of Trust, "Trustworthy information is shared through school, family, and/or neighbourhood groups". The HEIs current outreach approaches identified across the findings chapter and reiterated above, outline that HEI staff are to discuss the HEI as a whole institution and the benefits of attending this specific institution rather than widen and deepen pupils' knowledge around the differing courses, departments and faculties thus career paths. The pupils may walk away from such information sessions with little awareness of the multitude of opportunities available, instead maintaining a limited view of potential options and routes. Such an approach may not widen the pool of potential pupils that all Scottish HEIs and faculties within each HEI are drawing from, demonstrating missed prospects for pupils-students and the HEI.

HEI support alongside awareness of financial support can help pupils and their parents' decision making. Within the present research, the HEIs support system is described as "struggling as they are" burdened by "added numbers" where there are "a lot of students who really struggle" (findings 4.3.1). The situation is explained away by the HEI staff member as the fault of poor career advice from secondary school teachers who suggest to pupils to apply for specific careers, however the students "future is not really thought through". Schoolteachers' who are responsible for meeting other policy outcomes such as ensuring that "every pupil" has a "destination", commend pupils' aptitude for specific professions "without thinking it through" (Faculty B, Department A, Lecturer 5, Previous Academic Selector, findings 4.3.1). The

reported result by the HEI staff member is oversubscribed professions which applicants are not suited to despite schoolteachers' encouragement. The problem is placed by some HEI staff upon schoolteachers not HEI responses to and provisions around WA students support needs and outreach which broadens pupils' knowledge of differing careers, the appropriate preparation and application processes and thus expanding pupils' horizons and the pool of potential applicants.

The HEI must engage with local communities, schools and parents in a unified system-wide way and ensure that "Trustworthy information about college (HEI) is both believable and actionable" (St. John, 2011). The HEI can develop sensitised "knowledge workshops" encouraging students to follow through on HE and financial assistance applications.

Cultural Capital

St. John (2011) notes that HEI knowledge options can be "severely constrained to local, visible options, and learning from the experiences of others who have ventured into postsecondary education". Such examples of cultural capital which is related to a person's education, knowledge and skills, can be seen throughout the findings and above examples. This is evident in the Inclusion, Access, Equality Manager's questioning of why there is a pattern of who considers some courses and careers as achievable whilst others do not. Similarly, the WA Support Officer/HEI Outreach & Partnership Manager notices the same repetition of students from WA backgrounds selecting certain courses based on what their awareness of what is available. These concerns may take route in secondary school due to lack of knowledge around subject selection, SAAS funding etc. and so intervention and outreach is key as cultural capital links to each social process (St. John, 2013).

Theories around cultural and social capital, such as St. John et al. (2011), suggest that working class students from WA backgrounds may live in a different world in terms of social class norms. When such norms are not understood nor addressed by HEI's then students from WA backgrounds may not be encouraged nor enabled to thrive in HE in a similar way to their peers from non-WA backgrounds. Their peers may be from middle class families whose norms align with the HEIs may already feel like a "fish in water" rather than out of it (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 108). Attending to the six processes (St. John et al., 2011) outlined here can go some way to broaden students from working class backgrounds understanding of HE, HEIs and career options and ensure successful HE experiences and outcomes for such students. The work needed to achieve this includes "Knowledge of college (HEI) opportunities expanded by trusted

others" which could be carried out by the HEI via bettering understanding and engagement among its staff in partnership with related WA organisations and schools.

Habitual Patterns

The final social process of Habitual patterns outlines some of the mechanisms impacting social reproduction that "Local knowledge of familiar options prevails in college (HEI) choice process, other information is mistrusted as not applying to 'people like us". The above social process combine to demonstrate that students from working class/WA backgrounds may be most influence by those immediately around them – parents, schools, communities, as they are most trusted. If more students from such backgrounds enter and gain good education outcomes and career prospects then this can encourage those around them to achieve the same. Issues may arise where pupils have limited knowledge of all HE courses and differing professions or where students have poor experiences of HE such as a lack of understanding and support of the HEI and its staff as these experiences will also inform and shape those around them. The above notion of to "people like us" suggests that students from working class backgrounds see differences between themselves and other communities/social groups/HE students perhaps as being non-traditional in HE settings. The role and opportunity of the HEI is great in positively impacting the above mechanisms, notions and potential consequences for the better and common good.

St. John (2011) notes that "students observe successful others in schools...and community" and "develop personal habits that lead to preparation and informed college (HEI) choice". Such observations enable the building of self-navigating capacity through career and education systems leading to cross-generational/ family uplift and new life patterns, overcoming social reproduction. As described, there are differences between working class and non-working-class students. Where HEIs do little to change themselves, then students from WA backgrounds are "expected to change" (Roberts, 2011, p. 189). More middle-class attributes do well across HE as they mirror those of the HEI, leading students from working class backgrounds to assimilate to be viewed as "acceptable" (hooks, 1994, p. 178). For some HEI staff there is an awareness that such students are "competing with students who are coming with a different set of attributes" as a part of "class dynamics" and so "equipping" students from WA backgrounds is necessary achieve HE application and education outcome success (WA Organisation 2 Director, Non-direct Entry Route, findings 4.3.1).

To attend to these differences as an institution, the HEIs must exam its application and selection processes/expectations, staff training and understanding of the importance of encouraging

networking and developing different aspects of social, cultural and academic capital within students. Students from WA backgrounds can learn such skills whilst also being valued for what they bring to learning and social environments without having to adopt middle class attributes to be seen or get ahead. As highlighted by Roberts (2011, p. 189) non-traditional students are expected to "change" whilst HEIs remain "unchanged". Students from non-traditional backgrounds possess different social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Those interviewed by Roberts (2011) were aware of this, perceived as a "deficit" whereby "students felt they were alone in 'learning to play the game' even after successful HE access, leading to considerations of dropping out (Roberts, 2011, p. 193 as cited in Stewart, 2025, p. 41).

The work of St. John et al. (2015) as outlined above, maps out ways of addressing these factors by understanding students lived experiences and supporting them in ways that attend to these to make a positive difference. ACF is a guide for what HEIs need to observe and react to. St. John has done the research to understand students' lives and moved it on to what HEIs can do to support this. The HEI must look at itself and own practice. As can be seen from the ACF model, first comes an understanding of students experiences and then what the HEI can do to support them.

5.2.2 Engaging in institutional self-examination

The "Equity-mindedness" model (Bensimon, Dowd, & Witham, 2016; CUE, 2019) is disruptive. It outlines five principles which could enable the HEI to examine itself and understand the ways in which current practices are unfair and prevent equity as reported across the findings chapter. This very specific tool may penalise people or move them formatively forward in their understanding.

Bensimon and colleagues developed a process, scaffolded by five principles which enables HEIs to look at themselves as an institution, including their understanding, thinking, policies and practices towards particular groups of students.

Broady, the model focuses on equity around HEIs use of language, measures and goals, practices and policies, disaggregating data and interrogating assumptions, which are to instilled and actioned "institution and system-wide" via the "Equity-mindedness" model (Bensimon, Dowd, & Witham, 2016; CUE, 2019).

To briefly reiterate, the five principles are as follows (CUE, 2019, p. 1):

- Principle 1: Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.
- Principle 2: 'Equity-mindedness' should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.
- Principle 3: Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students' learning—not to treat all students the same.
- Principle 4: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.
- Principle 5: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.

The "equity-mindedness" model has been designed to end racism by highlighting issues of implicit bias around race within HE in the US. It could provide a model for exploring implicit bias around social class across HE in Scotland alongside the ACF model.

The current research found that implicit bias is an issue. As outlined previously, explicit (overt/unambiguous/conscious) and implicit (inherent/unspoken/unconscious) bias relates to beliefs, views and/or behaviours of individuals, groups and/or institutions as influenced by culture and/or context (Atewologun et al., 2018). Exploring HEI biases is important as HEIs can act in unfair ways towards students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds via HE entry processes and education experiences.

Principle 1: Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.

The present study argues that the language used: Widening Access, is not specific enough to identify the group of students that WA policy intends to support. By not directly stipulating that individuals from working-class backgrounds are to benefit from WA policy, institution-wide HEI staff awareness of social class and its differences and impacts on HE for such students appears absent. Opportunities to better understanding and provide support are missed. There are misunderstandings around the differences between equity and equality therefore students from working-class backgrounds may receive no further deliberation nor resources from the HEI and by its staff beyond Contextual Admissions on entry, where required. SIMD as the only measure to identify appropriate students is widely reported as questionable. Lack of mechanisms for identifying and supporting students intended and reluctance to tell HEI staff and students themselves when they have been classed as WA may lead to further inequity. Use of terminology such as merit and its ideological underpinnings, particularly considering all the above, is problematic.

Language

Bensimon and colleagues (Bensimon, Dowd, & Witham, 2016) argue that HE equality is a "structural problem that is hidden or revealed through the use of language imbued with political and social meaning". Clarity is required around equality and equity terminology to avoid mistaking one for the other and is imperative when identifying differing groups. Within the context of the current research the groups included within WA policy are: care experienced; from a military family; individuals residing in a few specific SIMD postcode areas. Social class i.e. working-class as a group is not mentioned directly nor accounted for. It appears that the HEI has aggregated such groups into either social class-blind and/or personal/family experience-blind categories which "erases monumental differences in circumstances" Bensimon et al. (2022, p. 3). The present study argues that social class ought to be explicitly stated across WA policy and enactment, that addressing HEI inequity for students of working-class backgrounds directly is necessary to achieve aims of eradicating social reproduction and stratification.

The differences between equity and equality was not widely understood and articulated by few staff members interviewed. There is evidence from participant interviews that staff see social class differently and were not aware of their own bias. For example, with regard to students from WA backgrounds' ability to afford a compulsory international exchange. There is an assumption by a staff member that "home" (Scottish) students, including those from widening access backgrounds, live at home with their parents therefore are saving money by not living in student/private accommodation and so there must be a surplus of money to afford the international exchange which is compulsory. Secondly, as outlined in full within findings 4.1.2, the above staff member outlines the notion that once students enter HE they are all to be treated "equally and fairly" which is equality and expected. However, treating students differently according to their needs – equity, is viewed as arduous "it's difficult cause we can't treat students differently". Thirdly, the staff member continues with an assumption that students from all backgrounds may experience situations which are "equally as challenging". There is no denying that students will face challenges however there are different sorts of challenges, one-off might be expected but repeated systemic challenges related to social class should not be tolerated. The solution is to have more direct conversations with, and input from WA students, as there is not a typical WA student. The cumulative nature of bias is demonstrated by the layering of assumptions, highlighting multiple points of misunderstanding and gaps in awareness around social class impacts across HE.

Meritocracy

The present research found attempts by the Inclusion, Equality and Diversity team – CA

On HEIs Contextual Admissions webpage, the opening statement outlines the HEIs intention with regards to applicant entry and selection criteria, seeking those with the "potential and ability to benefit from the education". Later terminology used mirrors the Scottish Government, whereby the term "merit" is communicated alongside the above when describing students that the HEI would prefer to select. Use of the term merit can be problematic as previously discussed (literature review, 2.2.1). Merit connotes a person as eligible of praiseworthiness, displaying excellence, that they are deserving and have earned something, all off their own steam. Similarly, merit as linked to meritocracy often implies that folks get ahead based on their own aptitude and endeavours. Across both the above, it is assumed that an individuals' personal input has led to their own success out with any external support, assistance or guidance. However, as a critical understanding of the realities of social class within the UK demonstrates, regardless of what effort or talent an individual may possess, should they not be born into a family of elite or middle-class social standing, their chances of achieving particular types of success such as academic and professional employment may be more challenging.

As Savage (2015) illustrates with the metaphor of mountaineering, those who start closest to base camp will reach the summit first. Guaranteed success depends where your journey begins on the mountain as well as the skills and resources available to you to undertake the journey. One can "mobilize and combine every advantage possible – their economic, social and cultural capital – so that they have the most effective kit on their arduous adventure" (Savage, 2015, p. 189) (literature review, 2.2.1.). In line with the devolved policy model, Scottish universities determine their own admission policies and support structures for students on their courses. Some offer automatic financial support for housing in the first year of studies for students from low SIMD or those with caring responsibilities. Many set the minimum (rather than competitive) admission requirements for students from low SIMD groups, or from schools with traditionally low progression rates into HE, as well as for students who are care-experienced or have caring responsibilities. However, children inherit the wealth, cultural knowledge, social networks and abilities of their parents (Bourdieu, 1984) and the CoWA can do nothing about this.

As earlier mentioned, Costa, et al., (2017, p. 8, citing Bourdieu & Boltanski 1981) and Brown & Hesketh, (2004) outline that class matters, and predominantly shapes individuals' trajectories rather than practices or indeed discourses of meritocracy. Therefore, use of merit in the above

context by the HEI may only serve to undermine working class students' experiences and circumstances which are likely out with their control, but which may impact upon their secondary education outcomes and beyond. Such circumstances may not allow for opportunities to gain merit or students merits gained may not be recognised by HEI's. Other qualities possessed and/or tricky circumstances experienced by such individuals may be difficult to communicate to HEIs, particularly at application stage. There may be a need for further clarification around what is being judged here and what considerations around such circumstances linked to social class, which draws upon social/cultural capital are in place, if at all. Also, of note to further consider is, at what point such students may discuss their circumstances and endeavours before applying to receive guidance on which matters and how they ought to address them within their applications. Within a neoliberal model, emphasis on such student-experience-centric understanding and enactment is not likely.

Some wealthier families may view WA policy, which relies on SIMD, as a way to get around the funding and places cap and instead use other means to get into HE such as buying or renting property in areas deemed as SIMD 1 and 2 (findings 4.2.2). The Scottish Government and HEI appear to collude on the inadequacy of WA policy and target setting e.g. "54% of children in low-income households in Scotland live outside SIMD20 neighbourhoods" (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015 as cited in Blackburn, et al., 2016, p. 23). Over half of the individuals intended to benefit from a WA policy centred around inclusion in HE who ought to be counted are excluded. When viewed from the HEI neoliberal perspective, it looks like WA policy works when HE entry targets are met and funding gained, whilst the more problematic realities experienced by applicants, students and staff may be unaccounted for.

Goals

One of the HEIs stated strategic aims (findings 4.1.2) is to include under-represented students in extracurricular opportunities. However, little consideration is given regarding any means of affording them financially. The assumption stated in the above example, demonstrates implicit bias around what students from WA backgrounds should and should not be able to afford depending on where and with whom they reside. There is a gap between the HEIs strategic aims and the ways these aims will be realised in practice for students from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also a lack of understanding around the ways social class impacts upon HE and students lived experiences, pointing again to a gap in HEI staff training and HEI-wide WA policy approach that aligns with its ethos.

Measures

The SIMD as a metric, misses out over half of those intended to benefit. With the SIMD metric in place, HEI staff now have the difficult job of rejecting some applicants over others with same grades as they live out with the designated SIMD postcode areas. Such applicants could live "two streets away" from each other (findings 4.3). Some HEI staff feel that they cannot tell applicants that the decision is due to SIMD. Instead, they check for this information covertly, asking applicants to email them with their "name and full postal address" to check whether they have WA status as it would be "chaos" to tell applicants about SIMD and related decision-making processes (findings 4.3).

Across HEI faculties and departments, SIMD recruitment targets are not equally distributed. Some HEI staff suggest the HEIs approach is not quite right yet as some departments are asked to take some more students from WA backgrounds than originally allocated when the HEI are not on track to achieve the SIMD target leading to a "50/50 split" of students from WA and non-WA backgrounds across some courses (findings, 4.2.1). SIMD targets are not decided in a way reflective of ending social reproduction by having an awareness of which course places are continually offered to applicants from particular social classes. It may be that students from WA backgrounds wish to do those courses but are not being facilitated because a single, competitive entry tariff continues to be applied to everyone. Alternatively, there may be insufficient applications to the course/faculty, indicating a need for outreach programs to raise awareness and applications from WA students as recognised by the WA Outreach organisation (findings, 4.3.1). Whatever the reason, the uneven distributions may result in WA students being funneled towards some courses and not others, and it is hard to argue that they experience true equity (Stewart, 2025, p. 46).

The voices of those at the heart of policy, presently students from widening access backgrounds, are to be heard for the HEI to develop an understanding of students' needs and what practices are to be in place to support them. Currently the staff interviewed were not aware of any overarching HEI mechanism(s) to gather such data to begin informing such work. There is the recognition by staff that the current student evaluation process does not connect students' experiences in a meaningful way. Student evaluations are for the entire student body and more generalised than a specific evaluation for students from widening access backgrounds at a more nuanced, granular level. Faculty staff highlight that the HEI needs to be "listening" and "adapting" suggesting that it is currently not. St. John's earlier research has done a great deal to gather students experiences as well as going a step further in developing an evidenced-based

model to support students' entry into HE. The HEI can utilise such models and build upon these if necessary to apply them to a Scottish HE context. It is gaining an understanding of the ways that social classes impacts upon HE access, experiences and outcomes for students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds that is key so that sensitised mechanisms are put in place.

A similar measure to the BESST could be developed within the current HEI to disaggregate data around social class and WA. Having a template example of a measure in action which increases practitioners (HEI staff) awareness of "equity gaps longitudinally" and to "know why equity gaps exist" via use of disaggregated data may lead to similar tool development which enables staff to understand and close equity gaps.

Principle 2: 'Equity-mindedness' should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.

As aforementioned, "Equity-mindedness" theorises that "individuals are aware of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices...and the impact of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3).

Presently, many HEI staff as well as the HEI itself may not be stated as being "equity-minded" as according to the four distinctive ways outlined (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). They are not social class-conscious "rather than blind" "in a critical sense" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3). According to the model as with regards to race but utilised here as with regards to social class, this requires "noticing and questioning patterns of educational outcomes that reveal unexplainable differences in outcomes for minoritized students (Gillborn 2005); it means viewing inequalities in the context of a history of exclusion, discrimination, and educational apartheid" or separateness (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3) which is absent institution-wide whilst present among a few individual staff and cascaded across courses/departments in some instances. Similarly, universal HEI awareness that "beliefs, expectations, and practices assumed to be neutral can have outcomes that are racially disadvantageous" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3) or socially disadvantageous in the present study context, is not found. Very staff members demonstrated a willingness to "assume responsibility for the elimination of inequality" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 3) and lacked top-down expectation and/or approaches to do so. Finally, the cognisance that discrimination against students from working class backgrounds may pervade policies and practices in HEIs, thus could disproportionately impact such students whilst maintaining social class hierarchies is missing institution-wide, aside from the small pockets of practice outlined previously.

The above examples highlight a practice of increasing student numbers whilst not increasing staff. HEI faculty/department staff must ensure top positioning on league table rankings (which include student satisfaction measures) whilst also being concerned that the reduction of staff-student time negatively impacts upon these relationships. Students from WA backgrounds must go it alone in a new environment where they may get lost despite some staff identifying that they require more support in a system where support services are struggling. The lack of WA related training leaves room for misconceptions to develop around students from WA backgrounds which are not favourable. Any pockets of good practice are down to individual staff members encouraging their teams, relying on staff goodwill rather than systemic HEI-wide approach to WA policy rollout and enactment. The current approach embodies neoliberal-managerialism as the HEI is focused on its own institutional rankings and market standing whilst students' personal HE success or failure is the responsibility of each individual student regardless of a dysfunctional HE system.

The use of SIMD of a metric and meritocracy as an ideology perpetuate inequity across HE particularly for students from WA, working class and poorer backgrounds. The key responses for HEI highlighted above, although not limited to these, appear to be more sporadic and in so being, may support middle class applicants over working-class students. None of the above seems to be informed by education equality policy and what does happen appears to be incongruent. Without recognition and understanding of the above areas and those outlined in further detail below, the effort; action or non-action of the HEI could be considered as not informed, cyclical and perhaps even piecemeal. There is an absence of understanding of social class as an issue which is not surprising when SIMD is so crudely operated. The current HE system appears to be unjust and WA policy has some distance to travel to become fully fit for purpose and undeluded by meritocracy. The above tensions could be viewed as obscured at best and ignored at worst. My research could provide a better understanding of this complex situation.

Principle 3: Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students' learning—not to treat all students the same.

As outlined by Bensimon and colleagues, "achieving equality in outcomes does not mean—in fact cannot mean—treating all students as though they are the same" (Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4). To be "equity-focused" HE policies and practices are to "recognize and accommodate differences in students' aspirations, life circumstances, ways of engaging in learning and participating in college, and identities as learners and students (Witham et al. 2015b, 31)"

(Bensimon, et al., 2022, p. 4).

The discourse around students from WA backgrounds fluctuates between being viewed as a nuisance or possessing exceptionality. Some staff state that students from WA backgrounds are more needy than others at the same time as staff outlining that students are to be "treated all the same" (findings 4.3.2). This is at odds with the principles and practices of equity which is about recognising individual differences. There appears to be little attention paid to understanding the mechanisms of social class but rather something akin to myths about students from WA/ working-class/ poorer backgrounds with no knowledge of social class discourses applied. Practical models such as ACF (St. John et al., 2025) as aforementioned could help the HEI to comprehend, recognise and appropriately respond to such mechanisms. Where such students come to HE with differing needs than their peers, then the HEI could have a toolkit in place to address their needs.

There were some examples of HEI staff-led understanding of the mechanisms of social class and students' subsequent experiences of HE. Adaptions were enacted to enable such students to thrive as outlined within the findings (4.3.2). Some of these changes included: giving students their timetables well in advance to aid organisation and preparation; bringing students on campus to show them around and introduce staff ahead of starting their courses; changing class start and finish times to align students non-HEI responsibilities and cascading this to FE feeder colleges for consistency across education journeys (findings, 4.3.2).

Principle 4: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.

Assumptions around finances (or lack thereof) are often positioned as the main and/or only difficulty that students from WA backgrounds may face on entering HE, cited by WA Organisation 1 as a main contributing factor when considering dropping out. With better financial capabilities WA organisation 1 could improve retention via pre-entry preparation. Students requiring financial support is viewed as a quick fix – go to the finance office to check what help is available. However, stating the need for other types of support due to being from a WA background is seen as though shameful (findings, 4.3.3). There is little acknowledgement of any other impacts. Equity, treating individuals according to their needs, must entail recognising peoples' differences and attending to them. Differences ought not to be regarded as a negative, particularly when WA policy intends to recognise that individuals have different starting points in life and so aims to close any gaps.

Critically, the findings of the present study suggest that narratives are constructed about students from WA backgrounds which are not positive. This mythical representation of such students evolve in a vacuum because the HEI and HEI staff are at odds with whether or not to identify students from WA backgrounds as such across the HEI, without students' knowledge/say, nor potential for suggestions. In short, students from WA backgrounds may be given access via contextual admissions processes such as lower entry requirements however the students themselves may not be aware of this rationale and reason for successful entry. They may miss out on vital information around support, guidance and opportunities, where they are available.

There are many positive aspects to the inclusion of students from widening access backgrounds in HE in Scotland as highlighted by several HEI and WA organisation staff members. However, such insight is far from universally shared across the HEI. The aspects discussed included bringing diversity and differing values. Such students also applied learning to their own communities, motivated to be helpful to people within society. They bring a wide range of real-life experiences and challenge notions of ease regarding policy implementation and/or approaches within the classroom. Some staff members appeared overjoyed to share the diversity, versatility, understanding and warmth that students from WA backgrounds brought to the learning environment and future profession.

The benefit of a mix of students from a mix of backgrounds is imperative to any equality focused or "equity-minded" societal endeavour. A key finding of the present study is that the above is not entirely understood, recognised, sought nor celebrated across the HEI. Overwhelmingly there is a discourse around students from WA backgrounds which appears mythical and mechanised as they are discussed by many staff in mainly negative terms. A deficit model approach can be observed which focuses on individual students or groups as having an issue or deficit rather than considering wider societal or systemic matters which may shape the individuals'/groups experiences and responses.

To design systems that promote equity, universities need real-time data oversight across all courses to allow a central team to drill down and prompt timely strategic action. Several participants pointed out that as each department/faculty works in a silo and so reporting faculty-level data is difficult as is ensuring equal access to all courses (findings, 4.3.1). Allowing this uneven process is implicit bias as there is little strategic oversight. Whilst targets may be met, the approach and process are inequitable. The Scottish Government determines recruitment numbers for certain professional courses (for example, medicine, nursing and teaching) to ensure that the universities produce sufficient trainees to meet demand. Professional

qualifications offer good economic prospects and are a reasonably solid route to social mobility. However, the Scottish Government does not monitor or require these courses to consist of 40% students from WA backgrounds (Stewart, 2025, p. 47).

Principle 5: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.

Along with implicit (unconscious) bias there are instances across the present research findings of explicit bias (conscious) bias. A key finding within the present study is that there is an absence of recognition, institution-wide, that a WA background is in any way significant in terms of impacting learning or experiences of HE. As outlined in the findings chapter, there are several examples highlighting explicit bias around this lack of understanding such as a member of HEI staff stating that they "would never tell a student" who came to speak with them that they are identified by the HEI as a student from a WA.

There is a reluctance by some staff around inviting students from WA backgrounds to come together as a group to learn about WA policy, their WA status and potential supports such as the grant scheme. Important to note is that there is no HEI-led guidance nor practices of approaching such matters. Again, students applicable to support regarding disability, BAME or care experienced are not sheltered from this knowledge nor are their differences viewed as negative. HEI staff are not informed of which students are identified by the HEI as WA unless they have access to admissions data. Being kept unaware regarding students' status would not be acceptable if applied to other student groups as noted above, however social class is not considered in the same way nor is backed by similar legislation and related punitive measures when not considered or indeed ignored.

Those whom WA policy intends to support may not know anything about it nor be informed by the HEI despite the HEI benefitting from having such students attend their institution as the students count towards the HEIs WA target and not another institution. Conversely, those in the know about WA policy and its affordances can receive support where applicable or capitalise on it despite it not applying to them, such as the example of middle-class parents purchasing properties in SIMD 1 and 2 postcodes so their children can access contextual admissions (findings, 4.2.2). The above gaming of the system can also translate into gaining access to the present HEIs entry routes specifically designed and advertised online as for students from WA backgrounds. However, due to the HEI not enforcing any guardrails to ensure that only students from WA backgrounds may enter via the non-direct entry route 1, students from non-WA backgrounds can also enter this way. Such practices fail to recognise the differences between social classes and the chances of successfully entering HE. This

situation implicitly and explicitly keeps the whole WA entry route unequal and unfair – again, bias is cumulative in its effect.

The HEI has a duty of care, often ensured by a legal framework and associated penalties, to consider the lived experiences of particularly groups of students and not discriminate against them regarding disability, race/ethnicity and being care experienced. These are enshrined in the Equality Act (2010) and go further to enable equality of HE opportunities such as the corporate parent policy. With regards to WA policy and social class considerations, there is no legal basis nor protections around discriminating, via implicit and/or explicit bias, against applicants and students from working class backgrounds. Whilst a solution would be for the Equality Act (2010) to include such a provision, at the very least HEIs can take it upon themselves to ensure that they cause no harm to and do not discriminate against students based on their social class, something that student are born into and cannot control nor change.

5.2.3 Thinking critically about social class consciousness, implicit bias and equity

As outlined, Marx operationalises the concept of class consciousness which he outlines as people becoming aware of their shared interests according to social class and exploitation of their labour (working classes – proletariat) by other classes (elite - bourgeoisie) (Elster, 1986). Where people are unaware of this, they inhabit a "false consciousness" and would not see society's structure as perpetuated by the ideology of the dominant ruling class (capitalists) (Elster, 1986, p. 131). Here, the present study utilises the term social class consciousness to signify when people of all classes have an awareness of the differences between social classes and their impacts. Groups would be aware of their own social class make-up and affordances and understand the differences of other groups and their social class affordances. Differing groups would recognise that opportunities are more or less readily available and can be taken up with ease or alongside hardship depending upon one's social class.

For example, the work of Savage (2015) outlines that inequality can be understood via social class and the impact of cultural, social and economic capitals as proposed by Bourdieu (1986). As aforementioned, inheritance of cultural capital from parents to their offspring ensures that understandings of how HE works, ways to get ahead and ensure professional employment opportunities are passed along. Savage (2015, p. 50) described that cultural capital can be "masked in a language of meritocratic achievement and hard work" and that its "power" lies in "not being recognized directly" (Savage, 2015, p. 49). Similarly, social capital denotes "the

range and nature of peoples' social networks, which can affect peoples' life chances" including getting ahead in the job market (Savage, 2015, p. 26). It follows that when the above is recognised, particularly by HEIs, then the power held can be lessened. Positive change could be realised where understandings of students lived experiences and the impact of social class upon HE are considered and acted upon by HEIs via equitable approaches to HE access, student support and employment opportunity awareness and practices.

Important findings from the present study are that within the HEI explored, it appears that there is little joined-up institution-led understanding of the ways that inherited capitals, largely influenced by familial social class, can impact upon HE experiences and outcomes. It is imperative to recognise that merit/hard work/effort may not mitigate the impacts of generational social class-related understandings of the ways HE works. Without such knowledge being shared and cascaded across all HEI areas and staffing, students from working class backgrounds who are intended to be supported by WA policy may continue to experience HE differently to their more affluent peers. Applicants and students like their parents, families and communities can be held tightly in one band/ social class by access, or lack thereof, to varying capitals (Savage, 2015) which can begin to explain the impact of social class upon HE access and success. However, the HEI demonstrates very little grasp of this situation and does even less to address it. When the above is taken into consideration it provides another reason why using SIMD as a metric on its own, an area/postcode-based measure, to assess eligibility of WA policy is irrational. Savage (2015: 192) outlines that "a person's class origin as that defined by the occupation of their main parental earner when they were fourteen years old". The HEI does not utilise parental income nor occupation with regards to WA policy and understanding the background of applicants nor students. Across the HEIs WA policy an explanation of social inequality and its impact on communities, families and students is absent.

Throughout the present study, a key consideration arose around the use of terminology to aid understanding such as implicit bias, whether it was useful at this stage or distracting. As aforementioned, the term implicit bias has been adopted from the "equity-mindedness model" (CUE, 2019) where it is stated as being deployed in its original intent, with regards to racism within colleges (universities) in the US. The term has emerged as a potentially useful concept in exploring HEIs treatment of social class. The present study seeks to explore whether the term could be applied in the above context within HEIs in Scotland. Both groups within the US and in Scotland are considered non-traditional within HE environments, experience disadvantage and discrimination. Is race more conspicuous whilst WA and social class is left to caricatures?

Implicit bias as well as explicit bias are not just one thing; they can be varied across many instances and cumulative in their effect. If inequity is being maintained by the HEI, then it is not unfair to think that using the term implicit bias might be useful. There is the consideration of whether the discourse evidenced across the findings around students from WA backgrounds would be acceptable if with regards to race, disability or care experienced students. A way of moving forward may be to view HEI processes and staff responses regarding students from working class and poorer backgrounds as implicit/explicit bias in the same manner and severity as racism. The ACF model could offer a framework to enable those coming into contact and working with such students to understand differing factors regarding social class, which may impact upon HE access and success, and end any bias.

Findings of the present research suggest that the HEI's current approach to WA policy enactment maintains inequity across the institution. There appears to be a limited attempt to understand the ways in which social class impacts upon students from WA backgrounds experiences of HE and where their needs may differ from traditional non-WA students. The current HEI WA approach ignores research that would help this aim. The beginning of the present study observed a rational process via WA policy to get more working-class students into HE. However, as the study progressed, it became clear that the WA policy process may fall short of achieving the impact intended, potentially contributing to continued social reproduction. It appears that there is no strategic approach undertaken by the HEI to understand staff knowledge of current WA policy and nor any research-evidenced models (such as those highlighted above) adopted to understand students' lives. There is a top-down focus is on achieving WA targets of a certain number of students entering the HEI coming from SIMD 1 and 2 postcode areas, argued here as problematic. Crucially there is reported lack of HEI staff training and guidance which describes to staff the shifts expected to be seen to deliver WA policy in a meaningful way beyond achieving numerical targets.

Universities that recruit WA students need to ensure that they also provide the support for students to succeed. There are student-focused projects such as the 40 Faces campaign by Universities Scotland which outlines 40 students' routes into and experiences of HE. Some students speak of their journeys into HE as happenstance for example "Luckily, I happened to attend an open night" (Anne: Universities Scotland, 2024). Other students clearly articulate the ways in which students from WA backgrounds may perceive themselves and the responsibilities of HEIs to cross the divide:

There needs to be a larger outreach and better integration of universities into both colleges and high schools across Scotland, and not just within the immediate proximity of a given university...

I believe certain psychological aspects can impede an individual's perception of deserving a specific education, I strongly believe that the pretentiousness and elitism within some academic environments needs to be eliminated to make education available to all, (Josh, Universities Scotland, 2024).

Having access to reflections of students' experiences is a step in the right direction, although bitesize and generalised. What is missing is any theoretical underpinnings of why students from WA backgrounds may think about themselves and their capabilities in particular ways as different to students from other social class backgrounds when it comes to attending HE. Also unaddressed is the HEIs role and impact upon such students in the ways signals who HE is for. The focus of 40 Faces (Universities Scotland, 2024) is working class students, perhaps to inform HEIs of students experiences however it does little to highlight any lack of understanding of the above nor the practices of institutions themselves. This need has been identified by researchers such as Bensimon and colleagues (2019) and can be addressed by utilising "Equity-mindedness" model. The model is more pointed, has bite and clear direction of ways HEIs can develop their awareness of inequity and alter their part in perpetuating it. Whilst the model was developed to tackle racism within HEIs in the US, its framework demonstrates ways of thinking and suggests enactments regarding social class across Scottish HEIs. Similarly, the ACF framework developed by St. John et al., (2011) aims to assist HEIs in an attempt to move from theory into practice. Unfortunately, it appears that such models created specifically for HEIs to better their own practices and understand the experiences and needs of working-class students, are not taken into consideration.

The next and final chapter will present the thesis research conclusion.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The present research project began with the observation that within Scotland there are historic and continuing barriers around access to HE for people from working class backgrounds. With the introduction of Widening Access policy by the Scottish Government to tackle the above, a question arose regarding how HEIs would enact WA policy to overcome the pattern of inequality of HE access. Previous research sought to dispel the notion of the low numbers of working class HE applicants as due to a lack of aspiration on the part of pupils – potential applicants and their parents, concluding this is a myth. Several studies indicated that parents with no prior knowledge of HE processes, systems and applications are unaware of how to support their children but have high aspirations for them as any parent would. Other matters regarding lack of HE access for working class individuals and families include differing considerations around secondary school subject choices, whether pupils are encouraged in FE college or HE, confusion around articulation approaches and admissions processes and how HE is to be funded. With much known regarding pupils and families lack of understanding around HE entry, the present study sought to explore the ways in which an HEI responds to and overcomes these, enabling fair access to HE as aimed for by new WA policy. This thesis contributes to the field of research around social class, WA policy in HE and theories and enactments related to equity as related to the systems, practices and processes of a home HEI.

This thesis explored the ways in which educational inequality can be understood through different lenses such as social class and related social, cultural, economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). All are important for the higher education student. Also examined is how HE institutions can respond to that. The research recognises the known ideas about inequality and looks at an HEI to understand how it positions itself to deal with this problem. On further review of the literature, concepts and related models such as implicit bias (CUE, 2019) and academic capital formation (St. John et al., 2011) operationalise some of the theoretical ideas. These are of interest and were discussed throughout the thesis. The present study acknowledges theoretical ideas (such as Bourdieu) and how useful they are, and then explores how they've been drawn on, used, and might still be beneficial. The thesis hinges on the idea that the university is unfair towards students from working class and poorer backgrounds. The research has tried to understand and explain that by looking at ways in which the HEI acts, we can think of them being implicitly biased towards some groups, or even explicitly biased. Throughout the findings chapter the university can be seen to act in particular ways. The culmination of all that suggests that it fits within a discourse of implicit bias quite neatly or it fits within a harsher discourse of actually being explicitly biased in different ways.

The main research question and two sub-research questions were as follows:

- What is role of Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in challenging/ creating/ contributing to inequity? (processes)
- What are the HEI mechanisms which impact upon Higher Education (HE): access, acceptance, and students experiences in Scotland? (policies in practice)
- What sociological theories help us to understand the mechanisms of inequity across HE and HEIs?

The aim of the present research is to understand:

- how HEIs nurture inclusive and equitable systems/processes/data collection and utilisation across HE access and learner journey: what HEIs systems/processes/data do and/or don't do to attend to Widening Access (WA)
- HEI students experiences and explore what may be missed across secondary schools and HEI approaches
- existing sociological theories and approaches which explore the mechanisms of inequity across HE and HEI and progress these.

This final concluding chapter will highlight a summary of the findings including contributions to knowledge. Next, there is a discussion of the limitations of the research. Lastly, the implications for further research, policy and practice generated by the study will be discussed. The sections flow as follows: 6.1. Findings summary; 6.2. Study limitations; and 6.3. Implications for further research, policy and practice.

6.1 Findings summary

6.1.1 Incognisant WA policy development

One finding of the present research is that of policy aimed at supporting the education outcomes of students from WA backgrounds, lacks an understanding of the lived experiences of those students. Thorough consideration of complex, nuanced experiences would lead to fewer misunderstandings and misconceptions and better outcomes. Promoting engagement around the lives and education experiences of individuals would help to create meaningful mechanisms to enable coherent and effective strategies for inclusion. It would sensitise HEI staff and policy actors to the lived experiences including present contexts of those individuals/groups for whom WA policy must work.

The "less authoritative and more egalitarian" devolved Scottish policy model (Cairney et al., 2016, p. 333) guidance allows local educationalists more rein to be creative in developing their practice and policy. Despite directive policy aims there remains ambiguity. The definition of the problem(s) is poor as it does not engage enough with the impacts of social class in education and related experiences. With HEIs viewed as autonomous (Scottish Government representative), the current tolerance of local variations in policy is maybe a good thing because it allows for different approaches across differing contexts. The more tightly specified outcomes in the WA policy complete with specified actions and target numbers, are not delivering an equitable admissions system. To work, tolerance of local approaches needs to be accompanied by assessment of what works and why. This requires sharing of understandings and implementation strategies across interest groups to generate grounded knowledge. Variation without reflection may lead to problems arising from limited knowledge and co-ordination of policy actors. Such issues could be overcome by seeking a greater voice and co-production with those that policy should help.

6.1.2 Experiences of implicit bias and inequitable practices

The HEIs current approach to WA policy appears to perpetuate disadvantage and in so doing, is maintaining inequity within HE in Scotland. As mentioned above, the WA approach requires sensitisation of students from WA backgrounds lived experiences, attunement to such students' needs and enactments which attend to these needs equitably. At present, HEI staff are not informed of students' categorisation as WA. Students from WA backgrounds are also not informed of their own applicability nor that such a policy is in place to assist their HE journey. A student may have entered HE via contextual admissions and not know. As such support mechanisms are not in place, or unlikely to be known where any are, in a uniform way HEI-wide. Such matters do not appear to have heeded warnings from the Commissioner for Fair Access that in terms of accessing HE, as outlined in literature review, 2.1.1. Entry mechanisms, such as contextual admissions, must be "understood by potential applicants" if they are "to be effective" especially for individuals that WA policy is "designed to support" as such applicants "are often the most lacking in informed support and guidance, with family and peers unfamiliar with application processes and requirements" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 4).

The continued use of SIMD as a measure across admissions processes, without any other more individual-based measures is problematic. As is, SIMD as a postcode area-based measure is exclusionary of folks it ought to include whilst including those not intended and can be gamed to include those it should not. When combined with unequitable application of HEI SIMD related WA targets across departments/faculties/courses, such factors may lead to prolongation

of social reproduction across HE and thus Scottish society. The Commissioner for Fair Access called for "fairer access to the professions" however, it is unclear how the HEI is seeking to ensure that this becomes a reality, as reiterated from section 2.1:

Fairer access to the professions, in particular high-status professions, is needed to ensure that they recruit from the widest possible pool of talent (efficiency); to avoid access being over-determined by accidents of birth and family circumstances (social justice); and to ensure professions are as representative as possible of the communities they serve (social cohesion), (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p. 5)

Key to the above statement is not only the focus on HE entry and its need for fairer access but the end outcome – impact for society or social cohesion. The top professions ought to be reflective of those they serve not a stark contrast between the social classes where those born into privilege are working upon those who are not:

In a 21st-century democracy it is equally important that members of the general public when they encounter members of the professions are able to interact with their 'peers' rather than a 'caste' composed predominantly of the socially privileged. This is especially necessary in the case of professions such as law or social work where in the past it has sometimes appeared that different social worlds are colliding with the 'clients' coming from one, more socially deprived world and the professionals coming from another, more privileged, world. Similar arguments apply to medicine where diagnosis and treatment may even be compromised if social interactions are inhibited, (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020, p. 21).

The use of SIMD as measure used alone and without being applied in a social class-conscious manner (outlined further below), taking into consideration the above observations, will ensure that no positive change occurs around fairer HE entry nor access to the professions. As warned eight years ago, SIMD should not be the only measure instead it was recommended that "a robust set of measures should be developed to supplement SIMD" (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017, p. 1). The findings within the present study regarding participants views of SIMD20 echo others across the field and combine to encourage shift action. The most recent shifts in SIMD20 usage suggest that things are moving forward, the landscape is changing. However, as yet, no other replacements have been designed, there remains some way to go.

The present research argues that the HEI could benefit from applying the work of Bensimon and colleagues. (CUE, 2019). Such work is proposed as it suggests a process of looking at oneself, and trying to understand one's own practice, as an institution and a practitioner. If HEIs work with those that can help them eliminate that, then that is a way forward. The development

of the "equity-mindedness" model (CUE, 2019) alongside its five principles, enables institutions and practitioners a way to engage in introspection and related equitable enactments.

For example, within the US in using the "Equity-mindedness" model, HEI's can check for implicit bias around race (original intent of the model) and enable practitioners to become "researchers" in order to identify and shift policy and practice, focusing on 'best practitioners not best practices...enabling subjects (staff etc.) to look at their practices' (CUE, 2019). As aforementioned, the model reclaims the "racial justice meaning of equity" as assistance according to need not a one size fit's all approach regardless of need (equality) and uses disaggregated data at classroom level, looking at results according to race. Practitioners can see that the black students, for example, might not be doing so well, denoted as 'not gap gazing' but looking to see where the practitioners' practices must change. Also recommended is reviewing the syllabus as an artefact which effects feelings, emotions and connections with subject matter and relationship with practitioner. CUE (2020) highlight "core concepts of racial equity":

The concept of racism is widely thought of as simply personal prejudice, but in fact, it is a complex system of racial hierarchies and inequities. At the micro level, or individual level, of racism are internalized and interpersonal racism. At the macro level of racism, we look beyond the individuals to the broader dynamics, including institutional and structural racism, (CUE, 2020).

Institutional racism is described as:

...racial inequity within institutions and systems of power, such as places of employment, government agencies, and social services. It can take the form of unfair policies and practices, discriminatory treatment, and inequitable opportunities and outcomes, (CUE, 2020)

Also of relevance is an understanding of "structural racism (or structural racialization)", which is:

...the racial bias across institutions and society. It describes the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color. Since the word "racism" often is understood as a conscious belief, "racialization" may be a better way to describe a process that does not require intentionality, (CUE, 2020)

As well as "systemic racialization":

...a dynamic system that produces and replicates racial ideologies, identities, and inequities. Systemic racialization is the well-institutionalized pattern of discrimination that cuts across major political, economic, and social organizations in a society, (CUE, 2020)

Whilst race may be considered the dominant mode of inequity within HEIs in the US, social class arguably intersects and draws an overarching thread throughout experiences of HEIs in Scotland. HE access remains easier for more affluent families:

The ability to navigate and orientate towards a profession, to locate knowledge and understanding of a profession in a broader context and to draw on professional social networks are cultural resources that are more readily available to young people with access to middle class professional networks, (Wilson and Hunter, 2023, p. 212)

Developing the above capital is noted as "more difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to acquire than academic qualifications" (The Sutton Trust, 2016a, p. 43 as cited in Wilson and Hunter, 2023, p. 212). Within HE environments, behaviour, speech and appearances are in the image of/modelled upon the elite and middle classes (hooks, 1994, p. 187) as this is what is respected and rewarded in such education systems (Bourdieu, 1984 cited in Crossley, 2014, p. 93).

The present research is not seeking to overlook or sidestep racism but draw a parallel between the nature of classism, across its forms and impacts. The HEI in the present study must take the lead in developing its understanding of the above forms of social class discrimination and ensure it does not contribute to inequity across HE access, experiences and outcomes of students from working class backgrounds. Utilising concepts of implicit and explicit bias (CUE, 2019) might be useful to progress the above.

Current discourse and approach around students from WA backgrounds would not be acceptable if with regards to race, disability, gender or care experienced students. The HEI has a duty of care, often ensured by a legal framework and associated penalties, to consider the lived experiences of students and not discriminate against them with regards to disability, race/ethnicity, or being care experienced. These are enshrined in the Equality Act (2010) and go further to enable equity of HE opportunities such as the corporate parent policy. With regards to WA policy and social class considerations, there is no legal basis nor protections around discriminating, via implicit and/or explicit bias, against applicants and students from working class backgrounds. As part of the HEIs reflective process, it could significantly develop HEI staff understanding of differences between equity & equality as well as ensure recognition that enactment of the former may lead to benefits for all students.

6.1.3 Lack of social class consciousness

One of the most prominent findings of the present research is that the HEI has not developed social class consciousness – a critical awareness of social class and related capital(s) which

impact upon experiences of HE. There appear to be no concerted efforts made by the HEI to understand social class and the lives and experiences of WA students via research initiatives or projects. As aforementioned, there is research already out there which has covered this groundwork and developed a practical model such as ACF (St. John et al., 2011). However, there is also an existing project housed within the HEI, the WA Mentoring Organisation, which has worked with secondary school and pupils linking them with mentors who assist the pupils in applying to HE and throughout their HE journeys. Here there is an abundance of firsthand accounts of the mechanisms in place which discriminate against students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds. There are also many examples of such students succeeding despite an HE system which appears to be working against them (findings 4.3.3.). Such inhouse insight is not drawn upon by the HEI to assist in an HEI-wide effort to get it right for students from WA backgrounds.

The HEI could adopt or develop an HEI-wide framework and provide training to enable staff to gain an understanding of students from WA backgrounds lives. A framework is needed to embed an awareness of the differences across capitals – social, cultural, academic as well as economic between differing social class groups and the ways these interact when applying to, entering and traversing HE as a non-traditional student. Such a framework could outline mechanisms of supporting such students. The HEI must develop a consensus around informing students directly about their WA status/categorisation and what this entails with regards to entry mechanisms such as contextual admissions or types of support once studying.

Another way that the HEI could develop social class consciousness is by ensuring that all HEI staff have a demonstratable understanding of the differences between enacting equity vs equality and are aware of the respective impact upon experiences of HE processes and systems, student experiences and outcomes. Today, an HEIs having goals and aims around being a part of social progression and having staff and students who reflect society ought to be par for the course. Having a mix of folk representative of society is to be viewed as expected within an HEI not as a special, short-term, piecemeal circumstance. Having goals around inclusion, diversity, equality is itself recognition that historically particular individuals, groups and social classes were excluded and signifies a move away from repeating such discrimination. In a modern HEI, all involved must continually question: do we understand social class trends of today?; are we doing/going far enough to attend to historic and continuing injustices?; how does this understanding shape our strategic goals and aims?; how is/will achievement be measured, via statistics regarding numbers of students entering HE and/or retention and/or obtaining related employment after graduation?

The HEI must critically challenge WA policies including handing back if necessary to the Scottish Government and maintaining an awareness of own ethos, processes and practices. At present WA policy appears to protect institutions not people. For example, if a person is excluded from entering HE based on use of SIMD measure inadequacies, then that is on them. As long as the HEI can show that they have met their WA target, then SFC can award them related funding and the Scottish Government can claim that x-amount of students from WA backgrounds are entering HE, regardless of whether or not that individual above was excluded. At present WA policy does not go far enough to make sensitised, beneficiary informed, long-lasting change which will lead to seismic shifts across society, quashing historic systems of elitest oppression. Institutions can be seen to be adhering to policy – meeting related WA targets, whilst in practice, no changes may be experienced by those initially intended to benefit. The HEI can allude taking responsibility and accountability by meeting SIMD WA targets whilst, as an institution and via HEI staff, treating students from WA backgrounds as the problem which is an insidious issue.

However, as an understanding of the realities of social class within the UK clearly demonstrates, regardless of what effort or talent an individual may possess, should they not be born into a family of elite or middle-class social standing, their chances of achieving particular types of success such as academic and professional employment may be severely stunted as discussed within the literature review and evidenced across the findings chapter. In grasping the above, it is not a far jump to recognise the need of creating such a policy as WA with an independent Commissioner to ensure impartiality from the Scottish Government and other stakeholders. It remains to be seen how the HEI will heed all warnings and develop awareness, systems and processes which operate equitably for students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Here, the HEI appears to talk the talk but not walk the walk particularly considering several HEI staff stated that current WA policy survives via the HEIs reliance on HEI staffs' "goodwill" (findings 4.2.) rather than any cognisant, constructive, structural enactments.

6.2 Study limitations

The present study initially set out to also explore the experiences of pupils from WA backgrounds who were interested in or intended to apply to any HEI. However, due to several factors out with the researchers control including difficulties incurred due to the Covid 19 pandemic coupled with mounting pressures on secondary school teachers following teacher

strikes it was not feasible to gather such perspectives during HEI open days due to their cancellation and rescheduling.

A quantitative questionnaire was proposed from the outset. However, as qualitative data collection began and continued, it became clear that a significant amount of time and effort was needed to capture the institutional level operations alongside how policy and practice cascades across departments and faculties as well as related WA HE organisations. To maintain the scope of the project the scale was adapted. The data collected from the present qualitative project has generated understanding and developed the knowledge base. A future study could utilise the gathered data from semi-structured interviews to create a larger scale questionnaire for HEI/HE System

The present study has several limitations, which when assessing the claims made, are to be considered. Such limitations are an embodied part of undertaking a PhD project. The research was conducted in one research setting due to the limited resources of researcher capacity and time. With the above as limiting factors, the number of participants, interview length and scope as apart of time within the field were impacted. When considering the applicability and generalisability of the research to other similar contexts, constraints ought to be acknowledged.

Firstly, the scope of the research was restricted due to having to complete the project in a short time span and whilst meeting scholarship funding criteria. As such the boundaries of the study were carefully planned, tested and adjusted to achieve the research aims outlined within the deadline set. Therefore, the project took place within one HEI in Scotland. Most of the participants were staff working as a part of or associated with this one HEI. These included staff distinguished by job role, regarding level of influence upon HEI mechanisms, direct contact with students or positioned within the HEI in a WA focused role/organisation. A handful of participants were representatives from wider HEI-focused organisations. HEI students from WA and non-WA backgrounds were also interviewed.

Secondly, a limitation may include the limited number of student participants included within the study. Across qualitative research around education, student perspectives are often studied however the impact upon the mechanisms which influence their experiences of HE can be limited and may take time to shift. Key within the present study was the inclusion of perspectives of individuals in positions of power and influence – HEI System Actors. Such participants are studied far less despite their potential and ability to enact positive, long-term change. The inclusion of HEI System Actors provides richness and depth to understanding the layering of the current positioning, engagement and enactment of WA policy across the HEI.

The interviews with HEI staff across differing faculties, departments and courses helped to shape a broader picture of the ways in which WA policy is implemented in practice within admissions processes and learning environments. Participants representative of wider HEI-focused organisations also added clarity around the situation from out with the HEI. These included the ways the HEI should and could enact WA policy and the impacts felt from students attending HEIs across Scotland. With more time, more student perspectives could have been gathered and indeed many more were approached than responded or agreed to take part. This is not to say that quantity of interviews impacts the quality of the few interviews that were conducted as they revealed a great deal of insight not gathered from other participant groups.

Thirdly, as the present study was limited to conducting research within one HEI in Scotland, the generalisability and applicability of the findings to other Scottish or indeed UK or Western HEIs is questioned. As aforementioned, Scotland's HEIs are viewed as autonomous and policy approaches are devolved. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the ways in which other Scottish HEIs enact WA policy and how the admissions processes and impact upon student experiences of HE may differ, if at all. The specific institutional, historical, socio-economic, local and cultural circumstances of this HEI, will shape the findings. Whilst the HEI has autonomy, it also operates within a nation-wide governmental strategic WA agenda. It could be argued that other HEIs across Scotland face similar aims, expectations and targets associated with WA and comparable consequences if these are not met. Therefore, the need to meet WA targets, use of SIMD as a metric, having access to the same pool of applicants, a fee cap impacting the number of Scottish students who can attend and competition for league tables ranking are shared features with all other Scottish HEIs.

Finally, conducting research in the field was limited by time available. Participants were carefully selected and also introduced via snowball-sampling. They were interviewed across one academic year, three semesters. All semesters have busy periods whether getting started or wrapping up and completing coursework marking and/or exams which impacted participant availability whether student or staff. The iterative data collection process prescribed within Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2013) allowed for a layering of different types of data and contexts over a short period of time. Whilst a substantial picture of the situation was generated, the research endeavour can be viewed as a snapshot in time. At another point in time, aspects such as discourse around students from WA backgrounds may have changed. The study cannot claim to have studied all nuances of WA policy enactment across the entirety of the HEI. However, the breadth of System Actor participants across a variety of key roles alongside the specific departments and faculties examined in more depth provide a clear understanding of ongoing

matters across the HEI. Without concerted effort and exploration by the HEI, some of these circumstances are unlikely to evolve on their own. With more time allocated, the study would have endeavoured to gather more experiences of students to continue the richness of data gained from the few involved. Increasing student participant numbers may have uncovered other significant experiences or patterns of HEI responses to WA enactment and treatment of students by staff, whether negative or positive.

6.3. Implications for further research, policy and practice

The Scottish government WA Blueprint identifies global percentages but perhaps needs to commission some further research to specify on a more granular level what equity actually looks like and encourage universities to do the same. Data analysis has a role to play in driving system change and universities need to be encouraged to provide a more detailed back-story to their headline figures. From this, Scottish Government could identify those universities that are doing WA well across all faculties, departments, and courses, and publicise how they achieve this. It is worth noting that wider issues may also impact upon HEI performance, differentials may not be due to university practice. There are some secondary schools across Scotland where no pupils enter HE. It is key to understand what the HEI role is here. The HEI must also show understanding of the wider complexity as well as their own role as ignoring wider issues is also implicit bias.

The Scottish Government could also investigate, across Scotland to see if some courses or subject departments are particularly poor or good at WA. Whilst this might not be easy to do at scale (universities do not provide directly comparable courses) it would be a simple matter to investigate the WA success of the professional courses where Scottish Government already controls admission numbers. There is ambiguity about the policy aim as well as definitions of the problem. Whilst there is a clearly defined, HE entry target set by the Scottish Government to be achieved by 2030, what is less described is the impact intended. A clearer understanding of the problem: inequity around social class within HE perpetuates social reproduction across education and society, then HEIs might take steps to commit to informed practice via being cognisant of relevant research. A more informed approach to the problem whilst being aware of the potential for HEI system-wide and staff biases around students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds could enable enactments which attend to equity across the education journey whilst encouraging societal shifts.

HEIs could do more to promote co-production between students and staff in the ways in which courses are designed and undertaken as with the above example where early planning and time considerations were employed. This approach could be tailored by staff across different faculties/departments according to need. Time is a limiting factor here as students from WA backgrounds often work more than middle-class students and to ensure uptake, faculty staff time must be considered too. The participant voices can be treated as experts by experience, a useful concept which could be utilised by the HEI to gather the experiences of students from WA backgrounds to generate understanding and collaborate with students and staff to enact change. Use of critical theory can help to identify implicit bias around class-based assumptions in courses. Theorists who have developed toolkits to assist with the above including the "equity-mindedness" model (CUE, 2019) and ACF (St. John et al., 2011) can be reviewed to assess their applicability and/or adaption for the Scottish education context.

The present study has identified gaps between institutional strategic aims, WA policy and its enactment as well as some of the ways in which the HEI itself and some staff members think about students from WA backgrounds. A clear knowledge and understanding gap and lack of guidance and/or training around WA policy and equitable practices has also been argued. Fundamentally there is little evidence of attempts to understand the lives of students from WA backgrounds nor the impact of social class upon HE experiences and outcomes. To address the current situation there are several theoretical approaches that can be drawn upon and adapted. As above, the concepts of implicit and explicit bias can act as ways to illuminate matters around conceptions of students from WA backgrounds and change institutional practice towards them. To make clear, there are theoretical works which explain the above including Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, the "equity-minded model" (CUE, 2019) and ACF by St. John et al., (2011), however, these are not drawn or worked upon by the HEI.

The "equity-minded model" (CUE, 2019) provides five equity-minded principles which are to be applied to explore institutional practices across differing domains and offers ways of attending to change. With the above approach HEIs look closely at themselves. The work of St. John et al., (2011) around Academic Capital Formation (ACF) enables a framework for HEIs and staff members to think about the experiences of students and the ways their needs can be considered and addressed. This approach enables HEIs to look at the ways they think about and interact with students from working class backgrounds. These two frameworks translate sociological principles into practical, actionable enactments. Lastly, Bourdieu's (1986) work regarding habitus, social, cultural and economic capitals help us to understand inequality however, not the institutional response. The above two approaches go some way to bridge this

gap. Very little of these understandings and practices are considered nor addressed within/by the HEI. Whilst beyond the scope of the present research to outline in full, several of the recommendations given to the Scottish Government by the new Commissioner for Fair Access (Professor John McKendrick) align with the findings detailed here, such as addressing SIMD as an institutional target and transitioning to individual level measures as well as disaggregating HEI data (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024). Such suggestions are a welcome step in a better direction towards equitable mechanisms and enactments by government and HEIs for those they serve; students from working class backgrounds.

People are indifferent, social positions in society are maintained by their access to social, cultural capital, economic capital (Savage, 2015). HEIs must move beyond using SIMD as the main and/or only metric to identify students intended to benefit from WA policy. The above theories help to guide understanding, the tools highlighted translate these theories into ways of addressing the issues outlined. If an approach aimed at HEI students experiencing disability was allowed to rely on a measure which had similar flaws to SIMD, then it would be considered discriminatory and illegal for the HEI to act as it does around WA. The HEI does not act out of malice but a lack of attention to the problem highlighted above which is left for HEI staff to sort out as acts of their goodwill. What is sought from HEIs is something more fundamental that makes a difference not sporadic events down to a few good-natured souls doing something, but down to a thorough understanding of how to move forward. Individual HEI staff members thoughtfulness and experience, however beneficial and useful it is, is not going to achieve the sort of system-wide institutional level change that is needed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Examples of the semi-structured interview questions for each participant group

HEI System Actors

1. **Can you tell me a little about your job – how did you get into this role?**
 - How long have you been in this role?
2. **How much time within your role is given to Widening Access?**
3. **What are some of the challenges for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in attending this HEI?**
 - What are some of the ways you are trying to address that?
 - What ways have been successful or not?
4. **Universities are expected to achieve equity, so for example where students may have disabilities the universities are required to ensure that all buildings and resources etc. are accessible, in terms of achieving equity for widening access students what do you think this could involve? What would this look like to you?**
5. **What do you believe could be done differently to improve WA and students' experiences?**
6. **From what we've discussed, do you have absolute confidence in this/WA or is it halfway there, quarter way or should we rip it up and start again?**
 - Are you comfortable that if a young person joins all the dots that they'll be successful?
 - With WA initiatives working on this, will more students get in and so if I came back to interview you in 5 years' time everything would be perfect, or do you feel that more could be done?
 - What areas are still outstanding?

Is there anything that you would like to add?

HEI Students

1. **Can you tell me a little about your journey into your current course?**
 - What you are studying?
 - What sort of work are you looking to go into upon graduation?
 - How did you find out about Higher Education and potential routes into your chosen career?
2. **What were your experiences of the application process?**
 - Did you have any support in completing it?
 - Who was your reference (within UCAS application)?
3. **What sort of things did you consider about the universities themselves before applying to them?**
 - Which other universities did you apply to?
 - What were your reasons for choosing to study there and here?
4. **Why have you chosen your degree?**
 - How do you find online vs in-person?
 - What did you want to do when you left school as a teenager?
 - How do you fit your studies around life/work/family? Does the uni. take this into consideration?
 - What is frustrating or good about it?
 - Do you think the university understands the needs of all students?
5. **Can you tell me a little about your experience of studying at HEI?**
 - What has it been like?
 - What do you enjoy?
 - What do you find frustrating?
 - How have you found engaging with your coursework, staff and students?
 - Where do you spend your time on campus?
 - Are you involved in anything outside of your course?
6. **Have you been offered any guidance or support in building relationships with your peers, staff members and field networks? If so, which kinds of support?**
 - Do you know who to ask for different kinds of support offered by the university such as academic/study equipment/financial? If so, how did you find out about these?
 - Do you foresee any potential barriers to completing your studies?
 - Have you discussed these with anyone?
 - How could these potential barriers be resolved?
7. **Do you have any ideas of ways the university could be more accessible for widening access students what do you think this could involve? What would this look like to you?**

Is there anything else you would like to add?

HEI Faculty/department staff

1. Can you tell me a little about your job – how did you get into this role? How long have you been in this role?
2. **Can you tell me how WA is approached within this department?**
3. **Can you briefly outline the application process specific to your course/department?**
 - What must the student demonstrate to be accepted?
 - What are the prerequisites, knowledge(s), competencies, experiences, networks required?
 - What else might be taken into consideration?
 - **How is SIMD dealt with?**
 - **Are there any problems with that approach?**
 - **What aspects of student learning is critical?**
 - **Is there a fuss about getting folk in but not worrying about them when they're in?**
4. **What kinds of support is offered by the university to students such as academic/study equipment/financial?**
 - Where do students find out about these?
 - What are the mechanisms for ensuring that students are aware of these?
5. **What are your observations of different students?** (WA/diverse background vs not)
6. **Can you tell me a little about the styles of student interaction in group/classroom settings?**
 - Do students converse with each other/ work well together/ form relationships and networks with peers and staff?
 - Is forming relationships and networks with peers and staff something that is nurtured? If so, in which ways?)
7. **Do you know the WA ambitions of the uni./dept.?**
 - What kind of training or guidance do you receive?
 - How are these ambitions put into practice?
 - What does the oversight of this look like, how is it measured?
8. **In terms of admissions into your faculty – do you think the system is fair?**
 - What changes have you seen over time?
 - What do you think Widening Access/equitable opportunities would involve?
 - What would this look like to you?
9. **In your experience, in which ways could the university improve its application and student support related data/systems/processes to better students' outcomes?**
 - Have you been involved in or heard of any initiatives/interventions/research which promotes equity across Higher Education that you are interested in exploring further and/or adopting within the university? (Prompt: Can you tell me a little about it and the findings?)
10. **Universities are expected to achieve equity, so for example where students may have disabilities the universities are required to ensure that all buildings and resources etc. are accessible, in terms of achieving equity for widening access students what do you think this could involve? What would this look like to you? Is there anything else you would like to add?**

WA related organisation staff

1. **Can you tell me a little about your job – how did you get into this role?** How long in the role?
2. **Can you tell me a little about the ways in which you assist and/or support the students you work with?**
 - Do you provide assistance/support with the university/UCAS application process?
 - If so, what is the extent of support/guidance offered?
3. **In your experience, what must potential university students demonstrate to be accepted?**
 - What are the prerequisites, knowledge(s), competencies, experiences, networks required?
 - What else might be taken into consideration?
 - Do these differ across universities?
 - Do you feel that there is competition between universities for WA students?
4. **Can you tell me a little about the Widening Access policy and practices within your role?**
 - Do you feel that contextualised admissions & reserved places are effective?
 - In your experience, are these places offered to the students most in need?
 - Do you think the system is fair?
 - Have you seen changes over time?
 - Are you involved in the mapping articulation routes or liaising with HE universities, FE colleges or secondary schools? - If so, can you tell me a bit about your workload and what you do?
5. **What are your observations of different students? (from WA/diverse backgrounds)**
 - What kinds of support is offered by the universities to students such as academic/study equipment/financial?
 - Where do students find out about these?
 - What are the mechanisms for ensuring that students are aware of these?
 - Is forming relationships and networks with peers and staff something that is nurtured? - If so, in which ways?
6. **Do you know the WA ambitions of the university?**
 - What kind of training or guidance do you receive?
 - How are these ambitions put into practice?
 - What does the oversight of this look like, how is it measured?
 - In your experience, in which ways could the university improve WA data/systems/processes to better students' outcomes?
 - Have you been involved in or heard of any initiatives/interventions/research which promotes equity across HE that you are interested in exploring further and/or adopting within the university? - Can you tell me a little about it and the findings?
7. **From what we've discussed, do you have absolute confidence in this/WA or is it halfway there, quarter way or should we rip it up and start again?**
 - Are you comfortable that if a young person joins all the dots that they'll be successful?
 - With Focus West & WA initiatives working on this, will more students get in and so if I came back to interview you in 5 years' time everything would be perfect, or do you feel that more could be done?
 - What areas are still outstanding?
8. **Some of the policies discuss achieving equity, so for example where students may have disabilities the universities are required to ensure that all buildings and resources etc. are accessible, in terms of achieving equity for widening access students what do you think this could involve? What would this look like to you?**

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Participants contact log example

Below outlines the format as an example (participant names have been omitted, pseudonyms were yet to be assigned):

No.	Name	Perspective/ Role	Date(s) Emailed/ Notes	Date/ Time of Interview
1.		HEI Strategy & Planning	29/9/22, Yes 13/10/22, courtesy reminder email: 22/11/22	28/11/22, 10.30- 11.30am, Microsoft Teams
2.		HEI Admissions & Student Lifecycle, Data Custodian	29/9/22, Yes 30/10/22	2/11/22, 12- 1pm, in-person (room number)
3.		HEI Faculty B & Marketing Communication Manager	29/9/22, yes 11/11/22	18/11/22, 9.30-10.30am, Microsoft Teams

Appendix 3: Example of Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form

Participant Information Sheet (PIS) for Widening Access Staff

Name of department: School of Education
Title of the study: What is role of Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in creating inequity?

Introduction

My name is Kelly Stewart I am an ESRC doctoral candidate in the School of Education, University of Strathclyde.

What is the purpose of this research?

The aim of this PhD project is to understand how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nurture inclusive and equitable systems/processes/data collection and use, across Higher Education (HE) access and learner journey.

Studies demonstrate that students from less privileged/lower socio-economic status (ses) backgrounds, particularly those with no family history of attending an HEI, may face several barriers to accessing HEIs in Scotland. Scottish Government policy seeks to improve equity in HE by widening access (WA) to HEIs, with the aim of having a fifth of HEI entrants coming from the poorest neighbour/areas by 2030 (Scottish Government, 2016). However, such recruitment targets may not ensure positive HE outcomes nor informed student support structures.

Equity is a problem for HE. To be meaningful and enabling, admissions targets need to be set alongside an understanding of the kinds of advice and support that working class and poorer students need in: subject selection; extra-curricular activities; university selection; course selection; workplace engagement. We also need clear ideas about how to support students on courses by making the formal and informal HE structures and procedures more inclusive.

This research therefore, aims to explore what HEIs systems/processes/data do and/or don't do to attend to widening access in Scotland and understand students experiences, enabling an exploration of what may be missed across widening access and HEI approaches.

Do you have to take part?

Your decision to take part in this research is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, your identity and responses will be anonymous. You have the right to withdraw at any time until the point of write-up (expected to commence December 2022) without consequence nor detriment and are not required to give a reason. Any information which may identify you will not be included in any outputs for this study.

What will you do in the project?

You will be invited to participate in an online interview using Zoom, which will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour in duration.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been asked to take part in this study because of your valuable expertise and experiences within your Widening Access role working within a Higher Education Institution (HEI).

What are the potential risks to you in taking part?

There are no explicit risks involved in participating in this research, nor any specific preparatory requirements. Throughout participation you are empowered to request that the interview pause and/or stop and have the right to withdraw your participation in the research any time until write-up (December 2022), without reason nor consequence. All information that you provide will be anonymised to ensure that you nor your place of work can be identified.

What information is being collected in the project?

This study will be collecting data on your knowledges and experiences of, and/or strategies used to, nurture inclusive and equitable systems/processes/data collection and utilisation across HE access and learner journey.

Personal information will be requested however, any identifiable information will be omitted from reporting and your name will be pseudo-anonymised during the analysis phase. Personal information collected includes age, family background, gender, ethnicity, race, disability and wellbeing.

Who will have access to the information

Upon your permission, interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Your data will be anonymised and treated with the strictest of confidence. This will be subject to change following disclosures of serious, imminent harm regarding self and/or others. Only the researchers of this study will have access to information collected from you including recordings and transcripts.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

The electronic data collected by recordings via Zoom will be stored on Onedrive, the University of Strathclyde's server (secure and password protected drive). The recordings will be transcribed and deleted thereafter. Any hard copies will be stored on the University of Strathclyde premises in a locked cabinet. Data will be securely destroyed after ten years. Any hard copies will be shredded, and electronic data securely disposed of in accordance with the University of Strathclyde policy and guidance. All data will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation.

Please also read our [Privacy Notice for Participants v0.8](#).

What happens next?

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

If you would like to find out more about this research and/or would like to take part, please contact Kelly Stewart (Researcher) and/or Professor Ian Rivers (Chief Investigator) on the contact details below.

If you are happy to be involved in this research study, please sign the consent form attached. If you would not like to take part in this research, we thank you for your time and attention thus far.

You are invited to request an electronic copy of the final research outputs: executive summary, full thesis, and any other research outputs.

This investigations results may be published in part or in full. As part of assessment procedures, the final research report (thesis) will be submitted to the University of Strathclyde and may inform pertinent reports, articles, academic and sector presentations and conferences, papers and policy.

Some elements of the research output may also be submitted to and potential publication in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Unless permission has been granted, participants identifying information will be omitted from all outputs which are potentially publicly available.

Researcher contact details:

Address	Contact Details
Kelly Stewart Doctoral Student School of Education University of Strathclyde Lord Hope Building 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT	Mobile: 07306432926 E-mail: kelly-stewart@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:

Address	Contact Details
Professor Ian Rivers School of Education University of Strathclyde Lord Hope Building 141 St James Road Glasgow G4 0LT	E-mail: hass-deansoffice@strath.ac.uk
Alastair Wilson School of Education	Telephone: 01414448108

University of Strathclyde Lord Hope Building 141 St James Road Glasgow G4 0LT	Mobile: 07540671925 E-mail: al.wilson@strath.ac.uk
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This research was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

The School of Education Ethics Committee
University of Strathclyde

School	of	Education
141	St	James
Glasgow G4 0LT		Street
Telephone:	0141	444
Email:	hass-courses-edu@strath.ac.uk	

Consent Form for Widening Access Staff

Name of department: School of Education

Title of the study: What is role of Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in creating inequity?

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - ☐ audio recording of interviews that identify me:
 - ☐ my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio and/or video recorded as part of the project.

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix 3: Examples of the ninety-seven questions and their categories posed whilst writing the literature review

	LR location	Questions	Theme	P. group
	1.1 'Aspirat. myth'	What are the ways in which HEI's may potentially transfer responsibility onto students and their families rather than that responsibility residing with them and government, which they have some power to shape, particularly when of own interest and/or benefit (...)?	Ways of shifting responsibility: HEI-S's	Overall
	1.1 'Aspirat. myth'	Does the terminology/language/connotations/assumptions of student aspiration continue to come up in HEI: an as institution and/or with staff and/or within policy and/or practice?	Terminology usage: Aspiration	HEI All
	1.1 Access gap	Why do advantaged students continue to go directly into an HEI whilst less advantaged students primarily enter FE colleges if such courses are intended equivalents?	Stable sentiment: differentiation & stratification	Overall
	1.1 Access gap	What HEI-related factors impact on HE access for students from less advantaged backgrounds?	Impact of HEI-related factors on access: S's-HEI's	S HEI All
	1.1 WP	What are the impacts of utilising SIMD as a measure for HEIs in determining the level of deprivation potentially faced by students and thus their suitability for assistance in HE access, when the SIMD has been flagged for inadequacies?	SIMD impacts	HEI Staff All

Appendix 5: Key Themes and Sub-themes defined table

Themes (Deducted from literature)	Sub-themes (Inducted from data)
Admissions: Any comments relating to the selection, admissions systems & processes, targets, policies & experiences of staff & students	Institutional ambitions, training & monitoring: Institutional ambitions, positioning, what the HEI wants, training & guidance to achieve policies, measurement & oversight.
	Routes into HE from schools & colleges: Relationships, understanding & communication with schools & colleges, lived experiences & knowledge of students & HE staff.
	Student selections systems: Centralisation vs devolved selection processes & impacts on relationships & support, selectors knowledge of important skills & experiences, range of evidence that informs selection, influence of wider institutional ambitions & admissions timescales.
	Views of inclusion & WA admissions targets & strategies: Different views about the extent to which WA matters & of the processes designed for WA such as open days, WA campaigns, experience weeks in the context of targets & recruitment.
	Inter-institutional competition: How institutions cooperate or compete for WA students & the extent to which the business model of the HEI serves what's in the best interests of an individual student.
	Widening the pool of potential WA students: Outreach work to widen the pool.
Job role:	<i>Views of equitability in admissions:</i> <i>Judgements of fairness around application, admissions processes & entry requirements.</i>
	Previous experience:

Any comments related to previous experiences, incidental learning, training, impact of multiple/changing roles and legalities.	Any previous experiences or incidental learning which inform staff attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, empathy, understanding of lived experiences of WA students.
	Legal systems & frameworks: Requirements & impact of compliance & external regulatory expectations.
	Range of roles: The extras, funded or unfunded, tasks, roles & expectations & their impact.
	WA Training: Focus, access of training courses & participation nudges and their impact.
	Continuation & churn issues: What are the supports to develop institutional memory for sharing the knowledge that staff have when entering or exiting roles in order to understand the role and do it well.
	Challenges & successes: What does and doesn't work on a day-to-day basis.
Data & Technology System designs that helps understanding of WA students: Any comments related to HEI/student data, reporting, technology, communication & processes which support students experiences of HE.	Staff access & use issues around data & technology: Who has the access rights to use & report on WA data and how it is used
	Communication with students: Staff communication channels (e.g. emails) habitual use of particular challenges, prompts to use systems differently where communication needs to be improved.
	Monitoring who gets support & why:

	Institutional/department/cohort monitoring to understand who is in the system, their needs, identification of potential support requirements & success.
	How the system shapes staff knowledge & understanding of WA students: System's ability to prompt staff to offer proactive support to students.
	Data & Technology Systems utilised to collate student data and enable reporting: Types of systems utilised to organise student/course progress/outcome data & their usefulness.
SIMD: Any comments related to SIMD as a measure, in relation to students/parents from SIMD/WA backgrounds & regarding support & advice.	Identification measures: Does SIMD measure capture who it is supposed to, how the system can be gamed.
	Labelling SIMD students: Comments about knowing who is SIMD, signposting support & entitlements, debates about the pros & cons of whether to inform students of their SIMD/WA status.
	Course design retention & support: Access & engagement for formal & informal experiences that shape students interactions with the course and fellow students.
	How staff talk about SIMD students: Non-SIMD strugglers, the missing-middle, differences between SIMD & non-SIMD students, myths & beliefs about SIMD students, definitions & expectations of success, assumptions of nous.
	Parents expectations of HE experience and benefits: HEI communication with students, parents' capacity to support students.

	Mechanisms for support within academic courses: Essay writing, marking systems & feedback
	Retention & drop-out advice: Advice & processes around retention & drop-out
	Careers advice & support: <i>Post-course employment support: CV writing, work placements and experiences with potential employers</i>
Equity: Any comments related to definitions/operationalisation of equity/equality.	Definitions and conceptions of equity & fairness and how they are operationalised
Navigating HE: Any comments related to how the HEI generally communicates with students, specifically communicates student support, assists in students understanding of HE & learns from staff & students.	Students navigating HE: Impact of mentoring programs, help with HE language usage/terminology, systems & expectations.
	Staff supporting students: Staff actions, empathy, knowledge and understanding of WA students
	Sign-posting support: Comments about how available support is signposted to students.
	Contacting students: Flexibility & variety of student contact methods via email/other systems, how students get access to knowledge & who sets up WhatsApp groups etc.
	Business vs best interest: Extent to which business model of HEI is guiding institutional practices/responses vs what is in the best interest of students.
	Learning institution:

	How institution learns from staff & students impact, voice(s) & experiences
Catch-all: Captures any other points of interest not captured by the above categories & will be analysed & reabsorbed in above categories or new categories generated.	

Appendix 6: Fairclough's CDA approach

Fairclough's CDA dialectical-relational approach; levels of analysis as outlined by Locke, (2004);

Level of Analysis	Focus of Analysis	Dimensions of Analysis, (Ibid: 42)
1. Sociocultural practice	<i>'the immediate situation that has given rise to its production and the various sociocultural practices and discursive conditions at both institutional and societal levels that provide a wider contextual relevance', (Ibid: 42)</i>	Explanation (social analysis)
2. Discourse practice	<i>'the way in which the text has been produced, including its relationship with similar texts, its mode of dissemination and the way in which it is received, read, interpreted and used by human subjects', (Ibid: 42)</i>	Interpretation (processing analysis) Explanation (social analysis)
3. Text	<i>'the text to ascertain ways in which it discursively positions readers via what Janks and Ivanic (1992) term its 'preferred reading', (Ibid: 43)</i>	Description (Text analysis) Interpretation (processing analysis)

'Fairclough: text analysis' as adapted from Locke, (2004: 46-51);

Textual Analysis	Concerned with	Brief Description
Word meaning	Vocabulary	Concerned with ' <i>meaning potential</i> ' as words can have several different meanings which may also be contradictory and ' <i>contestable</i> ', (Ibid: 50)
Wording	Vocabulary	" <i>various ways a meaning can be 'worded'</i> " i.e. ' <i>worded differently from perspectives which are differently discursively framed</i> ', (Ibid: 50)
Metaphor	Vocabulary	<i>'as with wording, the metaphorization of an area of experience is contestable'</i> , (Ibid: 51)
Modality	Grammar	<i>'the strength with which a particular position or statement is endorsed'</i> , (Ibid: 47)
Transitivity and theme	Grammar	The former is ' <i>the ideational dimension of the grammar of a clause and is concerned with the types of processes and elements that are coded in the clauses</i> ', in which there are four processes; ' <i>relational</i> ', ' <i>action</i> ', ' <i>event</i> ' and ' <i>mental</i> ', (Ibid: 48) The latter draws on ' <i>Hallidayan concept of theme</i> ' where the " <i>initial part of the clause which gives prominence to particular information ...is often an indication of taken-for-granted or 'common sense' assumptions about the nature of things</i> ", as well as ' <i>nominalisation</i> '; ' <i>process by which processes are converted into nouns or noun phrases</i> ', (Ibid: 49).
Connectives and argumentation	Cohesion	Fairclough again draws on Halliday ' <i>distinguishing three main types of relation between clauses: elaboration, extension and advancement</i> ' as well as ' <i>distinguishing four, main types of explicit cohesive marking</i> ' including ' <i>reference</i> ', ' <i>substitution and ellipsis</i> ', ' <i>conjunction</i> ' and ' <i>lexical cohesion</i> ', (Ibid: 48)
Interactional control	Text structure	<i>'control of the agenda and how interactions are established and finished'</i> , (Ibid: 46)